

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

1-06: DIVIDE & CONQUER

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Attacks by pirates between the borders of two worlds threaten to plunge a sector into war. Jayk and Brae Udra are ordered to track down those responsible for the attacks and also to prevent two Republic worlds from going to war with one another...

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1.

The warship dropped out of hyperspace to find the merchant vessel it had received a distress call from adrift while its attacker, a small raiding craft that the warship heavily outgunned accelerated away. The warship was one of an entire squadron deployed by the government of Rilless to combat the pirates that were striking neighbouring systems with increasing frequency. So far their targets had been isolated outposts and independent traders but they were becoming increasingly bold and concerns were growing that they would soon strike in the Rilless system itself.

"Lock weapons on target." the captain ordered.

"Enemy vessel is powering hyperdrive captain." the warship's comscan officer warned.

"Open fire. I want that ship disabled before-" the captain began before there was a flash of light as the raider entered hyperspace, "Plot me an exit vector." the captain added quickly, "Get after them."

"Captain," the ship's first officer said, "we both know where they've gone and we can't follow them."

"Damn that!" the captain exclaimed, "We practically caught them in the act and I'm not about to let them go over a line on a map."

"Vector plotted captain. Feeding data to navigation." the comscan officer called out.

"Excellent. Helm take us into hyperspace the moment you have the co-ordinates." the captain ordered.

"Aye captain." the helmsman replied and a few seconds later the warship followed the raider into hyperspace.

The trip was only a handful of light years and it was not long before the warship returned to realspace in another star system and immediately began scanning for the raider.

"Contact to port." the comscan officer announced.

"The raider?" the captain replied, "Bring us to bear and-"

"Target's too big." the comscan operator interrupted, "Vessel identified as a Dauphern discril cruiser." then the comscan operator raised her head and added, "She's powering weapons."

"Open a channel." the captain ordered, "Tell them we've tracked a pirate ship to this system and they should stand down."

"They're jamming every channel captain." the comscan officer said.

"Stang." the captain hissed and he snarled before adding, "Bring us about. Prepare to retreat."

Jayk Udra broke the surface of the water to find that he was no longer alone in the room that held one of the jedi temple's swimming pools. A teenage girl in jedi robes was stood at the far end holding a datapad and looking towards him.

"Brae." he said as he started to swim towards her, "I thought you were meditating in your quarters."

"I was master." Brae replied, "But I was summoned to receive orders."

"We're being deployed?" Jayk asked, climbing out of the pool and reaching out to summon a towel to his grasp before starting to dry himself off, "Has more information surfaced on Thal N'Krey?"

"No master." Brae said, "There is a border dispute that requires our intervention." and she held out the datapad so that Jayk could see it.

"Rilless and Collinar?" he commented, "I'm not familiar with either system."

"According to our data packet they're in the Outer Rim, about twelve parsecs apart." Brae said

"Twelve parsecs? That's a long way apart for them to be having a border dispute."

"Both systems act as bases for smaller outposts in surrounding systems and they've been accusing one another of stealing resources that they each regard as their own." Brae explained.

"So they are building empires and see one another as being in their way." Jayk said, "How long has this been going on?"

"They've been arguing about who owns what for decades but given the small size of the outposts involved they've been able to just stay out of one another's way for most of that time."

"So what changed?"

"Collinar started using troops to evict what it called 'illegal squatters' from several systems and ordered its forces to fortify a border. Rilless rejects this and they've started removing what they call 'unauthorised settlements' as well. But the real issue is that pirates have started to take advantage of the tension and are hitting targets in the territory currently controlled by one before making their escape into the territory held by the other."

Jayk snorted.

"Thus using the two rival forces as a shield against one another." he said, "Who requested our help?"

"Collinar. They've been losing more outposts and transports to the pirates and they accuse Rilless of arming them." Brae answered, "We will also have support from a judicial cruiser. The *Valiant* under Captain Reece.

The *Valiant's* job will be to hunt down the pirates while we negotiate a border settlement between the two factions."

"Very good. Go and find Tylo. Tell him to prepare the Swift Exit." Jayk told her, referring to the former smuggler who captained the light freighter that he and Brae travelled aboard as part of a deal done to keep Tylo out of prison.

"But why master?" Brae said, frowning, "We have transport."

"Two reasons my young apprentice." Jayk replied as he finished drying himself off and took his cloak from a nearby hook on the wall, "Firstly a judicial cruiser is a powerful military asset but it is somewhat conspicuous and any pirates in the sector are likely to start lying low as soon as it arrives. The *Swift Exit* on the other hand is anonymous and will not attract attention. Secondly I trust Tylo Kurrast to be able find pirates because he thinks like them. He knows the places where outlaws gather and can move among them freely. Now go, I want to leave within the hour."

When the dreadnought-class heavy cruiser *Valiant* dropped out of hyperspace at the edge of the Collinar system Jayk was on the bridge to observe. Unlike some of the modern experimental warship designs being produced in the Core Worlds that relegated far more minor tasks to droids, the dreadnought-class made use of an almost entirely organic crew and more than sixteen thousand crew members were crammed into the ship's six hundred metre length and as the ship arrived at its destination Jayk could sense all them busy at work.

"Reversion to realspace completed on schedule Jedi Udra." Captain Reece said, glancing over her shoulder at the Jedi.

"Excellent." Jayk replied, "May I?" and he indicated a nearby intercom panel.

"Be my guest." the captain answered and Jayk activated the intercom.

"Tylo, you're clear." he said.

"Understood. I'll meet you at the rendezvous point on Collinar." Tylo replied and moments later Jayk saw the YT-700 class *Swift Exit* racing away from the *Valiant* through the main bridge viewport. The *Valiant* was far enough from any settlements or other ships in the system for the *Swift Exit* to be seen separating from the docking tube that had connected the two vessels while in hyperspace and it was Jayk's hope that no-one would connect the transport with his mission here.

"YT-seven hundred is clear. Inbound for Collinar." one of the numerous bridge crew reported.

"Helm turn us ten degrees to port and proceed for six million kilometres." Captain Reeves ordered, knowing that the *Swift Exit* could not be seen to approach from exactly the same direction as her cruiser if its purpose here was to remain secret, "Then take us to Collinar."

Though powerful, Dreadnought-class cruisers were slow in realspace and it was several hours before the *Valiant* docked with the main space station orbiting Collinar. One advantage of this was that it gave both the Jedi and the planetary government time to prepare for a formal meeting and when Jayk, Brae and Captain Reece stood in front of the air lock as it slid open they found themselves met by a group of local dignitaries.

"Master Jedi." one of these said, "Welcome to Collinar. I am Vess Gorer, Prime Minister."

"Prime Minister." Jayk replied as he stepped off the *Valiant* and shook hands with the man, "I am Jedi Knight Jayk Udra and this is my padawan Brae Udra and Captain Reece of the Republic cruiser *Valiant*."

"Udra?" Vess commented when he heard Jayk use the same surname for both himself and Brae, "I was not aware that Jedi had families."

"My niece." Jayk said, "Normally the Jedi Order would not pair us together but Brae is a very special young lady."

"Indeed." Vess said. Then he extended a hand towards the other local dignitaries present, "Please allow me to introduce some of my cabinet. Leia Toll is my deputy, Nug Far my Minister for Foreign Relations and General Coran my Minister of Security."

Jayk bowed his head to each of these in turn as they smiled in return but when he bowed to the general he sensed a tremor in the Force.

Anger.

"I sense you would rather not have us here general." he said.

"I don't think we need Republic judicials or the Jedi here." General Coran replied, "We can take care of ourselves."

"From what I hear you haven't done such a good job of protecting your people from pirates." Brae commented.

"There wouldn't be any pirates left if my troops were allowed to do their job properly." the general said sternly, "We could hunt them down to the last man."

"By trespassing in territory claimed by Riless." Vess pointed out, "You could start a war."

"Our fleet is bigger than theirs. We've nothing to fear from a war."

"The Republic does not take kindly to its members fighting one another." Jayk said, "I am here to help you find a more equitable solution."

"At the point of a turbolaser?" Leia said as she looked at Captain Reece. Then she looked at Vess and added, "When you announced that you were going to request the Republic's help I had no idea that you were considering having them occupy our planet."

"The *Valiant* is here purely to track down the pirates that have been bothering you minister." Captain Reece explained, "Unlike your vessels mine can enter any system to search for these pirates without risking it escalating into a military conflict."

"Has the delegation from Rilless arrived yet?" Jayk asked.

"No but their ship is expected within a day." Nug Far answered, "In the mean time we have prepared quarters for you and your apprentice in the capital and I hope you will enjoy the hospitality of our world."

"Of course." Jayk replied, "The Jedi Order provided us with all the information they had on the situation but I would be grateful if you could provide us with everything you have as well so we can bring ourselves right up to date."

"I'll see that it's delivered right to you." Vess said.

"And I'll need full details of the pirates' activities." Captain Reece added, "I'd like to get started hunting them right away. I doubt it will take long for them to find out we're here and I'd prefer to find them before they can try and establish a proper defence."

"You'll get them." General Coran said, "But if we're sharing intelligence with you then I expect to be kept informed of your actions so we can avoid any accidental confrontations."

"Of course general." Captain Reece replied as an aide in a military uniform appeared and walked over to the general before whispering something in his ear, "Judicial department regulations are quite clear about informing governments of our actions."

2.

The hospitality that Vess had spoken of impressed Jayk as soon as he and Brae were shown to a suite in a hotel located very close to the government's administrative heart.

"All of the information you requested has already been transferred to your terminal sir." the government functionary that had escorted Jayk and Brae to the hotel, "But if you require anything else at all then you can contact the Prime Minister's office directly. The hotel has been given instructions on this. Additionally you are free to make use of any of the hotel's facilities. It's all compliments of the government and people of Collinar." "Thank you." Jayk replied, "Now if you don't mind my padawan and I require time to familiarise ourselves with the information you have provided."

"Of course sir." the functionary said, bowing before leaving the hotel suite and closing the door behind him.

"Wow." Brae said as soon as she and Jayk were alone and she looked in wonder around the room. The hotel was obviously very expensive and having spent almost all her life in the rather spartan surroundings of the jedi temple on Coruscant Brae was not used to such luxury, "Why can't we stay in more places like this uncle?"

"Because such material luxury can be a distraction." Jayk answered as he walked towards a table set into a section of the room that was at a lower level than the rest. This allowed the sides to be used as a circular couch around the table that did not come above floor level to the rest of the room, "Brae, there may be times when our duties bring us into close proximity with the wealthy and the powerful but remember that we serve every being in the Republic equally and very few of them will ever get to stay somewhere like this." and then he removed a crystalline cube from his robes that he set down on the table and as he sat down on the couch he added, "Cal can you access the hotel computer?"

"Of course I can." a male voice replied moments before the holographic image of Cal Udra, a distant ancestor of both Jayk and Brae materialised as if he was sat opposite Jayk, "The wireless connection in here is very good."

"So what additional information have they given us?" Jayk said.

"The usual. A list of pirate attacks and their military response to each one. There's a lot of technical information here, sensor profiles of the raiding ships and hyperspace vectors." Cal said, "Do you want to see it?"

"No. It's Captain Reece's job to deal with the pirates. I'm more interested in the conflict regarding the border between Collinar and Rilless." Jayk said.

"They haven't included much about that at all." Cal said, "Just a few reports of attacks on their citizens carried out by those of Rilless. Perhaps if I knew more about the people involved I could be more help."

"Brae." Jayk called out, "Come away from that bar and give Cal your impression of our welcoming committee."

"Prime Minister Gorer is worried about the pirate attacks but not all his government agree." Brae said, walking over to the recessed couch and sitting down next to Jayk.

"For example?" Cal asked.

"General Coran, the minister of security." Brae replied, "He obviously doesn't want us here and he isn't bothered about his lack of success in catching the pirates."

"What makes you say that?" Cal said.

"Because he reacted with anger when introduced to us but when I made a comment about how the pirates were still running around loose he didn't react at all." Brae explained and Jayk smiled.

"Very good." he said, looking at Brae. Then he turned back towards the hologram of Cal, "Hopefully we won't need to interact with the general much though. Prime Minister Gorer invited us here and I sensed only a genuine desire to reach a peaceful settlement to this situation from him."

"Yeah, the general is Captain Reece's problem." Brae added, "Oh and Tylo's I suppose since you set him to work tracking them down."

"Ah, I was wondering where he was given that we appear to be in a luxury hotel with a well stocked private bar over there. I don't mind telling you that my sister and I stayed in a few places like this and we always made sure to take advantage of what was offered while we could." Cal said.

"Talking of which." Jayk said, getting to his feet and he walked over to the bar and began to inspect the bottles of expensive spirits.

"Can I have a drink as well master?" Brae asked, smiling.

"You are welcome to sample any of the non-alcoholic beverages you wish." Jayk replied without looking at her, "But unless the information I have is wrong and you have already turned eighteen then the alcoholic ones are strictly off limits. Do you understand me Brae?" and he glared at her.

"Yes master." she said with a frown.

"Good." Jayk said. Then he smiled, "Ah, here we are. Corellian whisky and lum." and he placed two bottles on the counter in front of him, "And a dozen fine cigarras as well."

"But uncle, you don't smoke." Brae said, confused.

"None of these are for me." he said, "I'm going to meet Tylo and I expect that the meeting will be far easier if I take him these."

"But Tylo doesn't smoke either." Brae said.

"Maybe not, but I'm sure that he will find a use for them." Jayk said.

"So what am I supposed to do while you're gone?"

"You may treat the time as your own but you are to remain here unless I send for you. I recommend that you meditate or study but I'm sure that the hotel offers a wide variety of entertainment channels." Jayk told her as he slipped the two bottles and the cigarras under his cloak and headed for the exit.

Brae watched him leave and smiled before getting up and heading for the bar.

"What are you doing?" Cal asked.

"Getting myself something to drink while I chose what to watch." Brae responded.

"Jayk said not touch anything alcoholic remember." Cal commented.

"I know." Brae said as she crouched down behind the bar and started to rummage through the various drinks on offer, wondering which Jayk was least likely to notice had been taken.

Tylo spotted the hooded figure in the starport docking area and paused to observe him for a short while. Then when he was satisfied that it was Jayk he began to approach the figure from behind until he was standing right behind him.

"The red bantha flies to Chandrila tonight." he said and Jayk turned around and looked directly at him.

"Really? You need a code phrase to identify yourself?" he said.

"Well you're the one standing around trying to hide your features." Tylo replied, "It kind of makes you stand out."

"Actually I wasn't trying to hide my face." Jayk said, "I was hiding these." and he produced the two bottles from under his cloak.

"Where did you get hold of these from?" Tylo asked, a smile spreading across his face as he took the whisky and examined the label.

"The local government has been quite welcoming." Jayk told him, "I also brought you these." and he held up the cigarras.

"Nice." Tylo said, "I ought to be able to trade them for a few words in someone's ear."

"And how has that been going so far?" Jayk asked as the two men began to walk, doing their best to mingle in with the rest of the crowd in the starport.

"Well so far I'd say that there isn't as much concern about the pirates among those operating outside the law as there ought to be." Tylo said.

"Why?" Jayk said.

"Because for some reason they're only hitting targets that are operating openly and legally. Though of course the term 'legally' is somewhat vague here since we've got two different governments claiming sovereignty over the territory." Tylo explained.

"Why should they be attacking outlaw traffic as well?"

"Because people don't smuggle or steal anything that isn't worth the risk of getting caught. The idea of some sort of nobility or camaraderie among pirates is the stuff of fiction. These guys will target one another at the drop of a hat. They're pretty much guaranteed a good haul and they know that their target won't be sending any distress signals or calling the cops afterwards."

"I take it you don't have an explanation for this yet." Jayk said and Tylo shook his head.

"No, nothing yet. But I've taken the lay of the land and I reckon there are a few places worth me visiting to see what the local black market has to offer. After all these pirates have got to be moving whatever they steal somewhere." he said.

"And if the government of Collinar is right and Rilless really is supporting the pirates? The stolen property could be being sent there." Jayk pointed out.

"In which case there won't be anything on offer here and that will be another big clue." Tylo said, "But if I do find anything we'll have another route to locating the pirates."

"I take it that this carries with it some degree of risk." Jayk commented.

"Sure, I guess so. But this is how I used to live." Tylo said.

"Used to. Not any more and I'll be happier knowing you have back up."

"I thought you had all that diplomatic rambling to take care of."

"Yes I do. But I don't think that Brae has what it takes to approach such duties in the manner required just yet. I'd rather she put her power to better use."

"I suppose having the kid around could be useful." Tylo said, "She'll be able to tell what others are thinking, right?"

"Ideally yes. But remember that although her power is great she has yet to master controlling it." Jayk reminded him, "But an extra pair of eyes to watch your back can't hurt."

"Okay, so while you sit and listen to politicians bickering Brae and I will see what we can find out from the local underworld." Tylo said before he looked around, "So where is she anyway?"

"Back at the hotel. I told her to take some time off if she wanted." Jayk told him, "Though I recommended that she use the time to meditate."

"You think she will?" Tylo asked and Jayk smiled.

"Brae may be a padawan of the Jedi Order but she is still a seventeen year old girl who has had a strict upbringing but now has been left alone in a hotel room where everything is free." he said, "My guess is that she will helping herself to drinks from our bar."

3.

Brae had already gone to bed by the time Jayk got back to the hotel and he did not see her until she got up the next morning.

"Good morning," he said loudly from the table as she emerged from her room and she flinched.

Pain.

"Good morning master." Brae replied quietly.

"You weren't up so I ordered breakfast for you." Jayk said.

"Thank you master." Brae said and she walked over to where a covered plate waited for her. Lifting the cover from the plate she saw the fried meal underneath and clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Something wrong my young apprentice?" Jayk said with the hint of a smile.

"I am feeling somewhat unwell master." she replied.

"You are probably dehydrated." Jayk told her, "A consequence of all those soft drinks you consumed last night. The ingredients are known to have such an effect. But you need to eat for your assignment today."

"The negotiations? I'll take a ration bar and snack on it." Brae said.

"I'm afraid that you won't be joining me Brae. Tylo intends to make contact with the local black market and I want you to back him up."

"How master?" Brae asked.

"Just listen to Tylo. He has more experience in dealing with these sorts of beings than I do and being able to move around in such a world will be a good skill for you to have. Not all of our duties take place in such luxurious surroundings as these." Jayk said and he waved his hand at their surroundings.

"Of course master. Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. Your robes are likely to appear out of place and may draw attention to you. Take this credit stick with you and purchase new clothing. Tylo will advise you on what to wear."

Standing by the window of the conference room where the two delegations would meet, Jayk looked out into the street at the crowd of protesters that had gathered to demonstrate against the presence of the diplomats from Rilless. Hearing the sound of the door opening he turned to see these other visitors to Collinar entering. There were four of them in all, led by a tall woman who bore a stern expression and hair that with the exception of a long side braid that reminded Jayk of an enlarged version of the braids Jedi Padawans wore.

"Ambassador Mellendre." he said, "Thank you for coming."

"What choice did I have?" the ambassador replied as she and her delegation took their seats, "If Rilless had said no then the Republic would side with Collinar automatically and that cruiser you brought with you would be orbiting our world by now."

"I assure you ambassador, the Republic would require far more justification to take action against a member than an unwillingness to meet face to face." Jayk said in an attempt to reassure her but he sensed that his words had failed to make any change in her attitude. Fortunately he was not put in the position where he had to continue to speak to the delegation from Rilless alone much longer as the door soon opened to allow Nug Far and the rest of the delegation from Collinar to enter the room as well.

"Ambassador." Nug said, "Welcome to Collinar."

"Some welcome." Mellendre responded, "Your security agents had to hold back the crowd to stop them attacking my speeder."

"We are quite safe in here ambassador." Jayk said as he too sat down and from inside his robes he produced Cal's holocron and set it down on the table in front of him without paying it any attention, "I have reviewed the security arrangements and they are more than adequate. Now how about we start at the beginning? Madam ambassador, what would you say was the source of your grievances against Collinar?"

Ambassador Mellendre then scowled as she glared at Nug.

"They used military force to assault our citizens." she said.

"Citizens who had trespassed on our territory, attacked our citizens and destroyed our property." Nug responded.

"Nonsense!" Mellendre snapped and she turned her head sharply towards Jayk, "You see what we have to deal with?" she said, gesturing at Nug, "They make ridiculous excuses to justify their bullying. I demand that they admit they were the first to use force against us."

"We acted purely in self defence ambassador. Were you doing that when your warship entered our territory?"

Nug replied before Jayk could speak and Mellendre slammed her hands down on the table.

"Our ships were pursuing the pirates that are taking advantage of the situation your actions have created." she yelled.

"Pirates? Or privateers?" Nug asked and Jayk sighed. Clearly this was going to take some time and he

wondered how Brae and Tylo were getting along.

Brae looked at her reflection in a window and frowned.

"Come on kid." Tylo told her, "We don't have all day."

"I'm just not used to dressing like this." Brae replied. Her usual jedi robes had been replaced with a more casual outfit made mainly from animal hide. The boots and trousers hugged her legs tightly while the jacket was far looser and allowed her to conceal her lightsaber inside it. Added to this was a pair of glasses with coloured lenses that did nothing to improve Brae's eyesight, though she was relieved at the reduction in the level of light her eyes had to cope with following her drinking the previous night. All of the clothing had been obtained second hand and the back of the jacket had been decorated by its previous owner with an image derived from the now extinct Sith culture of a sorcerer unleashing a storm of Force lightning, "Is this really how people dress where we're going?"

"Some of them yes." Tylo said, "Now it may seem strange to someone who thinks a bathrobe should be considered everyday wear but there are those who think it's a good idea to demonstrate their contempt for authority by displaying it on their clothing. Look at it this way, at least you get to wear those dark glasses while you're nursing your hangover."

"Hangover? What are you talking about?" Brae asked.

"I'm talking about the fact that although you tried diluting juma juice with fizzy glug you're uncle still noticed that you drank an entire bottle of the stuff and unless you've got a lot better at using your powers to nullify the effects of alcohol since we first met then your head must be pounding like a missile bombardment on a planetary shield."

"Uncle Jayk knows?" Brae said in surprise.

"Of course he knows. He guessed that you'd be sampling from the bar as soon as he left to meet me. Don't worry about it though, I've done far worse in my time and it'll help give you more credibility if people think you've been drinking."

"And what about my hair? Did I really need to untie my braid? That is what marks me out as a padawan."

"Exactly. We can't afford to have anyone noticing that and putting two and two together and getting 'jedi spy'."

Tylo explained. Then he reached into his pocket, "That reminds me, I have something here for you." and he produced a blaster far more compact than the one he wore on his thigh and handed it to her.

"What's this for?" Brae asked as she took the weapon and clipped its holster to her belt so that it would be covered by her jacket until she chose to reveal it, "I have a lightsaber."

"Yeah and the moment you draw that you tell everyone who you are even more clearly than that braid would do. Now that's loaded so be careful where you point it if you have to draw it." Tylo said, "Now come on, if this place turns out not to be what we're after then I want to have the time to check out another."

Tylo proceeded to lead Brae to a part of the city that the local authorities clearly paid little attention to.

Obviously abandoned vehicles could be seen in alleyways between buildings while the safety rails of overhead walkways were missing in places yet no warning notices had been posted.

Brae looked down nervously at one of these walkways as Tylo walked across it calmly and it creaked.

"I think this walkway is not entirely stable." she said as she followed him, holding on to the rusted railing at one side.

"It'll hold us." Tylo replied, "Though be careful of that railing. The rust looks sharp in places and the last thing you need around here is a cut that could get infected."

Her eyes widening at the thought of being poisoned just walking across a bridge, Brae let go of the railing and then hurried along the walkway, hoping to get to the far side as quickly as she could. From there Tylo headed towards a flashing display screen that advertised the establishment it was located outside as one that offered food, drink and entertainment.

"A cantina?" Brae asked.

"Hmm, of sorts." Tylo answered, "If what I've heard is correct then this is a place people come to if they're looking for something they can't get elsewhere. Black market goods and services, that sort of thing. But beware. This sort of place attracts wretched scum and villainy from all over so you may want to prepare yourself. IF anyone gives you trouble-"

"Don't worry, I'll stay calm." Brae interrupted and Tylo snorted.

"Oh poodoo." he exclaimed, "If you're going to blend in then you need to stand up for yourself. But not with your blaster or lightsaber."

"You mean I should kick them like I kicked you when-"

"You just had to bring that up again didn't you?" Tylo interrupted before he went through the door located beneath the flashing display.

Following him through the doorway Brae found herself in an establishment that looked very much like she had expected it to. The lighting was poor, meaning that for most beings it was difficult to identify someone from more than a few paces away. The air was also thick with smoke from burning vegetable matter, most of it legal but at least some of it obviously not.

Tylo started to walk further into the cantina and Brae followed him. But as they squeezed between the dense crush of bodies she suddenly felt a hand reach out and slide under her jacket.

"Nice!" a gruff voice called out, "Hey guys, how about I make this little felinx purr for me?" and there was an outburst of laughter from the group that the grossly overweight humanoid was with.

Lust.

Brae sensed that his comment was more than just a drunken joke and the images he had in his head were so strong that she could not help but sense them as well. However, in grabbing hold of Brae the overweight man had put himself close enough for her to respond in a manner that Brae thought was in keeping with Tylo's advice.

Grabbing hold of the man's wrist with both her hands Brae first pulled it away from her body before she twisted it around sharply causing the man to let out a sudden scream even as Brae spun him around so that she could bend his arm up behind his back. A sharp kick to the back of one of his legs brought the man to his knees and Brae then pushed him to the floor.

"I have a hangover," she said, "and a blaster." and then she kicked him hard between his legs, producing a sharp squeal from the man and a wince from many of the startled onlookers.

Tylo saw one of the man's friends reach towards the weapon on his belt but Tylo was quicker on the draw.

"I wouldn't if I were you." he said as he aimed his weapon at the man who had his only half way out of its holster, "That little felinx is with me and she's got claws. Sharp ones."

Brae smiled and looked down at the man she had pinned to the floor.

"Meow." she said before finally letting go of the man's arm and stepping away.

"Let's go grab a drink." Tylo told her as he backed away from the fat man's friends, "We'll leave these nice fellows to pick up their hutt impersonating friend and take care of him." then as he holstered his blaster he took hold of Brae's arm to guide her towards the bar.

"Fancy moves for a youngling." the barman said, looking directly at Brae. Then he turned to look at Tylo, "So what can I get you?" he asked.

"For starters I'll have a beer," Tylo replied, "while my co-pilot will take a soda with ice."

"Coming right up." the barman said and as he poured the drinks he added, "Will that be all?"

"No." Tylo said and he leaned across the bar, "We're looking to get the lay of the land. We had a delivery job here and are available for anyone who needs anything moving discretely. Thing is we heard there's a bit of a pirate issue going on in the sector at the moment."

"You heard right," the barman said, "But that's opened up a lot of opportunities for anyone with their own ship right now."

"Why?" Brae asked.

"Because the pirates are good. They're hitting easy targets that bring a good haul without getting caught but they aren't moving their haul outside of the sector. Instead they're dumping it all locally onto the black market and letting the fences distribute it further afield where it won't be recognised as stolen." the barman explained.

"And how do we get in on this action?" Tylo said and the barman smiled back at him.

"Just take a seat." he replied, "As soon as anyone comes in looking for someone with a ship I'll point them in your direction."

"Thanks." Tylo said and he and Brae started to walk away from the bar, hunting for somewhere to sit. Having seen what Brae did to the last person to try touching her the other patrons stepped aside to give both her and Tylo a clear path and as they got to the far side of the cantina a pair of men sat at a small table got up and hurriedly departed.

Sitting down at the table, Brae lifted her glass to her lips but paused and frowned, staring at Tylo.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"The last time you got me a drink in a cantina it burned every time I used the refresher for the next three days." she reminded him and he grinned.

"You had that coming kid." he replied, "I got pretty much the same from you right before that. Would it make you happier if we swapped drinks?"

"No." Brae said, pulling her drink closer as Tylo held out his, "I think I better keep to soft drinks for the time being."

"Good idea kid." Tylo said before taking a deep gulp from his beer, "Now let's wait and see what drops in our laps."

"Is that really it? Just sit and wait?" Brae asked and she sighed, "I bet Uncle Jayk is having more fun than we are."

"Nonsense!" Nug snapped, "Your ships continue to violate our territory."

"Unclaimed territory minister." Mellendre replied, "The Republic has not recognised your claim yet so why should we?"

"Because it's your fault we had to establish a security zone around those systems." Nug said, "For years our

respective citizens were able to come and go freely and conduct business that was worth billions of credits to our respective economies. But thanks to you ignoring your society's criminal element as long as they are only attacking our citizens we've had to step in and do what you refused to."

"Minister Nug," Jayk said, "would you be willing to pull your forces back if Riless did the same? From the information you've both provided about the strength of the pirates Captain Reece and the *Valiant* are more than capable of dealing with them."

"If you don't mind me asking," Mellendre responded, looking at Jayk, "But what good is a single warship against a fleet? The pirates simply need to split up and head in different directions whenever your ship arrives."

"But in doing so they have to spend time and fuel in regrouping ambassador." Jayk said, "That means they are prevented from launching co-ordinated attacks against anyone else and must replace that fuel. In addition with each encounter they are likely to lose another ship and they will eventually run out."

"A war of attrition master jedi?" Nug commented.

"If you like." Jayk replied, "But the question remains are you willing to withdraw your ships and let the judicial department eliminate the pirate threat?"

4.

"I hear you have a ship." a voice said and Tylo and Brae both looked up at the hooded figure now standing beside their table.

"And you said a hooded robe would make me stand out." Brae whispered to Tylo.

"Yes we have a ship." Tylo said in response to the figure, "The *Swift Exit*."

"The *Swift Exit*?" the figure said as he sat, "Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"You've never heard of the *Swift Exit*?" Tylo asked, "Oh well, I suppose at least that means I don't owe you any money. So what do you want moving and where to?"

"I have a shipment of labour droids that needs to be transported to a colony out on the edge of Wild Space." the man said as he lowered his hood to reveal his facial features and Brae frowned momentarily, "You'll be given a down payment with the balance paid when the goods are delivered. A member of my group will accompany you there to ensure everything is carried out in an orderly fashion."

"Sounds fair enough." Tylo replied, "So how much are we talking about here?"

"Fifty tonnes of droids at one hundred and fifty credits per tonne." the man said, "Ready to be delivered to your ship this time tomorrow."

"Have you seen them yet?" Tylo said.

"No." the man answered, shaking his head, "But I trust the source. They've no reason to try and cheat me, I'm too useful to them. Now do we have a deal?"

"I think we do." Tylo replied, "But aren't you worried about that Republic cruiser that's in the area?"

"Not at all. I have it on good authority that it won't be around much longer." the man said.

"In that case have your droids at docking bay ninety four, this time tomorrow." Tylo said, "Along with the destination details of course."

"Excellent. My associate shall be at your ship in twenty-four hours." the man said before he got back to his feet and walked away.

"Okay now we wait." Tylo said to Brae, "When those droids are delivered we'll run their serial numbers and fake an engine problem long enough for us to find out whether this guy is working for the pirate we're after."

"He is." Brae replied and Tylo stared at her..

"How do you know?" he asked, "Did you read his mind or something?"

"No, I've seen him before. When Uncle Jayk and I first arrived there was a welcoming party waiting for us."

"And he was part of it? Stang, we're lucky he didn't recognise you."

"No he wasn't a part of it. He appeared a bit later on with a message for the minister of security, a general called Coran. That must be how the pirates are staying one step ahead of the military, they've got a man on the inside to pass them information."

"It also explains why the pirates aren't hitting outlaw traffic. The military doesn't know their flight paths or manifests. If they did then they'd be intercepting them themselves." Tylo said.

"But why would he think that the *Valiant* isn't going to be around much longer? It's not going anywhere." Brae said and Tylo nodded.

"I know. And I've got a very bad feeling about it." he said.

Almost all of the *Valiant's* sixteen thousand strong crew were at duty stations as they prepared for the ship to drop out of hyperspace. By matching together multiple exit vectors taken by pirate ships fleeing the scene of an attack the cruiser's navigators had been able to determine a location on the edge of an uninhabited system that appeared likely to be functioning as a staging area of some sort and now the plan was to launch a direct assault. Even if there were only a handful of pirates present the *Valiant* could lie in wait until there others returned and ambush them.

Captain Reece stood on her bridge watching her crew as they worked, letting them just get on with the tasks they had rehearsed so many times before.

"Weapons on line."

"Shields ready."

"Fighter leader reporting his craft are armed and ready for launch."

But all of a sudden there was a klaxon and the comscan officer looked up from his console.

"Gravity well ahead." he called out, "Object in flight path."

"Navigation, confirm our heading." Captain Reece called out, rushing over to the *Valiant's* navigator.

"On course as plotted captain. There shouldn't be anything out here." the navigator replied before the ship started to shudder as the gravity field from the mysterious object started to disrupt their travel through hyperspace and moments later the *Valiant* lurched violently as it returned to realspace when its hyperdrive safety features cut in to prevent the vessel from being torn apart by the mass shadow in hyperspace.

"Brace for collision!" the helmsman yelled out suddenly when in front of the *Valiant* he saw the object that had forced the ship out of hyperspace, a large asteroid that had not been on any of the navigational charts. "It's a trap! Hard to starboard." Captain Reece ordered but as the helmsman started to steer the ship away from the asteroid it suddenly exploded, sending a cloud of debris in all directions. Caught by surprise just after being forced out of hyperspace the crew of the *Valiant* had no chance to raise their vessel's shields and the cruiser was showered with debris from the exploding asteroid. Much of this failed to penetrate the thickly armoured hull of the dreadnought-class ship but several larger chunks of rock struck with sufficient force that even this protection was inadequate and the ship was further rocked by explosions, leaving it adrift and burning in space.

When Jayk returned to the hotel after the first day of seemingly fruitless talks between the rowing worlds he sensed Brae's presence the moment that he stepped from the turbolift but he was surprised to also find Tylo present, helping himself to the bar.

"You shouldn't be here." he told the smuggler, "The hotel staff are in contact with the government and they may inform them of your presence."

"Don't worry, no-one noticed me coming up here." Tylo replied.

"We came in through the back and I distracted all of the staff we saw." Brae added.

"Good job too, because the last thing we need is the government finding out about me." Tylo said, "Especially since the pirates are working with them."

"Seriously?" Jayk asked.

"Yes master." Brae answered.

"Well they've got a guy in the security ministry anyway." Tylo said before taking a sip from the drink he had just poured himself.

"The same man who we met today to arrange a smuggling job was present when you and I were greeted by the prime minister and his staff." Brae explained, "He was there to deliver a message."

"And one of his friends will be delivering a bunch of droids to the *Swift Exit* tomorrow." Tylo added.

Jayk took out Cal's holocron and placed it on the table.

"Cal did you catch all that?" he asked.

"About government moles working with the criminal underworld? Yes I heard it and if you take my advice you'll call for as much back up as you can get. I've seen what happens when governments become corrupted and it's not pretty." Cal said when his hologram appeared.

"We don't know the entire government is involved." Brae said, "It could just be a single insider."

"Or maybe not." Tylo commented.

"In either eventuality we now have two avenues of investigation to pursue." Jayk said, "I will follow up your lead within the security ministry while you continue to pretend to be smugglers looking for local work. Confirm that the cargo delivered to you was taken by the pirates and question whoever delivers it to you."

Just then the communication panel chimed and Jayk activated it.

"Jedi Udra?" a voice said.

"Yes." Jayk answered.

"I have a transmission for you from a Captain Reece."

"Ah yes, put her through." Jayk said and moments later a hologram of Captain Reece appeared in the room.

"Jedi Udra," she said, "the *Valiant* has been crippled by a trap. Somehow the pirates knew we were coming and were able to lay an asteroid that was rigged with explosives in our path. The mass of the asteroid forced us out of hyperspace and the debris from the explosion has taken out our engines."

"So what do we do now?" Brae asked, looking back and forth between Jayk and Tylo.

"The *Swift Exit*'s not a rescue ship." Tylo said.

"I was meaning about the pirates. Without the *Valiant* to support us we can't take on a fleet." Brae said.

"You should not place so much reliance on technology my young apprentice." Jayk told her, "The power of a warship is insignificant compared to the power of the Force."

"Jayk, are you saying that you can take down these pirates alone?" Tylo asked.

"Yes. Though I won't have to. Brae will deal with the pirates. With your help of course. I am needed here to root out how deep their influence in the local government goes." Jayk replied. Then he looked at the hologram of Captain Reece again, "Repair your ship as best you can captain. Then make for nearest port. We will deal with the pirates and their supporters in the local government."

5.

Aboard the *Swift Exit*, Brae and Tylo waited for their contact from the pirates to arrive with the droids they were supposed to move to the edge of known space and they were both somewhat surprised when the sullustan that arrived did so empty handed.

"So are these droids some sort of new super compact type then?" Tylo asked while he watched the sullustan climb the *Swift Exit's* access ramp.

"If we could get them to Collinar so easily then we wouldn't need you." the sullustan replied, "My name is Thon Thul and I will be your guide to where they can be collected."

"How do we know this isn't some sort of trap where you try and steal the ship?" Brae said.

"You don't." Thon told her abruptly, "How do I know you're not just planning to take the down payment and steal our cargo?"

"I get your point." Brae said.

"Good. Now show me to the cockpit, I need to program your nav computer."

Sullustans had an unparalleled innate sense of direction and this extended as far as plotting jumps through hyperspace. Providing they had already been to a place they would be able to find their way back and without needing to check any charts or databases Thon was able to program the jump co-ordinates needed to make their rendezvous entirely from memory.

"Where will this take us?" Tylo asked when the *Swift Exit* was approaching the point where it needed to enter hyperspace.

"Interstellar space." Thon told him, "One of our ships will be waiting there."

"One of?" Brae commented.

"We have a small fleet at our disposal. Remember that if you are planning on double crossing us. Our reach is long and we can hunt you down."

"The thought never even entered my mind." Tylo said before he activated the *Swift Exit's* hyperdrive. Then once he was satisfied that the ship's autopilot was functioning properly he got up, "Now if you don't mind I need to double check that my junior partner understands what I expect from her." he said before leaving the cockpit.

"Junior partner?" Brae hissed, having been listening in on the conversation from the other end of the passageway leading from the lounge to the cockpit.

"Just come with me." Tylo whispered back and he pulled her towards the crew quarters, "Okay, now we're going to be faced with a ship full of pirates. Do you think you can take them all out?"

"I don't know. How many are we talking about?"

"I don't know. Probably just a handful. But I was thinking we could do with taking one alive or at least keeping Thon in there alive."

"So he can lead us to their base you mean?" Brae asked and Tylo smiled.

"Exactly." he said, "But we'll need to overpower the rest and in all likelihood that's going to mean killing them."

"Okay." Brae said, "I'll make sure I've got my lightsaber handy."

"Do you have a knife?" Tylo asked and Brae frowned.

"Why?"

"Because a knife makes even less noise than a lightsaber does. Stick it between their ribs and twist so they can't cry out. Just use your lightsaber or blaster when there's no other choice."

"Well the Jedi Order issues them as multi-purpose tools. Mine is with my things."

"Good. Go and get it. I've got one tucked away as well. Plus I've got that rifle I never handed back in on Shonat. When the excitement gets going I'll fetch that and-"

"Hey!" a sullustan voice called out suddenly, "Where are you both? We're coming up on the rendezvous point."

"Coming." Tylo replied and he hurried back to the cockpit, getting there just in time to see the blurred lights of hyperspace turn back into the distinct points of light of realspace. Floating among these was a starship that according to its transponder was an Ulig Abaha dimel-class assault ship. At just under a hundred metres long the light warship was no match for most capital ships but it carried more than sixty crew and enough firepower to destroy the *Swift Exit* with a single volley, meaning that Tylo and Brae were heavily outnumbered and out gunned, "Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." he muttered to himself.

"This is Thon." Thon signalled without asking Tylo first, "Are you ready to transfer the cargo?"

"Ready when you are. Just pull alongside and we'll get them moved over." came the reply in a voice that bore the same sullustan accent as Thon.

"Well, you heard him." Thon said to Tylo, "Get us alongside that ship."

"Okay, okay. Hold your cracian thumpers." Tylo said as he turned the *Swift Exit* towards the pirate ship and headed straight for it.

Despite the pirate ship being almost four times the length of the freighter, the *Swift Exit* would not fit inside its cargo hold and so instead the two vessels joined together via their docking ports. Brae, Tylo and Thon were all present inside the *Swift Exit's* docking port when it opened to reveal a pair of sullustans with a row of bulky labour droids stood in a row behind them, each one fitted with a restraining bolt.

"Is this it?" Tylo asked when he looked along the row and calculated that the total mass of the droids in sight was less than a fifth of what he was expecting.

"Of course not." one of the sullustan pirate crew replied, "But the easiest way to transfer them to your ship is just have them walk aboard by themselves. We'll go and get the others when we're ready."

"Tylo, perhaps I should go and take a look at them myself." Brae suggested, "Just in case there's anything that needs to be taken into account."

"Good idea. But leave a comm channel open just in case. I'd hate to accidentally leave you behind."

"Hey wait." one of the sullustans said, "Nobody said anything about one of you coming aboard our ship."

"But it was your idea." Brae said and with a subtle wave of her hand she pushed the idea into his mind and deep as possible.

"I know it was. That's why I want you to get a move on." the sullustan replied and Tylo nodded at Brae before she crossed into the pirate vessel.

Following the pirate through the ship, Brae noticed that every one of the crew that she saw was also sullustan and that as a consequence of their superior sense of direction there were no signs at all to indicate which direction key areas of the ship were in. This made a great deal of sense to Brae, it meant that an invader could not simply follow them when trying to take such areas of the ship while the crew would be able to find their way around unhindered.

The cargo hold where the rest of the droids were being kept was not that far from the docking port and Brae looked around, finding herself surrounded by the machines. But being here did her no good, she needed to reach the assault ship's bridge if she and Tylo were going to seize control of it.

"Have you seen what you needed to?" the sullustan asked from behind Brae and she turned towards him.

"I need to see the bridge." she said, holding up her hand as she tried to influence the pirate's mind.

"The bridge is off limits." the sullustan responded.

"I need to see the bridge." Brae repeated, trying even harder to push the thought into the sullustan's mind using the Force but with no more success.

"And I just told you that it's off limits. Are you brain dead?" he replied and he reached out to grab Brae by the arm.

Knowing that if she was returned to the *Swift Exit* it would probably not be possible to gain access to the pirate vessel again without using force, Brae knew that she could no longer put off using a weapon and she slid her knife from under her jacket. The sullustan saw this and was about to call out for help when Brae thrust the blade into his ribcage and twisted it just like Tylo had told her. Unable to cry out, the sullustan collapsed while still holding onto Brae's arm and pulling her down with him. But pushing the knife in deeper, Brae pierced his heart and all of a sudden he let go.

Brae jumped back quickly, avoiding most of the blood that spurted from the wound she had inflicted on the pirate but looking down at the hand that held her knife she saw that there was a significant amount of blood on it as well as the sleeve of her jacket. Quickly she removed the jacket and used it to wipe the blood from her hand before tossing it onto the floor. Just one look at the body close to her feet was enough to tell Brae that it was a waste of time trying to conceal it, the expanding pool of blood would be obvious to anyone.

There was a similar issue now with her lightsaber as well and Brae unhooked it from under her shoulder, removing the harness that held it as well before she simply tucked the weapon inside her shirt. Had she left it on open display then there would be no chance of her trying to explain her way out of being caught prowling the corridors of the ship unaccompanied. Retrieving the weapon if she needed it would take time now, but at least it was hidden. Finally tucking her knife into her sleeve Brae left the hold and headed in the direction of the front of the ship where she expected to find the bridge.

"Looks like this sector has been pretty profitable for you guys." Tylo commented as he watched the droids marching into the *Swift Exit's* hold.

"Sure has," Thon replied, "and it was so easy as well. I don't know why we didn't think of it sooner."

"Think of what?" Tylo asked.

"Getting two worlds to the brink of war without them actually starting all that shooting." the other sullustan commented, "We attack some two credit mining post belonging to one and it gets blamed on the other by a guy we've bought off. Then that guy makes sure that tensions stay high while at the same time letting us know of targets ripe for attack as well as military patrol schedules."

"All in exchange for a cut of course." Thon added, "Behave yourself smuggler and this could be a lucrative opportunity for you."

Tylo had set his comlink not to make any sound when it received an incoming signal, instead he just felt it vibrate in his pocket when Brae attempted to contact him before he could respond to this suggestion. "I'll leave you lot to this." he said to the sullustans, "I just need to visit the refresher." and without waiting for any of them to reply he headed for the *Swift Exit's* bathroom. Once there he took out his comlink and activated it, "Go ahead." he said softly.

"Tylo it's Brae." Brae's voice said in a soft tone and Tylo sighed.

"Thanks for telling me. I'd never have guessed otherwise." he commented, "Where are you?"

"Aboard the pirate ship. I had to kill the one that escorted me to the hold but I'm heading for the bridge now. I hope."

"I take you hid the body?" Tylo asked.

"Not much point, there was blood everywhere so I just got moving as quickly as I could."

"Okay you did the right thing. Now you just get to the bridge and secure it. I'm going to deal with the pirates here." and he shut off the comlink and put it away. He was about to leave the bathroom when he remembered his stated reason for coming here and he activated the disposal sequence on the refresher so that the sullustans would hear it before exiting the bathroom.

However, rather than head straight back to the *Swift Exit's* hold he made his way quietly to his bunk and retrieved the rifle he kept stored there. Then with the rifle braced against his shoulders ready to fire he headed for the cargo hold. As expected the two sullustan pirates were still in the hold getting the droids to stand in positions that would make it easy to pack the entire shipment in. Out of the corner of one eye Thon noticed Tylo and the rifle in his hands and started to call out a warning. But before he could finish Tylo opened fire and a rapid burst from his rifle sent the sullustan flying backwards into one of the droids. The second sullustan reached for his own blaster but Tylo had him at a disadvantage and in the time it took for the sullustan to simply grab hold of his weapon's grip Tylo had already taken aim and fired again with a second burst despatching Thon as well.

Before anyone on the pirate ship could come to investigate what had happened to Thon and the other sullustan Tylo raced for the docking port and positioned himself just inside it so he could see into the pirate vessel. Then he took out his comlink.

"Brae." he said, "Are you free to talk?"

"Yes, go ahead." she replied.

"The *Swift Exit* is secured. Where are you now?"

"I can see the bridge ahead but there are two guards right outside. I'm not so sure I'll be able to bluff my way to the door."

"You could try-" Tylo began before all of a sudden a klaxon sounded aboard the pirate vessel, "I've got a bad feeling about this." Tylo said, "They must have found that body you left. No point in keeping out of sight now. Just go for it."

Hearing this Brae smiled as she put her comlink away and instead reached inside her shirt for her lightsaber. Part of it got caught on the shirt as she withdrew it, making her glad that she had not had to draw it in a hurry. The moment she ignited the weapon there was the characteristic 'snap-hiss' and both of the sullustan guards positioned outside the assault ship's bridge readied their weapons as Brae stepped out into the open.

"In the name of the Galactic Senate of the Republic you are under arrest. Surrender this ship to me now." she called out, knowing full well that an entire pirate crew was unlikely to surrender to her and that even if they did then she had no way of keeping them under control. Fortunately for her the sullustans opted not to surrender.

Danger.

Brae sensed the first shot before it was fired and was able to position her lightsaber to block the attack, sending the blaster bolt up into the ceiling where it struck a lighting panel in a manner that sent a power surge along the entire corridor and caused all of the lighting panels to explode. Brae immediately broke into a sprint, charging towards the bridge while the startled sullustans were too busy to react. She knew that she would not make it all the way to the entrance to the bridge before the guards came to their senses but Brae wanted to close as much of the gap between them as she could, well aware that her skills with a lightsaber were not sufficient for her to keep on deflecting blaster bolts. Instead her only hope was to avoid their blaster fire until she was close enough to strike back at them directly. This she managed, with blaster bolts flying past her as she evaded them but she was too late to prevent the bridge crew from dropping a blast door to seal the bridge.

"Stang!" she exclaimed moments before using two rapid cuts of her lightsaber to deal with both the guards. Then before the bridge crew could summon reinforcements Brae plunged her lightsaber into the blast door and started to drag it around in a roughly circular shape. The alloy of the blast door was not designed to resist a lightsaber blade and before long Brae saw that the circle was now complete and she stepped aside as the loose section fell free. Brae was just about to take a quick look through the hole she had created when a blaster bolt came flying out through it and she felt her hair being singed by the extreme heat.

"Stang!" she exclaimed again and instinctively she lashed out through the Force, sending a telekinetic blast back through the hole that hurled the pirate who had just taken a shot at her back across the bridge. Brae then dived through the hole, rolling across the floor as she landed and cutting the legs out from under a sullustan who stood in her way. Leaping to her feet, Brae then charged from one pirate to another and despatched each one in turn. Not all of the bridge crew had blasters but even those without still tried to resist by attempting to retrieve weapons dropped by those who did or even by fighting in hand to hand combat against her. As she moved she noticed that one sullustan in particular was doing his best to stay out her way while encouraging the others to attack her and she decided that this was obviously the captain of the assault ship and Brae took note of who he was.

When there was only one other sullustan remaining other than the captain, he attempted to run for the hole that Brae had cut in the blast door but he was too slow and Brae beat him there. Rather than attack with her lightsaber Brae simply threw a punch at the captain that struck him in the face and he collapsed in a heap with blood pouring from his nose. Meanwhile Brae turned on the last of the sullustans just as he was turning a blaster he had picked up in her direction. With the sullustan stood just a few metres from where Brae was, she reached out the same hand she had punched the captain with and concentrated on the blaster being held by the sullustan. She intended to pull it from the pirate's grip to leave him defenceless, but her focus was not narrow enough and the telekinetic pull she created instead dragged the sullustan himself towards her rapidly. Acting instinctively Brae raised her lightsaber into a defensive posture but the sullustan was still coming towards her and she impaled him on the blade.

This left only the captain to deal with and Brae turned to where he lay looking back up at her.

"On your feet!" she yelled, "You're under arrest." As the pirate captain got to his feet Brae took out her comlink again and activated it, "Tylo are you there?" she asked.

"Right here kid. How are you?" Tylo replied.

"I've taken the bridge and I think I have the captain prisoner." she told him.

"Excellent work kid. The *Swift Exit* is secure for now but it's only a matter of time before we're dealing with the rest of the crew. We need to get rid of them."

"How?" Brae asked.

"You've got the captain there haven't you? Get him to order them off the ship. Tell them that if they don't leave we'll evacuate all the air. That ought to work."

"Okay you heard him." Brae said, turning to face the captain, "Order your crew to abandon ship."

"Or what? You're a jedi and I am your prisoner." the sullustan hissed.

"So were they technically." Brae said, looking at the bodies on the floor of the bridge, "Who'd notice another corpse?"

The sullustan cursed under his breath and pulled himself up next to a nearby console before activating the ship's intercom.

"This is the captain. The jedi have taken control of the ship and I advise everyone to leave before they can disable the life support systems." he said into it.

6.

When Jayk reached the government building where the talks were due to restart shortly he did not head for the conference room. Instead he followed the signs that pointed him towards the offices of the security ministry. This was a high security area and when they saw him wandering the corridors a pair of security guards challenged him.

"Stop right there." one ordered, "What are you doing here?" but Jayk did not even bother to respond, instead he just waved his hand and the two guards turned around and walked away from him, leaving Jayk free to proceed. He had with him a datapad that showed an image captured by security cameras when he had first arrived at Collinar. The particular image Jayk had wanted showed the face of the man who Brae said had later met her and Tylo in the cantina and as Jayk walked past offices and rows of desks he checked the beings there to see if they matched the man he was looking for.

He found the man stood at a control and communications station, seemingly oblivious to the presence of the Jedi and Jayk drew his lightsaber.

"Step away from the console." he said clearly and the man turned and looked at him, his eyes widening when he saw the inactive lightsaber in Jayk's hand. But the man at the console was not the only person to see what was going on and there were gasps from around the room as other security ministry staff turned to watch. One of them however, instead of just watching what was happening activated their intercom to call for assistance and in under a minute General Coran appeared flanked by a squad of soldiers.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"General I don't know." the man Jayk was staring at replied.

"This man is acting in league with the pirates general." Jayk announced, "As we speak my padawan and another agent of the Jedi Order are taking action against pirates he arranged for them to meet with."

"Korsel, how could you be so foolish?" General Coran hissed. Then he turned to his guards, "Detain him." he ordered, but rather than point at Korsel he pointed at Jayk and the guards stepped towards the Jedi. But as they raised their weapons Jayk activated his lightsaber and turned to face them. The guards closest to him started to aim their weapons at Jayk but with a single stroke of his lightsaber he cut every single blaster in half, leaving the startled guards disarmed. Then he stretched out his hand and sent them flying backwards into their comrades using the Force.

"Run!" Coran snapped, dragging Korsel along with him as the pair started to flee while the other ministry staff looked on in amazement at what was happening.

Jayk leapt over the guards now sprawled out across the floor and gave chase to the two fleeing men. The problem was that they knew the layout of the building far better than the Jedi did and they had access keys that allowed them to seal doors behind them as they went. The doors were not proper blast doors and it took only a few seconds for Jayk to force each one open with his lightsaber but the delays mounted up.

As the general and his cohort ran down one particular corridor they found themselves confronted by Nug Far, who for the time being at least remained unaware of their role in the pirate attacks.

"General, have you seen Jedi Udra? He didn't arrive at the conference room yet security say-"

"Kriff the Jedi!" Coran exclaimed and he just pushed the diplomat out of his way as he and Korsel ran passed and dived into a turbolift.

"Where did they go?" Jayk called out when he appeared moments later.

"Up." Nug responded, pointing to the turbolift, "They could be heading for the roof, there's an emergency shuttle kept there at all times."

Jayk looked at the turbolift and knew that there was no chance that he could waste the time in waiting for another to arrive and take him to the roof. So instead he ran to the nearby access to the emergency stairs and looked up them, seeing that there were about half a dozen floors between his current position and the roof.

"Good job I'm in shape." he said to himself before he started to climb the stairs.

Bursting out onto the roof he immediately heard the sound of repulsorlifts as the shuttle started to rise up into the air, leaving behind it the body of the duty pilot who had had the misfortune to challenge Coran and Korsel about taking his vessel. Jayk rushed to the body to check for signs of life but found none. Then he stood up and shut off his lightsaber as he looked up into the sky as the shuttle grew ever smaller before it vanished entirely.

In the cockpit of the shuttle General Coran entered a set of co-ordinates into the navigation computer as the tiny vessel made it to open space.

"It should take us about half an hour to get there." he told Korsel, "Then those sullustans can pay us what they owe and drop us off in another sector."

"As long as they do." Korsel replied, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"You jedi are fools." the sullustan said as Tylo looked over the assault ship's instruments. The crew were long gone, having abandoned ship as soon as their captain had told them that the jedi had taken over and now Brae and Tylo were trying to gain as much information about their actions as they could, "What do you think you've gained here?"

"Well at the very least we've taken your ship and you with it." Brae said, "So that means you can lead us to your headquarters."

"Ha!" the sullustan exclaimed, "Do you think we're so stupid as to have a fixed base? Even if that cruiser of yours hadn't fallen right into our trap it would never have found us. We'd already jumped away by the time they figured out where we had been. The same will happen again."

"Hear that?" Brae said, looking at Tylo.

"Yeah, sounds like they're operating from a larger ship." he replied. Then he looked at the sullustan and added, "What sort of ship?" but the sullustan said nothing so he turned back to Brae instead, "Think you can manage this?"

"I'll try." she said and she took a deep breath as she stared straight into the sullustan's black eyes, "Tell me about your ship." she said.

"I'll tell you nothing jedi poodoo." the sullustan said but Brae smiled.

"You're not very strong minded are you?" she said and then she looked at Tylo and added, "He thought of it as soon as I mentioned it. It's an old invincible-class ship."

"Invincible-class?" Tylo commented and Brae nodded.

"That's thousands of pirates." she said, "We can't fight all of them and we certainly can't fight that ship."

"No we-" Tylo began before a smile suddenly appeared on his face, "I've got an idea." he said, "We use this ship." and the sullustan started to laugh.

"You are fools!" he yelled.

"This ship?" Brae said, "But this ship's less than a hundred metres long and an invincible-class dreadnought is nearer two thousand and armoured like a protosteel mountain. It'll tear us apart."

"In a broadside to broadside engagement maybe." Tylo replied, "But I'm not planning on using the ship's weapons at all. I'm planning on using the ship as a weapon."

When the shuttle dropped out of hyperspace Coran and Korsel saw the imposing sight of an invincible-class dreadnought ahead of them.

"Signal them." Coran said, "Let them know-" but before he could finish there was a flash of light from beyond the massive vessel as another ship dropped out of hyperspace.

With their sullustan prisoner in tow Brae and Tylo rushed back to the *Swift Exit* and sealed the docking port behind them before disengaging it from the assault ship. Then they secured the sullustan with plastic ties to a nearby pipe and rushed to the cockpit. From there they could see the assault ship's ion drives flaring brightly as the ship raced towards the invincible-class dreadnought beyond it.

Seeing the smaller vessel closing on them and refusing to make contact, the crew of the dreadnought started to try and move it out of the way. But a vessel of this size powered by technology around three thousand years out of date took a great deal of time and effort to get moving and as it slowly began to accelerate the assault ship's autopilot compensated, guiding the smaller vessel towards the dreadnought's engines.

"Here it comes." Tylo said as he looked at the *Swift Exit's* sensors and saw the gap between the two ships decreasing rapidly.

At the last moment the dreadnought's weapons opened fire as the crew sought to destroy the assault ship before it could collide with them. But although a turbolaser blast did tear off the assault ship's ion drive it was already too late and the momentum of the ship sent it careering into the dreadnought's own engines. The result of this was spectacular and there was a blinding flash as the rear half of the dreadnought exploded, consuming the entire ship and hurling shrapnel out into space. Fortunately the *Swift Exit* was so far away that none of it reached the transport before Tylo put his hand on the hyperdrive controls.

"Okay that's it." he said, "Time to go pick up your uncle."

Jayk was waiting on the roof of the government building when the *Swift Exit* landed and Brae and Tylo walked down the access ramp with their prisoner.

"Our mission is complete master." Brae said as the sullustan was taken into custody by local security officers.

"So how did yours go?" Tylo asked.

"Both Collinar and Rilless are standing down their armed forces and will continue the talks on establishing a formal border without us. But General Coran was in on the plot as well," Jayk replied, "and unfortunately he and the accomplice you encountered were able to escape in a shuttle."

"Well they won't be rendezvousing with the pirates, that's for sure." Tylo said.

"No, I'm sure they'll turn up somewhere." Brae added as the trio then began to walk back up the *Swift Exit's* access ramp.

The shuttle cockpit was dark for lack of power as Coran and Korsel went over every system to see what still worked after the shuttle had been showered with molten debris.

"The nearest safe port is sixteen hours away general." Korsel said.

"Well that's a problem then. Because we've only got nine hours of breathable air for the two of us." Coran replied and the two men stared at one another as they both thought about what this meant. With two of them breathing the air then they would run out when they were just over half way to safety, but if there was only one of them then they would have enough air to make it.

Then both reached for their blasters at the same time.