

# STAR WARS

## DARKNESS RISING

2-05: SEARCH & RESCUE

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While heading back to Coruscant the *Swift Exit* receives a distress signal deep in interstellar space. Answering this call for help leads the crew to something that could threaten all life within the Republic if it is able to spread...

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# 1.

"Feeling better Jayk?" the hologram of Cal Udra said as he materialised in the lounge of the *Swift Exit* while Jayk Udra poured himself a glass of water.

"Much." the jedi knight replied, "I think all the drugs used to stop me using my powers are out of my system now. Mind you I've been left with a pounding headache."

Jayk had recently been held captive by a group of political dissidents and they had known how dangerous it was to try holding a jedi prisoner so had taken steps to render him harmless. Fortunately his padawan Brae and Tylo Kurrast, the *Swift Exit's* owner had been able to effect his release before he came to any permanent harm and now the vessel was on its way back to the jedi temple on Coruscant.

All of a sudden the ship shuddered in a way that told Jayk that it had just exited hyperspace well ahead of when it was supposed.

"What's going on?" Jayk said.

"The main computer just overrode the hyperdrive." Cal said, "I think we just received a distress signal."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Jayk said, throwing back the remains of his drink and then hurrying to the cockpit to investigate. With the *Swift Exit* operating on autopilot the cockpit was empty when Jayk got there and he sat down in the pilot's seat to check the communication system. Just as Cal had said this recorded having received a distress signal just a few moments earlier. It was almost impossible to target a subspace signal at a ship travelling through hyperspace unless that signal was sent directly along the direction of travel so the distress signal had instead been broadcast in all directions so that any vessel within range would be able to pick it up.

"What's wrong?" a voice said from behind Jayk as Tylo entered the cockpit, still fastening his shirt after dressing in a hurry.

"A distress call." Jayk replied, vacating the pilot's seat for Tylo, "Looks like it's from a commercial vessel."

"Are we in interstellar space?" Tylo asked when he looked at the navigational display.

"It looks that way. There's no information about what the cause of their problem is and the signal was only broadcast once." Jayk said and Tylo frowned, "What's wrong?"

"Frankly this seems like a waste of time to me. Probably someone just had their hyperdrive burn out on them. Normally I'd just continue on our way but I'm guessing that you jedi don't do that." Tylo replied.

"And you would be correct." Jayk said, "Plot a course to take us to the source of the signal. I'll go and alert Brae." and then he got up and left the cockpit. On his return to the lounge he encountered Brae coming the other way from the crew quarters.

"Sorry I took so long uncle." she said, "Tylo doesn't worry about dressing in front of me but frankly I'd rather change in private."

"That is quite understandable." Jayk said. All of the YT-700 class *Swift Exit's* bunks were in the same compartment and this placed severe limits on privacy aboard the ship. Something that sometimes posed problems for a teenage girl who had to share the ship with two adult men.

"So what's happening?" Brae asked.

"We've received a distress signal. Tylo is plotting an intercept course now. For the time being we don't know what the problem is so we'll check the status of our emergency equipment.

"Yes master." Brae replied and the two jedi headed for the ship's cargo hold.

The source of the distress signal was a ship less than a parsec away from the *Swift Exit* and so it took only a few minutes for Tylo to fly his ship to meet up with it. As soon as the light freighter left hyperspace the source of the distress signal lay right in front of it and Tylo smiled when he saw the readings on the *Swift Exit's* sensors.

The distress signal had been sent by an old LH-3010 freighter. These massive ships had been used by the Trade Federation since its inception a hundred years ago and only now were being phased out in favour of the newer LH-3210 Lucrehulk-class vessels. However, the LH-3010 was still a valuable piece of equipment and if the readings Tylo was looking at were to be believed then this particular vessel had been abandoned by its crew and left adrift. If that really was the case then the Republic's laws of salvage meant that anyone who boarded the ship could lay claim to it.

The ship was drifting just beyond the outer reaches of a star system that the navigation computer identified as Kestra Majorus, in the region of space where the Outer Rim bordered the Mid Rim. The only settlement listed for this system was a mineral processing facility on one of the inner planets where metals gathered across the system would be brought. There was no transponder broadcasting to identify the ship but Tylo knew that he had to try and make contact before going aboard to see if he could stake a claim. As well as the ship itself Tylo saw that there were numerous cargo containers drifting close by it, suggesting that a large

part of whatever cargo it had been carrying has been ejected into space for some reason.

"Attention unidentified LH-thirty-ten." he signalled, "This is the freighter *Swift Exit*. We have picked up your distress signal. What is the nature of your emergency?" but there was no response from the massive starship and Tylo smiled.

Exiting the cockpit Tylo made his way to the air lock where Jayk and Brae were double checking the brightly coloured vacuum suits stored there.

"Are those ready?" he asked.

"Yes, all fully functional." Jayk replied.

"The oxygen cylinder on this one is only half full though." Brae added, "It's probably quicker to swap it for one of the spares. I know all of those are full.

"Good idea." Tylo said, nodding. Then he looked at Jayk, "The distress signal comes from a ship alright. But it doesn't look like it's just mundane hyperdrive failure. The ship's adrift and the sensors aren't picking up any life signs."

"What sort of ship are we talking about?" Jayk asked.

"It's an old LH-thirty-ten." Tylo answered, "She looks intact but I couldn't get any answer when I tried signalling her."

"Let me see." Jayk said and the two men started to head back to the cockpit.

"Hey, wait for me." Brae called out and she hurried after them.

When the trio reached the cockpit the massive ring shaped freighter still appeared motionless in front of the *Swift Exit* and there were no running lights at all. The only reason it could be seen at all this far from the nearest star was thanks to the external spot lights mounted on the *Swift Exit* itself.

"The hangar shields have been shut down." Jayk commented, "That could be why all that cargo is scattered around outside the ship. It would have been blown out into space when the shields failed."

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

"Do you sense anything over there Brae?" Jayk asked, knowing how strong his niece was with the Force even if her control of it was still far from perfect.

"No." she replied, shaking her head, "Wait, I'm not sure. It feels – feels-"

"Take your time Brae. Focus your mind and open it to the Force." Jayk said and Brae gasped.

"Cold." she said suddenly, "Death. But I don't sense anything from a specific point inside the ship. It's more like the entire ship is soaked in it."

Tylo looked at the drifting ship.

"Well it certainly looks dead to me." he said, "Perhaps we should go aboard and check it out. If there is anything dangerous aboard then we can always leave."

"The cargo doors are open on the port side arm." Jayk pointed out, "We can fly the ship straight into there."

"There are no power readings though." Tylo commented, "We'll need those suits if we're to take a look around."

"Sounds like a plan." Jayk replied, "Let's suit up."

## 2.

Landing the *Swift Exit* inside the larger freighter's expansive cargo hold was straightforward. The only thing that Tylo had to watch for was the state of the ship's artificial gravity field. Had this been active then he would have had to be ready to compensate for the sudden pull towards the deck. However, just like everything else about the ship, the gravity generators seemed to be inactive and the *Swift Exit* floated above the deck without any need for Tylo to make use of the ship's repulsorlifts. Instead after extending the *Swift Exit*'s landing gear he used the manoeuvring thrusters to lower the ship onto the deck.

"Okay we're down." he said, "Now let's go and find out what happened to everyone."

The crew of the *Swift Exit* climbed out of the ship's air lock and stood on the deck using magnetic boots to prevent themselves from floating away in the zero gravity. With the internal lighting not functioning the crew also had to carry their own lights, in this case glow rods clipped to their helmets that would follow their movements.

"So where to first?" Brae asked.

"The main reactor." Jayk said, "It's located at the rear of the ship and is accessible from the cargo hold."

"Looks like there could be some sealed doors between here and there." Tylo pointed out.

"Don't worry. Brae and I have keys to any door." Jayk said and he patted the lightsaber that hung from his belt.

The group then began to walk around the freighter's spacious hangar, eerily empty now that there was no cargo inside it. They continued until they came to a large door that had been closed to block the entire width of the hold and Brae drew her lightsaber.

"Allow me master." she said.

"Patience my young apprentice." Jayk responded, "We need to be cautious. For all we know the hold on the other side of this door still retains an atmosphere that someone is using to stay alive."

"Tylo said that the *Swift Exit*'s sensors didn't pick anything up," Brae pointed out, "and I don't sense anything."

"Perhaps not, but it never hurts to be cautious." Jayk said.

"So how to we do this then?" Tylo asked.

"We make a small hole in the door to see whether any air comes out. If it does then we seal it." Jayk said.

"With what?" Tylo asked.

"We could cut a floor panel." Brae suggested and Jayk nodded.

"Do it." he told her and Brae activated her lightsaber and used it to cut a section out of the floor by her feet, using the Force to lift it out of the hole created without risking injuring herself on the edge.

Jayk then activated his own lightsaber and thrust it straight through the door in front of them before stepping back. This left a small hole in the door that would have been more than enough for any air on the other side to escape through but there was nothing.

"It's vacuum on the other side as well." he said before pushing his lightsaber back through the door and using it to start cutting a hole large enough for them to step through.

The hold on the far side of the door was just as dark as the section open to space but unlike that one this still contained cargo.

"I wonder what's in these crates?" Tylo commented, well aware that the value of any cargo still aboard the ship would be included in any salvage claim he made.

They encountered no further barriers to their passage before they reached the massive main reactor located at the very rear of the hold and it was here that they found the first signs of activity aboard the freighter since coming out of hyperspace in the form of a functional control panel in standby mode. Jayk reactivated this and used it to check on the status of the reactor itself.

"The reactor was subject to an emergency shut down." he said, "Someone vented all of the fuel out into space and the ship lost power."

"Why would someone do that?" Brae said.

"Normally you do that if a reactor's about to overload." Tylo commented.

"That's exactly what happened." Jayk added, "According to this log file the fuel lines were deliberately locked fully open and the cooling system shut down. The automatic venting was taken off line as well and the whole thing was about three minutes from destroying the entire ship."

"That would have triggered the distress call." Tylo said, "But I don't get why it was cut off."

"The distress call could have been shut off from the same place that the self destruct sequence was initialised from. The bridge." Jayk said and he was just about to suggest that they make their way there when he saw something reflected in the screen he was looking at. The reflection was clearly a figure in a vacuum suit of the same or similar model to that worn by the *Swift Exit*'s crew but the colour did not match either Brae

or Tylo's suits.

Jayk spun around on the spot and drew his lightsaber as the figure behind them staggered closer and upon seeing this Brae and Tylo also turned to face the figure.

"Stang." Tylo hissed, annoyed at losing his salvage claim now that one of the crew had been found to still be alive.

"Master what is it?" Brae asked as she drew her lightsaber.

"It's one of the crew isn't it?" Tylo said, confused.

"Perhaps once. But not any more." Jayk replied before he addressed the figure shambling towards them,

"Stay where you are." he called out, his suit's built in comlink broadcasting his words across the vacuum but the figure kept on coming and raised its hands towards them.

"What the hell?" Tylo exclaimed as both jedi activated their lightsabers and held them in defensive postures.

"That's not one of the crew." Brae said, "It isn't even alive."

"But I can see its face. It's a person." Tylo said, looking at the gaunt expression behind the figure's visor.

All of a sudden the figure lunged at Tylo, knocking him off his feet and in the zero gravity he and his assailant flew through the air until they struck the bulkhead behind them where they bounced off and began to float in the opposite direction.

"Get this kriffing freak off me!" Tylo yelled as he grappled with the man with one hand while attempting to draw his blaster with the other.

Jayk and Brae both leapt off the deck, propelling themselves towards Tylo and they grabbed hold of his attacker in an attempt to separate them. However, before they could manage this Tylo saw the man open his mouth wide and suddenly cough up a mouthful of thick black fluid that splattered across the inside of his helmet, turning it black and concealing his gaunt face. The man continued to grapple with Tylo though and he attempted to reach for the seals of Tylo's vacuum suit. Before this could happen however, there was a flash of blue as Jayk ignited his lightsaber and he used it to slice through one of the man's arms. The vacuum suit the man wore gripped his body tightly in order to maintain pressure but there was still some atmosphere contained within it that was able to escape through the hole created by the loss of the arm and this was enough to push the man away from Tylo as more of the black fluid flowed out of the stump of his arm in places where it had not been cauterised by Jayk's lightsaber blade. This fluid formed a cloud of dark vapour as it boiled in the hard vacuum before then dissipating entirely. Brae was still holding onto the man as he spun backwards away from Jayk and Tylo and she pushed herself away from him before he could turn on her.

"What's happening?" she said as she landed back on the deck and clamped herself in place with her magnetic boots.

"It must be some sort of contagion." Jayk replied, using the Force to guide himself and Tylo back to the deck where their own boots could lock onto it. Meanwhile both the gaunt man and his severed arm continued to spin as they drifted across the hold. Then he looked towards Brae, "Brae, did any of that black substance get on you?" and she looked down at her bright orange suit.

"No master." she replied.

"Good, that is likely how it is spread." Jayk said.

"I guess now we know why the distress beacon was cut off." Brae added, "The captain didn't want rescue ships turning up and risking the disease spreading to them."

"Yet here we are. So what sort of disease would make a captain want to blow up his own ship?" Tylo said.

"I don't know. Perhaps we should search for more information." Jayk said, "The fact that neither Brae nor I could sense that man worries me. A ship like this would have had hundreds of crewmen aboard. Who knows how many more of them are like that now."

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Tylo said, "How about we head back to the *Swift Exit* before we try checking out the bridge here? I know I'd feel better if I had a rifle."

"Very well." Jayk agreed, "I think we can afford a slight delay."

"Back so soon?" Cal asked when the trio returned to the *Swift Exit*, placing their helmets on the table in the lounge while they each got themselves something to drink, "I wasn't expecting you back for several more hours."

"We ran into someone." Tylo replied.

"More like he ran into you." Brae added and Cal frowned.

"You mean there are still people aboard that the sensors didn't pick up?" he said.

"Cal what do you know about people who can't be sensed in the Force?" Jayk said, hoping that the ancient jedi would have some knowledge that he did not.

"It's impossible." Cal told him, "Living beings, sentient creatures especially, all have a presence in the Force. Without it they couldn't exist. Of course some feel different to others but they all have a presence of some sorts." and Jayk frowned.

"The man we encountered had no recognisable presence in the Force," Brae said, "and he was either human

or a closely related species.”

“Maybe it had something to do with that black goo.” Tylo suggested, “Could that hide him from your powers?”

“Black goo? What black goo?” Cal said.

“The man's body appeared filled with a black fluid.” Jayk said.

“Yeah, that he tried to spit at me.” Tylo added, “If he hadn't been wearing a suit then who knows what I'd be infected with.”

“Do you know what we're dealing with?” Brae asked and Cal hesitated.

“I'm not sure.” he answered, “The original me never dealt with anything like this personally but there were stories told about something in the Unknown Regions that was described as a mass of black fluid.”

“And you're just telling us about this now?” Tylo said, “If the jedi knew about it almost four thousand years ago then why keep it a secret?”

“Because all there ever were were rumours, typically from exploration teams who had just returned from beyond charted space. Of course none of them ever brought back any physical evidence to study so all we had to go on were wild stories about shambling hoards of infected victims vomiting this black stuff all over people.” Cal explained.

“Will the archives contain more material?” Jayk asked.

“They should.” Cal replied, “Even if there were nothing more than rumours after I died then those should also have been recorded.” and Jayk nodded.

“Then I'll put in a call.” he said, “Brae, Tylo, I think you should join me while I make it. Better to have all of us hear what the temple has to say.”

The three of them then made their way to the cockpit where Jayk opened a channel to the jedi temple on Coruscant.

“This is Jedi Knight Jayk Udra. I have an urgent request for information from the archives.” he said as soon as the face of the jedi communication officer appeared.

“Putting you through now Jedi Udra.” the other jedi said and his young face was replaced by an older female one.

“Yes, what do you require?” the archivist asked.

“I need a search for all information regarding a communicable infection from the Unknown Regions that is characterised by a large build up of black fluid inside the bodies of the victims.” Jayk said.

“Can you be more specific? Do you have a date reference?” the archivist asked.

“No. But the guardian of a holocron in my possession has told me that you will have information.” Jayk answered, “His name is Cal Udra.”

The archivist sighed.

“I shall check.” she said and she disappeared, the image on screen being replaced with a rotating Republic emblem.

“Does anyone else get the feeling she felt annoyed that she's having to do this?” Tylo commented.

“Tell me about it.” Brae responded, “Archivists are-” but before she could finish her sentence the woman's face reappeared.

“I have searched our archives Jedi Udra.” she said, “There are no confirmed contagions that match the profile you have described. However, there are a number of entries filed under 'myths and legends'.”

“That could be what we're looking for.” Jayk said, “What do they say?”

“Jedi Udra, the archive is dispensing factual information. Not story telling.” the archivist replied.

“Tell me what they say or transfer me to Grand Master Ress. My assignment is for him.” Jayk interrupted and the archivist frowned before vanishing again.

“An assignment for Grand Master Ress?” Brae commented as she and Tylo looked at Jayk.

“We're here because he ordered us to the Outer Rim to deal with those fanatics.” Jayk pointed out, “So what I told her was true. From a certain point of view.”

The archivist then appeared again with a stern look on her face.

“I have the information you requested.” she said, “The contagion is spread via the black fluid carried inside its victims. If any of this enters a living body then it will feed on the internal tissues and expand to fill it. Some reports indicate that even as they are consumed the victims retain some semblance of intelligence, acting together to spread the sickness and retaining the ability to move, speak and operate technology even after they ought to be dead. The fluid itself is also reported to be capable of movement outside the body of an infected being, forming various tentacles and such to attack with.”

“Sounds like something out of a horror movie.” Tylo commented.

“Quite.” the archivist said, “Which is why in the absence of any physical proof the contagion has been listed under 'myths and legends' instead of 'communicable diseases'.”

“Are all species affected?” Brae asked.

“There are no notes regarding any species with an immunity.” the archivist answered, “The only other piece of information available is a name. The contagion has been referred to as mnggal-mnggal. Now if there is nothing else, I have duties to attend to.”

"That will do for now." Jayk said, "We'll be back in touch if-" but the signal was cut off before he could finish.

"How rude." Brae said.

"Now we know why the ship has had all of its atmosphere vented." Jayk said.

"We do?" Brae said, "Why?"

"It's a fluid." Tylo said, "If the disease is spread as a fluid then removing the air will boil the fluid. Obviously that guy we encountered at the reactor must have become infected before the ship was decompressed and died after putting on his suit." then he smiled, "But at least we know the infection is dealt with now so we can have the ship towed to-"

"Not so fast." Jayk interrupted, "We still need to confirm that the ship is clear of infection. The fact that the captain saw fit to set his vessel to self destruct suggests otherwise."

"So the man by the reactor may not have been alone?" Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"It's a possibility." he said, "But getting to the bridge will tell us more."

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

"Come on." Jayk said as he got up, "Tylo needs his rifle and we'll need equipment to get the ship's computers working. Then we can go."



### 3.

Tylo held his rifle at the ready as he kept behind the two jedi while they made their way towards the freighter's bridge. Both jedi had their lightsabers active and held up in front of them so that they would be able to defend themselves at a moment's notice should any further infected crewmen appear. The lightsabers also allowed the jedi to easily cut through any doors that blocked their path to the bridge and the trio had soon reached the spherical core of the ship.

"The bridge is at the top." Jayk said, "We'll need to locate a turbolift shaft."

"Think you can get one working with that power pack?" Tylo asked, "What if the car is on another floor?"

"Actually I was thinking that in the absence of gravity we could just jump up it and drift until we get to the correct floor." Jayk answered and Tylo smiled nervously.

"Sure, I knew that." he said and Brae grinned as she sensed his embarrassment.

Meanwhile Jayk took out his datapad and checked the schematics for the ship he had downloaded.

"There should be a turbolift cluster dead ahead." he said before putting the device away again and continuing to advance.

The trio had almost reached the turbolifts when the light cast by the jedi's lightsabers illuminated something floating towards them out of the darkness.

"Down!" Tylo snapped as he fired his blaster at the shape and the energy bolt's light revealed it to be another crewman, this one not wearing a space suit and obviously dead even before being shot.

"Put that down." Jayk told him, "If you could try not shooting at everything before we know what it is I'd be very grateful." and he walked forwards to grab hold of the body floating in zero gravity.

"What killed him master?" Brae asked.

"Fortunately it wasn't Tylo's blaster." Jayk replied, "Nor does he look like the man we encountered by the reactor." then he frowned, "There are marks around his neck that would suggest he hanged himself though."

"I don't see a gallows anywhere," Tylo pointed out, "and if he did hang himself then why isn't there a noose still around his neck."

"What was it that the archivist said about that black stuff being able to move about on its own?" Brae said, "Maybe it did this."

"That seems as likely a suggestion as any." Jayk said, pushing the body out of the way, "Come on, we better get moving. Stay alert. We can't be one hundred percent certain that an independent mass of the black substance will boil in a vacuum. It may become dense enough to retain its cohesion."

Reaching the turbolift cluster without encountering any further members of the crew, whether alive or dead, Jayk quickly set to work cutting through the door and exposing the shaft. Then he leant through the hole and shone his glow rod up and down the shaft to see where the car itself was located.

"See anything interesting?" Tylo asked.

"The car appears to be above us. If not on the same level as the bridge then very close to it." Jayk replied and then he jumped into the shaft, propelling himself upwards in the direction of the bridge.

"Here goes." Brae said as she followed him into the shaft.

Meanwhile Tylo just peered through the hole and looked up at the jedi above him.

"I really don't like the look of that." he said and then he remembered that he was now all alone, "Hey! Wait for me." he called out and then he jumped into the shaft. However, rather than drifting straight up gracefully Tylo moved at a much flatter angle and his eyes widened as he flailed his arms in a vain attempt to prevent himself from bouncing off the wall opposite the hole.

Jayk and Brae listened to Tylo's exclamations as he continued to bounce off the walls of the shaft, unable to get a handhold. Reaching the underside of the turbolift car the two jedi grabbed hold of it to stop themselves and then looked back down the shaft to where Tylo was still bouncing off walls.

"Perhaps we should give him a hand master." Brae suggested and Jayk smiled.

"Feel free young one." he said and Brae extended her hand towards Tylo.

"Hey wait a-" Tylo began, having heard their conversation via his suit's built in comlink but before he could finish his sentence Brae used the Force to take hold of him and drag him rapidly up towards her, "Whoa!" Tylo exclaimed, his arms and legs flailing as he sped up the shaft until all of a sudden Brae brought him to a halt in front of her and smiled at him, "Thanks." he said, scowling at her, "Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome." she replied.

"The turbolift is stopped at the level the bridge is on." Jayk said as he read the labels written on the inside walls of the shaft, "I'll cut through the floor." then he activated his lightsaber and used it to slice an opening in the floor of the turbolift. Had the freighter's artificial gravity been active then the section cut free would have plummeted downwards, most likely striking Tylo as it fell. But in the zero gravity inside the ship it remained where it was and Jayk had to knock it out of position to clear the opening so that he could push himself

through it into the turbolift car.

"Anything interesting up there?" Tylo asked from below.

"The doors are open." Jayk replied as he pushed himself to the open doorway and looked out of the turbolift, "We should be able to access the bridge directly."

Behind him Brae and then Tylo also climbed through the hole in the floor and the group was just about to exit the turbolift when they saw another figure floating outside it. Tylo aimed his rifle but this time he held his fire until he could positively identify his target. Unlike the previously encountered figure, this one wore a space suit and as the light from the jedi's lightsabers as well as Tylo's glow rod illuminated it properly it became apparent that it had been infected by the mnggal-mnggal. The figure's face was gaunt and the eyes just dark pits where they had burst following a hole being broken in the vacuum suit's faceplate.

"I suggest we avoid coming into contact with any bodies we find." Jayk suggested as he waved his hand to use the Force to push the corpse out of the group's path before they exited the turbolift, now using their magnetic boots to attach themselves to the deck plates so that they no longer floated above them.

"I wonder what did that to his suit?" Brae said.

"Hole's small like a blaster puncture." Tylo commented, looking at the floating corpse again, "But there's no burning around it. It could have been a projectile of some kind. If anyone wants to take a closer look I'm sure that there'll be a matching wound to his face."

"Like a bullet?" Brae said, "Who uses slug throwers nowadays? Especially aboard a starship."

"More likely an engineering tool of some kind pressed into use as an improvised weapon." Jayk replied, "Though if the crew did not have enough blasters to defend themselves then I'm sure that they'd have been willing to risk firing a slug thrower aboard a starship that was already de-pressurised in any case."

The freighter's bridge was only a short distance from the turbolift, although the group's use of magnetic boots made it harder work to get there than would have been the case had the ship's artificial gravity been working. A heavy blast door had been closed to protect the bridge but this had failed to hold, a large section having been cut from it with a heavy plasma cutter that now floated nearby.

"Okay so how do we do this?" Tylo asked, looking at the hole in the blast door that appeared just about large enough for all three of them to pass through together, "Do we all go together or one at a time?"

"Brae and I will go together." Jayk said, "You can cover us and then follow."

"Okay, sounds good." Tylo replied, nodding and he aimed his blaster at the centre of the hole.

Jayk and Brae then leapt through, pushing themselves to either side of the hole to leave it clear just in case Tylo needed to fire his blaster and then they took their first good look at the bridge. Several of the control stations were still manned by crewmen in vacuum suits but all of them were motionless and the manner in which their arms floated in front of them suggested that they were dead. They were not the only ones in the bridge, however and a number of other bodies floated freely in the zero gravity.

"Defenders or attackers?" Brae said, wondering whether the floating bodies were of crewmen who died trying to protect the bridge or victims of the mnggal-mnggal who died while trying to spread their infection.

"Take care." Jayk said as he walked towards the centre of the bridge, "Remember that we did not sense the man we encountered near the reactor. Any of these bodies could still be active."

"I'll be careful." Brae replied as she moved around the side of the bridge, inspecting each of the bodies sat at control stations.

"Look out!" Tylo yelled suddenly as one of the previously motionless bodies flexed, kicking at a nearby console to give it the thrust it needed to head towards Brae. Brae spun around when Tylo shouted his warning, bringing her lightsaber up in front of herself. A flash of light from the doorway marked Tylo firing his blaster at the figure and his shot hit it at the base of its helmet. This produced a brief explosion as the helmet was blasted open and the air inside suddenly rushed out before being lost to the vacuum present on the bridge. The face of the woman inside the suit was then left exposed and for a second she appeared normal and Tylo was concerned that he may have accidentally killed one of the crew who had simply been waiting for rescue. Then moments later a spray of black erupted from her mouth, the fluid boiling away in the vacuum and Tylo relaxed, "Perhaps you two should use your powers to move all these bodies out of the way." he suggested.

"That's a good point." Jayk said, kneeling down beside the central control station where the freighter's pilot sat dead in his seat with a large tear in the back of his vacuum suit, "Brae can you move them all to the very front of the bridge by the viewports? If any show signs of movement then Tylo can shoot them." then as Brae began to push the floating bodies towards the front of the bridge Jayk set to work opening up the console he was knelt beside so that he could gain access to the circuitry inside it. Jayk had with him a portable power supply that, after disconnecting the console from the rest of the bridge network, he was able to use to bring just that one station back on line and he stood up to see the results. Many of the readouts on the console reported errors and more than half the display was made up of flashing red bars indicating that they were not receiving the data they required. All of these were the real time readouts that provided the pilot with information from the freighter's engines and navigational systems but Jayk was not interested in any of this information. Instead he wanted to know about events aboard the ship before it had dropped out of

hyperspace here beyond the nearby star system. The console maintained a log of all the major navigational events and according to this the command had been given to terminate the freighter's passage through hyperspace early, depositing it in interstellar space several light hours away from its current location. After that the ship had proceeded under its sublight ion drive until it had reached its current location where all movement had ceased.

"Anything interesting?" Tylo asked, appearing over Jayk's shoulder as he studied the console.

"The freighter's last stop was a system on the edge of Wild Space, collecting machine parts from an industrial colony to be shipped to the Core Worlds." Jayk replied, "Then they made their way here. Though this was not their intended destination. The course the navigator set would have taken them directly into the Core."

"So the captain figured out he had a plague aboard and dropped out of hyperspace while he tried to get it under control." Tylo suggested and Jayk nodded in agreement.

"Certainly returning to the Core bringing an infection would have seen the ship and its cargo placed in quarantine for several weeks at least." he said, "It seems likely that the captain hoped to purge his ship of it out here and then proceed as if nothing had happened." then he looked towards Brae, "Brae can you see if you can find the captain's logs? They ought to be accessible from his office over there." and he pointed to an open doorway leading from the bridge.

"I'll look." Brae replied and she headed through the doorway. On the other side she found herself in a small office that had a pair of bodies floating in it as well as a blaster that had been released by one of the two. One of the bodies had its vacuum suit torn open while the other had been shot several times by a blaster, offering an easy answer as to who the floating weapon had belonged to. Unsure of which out of the pair may have been infected by the mnggal-mnggal, Brae used the Force to push both corpses aside before she made her way to the desk in the middle of the room where she disconnected the computer terminal from the main network and plugged in the power supply she carried so that she could turn it on. As expected the captain had used this terminal for maintaining his log and copies of all the entries were held locally. Brae started with the most recent entries and immediately what she found made for worrying reading.

"Master." she called out, despite her suit's comlink making anything more than an ordinary statement unnecessary, "I've managed to access the captain's log. I think you should come and see this."

"We're on our way." Jayk replied and shortly after he and Tylo came into the office, "What have you found?" he asked.

"The captain ordered the ship set to self destruct." Brae replied, "It's the last entry in his log. Prior to that he reports the bridge coming under attack."

"He was probably hoping to hold out until help arrived." Tylo said.

"That was before the distress signal was sent." Jayk pointed out, "More likely he was hoping that his crew outside the bridge would be able to deal with the infection."

"Well it doesn't look like they managed that now does it?" Tylo said.

"There's also mention of the order to decompress the ship." Brae said, "That's when the bridge was sealed. The captain says that more than half the crew had been affected by that point. Some were wandering around attacking people while others were just in the early stages and confined."

"I don't suppose that there's any mention of where they picked this plague up from is there?" Tylo asked, "You know, just so I know never to go there?"

"Hang on, I'm checking." Brae said, "The further back I go the more the entries relate to other stuff about the ship." then she paused as she scrolled through the entries, "Wait, here's a mention of two crewmen being taken to the infirmary complaining of severe abdominal pains. There's no diagnosis listed but later on there's an entry saying that both men suddenly attacked the medical droids and escaped from the infirmary. After that there are more attacks and more men falling sick."

"Until eventually the captain decided to destroy his own ship to contain the infection." Jayk said.

"Yeah, only one of the infected crew managed to pull the plug on the reactor." Tylo added. Then he looked back at Brae, "But there's nothing about how the infection got aboard in the first place then?"

"The captain mentions a shuttle being found adrift before they entered hyperspace." Brae said.

"What sort of shuttle?" Tylo said.

"An obsolete type, sublight only." Brae said, "The freighter picked up a beacon that looks to have activated when the shuttle entered the gravity well of the system. There were the remains of a corpse inside that the crew cremated." she continued. Then she smiled, "Oh this is interesting." she said, "The two crewmen who removed the corpse for cremation were the first two taken to the infirmary a day later."

"So a victim of this mnggal-mnggal set out in a sublight ship and drifted through space even after he died of the disease." Tylo said, "Then along comes this freighter, picks up the shuttle and the contagion is still viable."

"What happened to the shuttle?" Jayk asked.

"Huh?" Tylo said.

"We saw no signs of other ships in the hold." Jayk pointed out, "Maybe the shuttle was in the other half of the

ship but if it's not-"

"Stang." Tylo hissed, "You're saying that someone infected could have got off the ship."

"The shuttle was considered safe to use." Brae said, "The crew refuelled it and placed it in one of the auxiliary holds in the starboard arm."

"So it could still be down there." Tylo said, "We never got that far around and the main doors are still closed on that side."

"We need to carry out a visual inspection." Jayk said, "If it's missing then we need to locate it quickly. Before anyone else can come into contact with it."

## 4.

Returning to the freighter's hold, the group made their way around to the starboard side of the ship rather than heading back towards the *Swift Exit*. To get all the way around this section it was necessary to cut through another blast door and on the other side of this the cargo was absent from the main hold as if it had been blown out into space just as had happened on the other side. Obviously with the large external door sealed this could not have happened so the only logical conclusion was that the door had been closed after the hold had had the air flushed out. However, upon closer inspection it emerged that the external door was not fully sealed after all. Instead there was a gap of about half a metre between the two halves and matching damage to each half as if something had been caught between them.

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

"The crew realised that the shuttle was escaping." Tylo said as he looked up at the damage to the doors, "They tried to seal it in but someone shut off the reactor and the motors to the doors lost power just before they could close. The doors must have just clipped the shuttle on its way out."

"We need to get back to the *Swift Exit*." Jayk said, "If that shuttle reaches any of the settlements in this system then the contagion will spread further. It only needs to get aboard one ship with a hyperdrive and it could even spread to the wider galaxy."

Tylo then began to turn around before Brae spoke.

"Where are you going?" she asked and he pointed to the rear of the ship.

"Back to my ship. It's round on the other side." he said and both Jedi smiled.

"That way is quicker." Jayk said, pointing towards the gap between the doors, "It's just one small leap across to the other side." and Tylo's face fell.

"Ah you're back." Cal said as the *Swift Exit*'s crew returned to the ship, "So is mnggal-mnggal real then?"

"Very much so," Jayk replied, "and it appears that someone infected by it may have escaped in a shuttle. We're going after them now." and then the crew made their way to the cockpit.

"So I'm guessing we'll be working under the assumption that the shuttle is making its way to the main colony?" Tylo said as he went through the *Swift Exit*'s preflight procedure.

"That seems likely." Jayk replied, "It offers the maximum number of potential victims plus the greatest likelihood of there being another ship there that could be used to escape to another system."

"You make it sound like this disease knows what it's doing master." Brae said.

"She's right. Do you really think that it can think for itself?" Tylo asked.

"If it can fly a shuttle and knows how to shut down a reactor then the diseased host must retain some level of intelligence." Jayk said, "How can we be certain that it is not the disease itself that it doing the thinking?"

"Great." Tylo muttered, "Now even germs are starting to think."

The shuttle had a considerable head start on the *Swift Exit* but fortunately it was limited to sublight speeds whereas the *Swift Exit* was hyperspace capable and so by making a short range jump at light speed the light freighter was able to reach the primary world of the system in a matter of seconds and almost immediately they were contacted from the surface.

"Unidentified vessel this is Kestra Majorus control. State your purpose."

"This is the light freighter *Swift Exit*." Jayk responded, "I am Jedi Knight Jayk Udra and this ship is under my command." he added at which point Tylo scowled briefly.

"And what brings the Jedi all the way out here?" the controller asked.

"We have reason to believe that a shuttle carrying a dangerous infection may be on its way to your world. Have you detected any other vessels on approach?" Jayk told the controller.

"We had a ship come down just under twelve hours ago." the controller answered, "It landed about a hundred kilometres from here after refusing to make contact. We've sent out a search party in an airspeeder. Standard four man team."

"Control you need to call back that search party." Jayk exclaimed, "Victims of the contagion are extremely dangerous and there is a high risk of infection."

"We can't. The impact site was beyond the mountain range north of here. We don't have communication with them." the controller said anxiously.

"Stang." Tylo hissed, "If one of them gets infected and makes his way back then the whole colony could get infected."

"Control do you have surface to air defences?" Jayk asked.

"Yes, but they're limited. Just a pair of laser cannons emplaced near the main refinery to deter pirates from trying to land there and take the metals."

"They will do. Control you need to activate those cannons. If the airspeeder reappears then shoot it down,

make sure that it is totally destroyed. We'll search for where they landed and evacuate them ourselves. This is the *Swift Exit* signing off." Jayk said before shutting off the communication system. Then he looked at Tylo, "Tylo take us down. North of the mountains and scan for that landing site. But don't land yet. Just circle while Brae and I prepare."

"Prepare for what master?" Brae asked.

"The same thing we do every time Brae. Try to save the world." Jayk answered, "And for that we'll need our helmets. It will be harder for us to become infected if we are in vacc suits."

Tylo piloted the *Swift Exit* into the thin atmosphere of Kestra Majorus and headed north of the mountain range close by the primary settlement. The terrain here was rich in metal deposits and this made scanning for the metal content of either the shuttle or the rescue airspeeder difficult. Fortunately the general lack of energy sources meant that the recently used engines of both craft, as well as the residual surface heat of the shuttle following its entry into the atmosphere provided Tylo with something to follow.

"We're over the landing area now." he said over the intercom, "Looks like that shuttle came down hard. I'm circling at an altitude of a thousand metres and range of five hundred."

"Excellent." Jayk said, appearing in the doorway behind Tylo. The jedi now wore his helmet and placed another down in front of Tylo at the same time as he placed Cal's holocron on top of the flight control console, "Cal, can you take over?" he said an Cal's hologram appeared.

"Yes, I'm hooked into the system." he said.

"Wait, what's happening?" Tylo asked.

"We can't risk landing." Jayk said, "The mnggal-mnggal could get aboard the *Swift Exit* and we carry it back to Coruscant. Instead the three of us will drop down and destroy the engines of the airspeeder and check that the shuttle is unflyable to make sure that neither can be used again. The only way out of here will be to summon the *Swift Exit* down to pick us up."

"Err, I hate to say it but what if one of us is infected with this stuff?" Tylo asked.

"I won't land." Cal said, "Jayk or Brae will be able to get back aboard using the Force to help them leap up to the ship. Then they can land to pick you up."

"So I'll be the last one off the ground." Tylo said, "Great."

The *Swift Exit* hovered over the shuttle and its crew looked down at the surrounding area. For safety the rescue team had landed about a hundred metres distant, far enough away to limit the damage that would be done to their speeder if the shuttle exploded while still being slow enough that they could quickly move any casualties to their vehicle. While Cal held position over the wreck of the shuttle the other headed for the hold. "Brae are you okay?" Jayk asked when he noticed his apprentice tremble as he opened the access ramp.

"I'm getting the same feeling of death I got at the freighter." she replied, "It's everywhere."

"Then our fears about the mnggal-mnggal escaping have been shown to be well founded." Jayk said, "It must be here somewhere."

A single figure stood by the airspeeder, dressed in an orange suit and with a breath mask over his nose and mouth to supply him with the additional oxygen he needed to be able to perform strenuous activity in the oxygen poor atmosphere of Kestra Majorus. The figure waved at the crew of the *Swift Exit* as they all stood on the end of the access ramp.

"Looks like we've found the first of the rescue team." Tylo said before Jayk and Brae suddenly grabbed him by his arms, "Hey!" he exclaimed just as the two jedi stepped forwards and pulled him off the end of the ramp, using the Force to slow their descent enough that they landed safely. However, as soon as they landed and let go of Tylo he collapsed, "That wasn't funny." he said, getting back to his feet and unslinging his rifle.

"Hey there!" the rescue worker called out as he walked towards them, "What are you doing here? Can't you see that we're in the middle of-"

"It's a trap." Jayk interrupted, "Your team is at risk of infection from a highly contagious disease. Where are the others?"

"Searching for survivors." the rescue worker replied.

"You mean someone survived that?" Tylo said, looking over his shoulder at the wrecked shuttle.

"It seems so." the rescue worker said, "There was the pilot's body inside but someone managed to open the hatch and then crawl away. Look, you can see the trail in the dirt."

The *Swift Exit*'s crew turned to look at the shuttle again and after being made aware of it they saw where the ground had been disturbed by something moving away.

"No footprints." Tylo commented as they moved in closer for a better look, "In fact no signs of anywhere that a humanoid could have used a hand or foot to get a grip on the ground and move themselves along."

"So more like a pool of liquid flowing then?" Brae asked and Tylo nodded.

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

"Can you contact the rest of your team?" Jayk asked, looking at the rescue worker again and the man nodded.

"Sure." he said.

"Get them back here." Jayk told him, "Get them back here now." and then he ignited his lightsaber and walked up to the rescue team's airspeeder before effortlessly slicing through both its engine pods to disable the vehicle. Then he simply turned back around and began to follow the trail. Behind him Brae followed him while Tylo raised his rifle and looked at the startled rescue worker.

"Seriously." he said, "Get them back here now and don't worry about getting out of here, we'll give you a ride in our ship."

"Err, sure." the rescue worker said before he briefly removed his breath mask in order to wipe away a drop of black fluid that came from his nose, staring at it on the tip of his finger momentarily before placing his finger in his mouth to suck the fluid off.

## 5.

The trail left in the dirt led as far as a cave opening and tracks alongside it indicated that the other three rescue workers had all gone into the cave as well.

"Careful." Jayk said as he led the way into the cave, "We have no way of knowing whether the rescue team has been exposed."

"Oh, I think we do." Tylo replied and he pointed to a ledge inside the cave that had one of the rescue workers stood on it. This one had his breath mask hanging down in front of him as he looked blankly at the three newcomers while Tylo raised his rifle and took aim. However, before he could open fire the rescue worker leapt from the ledge and let out a howl as he fell towards the group.

Reacting quickly Jayk reached out his hand and used the Force to catch hold of the man while still in mid air and he brought the falling victim to a sudden halt. The former rescue worker howled again and let out a spray of black fluid that struck Jayk's faceplate. Fortunately though, the seals on his vacuum suit remained intact and the fluid simply flowed down onto the ground.

"Now Tylo!" Jayk yelled and Tylo opened fire with his rifle set to fully automatic. The stream of energy bolt struck the immobile man enough times that his body burst into flames and only then did Jayk allow it to drop to the ground, watching to make sure that it was fully destroyed and no more of the fluid could escape.

"Uncle look!" Brae called out all of a sudden and she pointed to the fluid that Jayk had been sprayed with. Unable to penetrate his vacuum suit, the fluid had already all run off onto the ground where it had formed a tiny pool just a few centimetres across and now this pool was moving across the ground. Significantly as the Jedi watched it flowed up and over a piece of stone.

"Holy kriff." Tylo said when he saw this.

Jayk was more calm, however and he simply lowered his lightsaber, pushing the tip into the tiny pool. This created a sudden 'hiss' sound and small cloud of black vapour as the fluid was boiled away to leave nothing left behind.

"We must assume that all of the rescue team have been infected." he said and then he continued to walk deeper into the cave.

"Can you hear me?" a rasping voice asked over the *Swift Exit's* communication system.

"Yes I can hear you." Cal responded. Given the limitations of the holocron's own sensors Cal could not perceive the rescue worker signalling him from the ground directly but the *Swift Exit's* external cameras allowed him to see the man and he noticed that he had retrieved a grapple launcher from the disabled speeder. Now he was walking closer to where the *Swift Exit* hovered.

"I need to come aboard." the rescue worker said, his voice still sounding as if he was having difficulty forming the words.

"I'm under orders not to let that happen." Cal replied, "I'm not coming down for you."

"It is dangerous here. Mnggal-mnggal is loose." the rescue worker said, "You don't need to land though. I can make my own way to you." and then he fired the grapple launcher at the *Swift Exit*.

"Interesting." Cal said as the grapple caught onto part of the hull close to the access ramp that remained open, "You really are intelligent aren't you? How else would you know your own name since I didn't hear anyone else use it in front of you."

"I will spread." the man said as he began to pull himself up the syntherope line connected to the grapple, "I cannot be contained. I cannot be destroyed."

"Actually I beg to differ." Cal said, "Now just head back down to the ground and I'm sure Jayk, Brae or Tylo will deal with you in a much more pleasant manner than what I'm planning."

However, there was no response to this and the infected man continued to climb the line towards the *Swift Exit*.

"Oh well, can't say I didn't warn him." Cal said to himself and he suddenly closed the access ramp and brought the nose of the *Swift Exit* up so that the ship was aligned vertically. Beneath the ship the man managed to hold onto the syntherope and looked up to see that the main engine exhaust was now pointing directly towards him, "Bye." Cal said before he momentarily triggered the *Swift Exit's* ion drive.

The powerful sublight drive was not intended to be used inside a planetary atmosphere and it caused the light freighter to shoot upwards at high speed. But more significantly the engine exhaust created a massive blast of heat and flame that incinerated the infected rescue worker as well as the syntherope line he was climbing so that when Cal shut off the ion drive again and levelled the *Swift Exit* out there was nothing left of either of them.

"Jayk," he signalled as he brought the ship back down to a lower level using its repulsorlift engines again, "I think you should know that that rescue worker you met by the speeder was infected. He just tried to get



aboard using an ascension gun. Don't worry though, I dealt with him."

"Understood." Jayk replied, "We encountered another infected member of the rescue team so that still leaves two more. Let us know if you spot them." and then he looked at Brae and Tylo, "Come on, let's keep going." he told them.

"You know I'm starting to wish I'd brought a few grenades along." Tylo commented as they began to move deeper into the cave again.

"You couldn't use them in here anyway. You'd bring the roof down on us." Brae pointed out.

"Depends on how we use them kid. I was thinking that we use grenades to bring the roof down on top of them."

Continuing to follow the tracks left by the rescue team Jayk halted when he noticed something about the illumination of the narrow cave had changed and he shut off his lightsaber and reached for the glow rod mounted on his helmet.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Tylo asked and Jayk nodded.

"Turn off all illumination." he said.

"Are you insane? With that black stuff around?" Tylo exclaimed.

"Just do it." Jayk replied and Tylo sighed as he and Brae extinguished all sources of light that they carried. Then he frowned when he found that he could still see.

"The rescue team?" he asked quietly.

"I think so." Jayk answered and he looked at Brae, "Do you sense anything?" he asked her.

"I'm not sure master." she said, "It's as if there's something there that isn't quite complete. But it's difficult to tell while I can sense that coldness everywhere."

"I sense the same." Jayk said, "Perhaps we are sensing what remains of the presence in the Force of someone infected but not yet totally consumed."

"I sensed the one we found by the speeder. The one Cal said tried to get onboard the ship." Brae agreed.

"As did I." Jayk said.

"So they're still infected?" Tylo said.

"Their presence in the Force is greatly diminished." Jayk told him, "I think that there are two people ahead of us but I can't be certain. There could just be one."

"Plus anyone who got off that shuttle." Brae added.

"I thought it was just the goop itself that got off." Tylo said.

"Perhaps. But we should be alert no matter what." Jayk replied and he began to slowly move forwards, still holding his lightsaber but leaving the weapon in an inactive state.

He halted again when he came to a sharp turn in the narrow cave that the light appeared to be coming around. Peering around this he saw that the cave opened out here into a roughly circular chamber that was a dead end. The final two members of the rescue team were both present, sat beside what appeared to be a pool of water in the centre of the chamber. The two rescue team members had dropped their glow rods onto the floor of the chamber and it was these that were providing the light that had alerted Jayk to their presence.

"They're here." he said as he retreated around the corner, "Both of them."

"No signs of anything looking like a big black blob of plague?" Tylo asked and Jayk shook his head.

"It could be that the substance is now entirely contained inside its victims." he said, "The chamber around the corner is a dead end and we've not encountered any junctions that the mnggal-mnggal could have used to travel a different way."

"Okay so how do we do this?" Tylo said.

"We should go first master." Brae suggested.

"I agree." Jayk replied, "I'll focus on the one to the right, you the one to the left. We'll lift them up to immobilise them and then Tylo can use his rifle."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Tylo said. Then he glanced down at his weapon, "Hang on, let me just put in a fresh power pack. No sense in wasting time reloading later." and he ejected the partially spent power pack from his weapon and swapped it for a fully charged one, "Ready." he said, smiling.

"Now!" Jayk snapped and he leapt around the corner and reached out through the Force, picking up one of the infected rescue team members and leaving him flailing about in mid air. Brae did the same just moments later and both the rescue team members howled at them, reaching out towards the jedi as if trying to claw at them.

"Tylo come on." Brae said and Tylo stepped out behind the jedi, aiming between them before opening fire on the figure being held by Brae. Once again he sustained his fire beyond what was needed to kill a human and the flesh of the body began to char before it finally burst into flames, at which point Brae released the corpse and Tylo switched his aim to the second rescuer in the chamber. Another sustained volley was enough to make this victim of the mnggal-mnggal burst into flames as well and Jayk let it go.

"Something's wrong." he said, frowning, "I can still sense—"

"Jedi." a strange voice came from the chamber ahead of the trio and Tylo looked around, swinging his rifle

from side to side as he searched for a target, "Jedi." the voice said again, "You can destroy my puppets but you cannot destroy me."

## 6.

"Where the kriff is that coming from?" Tylo said when he heard the voice.

"I don't know." Jayk replied, igniting his lightsaber and Brae did the same.

All of a sudden what Jayk had thought was a pool of water burst upwards and formed itself into a cloud of bat-like flying shapes.

"Kriff!" Tylo snapped as he fired his rifle, once more using automatic fire only this time spraying the shots around rather than concentrating on a single target. The flying shapes burst as they were hit but there were so many of them that the power pack of Tylo's rifle ran out before he had destroyed even a significant fraction of them and he cursed as he ejected the spent power pack and hurriedly reached for another.

"Uncle what are they?" Brae asked as she and Jayk stepped forwards, spinning their lightsabers in front of them to create a barrier that the flying shapes fluttered in front of before retreating away and dropping to the ground where they melted and began to flow together. Meanwhile the Jedi stopped spinning their lightsabers and instead held them out in front of themselves in a defensive posture.

"Join me Jedi." the voice of mnggal-mnggal called out.

"I'll never join you." Brae responded, "I can sense your evil."

"And I can sense what is inside you." mnggal-mnggal said, "They are lying to you. The Jedi Order are lying to you. Join me and be greater than you could otherwise dream of being."

"You've had our answer." Jayk said.

"Then if you will not join me you will be destroyed." mnggal-mnggal said and the pool rose up as a single mass. Tylo took aim at this but before he could shoot the mnggal-mnggal created a tentacle out of its mass that lashed out towards him. The blow knocked Tylo's rifle from his hand and wrapped around the base of the smuggler's helmet, trying to release the seal so that it could get inside his suit. However, before this could happen both Jayk and Brae struck at the tentacle with their lightsabers and severed it from the main mass. The severed piece continued to wrap itself around Tylo until Jayk used the Force to tear it away from him and hurled it back into the chamber where it was reabsorbed by the larger part.

"Oh great." Tylo said as he recovered his rifle, "How are we supposed to beat this thing?"

"Pull back." Jayk said, "Just around the corner." and the trio backed away, the Jedi still holding their lightsabers out in front of them.

"I can wait here forever Jedi." the mnggal-mnggal called out in its eerie, inhuman voice.

"That thing has a point." Tylo added before Jayk shut off his lightsaber and smiled.

"I've got an idea." he said.

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

"What are you doing master?" Brae added when she saw Jayk reaching behind his back to unhook the oxygen cylinder from his vacuum suit.

"These suits are flameproof." he said.

"Oh now I know I've got a bad feeling about this." Tylo said, "How many do you think it will take?"

"We'll just use two and keep the third just in case." Jayk replied and Jayk set his rifle down before starting to remove his own oxygen cylinder, "We should be able to make it back to the *Swift Exit* with the air inside that one."

"What are you planning?" Brae asked again.

"Making a fire bomb." Tylo told her.

"We'll throw these into the chamber and then Tylo can shoot one." Jayk added, "The blast from the first will trigger the second and the metal of cylinders themselves along with those two burning corpses in there should act as fuel enough to fill that entire chamber with flames."

"Okay I'm ready." Tylo said as he picked up his rifle again.

"Good. Brae, get up against the wall. The flames shouldn't harm us but fragments from the cylinders could if they get this far."

Brae nodded and shut off her lightsaber as she pressed herself up against the cave wall for cover.

Meanwhile Jayk used the Force to hurl the two detached oxygen cylinders into the chamber around the corner before taking up a position right beside Brae.

"Go." he said to Tylo.

Tylo leant around the corner and fired at the first oxygen cylinder he saw. The high energy blasts punched through the toughened metal cylinder and the contents immediately began to leak out. Encountering the burning fragments of the cylinder the concentrated oxygen created a massive blast of flame that spread out around the chamber, causing the second cylinder to rupture as well. The flames filled every part of the chamber, leaving nowhere for even the smallest piece of the mnggal-mnggal pool to hide. The fire also spread from the chamber back along the cave towards the surface and it washed over the three humans

standing just around the corner. Fortunately by this point the fire was not enough to damage Brae's oxygen tank and the flames just washed over them before burning themselves out as the oxygen in the cave was consumed.

As the brief but intense firestorm subsided Jayk and Brae exchanged looks, sensing the dark presence in the Force of the mnggal-mnggal lifting.

"Wow." Tylo said, "That was such a rush."

Tylo watched the LH-3010 unhappily.

"There is no other way to be sure." Jayk told him, "If just one piece of mnggal-mnggal remains aboard somewhere then it could spread."

"I know. I just thought I'd finally hit it big with a salvage claim on that thing." Tylo replied.

The mining colony had been able to improvise a crude fusion device from parts they had to hand and a mining droid carried the device through the massive freighter to the main reactor. When triggered, the bomb would start a chain reaction in the freighter's fuel that would consume the entire vessel and leave nothing behind to act as a refuge for the mnggal-mnggal.

"There's the signal." Jayk said, "The bomb is in position."

"Okay, backing us away now." Tylo said and he pulled back on the control column in front of him to take the *Swift Exit* to a safer distance.

Then there was a brilliant flash of light and Tylo sighed, knowing that the freighter and anything close by it was now gone.

"Think you can take us back to Coruscant?" he asked Jayk.

"Yes. But why?" Jayk asked.

"Oh I'd rather just go and think about what could have been." Tylo replied and he got up and left the cockpit, sidestepping to avoid Brae as she came the other way.

"Uncle Jayk, what's wrong with Tylo?" she asked as she sat down while Jayk programmed the *Swift Exit* for the jump back to Coruscant.

"Tylo hoped to be able to make a salvage claim on the freighter." Jayk answered without looking up.

"So you didn't tell him that for as long as he's acting under orders from the Jedi Order he can't make a salvage claim and that anything we find belongs to the Republic?" Brae said and Jayk looked up and smiled at her.

"It never came up." he said.