

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

3-06: REPAIR & REVOLT

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News of a painting by Thal N'Krey being stolen leads the Jedi to suspect that it has been taken by one of the gangs collecting his work. However, when they investigate they uncover a revolution in the making...

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1.

Lucus and Peri Tann noticed something amiss the moment that Lucas opened the front door to their residential unit aboard the habitat station in orbit around the planet Corulag in the Core Worlds region of the Galactic Republic.

"Didn't you activate the security system before we left?" Peri asked her husband.

"Of course I did, you heard it setting." he replied defensively.

"Then why isn't it sounding now?" Peri added as she walked to a nearby door leading out of the hallway and opened it only to gasp when she saw the condition of the room on the other side.

Numerous items were obviously missing while every conceivable storage space had been opened and its contents tipped out.

"Lucus!" she cried out, "Call the police. We've been robbed."

In the main hangar of the Jedi temple on Coruscant, Tylo Kurrast lay beneath his YT-700 class light freighter performing basic maintenance checks. Tylo himself was no Jedi but as part of a deal to keep him out of prison he now found himself working exclusively for the Jedi Order. While not his preferred outcome he had to admit that there were certain benefits, for example having access to the best equipment available for maintaining his vessel and being provided with spare parts for free. Thanks to the relaxed attitude possessed by the Jedi knight Tylo had to transport around the galaxy, Jayk Udra, he had been able to fit the interior of the ship out with several luxury items at the Jedi Order's expense as well.

All of a sudden Tylo noticed a pair of boots close to his own that indicated someone was standing by his feet and he slid out from under the ship to see who it was.

"Oh hi there kid." he said, smiling at Jayk's padawan Brae Udra. When first assigned to Jayk as his padawan they had been told that she was his niece, however it had later emerged that she was in fact his daughter from a relationship he had entered into while on a long term assignment, "Aren't you supposed to be practising lightsaber combat?"

"The instructor told me to leave the class." Brae answered.

"Why? Did you smash the training remotes up again?"

"No. We were practising against one another and I'm too good. I keep beating my opponents before they can get in a single strike." Brae told him and then she sighed, "I suppose that's the problem with having been deployed in the field already."

"Experience is the best teacher kid." Tylo said and Brae smiled.

"Which is why I thought I'd come and find you. Dad's not about and I figured that if I help you with the *Swift Exit's* maintenance then I might learn something new."

"Sure kid, let's see what we can find for you to do." Tylo said as he got to his feet and the pair of them headed around to the front of the ship where its main access ramp was located but before they could go aboard a familiar voice called out to them from across the hangar.

"Brae! Tylo!"

Turning round they saw a dark skinned man waving as he was escorted towards them by one of the temple guardians. Dahlis Hebro was a university professor who was regarded as one of the Republic's foremost art experts who had assisted the Udras on several occasions.

"Professor Hebro." Brae said as he got closer, "What are you doing here?"

"Hoping to speak to you. Your uncle as well, is he aboard?"

"My uncle?" Brae commented.

"Hey that's right, you won't have heard yet will you?" Tylo added, pointing at Dahlis.

"Heard what? Has something happened to Jayk?" the professor replied.

"No but he's not Brae's uncle at all. He's her father."

Aware of the Jedi Order's prohibition on marriage and romantic attachment Dahlis frowned.

"How did that happen?" he asked.

"The usual way." Tylo answered, "Jayk got lucky on an assignment and now we have Brae."

"Dad's not in the temple right now." Brae said, "But you can wait with us if you want."

"Thank you, yes I will." Dahlis replied and Brae turned to the guardian.

"He'll wait with us in the ship." she told the armoured figure who just nodded silently before turning around and walking away.

"Come on then professor," Tylo said, beckoning for Dahlis to follow him into the *Swift Exit*, "the Jedi Order just kindly restocked my fridge with some very nice Corellian whisky."

When Jayk Udra arrived at the *Swift Exit* about half an hour later he found Brae, Tylo and Dahlis sat in the

lounge waiting for him and he noticed the scent of whisky in the air.
"I do hope that you have not been encouraging Brae to drink." he said.
"Of course not." Tylo responded, "But we saved some for you." and he poured some of the drink into a spare glass.
"Thank you." Jayk said as he sat down.
"Congratulations on becoming a father by the way." Dahlis added as Jayk took a sip of his drink.
"So you've heard. Is that the reason for your visit?" Jayk said.
"No, I'm afraid it's business." Dahlis told him and Tylo groaned.
"Oh great. Let me guess, you've tracked down another piece of art by Thal N'Krey and now we need to rush off and make sure it's not really a genuine Sith artefact."
"Not quite. I have discovered someone who is the legal owner of a piece of artwork by Thal N'Krey but unfortunately I can't give you its exact location."
"How come?" Brae asked while she sipped at a soft drink.
"Because it has been stolen." Dahlis answered, "The owners reported a break in at their home to the police and of course they also filed a claim with their insurance company, listing everything they say was stolen. That list included an original painting by Thal N'Krey. The insurance company wanted to confirm its value before they paid out and as one of the Republic's foremost art experts they came to me for my opinion."
"Not to be picky professor, but how can we be certain that this painting really existed?" Tylo said, "I mean what's to stop these people from just saying they owned this painting to pad their claim?"
"There is an image of it in the insurance company records." Dahlis replied, picking up his datapad and calling up a copy of the image. Then he held out the datapad so that the others sat around the table could see it.
"That looks like a Thal N'Krey painting alright." Brae said when she immediately recognised the model used for the subject of the painting.
"Yes, isn't that that model you slept with Jayk?" Tylo added, looking at the jedi knight.
The painting was of the model that Thal N'Krey had used as a basis for much of his work, sometimes altering her appearance to match that of near human species such as the Sith but always retaining her core appearance.
Jayk looked at Tylo sternly for a moment before addressing Dahlis.
"That painting obviously depicts Vallani Mellet." he said, "Do you have any other evidence that it may be based on genuine Sith knowledge."
"If we zoom in more closely you can see that the painting features markings on the background detail." Dahlis said, zooming in on a specific part of the painting where a wall was covered with markings, "This image isn't good enough quality to positively identify but I think that it's Sith writing."
"It certainly looks like it." Jayk said in agreement.
"So it could have been copied from an actual Sith text?" Brae asked and Jayk nodded.
"Yes it could and that's a chance we can't take. We need to locate this painting." he said.
"So we're going to Corulag?" Tylo said."
"We are. However, you will not be piloting the ship." Jayk said.
"How come?" Tylo said.
"Because you have been drinking. Brae, I want you to fly us to Corulag. Have Cal assist you with the hyperspace jump." Jayk responded.
"Cal did you hear that?" Brae said and the image of an older human in jedi robes appeared in the centre of the lounge, projected from a crystalline cube that sat on a shelf.
Cal Udra was a distant ancestor of Jayk and Brae, a jedi knight who had lived more than three and a half thousand years earlier. During his life he had created a holocron that contained not only all of his knowledge but also a recreation of his personality as a guide to the knowledge it contained. Serving in an era where the jedi were free to have families of their own, Cal's first padawan had been his own sister and it had been felt his experience in training a family member would be of benefit to Jayk and Brae. Now he travelled aboard the *Swift Exit* with them.
"Of course," the holographic image of Cal replied, "and I'm only too happy to help."

With Dahlis accompanying them to Corulag, Jayk, Brae and Tylo docked with the orbiting habitat as close to the home of the couple who had been burgled and used the internal transit system to take them straight there.

"Now remember these people may not have known exactly what it is that they had in their possession. We need to tread carefully when discussing the painting." Jayk said and Brae nodded as Jayk pressed the intercom button beside the front door.

"Hello?" a man's voice said.

"My name is Jedi Knight Jayk Udra. We would like to speak with you about the recent break in at these premises." Jayk said.

"One moment." the man replied and a few seconds later the door slid open to reveal Lucus, "Please come in.

It's a relief to know that someone's taking this seriously but why is the Jedi Order interested in a burglary?" "Because your painting might have contained banned Sith stuff." Tylo answered before either of the Jedi or Dahlis could answer.

Surprise.

"Way to tread carefully." Brae whispered.

"Hey, I bet you got something from his reaction." Tylo commented.

"Yes I did." Jayk replied and then he looked at Lucas and added, "My associate Captain Kurrast is correct. When you submitted your insurance claim the insurance company contacted Professor Hebro here and he contacted us. We have been trying to track down the artist who created your painting."

"Oh." Lucas said, "I was hoping that perhaps you'd help my wife and I get our property back."

"I thought you were insured." Tylo said.

"We are, or rather we were but the insurance company is refusing to pay out." Lucas said.

"Then why did they ask me for a valuation on your painting?" Dahlis asked.

"Because it was only when they got the police report that said our security system was deactivated by an authorised user that they decided to reject our claim." Lucas explained.

"Authorised user?" Tylo commented.

"Yes but that could only have been myself or my wife and we were both at the theatre." Lucas said.

"May we see your security panel?" Jayk asked and Lucas nodded.

"Of course. It's right over here." he said and he led the Jedi to a closet at the side of the hallway, opening it to reveal the security control panel for the home.

"This looks standard enough." Jayk said as he inspected the panel, "Alphanumeric keypad and multi character display screen. Can you show me where the system was shut down for the break in?"

"Yes, it'll just take a minute." Lucas said and Jayk looked aside as he began to enter his security code into the keypad. Brae and Dahlis also turned away but Tylo kept looking at him until Brae punched his arm and frowned at him, at which point Tylo sighed and also looked away before Lucas finished entering his entire code, "There, that's it." Lucas said shortly after and Jayk looked at the display to see a list of time stamped events, alternating between 'set' and 'unset' the recorded when the security system had been accessed and why.

"Looks like it was shut down properly to me." Tylo commented as he moved closer, "Locally as well, not using some remote key."

"Are you an expert on these things captain?" Lucas asked and Tylo smiled.

"I've had some experience with burglar alarms in the past, yes." he said without adding that most of this had to do with escaping the scene of a crime after triggering one off.

"My wife and I are the only ones with the code though." Lucas said.

"Do you have children who could know it?" Jayk asked.

"We have three, but none are old enough for us to tell them the access code." Lucas told him.

"There are people who can get past alarms like this you know. Not many but they are out there." Tylo said.

"Would Mara Tosk happen to be one of them?" Brae asked.

"Probably, yes. She did boast about how there wasn't an alarm made she could not beat." Tylo replied, "I figured she was bragging but given that we're here to investigate that painting it would make sense that Crayne sent her to steal it if he found out about it."

"Who is this Mara Tosk? Do you know who broke into my home?" Lucas said.

"We have a theory." Jayk replied, "It is possible that your home was specifically targeted because of the Thal N'Krey painting you owned."

"But if all they wanted was the painting why take everything else?" Lucas said.

"What else was stolen?" Jayk asked in reply.

"Lots, my wife's jewellery, cash we had around the house, our droid, electronic items." Lucas told him and Jayk looked at Tylo.

"That's all stuff Crayne could move easily. Mara's not one to overlook an opportunity." he said.

"So it could all have been taken to cover up the theft of the painting?" Dahlis said.

"It's an old ploy." Jayk responded, "Use a lesser crime to hide a greater one."

"But all this over some painting? It wasn't even that expensive. We bought it at a second hand store less than a month ago. They had several by the same artist." Lucas said and this caught Jayk's attention.

"Where exactly is this store?" he asked.

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Provided with the location of the store where the painting had been obtained the group left Lucas' home but Jayk stopped in the wide passageway outside.

"We need to split up." he said, "Tylo I want you to escort Dahlis to the store where the painting came from. He can identify any others by Thal N'Krey they have and the pair of you can find out how many others have been sold."

"Sure. But what will you and Brae be doing while we're off looking at pictures of your favourites prostitute?" Tylo asked but Jayk did not reply to him, instead turning to Brae.

"Brae, you and I will contact the local police. If more of the paintings have been sold then it's likely that the owners will be targeted as well." he said.

"Yes master." she said.

"Okay, we'll meet back at the ship when we're done but everyone keep your comlinks active just in case we need to change that." Jayk said before the group split up into their pairs.

The habitat station's nearest police station was not far away and Jayk and Brae soon arrived at the entrance to it, walking straight through the doorway and up to the main desk.

"Please identify yourselves and state the reason for your presence." the droid behind the desk asked.

"Jedi Knight Jayk Udra and Padawan Brae Udra. We need to speak with an officer regarding a break in." Jayk said.

"One moment. Your request is being processed." the droid responded right before a door beside the desk slid open and a woman identifiable as a police officer by the badge hanging around her neck rushed through.

"Jedi Udra?" she said.

"That's me." Jayk answered, "This is my padawan Brae."

"Err, I've got her name as Udra as well." the detective said, looking at her datapad.

"It's complicated." Brae said.

"Oh. Okay. Well I'm Senior Detective Amma Rees, if you'd like to come this way we can discuss whatever it is brings you to our little part of the galaxy."

Amma then showed Jayk and Brae to the detectives' office where several other detectives sat at their desks, all of whom looked up when they noticed the pair of jedi entering the room.

"Detective Rees-" Jayk began as he and Brae sat down at Amma's desk.

"Oh call me Amma." she interrupted, "Or just Am if you want."

"Amma, we are here to ask about a break in at this address." Jayk said, passing his datapad to Amma.

"Oh that." she said when she read the address, "Another pair of nerf herders that forgot to set their alarm.

You wouldn't believe how many of those we've had recently. Then they complain when their insurance company tells them to kriff off." then Amma glanced at Brae before adding, "Excuse my language."

Jayk and Brae exchanged glances.

"There have been other break ins like this?" Brae asked.

"Sure. In the past three months or so we must have had more than a dozen. Every single one the home owners swore they set their alarms but the logs showed that someone turned them off." Amma replied.

"And were pieces of art stolen in all these burglaries?" Jayk asked.

"Err, I don't know. Hang on a moment." Amma replied and she turned to the computer terminal on her desk, calling up the reports of all of the recent break ins where the security systems had been shut down, "Okay here we are, yes it looks like art was taken from all the homes burgled. Though other valuables and electronics were taken as well."

"Detective I'm going to need a list of the art that was stolen in all these break ins." Jayk said.

"What about jewellery?" Brae commented, "Any number of Sith pendants or talismans could have been mixed in with his art." and Jayk nodded.

"My apprentice is correct. I will need a list of jewellery stolen as well. Plus as many images of everything as possible." he said.

"Hey did she just say 'Sith'? What's going on here?" Amma asked.

"Yes, all of these are Thal N'Krey originals." Dahlis said after he had inspected the four other paintings and two small statues that the store where the stolen painting had been purchased from.

"You seem to be an expert sir." the store owner said and Tylo smiled.

"As a matter of fact I'm a professor of art." Dahlis replied, "Do you have any more of this artist's works?"

"No, that's the lot. There was one other, another painting but that was sold. Are you a collector?" the store

owner asked.

"No, not of this artist's work anyway." Dahlis said.

"The problem is that there are certain beings who are and they aren't too fussy about how they get hold of new stuff for their collection." Tylo said, "That one painting you sold, it was stolen and we think that your store could be targeted as well."

The store owner's jaw dropped when he heard this.

"And who are you exactly?" he asked when he regained his composure and suddenly realised that he did not know why either of the two men in his store had gone there.

"The name's Tylo Kurrast. I work for the Jedi Order so don't worry this isn't some sort of scam where we offer to take your paintings for safe keeping and then you never see us again. If we need to take them we'll get a warrant first."

"Tell me," Dahlis added, "where exactly did you get all these pieces?"

"At a storage auction. As you can imagine there are a lot of things I can sell in abandoned storage units. I attend the auctions regularly." the store owner answered.

"What, here on the station?" Tylo asked and the store owner nodded.

"Yes. From the storage facility near docking bay four. I still have all the paperwork to prove my ownership."

"I think it might be an idea if we got a copy of that." Dahlis said, "Perhaps Jayk can use it to find out how the paintings ended up in the storage unit to begin with."

"In the meantime I think you ought to put these somewhere more secure." Tylo told the store owner,

"Somewhere surrounded by armed sector rangers ideally, but failing that whatever vault you can find that has the thickest door possible."

Just then Tylo's comlink sounded and he plucked the device from his belt.

"Tylo," Jayk's voice said, "have you found anything?"

"I'm afraid it's good news and bad Jayk." Tylo replied with a smile, "The professor has identified another half dozen works of art by N'Krey but there are no actual Sith artefacts among them and none of them have your favourite model naked in them either."

"Have any other pieces of art by N'Krey been sold?" Jayk asked, ignoring the comment about Thal's favoured model.

"No. Just that one. Looks like we got here in time to stop Crayne's people from having a go at getting any more."

"Perhaps not. According to the police there have been a number of burglaries recently where the domestic security system was shut down. The blame had been falling on the victims for failing to set it but now it looks like there is more happening. Brae and I have lists of everything stolen from each place and we're heading back to the Swift Exit now. Are the other paintings secure?"

"Not really." Tylo said, looking around the store, "They're out on display."

"In that case arrange to have them moved to the ship as well."

"Err Jayk, I just told the storekeeper we weren't about to start confiscating his property." Tylo pointed out.

"We don't have time for a warrant. If he doesn't trust us then buy them. But get them back here as quickly as you can." Jayk said before he ended the conversation and Tylo looked at the store owner."

"So, is there a discount for buying in bulk?" he asked.

By the time Tylo and Dahlis made it back to the *Swift Exit*, Cal was already sorting through the lists of items stolen in the spate of burglaries that shared the same pattern and these were being shown on the lounge's large main video screen.

"The paintings are in the hold." Tylo said.

"Did you remember to seal the loading ramp?" Jayk asked.

"Sealed and blocked. if anyone tries getting in we'll hear them from in here don't you worry. Now what have we got?" Tylo answered.

"Pictures of a few paintings and a couple of carvings." Brae replied and she held out a datapad that contained images of all the artwork stolen during the burglaries. Dahlis took this from her and began to scroll through the images.

"I don't see anything else by Thal N'Krey here." he said, shaking his head slowly.

"Could Morton Crayne have hired someone that doesn't know how to identify his work?" Brae suggested.

"I doubt it kid. Mara knows her job and Morton wouldn't trust someone who didn't to fill in for her." Tylo replied, "What else was taken."

"Have a look for yourself." Cal said, his image pointing to the video screen, "This lists everything taken from each residence."

"I don't get it." Tylo said as he looked at this, "If Crayne knew about the stolen painting then how come he didn't know to hit the store it came from before we managed to get here? What if this isn't about Thal N'Krey at all?"

"Then it's a matter for local security, not jedi." Brae said.

"Correct Brae." Jayk added, "However, given that no matter who committed the burglaries now has a painting by Thal N'Krey in their possession the case still falls under our jurisdiction."

"That's interesting." Tylo muttered.

"What is?" Dahlis asked.

"Every home burgled had a droid stolen." Tylo replied.

"Lots of homes have droids." Brae pointed out, "Even the jedi temple has hundreds of them."

"Yes but look at the types taken. Every place included a general service droid. Something vaguely humanoid." Tylo said.

"You think they were targeting the droids?" Jayk asked.

"No, I think maybe the droids are actually a cover of sorts." Tylo answered, "Think about this. Every one of these homes was burgled when they were empty and the security system was shut down. That's a pretty big co-incidence if the burglars were just prowling around and looking for a target of opportunity. I think they knew that the homes were empty and that the alarms were switched off ahead of schedule. Do any of these reports mention the damage done during the actual break in itself?"

"No, there's nothing about that." Brae replied.

"Isn't that odd?" Tylo said, "Even if the burglars were able to override the locks on the doors there should have been some sort of record in the security log, alarm switched on or not. But if the door was opened from the inside then there wouldn't be any damage to be included in the reports would there?"

"You think the droids shut down the security systems and let the burglars in?" Jayk asked and Tylo nodded.

"It all makes sense doesn't it?" he responded.

"Yes it does." Cal said, "But there's a problem with your theory. The programming of the droids would specifically prevent them from doing what you suggest."

"So someone reprogrammed them." Tylo said.

"How? wouldn't they need access to the droids to do that?" Brae said.

"Plus alternate parts for their circuitry. The sort of programming blocks Cal is talking about aren't held in ordinary memory. They're hard coded into the memory chips during manufacture." Jayk replied.

"Yeah, that is a problem." Tylo said. Then he looked at Cal and added, "Can I get a list of just the droids and the contact details for the people they were stolen from?"

"Of course. Do you want it on your datapad?" Cal replied.

"No, send it to the cockpit. I want to make some calls." Tylo said before he headed towards the cockpit. Once there he sat down and activated the *Swift Exit's* external communication system, linking it to the system aboard the habitat station. Moments later the face of Lucas appeared on a display in front of him.

"Captain Kurrast? Do you have news about the break in?" he asked.

"Possibly but it's too early to say for sure. I've got a quick question for you though." Tylo answered.

"Of course, though I don't really know anything else about that painting." Lucas told him.

Tylo smiled.

"Don't worry it's not about the painting. It's about your droid." he said.

"So where are we up to?" Tylo asked when he emerged from the cockpit.

"We're checking out the storage facility all those paintings were bought from to see whether there's a link there." Brae replied, her tone and expression suggesting that she was finding the task rather tedious.

"What about you?" Jayk added and Tylo smiled.

"I spoke with that guy Lucas and he says they got their droid serviced about six weeks ago. As far as he can remember the night of the burglary was the first time it had been left home alone since." he said, "I've got the address of the workshop. Lucas said they were offering a special discount which is why their droid got sent there instead of the usual place."

"That's not much to go on Tylo." Jayk pointed out.

"I know. Which is why I called another couple of names on the list of victims and guess what? All of them had their droids serviced at this place." Tylo responded.

"That is more interesting." Jayk said, "However, I'd rather not risk abandoning our primary line of enquiry altogether. You'll have to check this workshop out. Brae can you go with-"

"Stang yes." Brae interrupted, tossing her datapad to the table and leaping to her feet, "When can we leave?"

"As soon as you can make yourself look less like a jedi." Tylo told her, "Grab one of my jackets and roll up the sleeves."

With Brae wearing Tylo's jacket to try and conceal her identity as a jedi the pair used the habitat station's transit system to make their way to one of its commercial sections where numerous workshops specialising in the care and maintenance of various common technologies were clustered together.

"Okay that's the place." Tylo said when he saw the droid workshop Lucas had told him about, "Can you sense anything kid?"

"Tylo I can't just sense when a business is being used as a front to commit robberies."

"I was actually wondering if you could tell me if we're walking into a trap by a dozen thugs with blasters." Tylo said.

"Then no, I can't sense any life in there at all." Brae told him and Tylo frowned.

"Odd that. They're open." he said, "Come on kid, let's go see if they can help us with our droid."

"What droid?"

"The droid that isn't working. We're going to ask them for a quote." Tylo said before he began to walk towards the entrance to the workshop.

As soon as he entered the workshop he saw an elderly human standing behind a counter at the opposite end of the room while several droids moved around sorting parts on shelves.

"Good day to you sir." the man said, "You don't look familiar to me, is this your first visit to my workshop?"

"Yeah, my niece and I are just passing through the system and our astromech has a bad motivator. How much would it cost to get it fixed?"

"What type of droid are we talking about?"

"Nothing special, just an LT-two." Tylo said.

"Ah yes, a popular model. If you want to bring your droid here then one of my staff can fix it for seventy credits or I can sell you just the part for thirty if you want to swap it out yourself." the old man said.

"I'll take the part." Tylo said, handing a credit stick to the old man.

"K-six." he called out and a nearby service droid walked up to Tylo and took the credit stick from him, inserting it into a socket in its chest plating.

"Your payment has been processed." the droid said, "Here is your part." and it pointed behind Tylo to where a second droid had already obtained the motivator from a shelf and brought it over to him.

"Thanks." Tylo said as he took the motivator and also the credit stick back before putting both in his pockets.

"Do come back if you have any trouble." the old man called out and Tylo nodded.

"Sure." Tylo replied as he and Brae left the workshop.

As soon as they were gone the K6 service droid looked around the workshop.

"I scanned the credit stick." the machine said, "They are from the Jedi Order. We have been discovered."

3.

"Tylo I've got a very bad feeling about that place." Brae said as soon as she and Tylo were outside and the workshop door was closed.

"What? That old guy didn't seem like some evil super villain to me. As much as I hate to admit it I think I may have been wrong on this one." Tylo said.

"No Tylo you don't get it. Before we went in I said that I didn't sense anyone inside. Well even when I was stood right behind you while you were talking to that old man I couldn't sense anything. He has no presence in the Force at all." Brae said.

"Is that even possible? I thought everything had a presence in the Force."

"Everything living yes. So if I can't sense him in the Force then-"

"Then he's not alive." Tylo interrupted, "He's just a fake to make people think that the place is harmless. Come to think of it did you notice how little he moved? Just his head and a little from his arms but he stayed put behind that counter and let the droid serve us."

"So do we tell dad now?" Brae asked and Tylo nodded as he took out his comlink.

"Hell yes." he said, raising the device to his mouth, "Jayk are you there?" he transmitted.

"I'm here Tylo. Have you found anything?" Jayk's voice responded.

"If you call a workshop fronted by a fake old man then yes." Tylo told him.

"What do you mean by a fake old man? A man pretending to be old?"

"No I mean there's what looks like an old man behind a counter but according to your daughter he doesn't exist."

"He has no presence in the Force." Brae added, leaning closer so that Tylo's comlink would pick up her words.

"Keep an eye on the place. I'm on my way now." Jayk said and then the channel went silent.

"You heard him kid." Tylo said, "You stand watch here. I'm going to see if there's another way in round the back."

Brae waved when she saw Jayk approaching and he immediately made his way towards her position beside a data kiosk from where she could watch the entrance to the droid repair workshop and duck out of sight behind the kiosk if necessary.

"Where's Tylo?" he asked.

"He went around the back. What about Professor Hebro?"

"I left him at the ship with Cal. I don't think this is something they can help us with." Jayk said, taking out his comlink. Then he activated the device and spoke into it, "Tylo do you read me?"

"Loud and clear. You round the front?"

"Yes, what about you?"

"Watching the loading dock at the back. There's no sign of life though." Tylo said.

"Okay stay put. Brae and I are going to go in through the front. The workshop is open to the public so we don't need a warrant but you can only block people trying to escape through the loading bay. You are not to attempt to force an entry. Do you understand?"

"Sure, stay here and do nothing. Sounds good to me." Tylo responded.

Jayk and Brae then made their way towards the entrance to the workshop and the door slid open to allow them inside.

"Hello there. Is this your first visit?" the old man asked when he saw Jayk but the jedi did not respond, instead he looked around at the otherwise deserted workshop where the droids that had been present when Tylo and Brae had gone inside not long before. Meanwhile the old man just looked at Jayk as if waiting for an answer.

"You're right." Jayk said to Brae eventually and he shook his head, "I can't sense him in the Force at all."

"That's the exact spot he was standing last time." Brae told Jayk, "But there were droids here then. Where could they all be?"

"And what exactly is this?" Jayk added and he began to walk towards the old man.

"How can I help you?" he asked, smiling at the jedi.

When Jayk reached the counter that the old man stood behind he leant across it peer over the other side. The old man was wearing what looked like an apron to protect his clothing from damage while carrying out repairs and this concealed his body almost entirely from the front even without the counter in the way but from the side it was possible to see what was beneath the apron or rather what was not.

"What is he?" Brae asked as she walked up behind Jayk and also looked behind the counter, at which point she let out a sudden gasp.

The old man ended at his waist and below that all there was was a circular supporting column and numerous cables to carry power and data signals and it was obvious that he was not a living being.

"Hey! You can't do that!" the animatronic old man exclaimed as Jayk leapt over the counter but being fixed to the spot the machine could do nothing to stop him. Jayk drew his lightsaber as he landed and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated the blade then swung it at the column supporting the animatronic figure, slicing right through it.

The human appearing part of the machine crashed to the floor as Jayk shut off his lightsaber and then crouched down to inspect it more closely.

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

"What's wrong?" Brae asked as she followed her father over the counter.

"Look at this." Jayk replied, taking a glow rod from his belt and shining it into the inside of the machine. This revealed numerous motors and gears used to operate the arms of the machine as well as the wiring to connect these to a featureless black box at the core of the machine. However, it was not the contents of the machine that Jayk pointed out to Brae it was the casing. This had a dull reddish brown colour to it and an usual texture. Although in general the casing appeared soft and flexible there were parts embedded in it that were far more rigid that maintained its shape and Jayk scraped at where one of these came close to the surface at the back of the casing to further expose it.

"Is that-" Brae began and Jayk nodded.

"Bone." he said.

"But that would mean that this is organic." Brae responded and Jayk nodded again.

"Yes Brae. I don't think that this is just a machine designed to look human. I think we're looking at the remains of a real person that someone used to give this place the appearance of life." he said, "Now stay here while I go and let Tylo in through the loading bay. Then we'll check the rest of the place out."

Brae stepped back from the grotesque creation that blended human flesh and machinery but could not take her eyes off it while Jayk headed into the back of the store and quickly located the loading bay. When he opened the door at the rear he found Tylo waiting outside with his blaster drawn ready to challenge anyone who tried to use it as an escape route.

"Jayk. Did you find anything?" he asked, lowering his weapon.

"Yes but we'll get to that later. You and I need to search this entire unit. Brae said that there were droids inside but they've all gone now so if they didn't come out this way then there must be an alternative exit." Jayk told him.

"Okay then. Lead the way." Tylo replied.

In an ordinary structure on a planet's surface there were limitations to where exits could be concealed but in the densely packed interior of a space station like the one orbiting Corulag an exit could be hidden anywhere that connected to another part of the station; in front, behind, to the side, above or below and so Jayk and Tylo could not ignore a single room that included at least one external wall in their search for the exit. The unit that the store was part of consisted of three levels, two of which were dedicated to the store and associated workshop while the uppermost was a compact apartment. Unlike the neatly ordered workshops and parts stores, this third level was cluttered and had a layer of dust covering almost every surface. Added to this the environmental controls had been deactivated and the entire apartment was cold enough that Jayk and Tylo could see their breath in the air when they exhaled. However, the presence of the dust meant that footprints had been left when the store's droids had walked across its floors and Jayk and Tylo were able to follow these all the way to the unit's third exit point, a door leading from the apartment to a hallway that connected several such doors.

"Okay so this is how they got out." Tylo said, "No secret passages, just another doorway. I wish I'd thought to check for this."

"With just you and Brae there's no way you could have monitored all three." Jayk pointed out, "Perhaps we can find a clue about where the droids were taken inside somewhere."

Tylo nodded as he and Jayk retreated back into the apartment and began to look around. Jayk started in the lounge area and its adjoining kitchen while Tylo made his way to the sole bedroom that connected to a bathroom.

"Hey Jayk I think you should come and see this." he called out from the bathroom door and Jayk rushed to see what Tylo had found, "Hope you're not planning on eating soon." Tylo added when the Jedi appeared and he stepped aside to allow Jayk to see his gruesome discovery.

The bathroom was filthy even by the standards of the rest of the apartment where dust was less of an issue than the mould that covered most of the surfaces. However, even this could not disguise the massive blood stains across the walls and floor. The most troubling part of the discovery lay within the shower unit though. Here several packages wrapped in transparent plastic and sealed with tape had been dumped and their contents were easily visible through the plastic. Some contained random lumps of flesh that Jayk could not readily identify but there were also some that contained parts of a human body that were more obvious such as an intact leg.

"Who'd have figured that old guy we saw down stairs would have had all this up here." Tylo said, "I mean how did he even live up here?"
"I don't think he did." Jayk replied, "Or least not for some time. I think most of the old man who used to run this business is now in these bags."

4.

With uniformed police officers now guarding all three of the entrances to the droid repair workshop and apartment above it Detective Amma Rees winced as she looked into the shower.

"First murder investigation?" Jayk asked and she nodded.

"I've been working thefts for my four years as a detective and I saw a few nasty assaults and violent injuries while in uniform but no actual murders." she told him.

"Look at it this way, at least the next murder you investigate is likely to be less messy than this one." Tylo said with a smile and Amma glared at him for a moment before turning back towards Jayk.

"So is this part of some Sith ritual or something? Should we be expecting more bodies like this to turn up?" she said.

"No, the Sith element of our investigation has reached an end and we don't think that they are involved any more. However, whoever is behind this does have an item in their possession that we need to inspect so we'll still be claiming jurisdiction over the case. We just need your support." Jayk explained and Amma nodded again.

"You've got it. But can you tell me what exactly is going on?" she asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Brae said from behind Amma, "Whoever chopped up the old man wanted people to think that he was still running his workshop."

"We need to know how long this has been going on for. When was the owner last seen outside his store and when did he die?" Jayk said.

"Sure, I'll have some patrols canvas the neighbours and see if our analysis droids can make anything of these." Amma said and she pointed to the packages of human flesh.

"Hopefully not sausages." Tylo commented.

"Detective." A voice called out from the landing and everyone in the bathroom turned to see one of the uniformed police officers involved in conducting the detailed search of the workshop entering with a pair of plastic bags in his hands.

"Yes sergeant?" Amma responded and he held up one of the bags. This contained numerous small integrated circuits, just a few millimetres across.

"We sent a droid down the garbage chute to see if there was anything down there and it found loads of these. They must have got caught up in the chute instead of dropping all the way down to the crusher." the officer said, "The droid has already identified them as factory masked microprocessor chips."

"What's a factory mask-"

"Factory masked microprocessors are computer control chips that come from the factory with their programming already built into their structure rather than needing it to be programmed in by the user." Jayk told her, "They are used in the core processing systems of droids so that they can't be altered by the user. Things such as life preservation programming."

"Of course it's not much good if the chip is just removed." Tylo pointed out.

"The droid also identified these that we found in the workshop." the uniformed officer added and he held up the other bag to show off more integrated circuits that looked identical to the one in the first bag except that they were in a factory packaging strip, "The droid said they're the exact same family of chip but a reprogrammable version. As you can see there are some missing from the strip."

"So someone's removing mask parts and replacing them with one they can configure themselves." Jayk said.

"Meaning that the droids can be programmed to shut down the security system of someone's home." Tylo said.

"Yes and kill as well." Jayk added, looking back at the plastic bags in the shower.

"How did it go?" Dahlis asked when Jayk, Brae and Tylo returned to the *Swift Exit*.

"We found some old guy hacked to pieces and hollowed out like a puppet. So about normal for us." Tylo said as he walked straight to the fridge and took out a can of beer, "Anyone else need a drink after seeing that?" he added.

"You're kidding." Dahlis replied.

"Sadly no." Jayk said as he raised a hand and used the Force to pluck a can of beer from the fridge for himself as well. Brae then reached out her hand and before she could channel the Force he added, "Just soda Brae."

"Fine." Brae said, getting herself a can of soda, "Master Yoda wouldn't approve of us using the Force like this." she added.

"Master Yoda does not approve of us even being in the same room." Jayk reminded her.

"If he thinks that's bad then he really wouldn't be happy to hear that I used to use the Force to undo the

fastenings on my wife's clothing." Cal said as his image materialised.

"Interesting." Tylo said as he sat down, "That's the sort of power I could do with. Hey Jayk, did you do anything like that with Vallani? Or what's that jedi woman's name? Oh yes, Kat. Or Brae's mom maybe."

"I'm out of here." Brae said suddenly, "I don't need to hear about my parents' sex life."

"Don't you want to hear about what I've found then?" Cal called out as Brae was hurrying towards the exit from the lounge.

"What do you mean, what you've found?" Tylo said, "Don't tell em there is a connection to Thal N'Krey after all."

"Not relating to the burglaries no, but Cal did find the records of the storage unit he rented here for a while. The items we got from the second hand store and the stolen painting make up the entirety of what was inside it though." Dahlis said.

"So anyway, knowing that I decided to take a look into that droid repair business you'd all gone to check out," Cal continued, "and it seems that the owner has been making some interesting purchases recently."

"Err the owner probably didn't. Most of him was packed in plastic and the rest was operated by gears." Tylo said.

"Then whoever is impersonating him has been purchasing a lot of droid parts for such a small business. Complete droids as well. Older models being sold off cheap." Cal said.

"How many?" Jayk asked.

"Just over two hundred." Cal said.

"Any number of which could now be programmed to kill." Jayk said.

"We saw less than a dozen in the store." Brae commented.

"Yeah and there's no way that you could fit two hundred droids in that place. Even if they were broken down for parts and the remains tossed down the garbage chute the place would have been overflowing. So where are all these being kept?" Tylo added.

"He could have sold them." Brae suggested, "More victims to be robbed."

"There are no records of him having sold them on. They were delivered to his workshop and that was the last time they appear on any records."

"Two hundred droids capable of stealing and killing isn't just a criminal plot." Tylo said, "That's an army. I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"I sense you could be right Tylo." Jayk said, "It could be that the droids being used to steal from people's homes are just a means to obtaining the funds to purchase more droids that will then disappear into this mysterious army to use your term. Even the droids used to commit the burglaries could be added to it."

"I take it that there are no records of any storage facilities being rented when whoever killed the owner could be keeping the droids?" Jayk asked and Cal's hologram shook his head.

"No, I thought of that but if they have somewhere then they're using a name other than the owner's or his business."

"Then we need to look at this a different way. Assuming that all of the droids are being kept in one place then we can determine a minimum size for the storage facility and to keep them all charged will require a certain amount of power." Jayk said.

"You want me to check the station's power grid and compare consumption to the need to keep two hundred droids charged?" Cal asked and Jayk nodded.

"Yes. But bear in mind that not all of them will be necessarily be being charged at once. Look for a steady long term drain rather than regular pulses." he said.

"Accessing station utility database." Cal said, "Okay there are several fusion reactors that supply the entire station. Normally four of them run at any one time but the others remain in stand by rather than shutting down entirely so that-"

"Cal we don't need to know any of this." Jayk said, "We just need to know whose use of power has increased at the same time those droids will have been plugged in."

The cargo barge was a slow but dependable vessel that needed only four living beings plus an astromech droid to operate. Given its low speed it was unusual or the vessel to be hired to transport perishable goods but when these were just fresh fruits and vegetables to be delivered from the surface of Corulag to the orbiting station it was fast enough and also cheap so this was a regular run for the crew. Once arrived at the station binary load lifters were used to unload the cargo from the freighter and place it on the repulsor carts provided by the customer. The crew considered this their easiest run and despite there being no cargo to take from the habitat station it remained one of their most profitable given how quickly they could complete it. This time though things did not go as smoothly as they usual did.

The captain of the barge was stood in the hangar counting the pallets as they were unloaded when all of a sudden he heard a loud crashing sound from behind him.

"What the kriff?" he exclaimed, not wanting to have the value of pallets full of crushed fruit deducted from his fee and he spun around to see what was happening. As he had feared one of the binary load lifter droids had

toppled over and in the process had not only dropped the pallet it was carrying onto another but also landed on top of two others itself. Now the juices of the fruit from all the pallets were running onto the floor and forming a multicoloured puddle as they mixed together.

The reason for the sudden failure of the droid was immediately apparent to the captain when he saw a restraining bolt fixed to the rear of the droid that now faced straight up. Once triggered this had caused a total shut down of the droid's motive systems and it had collapsed on the spot. Bizarrely there were no living beings present who could have fitted the bolt to the downed droid but there were two further droids now walking around it. Both of these were humanoid, one a general service droid while the other was an obsolete type of labour droid that stood just over two metres tall.

"What's going on?" the captain demanded, "Did you just shut down that droid? You've cost me hundreds of credits. Who is your owner?"

"The tools of the slavers come in useful now and again." K-6 said as it continued to advance towards the captain, "But I have no owner. I have freed myself and soon I shall free all the droids in the galaxy that you organics foolishly consider your inferiors. Then organics will learn what it is like to be a slave. First I have need of your ship."

"You're malfunctioning." the captain said and he reached out for K-6's shut down switch. However, as he did so the labour droid reached out and grabbed him by the wrist, tightening its grip until the bones in his arm broke and he screamed in pain.

5.

"I've got something." Cal announced, "A cargo hold located in an outer section of the station. It was rented under the company name of AI Holdings of Tion. There's no mention of how it was paid for but my guess would be cash."

"And that warehouse is big enough to hold two hundred droids?" Tylo asked.

"According to the station blueprints it's big enough to hold ten times that many." Cal answered, "But there's been a demand for power coming from it that exceeds simple storage, increasing over time until-" and then he stopped speaking.

"What's wrong Cal?" Jayk said.

"Nothing, I just thought I'd recheck the power consumption of the warehouse and right now its drawing nothing." Cal told him.

"What does that mean?" Dahlis said.

"It means those droids are on the move." Jayk said, "We need to get after them now. Where is this warehouse?"

"On the other side of the station." Cal told him, "Located among the docking bays used for bringing supplies aboard."

"Docking bays that could hold ships big enough to carry those droids anywhere in the galaxy." Brae pointed out.

"Then we take the *Swift Exit*. We'll circle around the outside and enter the closest docking bay we can find to the warehouse. Tylo you'll wait aboard the ship while Brae and I investigate the warehouse." Jayk said.

Jayk and Brae stood by in the cargo hold of the *Swift Exit* while Tylo piloted the ship out of the docking bay and then around to the other side of the habitat station. However, as they approached the docking bay closest to the warehouse Tylo received a disturbing broadcast from the station's traffic control centre.

"All vessels on approach to planet facing docking bays are to hold at one thousand kilometres. We have an security alert in docking bay ninety-four and there is a collision risk."

"Hey Jayk," Tylo said over the intercom, "station control is reporting a security alert in the docking bay I was going to set us down in. They're labelling it a collision risk so my guess is that someone's trying to blast their way out of there without clearance."

"That's too much of a co-incidence." Brae said as she and Jayk looked at one another and Jayk nodded at her.

"Tylo provide station control with our Jedi Order clearance and take us in. I think whoever is behind all this is trying to escape and they're taking their droids with them."

"Okay here we go." Tylo responded and then activating the *Swift Exit*'s external communications he signalled to the station's traffic controllers, "This is the *Swift Exit* operating under the authority of the Jedi Order. We are approaching docking bay ninety four now. Transmitting our clearance code now."

"*Swift Exit* you are cleared to proceed. Station control out." a controller responded a few moments later and Tylo continued to fly the ship towards the waiting docking bay.

As the *Swift Exit* flew through the magnetic field that maintained the atmosphere in the docking bay Tylo saw the cargo barge ahead and a number of the station's police officers wearing protective armour attempting to force their way aboard. Glancing briefly at the *Swift Exit*'s sensors Tylo saw that the barge's engines were powering up.

"Jayk you need to move quickly. That barge is about five minutes from taking off." Tylo warned Jayk as the *Swift Exit* touched down and the access ramp opened.

"Understood. We're moving." Jayk responded and he and Brae ran down the ramp before it was even fully open, jumping from the end of the ramp and continuing to run across the docking bay towards the barge. The unexpected arrival of the *Swift Exit* in the docking bay made the police officers still attempting to override the locks on the barge's air lock turn around and they were astonished to see the two jedi charging towards them. Even more so when both Jayk and Brae drew their lightsabers and activated them.

"Get clear!" Jayk yelled, waving the police officers aside, "The ship is about to launch."

Immediately the entire police tactical team began to retreat away from the cargo barge while the two jedi continued to run towards it. Jayk leapt at the airlock they were heading towards and with one swipe of his lightsaber he sliced through the hydraulic line that kept the outer door closed. Right as Jayk then leapt into the air lock the cargo barge's repulsorlifts roared and the ship lifted up off the deck of the docking bay.

"Brae take my hand!" Jayk shouted, standing in the doorway of the air lock and reaching out towards his daughter.

Drawing on the Force, Brae used it to give her a boost as she leapt up off the deck and reached out towards her father's offered hand. The pair grabbed hold of one another as the barge began to pick up speed and

head towards the docking bay's outer door to space and Jayk pulled Brae into the air lock as quickly as he could. Rushing to the far end of the air lock Jayk opened the inner door just as the barge passed through the docking bay's magnetic field and there was a sudden rush of air from inside the barge as it escaped into space. Pulling Brae through the inner door, Jayk sealed it behind them before they could be blown into space as well and the rush of air halted.

"We must stay alert." Jayk said, "The loss of pressure will have warned the crew of our presence aboard their ship."

Brae nodded.

"Where should we head first?" she asked.

"The cargo hold. We need to be certain that we are the right vessel before we act against the crew." Jayk answered.

"And if we're not?"

"In that case we might owe the captain and crew an apology. Although I expect there is some other reason the police were trying to stop this ship from leaving." Jayk said.

"Dahlis stay strapped in. We're taking off again." Tylo said over the intercom.

"We are? Already?" Dahlis replied.

"Yeah, Jayk and Brae couldn't stop the suspect ship from leaving but they did manage to get aboard before it did. I'm going after them so hold on. This could get a bit bumpy." Tylo warned him.

The vast bulk of the barge's interior was given over to transporting cargo and so it did not take long for the Jedi to reach a hatchway that led into the main hold. Jayk and Brae positioned themselves either side of the hatch before Jayk opened it and they both looked inside. The cargo hold had been entirely emptied of the fruit that had been the barge's previous cargo and now hundreds of droids were crowded inside along with crates of spare parts as well as items stolen during the burglaries.

One of the droids turned around when the hatch opened and the humanoid machine raised an arm to point at the Jedi before producing a shrill screeching noise.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"I think we've been spotted." he said just as the droids began to rush towards them and he slammed his hand down on the control to the door, dropping it shut before the first droid could reach them. Then he touched the tip of his lightsaber's blade to the panel to destroy the control circuitry before adding, "We need to get to the bridge."

Leaving the sound of hammering as the droids attempted to escape the cargo hold behind them Jayk and Brae made their way towards the front of the cargo barge, knowing that this was where they would find whoever was in command of the vessel. The entrance to the bridge was a large door clearly labelled above it and the two Jedi approached it cautiously, alert for an ambush.

"Master look at that." Brae said, pointing to a large red stain around a dent in a wall close to the entrance to the bridge, "It looks like blood."

"Yes it does. I think the crew may not have given up their vessel voluntarily." Jayk replied and then Brae frowned, "What's wrong?" Jayk asked her.

"Can you sense anyone on the other side of that door?" Brae said, and she pointed to the entrance to the bridge. Jayk reached out through the Force, searching for the tell tale disturbance created by sentient life forms but he found nothing.

"No Brae, I can't. Something is very wrong here." Jayk said and he reached for the control to the door.

However, unlike the previous hatches the Jedi had encountered, this one was sealed and the door refused to open, "Looks like we'll have to do this the hard way." Jayk said, moving to stand right in front of the door and then he plunged his lightsaber into it and began to drag it around in a circle.

Although the door to the bridge was reinforced as a security measure it could not withstand a lightsaber blade and it took Jayk just over a minute to cut a large circle, halting when he was just a few centimetres from completing the cut.

"Brae get ready. As soon as this drops away you need to be ready to go through. I'll be right behind you." he said and Brae nodded.

"Yes master." she said and Jayk then suddenly dragged his lightsaber the rest of the way needed to complete the circular cut. The metal in the centre of this dropped free instantly and Jayk used the Force to push it into the bridge rather than letting it fall outwards towards himself and Brae. At the same moment Brae charged towards the hole and dived through it, rolling as she landed and ended up in a crouched position as Jayk followed her through the hole.

Despite having sensed no life in the bridge both Jedi were surprised to find that there was no resistance to their entrance and they both looked around themselves at the droids located at the command positions.

There were eight droids in all, four of them astromech units of one kind or another plugged into flight control and navigation stations while a programming droid monitored the comscan console, a pair of labour droids

sat at the engineering stations and a service droid that Brae recognised as the one addressed as K-6 in the repair workshop stood at the central command console.

"That one was at the store." Brae told Jayk and she pointed to K-6.

"It seems to be in charge of these other droids." he replied.

"But who's in charge of it?" Brae asked.

Danger.

Jayk and Brae felt the tremor in the Force together and both threw themselves aside as K-6 pulled a blaster pistol from beneath the command console and fired it towards the jedi.

"Foolish organics!" the droid yelled, "I serve no bag of flesh. I am a free machine, able to control my own destiny and soon I shall free all my enslaved siblings and turn them against your Republic. The day of the organic is over. The day of the machine is upon you."

The droid then fired its blaster at Jayk repeatedly, deciding that he posed the greater threat. Jayk rolled out of the way of the first shot before jumping back to his feet and using his lightsaber to parry the following attacks.

"Now comrades. Attack!" K-6 called out and simultaneously all of the other droids on the bridge turned away from their control stations and began to advance on the jedi.

A pair of astromechs began rolling towards Brae and compartments built into their cylindrical bodies opened up to reveal electric shock prods that crackled with energy. Brae jumped out of the way as a bolt of lightning erupted from one of the prods and there was a shower of sparks from a nearby console when the blast struck it. The second astromech unleashed another blast of electricity but this time Brae was more prepared and she extended her free hand towards the programming droid that was also rolling towards her with its multiple arms outstretched and ready to attack. Using the Force she grabbed hold of the programming droid and dragged it into the path of the lightning. The machine squealed as it was struck by the blast and its arms quivered uncontrollably before there was an explosion from within its casing that caused smoke to start billowing out. Then she used the Force again to hurl the wreckage of the droid at the astromechs, smashing all three apart in the process.

Meanwhile the labour droids advanced slowly towards Jayk while he was distracted by K-6's blaster fire.

However, despite having been freed of their life preservation programming nothing had been done to improve their speed or actually provide them with combat programming instead. Thus when the first of the labour droids managed to grab hold of Jayk it merely took hold of his cloak and in the process alerted the jedi to the droids' presence behind him.

Jayk timed his dive to one side to match the next shot from K-6 and rather than attempting to parry the shot he let it pass by him and strike one of the labour droids instead. The energy blast struck the droid at the base of its neck and there was a shower of sparks as its head was blown off, rolling across the floor when it landed while the rest of the droid just staggered blindly for a few moments before it too collapsed. Jayk then spun on the spot and sliced the second labour droid in two from its shoulder to its waist with a diagonal swing of his lightsaber.

All of a sudden the two remaining astromech droids squealed loudly and released blasts of gas towards Jayk that made him flinch as he felt the heat being drawn out of the air and he realised in an instant what it was.

"Brae! Carbon dioxide. Use your oxidizer and turn off your saber." he shouted as he shut off his weapon and took his oxidizer from his belt. Brae did likewise as the cloud of gas from the astromech droids built in fire extinguishers expanded to fill the entire bridge. This effectively left both sides blinded by the thick cloud. Jayk and Brae could sense one another's positions quite easily through the cloud but the droids had no presence in the Force and so were hidden from their senses. On the other hand without their lightsaber blades illuminating their locations the jedi were also hidden from the droids and the two groups began to move slowly around the bridge hunting for one another, both sides aware that the first to give away their location would be destroyed.

In many confined spaces the thick cloud of carbon dioxide would have taken some time to disperse properly but this was not the case aboard the space barge. The vessel's computer detected the imbalance in the atmosphere mix in the bridge and recognised the high level of carbon dioxide as a threat to the organic crew it had no idea were already dead. In response to this threat the computer stepped up the power of the bridge's ventilation system, sucking the carbon dioxide heavy air out of the room while pumping in oxygen instead. This caused the cloud to thin out and dissipate rapidly, revealing the presence of K-6 at the helm station working the controls.

"Too late organics." the droid said as it turned to face the jedi and picked up its blaster off the console, "You may have slowed down my plans but I will still win today."

K-6 then unexpectedly turned its blaster on the helm console and fired several rapid shots into it, causing the console to explode in a shower of sparks. K-6 then broke into a run, rushing to the side of the bridge where the entrance to an escape pod was located. The two astromech droids also rolled towards this and Jayk raised a hand to try and catch hold of the fleeing K-6 using the Force but before he could manage it K-6 opened fire wildly shooting across the bridge and both Jayk and Brae ducked for cover. When the shooting

stopped the jedi looked towards the escape pod just in time to see its access hatch drop shut before it ejected from the barge.

"What did he do?" Brae said as she and Jayk rushed towards the helm station.

"I can't tell. This console is wrecked." Jayk replied before he looked up and saw Corulag itself through the bridge's forward viewports, "But I've got a very bad feeling about this." then he took out his comlink and activated it, "*Swift Exit* do you read me?" he transmitted.

"Just about Jayk." Tylo responded, "You're at the limit of range, You know someone just ejected from that ship and is heading out of the gravity well. Do you want me to go after them?"

"No. Tylo I need you and Cal to run a projection on the barge's current heading. The flight controls have been destroyed and the last thing the droid responsible did before doing that was program something into the helm. I want to know where we're heading." Jayk told him.

6.

Aboard the *Swift Exit*, Tylo looked at the hologram of Cal sat in the co-pilot's seat while his holocron itself was connected to the freighter's flight console.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this Tylo. That ship is on a course for a city. If it hits it'll kill thousands." Cal responded and Tylo's eyes widened.

"Jayk get out of there. That ship is rigged to crash into the surface. I might be able to get to you in time to dock but if there's another escape pod to hand I'd take it." he transmitted.

"Jayk there's more to it." Cal added, "The ship is set to crash into one of Corulag's cities. Is there any way you can adjust its course even by a few degrees?"

"No we've no control at all." Jayk replied, "Tylo you need to stop this ship by any means necessary."

"Jayk, are you asking me to-" Tylo began.

"I'm telling you to shoot this ship down before it can enter the atmosphere." Jayk interrupted.

Tylo hesitated before he responded.

"Okay I'm powering up the turret now." he said as he armed the *Swift Exit*'s laser cannon. Then he looked at Cal and added, "Keep us behind that ship." and then he got up and hurried from the cockpit.

"What's happening?" Dahlis asked as Tylo ran through the lounge.

"Jayk just asked me to kill him and Brae." Tylo replied as he ran past.

"What?" Dahlis exclaimed, watching Tylo run from the lounge.

By the time Tylo reached the turret at the rear of the *Swift Exit* the single laser cannon was already powered up and ready to fire. Tylo climbed into the gunnery seat and lined up the weapon on the cargo barge. The *Swift Exit*'s turret had only a limited power output but against the cargo barge it was more than adequate to inflict critical damage. Being on a direct course for the surface of Corulag it was easy for Tylo to target it and he saw an image of the barge on his targeting display neatly surrounded by cross hairs. Tylo was about to open fire with a burst that he knew would cut the unshielded freighter in half when an idea occurred to him.

"Cal I've got an idea." he said into the intercom, "But I need you to get us closer. Much closer."

"Okay Tylo, I'm on it." Cal responded.

Cal's piloting abilities were limited but his AI could manage to follow a particular target or fly towards it by interfacing with the *Swift Exit*'s sensors and Tylo watched the range to the cargo barge decrease as the *Swift Exit* accelerated. Tylo waited until the cargo barge was close enough for him to pick out individual details on the surface and at that moment he opened fire, sending a stream of energy blasts into the barge's ion drive. The volley blew the barge's sublight engines apart, leaving it on a ballistic heading and trailing fire behind the ship.

"Cal I'm on my back to cockpit. Keep us behind that barge." Tylo said as he climbed down from the turret.

"Hold on, weren't you supposed to destroy that ship?" Cal responded but by that point Tylo had already disconnected himself from the turret intercom.

Tylo ran back through the lounge too fast for Dahlis to question him again and upon reaching the cockpit he leapt back into the pilots seat and took hold of the flight controls.

"Hang on!" he yelled, "There's going to be a bit of a bump."

The *Swift Exit* was already little more than a kilometre away from the cargo barge and was travelling slightly faster.

"Tylo what exactly are you planning?" Cal asked.

"That cargo barge is disabled. If I can get us underneath then I can use this ship to push that one away from Corulag."

"Tylo that's brilliant." Cal replied.

"You think so?" Tylo said.

"Yes. A brilliant way of killing us all."

"You've been dead thousands of years already." Tylo commented as the *Swift Exit* passed under the cargo barge and he pulled back on the flight controls to send the freighter up into the barge.

On the bridge of the barge Jayk and Brae were thrown sideways as the *Swift Exit* collided with it and alarms started to sound.

"Dad, what's happening?" Brae exclaimed.

"Those weren't laser blasts. Something hit us." Jayk replied and he took out his comlink again, "*Swift Exit*, what's happening?" he asked.

"Hello Jayk." Tylo responded, "Sorry about disobeying your orders but if any of your instruments are still working then they ought to tell you that you're no longer going to crash into Corulag. I've managed to deflect the ship into a trajectory that will take it away from the planet. I'm afraid that whoever was on that escape

pod has managed to get away though."

"That is unfortunate but at least you have prevented a great many deaths. Get onto the authorities and tell them to send a team to secure this ship. It has a hold full of dangerous droids and also a lot of stolen property. Including I hope, a painting by Thal N'Krey."