

# STAR WARS

## DARKNESS RISING

2-10: GATHER & PREPARE

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### 2-10: GATHER & REPAIR

A sighting of a large force of warships in deep space alerts the Republic to a threatened invasion. With no fleet at hand to defeat this, the crew of the *Swift Exit* are sent to delay this invasion long enough for the Republic to prepare a proper response...

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# 1.

The crew of the mining ship *Sok'Torr* had worked the atmosphere of gas giants for many years and by this time they were experts in drawing out the valuable tibanna gas. Their ship dipped into the upper layers of the atmosphere. From this altitude the ship's sensors could still monitor space outside the atmosphere though in the uninhabited systems there was rarely anything detected. However, on this occasion the bored crewman monitoring the ship's flight systems was suddenly disturbed from the datapad he was looking at by an alert warning him that a number of vessels had just dropped out of hyperspace. The energy levels detected indicated that either a large number of vessels had just arrived or the arrivals included some very large ships. "Captain to the bridge." the crewman said into the intercom, "We've got company."

The captain arrived in the bridge soon after and stood behind the crewman.

"What have we got?" he asked, "Another mining ship?"

"I don't think so sir. Look." the crewman responded and he pointed to the sensor display. In the time taken for the captain to reach the bridge the mining ship's sensors had been able to conduct further scans of all of the ships that had arrived and in doing so identified nine individual vessels. Six of these were about a hundred and fifty metres long while two of the other three were twice that size and the final one dwarfed them all at around three thousand metres long. All of the ships were of types listed in the mining ship's recognition database and all of them were listed as warships of Republic origin, dating back thousands of years to before the time when the Republic's armed forces had been disbanded during the Ruusan Reformation.

"That's some serious firepower." the captain said, "Have they seen us?"

"If they have then they haven't reacted. I'm not reading any transponders from the though."

"Spin up the hyperdrive." the captain said, "We need to report this, I've got a very bad feeling about this."

The archivists of the Jedi Order prided themselves on having knowledge of everything in the galaxy in their vast catalogue of books, scrolls, holocrons and the wide variety of digital data storage formats that had come and gone in the almost twenty-five thousand years since the foundation of the Republic and their order. If something could not be found in the archives, it was said, then it did not exist. Naturally enough not all of the information was made freely available and different sections of the archive could only be accessed by certain members of the Jedi Order under specific conditions. Even among the Jedi it was felt that keeping specific information a secret would avoid their members being tempted to replicate what they read.

"I am sorry Jedi Udra," the archivist said to Jayk Udra as he stood on the other side of the counter while the archivist studied the computer in front of her, "those texts are not available to you. The knowledge relating to Sith alchemy is considered restricted. I should also caution you that I am required to report to the council all requests to access it."

Jayk sighed, glancing at his padawan and niece Brae who stood behind him before looking back at the archivist.

"I know it's restricted," he said, "and the council knows I'm here. My padawan and I faced down something the Sith cooked up and we'd really like to know where it might have come from. Though if you can guarantee that there are no more such creatures running around then Brae and I can just go back to our quarters and meditate on a job well done. Now are you going to let us into the restricted section or not?"

"As I have already said Jedi Udra, those texts are not available to you." the archivist said again.

Jayk was about to speak again when his comlink sounded.

"I'll deal with you in a moment." he told the archivist as he took his comlink from his belt and activated it,

"Jayk Udra." he said.

"Jedi Udra," the familiar voice of Grand Master Ress, the highest ranking member of the Jedi Order said, "report to the council chamber immediately."

"Yes master, we're on our way." Jayk replied before shutting off the comlink and looking back at the archivist, "We aren't finished." he said, pointing a finger at her before he turned and walked away with Brae following him.

"Uncle, why would the council want to see us so soon after our return?" Brae asked, "Could it have something to do with the creature we fought? Perhaps they know more about it than they first admitted." and she had a brief flash of a dream she had had recently in which she saw her uncle confronting the Jedi Council about information he discovered they had withheld from him. She had discussed this dream with the guardian of a holocron created by a distant ancestor of her and Jayk but had yet to reach a decision about saying anything to Jayk himself, worried that the very act of mentioning it could be the trigger for his anger at the council.

"Have patience my young apprentice." Jayk told her as they stepped into a turbolift and Jayk set it to take them to the council chamber, "The council will tell us why they want to see us when we get there."

The turbolift took Jayk and Brae all the way to the top of the temple's central tower. Exiting this they initially found their way into the council chamber blocked by a pair of masked temple guardians but these Jedi had obviously been told to expect the Udras as they stepped aside to allow them to pass, one of them opening the door.

"Ah Jedi Udra and Padawan Udra." Grand Master Ress said as the pair entered the chamber to find themselves surrounded by Jedi masters. Most of the council were present in person but on this occasion three of its members were somewhere else in the galaxy and their seats were occupied by holograms being streamed live over the holonet from wherever they were.

"You asked to see us master." Jayk said and Master Ress exchanged glances with several other members of the council.

"Yes. A matter has arisen and several members of this council feel that your experience is well suited to deal with it." he said.

"Then this does not relate to the investigation of Thal N'Krey?" Jayk asked.

"No. Jedi Udra how familiar are you with the Navy of the Republic?" Master Ress responded.

"The Republic has no navy any more." Brae answered before Jayk could.

"Ah, eager your apprentice is." Master Yoda said, "Centred in the present, but the bigger picture she sees not."

"The Republic disbanded its naval and ground forces in the Ruusan Reformations." Jayk said, "At the same time as the Jedi Order demilitarised. The ships were either transferred to local planetary control or scrapped."

"Quite correct Jedi Udra." Master Ress said, "Unfortunately over the millennia in which the Republic fielded fleets of its own there were always a certain number of vessels that just vanished. Ships were sent beyond the Republic's borders and not all of them came back. Every so often one will be discovered and we will find out what happened to them but there are still many unaccounted for."

"Yes I remember being on one of them." Brae commented as she recalled a crashed light cruiser that had been listed as missing around two thousand years earlier.

"Jedi Udra take a look at this." another member of the council said and he activated a holographic projector that created an image of several obsolete warships.

"I recognise some of these designs." Jayk said, "Hammerheads?"

"An older type yes." the Jedi master replied, "All the ships in this image are at least three and a half thousand years old but we also have these." and the image changed to several smaller ones, each of which showed a number of obsolete warships of classes that had at one time been operated by the Republic.

"I take it that these are connected somehow." Jayk said, "We're not just dealing with a few salvaged ships."

"Every ship seen in these images was sighted in the same sector in the Mid Rim and it is considered too much of a coincidence for them all to have gathered there by chance. All of the encounters have been in uninhabited systems and there has been no effort at communication from them. It is the opinion of the Judicial Department that these ships are part of some criminal enterprise that is planning to use these ships as an attack force against local targets."

"Using ships more than a thousand years out of date?" Brae said, "Surely modern warships would make short work of them. Those ships are slower, inefficient and-"

"Ah, so confident in technology your padawan is Jedi Udra." Yoda interrupted, "Far away the Mid Rim is and few warships there are there."

"Master Yoda is right." Master Ress added, "A single Judicial squadron could wipe these ships out with ease but the forces of the Judicial Department are spread thin and mustering them will take time. In the meantime there are dozens of inhabited systems that are open to attack. Some of them have small warships or fighter squadrons but nothing of the scale needed to fight off an attack by these sorts of ships. Many of the planets in the area do not even have full planetary shields and one of the vessels we have seen is capable of terrible destruction against unshielded planets."

"I take it that we are not expected to launch a head on assault against this force." Jayk said.

"No. Though you will be issued with starfighters to get you to the area as quickly as possible and provide you with the best defensive capabilities." Master Ress told him.

"What about Tylo?" Brae asked, referring to the former smuggler whose freighter she and Jayk travelled aboard.

"His knowledge of the criminal underworld useful may be." Yoda said, "Join you he will."

"Another fighter will be made available." Master Ress added, "Your mission is to locate this fleet and confirm its intent. If it is hostile as we suspect then you are to identify the leader of this armada and remove them. We expect that the loss of their leader will either cause the rest of these outlaws to disperse or turn on one another while rivals for the position fight among themselves. In either case this should delay any attacks on populated worlds while the Judicial Department organises."

"But if the opportunity does arise to inflict more serious damage on this fleet are we authorised to take it?" Jayk asked.

"You may take whatever action is justified to protect the Republic and its citizens." Master Ressa answered, "That includes disabling or destroying hostile starships."  
"As you wish master." Jayk said, "We will leave immediately."  
"Then may the Force be with you Jedi Udra." Master Ressa replied.

"We're going where?" Tylo said when Jayk told him to prepare to leave for the Mid Rim.

"The Mid Rim." Brae responded and Tylo frowned.

"Yeah, my ears work. But in starfighters? I'm no fighter pilot." Tylo said.

"You aren't being asked to fly into combat." Jayk said, "The astromech will be able to handle the basic piloting if you can't."

"Hey, I can fly pretty much anything under five hundred metres." Tylo said, "But the *Swift Exit* can get us there far more comfortably."

"It will also take twice as long and time is of the essence." Jayk pointed out, "Now gather whatever equipment you think we will need but remember that you are limited to fifty kilogrammes of cargo."

"Are we at least starting off in a civilised system?" Tylo asked, "If we can pick up more gear there then that's going to make packing a lot easier."

"We'll head for Naboo first." Jayk said, "They maintain a token fighter force of their own so they've got all the necessary facilities to service and repair our ships."

"Naboo?" Tylo said, frowning.

"Is there something wrong with Naboo?" Brae asked and Tylo looked at her.

"Not if you stay on dry land." he told her.

## 2.

Dropping out of hyperspace just within the orbit of its second moon the three wedge shaped jedi starfighters were challenged almost immediately. Their transponders identified them as jedi craft but no word had been sent ahead of their arrival.

"This is Theed traffic control to jedi fighters. What is your purpose here?" a controller signalled from the ground.

"This is Jedi Udra, we require permission to land and refuel before we depart again." Jayk responded.

"Not telling them about our mission?" Tylo asked on a closed channel that only Jayk and Brae could hear.

"I see no reason to advertise our purpose on an open channel." Jayk told him before he received a response from the surface.

"Confirmed Jedi Udra. You are cleared to land at Theed starport." the controller said.

"Understood control, we shall commence landing cycle now." Jayk replied and at that moment both he and Brae jettisoned the hyperdrive rings that were clamped to their fighters. On the other hand Tylo looked at his control console, confused.

"Where's the control to ditch this damned ring?" he asked.

"Just let your droid do it." Brae told him and Tylo scowled.

"Yeah, like I'm to rely on some motorised trash can to-" he began before he was interrupted by a shrill whistle from the C1 astromech droid mounted beside his cockpit and his fighter's hyperdrive ring was promptly ejected, "Gee, thanks." Tylo muttered as he flew his fighter towards the atmosphere of Naboo, following Jayk and Brae. Then as their fighters descended the hyperdrive rings automatically assumed a stable orbit, waiting for them to return.

Theed was the capital of Naboo and as such its starport was the most extensive on the planet, though given the backwater nature of the planet it could not compete in either scale or level of services available with those to be found closer to the Core. The starport itself was located at the base of a massive cliff that had the Royal House of Naboo's palace built at its top. The Royal Naboo Security Forces were also headquartered in the palace at the top of the cliff and the hangar that housed their starfighters was clearly visible.

Being much smaller than the transport vessels that the starport was designed to be able to handle all three fighters were guided to a single landing platform and as they landed a large landspeeder mounting a blaster cannon and driven by men in security force uniforms drove towards them.

"Jedi Udra?" one of them said as he climbed out of the speeder and saw Tylo disembarking from his fighter.

"I'm not the jedi you're looking for." Tylo replied, smiling as he waved his hand in front of the security officer's face.

"I am Jayk Udra." Jayk called out as he jumped down from his cockpit, "This is Brae Udra my padawan and Captain Tylo Kurrast is one of my advisers."

"My name is Captain Nerol." the security officer said, "It is an honour to host you here. If you would like to accompany me I will take you to the palace."

"The palace?" Tylo commented, looking at Jayk, "At last the sort of reception I can appreciate."

The section of the palace that the security forces were headquartered in were not a luxurious as Tylo had hoped and what he saw as he looked around the control centre did not impress him, making him think more of a local police control room than a room in a royal palace.

"This is where our defensive forces are controlled from." Nerol said as he led the jedi and Tylo into the control room.

"Doesn't look like much." Tylo commented, "I've seen more equipment in a surplus store. Better too."

"We don't have much need for a military." Captain Nerol replied, "Just enough to guard the palace and operate two squadrons of fighters."

"Are your fighters hyperspace capable?" Brae asked.

"No we have a defence force, not an army of interstellar peace keepers." another voice said and turning around the jedi and Tylo saw a an older man in formal robes entering the room.

"Minister Jaffo." Captain Nerol said, snapping to attention, "Allow me to present Jedi Jayk Udra. Padawan Brae Udra and Judicial Captain Tylo Kurrast."

Tylo smiled when he heard this, realising that Captain Nerol had no idea that he was in fact a criminal forced to assist the jedi as part of an agreement to keep him out of prison.

"I am the king's minister of security. It is rare that we get jedi on Naboo." the minister explained, "As I am sure you can guess we are all interested to find out what it is that had brought you to our little planet."

Jayk held out a mem-stick.

"Perhaps you can plug this into your projector." he said and Nerol nodded as he took the device and then plugged it into a nearby console, at which point the main display screen in the control room showed the



collected images of the warships sighted in the area.

"What are these?" Minister Jaffo asked.

"All of these warships were sighted within a day's travel of Naboo." Jayk answered, "So far we have no idea who is operating them or what their intentions are but it is unlikely that they have anything but hostile intent." "We haven't seen any warships." Captain Nerol commented, "Are you sure that they are planning to attack us?"

"They could attack anyone." Brae said.

"So far no more than a handful have been seen at any one time in various systems." Jayk explained, "It is too much of a coincidence for them all to be gathering in your sector by chance so we are operating under the belief that they are all part of one larger force that is trying to remain hidden until ready to strike."

"A fleet would need support." Captain Nerol pointed out, "Food for the crew and fuel for the ships. There are no starports in the sector that could handle that amount of business without us knowing."

"Care to offer us the opinion of the Judicial Department Captain Kurrast?" Brae said, looking at Tylo and putting extra emphasis on the title of 'captain'.

"Last I heard there were three shadow ports in this sector." Tylo said, "Any one of them could handle the smaller ships."

"While the larger ones could store enough consumables for many months of operations." Jayk added, "These ships are old minister. Their slow speed made it necessary for them to be able to remain away from port for long periods of time."

"But what can we do against them?" Minister Jaffo said, "Our fighters are no match for an armada consisting of even half those ships, even with you to support us. If they attack we'll have no choice but to surrender."

"The minister is correct. That's a kumari battleship." Captain Nerol agreed and he pointed towards the largest vessel pictured, "If its mass driver is functional then we don't stand a chance. We've no planetary shield to stop it bombarding our cities from space."

"We aren't here to organise a defence against these ships minister." Jayk said, "Our mission is to seek out the leadership of this force and eliminate it. The Judicial Department will then deal with the fleet while it is leaderless and disorganised."

"Of course you'll have our every assistance." Minister Jaffo responded, "We can also contact other worlds in the sector to arrange-"

"No minister." Jayk interrupted, "Information about our mission here must not leave this room. It is likely that these outlaws have spies active in the sector to gather information on potential targets and if they have not transmitted word of our presence to their allies yet then they soon will. But by having you refuel our ships we can give the impression that we are moving on when in fact we will be remaining in the sector."

The Jedi starfighters' hyperdrive rings were still in orbit when the three small craft left Naboo's atmosphere again.

"Okay so now what?" Tylo asked just as his fighter was locking into its ring.

"You said there were three major shadow ports in this sector." Jayk replied, "Since there are three of us I suggest that we each investigate one. Tylo, we'll need the co-ordinates or at least the names of the systems they are in."

"Master are you sure that's wise?" Brae asked.

"If you're worried about Tylo running off while neither of us is there to watch over him then you need not concern yourself. Remember that his astromech droid will be there to keep an eye on him and warn us if he tries anything." Jayk answered.

"Gee, nice to know you have such faith in me." Tylo commented.

"Actually I was thinking about myself." Brae said, "I haven't undertaken any solo assignments before. Now you're sending me to a shadow port in a star system on my own."

"Have faith in yourself Brae." Jayk told her, "I am not asking you to clear out the shadow port on your own. All I need from you is to find out whether anyone has been buying large amounts of fuel or munitions recently. Besides you too will have your astromech droid with you as well as Cal. I take it you did bring him along with you?"

Cal Udra had been a Jedi knight thousands of years earlier during a time when it was not only permissible but also common for Jedi to marry and have children. Cal had been the son of two Jedi and had been assigned his own sister as his padawan. Now the Jedi Council had decided that the holocron into which he had placed all of his knowledge would be useful to Jayk in his instruction of a close family member.

"Err, actually I've got the holocron." Tylo said, "Brae didn't have room in her pack."

Jayk sighed.

"Very well. Brae I am sure you will do just fine with just your astromech droid. Tylo do try not to sell Cal's holocron to the first black marketeer you meet." he said.

"I'll do my best." Tylo said sarcastically, "Now do you want these systems or not?"

"If you would." Jayk said.

“Okay the first one is at Gentar about six parsecs from here. The second is at Hullon Minor about ten parsecs out and the third is in an unnamed system just catalogued as Chommell ninety-six eighty-four seventeen.” Tylo said, “That last one is rough even by shadow port standards.”

“Then that is the one I will take.” Jayk said, “Brae you will go to Gentar and Tylo will take Hullon Minor. We'll meet back here in no later than two days time.”

“Yes master. My astromech has calculated the jump data.” Brae said.

“Then go and may the Force be with you.” Jayk told her and moments later there was a flash of light as Brae's starfighter jumped into hyperspace.”

“Are you sure that kid will okay all by herself?” Tylo said as soon as Brae's fighter was out of range of their short range communications.

“Providing she remembers the training she had already received, yes.” Jayk answered, “Besides all she has to do is keep a low profile. I'll see you and her in two days.” and then there was another flash of light as Jayk's starfighter also jumped into hyperspace.

Now alone, Tylo glanced at the C1 astromech droid that navigated his starfighter. According to the system readouts in front of him its unit registration was C1-DN and he smiled.

“Okay I'm going to call you Sidney. No wait, Sid.” he said, “How do you like that?” and the droid produced a sharp tone.

“Whatever. Get those numbers into the hyperdrive and let's get out of here.” Tylo said right before his fighter made the jump into hyperspace as well.



### 3.

Dropping out hyperspace in the Gentar system Brae immediately checked her fighter's sensors to see whether any of the mysterious warships were present.

"Okay what have we got Kicker?" she asked her astromech droid, C1-KR and the little droid whistled back at her as it flagged up several sensor contacts orbiting one of the planets. One of these contacts dwarfed all of the others and it quickly became apparent that it was a space station of some kind. Around this were numerous smaller craft, some of them several hundred metres long themselves. None of them were military vessels but there were two that could easily serve as refuelling ships.

"Right." Brae commented, "We'll leave the hyperdrive ring out here where it's less likely to be found and head in."

Flying towards the station Brae expected to be challenged by a traffic controller but there was no attempt at contact at all from the station or any of the nearby ships. Instead Brae was able to fly her fighter right up to the station and get a close look at it. As expected there were numerous hangars and docking ports littering the surface area of the outer hull, some of them looking as if they had been added after the station had been constructed and it occurred to Brae that this was an effort to maximise the number of vessels that could dock at any one time.

Each docking port and hangar was marked externally with a price in credits as well as a time that explained how much it would cost to use that facility and Brae understood why a traffic controller would be of little use here. If each hangar and docking port was being run as an independent business then inevitably the controllers would be blamed if too few vessels made use of any particular one while some operators may attempt to bribe the controllers into guiding more traffic their way.

Brae chose one of the internal hangars that looked as if it was part of the station's original construction, not wanting to risk being in a section that may not have been built to the highest standards and she flew straight into the hangar. As she landed her fighter a pair of armoured guards approached her, each one wielding a vibroaxe.

"One hundred credits." one of them said without bothering to enquire why Brae was here."

"Your sign says twenty an hour." she replied, "I might not be here for five hours."

"Five hours minimum." the same guard said. Brae guessed that she could beat both of them if it came down to a fight but that was not why she was here and even using the Force to deceive them risked attracting unwanted attention. Instead Brae reached into her robes for the pouch of cash she carried with her. This contained coinage of several different currencies but was primarily Republic Dataries and she counted out a hundred of these that the guard then snatched away from her.

The second guard then let out a whistle and waved a ground crew over.

"That's okay, my ship doesn't need fuel or servicing." Brae said but the guards both just snorted as the ground crew proceeded to push a gravity lock over towards her fighter.

"It will be released when you pay what else you owe." the first guard then commented and Brae noticed that each of the ships in the hangar had a similar device fitted to them. Gravity locks functioned in a similar way to tractor beams but the gravitational disruption they created was designed to interfere with repulsorlift drives as well as physically restraining the ship to which it was fitted. The sheer power of an ion drive would be able to overcome the lock but the risks of taking off using an ion drive were severe and in the confined space of the hangar the back blast would likely destroy any ship attempting such a thing.

"Come on Kicker." Brae called out to the astromech droid, "Let's go take a look around."

Leaving the hangar Brae found herself in a wide corridor that was lined with vendors selling all sorts of small items. Some of these had laid out stalls on tables or piles of cargo containers while others simply thrust their wares in the faces of passers by while shouting at them to make a purchase. Here and there more than one merchant would attempt to attract the same customer at once and they would argue over who had the right to try and make a sale, often while the potential customer themselves slipped away. Brae also noticed that almost everyone appeared to be carrying a blaster though she saw no evidence of these being used to settle any of the numerous disagreements she witnessed over sales.

All of a sudden Brae sensed someone approaching her while doing their best to avoid attracting her attention and she felt something brush against her side. Without averting her gaze from the direction she was heading in she reached down and grabbed hold of a narrow wrist that had been in the process of reaching into her robes about where her lightsaber hung out of sight.

"Nothing there but trouble." she said, looking around at the thinly built alien.

"A mistake." the alien hissed, "You let go you not get hurt."

"Kicker." Brae said and the astromech droid extending its built in welding torch and used the tool to deliver a sharp thermal shock to the alien's side, causing it to cry out in pain. In turn this caused the crowd close by to

turn towards them both, watching to see what would happen next, "Be glad I'm letting you go with all your fingers," she said, "and your head." then she shoved the alien away from her, aiming for one of the larger members of the surrounding crowd so that when he collided with the crowd member he would be too busy with trying to excuse himself to make another attempt at coming after Brae.

However, this near miss did alert Brae to an issue that could cause her trouble. Her only weapon was her lightsaber and she had to keep this hidden to avoid giving away her identity. Fortunately even though it did not normally issue its agents with any other sort of modern weaponry the Jedi Order did teach them to use every type of weapon that they could conceivably come across from archaic bows and muzzle loading firearms to modern blasters. Being in a shadow port also meant that weapons were easy to come by and Brae saw several vendors offering blasters. These all seemed to be older types though and Brae suspected that they might not be as reliable as they ought to be so she continued to search.

Leaving the corridor that connected many of the numerous hangars and docking ports together Brae found herself in what looked remarkably like a shopping mall on a civilised world. Or at least a shopping mall where the walls were all decorated with graffiti that no-one was responsible for removing and where all of the customers carried weapons rather than just the security guards that did not exist here. Almost right away Brae saw that there was a boarded up store nearby and that on the plating that had been fixed over its windows it advertised what it sold.

WEAPONS, WEAPONS, WEAPONS...  
BLASTERS...  
VIBROBLADES...  
EXPLOSIVES...  
LARGE AND SMALL...  
ALL IN ONE PLACE...

Smiling, Brae walked up to the store and opened the door. Inside she saw that the claim made on the sign were accurate and behind a mesh screen that separated one side of the counter all around Brae from another the walls were covered in personal weaponry of almost every description. She also noticed a pair of security droids that looked to have had their weaponry illegally upgraded from stunners to something more lethal on the other side of the counter and Brae guessed that these were not there as merchandise to be sold.

"Ah a new customer if I'm not mistaken." the arachnoid harch arms dealer said in a deep voice when he looked at Brae.

"First time on the station." she replied as she walked up to the counter where he stood.

"Then allow me to commend you on your intelligence for ignoring all those crooks out by the docking bays who would attempt to con you into purchasing substandard goods."

"Whereas I suppose that everything you sell here is still under the manufacturer's warranty, right?" Brae said.

"Ah you wound me girl. I test everything I sell." the harch replied, clamping several of its arms over the centre of its chest.

"What, even those?" Brae asked and she pointed to three concussion missiles of the same type as were loaded into her starfighter that were stood up in the corner.

"Within reason." the harch said, "But should any weapon sold by me fail to function within half a year of purchase for any reason other than user error then then I shall happily offer you store credit."

"Assuming I survive." Brae muttered and then she looked at the weapons he had on display, "You have a wide range of weapons." she said.

"I pride myself on being able to offer my customers the perfect weapon for every occasion." the harch said, "A hold out blaster is no more use for precision fire at three hundred metres than a hunting blaster is for concealed carry. I offer them both and everything in between."

"What about lightsabers?" Brae said out of curiosity. Despite the Jedi Order's best efforts some of its agents' weapons still became lost to the order and every so often they would appear on the black market. There were also occasional rumours about renegade jedi producing them to sell to anyone with the credits.

"Sadly not. Though even if I did have any they would be very expensive. At least a hundred thousand credits." the harch said.

"What about those. How much are they?" she asked, pointing at a cluster of blaster pistols hung on the wall nearby.

"Ah you have an eye for quality, They are eight hundred credits each."

"Eight hundred?" Brae said, "I could get one on Coruscant for just over half that."

"Ah, but on Coruscant you would have to apply for a licence and also provide a secure cabinet that would cost you more than a thousand credits." the arms dealer pointed out, "On the other hand I place no such obstacles in the path of those innocent citizens whose only wish is to be able to defend themselves."

Brae sighed.

"Let me see the third one down." she said and the dealer retrieved the weapon, sliding it through a gap in the protective mesh so that Brae could feel the weight.

"Well?" he asked.

"I have a thousand credits to spend." Brae replied, "I'll need a holster and ammunition. How much can I get?"

"I tell you what youngling, I like your face even if it doesn't have enough eyes for my taste. For a thousand credits I'll give you the blaster, half a dozen power packs and a holster. How does that sound?"

"Make it eight power packs and you've got a deal." Brae said and the harch laughed.

"Ah you know what you want. I like that. Deal." he said and Brae placed the plaster down on the counter while she started to count out the money from her pouch. Then as the harch was gathering the power packs and holster that were part of the deal Brae looked at the concussion missiles in the corner once again and a thought occurred to her.

"I may need some heavier ordnance in the near future." she said, "Bigger than anything I can see here. Can you help with that?"

"Ah if only you had come here a month ago." the harch said as he pushed the power packs and holster under the mesh, "I had four turbolaser cannons for sale. Sadly I don't know when I'll get any more of those in stock, the Sector Rangers tend to keep close tabs on the suppliers."

"What happened to those four?"

"I sold them of course. Right now anything to do with large scale starships is commanding a high price.

There are aqualish here buying up everything that they can get hold of."

"Thank you anyway." Brae said, smiling at the harch, "I may try again when the demand has died down a bit. But I must be going. I didn't actually come here just to buy a blaster pistol."

"Of course, your business is welcome here youngling." the harch said as Brae was turning to leave.

## 4.

To avoid having it recognised as a Jedi craft, Tylo landed his fighter beyond what appeared to be the outer edge of the shadow port. This was a difficult thing to determine precisely given the somewhat random nature of the construction of the facility. Some of the structures were the converted remains of a mining facility that had been closed down when it ceased to be profitable whereas many more were much cruder buildings created from simple prefabricated parts or adapted from the hulls of long abandoned vehicles. He was not the only one to do this either and while he was on final approach he saw several more starships that had landed beyond where they could easily be identified.

"No, you stay put Sid." he said as he unpacked his blaster rifle from the fighter's small cargo compartment. The droid had just been lifting itself out of its socket in Tylo's fighter when the former smuggler told it to remain in place, "I need you to keep an eye on the ship." he continued, "If anyone comes near then signal me in town. Cal, can you understand an astromech?"

"Of course I can." the life sized hologram of Cal Udra said as it materialised beside Tylo, projected from the crystalline cube that rested on top of the fighter close to Tylo's head.

"Good. Then you can tell me what he's saying if he calls us." Tylo said, "Now can your sensors pick up explosives?"

"No, they aren't that sensitive. Sadly when the original Cal created me he didn't think that I'd be used as a bomb sniffer." Cal said.

"Oh well. At least you don't weigh much. Now stay out of sight." Tylo said and he reached up to grab hold of the fist sized cube and stuffed it into his jacket. Then with his rifle slung over his shoulder he headed on foot for the shadow port.

It was getting dark when Tylo saw the first of the structures but that meant little in a shadow port. Here business would be carried out at any time of the day or night but there were specific places that seemed to do better after dark. Chief among these were the cantinas that littered the area and Tylo knew that these would be the best place to discover the general goings on in this place for the minimum effort.

Tylo arrived at the nearest signposted cantina just as there was a loud roar that he recognised as coming from a Wookiee from inside and then a Rodian came crashing through a window to land at Tylo's feet. Smiling, Tylo headed inside but was forced to rapidly move aside as a Wookiee came charging out at the same time as Tylo was attempting to go inside. Looking around briefly before continuing inside Tylo saw the Rodian was now on his feet and running as fast as he could.

Inside the cantina Tylo headed straight for the bar and ordered a beer. Then as he was handed his drink he looked at the barman.

"Busy night?" he asked.

"Not bad." the barman replied, "Though business here is slow right now."

"Really? Any idea why?" Tylo said, sipping at his drink.

"The trade between the shadow ports has dropped off." the barman said, "We're more geared towards export from the sector whereas the other two larger ports import more. Goods are still coming into the sector but a lot is being bought up by a new player."

"Let me guess," Tylo said, "mainly it's got to do with large scale weapons and the equipment for maintaining starships."

"That's right." the barman said, "Those damned walrusmen are swallowing up everything."

Tylo frowned, noticing the derogatory term for members of any of the various Aqualish species. For thousands of years the species had been prohibited by the Republic from organising and deploying any military force as a consequence of their violent initial interaction with it. This had not prevented a large number of them becoming pirates and mercenaries however, but Tylo had never heard of them organising anything on the scale now being done.

"Aqualish raiders never stay in one place long." Tylo told the barman, "Even after thousands of years they still haven't forgotten how the Republic put them in their place." and then he started to walk away from the bar. Tylo walked around the whole cantina, looking out for any Aqualish among those drinking there but he saw none and so left, deciding that he should try some of the other cantinas as well to see what he could learn there.

However, rather than go straight on to the next cantina Tylo ducked into a narrow alleyway and took Cal's holocron from his pocket.

"What can you tell em about Aqualish?" he asked.

"Best avoided." Cal answered as his hologram appeared, "The ones on their homeworld are apparently somewhat civilised but most of the ones in the galaxy, which is the majority of their species by the way, tend to drift towards criminality. Violent criminality."

"I was worried you'd say that." Tylo said.

"Let's put it this way, if these ships we're looking for have all fallen into the hands of the aqualish then this sector has a real problem on its hands."

"Hey! What's going on back there?" a voice suddenly called out and Tylo turned to see a group of beings from various species approaching him, apparently attracted by the light given off by Cal's hologram.

"Nothing, just checking in with my ship." Tylo answered, his hand moving to rest on the heavy blaster pistol holstered on his leg.

"Like kriff you were. That's a holocron." one of the group said and Tylo smiled.

"Would I be in a place like this if I could afford a holocron?" he said, "This is just a novelty holo-transmitter."

"Then hand it over." the same individual said, extending a hand towards Tylo.

"I tell you what, how about we all go our separate ways and no-one needs to get hurt?" Tylo said but the group facing him just glared back at him angrily.

"Perhaps we should be getting out of here." Cal said quietly and Tylo nodded. Then he drew his sidearm and fired it before any of the group could react. But rather than firing directly at the mob he fired at the wall beside them. Each of the powerful shots from Tylo's heavy blaster pistol blew a large hole in the stone wall and this sent shards of stone flying in all directions that caused the mob to duck for cover to avoid being injured by the flying debris. Taking advantage of this Tylo turned and ran, firing behind him over the heads of the mob.

"Boring conversation anyway." he said as he returned the holocron to his jacket.

Tylo continued to run as he headed back towards his fighter but behind him he heard the sound of repulsorlift engines and he realised that the locals were mobilising to come after him.

"I think that word is out about us." Cal said from inside Tylo's pocket, "I'm picking up a lot of communication traffic for a place like this. I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Me too." Tylo replied, "We'll never make it back to the ship on foot."

"Perhaps not. But I can signal Sid to bring the ship here." Cal replied and Tylo nodded.

"Do it." he said as he ducked into another alleyway where he holstered his pistol again and unslung his rifle from his back, unfolding the stock as he readied it for use. Then Tylo made a break for another narrow gap between two buildings that he was certain would take him closer to the edge of the shadow port. However, as he ran down this he heard a repulsorlift engine ahead of him and a speeder came to a sudden halt at the end of the gap, cutting Tylo off. Reacting quickly Tylo fired his rifle on automatic and several high energy blasts slammed into the side of the speeder, disabling its main engine and bringing crashing to the ground. Some of the occupants survived this though and Tylo was forced to seek cover in a doorway as blaster bolts headed back down the alleyway towards him. A scream from behind Tylo made him smile as he realised that the blaster fire coming from ahead of him was in fact being directed at some of the beings chasing him and when another blaster bolt passed him in the other direction it became apparent that his enemies were now firing at each other.

Tylo then pointed his rifle at the lock of the door he was stood next to and fired at it, producing a shower of sparks.

"I don't suppose you can do that Force thing to lift the door up can you?" he asked Cal.

"Sorry no, I may have all the knowledge and personality traits of Cal Udra but I don't have his powers." Cal answered and Tylo frowned as he reached down to try and drag the door open. He was just about able to lift it high enough to create a gap he could fit through before he felt the door jam and he groaned as he squeezed beneath it, leaving his opponents still firing on one another.

Looking round Cal found himself in an establishment that appeared to specialise in the selling of droids and most of those present were clearly modified in ways not normally permitted by law. He moved carefully across the interior of the business, keeping his rifle at his shoulder just in case any of the droids turned out not to be quite as inactive as they initially appeared. Reaching the door at the far side Tylo opened this and took a quick look outside before he broke into a run again. He could see the outermost structures of the shadow port now and after that he knew the terrain was irregular enough that he would be able to find cover from his pursuers. Unfortunately for Tylo however, some of the locals had anticipated this move and he saw a skiff filled with armed figures speed on ahead of him, settling down just outside the shadow port so that its passengers could disembark and take cover.

"Stang." Tylo hissed as he realised that he was now cut off from the fighter.

"Turn right." Cal said and Tylo frowned.

"That doesn't get us any closer to the fighter." he said.

"Maybe not, but it does get us closer to the fusion reactor putting out all that heat." Cal replied and as Tylo turned to he right he saw a small hut made from sheet metal that had a portable fusion unit set up beside it. Cal had detected the waste heat being emitted by the machine so Tylo knew that it was functioning even without being able to see any of the readouts and a functioning fusion generator meant that it had a supply of fuel that would react very badly to being hit by blaster fire. Sure enough as Tylo ran towards the reactor one of his pursuers appeared behind him and took aim with his blaster only to be pushed aside by one of his comrades before he could open fire and risk damaging the reactor. On the other hand Tylo was free to fire at

his pursuers as he wished and he slid to halt beside the fusion reactor before unleashing a burst from his blaster rifle that sent two of them sprawling in the dirt while the others scattered out of the line of fire. Tylo was still heavily outnumbered, however and even as he fired more bursts to keep his opponents back he could see that they were starting to surround him. If that happened then it would only be a matter of time before they could overwhelm him.

It was then that the air was filled with the sound of a powerful repulsorlift engine though and looking up into the sky Tylo saw the familiar wedge shape of his fighter descending over him. Tylo crouched as the fighter hovered low over his head and over the sound of its engines he just about heard the sound of whistling coming from Sid before there were flashes of light as laser fire exploded from the fighter's cannons. C1 droids were not designed for combat purposes and the cannon fire was aimed to strike at open ground between Tylo and the locals but it had the intended effect as the locals fell back in panic. Taking advantage of this Tylo leapt to his feet and rushed towards the fighter. Sid rotated the hovering vessel, still firing its cannons to prevent the locals from advancing towards it while Tylo limbed aboard.

"Okay Sid let's get out of here." Tylo said as he strapped himself into his seat and the droid whistled as the fighter rose back into the sky and then raced away, leaving the angry locals staring into thin air.

## 5.

Having assigned himself to survey the shadow port described as the most dangerous one by Tylo, Jayk took no chances. Before even setting down he flew over the primary settlement on the planet, built on a cluster of small islands that were interconnected by bridges. Dominating the low structures that were spread out over a wide area there was an ancient looking tower marked with a large clenched fist symbol painted on its side that rose up from an island located at almost the exact centre of the settlement and beside this he saw what he immediately recognised as a surface to orbit turbolaser cannon that although obsolete by modern standards would be able to inflict heavy damage on any of the obsolete warships sighted in the area. In addition to these bridges Jayk's low level pass allowed him to see numerous lightweight repulsorlift vehicles also in operation moving goods and people across the water. Jayk also saw the telltale flashes of blaster fire in numerous places but more commonly towards the outskirts of the settlement away from the tower.

Jayk set his fighter down on another island not directly connected to any of those that made up the shadow port that had enough vegetation on it to conceal both himself and the fighter and crouched down in the undergrowth as he peered through his macrobinoculars. Now better able to see the individual beings that inhabited the shadow port Jayk saw that many of them wore small items of brightly coloured cloth such as armbands, hats or occasionally vests. Beings wearing such items gathered together only with other beings wearing the same colour and Jayk reasoned that these were gang markings to identify members of different rival gangs. This theory was reinforced when another flash of blaster fire caught his eye and focusing on the source of this he saw that the combatants were wearing different colours.

Then something else caught Jayk's attention and he turned his macrobinoculars towards a crude metal frame located on one of the islands closest to his position. This looked as if it had been erected some time ago from the plant growth on the vertical supporting struts but the bodies that hung from it were definitely fresh. Jayk counted seven bodies in all, every one of them aqualish and none of which wore any of the gang colours he had seen elsewhere in the settlement. Jayk was just considering the implications of this when he heard the sound of repulsorlift engines and sensed the approach of sentient beings.

Turning around Jayk saw a pair of speeder bikes coming racing across the water. Each bike carried two riders, one driving it and another holding onto the back with a rifle slung over them. All of the riders were clad entirely in black and rather than being marked by gang colours their jackets and helmets bore the same clenched fist symbol that Jayk had seen painted on the side of the tower. If there was any sort of authority in this place then these beings were probably representatives of it.

The two bikes set down on the edge of the island so that their riders could disembark and the four figures formed a line.

"Spread out." one of the figures called out, "That ship came down here and the boss wants to know who was aboard."

"What if it's the walrusmen again?" another asked.

"Then they join the others." the leader answered.

Jayk smiled as he watched the group advance from the shore into the undergrowth, leaving their speeder bikes unguarded. It was inevitable that they would eventually find his fighter but he doubted that they would attempt to destroy a valuable ship. On the other hand Jayk now had the chance to prevent any of them from rapidly leaving this island and as he put his macrobinoculars away he ran along the shore towards the speeder bikes, drawing his lightsaber as he neared them. Sensing no-one close by Jayk activated his weapon and there was a 'snap-hiss' as the glowing blue blade extended. Then he swung his weapon at the control veins of both speeder bikes, disabling their repulsorlift engines completely. He chose a different control vein on each bike so that it would be possible to make one functional bike from the parts of them both but that was a task that would take time. Then he shut off his lightsaber again but kept it in his hand as he set off into the undergrowth, following the trail left behind by the four new arrivals.

The bikers made their way through the undergrowth slowly, periodically pausing to look around as they searched for any signs of Jayk's fighter. However, the idea of checking behind them was not something that occurred to the group and Jayk followed without being seen. The fighter was located in a clearing near the centre of the island, chosen by Jayk for its concealed location and the four bikers halted at the edge of this.

"There's no pilot." one said softly when they saw the open cockpit.

"He must be here somewhere." the leader said, "Go check it out."

"Excuse me." Jayk called out suddenly from close behind the group, "Are you looking for me?" and then he ignited his lightsaber.

"Jedi!" one of the bikers yelled and he fired his pistol at Jayk who responded by effortlessly swatting the shot aside as he charged forwards. The other three bikers also opened fire at this point and Jayk sent the first shot from a rifle straight back at its firer, sending the man falling backwards into the undergrowth. Another ran



closer to Jayk in an attempt to circle around to where he could not use his lightsaber as a shield without exposing himself to the other two bikers but this brought him close enough that the Jedi was able to cut him down with a single stroke of his lightsaber. The final two bikers backed away from Jayk, still firing at him and he continued to use his lightsaber to deflect the blasts as he pressed forwards.

"Split!" one of them snapped and the bikers separated. Now attacking from two different directions at once Jayk was forced to make use of his reflexes to avoid being hit more than relying on his lightsaber, "You should learn to count Jedi!" the biker called out.

"And you should learn to watch behind you." Jayk responded right before the C1 droid from his fighter that had used the commotion of the firefight to disengage from its position rolled up behind the biker with its electric arc welder extended. Rather than use this to burn the biker the droid instead pulsed the tool so that the alternating current made him convulse and drop his blaster before he fell stunned to the ground. The one remaining biker turned towards the droid and aimed his rifle at the machine but before he could fire Jayk leapt through the air and landed right in front of him before thrusting his lightsaber through the biker's chest.

The biker groaned as he regained consciousness and the first thing he noticed was that his helmet had been removed and also that he was tied to a tree.

"Ah, you're awake." Jayk said when he sensed the additional brain activity from the man and the Jedi walked over to him, "Now tell me what the story is with those Aqualish you hanged."

*Anger.*

*Hatred.*

"Kriff off Jedi." the man snarled and Jayk smiled.

"You want to tell me what happened." he said, waving his hand as he used the Force to push the idea of helping him into the man's mind, "You know it makes sense."

"It makes sense." the man repeated, "The Aqualish came in a warship. They wanted fuel and weapons but the boss didn't want to deal with them. He knew they were too strong to control if he let them land. So he killed their messengers."

"So their fleet isn't here then?" Jayk asked and the man shook his head.

"Their ship left after the boss fired the turbolaser at it. Just a warning shot but it was enough to scare them off."

"Thank you, you've been most helpful." Jayk said and with one quick swing of his lightsaber he cut through the rope binding the man to the tree, "Now go. It'll take a while for you to fix your bike and by the time you get off this island I'll already be long gone."

Accompanied by Kicker, Brae made her way to the outer edge of the station where she quickly located a viewport that enabled her to see the ships outside. Using her macrobinoculars she looked at each one closely, examining the markings on the hulls. Most of the vessels were marked with names and registries, whether genuine or not, in either Aurebesh or High Galactic but there were also several that used non-human lettering for their markings and it was these that Brae paid most attention to. Brae reasoned that any Aqualish that were gathering illegal arms were unlikely to be sufficiently friendly to the Republic to be willing to use its lettering on their vessels and that they would instead have marked it in their own script.

Brae spotted a class-VI bulk freighter some distance from the space station. This class of vessel had been in continuous service for thousands of years and some examples still flying were contemporaries of some of the warships in the Aqualish fleet. Sure enough, as Brae focused on the forwards hammer shaped hull section of the freighter she saw several large characters in what looked to her like the Aqualish language.

Although Brae could recognise the letters themselves as probably being Aqualish she did not understand the language and so had no idea what they said. However, the mere presence of this ship was a major lead.

"There she is!" an all too familiar voice suddenly cried out and Kicker let out a whistle. Looking around Brae saw the thinly built alien that had attempted to rob her earlier and behind him were a pair of much stockier aliens of a different species, each of which held a blaster.

"Kicker! Run!" Brae exclaimed as she drew her newly acquired blaster and fired it down the corridor. The shot was not carefully aimed and it hit only the bulkhead behind the three aliens but it did make them all flinch long enough for Brae and Kicker to start to retreat. The pair hurried down the corridor towards a turbolift while the aliens yelled insults at them in their own language. Hurrying into the turbolift, Brae hit the button to close the door before selecting a destination and just as the door dropped shut the thinly built alien yelled at her.

"We know your ship! You never leave this system!"

"Kicker, I've got a bad feeling about this." Brae said as she reached out for the button that would take them back to the level that her fighter was docked on.

Not wanting to expose herself as a Jedi, Brae kept hold of her blaster as the turbolift moved and when it came to a halt she prepared herself to use it. She did not however, aim it towards the door before it opened just in case whoever was outside took that as a threat and attacked because of it. Fortunately when the door

slid open there was no-one waiting outside to block Brae's exit and she and Kicker were able to quickly make their way back to the hangar where her fighter was docked.

"You not leave. You owe." the same guard that had met Brae when she landed told her as soon as she entered the hangar.

"I'm still in credit." she replied, "You can keep the change."

"They say you owe." the guard replied, pointing across the hangar to where two more stocky aliens with blasters stood by her fighter.

"They're lying. They're trying to rob me." Brae said, "Now remove the gravity lock and I'll be on my way."

"You pay them. Then you go." the guard said and Brae sighed.

"Oh well. I suppose that we'll just have to do this the hard way." she said and she started to walk across the hangar towards her fighter.

Spotting her coming towards them, the two aliens turned towards her and prepared to challenge her. Seeing the blaster in her hand they raised their own weapons and took aim. But Brae returned her blaster to its holster and instead reached under her robes and drew her lightsaber. Then there was a 'snap-hiss' as she activated the weapon and as the occupants of the hangar all stared at her in disbelief she smiled at the aliens blocking her path to her fighter.

"Your choice." she said.

For a moment she thought that maybe the aliens would come to their senses and step aside but then one of them let out a roar and fired his blaster at her. Rather than try to deflect the attack Brae dived out of the way and broke into a run towards the two aliens. Behind her the guards started shouting and glancing around she saw several of them running towards her with their vibroaxes held high. Waving her hand Brae used the Force to slide an energiser module across the hangar deck into the guards' path and they ground to a halt rather than run right into it.

The two aliens in front of Brae continued to fire at her and now she used her lightsaber to protect herself, deflecting the blaster bolts away. Lacking experience Brae could not control the path of the deflected blaster bolts with enough accuracy to be able to send them back at the aliens firing on her without also risking hitting her fighter but she was able to defend herself well enough that she made it within arms reach of them both without being injured and she let out a scream of anger as she swung her lightsaber at them. Her attack cut down both aliens in one go and she felt powerful because of this. Turning towards the hangar guards again Brae was about to call on the Force to simply hurl them away from her when she recognised the pull of the Dark Side for what it was and stopped herself just in time.

The gravity lock was still an issue for her though, while it remained clamped to her starfighter she could not leave and she had only a few seconds before the guards reached her.

"Kicker get aboard." Brae called out to the astromech and she turned her attention to the gravity lock. The device was designed to resist attack by blasters and explosives, requiring such energy to damage it that the vessel being held in place by it would likely be damaged as well. But the material technology to resist a lightsaber blade was incredibly rare and more expensive than it would be worth to include it on a mere gravity lock.

Brae plunged her lightsaber into the gravity lock and pulled back on it, cutting through the device and triggering a shower of sparks as the mechanism inside was destroyed. Kicker then whistled to indicate that the starfighter was no longer being held in place by the gravity lock and opened the cockpit for Brae to get aboard. Shutting off her lightsaber Brae jumped up into the air, somersaulting before landing perfectly in the pilot's seat and she reached up to close the canopy.

Normally taking off in a starship required a series of safety checks to make sure that all of the vessel's systems were functioning correctly but Brae knew that she did not have the time for all of these before the guards reached her and so as she strapped herself in she looked at the astromech beside her.

"Kicker, no time for the checks. Just get us out of here." she said and the droid chirped as it powered up the fighter's repulsorlifts and it rose off the deck, turning towards the space door. By this time Brae was ready to take control of the fighter and she accelerated out of the hangar, leaving the furious guards behind her. As soon as the fighter was out in space its repulsorlifts became useless and Kicker activated the ion drive instead. Then the droid whistled as Brae turned the fighter sharply rather than continuing to fly directly away from the space station.

"No Kicker, I know what I'm doing." she said, "There's something I need to do before we head back to Naboo."

Brae then proceeded to fly her fighter between the other starships in close proximity to the station, staying as close to them as possible to prevent the station's weapons from being turned on her. She continued to circle the station until the class-VI freighter with the aqualish marking on it came into view and then she brought the fighter's weapons on line. Lining up the targeting system on the slow moving freighter, Brae waited for it to indicate that she had achieved a weapons lock before she fired from point blank range. However, rather than making use of either the starfighter's laser cannons or concussion missiles that could easily inflict serious damage on or even destroy the freighter she released a tiny rocket that accelerated rapidly towards her

target. Rather than being designed to strike its target directly, the rocket flew close past the freighter and released a tiny device from inside that promptly latched onto the freighter's hull and unfolded to reveal a compact subspace transmitter.

"Okay tracker's in place." Brae said as she broke off her run and started to fly away from the space station. Diverting full power to the fighter's engines Brae flew back to the spot where she had left the hyperdrive ring. However, rather than the functioning hyperdrive that would allow her to leave the system she instead found just a small cloud of debris and she realised what the thinly built alien had meant when he said that she would never leave this system.

## 6.

"Brae's two days are up." Tylo said to Jayk. The pair had returned to Naboo as planned and landed at Theed starport again while they waited for Brae to join them. To help keep a low profile they had rented an apartment near the starport and Jayk had spent most of his time meditating.

"I know." the jedi said, still sitting on the floor with his eyes closed.

"Do you think something could have happened to her?" Tylo asked and Jayk sighed.

"Brae may be young and inexperienced but she is resourceful and intelligent." he said, "Plus I have not sensed anything in the Force to suggest that she is in grave danger."

"So are we going to wait for her?"

"No." Jayk replied, opening his eyes and getting to his feet, "Something is preventing Brae from either returning to Naboo or making contact. Therefore, we shall travel to Gentar and find out why."

Jayk and Tylo came out of hyperspace on the outer edge of the Gentar system and immediately began to search for signs of activity.

"I've got the station," Tylo said, "and plenty of ships in close proximity. No signs of our girl though."

Jayk hesitated and then reached for his long range transmitter. Normally the subspace antenna would be used for sending messages over interstellar distances but its faster than light communication speed also made it effective for communication over interplanetary distances without the delays of several hours associated with electromagnetic communication methods such as radio or laser arrays.

"Brae." he said after setting the system for a wide field broadcast rather than a point transmission, "It's your uncle. I'm here. Are you okay?"

"Stang Jayk. You just sent up a-" Tylo began before he was interrupted by an incoming signal.

"Uncle Jayk." Brae's voice said, "My hyperdrive ring was destroyed. I've been running silent for the last fifty hours or so. I don't think that anyone has come hunting for me but I can't go back to the station, I had to fight my way out of there."

"I've got your location Brae." Jayk said as his communication system locked on the source of Brae's signal, "We'll be there in a minute."

Executing a micro jump through hyperspace Jayk and Tylo's fighters suddenly appeared just a few hundred metres away from Brae's, enabling them to establish secure short range communication that would not have any noticeable delay.

"Master the warships are being operated by aqualish renegades." Brae said as soon as the link was established.

"Yes I know. Both Tylo and I found evidence of their involvement as well." Jayk responded.

"A pity we still don't know where they are." Tylo added.

"But we will soon." Brae said, "Master, one of their freighters was here and I managed to deploy a tracker onto its hull. It was still broadcasting when the ship jumped to hyperspace, I'm sending you the exit vector now."

"That vector takes the ship into the N-sixteen quadrant." Tylo said when he looked at the data, "The Aurek Ionis system."

"Then that's where we need to go." Jayk said, "Brae, what sort of ship did you see?"

"A class-VI freighter."

"Then it'll still be in hyperspace." Jayk said, "We can head it off."

"Not all of us though." Tylo pointed out, "We've only got two hyperdrive rings and there's no time to try and commandeer another ship."

"Tylo's right. I'll have to wait here." Brae said.

"No." Tylo responded, "Like I said, I'm not a real fighter pilot but you two are both trained, even if Brae's not very experienced. Plus she's a jedi. I'll ditch my ring here and head for the station. I'm sure I can get passage back to Naboo easily enough."

"Very well." Jayk said, "Brae set a course for Aurek Ionis and dock with Tylo's hyperdrive ring. We have a freighter to seize."

"Yes master." Brae replied, "But Tylo, I suggest you avoid a docking bay that charges twenty credits an hour. They'll be watching for one of our fighters and I doubt even you'll be able to talk your way out of the mess you'll be in."

"Uncle, they're here." Brae said just seconds after she and Jayk returned to realspace in the outer reaches of the Aurek Ionis system. Though the information was several hours out of date it clearly showed a large force of warships in the system that included both a kumari battleship and invincible-class dreadnought. As

expected the warships present in the system were all obsolete, thousands of years behind the two jedi starfighters in technology and although the jedi could see them they were out of range of the warships' own sensors.

"I see them." Jayk responded, "I'm also picking up several freighters heading for them. "

"That ship couldn't have got here ahead of us could it?" Brae asked.

"No. None of them are following a course that could have originated in the Gentar system. Brae we need to use a full power sublight burn to accelerate us toward that fleet. Then we'll run silent and drift towards them until the freighter arrives. After that we'll board the freighter and seize it so we can use it to get close to that kumari battleship."

"Why that ship?"

"Because it's the biggest. I can't think of any better option for which ship will be the flagship."

"But can we fight our way through the crew of that master?"

"If my plan works we won't need to. That battleship is even slower than the freighter. We'll use the freighter like a guided missile and ram it into the battleship. With any luck all of the munitions the aqualish have been buying will be enough to take out their flagship and anything else close by as well."

Accelerating towards the warships, the jedi maintained communication silence while they waited for the freighter to arrive and it was only when Jayk's astromech droid picked it up on the fighter's long range sensors that it chirped at him to rouse him from his meditation. Modern vessels typically travelled so fast that they would emerge from hyperspace so soon after entering sensor range that there would be no effective warning of their approach but the freighter was so old that Jayk had time to alert Brae before it dropped out of hyperspace.

"Here it comes." he signalled, using a directed transmission to avoid detection before there was a flash ahead of them as the freighter dropped to realspace.

"I see it. Range sixteen thousand kilometres. Dead ahead." Brae responded.

"Stay behind the target so their own engine exhaust will mask us and proceed at half power." Jayk ordered and the two jedi accelerated towards the freighter.

The crew of their target vessel obviously did not expect any trouble this close to their own fleet and the freighter continued onwards in a straight course, making no manoeuvres intended to make sure that no-one was doing exactly what Jayk and Brae were and it took just a few minutes for them to get within a thousand metres of the freighter.

"How do we get aboard master?" Brae asked as she studied the ancient transport ship more closely, "Neither of us is wearing a space suit."

"We don't need them." Jayk replied, "We'll just open one of the cargo bays doors and fly right in. Or rather my astromech droid will." and then he looked to his side where his astromech droid was mounted, "I need you to detach and make your way over to the freighter. Locate an access port and open the cargo door for us. Don't forget to make sure that the magnetic field is active though. The crew will notice a decompression."

The C1 droid whistled in response as it lifted itself up out of its mounting. Then there was a jet of flame from its base and the little droid flew across the gap between Jayk's fighter and the freighter. Clamping onto the larger vessel's hull magnetically the droid then rolled across the surface until it reached a computer access port beside a cargo door that it could access and extended a probe to plug in. Moments later the freighter's large ventral cargo door slid open slowly, a pale blue glow across the opening indicating that the atmosphere inside the hold was contained.

"I'll go first Brae, you follow." Jayk said as he fired his fighter's manoeuvring thrusters, carefully guiding his ship into the hold before setting it down on the deck. As Brae was copying this Jayk opened up his cockpit and climbed out of the fighter, drawing his lightsaber just in case any of the crew happened to be close by. Looking around the hold Jayk saw that it was indeed filled with munitions, with everything from grenades to capital ship scale missiles. Then he heard the sound of repulsorlifts from Brae's fighter cease and he turned around to see her climbing out of the ship.

"How many crew do you think we'll be dealing with master?" she asked as she drew her own lightsaber.

"A class six freighter typically operates with four crew plus a gunner for the turret." Jayk replied, "Though one or two passengers could also be carried."

"So up to seven then." Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"Most of whom will be on the bridge so that's where we'll start. The droids can guard the ships." he said.

The bridge of the freighter was cramped and disorderly with numerous systems only functional because of improvised repairs that needed constant monitoring. This poor state of repair kept the entire crew's attention so focused on their duty stations that none of them initially noticed when the door to the bridge slid open and the two jedi peered inside.

"I count five." Jayk whispered as he and Brae backed away from the doorway again, "All armed. Sidearms only."

"How do we do this?" Brae asked.

"We don't have time for anything fancy." Jayk answered, "We rush them." and then he held up his lightsaber. The sound of two lightsabers igniting finally alerted the aqualish crew to the fact that they had been boarded and all of them turned away from their consoles just as Jayk and Brae came charging into the bridge. The closest of the aqualish barely had his weapon out of its holster before Jayk cut him down with a single swipe of his lightsaber. Meanwhile Brae used the Force to push another aqualish's arm aside just as he was taking aim in her direction before plunging her own weapon into his chest and he let out a dying scream. The sound of a blaster shot rang out across the bridge and Jayk angled his lightsaber to deflect the energy bolt away from him. In the confines of the bridge he was unable to send it straight back at the firer but there was another aqualish crewman about to fire on Brae that he was able to target, hitting him in his side just under his arm. Jayk then leapt towards the aqualish who had just shot at him and before the alien could fire again he sliced its head from its shoulders.

One only member of the crew now remained on the bridge and he suddenly dived towards the communications console, obviously intending to warn the fleet about the Jedi. However, before he reached the console Brae extended her arm towards him and unleashed a telekinetic blast that pushed him away. She did not use enough power to injure the aqualish but it was enough to make sure that he landed on the deck out of reach of the console. Cursing in his own language the aqualish then turned his blaster towards Jayk, the older Jedi being an easier target from where he had landed and fired. Jayk stood his ground and blocked each shot, making sure that every one was deflected in a direction away from any of the control consoles on the bridge.

"Brae, quickly." he said as he deflected another energy bolt.

Brae was about to charge at the aqualish when she remembered the blaster pistol she still had holstered on her belt and she drew the weapon and fired it at the aqualish twice in rapid succession. Her first shot was slightly off from her aim point dead centre of the alien's chest and it instead hit him in the shoulder but her second was right on target and the aqualish let out a brief groan before he slumped forwards and lay still.

"A blaster?" Jayk commented.

"It worked, didn't it master?" Brae responded as she shut off her lightsaber and holstered her blaster.

"This time, yes. Now we need to set this ship on a collision course with that battleship." Jayk said and he headed for the helm position while Brae made her way to comscan.

"I've got a lock on the battleship's transponder." she announced.

"Good. I'll lock the navigation system onto it." Jayk replied.

"Won't the aqualish just shoot the ship down?" Brae asked.

"If we set the freighter on an obvious collision course too early, yes." Jayk answered, "But if we hold our current course and speed then we should be able to get within ten kilometres of the battleship before engaging full power. Even if the aqualish are able to react in time all of the ordnance in this ship's hold make it a flying bomb."

"That's not going to give us much time to escape." Brae pointed out.

"I know. We'll have to set everything on automatic and trigger the course change by remote."

"Is that even possible with the systems in this state?" Brae said.

"I hope so. But even if it is not then we may be able to trigger a detonation of the ship's cargo using our own missiles. Of course that means being much closer to the ship when it explodes than I had hoped." Jayk said as he programmed the freighter's navigation system. Class-VI freighters had first been introduced at a time when travelling across the galaxy relied on static navigation beacons to provide up to date jump data and so the freighter's systems were compatible with the concept of making course changes in relation to an external signal source. All Jayk needed to do to set the collision course was tell the ship's computer that the battleship's transponder signal was one of these ancient beacons and instruct it to make a course change at the right time.

"It would appear that the Force is with us." Jayk said as he finished programming the collision course into the computer.

"How so master?"

"The navigation system includes safeguards to prevent what I am doing." Jayk told her, "The computer should not make any course changes that would result in one. However, with all these repairs it seems that the aqualish have failed to maintain that particular system. Now let's go. We need to be in our fighters before this ship reaches the fleet."

The two Jedi hurried back to the hold where their starfighters were still landed and jumped into the cockpits as their astromech droids returned to their positions as well. As soon as both pilots and droids were aboard the Jedi launched their fighters through the still open cargo bay door. Using the freighter itself to shield themselves from detection by the aqualish fleet they fired their ion drives on full power for a fraction of a second to take them on an oblique course relative to the fleet and then they sat back to watch what happened.

The freighter continued on its course towards the aqualish fleet unchallenged. The aqualish recognised the

ship as one of their own and its crew had made contact just after leaving hyperspace so they had no reason to expect a trap. The freighter flew past the outlying ships, foray-class blockade runners and made its way deeper into the fleet guided by the battleship's transponder. When the freighter reached a distance of ten kilometres from the battleship it suddenly executed the sharpest turn its limited manoeuvring system would allow and its ion drive ramped up to full power.

Now the aqualish knew that something was wrong and the kumari battleship tried to move out of the way. But the ancient vessel was not designed to make rapid changes in course or speed and as it lumbered forwards even the ancient freighter was able to out turn and outrun it. Some of the aqualish ships tried turning their weapons on the freighter but by this point it was too late and although a turbolaser blast from the dreadnought did strike the forward section of the ship and blew it apart it did not stop the remnants of the ship and its entire deadly cargo from slamming into the kumari battleship just forwards of its own engines. The force of the impact punched a large hole in the battleship's hull moments before the explosives carried in its hold detonated and turned the freighter's reactor into a miniature sun for just a fraction of a second. This broke the battleship in half and its ancient reactors also exploded, spreading destruction even further. The battleship's efforts to evade the freighter's suicide run had brought it closer to the dreadnought and this once mighty vessel was also consumed in the blast from the two exploding ships.

Several other nearby ships were caught up in this and they veered away, burning badly themselves while every ship was hit by at least some of the rapidly expanding cloud of debris. From their vantage point in their starfighters Jayk and Brae watched as the powerful armada that had been threatening the entire region was suddenly reduced to a handful of small and obsolete warships, all in need of repair before they would be capable of combat.

"We did it!" Brae exclaimed while Jayk just smiled, "Look uncle, both their main vessels are gone."

"Quite so." Jayk replied, "The surviving ships will be easy for the Judicial Department to deal with but I suggest we get out of here before they have chance to regroup and can come hunting for us. Set course for our hyperdrive rings, our next stop is the jedi temple on Coruscant. If we hurry we may just beat Tylo there."