

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

3-07: GODS & MEN

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Piracy is nothing new for the Jedi Order to deal with but when ancient warships are used to steal cargoes than then never appear on the black market the trail leads Jayk and Brae out beyond its borders into unexplored space...

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1.

The freighter dropped out of hyperspace beyond the gravity well of its intended destination. The planet was surrounded by a rings system as well as two large moons and it was common for the gravitational pull of these to drag debris out of the rings for a time. This meant that it was far safer for approaching ships to exit hyperspace early and travel the rest of the way at sublight speed in realspace rather than risk colliding with one of these rogue asteroids immediately upon exiting hyperspace.

"This is the *Leaping Star* to traffic control. Requesting permission to land." the freighter's captain transmitted. "Confirmed *Leaping Star*, your flight path is clear. You may approach beacon two and land. Welcome to Syronia." a controller responded.

"Thanks control, we're locked on beacon two now. ETA fourteen minutes." the captain said and then he leant back in his seat and looked at the young navigator who was on his first tour with the freighter, "Easy as ever." he said, smiling.

The freighter continued to fly towards Syronia with little for its command crew to do other than watch the computer perform most of the flying automatically. That was until the freighter came within the orbit of the planet's outer moon when the ship's sensors registered two other vessels coming around the moon at high speed.

"We've got incoming. Two contacts on intercept course." the *Leaping Star's* comscan officer said.

"Local security ships?" the navigator suggested.

"Not unless the Syronians have suddenly got themselves some patrol ships since our last run." the captain said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this. Comscan signal those ships and stand by on shields. We may have to make a run for it."

You think they're pirates?" the navigator asked.

"Who else would be flying ships like that all the way out here?" the captain replied.

"Picking up transmission captain." the comscan operator then announced.

"Attention freighter." a voice announced over the communication system, "Surrender your cargo and you will not be harmed. Resist and your ship will be fired on. We aren't looking to kill anyone but we aren't fussed about doing that if that's what it takes."

"Shields are up captain." another of the bridge crew replied.

"Time to atmosphere?" the captain asked.

"Now twelve minutes." the helmsman answered.

"Pirate vessels will intercept in six minutes captain." the comscan operator added.

"Our shields won't hold out against attack ships for eight minutes." the captain said, "If we drop them and go full burn can we reach the atmosphere before they get to us? Syronia may not have any patrol ships to help us but they do have surface defences that can cover our descent."

"It'll only shave off two minutes captain." the helmsman said.

"Then keep the shields up and give me best possible speed. Stand by to take evasive action." the captain ordered.

"Aye captain." the helmsman said as he diverted as much spare power to the *Leaping Star's* ion drives as he could without weakening the freighter's shields.

The two attack ships continued to head for the fleeing *Leaping Star*, the relatively small vessels easily outpacing the lumbering freighter laden with cargo and as they drew closer another vessel began to emerge from around the moon.

"Third contact." the *Leaping Star's* comscan operator announced, "Looks like a mother ship of some kind."

"Keep us moving." the captain said before there was a flash of weapons fire from one of the attack ships and the *Leaping Star* lurched as it was hit, "Damage report!" the captain exclaimed.

"Minor damage only. Shields weakened but holding. Still five and half minutes to atmosphere." one of the crew replied.

"Attention freighter that was just a warning shot." the voice of the pirate announced over the communication system, "Surrender your cargo."

"Keep going." the captain told his helmsman and the officer nodded.

"I've giving her all I can." he replied before the freighter shook under another impact and the bridge was filled with alarms.

"We've got a hull breach on C deck." one of the bridge crew called out, "Shields failing."

"They'll cut us to pieces without them." the comscan operator added.

"Captain the structure's buckling, we can't maintain this level of thrust." the helmsman warned.

"Kriff." the captain hissed as he realised there was no way to get his ship and cargo to within the range of Syronia's limited planetary defences. Then he drew in breath and gave the only order he could think of to get

his ship and crew out of this situation, "Get someone down to the cargo arm and have them eject the containers. Let's see if those pirates really will leave us alone if we give them what they want."

As the magnetic clamps holding the containers that held the *Leaping Star's* cargo to the main arm running from the freighter's forward command module to rear engineering section were disengaged the containers began to drift away, falling behind the ship as it continued to accelerate at a slower rate owing to the damage it had suffered. The freighter's command crew watched their sensors closely and they breathed a collective sigh of relief as the trio of pirate ships all veered away from the *Leaping Star* and towards the cargo containers now tumbling through space.

"They're taking the bait." the navigator said.

"That bait was our cargo." the ship's captain said sternly, "Our ship is damaged and we're arriving empty handed. Do you think our customer is going to pay for a cargo we didn't deliver?"

"Don't see you down here much Jayk." Jedi Knight Kat Maran said when she saw Jayk Udra entering the jedi temple's firing range. Lightsabers were the ubiquitous weapon of the jedi but that did not mean they were not trained to use more conventional ranged weapons and Kat was one of the jedi that instructed padawans in their use, "So what brings you here? Wanting to practice your marksmanship?"

"There is nothing wrong with my aim Kat." Jayk responded with a friendly smile, "I came to see if you were free for lunch. Tylo has recommended a bantha meat stand that has opened up near Coruscant Park."

Kat smiled.

"Okay, my next class isn't until three so I'm free." she said.

"Then lunch is on me." Jayk said and the pair of them walked from the firing range and headed for the jedi temple's main entrance. However, just as they were about to step outside Jayk's comlink sounded and he took the device from his belt, "Jayk Udra." he said.

"Dad you need to get back to the *Swift Exit*."

As a general rule jedi did not procreate, although it was far from unknown. On the other hand the Jedi Order took great care to keep closely related jedi away from one another to avoid them developing an emotional attachment that in the view of the order could increase the risk of them falling to the Dark Side if anything happened to their relatives. However, when Brae Udra had been close to being expelled from the Jedi Order before completing her training the council had instead opted to assign her to Jayk as his padawan in the hope that he would be able to provide an example of how their family had served the Jedi Order for many generations. At the time both Jayk and Brae had been told that she was his niece but it had later emerged that she was his daughter, the product of a romantic relationship he had entered into with a woman while on a long term assignment. The Jedi Order had reassigned Brae for a time after this information had become known but they had been persuaded to reverse this decision and now father and daughter served together as master and apprentice.

"Brae what's wrong?" Jayk asked.

"We've just been handed an assignment." Brae answered.

Jayk sighed and turned to Kat.

"I'm sorry it looks like we'll have to try that stand some other time." he said.

"You maybe." Kat replied, "I'm still on lunch now. See you when you get back." and then she leant forwards and briefly kissed him on the cheek before walking out of the temple.

After Kat left Jayk made his way to the jedi temple's main hangar where he found the *Swift Exit*. This ship stood out from the other vessels present in the hangar that belonged to the Jedi Order. The order maintained a large number of starfighters and long range shuttles that enabled jedi to be deployed to the furthest reaches of the galaxy at short notice. On the other hand the *Swift Exit* was a YT-700 class light freighter that belonged to the former smuggler Tylo Kurrast.

Jayk could see Tylo through the cockpit canopy as he walked towards the ship and when Tylo saw him approaching he waved and Jayk waved back. Entering the *Swift Exit* via the access ramp leading into the ship's hold Jayk made his way to the cockpit and found Tylo finishing his preflight system checks.

"You seem eager." Jayk said.

"Eager to carry out my duty to the Republic." Tylo replied with a smile.

"I don't even need to be able to use the Force to know that's a load of poodoo." Jayk commented.

"Hi dad," Brae's voice said suddenly as she entered the cockpit as well, "Tylo's just eager to get to the shadow port he thinks we need to visit. Apparently there's an establishment there where the women are-"

"Hey kid I thought we weren't going to mention that." Tylo interrupted.

"We aren't. I'm doing it alone." Brae responded and Tylo frowned.

"Damned jedi twisting things to their point of view." he muttered.

"Brae fill me in on our assignment and why Tylo thinks he'll have enough free time to purchase the personal services offered by the professional women at a shadow port." Jayk said.

"Pirates." Tylo replied but Jayk kept his gaze fixed on his daughter.

"There's been a spate of attacks across three sectors in the Outer Rim." Brae explained, "Local law

enforcement isn't strong enough to do anything about them and the Republic's anti-piracy forces are spread too thin to be able to deploy a task force long enough to track them down so the Jedi Order has been asked to intervene. Tylo's criminal record indicates that he's been active in that area so we've been assigned the mission."

"And I've already got the co-ordinate locked into the nav computer." Tylo added.

"How long will it take to get there?" Jayk asked.

"Oh about a day. Like Brae said we're heading for the Outer Rim." Tylo answered.

"In that case we can use the flight time to review all the information we have on these pirates." Jayk said,

"Brae and I will start now. Tylo, you join us once we're in hyperspace."

"Save me a beer." Tylo replied as the two Jedi left then left the cockpit.

2.

"Cal we'll need your input on this I think." Jayk said as he and Brae sat at the table in the *Swift Exit's* lounge and a hologram of another man in Jedi robes appeared. This was an image of Cal Udra, a Jedi knight who had lived long before the prohibition on Jedi having families came into effect. Cal's first Padawan had been his own sister and the Jedi Order had decided that the holocron he had created would be able to guide Jayk through training a close relative.

"Brae let me see the files." Cal announced, "I've been going through them since then.

"And is there anything in particular you can tell us?" Jayk asked.

"That it makes me feel kind of nostalgic. I haven't seen ships like these since the original me was alive." Cal said, "Look, I'll put them on the screen for you." and the hologram turned to face the large wall-mounted screen that Tylo had added to the lounge. Officially the high quality screen was for briefings such as this but in practice Tylo was more likely to use it to watch sporting events on. Remotely accessing the screen, Cal displayed a set of starship design schematics, each one showing the exterior of a vessel that had long since passed out of service in the Republic.

"I don't recognise any of these ships." Brae said as she looked at the screen.

"Nor should you. These are museum pieces." Cal told her, "The footage we have from the victims of the pirate attacks all show vessels of types that were in use between three and a half and four thousand years ago. In fact I flew aboard several of these types of starship myself when I was alive. Most of these are light scout and courier types, well armed in their day and with some cargo carrying capability. Against modern warships they wouldn't stand a chance but they're still a threat to civilian vessels."

"What about that larger ship?" Brae asked.

"That? Oh that's a bulk transport. Probably being used by the pirates as their mother ship. Mind you, I don't see how they could manage to fit all these other ships inside it. Either they've got more than one large transport or they have a safe port somewhere that they can dock and they just send out a few of their ships at a time."

"Tylo's shadow port perhaps?" Brae suggested.

"That's possible. Though we shouldn't count on it. Shadow ports are places to dispose of stolen goods, not full scale shipyards." Jayk replied. Then he looked back at Cal, "Is there any pattern to the pirates' attacks?" he added.

"Yes, they hang about near planets that don't have defence craft of their own and wait for ships to approach. It doesn't seem to matter what they're carrying either which is odd. In one attack they stayed around long enough to pick a ship clean of construction supplies that were meant for expanding a new colony. That just doesn't make sense. The ships they are using are nowhere near as efficient as modern ones and even if their engines are operating at or near their peak the amount of fuel they'll burn to take stuff like that anywhere they can sell it will cost more than it's worth." Cal told him.

"Then they must be building something themselves." Jayk said, "Something that means they can use those materials themselves. I think we should keep an eye on similar shipments in the area they are targeting."

"Perhaps it relates to that safe port Cal says they need. They could still be building it." Brae said.

"That would make sense. Find some deserted rock somewhere and set up a few temporary structures then improve on these as the resources become available. Jayk this could make them difficult to deal with unless we can find a way to stop them from running at the first sign of a Republic anti-piracy cruiser. If they pack away their initial set up then they can take off and start over in another system." Cal said in agreement.

"What about the more obvious things to steal. Have any of them been recovered yet?" Jayk asked but Cal shook his head.

"No. However the pirates are moving their stolen goods they're doing it quietly." he said.

"That's why I was chosen I think." Tylo said as he entered the lounge and went directly to the fridge for a beer, "So what do we know so far?"

"Very little." Jayk said, "They appear to steal anything but then don't sell it on."

"Thankfully I'd say that we've got a fair chance if we come up against one of their ships on its own." Cal added, "We may only have one laser cannon to defend ourselves with but it has far superior range to any of the weapons the pirate ships carry. Plus our sensors are superior, they should enable us to spot them before they spot us and we can decide whether or not to engage."

"Whoa there." Tylo said, lowering his drink from his mouth, "I thought we just had to find these guys. No one said anything to me about this being a combat operation."

"The Jedi are keepers of the peace, not soldiers." Jayk said, "If we have to engage the pirates directly we will but for now our mission remains to locate them so that the Republic can deal with them."

"Good. Because I never signed on to be a warship captain." Tylo said and he took another swig of his drink.

"You signed on to do whatever would keep you out of prison." Brae pointed out.

"Tylo how good are your contacts at this shadow port we're heading for?" Jayk said, turning his attention to the former smuggler.

"They were pretty good. Before I signed on with Morton Crayne's gang this was one of my regular haunts but that's more than a year ago now. People could have moved on." Tylo said, "I'm sure that at least someone I know will still be about though. What worries me more is you two. If anyone realises that you're jedi then we'll need to get out of there pretty quickly."

Jayk nodded.

"Brae we better change into something a little less formal before we arrive. We'll take blasters as well." he said.

"What about our lightsabers father?" Brae said.

"We'll keep them to hand but hidden." Jayk replied.

"That ought to do. This isn't the sort of place where you get stopped in the street and searched." Tylo said, "Stopped and murdered if you don't watch your back too closely though so mind your step. This place can be a little rough."

The shadow port had once been a more legitimate trading outpost until the advent of more advanced navigation technology meant ships travelling by no longer had to drop out of hyperspace to refuel and recheck their headings. Now although the structures of the trading post remained, many were not in the best state of repair and signs of disrepair were obvious.

The thin plating used to cover a cantina window failed to hold as a man was thrown against it from the inside and came crashing through into the street and landing right in front of the Udras and Tylo.

"Are we going in there?" Brae asked but Tylo shook his head.

"No, we want somewhere on the seedier side of town." he replied as a rodian leapt screaming through the window and the moment he landed by the man lying in the street he began to kick him while he was down.

"You have finished with this man." Jayk said as they walked past the rodian, waving his hand in front of the alien's face.

"I've finished with him." the rodian said as Jayk's suggestion overrode his desire to inflict injury on the man lying on the ground. Then the rodian straightened his jacket and headed back inside the cantina.

"That was risky." Tylo said, glancing back over his shoulder as the man was picking himself up off the ground, "What if someone had noticed you doing that?"

"Then we'd have convinced them that they were mistaken." Brae responded and Tylo frowned.

"Typical jedi answer for everything." he muttered.

Tylo continued to lead the jedi through the streets of the shadow port until they reached a small structure set among the remains of a larger building that had long since been dismantled. What was now left standing was nothing but a staircase that led down below ground and Tylo waved for Jayk and Brae to follow him.

"Come on, this is it." he said, "But don't eat or drink anything unless I do."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Brae said softly as they walked down the stairs.

"I think you may have a point." Jayk replied when they reached the bottom of the stairs to find themselves in another cantina converted from the basement of the building that had once stood above it. Beings of various species sat at tables and in booths around the edge of the room while a bar ran along the entire length of the far wall. A wookiee and a hok sat either side of the bottom of the stairs, each armed with a large club in their hands and a blaster slung over their shoulders. The two bouncers appeared to study Jayk, Brae and Tylo closely as they passed between the pair but neither said anything as Tylo made his way to the bar with the two jedi right behind him.

"Merrik!" Tylo yelled as he drew closer and the man behind the bar looked towards him and smiled.

"Tylo." he responded, "I heard you'd been arrested."

"I kind of was but I beat the rap." Tylo replied, "With a little help from my new crew here. Merrik meet Jayk and his lovely daughter Brae."

"Drinks?" the barman suggested.

"That depends, do you still drink the beer yourself and then sell your customers what you piss out afterwards?" Tylo said and the barman grinned.

"Why mess with success?" he said.

"Then bring me a bottle of whiskey. A full one and four glasses." Tylo said as he placed several bank notes on the bar and Merrik nodded while Tylo and the two jedi sat down at the bar.

It took just a few seconds for Merrik to produce a bottle of whiskey and four small glasses, placing one in front of each of the trio in front of him and the final one in front of himself.

"Let's see that." Tylo said, taking the bottle and inspecting the seal to make certain that it was intact.

"Don't you trust me Tylo?" Merrik asked.

"Of course not. You'd sell me out in a second if there was a credit in it for you." Tylo said. Then when he saw that the bottle was still in the same condition it had been when it left the bottling plant on Corellia he broke

the seal himself and poured each of the four of them a drink.

Merrick lifted his glass and downed the shot before looking straight at Tylo.

"So why are you here Tylo?" he asked.

Tylo gulped down his drink and refilled both his and Merrik's glasses.

"I hear a lot of cargoes aren't reaching their intended destinations Merrik." Tylo said.

"Ah, so you're looking to help those who now have the cargoes to move them?" Merrik said.

"Well I am one of the foremost experts in getting cargoes past the prying eyes of the Republic and local authorities." Tylo replied with a smile before he downed the second shot of whiskey.

"Yes you are." Merrik said, "Which is what makes it such a shame that I can't help you."

"Why not?" Jayk asked.

"Because while everyone around here knows that there are some new players at work there's no-one that knows who they are." Merrik said.

"How can that be? How can they sell what they're stealing if they don't deal with anyone else?" Brae said.

"They could be taking it further afield." Merrik said, "Perhaps out to Hutt Space."

"With the ships they've got? Merrik that would take weeks." Tylo said, "They have to be moving their stuff locally and even if it's not here then there should be someone here that knows where it's being moved."

"Hey I agree with you." Merrik said, raising his hands, "But I haven't spoken to anyone that seen so much as a credit that's been taken."

"Sounds like they're stockpiling what they steal." Jayk said but Tylo shook his head.

"That doesn't make any sense. No pirate crew is going to hang around while loot just stockpiles. They'll want their share and they'll want to spend it on drink and women. Both of those have to come from somewhere." he said.

"Hang on a minute Tylo." Merrik said, "That reminds me of something. A couple of months ago a mining ship landed here and a couple of its officers headed over to that place by the cliffs. You know the one-"

"Yeah, I know." Tylo interrupted, "I was thinking of paying a visit there later on. Revisit a previous acquaintance or four."

"Well most of the girls have gone." Merrik said, "When that mining ship arrived they took them away with them."

"By force?" Jayk asked.

"You really don't know this place do you?" Merrik said.

"If anyone tried anything against the girls at that place they wouldn't make it back to their ships alive." Tylo said, "Too many people enjoy their services."

"So they went willingly." Jayk said.

"I think we should check that out." Tylo said to Jayk and Brae frowned.

"Really?" she said, "We're here trying to track down a bunch of pirates and all you can think about is visiting a-"

"Tylo may have a point Brae." Jayk interrupted, "The timing of the start of the pirate operations and the visit of the mining ship may just be a co-incidence but perhaps the reason none of the cargoes that have been stolen have hit the black market yet is because the pirates responsible are keeping it to themselves for some reason. But as Tylo said that would not satisfy them so instead what they would spend their wealth on has to be brought to them. Perhaps you should wait at the ship while-"

"I think I can handle myself at a place like that." Brae said.

3.

Anger.

Tylo gasped as Brae swung her fist and punched the drunken man who had just stumbled into the brothel behind them and immediately tried to grab hold of her. Jayk sensed her anger at this but on this occasion he said nothing, the man's actions having made him just as angry while Brae had not used the Force in her attack so she had not drawn on the Dark Side.

"Hey if she's going to attack my customers-" the overweight female twi'lek that was in charge of the establishment began.

"Brae will not attack anyone else unless they assault her first." Jayk said.

"Unlike most other people here my body is not for sale or rent." Brae added sternly.

"Hey look Heema all we want is some information then we can be out of here." Tylo said, addressing the twi'lek by name and this made her look at him more closely and she frowned.

"I know you don't I?" she said, "You're Tylo Kurrast."

"That's right and my friends and I would like to know more about why you're short handed right now." he answered.

"Some stuck up laser brain miners came in waving gold and gemstones about and promising my girls a better deal with a long term contract on their prospecting mission." Heema said, "More than half of them were stupid enough to accept it and just walked out."

"Stupid? You think they were tricked?" Jayk commented and the twi'lek nodded.

"Of course they were tricked. No one legit comes here. I bet they all ended up being sold as slaves." she said.

"Thank you, I think that's all we needed to know." Jayk said.

"Okay I'll join you back at the ship later." Tylo told the jedi, "I just want to hook up with an old friend."

"If you mean Tari then she's gone." Heema said, "She left with the miners." and Tylo's face fell.

"I guess this means you'll be enjoying the pleasure of our company instead then." Brae said and Tylo snorted before he and the two jedi left the building and began to walk back towards where the *Swift Exit* was landed.

"So do you think the departure of those women is connected to the pirates?" Brae asked, looking at Jayk.

"Yes I do." he responded, "I do not think that we are dealing with ordinary pirates. This particular group have an unusual way of operating and I think that locating that mining ship could lead us to them."

Returning to the *Swift Exit*, Jayk, Brae and Tylo headed for the lounge and both jedi placed their borrowed blasters on the table.

"Cal we need your help." Jayk said and Cal's image materialised.

"Actually I may have something more for you." he said.

"Don't tell me you've actually found those pirates." Tylo responded.

"No but while you were gone I accessed the Bureau of Ships and Services database and I think I've managed to figure out where they got their ships from." Cal told him.

"Where?" Brae asked.

"A storage depot in the Parolis system in the Colonies region. They have tens of thousands of ships there and a number of them were reported as stolen with BoSS right before these pirates started their attacks." Cal said.

"And all these ships at Parolis are as old as these are they?" Tylo said.

"No, some are as much as ten thousand years old but there are some that are less than a hundred." Cal replied.

"So why steal ships that are almost four thousand years old?" Brae said.

"Nostalgia?" Tylo added.

"Probably to do with security." Cal said, "Although as new sections are added to the depot they are given the best security available those security features aren't retrofitted to older vessels so the stolen ships would have had lockouts almost as old as they were. I've checked the listing for the inventory and all of the pirate ships that we know about match vessels taken in the raid."

"Do the authorities know who was responsible?" Jayk said.

"The sector rangers suspect that it was an inside job. Probably engineering teams that knew which ships were functional enough to be of use and which of them had security they could break fast enough to get away before the system's defence ships could be scrambled to intercept them." Cal explained, "They may be looking at expanding their fleet with some more modern vessels though. The first recorded sighting of any of these ships after being stolen was a brief raid at a mineral processing colony where-"

"Oh wait, let me guess." Tylo said, raising his hand, "They stole a mining ship."

"How did you know that?" Cal asked, his image frowning.

"Because a mining ship came here at about the time the pirates began their attacks," Brae told him, "and dad thinks that it was connected to them."

"It could provide a useful means to turn their ill gotten gains into cash." Jayk said, "If they have a way of laundering what they steal as precious metals and gemstones then they could just sell these on the open market and claim to have mined them themselves."

"Okay so it sounds like we're going hunting for this mining ship," Tylo said, "but where do you suggest we start?"

"Public discussion forums." Brae said and the others all turned to look at her, "Well if these pirates are posing as miners and suddenly turning up with a hold filled with precious minerals then people are going to notice and they'll get jealous. Someone will start asking about where that ship goes so they can try their own luck and an online forum is the obvious place if you ask me."

"Very good Brae." Jayk said, nodding slowly and then he turned to Cal's hologram.

"Let me guess." Cal said, "Start searching public discussion forums for signs of the stolen mining ship."

"If you wouldn't mind." Jayk replied and Cal vanished, "In the mean time we should get ready to leave. I think we've learned all we can here." he added.

It did not take long for Cal to track down numerous reports of a mining ship previously unknown in a neighbouring sector that had just arrived and was making repeated sales of certain precious metals and various gemstones. Appearing in the lounge only Tylo was present and he had to summon Jayk and Brae who were still changing back into their jedi robes.

"This ship is of the same class as the one that we think the pirates hijacked." he said as Jayk and Brae returned to the lounge and he brought up an image of the mining ship that had been taken at a starport on the video screen, "Its transponder is different of course, but its only to be expected that they'd alter it. I'd need access to the full BoSS database to check whether the code is false or has been cloned from another ship though."

"We'll have to have access to the ship for that." Jayk said, "What can you tell us now?"

"I can tell you that it lands every two to three weeks in the Ventaran system." Cal said.

"I know that system." Tylo said, "Lots of industry there that could make use of precious metals and gems."

"It's also the hub for navigation through its sector." Cal added, "Any shipping entering or leaving will have to file a flight plan there beforehand."

"Let me guess, all of the ships that were hit passed through that sector." Jayk said and Cal's hologram nodded.

"Every one of them." he said, "The connection was too vague to be found before now, some of the ships didn't come within thirty parsecs of one another but the pattern makes more sense now."

"So they land at Ventaran, offload and sell their cargo and at the same time either one of them slices into the shipping database or they pay someone else to and they get a list of what ships and cargoes will be most useful to them." Tylo said. Then he looked at Jayk, "So I guess we're heading for Ventaran then." he added.

"Yes. We'll need a way of accessing the ship's computer system. I want the full navigation log and anything that can tell us what the pirates might hit next. Perhaps we can warn their prospective victims to take steps to protect themselves."

"I'll go and program the nav computer." Tylo said, getting out of his seat, "It's pretty close so we can be there in about an hour."

"Very good." Jayk replied and then he looked at Brae, "Once we get there you and I will track down the mining ship with Cal." he told her.

"Then what?" Brae asked.

"Cal can you identify the stolen mining ship if we take you close enough?" Jayk said.

"Possibly. I have a full copy of the police report that list all the significant features and if I can get close enough to read their transponder then I can compare it to BoSS records and see what we get." Cal answered and Jayk looked back at Brae.

"If it does look like the mining ship is the one we believe was stolen by the pirates then we'll go aboard and detain the crew. Then we can take a look at the navigation system to try and isolate where the pirates are operating from." he said.

4.

As Tylo had promised it was only a short jump through hyperspace to the Ventaran system where the planet of the same name was located. As a major industrialised world the space around it was far busier than over the shadow port and this meant that it had to be properly administered by an advanced traffic control system. The existence of this system meant that every ship that visited the planet was recorded and before they even landed on the surface Jayk was already speaking with a senior member of the traffic control authority.

"As I told your subordinate my name is Jedi Knight Jayk Udra and I am here to investigate the recent spate of pirate attacks in this region of space." he said.

"There are no pirates here Jedi Udra." the controller replied, "We have an efficient patrol squadron to guarantee the safety of-

"I'm not interested in your boasts about planetary security." Jayk interrupted, "My investigation has indicated that the pirates may be exchanging their stolen goods for minerals they are then selling here. We are looking for a Kuat Drive Yards AP-one-fifty."

"One moment Jedi Udra." the controller responded as he began to search his records, "We have one AP-one-fifty recorded that has made several visits over the past few months. It's name is the *Lost Soul* and it always lands at space port North Fifteen." he added when the result of his search came back.

"Have you checked the registration with BoSS?" Jayk asked.

"No sir. The vessel has never caused any trouble so we've haven't had the need." the controller answered, "The vessel is not currently in the system. Shall I alert our defence force to intercept it when it next arrives?"

"No." Jayk responded, "Let the ship land but inform me of its precise location. *Swift Exit* out."

"So what now?" Tylo then asked, "Do you want us to hang around in orbit?"

"No. Take us down to the surface. If the pirates aboard that mining ship scan space around Ventaran when they arrive then they might think a light freighter orbiting for no reason is suspicious. Find us a nice anonymous docking bay as far from North Fifteen as you can get while still being within twenty minutes travel time and set us down in it."

"We're specifically avoiding the place they land every time they're here?" Tylo commented and Jayk nodded.

"I'm trying to cover all the bases." he said, "The pirates could have an agent among the starport staff reporting on any unusual activity."

"Okay I've got a beacon just over a hundred kilometres from the North Fifteen one." Tylo said, "Will that do?" "I think so. Take us down."

Tylo landed the *Swift Exit* in a hangar that was part of a mushroom shaped structure designed specifically for handling small transport ships such as his. Each vessel was allotted a private hangar and this allowed the occupants of the ship to remain unobserved by anyone who might find the lack of anyone leaving the ship suspicious.

There was nothing relating to their mission for the *Swift Exit's* occupants to do while they waited so they found other things to occupy their time instead. Tylo spent his entire time watching sports programs from the planetary broadcast system while Jayk and Brae alternated between meditation and practising Brae's use of the Force under the instruction of both Jayk and Cal. This continued for more than four days until the trio were woken in the early hours of the morning by the communication system.

Rather than make his way to the cockpit, Tylo reached out to the intercom panel beside his bunk and slapped it to transfer the connection to the crew cabin where he and the Udras slept.

"Do you know what time it is?" he said, looking at his chronometer.

"Yes. It is currently three fourteen in the morning at your location." a mechanical voice said.

"Oh great a droid." Tylo commented, looking across the cabin at where Jayk and Brae were now both looking at him from their bunks, "I bet it wants to know if we've had any accidents that weren't our fault in the last three years."

"I am contacting you on behalf of the planetary traffic control system sir." the droid said.

"Has the *Lost Soul* arrived in system?" Jayk asked.

"Yes sir. There is a flag in our system instructing me to alert you as soon as the vessel touches down. It has just done so at North Fifteen, docking bay ninety-seven." the droid answered.

"We need priority clearance." Jayk said as he and Brae both climbed out of bed and grabbed hold of the robes hanging nearby and while Jayk remained in the cabin Brae rushed into the bathroom with her clothes to get dressed. On the other hand Tylo remained in his bunk and snarled.

"Affirmative. The *Swift Exit* is cleared in our system to enter all restricted traffic zones." the droid told him.

"Good. *Swift Exit* out." Jayk said and Tylo shut off the intercom.

"I suppose we're going now." he said as he finally swung his legs out of his bunk and Jayk nodded.

"We are. Which means I need you to fly the ship while Brae and I take Cal to inspect this mining ship." he

replied.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Tylo muttered as he stood up. Then he hesitated before he added, "I need caf. Strong caf. Very strong caf."

It took less than half an hour for the *Swift Exit* to make it to starport North Fifteen but in that time Tylo was able to down two mugs of caf brought to him by Jayk and Brae. The three of them all sat in the *Swift Exit's* cockpit, looking down at the large docking bays as they searched for the pirates' stolen mining ship. Although the starport's docking bays varied in size from smaller ones suitable for a ship such as the *Swift Exit* right up to bays several hundred metres across and capable of handling bulk freighters and even small capital ships they all shared a common configuration. The starport was built at below ground level with each circular docking bay dug down into the ground and interconnected by underground passageways. Retractable domed covers could be raised over these bays and some were covered by them, the starships beneath rendered invisible but fortunately for the *Swift Exit's* occupants the cover to the docking bay that held the *Lost Soul* was still wide open and the ship was clearly visible within it.

"There, docking bay ninety-seven." Tylo said, pointing to the open docking bay in which sat the KDY AP-150 class mining vessel. At more than two hundred metres in length and almost half that wide the ship came close to filling the docking bay and its upper hull protruded above ground level.

"A ship like that could hold hundreds of people." Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"Full crew complement for a ship of that class is over two hundred." Jayk replied, "However, that number does include the workers who would undertake the mining and refining of the ore. Given that the pirates probably aren't doing either then there could be as few as twenty people aboard that ship."

"So you'll be outnumbered by between ten and a hundred to one?" Tylo said and Brae smiled.

"Doesn't sound fair does it? Perhaps we should give them the chance to get reinforcements." she said.

Jayk smiled as well, recognising the humour in the comment rather than over confidence.

"Take us down over the mining ship and drop us off when I give you the word." he told Tylo, "Then pull back and circle while Brae and I investigate the ship."

"Okay here goes." Tylo said as he guided the *Swift Exit* towards the ground.

As the ship descended Jayk and Brae made their way to the cargo hold and Jayk opened the access ramp while the ship was still in flight.

"Brae do you think you can jump from here?" Jayk asked when the ship was about fifty metres above the upper hull of the mining ship and knowing that the lower the *Swift Exit* got, the more likely it was that one or more of the pirates would notice it.

"I think so." she replied, nodding as she peered out of the hold and down at the mining ship below.

"Then we'll jump from here and land as close to that hatch by the sensor dish as we can." Jayk told her before activating the intercom, "This is low enough Tylo. Give us chance to jump and then get out of here."

"Got it. Ready when you are." Tylo responded and Jayk immediately sprinted down the ramp and leapt from the end, using the Force to slow his descent so that when he landed on the upper hull of the mining ship he did so without injuring himself. Jayk dropped into a crouching position and drew his lightsaber as soon as he landed and waited for Brae to land. This happened just a few seconds later, the teenager landing a few metres behind Jayk and further away from the hatch he had identified as their target.

"Time to consult Cal I think." he said and Brae produced Cal's holocron from beneath her robes, "Cal can you read the transponder from here?" Jayk asked.

"Yes its active," Cal's voice responded while his holographic image remained inactive to avoid being noticed, "and I think this is our ship, the underlying transponder code matches the stolen vessel."

"Good. That gives me probable cause to do this." Jayk said and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated his lightsaber and then swung it at the hatch, destroying the magnetic lock and causing it to slide open in an instant.

"Down again." Brae said as she tucked Cal's holocron back into her robes and Jayk nodded.

"Down again." he repeated and then jumped into the hole beneath the open hatch and vanished, "Clear." he called out from inside the ship and Brae ran towards the hatch as well and jumped inside.

5.

The compartment beneath the hatch was an emergency airlock that included a rack of vacuum suits and life support packs while a set of handholds embedded in one wall led up to the hatch itself. There was only one other exit from the compartment and this was currently open to reveal the corridor on the other side. Jayk stood just inside this doorway, peering out into the corridor to check that none of the ship's crew were close enough to have noticed the jedi's uninvited entry to their ship.

"Where to now master?" Brae asked.

"Down." Jayk answered, "From my study of the schematics for a ship of this class the main refinery should be right underneath us and from the control centre of that section it's a direct route to the main bridge where Cal can plug in."

"Do we search for a ladder or turbolift, or do we just make our own way down?" Brae added.

"One of the existing routes down is best. Anything else could give away our position." Jayk said and then he darted out of the airlock, rushing along the corridor in the direction of what the ship schematics he had reviewed indicated was the location of a nearby turbolift.

The corridor was deserted and the jedi made it to the turbolift without being detected and from there they summoned the turbolift car.

"Be ready with your lightsaber. We don't know if there will be anyone in the refinery." Jayk told Brae as they stepped inside the turbolift and then selected the level he expected to give them the easiest access to the mining ship's bridge.

As the turbolift descended both jedi stood with their lightsabers held at the ready but inactive to avoid the light and hum of their blades to give away their presence. As it happened there was no-one close by when the turbolift door slid open and the two jedi crept out into the refinery. They found themselves on a small platform that overlooked the machinery used to separate out valuable minerals from the rocks they were embedded in. Typically this equipment would be used to process ore while the mining ship was gathering ore, enabling the worthless rock to be ejected from the ship so that valuable hold space would not be wasted. Then during the journey to where the refined minerals would be sold the equipment could be shut down and serviced. Much of this service work would be undertaken by droids but there would still be plenty of living crew members on hand to oversee the operation, however as the jedi looked out over the silent refinery they saw no signs of life or movement at all.

"There's no-one here." Brae said as she looked around, reaching out through the Force to see if she could sense the presence of anyone other than her and Jayk in the refinery.

"No, this fits with the idea that the pirates are able to exchange what they steal for valuable minerals somewhere else and all they need to do after that is bring them here to be sold." Jayk replied.

"But if this equipment has no use then why not just rip it out to create more cargo space?" Brae asked.

"The cargo capacity of this type of vessel is well known. To arrive in port with twice what it can carry would arouse suspicion." Jayk told her, "Now come along, the monitoring station is over there." and he pointed to a row of windows set into a wall beside another raised platform.

The monitoring station on the other side of the refinery was where the jedi encountered the first sign of habitation aboard the mining ship in the form of several labour droids stood in a line at their recharging station. None of these were operational though, and the chest panels of all of them had been opened so that critical components could be removed to ensure that they could not be reactivated by accident.

"Someone really didn't want these things turning on." Brae commented.

"They are probably all programmed to recognise the ship's lawful owners." Jayk pointed out as he crossed the monitoring station and opened the door on the opposite side to reveal another corridor, "This should lead us straight to the bridge." he said.

The corridor connecting the refinery to the bridge went for about twenty metres before it reached another compartment filled with computer equipment that was deserted. The circular room contained a dozen duty stations arranged around the outside, each of which was identical in appearance, resembling the comscan stations aboard capital ships.

"This is where mining operations would be controlled from." Jayk said softly, not wanting to risk anyone in the bridge overhearing him.

"Another part of the ship the pirates have no use for." Brae responded and Jayk nodded.

"That should be the bridge." he said, pointing to a door opposite the one the jedi had entered through and the jedi advanced towards this. Positioning themselves either side of the door Jayk and Brae exchanged glances before Jayk opened it and they looked into the bridge on the other side.

At long last the jedi now encountered other living beings aboard the mining ship in the form of two men in overalls sat at two of the consoles. One of them sat at the comscan station to monitor communications while

the other rested in the captain's chair, a lit cigarra in one hand.

"Step away from the consoles." Jayk ordered and both men spun around to face the door behind them.

"Who the kriff are you?" the one in the captain's chair demanded and Jayk just smiled as he activated his lightsaber.

"Obvious yet?" Brae commented as she did the same.

"Jedi!" the other man exclaimed and both of the pirates reached for their blasters. Jayk lunged forwards with his lightsaber pointing straight out in front of him and the blade passed right through the chest of the startled looking pirate. Meanwhile the second pirate was far enough away from either Jedi that he was able to get his weapon in his hand before either of them could get close enough to strike. He fired his blaster at Brae, judging her to be the more vulnerable of the two Jedi thanks to her youth and small physical stature.

Brae dodged his first shot and the energy blast flew into the operations control room behind her before hitting one of the control terminals in there. His next shot she parried with her lightsaber, careful to redirect the blast away from any of the control stations in the bridge that they would want to access once they had control. Instead she sent the blaster bolt towards the viewport that dominated the front of the bridge and the transparisteel scorched where it was hit.

Jayk took advantage of the pirate's focus on Brae to vault over a console and land right beside him before bringing his lightsaber up in an arc that slashed across the pirate's chest.

"Brae, the door." Jayk said as the second pirate fell dead and she turned and waved her hand at the controls to the door, causing it to close, "Good, now let's see what Cal can tell us."

Reaching into her robes, Brae produced Cal's holocron and set it down on the captain's console.

"Cal are you ready to patch in?" she asked.

"Ready but not exactly able yet." Cal replied as his hologram appeared, "The wireless access to the computer network isn't working. You'll need to plug me in directly."

"Brae look around. See if you can find a suitable port." Jayk said and the two Jedi began to search for a computer access port on one of the consoles, "Wait, there's one here on the navigation station."

"Probably for an astromech droid." Cal commented, "That should make it easier to access the navigational system from there."

"I've got the cable here." Brae added as she picked up Cal's holocron and plugged in a data cable that in turn enabled her to connect Cal to the mining ship's computer system.

"Okay the network slicing defences have already been disabled. Most likely when the pirates stole the ship in the first place." Cal said.

"Can you tell where the ship has been since it was stolen?" Brae asked.

"Of course, I'm accessing the logs now. That's interesting." Cal said.

"What is?" Jayk responded.

"This ship doesn't go many places. In fact just back and forth between the same two locations." Cal said,

"Here and one other place."

"Where?" Brae asked.

"I'm not sure. There are co-ordinates listed in the nav computer but no destination name. The co-ordinates are pretty close to the hyperspace anomalies that isolate the Unknown Regions. Back in my day it wouldn't have been possible to get that close." Cal answered.

"Why not?" Brae said.

"A simple matter of computing power. We didn't have independent nav computers aboard most of our starships and had to rely on navigation beacons at key locations to provide us with data. The problem is that a hyperspace anomaly can shift its boundaries very rapidly and make the data held by a beacon obsolete. Of course nowadays I understand that both your nav computers and hyperdrives can compensate for the changes more easily." Cal explained.

"But aren't pirates using ships that date back to your time? The original Cal Udra." Brae said.

"But they could be using more modern navigational equipment and astromech droids. It would be compatible." Jayk pointed out.

all of a sudden there was a pounding on the door and the Udras, including Cal's image turned to look towards it.

"Hey! What's going on in there? We thought we saw firing from outside." a voice called out.

"Looks like they spotted that shot I sent into the window." Brae said.

"Cal have you saved the co-ordinates this ship has been travelling to?" Jayk asked and Cal's hologram nodded.

"Of course." he said.

"Good. Then we'll disconnect you and get back to the *Swift Exit*. We can figure out what's there once we're aboard."

With the pounding at the door continuing Brae disconnected Cal from the ship's computer and then Jayk reactivated his lightsaber.

"We need to make sure that these pirates can't warn their comrades about us." he said and Brae smiled as

she ignited her weapon as well.

"Let's do this." she said and both Jedi began to hack at the control consoles in the bridge with their lightsabers, destroying them one at a time.

While they were disabling the ship's control systems the pirates outside were busy trying to gain access to the bridge and just as the last console was destroyed by a swing from Jayk's lightsaber the door suddenly slid open and the Jedi turned to find themselves face to face with a trio of startled pirates.

"Kriff! Jedi!" one yelled out as he leapt aside to take cover behind the door frame and drew his blaster.

"Warn the others!" a second pirate yelled at the first and he too produced a blaster as he dropped to his knees and fired at Jayk. The shot was poorly aimed and Jayk easily dodged it as the third pirate turned around and broke into a run, heading back across the operations control room.

The first pirate then began to fire around the door frame as rapidly as his weapon's recharge cycle would allow and Jayk had to react quickly to parry or deflect each shot with his lightsaber. He sent as many of the blaster bolts as he could back at the pirate but his position behind the door frame left very little of himself exposed and none of the deflected energy blasts hit him.

Meanwhile the kneeling pirate now turned his attention to Brae and fired at her. Like Jayk she used her lightsaber like a shield to protect herself from the blaster fire, though this time she was not concerned about causing any further damage to the bridge and was able to deflect blaster shots in almost any direction that was easy. Only the arc that would risk hitting Jayk could be ruled out. Even with so many options she still focused her attention on reflecting the shots right back at the pirate who was firing at her and after sending three shots into the remains of three different already smashed consoles she was able to angle her lightsaber blade just right to reflect the next shot straight back at the kneeling pirate. The bolt hit him in the chest and he fell backwards, his blaster clattering to the floor. Seeing this Brae reached out her hand and used the Force to bring the weapon to her, catching it one handed before turning it towards the other pirate behind the door frame. From her position she had a better angle of view than Jayk and most of the side of the side of the pirate was exposed, enabling her to aim the blaster easily before squeezing the trigger. Having counted on his comrade to keep Brae at bay the pirate was taken by surprise by this attack and he cried out as she hit him in the hip. The wounded pirate collapsed on the spot and turned his blaster towards Brae but he was not quick enough to be able to take aim before she fired a second shot that clipped the side of his head and killed him instantly.

"Nice shooting." Jayk said and Brae nodded as she tossed the blaster away.

"It didn't feel very civilised though." she replied and then both Jedi hurried out of the cockpit, heading back towards the dorsal air lock that would get them back onto the upper hull of the mining ship.

As they ran down the short corridor leading to the refinery section of the ship another group of pirates that included the third one from the bridge appeared at the far end, all three armed with blasters.

"There they are!" the pirate who had run to raise the alarm yelled and he fired his blaster down the corridor. The pirate's aim was poor and the shot passed between Jayk and Brae as both Jedi brought up their lightsabers and braced themselves for the next volley of blaster fire from the pirates.

"Ready Brae?" Jayk asked and Brae nodded.

"Whenever you are master." she answered.

"Go!" Jayk snapped and both Jedi suddenly broke into a run, charging down the corridor towards the pirates who immediately opened fire on them.

Jayk and Brae blocked every shot that came towards them, sending as many right back down the corridor as they could and one of these struck one of the pirates before he could dive out of the way of the deflected shot. Startled by the unexpected death of their comrade the other two pirates ceased their fire for a moment just as Jayk closed to within arms' reach. With one quick strike he despatched one of the pirates and with a wave of his hand he knocked the other aside, clearing the way for Brae to leap over him as she caught up with Jayk. The pirate rolled over and looked up at Brae, but as he lifted his blaster she lashed out with her foot and kicked it from his grip. Both Jayk and Brae then sprinted across the refinery monitoring room and out onto the platform outside. Jayk then closed the door behind them and touched his lightsaber against the control panel. This produced a small explosion and a shower of sparks that disabled the controls, effectively jamming the door shut and trapping the pirate inside the monitoring room.

"Come on, before more pirates show up." Jayk said and he and Brae started to run once more, climbing down into the refinery itself.

As they continued towards the turbolift that would take them back up to the airlock the Jedi heard the sound of shouting and Jayk looked around to try and identify the source.

Danger.

"Brae get down!" he shouted when he sensed the disturbance in the Force and both Jedi dived for cover just as a blaster bolt flew over their heads. The two Jedi now took cover behind different pieces of refinery machinery as more shots flew past them, the pirates unconcerned about damaging any of the equipment they had no use for, "They're on the platform towards the stern." Jayk said as he peered around the machinery towards the origin of the blaster fire, "We can probably make it as far as the ladder we need to

use but they'll cut us down as soon as we try climbing it."

"Then what about a different route?" Brae suggested.

"What did you have in mind?" Jayk asked.

"The turbolift we came down in goes down more levels than the one we stopped at." Brae reminded him and Jayk smiled.

"Do it." he told her and Brae instantly turned her lightsaber so that the blade pointed straight down and began to cut through the deck.

While Brae was creating an alternative exit from the refinery Jayk kept watch on the pirates shooting at them, making sure that they saw just enough of him to keep their interest in targeting him but not so much that they could easily score a hit. For their parts the pirates remained convinced that they had the jedi pinned down in place and continued their firing. However, they were not the only pirates left aboard the mining ship and when more arrived behind this group Jayk saw them instead began to climb down from the platform into the refinery, obviously intended to root out the jedi from their hiding place.

"Brae we need to leave quickly." he said.

"Almost there." Brae responded as her lightsaber neared the point at which she would have cut a complete circle out of the deck and then all of a sudden there was a loud 'clang' as she completed the circle and the loose section of decking dropped through the hole she had cut.

"Down you go." Jayk told her and Brae nodded before jumping into the hole.

Jayk then leapt across the gap between the machines he and Brae had been hiding behind, prompting another flurry of blaster fire that clipped his cloak before he dived through the hole as well.

The hole brought the two jedi out in a barracks and the bunk immediately beneath the hole help break their fall as they landed. Looking around the jedi saw that the barracks was empty, the state of the bunks that lined the room suggesting that this was another area of the ship that was not being used by the pirates.

However, at the far end of the room from where they now stood there was the door to the turbolift that would take them almost all the way back to the dorsal airlock.

Rushing right up to the door Brae summoned the turbolift car but when the door slid open the jedi found themselves facing another of the pirates.

Surprise.

Fear.

The pirate was a large man and he carried a bulky blaster rifle in his hands. However, he had not expected to be facing the jedi as soon as the turbolift doors opened and he was not prepared for them, his rifle held low in front of him. as he raised his weapon Brae also brought up her lightsaber, slicing the muzzle of the weapon and coming close to taking the fingers off the pirate's hand in the process. The pirate gasped and let go of the rifle, its barrel now too hot for him to hold. Then as it dropped to the floor and the pirate reached for the pistol holstered at his waist Jayk formed a fist and delivered a powerful punch to the man's face. This produced a 'crunch' and blood spurted from the man's nose as he collapsed, his hands covering his face.

Brae reached out towards the helpless pirate and using the Force she took hold of him and pulled him from the turbolift, leaving him sprawled on the floor of the barracks while she and Jayk got into the turbolift and set it to take them back to the uppermost deck of the mining ship.

"Tylo do you read me?" Jayk said into his comlink as they burst out of the turbolift and ran towards the airlock.

"Yeah I read you." Tylo's voice responded, "You need a pick up?"

"Yes, quickly if you don't mind. Brae and I will be on the upper hull in a few moments and there are likely to be some upset pirates following after us."

"Understood. I'm on my way down now. ETA two minutes." Tylo said.

Jayk and Brae ran back to the air lock and Jayk turned to cover the corridor as Brae climbed out onto the mining ship's upper hull before he followed her as well. By the time both jedi were standing on the outside of the mining ship the *Swift Exit* was already descending towards them, its access ramp open.

The sound of voices coming from within the mining ship alerted the jedi to the approach of more pirates and Jayk and Brae looked at one another.

"Ready Brae?" Jayk asked, offering his hand to his daughter.

"Ready father." she replied as she took his hand in her own and then both jedi leapt up into the air, using the Force to give them a boost.

They landed on the end of the access ramp and let go of one another's hands as they ran up it. Jayk rushed up to the control panel and closed the ramp. Then while it was closing he activated the intercom.

"Tylo we're secure. Go." he said.

6.

"So what do we have?" Tylo asked when Jayk and Brae entered the cockpit just as the *Swift Exit* was leaving the atmosphere.

"The co-ordinates of the pirate's home base." Brae replied, grinning.

"It might just be a rendezvous point." Jayk commented, "However, hopefully by comparing the information to the Jedi Order's star charts we will find out more. Brae we need Cal."

"Of course." Brae said and she reached into her robes. However, rather than taking out the holocron she froze and her eyes widened, "Stang!" she hissed, "I must have dropped it somewhere on the mining ship!"

"Are you kidding me?" Tylo exclaimed, "You mean we have to go back."

"Oh no here it is." Brae said as she then took out the holocron.

"That was not funny." Jayk commented.

Brae set the holocron down and Cal's image appeared at the rear of the cockpit.

"Can you compare-" Jayk began.

"The co-ordinates to the Jedi Order's star charts? Already done it and they match with an uncharted star system. Remote observations suggest a system of planets including one rocky one that could have a type one atmosphere." Cal interrupted.

"So it could be their base." Brae said.

"Yes, or possibly another shadow port we were not previously aware of. In any case, those are the co-ordinates we have and we should make our way there with haste. Tylo I will contact the authorities on Ventaran to have them apprehend the pirates on the surface, I want you to set the hyperdrive for a jump to these co-ordinates."

The *Swift Exit* came out of hyperspace on the edge of the system located close to one of the numerous hyperspace anomalies that made travel into the Unknown Regions difficult and Tylo directed the ship's sensors deeper into the system, searching for the planets known to orbit the star.

"Got it." he announced over the intercom and Jayk and Brae came rushing into the cockpit.

"What is it?" Brae asked.

"A planet with a type one atmosphere just like Cal said, "Plus I'm picking up signs of an advanced civilisation there."

"That's not possible." Jayk said, "If the system had reached even an atomic level of development then the republic's listening stations would have detected it."

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

"Well take a look at these readings." Tylo said, pointing to the sensor readouts, "I'm picking up emissions from fusion reactors and modern communication patterns over a wide area. That's way more than just a pirate base or shadow port."

"Yes it is." Jayk agreed, "But none of the thermal readings associated with the cities and industry necessary for such a level of technology and no signs of even a single satellite orbiting the planet."

"So what now?" Tylo asked.

"Take us down. Land us just beyond Brae and I will investigate on the ground while you survey the area from the air." Jayk told him and Tylo nodded before engaging the *Swift Exit's* ion drive and accelerating towards the planet.

As the ship drew closer to the planet nothing explained why it showed some of the signs of an advanced civilisation yet had none of the others. The planet had large seas and just two continents located near the equator, both of which had a mix of desert and jungle terrain. The transmissions and energy readings came from the one of the regions covered by jungle and so Tylo steered the *Swift Exit* towards this. He entered the atmosphere over one of the oceans and descended to a low altitude before flying over the ground towards the source of the signals before landing several kilometres short of them.

Jayk and Brae disembarked from the ship before Tylo took off again, leaving the two Jedi to make their way through the jungle on foot, using their comlinks to track the source of the transmissions that had been detected.

"Dad I can sense something up ahead." Brae said after a while, "Sentient beings, hundreds of them. Maybe thousands."

"Yet no signs of an advanced city from space." Jayk replied, "We should proceed with caution."

The Jedi continued to advance, making their way up a hill and when they reached the top both took out sets of macrobinoculars to investigate what lay beyond.

"That looks like a city to me." Brae said as she observed the wood and stone structures laid out over a large area.

"But not an advanced one." Jayk replied, "This civilisation looks as though it has not long mastered fire or the wheel and yet we are detecting advanced technology from within it.

"Look over there." Brae said, pointing to the edge of the city and Jayk turned to look. There he saw a small cluster of structures that stood out from the rest, being obviously made from modern building materials. He could just about make out movement in front of it and he zoomed in for a closer look.

In the grounds of the largest of the modern structures Jayk saw two rows of what looked like near human natives clad in animal skins and holding spears and shields while between them another pair of natives dressed in brightly coloured robes led a procession of other natives carrying a large box between them up the steps that led to the building's entrance. At the top of these was an ornate chair in which sat a human in a silver vacuum suit, his helmet resting beside him while two other vacuum suited humans armed with blaster rifles stood either side of him.

The natives set down their box and opened it up to reveal the precious metals within it, at which point the seated man waved and a loading droid advanced out of the building behind him carrying a crate that it set down beside him. The droid then picked up the box full of precious metal and carried it inside, the vacuum suited humans following it. At that point one of the ornately dressed natives walked up to the crate and opened it before taking out and holding up an ordinary datapad for the others to see, at which point they began to cheer.

"Why do I get the feeling we just witnessed some sort of religious ceremony?" Brae asked.

"Because I think we did." Jayk answered, "Our pirates seem to be handing out the advanced technology they steal in exchange for gems and precious metals that are mined by the natives. They're pretending to be gods." and he took out his comlink, "Tylo we need you now." he transmitted.

"Hang on Jayk, I've got company up here." Tylo responded, "Several ships just dropped out of hyperspace and they've seen me."

"The pirates." Brae said when she heard this.

Then there was the sound of repulsorlifts from overhead and the Jedi looked up to see the *Swift Exit* fly over them, then moments later a pair of dart shaped craft with stubby wings followed. All three craft vanished beyond the trees and there were flashes of red from the sky as at least one of them began firing. Then there was a sudden explosion and Jayk lifted his comlink to his mouth again.

"Tylo are you there?" he signalled, "Tylo, can you hear me?" but there was no response and Jayk turned to Brae, "I think the *Swift Exit* was hit." he said, "Tylo could be dead."