

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



IV-III: PARASITES

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



ELEVEN FAMILIES.
TWELVE GENERATIONS.
ONE EVIL.

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THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO A SMALL GROUP OF INTREPID EXPLORERS SURVEYED THE NARTHIS SECTOR AND SOON IT BECAME ANOTHER PART OF THE GALACTIC REPUBLIC. THE DESCENDANTS OF MOST OF THESE EXPLORERS STILL RESIDE IN THE SECTOR, WHERE THEY HAVE BECOME BOTH FAMOUS AND WEALTHY. BUT DID THE ORIGINAL EXPLORERS DIVULGE EVERYTHING THEY DISCOVERED, OR HAVE THEIR FAMILIES BEEN HIDING SOME DARK SECRET EVER SINCE? NOW A JEDI KNIGHT HAS VANISHED WITHOUT TRACE AND THE INVESTIGATION WILL BRING ANOTHER FAMILY TO THE SECTOR. FROM NOW ON NOTHING WILL BE THE SAME...

PARASITES

PIRATES ARE SEEMINGLY ABLE TO DELAY STARSHIPS IN TRANSIT LONG ENOUGH TO AMBUSH THEM WITHOUT ATTRACTING THE ATTENTION OF THE AUTHORITIES UNTIL IT IS TOO LATE. WITH THE MILITARY AND SECTOR RANGERS UNABLE TO PREVENT THESE ATTACKS CAL AND LARA UDRA ARE ENLISTED BY ONE OF THE SECTOR'S RICHEST MEN TO FIND OUT WHAT IS GOING ON...

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.html>

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1 .

"Tell Del Karn I don't care." Hyronymous Kast, known as 'Hyron' to his few friends said to the group of lawyers standing on the other side of his desk. Over the years Hyronymous had built up a massive business empire that now stretched across the Narthis Sector and this often brought him to the attention of members of the group of families known as the Founding Families, those individuals descended from the crew of the survey ship that first charted the sector three centuries earlier, "I remember him before he married into that blasted Karn family, back when he was still Del Farris and let me tell you, their arrogance has rubbed off on him. So no, I'm still not interested in his business proposal. Now get out of here and do something to earn the ridiculous fee you charge."

Silently the lawyers turned around and began to walk out of Hyronymous' massive office. Just as his secretary came walking in.

"I'm sorry to bother you Mister Kast," she said nervously, having overheard his abrupt dismissal of the lawyers and fearing how he would react to more news that he was not going to like, "but there's a report in from shipping."

"Let me see Bythany." Hyronymous replied and he held out his hand to take the datapad that she had brought in with her. He skimmed through the summary at the beginning of the document and frowned.

"How can this be accurate?" he asked, "There's no way that fuel costs could be up that much. We're not running that many extra flights."

"Well, it seems that the cost per journey is increasing sir." Bythany replied.

"But we supply our own fuel from one of our subsidiaries." Hyronymous pointed out, "We've not increased the price to our selves."

"No sir, but we are consuming more fuel than usual. It would appear that mynock infestations are spreading across the sector."

"Mynocks? Are you telling me that we're losing forty million credits per month because of some damned parasites?"

"I'm afraid it gets worse sir."

"Worse? How?"

"It's in the other document." Bythany replied and Hyronymous looked at the datapad again and scowled.

"Pirates?" he asked, "And where exactly was the Republic while this was going on? I thought that the new Besh Station was crawling with their ships."

"Ah, it seems that the gunships deployed to the area were withdrawn once the beacon was confirmed as functional sir."

"Well we'll see about this." Hyronymous said, "Get me a ship, I'm going to Aurek Station to confront Captain De Kuun and that bothan administrator about this in person. We pay trillions in taxes every year and we ought to be getting something in return for that."

As the senior administrator of Aurek Station, the primary navigation beacon in the Narthis Sector, Ishtel Varr'kay was the most senior Republic official in the sector and to get a face-to-face meeting with him was not the easiest thing to arrange. However, when one of the sector's wealthiest individuals arrived on the station demanding such an audience the bothan's innate paranoia about plots to undermine him kicked in and his schedule was rapidly rearranged to allow for it. Thankfully for the administrator Captain De Kuun, the duros naval officer in charge of the Republic's forces for the sector was also on the station when Hyronymous demanded to speak with him as well and so the bothan did not feel like he was going into the meeting alone. However, the feelings of the two men going in were quite different. Whereas Administrator Varr'kay was concerned about his position, the captain was more annoyed at having a civilian make such demands on his time.

"Ah gentlemen, do come in and sit down." Hyronymous said to them and then he turned to the humanoid droid standing beside him, "Doc, provide our guests with refreshment. Nothing intoxicating though, I suspect that neither of them wishes to indulge right now."

"Of course Mister Kast sir." The droid replied before walking towards the two Republic officials with a tray containing food and drink.

"So what brings you to the station Mister Kast?" Administrator Varr'kay asked.

"This." Hyronymous replied and he tossed the bothan a datapad that detailed the attack on his freighter in which the cargo had been looted and the ship severely damaged, "How was this allowed to happen? I thought that the Republic was supposed to be in control of that region of space."

"We are." Captain De Kuun replied, "But we have limited ships at our disposal. I have only one squadron of gunships to cover the entire sector while the frigate *Perseverance* cannot remain purely within the Narthis Sector."

"Don't take me for a fool captain!" Hyronymous snapped, "My ship was ambushed by a fleet of a dozen pirate vessels, not just one. I know that a force that size attracts attention as it travels. So why didn't any of your patrols or sensor nets pick it up?"

Captain De Kuun frowned.

"There were no reports of any such formations." He said.

"Perhaps it was assembled piecemeal." Administrator Varr'kay suggested.

"But that can only happen if the pirates know that a ship is coming." Hyronymous pointed out.

"This report indicates that your ship was slowed by mynock." Captain De Kuun added, "That could have allowed the pirates the time they needed to gather their forces."

"Then perhaps you should do something about the mynock infestation in the Jaynas system." Hyronymous said.

"Mynock control is a job for local government, not the Republic." Administrator Varr'kay replied.

"So what all this boils down to is that neither of you plans to do anything to prevent this from happening again. Am I correct?" Hyronymous asked.

"With the ships available to us there is nothing more that we can do." Captain De Kuun admitted.

"Perhaps you could hire armed escorts of your own." Administrator Varr'kay suggested and Captain De Kuun frowned briefly at the suggestion his forces needed the help of mercenaries to keep the space lanes open.

"I don't just want armed ships to drive off pirates after they launch an attack, I want these pirates caught. And caught quickly." Hyronymous responded.

"Perhaps there is an alternate solution Mister Kast." Captain De Kuun said, "As you know there is a permanent jedi presence on Aurek Station once more. Perhaps you could speak to them."

Lara Udra squealed as she was hurled through the air to land on her back. Fortunately the floor was coated with thick padding designed specifically to cushion what would otherwise have been a hard landing.

"You learn to anticipate an attack padawan." The man standing over her said.

"Oh I know you're about to do it." Lara replied, "It's just stopping it that's the hard part."

"Concentration is the key." The man told her, "Only by focusing your thoughts will you be able to defend yourself against even the worst dangers." And then he just stared at the hand she reached up with.

"Well aren't you going to help me up?" she asked.

"Very well." The man replied, but as he pulled Lara to her feet he suddenly hurled her across the mat and she squealed again.

Then there was the sound of laughter as a third jedi appeared in a doorway. This man was just a few years older than Lara, so still much younger than her sparring partner.

"Not bad little sister." He said, "Perhaps with a few years of practice you'll be able to stand up for a second before getting knocked down."

"Cal you're just jealous that I've lasted longer than you did when Tarris kicked your-" Lara began but she was interrupted by the sound of a chime from the doorbell and the dog that had been watching from the side of the room began to bark.

"Quiet Ghost." Cal called out and he went to answer the door. Opening it he found Hyronymous standing in the corridor outside with his droid just behind him.

"Mister Kast." Cal said, "Come in."

"Thank you." Hyronymous replied.

"You remember Lara don't you?" Cal said pointing to his sister and as she smiled at Hyronymous the older man grabbed hold of her and flipped her over his shoulder again.

"Do not relax your concentration!" he exclaimed.

"And that is Jedi Tarris Blake." Cal told Hyronymous and as the dog walked up to Hyronymous and sniffed him Cal added, "Oh and this is Ghost and the droid over there is Shorty." And he pointed to a massive labour droid that stood more than two metres tall that stood motionless on the far side of the room. Cal then looked around and frowned, "Err I'm afraid we got rid of most of the furniture in here to make room for the exercise gear. Shorty, could you go and fetch a chair for our guest?" the droid then nodded and without a word it headed out of the room.

"Well this is a step up from the last time we met." Hyronymous said as he looked around the spacious apartment.

"Yes, Jedi Blake graciously allowed us to share with him." Cal said.

"Gracious?" Lara commented as she picked herself up off the floor again.

"So what can we do for you Mister Kast?" Cal asked.

"Well for a start you can call me Hyron Jedi Udra."

"Only if you call me Cal." Cal replied as Shorty returned with a chair and placed it beside Hyronymous. Then the droid looked briefly at Doc before it returned to its spot on the other side of the room.

"Certainly Cal." Hyronymous said as he sat down, "Now first I'd like to thank you for dealing with that creature in the Jovan system."

"You've not found another have you?" Lara asked worriedly, "That thing nearly ate us and our ship."

"No. This time my problem is more mundane in nature." Hyronymous said, "Pirates attacked one of my ships and the Republic's response has been less than satisfactory, "Captain De Kuun suggested I speak with you."

"Oh he did, did he?" Cal replied, "The captain seems to think that the Jedi Order exists only to do as the military wishes."

"So you're saying that you won't help?" Hyronymous asked.

"Oh no, we'll help you out Mister – err, Hyron. Well, Lara and I will. Jedi Blake's mission here is somewhat, ah, well, more specialised."

Hyronymous smiled and passed Cal a datapad.

"Thank you Cal. Here is all the information I have."

2.

The freighter dropped out of hyperspace and the crew instantly checked their position.

"Right on target captain." The navigator said.

"Yes, but about nine hours late." The captain responded, "What sort of jump data did you feed into that blasted computer?"

"The same we always use." The navigator answered, "I think the hyperdrive wasn't getting enough power."

"Well that's going to have to be checked before we jump for Xyros. At this rate it'll be more than a week before we get there." The captain said before he was interrupted by the ship's comscan operator.

"I've got a contact in sector fourteen." He said, "Two ships on an intercept course. No wait, there are four of them in close formation."

"Wait, I can't raise the beacon." The navigator then said, "Those ships are jamming our communications."

"It's a trap!" the captain exclaimed, "Helm get us out of here. Full sublight thrust. We'll see if we can get out of the range of their jamming and send a distress signal before they reach us."

"Aye captain, engines to full." The helmsman replied and there was a rumbling as the freighter began to accelerate, but the helmsman looked at his instruments and frowned.

"What's wrong?" the captain asked.

"Captain we're not accelerating properly. There's a power loss in the system somewhere." The helmsman told him and the captain brought up a system status chart on his display, along with a sensor readout that showed the relative positions of his ship and the pirate vessels. Sure enough the chart showed that the engines were not receiving the power that they ought to be, although the output of their reactor was not impaired. Then he suddenly noticed another set of dots appear on the sensor display arranged in a similar formation to the pirate ships but this time in front of them.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." The captain said.

Alarms sounded in the cockpit of the *Bright Hope* as soon as it dropped out of hyperspace close to Besh Station, ready to get the jump data needed for the final stage of the trip to the Jaynas system from the fully automated navigation beacon.

"What's that?" Lara exclaimed.

"Sensors are picking up weapons fire." Cal replied, "I'm bringing us round. Power up the weapons and get ready to engage."

The delaya-class *Bright Hope* had both speed and manoeuvrability that rivalled that of starfighters so it did not take long for Cal to re-orientate the ship to face the battle now going on. Still many thousands of kilometres away from them, the Jedi could still see the flashes of weapon fire though they could not tell exactly who was doing the fighting.

"I only see one transponder broadcasting." Lara said as she checked the sensors, "A freighter by the looks of it."

"Then we've probably wandered into a pirate ambush." Cal replied, "Just like the one that Hyron's ship got caught in." then he activated the *Bright Hope's* close range communication system, "This is the Jedi vessel *Bright Hope* to all ships. I am ordering you to cease fire and come to dead stop. Any refusal will be taken as an act of resistance and dealt with severely." And as he allowed the ships some time to take in his warning he looked at Lara again, "Let's see what effect that has." He said to her.

"Well it looks like we've got their attention at least." Lara replied and she pointed to the scope, "Two ships veering towards us. No transponders."

"Raising shields." Cal said, "Stand by to open fire, but do not fire unless we're fired upon."

Moments later there was a flash of light from outside the cockpit as a blast from a weapon struck the *Bright Hope's* forward shields and Lara smiled.

"All the excuse I needed." She said, "I have you now." And she swung the *Bright Hope's* two laser turrets to face the ship that had just fired at them. Twin streams of energy erupted from the turrets and as the pirate vessel closed in further they struck it along one side, first triggering flashes from the shields and then explosions along the hull as its shields were overwhelmed. Only when the ship was this close was it revealed to be an armed transport ship, a light freighter mounting a single turret under its nose. There was another explosion from within the pirate ship as fires started by Lara's attack reached something volatile and then the entire ship was consumed in a ball of fire.

"Cal I got one!" Lara exclaimed.

"I saw. Don't get cocky." Cal replied, "Now hang on, I'm going after the other one." And he steered towards the second pirate ship.

This one was a lightweight gunship that also mounted only a single laser cannon and as its pilot saw the *Bright Hope* turning towards it like some sort of space borne predator its pilot decided that his best chance of survival was to turn and flee. But as he fled his gunner kept on firing at the *Bright Hope*, making it a threat to the Jedi and Cal reacted in the only way he could.

The *Bright Hope's* sensors tracking the gunship and Cal watched in his targeting display as the computer locked onto the ship, a high-pitched tone indicating this and he squeezed the trigger built into his control column. Instantly there was a slight shudder and a flash of white as the torpedo fired, streaking towards the pirate ship. Only then did the pirate gunner cease fire as the pilot took evasive action, steering wildly in an attempt to shake off the rapidly closing torpedo. But the pirate's efforts were in vain and soon after the torpedo slammed into the rear of the gunship, punching through both shields and hull and totally destroying the lightweight ship.

"Okay," Cal said, "now let's go see if we're in time to help that freighter."

The destruction of the two pirate vessels had not gone un-noticed by the other pirates and as the *Bright Hope* accelerated towards the freighter the pirates still swarming around it all pulled away, flying in different directions to prevent the Jedi from following after more than one. But on this occasion the Jedi were not interested in pursuing pirates. The freighter had suffered damage during the attack and with its crew at risk Cal and Lara were duty bound to help them.

The captain was waiting by the airlock when the *Bright Hope* pulled alongside and docked.

"I can't thank you enough." He exclaimed when the hatch opened and Cal and Lara stepped onto his ship, "But how did you manage to get here in time? We weren't able to send a distress signal because of the pirates jamming us."

"Actually it's a happy coincidence." Cal replied, "We were heading for the Jaynas system on an assignment to deal with pirates. Quite possibly the same group that ambushed you."

"Do you have injured?" Lara added.

"A few." The captain replied, "But they aren't serious. The pirates weren't shooting to destroy us, just disable us."

"They were after your cargo." Cal said, "What is it?"

"Refined metals. Mainly iron, but there's several tonnes of silver and gold in there as well." The captain answered, "We've actually just come from Jaynas."

Cal glanced briefly at Lara before looking at the captain again.

"Did you notice anything unusual before you left?" he asked, "Another cargo ship was attacked by a pirate force here recently and it came from Jaynas as well."

"No." the captain said, "The only odd thing is the amount of time our jump took. For some reason we've been losing power." And Cal frowned.

"Cal what's wrong?" Lara asked.

"Maybe nothing." Cal replied, "But I'd like to take a look at the outside of this ship. I've an idea about why it's losing power."

Cal wore a white vacc suit while Lara's was bright pink, both colours selected for easy visibility in most environments. Outside the freighter there was no gravity and so the two Jedi made use of magnetic boots to allow them to walk along the hull of the ship towards its engines.

"Cal, are you going to tell me what we're looking for?" Lara asked as she followed her brother along the hull.

"You'll know as soon as we find it." Cal replied and he took a compact torch from a pouch and turned its beam on the hull. Cal focused his search near to the engines and the power conduits that led from them until eventually he found something amiss, "Here." He said, crouching beside a panel that was not fastened down properly.

"Could it have been blasted loose in the attack?" Lara asked.

"No." Cal answered, shaking his head even though his helmet meant that Lara could not see the gesture,

"There's no signs of carbon scoring. This panel was prised up to allow something to get under it."

"Something like what?" Lara asked, but rather than answer straight away he put his torch away and drew his lightsaber, the blade extending silently in the vacuum. Then he swung the weapon at where the panel was still fixed to the hull of the freighter and cut it free, "Great work Cal, now there's another bit of junk floating in space around here." Lara commented.

"Never mind that." He said, standing up and taking a step backwards, "Take a look at this." And he pointed at the power lines beneath the panel where a pair of slender creatures with bat like wings lay alongside them, their wide mouths clamped against the cables themselves.

"Oh great." Lara said with a frown, "Mynocks."

"Well we can't leave them attached to the ship." Cal said, "And we can't just pull them off and leave them to latch onto another ship, or more likely the beacon where they'll just reproduce and spread to every ship that comes by here." And then he pushed the tip of his lightsaber into the torso of each one in turn, watching as the creatures shuddered and then simply drifted away from the freighter. Shutting off his lightsaber, Cal turned to face his sister, "The report Hyron gave me about the attack on his ship stated that it's flight from Jaynas to here took longer than necessary because of a sudden upsurge in mynock infestations that his company has seen recently."

"Do think that the mynocks are related to the pirate attacks?" Lara asked and Cal smiled.

"Very good." He said, "A typical freighter will take fifteen to twenty hours to make the trip here from Jaynas. But add in the power drain from mynocks and it could take anything up to two or three days and that—"

"That gives the pirates the opportunity to gather their forces for an ambush without attracting the attention that an entire squadron of ships moving together would get from the authorities." Lara interrupted and then she smiled.

"Exactly." Cal said, "Though we still have to find out if the pirates are just taking advantage of a natural increase in the mynock population or if they're actually doing something to increase it themselves. For that we need to get to Jaynas."

Leaving the crew of the freighter to clean off any further mynocks infesting their ship Cal and Lara headed on to the Jaynas system, a journey that took the speedy *Bright Hope* only eight hours through hyperspace. This consisted of a dense asteroid field orbiting the star, with no bodies larger than about a thousand kilometres in the system at all. At some point a ship had brought a number of mynocks to the system and they had made their home in the mineral rich asteroid belt, causing problems for the prospectors who mined it.

Almost as soon as it dropped out of hyperspace the *Bright Hope* was challenged by the traffic control of a nearby space station, a ring shaped structure with hangar bays and docking ports for larger vessels located all around it's outer edge.

"Incoming starship identify yourself." The station's controller transmitted with no hint that he actually cared.

"This is the jedi vessel Bright Hope." Cal responded, "We request permission to dock."

"Confirmed *Bright Hope*. Follow beacon for hangar eighteen and standby for inspection."

Lara frowned and looked at Cal.

"Inspection? You just told them that we're a jedi vessel. Why would customs be inspecting our ship?" she asked.

"I don't think it's that sort of inspection." Cal replied and as the ship neared the hangar allotted to them he pointed out a cluster of figures visible through the magnetic field that held the atmosphere inside. Despite not being in the vacuum of space, each of the figures still wore an environment suit and over that bulky armoured vests. In addition each figure carried a long pole that both Cal and Lara recognised as a form of electro staff weapon, "Mynock hunters." Cal added, "They'll check the hull of the ship to make sure it's clean."

Sure enough as soon as the sound of the Bright Hope's engines began to fade the hunters rushed forwards, bringing with them a scaffold that allowed them to easily climb up onto the ship as they searched all over the hull for any signs of mynock infestation.

One of the hunters did not join the others in the search however; instead he waited at the bottom of the *Bright Hope*'s access ramp for Cal and Lara to emerge. While this happened Cal had Ghost on a lead and Shorty followed along behind them. The bulky droid turned to look at the hunters as they moved across the hull before turning to face ahead once more.

When the group reached the hunter at the bottom of the ramp they came to a halt, but Ghost moved ahead of Cal as far as the leash would allow and then began to bark.

"Be quiet Ghost. Heel." Cal said, tugged the dog back towards him. Then he looked into the visor of the hunter's helmet and added, "Sorry, he's not normally like this."

"Where have you come from?" the lone hunter asked ignoring Ghost's reaction to him, his voice distorted by his helmet.

"Aurek Station." Cal replied, "Via the Crassis system and Besh Station."

"And have you suffered any equipment failure or power loss along the way?" the hunter asked.

"No." Cal answered.

"Though we did run into a bunch of pirates at Besh." Lara added, "Seems they used the delay caused by a mynock infestation of a ship from here to arrange an ambush."

"Who do we speak to about the level of mynock population in this system?" Cal then asked the hunter.

"Well I can tell you that we've not noticed much of an increase here at all." He replied, "I wish we had. We get a bonus for every one we find."

"What about other stations?" Cal asked, "Or the bigger ships? We've heard of more than one instance of a freighter leaving this system with mynocks attached."

"My team only handles smaller ships." The hunter said, "Whatever will fit in this bay. You'll need to try asking at the control centre, they hand out assignments and pay our bounties. Plus they get updates from the other stations. But some of the really big ships don't bother docking at any of the stations if they're just running raw ore so they won't get checked for infestation. Its cheaper."

"The ships we know about had processed cargoes." Lara said.

"Then they ought to have been checked out when they docked." The hunter replied.

"Thanks." Cal said, "We'll go check with your control then." Then he looked at Shorty, "You stay here and keep an eye on the ship. Understood?" and the droid nodded once.

3.

The station's command and control section consisted of a cramped computer filled room occupied by about a dozen beings of several different species, though one of the stations was instead manned by a droid.

"Can I help you?" one of the control staff asked when Cal and Lara entered the room.

"We need information regarding mynock." Cal replied.

"Such as what?" the controller asked.

"Such as has there been an increase in their numbers recently?" Cal asked.

"One moment." The controller said and then he looked at the controller sat at the station next to his, "Hey Georg, watch my post while I deal with this would you?" and the other man nodded.

"Sure Hitch." He said.

The controller named Hitch then looked at the two jedi as he got to his feet and he beckoned for the jedi to follow him. But as Cal walked past Georg's station Ghost suddenly came to a halt and began to bark again, triggering stern looks from the other controllers as their work was disturbed.

"Ghost no." Cal said as he pulled Ghost away, "Sorry about that, I think that there's something about this station he doesn't like." He added and then he followed Hitch from the control room into an even more cramped room adjoining the control centre.

"Here we go." Hitch said as he picked up one of numerous datapads stacked up on a table that ran the length of the far wall, "Bounties paid for mynock removal." And he began to scroll down the screen.

"Don't you keep it on your mainframe?" Lara asked.

"It's backed up to our system yes," Hitch told her, "but it's easier to read of this than go through the process of accessing the backups."

"Do the other stations all work the same way?" Cal asked.

"Some of them." Hitch answered, "We're all independent businesses. Some of the sector's big corporations maintain offices in the system but so far none of them have bothered to establish their own stations with central rules to follow." Then he finished reviewing the datapad and looked up, "Ah, here we go. There was a bit of a blip in mynock bounties about two months ago, but since then it's settled back down to normal. We check all vessels coming into the station for signs of infestation. The Jaynas Belt is crawling with the damned things and they're a real problem for the prospecting and mining ships."

"What about the freighters?" Lara asked.

"Depends." Hitch replied, "If they dock at a station then they'll be checked and they should be okay. Even though we release a fair amount of energy ourselves, mynocks tend to stay away. Our sensor net can pick them up as they drift through the open space between the belt and us and we make sure our own hull is kept clean of them as well. Ideally we send out a marksman with a rifle to pick them off before they even reach us."

"Can I borrow that?" Cal asked, looking at the datapad.

"No, but I can let you copy it." Hitch replied and Cal nodded, producing a datapad of his own and handing it to Hitch who then connected the two devices together and copied across the information to Cal's before he gave it back.

"Thanks." Cal said, holding up the datapad, "We'll go check this out and see if we can see anything."

Back aboard the *Bright Hope* Cal sat in the lounge studying the information copied to his datapad.

"So is there anything interesting in there?" Lara asked as she sat down with a drink and some food.

"Well both the freighter we rescued and Hyron's are listed as having docked at this station." Cal told her,

"But both of them were given a clean bill of health regarding mynocks."

"So they must have gone closer to the asteroid belt then." Lara said but Cal shook his head.

"There's more than just mynock data in the file." He said, "There's other docking information and according to the departure times both ships left the station and headed straight out of the system. Neither went anywhere near the belt and if what Hitch told us is right then there's no way that any mynock could have reached them."

"So they can't have had mynocks on them at any point they were here because the hunters would have found them and they can't have acquired them after leaving because the station keeps them away by shooting them." Lara said, "I don't see that leaves anything." And Cal frowned.

"Yes it does." He said.

"What?" Lara asked.

"Well according to this log ships are only checked when they arrive, not when they leave." Cal Said, "So what if the mynock got onto the ships after they were checked?"

"But why would they detach from one ship just to go to another? A freighter in port isn't going to be emitting enough energy to make it more tempting than even a small ship under power."

"No it's not." Cal agreed, "But what if someone actually captured a mynock and then transported it here?"

"Well wouldn't the hunters find it?" Lara asked.

"Only if it's on the outside of the ship." Cal said, "But what if someone lured a mynock inside their ship instead?"

"Eew." Lara said, pulling a face to register her disgust, "Actually bringing one of those things inside on purpose? Cal, that's gross."

"But possible." Cal replied, "Then they attach one or more of the critters to a potential target and just leave it there. Then when it jumps away they signal their pirate friends and have them spring an ambush at Besh Station. Every ship leaving here has to go there, the Jaynas system is a dead end in hyperspace navigation. I'd have to check with Hyron, but I wouldn't be surprised if more ships had been infested with mynocks either. It would look suspicious if only the ones getting attacked by pirates were affected."

"So how are they targeting the ships?" Lara asked and Cal smiled.

"The same way those pirates we dealt with just after we were sent here to the Narthis Sector." Cal said, "They've bribed one of the station staff. Only here it's easier. On Aurek Station they had to bribe someone to manipulate jump data to drop ships in the middle of nowhere. Here all they need is to get a look at the cargo manifest."

"But who?" Lara asked, "A lot of people get to see cargo manifests Cal. Loaders, supervisors, guild reps, customs agents. Where do we start?"

Cal grinned.

"I already know who it is." He said.

"Who?" Lara asked, "And how?"

"I'll answer the how first." Cal said.

"Fine, just don't say its because you're amazing." Lara commented.

"Okay, I'll leave out the obvious then." Cal said and Lara groaned, "What happened when we arrived?" Cal then asked.

"We got searched for mynocks." Lara said.

"Exactly." Cal replied, "And who did we see in the hangar?"

"Mynock hunters."

"That's right and what did Ghost think of them?" Cal asked and he looked round at where the dog was lying on the floor. At the mention on his name he looked up expectantly.

"He didn't like them. He barked at that one who spoke to us." Lara said.

"And why do you think that was?"

"Because mynocks stink and it fits that the hunters got the stink all over them when they smoosh them."

"Correct. Except that 'smoosh' isn't a real word. Stop using it."

"You're not the boss of me."

"Actually I am. Now where else did we see Ghost react like that?" Cal said and Lara's eyes widened.

"In the control room." She said, pointing to Cal, "That guy sat next to Hitch. Georg. Ghost stopped to bark at him as well. He must have had mynock smoosh juice on him." then she bent down and looked at Ghost, "Come here boy. Good dog, mommy loves you so much." And she embraced Ghost as he walked up to her in response to the summons."

"Just remember he's mine." Cal commented as Lara continued to stroke Ghost and she frowned back at her brother.

"No you're not, are you?" she then said looking directly at Ghost, "You know you're mine too." Then she turned to look at Cal again, "So what do we do now?" she asked, "Ghost barking at someone is hardly good reason to have them arrested."

"No it's not. No matter how smart my dog is." Cal replied, "But if he still stinks of mynock then he must have been on the pirate ship recently. Probably to collect whatever bribe he's getting. So that means we can check on recent docking activity to try and identify it. We're probably looking for a fairly large ship, one too big to fit inside a hangar. If the pirates are wanting to carry out EVAs without being noticed then the last thing they'll want to do is pass through a magnetic field on the way in and out of a hangar."

"I hate to think how a mynock would react to that." Lara commented and Cal nodded.

"Yes, the energy arcing through them could have interesting effects." He said, "So they'll have docked on one of the outside ports from where they can space walk as much as they like."

"And what about this Georg?" Lara asked.

"We'll just have to trail him. Maybe he'll meet with the pirates again and that'll save us some time on identifying their ship. We should also look for any behaviour odd enough for us to be able to challenge him over and excuse us searching his quarters. I doubt that the pirates are bribing him with electronically transferred funds so that means he must have whatever they gave him hidden somewhere and his quarters are the best place for us to start."

"What about station security?" Lara asked, "Should we bring them in on this?"

"I don't think that there is a dedicated security force aboard." Cal replied, "I certainly didn't see any between here and the control centre. My guess would be that they use customs agents as investigators and their mynock hunters for any other work."

Lara nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, those electrostaffs most of them carry should be pretty good for internal security work." She said, "But for now I suppose it's just you and me then brother." And then she sighed and looked Ghost in the eyes, "I've got a very bad feeling about this Ghost."

4.

The two jedi positioned themselves as close to the control centre as it was possible to get without having to go through any form of checkpoint and waited for Georg to complete his shift. Though they had considered bringing Ghost along with them, they determined that the dog would likely draw too much attention on the station. From what they had seen there were no other such animals present and it would only take one mynock hunter to approach them to set him off barking. Therefore Ghost was left aboard the *Bright Hope* in Shorty's care.

Lara's superior ability at using the Force to conceal herself meant that she was positioned closer to the control centre and was the first to see Georg as he emerged in the company of two other control staff. "Okay he's here." She whispered into her point to point communication link and then she watched as the two other controls went in one direction while Georg went in another, "He's heading off on his own." Lara added.

"Follow him." Cal replied, "I'll be right behind you."

Without replying Lara headed after Georg, focusing on him through the Force and willing him not to notice her. Even if he did happen to turn around Lara hoped that with the hood of her robes up he would not recognise her. Behind her Lara could sense Cal, following but remaining a safe distance so no one else would notice two hooded figures trailing one man and get suspicious. After just a few minutes it became apparent to Lara that Georg was leading her towards the outer edge of the station, towards the hangars and docking bays and as would be expected she began to see an increasing number of mynock hunters in their armoured suits and carrying their bulky electrostaves. These men stepped out of the way of Georg, whose controller uniform obviously carried some authority with it. On the other hand they were less than enthusiastic about clearing a path for a stranger hiding their face and so Lara found herself falling further behind until eventually she turned a corner expecting to see Georg ahead of her and instead found herself looking down a deserted corridor.

"Cal I've lost him." she signalled.

"Are you sure?" Cal responded.

"Yes I'm sure. He was in front of me one minute and then he went round a corner. By the time I got there he was gone."

"Hang on, I'll be with you in a minute." Cal said and he shut off his PTP link. He was good to his word though and it was only a short while before he stood at he sister's side and looked down the corridor.

"See? Gone." Lara said.

"Obviously." Cal replied, "But look at where we are Lara. We're right on the edge of the station and these doors down here are all either hangar access doors or docking port hatches. Georg's gone aboard a ship." Lara looked at Cal.

"So one of the ships docked here now is the pirate ship?" she said.

"That's a logical deduction." Cal replied, "Now I think we ought to split up. You stay here and see if he comes out again and follow him."

"Where will you be going?" Lara asked.

"Back to the *Bright Hope*. I'm going to check out the ships docked in this section from the outside. I'll do a single full circuit of the station and run a sensor sweep of them. Maybe I'll be able to pick up any mynocks they have aboard. That ought to be evidence enough."

"Okay go. I'll signal you if I see him and let you know which ship to check out." Lara replied and Cal nodded before heading back to the *Bright Hope*.

In the cockpit he brought the ship's systems on line and signalled to the station's traffic control.

"This is *Bright Hope* requesting permission to leave." He transmitted, "I want to do a test flight, one lap of the station and then back to this hangar if possible."

"Confirmed *Bright Hope*." Came the reply, "Be advised, regulations will require your ship to be rechecked for mynock infestation. There are no exceptions."

"Understood control. *Bright Hope* out." Cal responded and using the *Bright Hope*'s repulsorlift drives he lifted off and backed out of the hangar.

Cal would have preferred to keep close enough to the station that he could have made use of its mass and gravity well to allow him to leave the *Bright Hope* operating on its repulsorlift engines but that would have drawn attention, a test flight ought to test more than just the engines normally only used for landing and taking off again. Therefore Cal backed the *Bright Hope* off from the station, keeping it visible through the cockpit canopy at all times. Then, when he was far enough away that he could view the entire station

without having to turn his head he fired the ship's thrusters to take him in an orbit around it and activated both his active and passive sensor arrays.

Right away the passive array alerted him to the fact that one of the docked ships was still outputting a significant amount of power, about the same amount that the *Bright Hope* was outputting in flight in fact and when he checked this ship's location he saw that it was a large cargo ship docked in the section where Lara had seen Georg go he vanished.

"I have you now." Cal said to himself, smiling as the *Bright Hope* moved closer to the ship. Then he noticed something else, what looked to be a tiny speck of light from this distance appeared along the side of the mysterious cargo ship for just a few brief moments and then a flare of heat and light followed this as someone ignited a rocket pack. Quickly Cal used his sensors to focus in on this and he saw a figure in a vacuum suit fitted with a rocket pack moving away from the suspected pirate ship. But what really interested Cal was what the figure carried with it. There was what looked to be a pair of metal rods, each one about a metre long and held a fixed distance apart from one another, about a quarter of their length. A cable running from this connected to what could only be described as a large battery pack mounted on the rocket pack that the figure wore while clinging firmly to the frame was a pair of mynocks, obviously feeding off the energy that the *Bright Hope's* sensor could detect flowing through it.

For a moment Cal considered intercepting the figure, or maybe alerting the station controllers to what was going on right under their noses. But then he decided that he would instead wait to see exactly what the figure was up to. He saw the figure float past several other ships unseen until it reached a vessel just under two hundred metres long and the rocket pack was fired again to allow the figure to make soft contact with the ship right near it's engines. At first Cal thought that maybe the ship was the frigate *Perseverance*, but on closer inspection he realised that it was in fact a Corellian Class-VI freighter. To cut design costs the designers of the freighter had simply adapted the older praetorian-class frigate's hull and turned it into a commercial vessel instead. The figure pried open an inspection hatch covering a system that would still have power running through it and held the frame close to the opening. The mynocks that had until then been sitting motionless on the frame suddenly began to move and a quick glance at his sensors told Cal that the power that had been flowing through the frame previously had been cut off. Now that the biggest source of nourishment close by was the freighter, the two mynocks launched themselves across the gap between the figure and the ship and disappeared under the loose panel. The figure in the environment suit then pushed the cover back into place without fixing it down again and triggered its rocket pack, blasting off back in the direction of the pirate ship.

Cal now turned his full attention to the pirate vessel that the *Bright Hope* was now closing with rapidly. The battered exterior of the ship suggested that it had spent considerable time within the nearby asteroid belt and now that it was closer the *Bright Hope's* sensors could pick out much more detail about the unusually high energy output. The ship's main power source was of course the reactors that ran the engines, but it appeared that several more power sources had been added in what was the ship's cargo hold.

Unfortunately these served to mask the far less noticeable thermal energy signatures created by any warm blooded beings among the crew and the life form indicators were unable to draw any conclusions.

The *Bright Hope* continued on its course circling the station and before long the pirate vessel passed out of the arc of the Jedi ship's sensors and it was then that the communication system came to life.

"Cal are you there?" Lara's voice asked.

"Yes I'm here." Cal replied, "What do you want?"

"Georg just came out of one of the docked ships." Lara told him, "I'm right behind him. He's heading for the habitation section."

"He's probably heading for his quarters." Cal said and then through the cockpit canopy he saw an engine flare as the pirate ship disengaged from the station, "And it looks like our pirates have somewhere to be as well." He said.

"So Georg was meeting with the pirates then?" Lara asked.

"Yes. I even saw one of them do an EVA with a pair of mynocks. He stuck them to a freighter and then headed back to the ship. Look, never mind Georg for now, we can deal with him later. I want you to get to the hangar and I'll pick you up."

"Okay, I'll see you there." Lara replied and then the channel went dead.

Cal brought the *Bright Hope* back into the hangar before Lara came rushing in and unfortunately the station's regulations meant that the Jedi could not depart again until another check had been carried out for mynocks infesting their ship. However, as soon as this was completed they were free to head after the pirates.

"I've got their ion trail." Cal said as he checked the *Bright Hope's* sensors.

"Are you sure it's them?" Lara asked.

"Yes. There haven't been any other launches towards the asteroid belt." Cal told her, "I'm guessing that they're heading in there to pick up some more mynockes."

"So what's the plan then big brother?" Lara asked next.

"Easy. Find the pirate ship and get aboard it. Then capture it and hand it over to the Republic." Cal told her.

"Just the two of us? How many pirates are we talking about here?"

"Ah. Well I can't be sure. All the extra power that ship was putting out kind of interfered with our sensors when doing a lifeform sweep."

"Oh great." Lara said, "So we're up against a completely unknown number of pirates. I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Well at least that ship's easy to find." Cal told her, "Look." And he pointed to the sensor display where an asteroid ahead was showing signs of being heated abnormally on the far side.

"They're behind the asteroid?" Lara said.

"It looks like it." Cal said, "We better get suited up. I've got an idea."

5.

Landing the *Bright Hope* on the asteroid the two Jedi exited their ship and began to make their way across the surface. In addition to their traditional lightsabers on their belts, each of them had a pulse wave blaster holstered at their side and a pulse wave rifle in their arms. On this occasion Cal's rifle was also fitted with a grenade launcher mounted beneath the barrel and he had a bandolier of extra ammunition wrapped around him.

Irritation.

"It's my turn." Cal said as he sensed his sister's feelings about not having the grenade launcher herself.

"It's not fair." Lara replied, "You know what? We ought to get another."

"Master Karas doesn't even want us to have this one." Cal pointed out.

"Well we needn't tell him. We never really told him about the one we've got."

"No, but unless we can find someone else who's got one we can steal then how do we – Down!" Cal snapped and he ducked behind a rock, pulling his sister down with him.

"Hey Cal, there was no need for that." Lara said, frowning, "What's wrong anyway?"

"Take a look up ahead." Cal replied and then both Jedi slowly peered over the rock at where the pirate vessel had set down and several of the crew in environment suits were moving about on the surface of the asteroid.

"Mynocks." Lara said, pointing to an area of flat terrain and Cal saw several dozen of the creatures there, their wings outstretched.

"They must be sucking up the heat being absorbed by the asteroid." He said and he looked up into the sky where he saw the system's star shining towards them. Then he lifted his rifle to his shoulder.

"What are you going to do?" Lara asked.

"I'm going to keep them here." Cal replied as he lined up the rifle on the pirate vessel, positioning the sight over one of the four engine exhausts, "Get ready to duck." He said and then he moved his hand towards the trigger for the grenade launcher.

With the weapon pressed into his shoulder, Cal felt the distinctive 'Pop!' as the grenade was fired and then he and Lara both ducked down behind the rock again.

In the low gravity and vacuum of the asteroid the grenade sped towards its target and was inside the exhaust port before its electronic fuse ran down and it detonated. The exhaust port itself was heavily armoured, a natural feature of its being designed to channel the amount of energy needed to accelerate a starship at more than a thousand gees in space. But this heavy protection only served to focus the blast further down the exhaust to the engine itself and the effect was that the entire engine was torn apart from the inside.

Despite the vacuum outside the explosion created a shockwave that travelled through the asteroid itself and so even concealed behind the rock both Cal and Lara were able to hear the roar of the blast.

"Let's go!" Cal snapped and both he and Lara leapt over the rock, landing some distance ahead thanks to the almost zero gravity and they began to run towards the pirate ship.

Ahead of them several of the pirates working outside had been blown off their feet by the explosion and one was now tumbling off into space leaving behind a trail of red vapour, an effect of the piece of debris that had struck him and torn right through both his vacuum suit and him. The two Jedi fired as they ran, picking off pirates before they could realise what was going on around them and by the time they reached the hull of the pirate ship there were none left alive outside.

"Airlock!" Cal shouted, despite the PTP link built into his suit being able to pick up a whisper and he waved at an open hatchway that had a small flight of steps descending to the asteroid's surface.

The two Jedi rushed up the steps into the airlock and Lara slammed her hand down on the control to seal the outer door and begin the pressurisation cycle. When a buzzer sounded to mark the completion of the cycle Cal reached up to his helmet and lifted its visor.

"Okay normal drill." He said, "We keep our suits on just in case the crew decided to depressurise any part of the ship.

"Or in case that engine you blew up put a massive hole in the hull." Lara added as she opened her own visor. Both Jedi then allowed their rifles to drop to their sides, supported by their slings and drew their lightsabers. The 'snap-hiss' sounds the weapons produced as they were activated in unison merged into one and then Cal reached for the control to the inner door.

"Ready?" he asked and Lara nodded before he opened the door.

Immediately the airlock was filled with the sound of the alarm sounding throughout the rest of the ship.

"I think they're having difficulties." Lara whispered.

"Yeah, I wonder why?" Cal replied as he looked in both directions along the corridor that the airlock opened into, "The bridge ought to be this way." He added and he began to head towards the front of the ship.

The corridor led directly to a flight of stairs that led to the upper deck of the ship and Cal and Lara climbed it side by side, checking all around for any sign of an ambush. But the upper deck was as empty as the lower one, the only difference being that up here the lighting panels were flickering off and on rapidly owing to the damage inflicted by the explosion. The Jedi had emerged into a lounge area that for now at least was empty, but the three half eaten meals on the table suggested that there were at least three pirates still active aboard the ship. Looking towards the front of the ship again Cal saw a door that was helpfully labelled 'COCKPIT' and he and Lara positioned themselves either side of it.

"Ready?" Cal asked and Lara nodded. Cal promptly opened the door and both Jedi stepped into the cockpit on the other side.

"It's about time." A pirate said from one of the control stations without bothering to turn around, "Did either of you find out what the hell is—" and then he pivoted in his chair and his jaw dropped when he saw the two suited figures wielding lightsabers standing in front of him, "Oh kriff!" he exclaimed and he reached for the heavy slug throwing pistol on his hip.

"Don't do it!" Cal yelled as the pirate drew his weapon and he reached out through the Force to push the man's hand aside. But the pirate's finger tightened around the trigger of his weapon as it pushed out of the way and the sound of a single shot echoed loudly in the confines of the cockpit, followed by a sharper 'crack' as the bullet struck the main viewport and punched through it.

"Cal look!" Lara exclaimed as she saw cracks spreading out from around the tiny hole and heard the whistling of escaping air.

"Get back!" Cal yelled and he pulled Lara back out of the cockpit just before the door dropped shut automatically to contain the pressure leak. Horrified, the pirate just stared at the damaged viewport, watching the cracks become ever bigger. All of a sudden the viewport gave way and fragments of it exploded outwards. The whistle of escaping air suddenly became a roar as all that was left in the cockpit was blown out into the vacuum outside, dragging the pirate along with it.

"Okay, so now where?" Lara asked in the lounge outside the cockpit.

"Well we know that there were more pirates who survived the explosion." Cal replied.

"Yeah, from the way that guy in there said 'either' I'd say he was expecting two others." Lara agreed.

"So they probably went to see what caused the explosion." Cal said, "Which means they'll be towards the back of the ship. Would you like to lead the way? Ladies first and all that."

"I thought we were going with age before beauty." Lara replied and Cal began to head towards the rear of the ship.

Remaining on the upper deck Cal and Lara passed by several crew cabins. The doors to all of these were open though not all displayed signs of having been in use prior to the Jedi launching their attack.

"Nine." Lara commented as she and Cal checked each cabin in turn.

"What?" Cal asked.

"In these cabins there are nine bunks set up." Lara explained, "There were six pirates outside when you blew up the engine and then there was that guy on the bridge. So that just leaves two of them." And Cal smiled.

"Then let's hurry up and deal with them." He said and he pressed on.

After the cabins the Jedi came to another closed door, this one labelled 'HOLD' and Cal opened it to reveal a small platform and some more stairs leading down into the hold. Inside the hold was dark, with limited light coming from illuminated displays on the row of fusion generators that ran down one side of the room.

Meanwhile the rest of the hold was filled with metal frames just like Cal had seen the pirate carrying on his space walk between this ship and the class VI freighter. Some of these were empty, but about half of them had a pair of mynocks clinging tightly to them.

"So these frames are what the pirates used to carry the mynocks to the other ships then?" Lara asked.

"That's right. Those generators must be keeping them fed until the pirates are ready to move them." Cal said softly as he looked from the generators to the frames.

"So what do we—" Lara began before Cal felt a tremor in the Force.

Danger.

"Down!" Cal snapped just moments before a pulse wave blast flew overhead and struck the bulkhead behind them. Cal vaulted over the side of the platform and landed on the deck below just as a pirate rushed towards him with a blaster raised. The pirate fired twice and each time Cal swung his lightsaber to block the energy blast, the compact spatial distortions bursting when they struck the blade. In response to this attack

Cal jumped forwards and held his lightsaber straight out in front of him. The tip of the blade made contact with the pirate in his chest and burned a hole right through where his heart was. Then Cal lifted the weapon, cutting through the pirate's corpse to his shoulder as it fell and then he turned to see where his sister was. Lara came rushing down the stairs, deflecting another pulse wave blast as she went and then she temporarily deactivated her lightsaber before rolling across the deck towards the pirate who was barely visible in the gloom of the hold. Then in a single motion she leapt back to her feet and reactivated her weapon, swinging in an upward arc.

"Lara wait!" Cal yelled when he saw what was above her but it was too late.

As well as slicing through the final pirate the lightsaber blade also effortlessly cut through a thick power cable that dangled over Lara's head and there was a sudden brief shower of sparks as the numerous cores were shorted together and then the sound of the generators came to a stop.

In an instant the captive mynockes were suddenly deprived of food through their frame they perched on. However, there were still two other strong energy sources in the hold.

The Jedi's lightsabers.

The mynock screeched and almost in unison took off, stretching out their wings as each one headed for the closest of the lightsabers.

Lara recoiled, screaming and holding up her lightsaber in front of her as one of the creatures came at her. But the mynock was more interested in the weapon itself than in her and it tried to wrap its circular mouth around the humming blue blade, succeeding only in impaling its own head before dropping dead at Lara's feet.

Another mynock landed on Cal's back and as it extended its head over his shoulder he punched it with his free hand to knock it away right before slicing a second in half as it flew at him from the front.

"Lara get your visor down and shut down your boots!" he shouted as his sister continued to try and swat a circling mynock with her lightsaber and without replying she sealed her helmet visor and deactivated her magnetic boots.

Cal then charged across the hold, using his lightsaber to clear a path through both equipment and oncoming mynockes. He kept going until he reached the side of the hold where there was a massive hatchway and he plunged his lightsaber through the electromagnetic element holding the two halves together.

Freed from the force keeping the hatch shut, the two halves rolled apart and Cal and Lara both found themselves being hurled out through the hatchway along with everything else in the hold. As they flew over the surface of the asteroid both Jedi shut off the lightsabers and then used the Force to project a telekinetic push against the surface to slow their travel enough that when they landed they just bounced harmlessly a few times rather than impacting with enough force to injure themselves. Meanwhile the mynockes took to flight, without the lightsaber blades to attract them the creatures instead spread out, heading for the area where more of their kind were stretched out feeding from the solar energy they collected from the asteroid itself.

Lara was the first back to her feet and she walked over to Cal and held out her hand to help him up.

"Okay so now what?" she asked.

"We need to get back to the station." Cal replied, "The first thing we need to do is arrest Georg."

"First thing? What else is there?" Lara asked.

"Well there's still a fleet of pirate ships out there isn't there?" Cal said.

When Georg got up to answer the door to his quarters he found a pair of mynock hunters and a customs agent standing in the corridor outside. Confused he drew in breath to ask them what they wanted, but before he could speak one of the hunters thrust the tip of his electrostaff into Georg's stomach and he doubled over in pain as the energy charge flowed through him.

"Controller Georg," the customs agent announced as the two hunters then dragged him back to his feet and held him tight, "you are under arrest as an accessory to piracy." And then the agent looked back into the corridor where Cal and Lara waited, "Okay, he's secure." He said and the two Jedi walked past into Georg's quarters.

"Well what do we have here?" Lara commented as she pulled a sheet from over a bulky object in the corner. "Why it looks like a short range subspace communication unit." Cal replied, "I'd say with a twenty parsec or so range. Easily enough to signal to any pirate ships on this side of the sector." Then he approached Georg, "Today is your lucky day." He said to the scowling man, "Because you've got exactly one chance to get me to tell a judge how you co-operated with us."

"What do you want me to do?" Georg asked and Cal smiled at him.

“Easy.” He said, “You’re going to use that subspace transmitter to tell your pirate friends that the Corellian freighter is on its way and it’s loaded with valuable goodies.”

6.

With most of the *Bright Hope's* systems powered down Cal and Lara waited in space close to Besh Station, watching as ships dropped out of hyperspace, obtained the data for the next stage of their journey from the unmanned beacon and then jumped back into hyperspace. But every so often a ship would emerge from hyperspace and instead of moving on it would veer off at sublight speed and join the growing crowd of vessels waiting just a bit further away. So far the crowd of ships was now up to twenty in number. Then there was another flash of light that heralded the arrival of another vessel. This one was one hundred and eighty metres long and the passive optical sensors of the *Bright Hope* revealed the silhouette of a class VI freighter.

"They're here." Cal said, "Stand by." And his hand hovered over the control to bring the *Bright Hope's* systems back on line.

With the arrival of this last vessel the gathered crowd of ships began to move, forming themselves into a 'V' formation and flying straight towards it. Initially the newly arrived vessel remained motionless, as if unaware of the approaching pirates. But then it began to move, firing manoeuvring thrusters to turn it around, its bow turning towards them. Then, just as the ship was pointed directly at the pirates two brilliant bolts of energy erupted from it and two of the lead pirate ships were turned into nothing but clouds of scrap.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Veers of the Republic frigate *Perseverance* to all pirate craft. You are ordered to power down and prepare to be boarded." The frigate broadcast to every ship within range and on its bridge Veers turned to his gunners, "Open fire, all batteries." He ordered, "Scramble fighters."

The frigate's main turbolasers fired again, but by now the pirates had broken formation and the heavy guns missed the fast moving vessels they had targeted. But with the pirates now much closer the *Perseverance's* close in defence weapons were in range as well and the two turret mounted laser cannons opened fire as well, sending streams of energy blasts at the pirates. At the same time a dozen starfighters burst from the frigate's hangar, swarming around any pirate ship that attempted to get close enough that the *Perseverance's* own hull kept them out of the frigate's line of sight.

"Here we go." Cal said as he dropped his hand onto the controls and the *Bright Hope's* systems came to life and then he accelerated towards the battle. Beside him Lara fired the ship's own laser cannons, but with them still far from the centre of the action the attack went wide. In the meantime Cal activated the *Bright Hope's* subspace transmitter, "Captain De Kuun, we're ready for you now." He transmitted.

"Confirmed Jedi Udra. We are inbound." The captain's voice replied and just seconds later there was another series of flashes as the twelve gunships of his squadron dropped out of hyperspace, having been waiting just a handful of light hours away until they were summoned to join the attack.

Aboard one of the pirate ships, a crescent-class courier the aqualish commander of the pirate fleet stared in disbelief at the unfolding battle on his tactical displays. So far five of his ships had been destroyed by the Republic taskforce and several others were reporting damage.

"What's happening?" he demanded, "Where have all these Republic ships come from?"

"I don't know Captain Dabb." the co-pilot replied.

"What about the freighter? Do any of our ships have a location on it yet?" Dabb asked.

"None of them are reporting it sir."

"But it should have been here by now, not that warship." Dabb said, "Get me a link to Georg, I want to know what's happening in the Jaynas system."

"But what about here sir?" the co-pilot asked as he tried to follow what was happening. So far escorted by its fighter squadron the Republic frigate was powering straight ahead, scattering the much lighter pirate ships while the newly arrived gunships squadron had broken into three groups of four that were pouncing on isolated pirate vessels and overwhelming them with a mix of laser cannons and torpedoes. Added to this there was a delaya-class vessel closing rapidly that would bring even more firepower to bear against the pirates. From the looks of it this vessel was the same one that had arrived to defend a previous target, meaning that it was crewed by Jedi. With so many ships available to them, the Republic could maintain pursuit of all of Dabb's ships even if they all headed in a different direction.

"The Jedi!" Dabb snapped, "Have all ships head for that delaya-class ship. Even if we can't defeat this Republic force we can still take out that Jedi vessel."

Lieutenant Commander Veers frowned when he saw the pirate ships begin to pull away from his frigate.

"Are they running?" he said out loud.

"I don't think so captain." The comscan operator replied, "Their ships aren't scattering, they may be pulling away in different directions but then they're gathering together again."

"For protection from Captain De Kuun's squadron perhaps." Veers commented.

"Pirate vessels are moving away from the gunship squadron as well." The comscan operator reported.

"That only leaves the *Bright Hope*." Veers said and he activated his ship's communications, "*Bright Hope*, this is *Perseverance*. Looks like you're about to have company."

"Copy that *Perseverance*." Cal's voice replied, "Here they come."

Lara fired continuously at the oncoming swarm of pirate ships as Cal veered off. Lara's fire did not actually hit any of the pirates, but that was not her intention. For now all she wanted to do was prevent any of them getting a clear shot at the *Bright Hope*.

As he manoeuvred the ship, Cal kept an eye on the sensor display. Mainly this was so he could check on the position of the other Republic vessels, but he was also watching how the pirates reacted to each manoeuvre he made.

"There!" he exclaimed suddenly, "That's their leader!" and he pointed to one of the sensor returns.

"How can you tell?" Lara asked.

"Because he's the first one to turn each time we do. The others are positioning themselves according to his orders." Cal explained.

"So what do we do?" Lara asked.

"We're going to attack." Cal replied.

"Attack? But Cal there are still a dozen of them."

"Never tell me the odds." Cal said as he swung the *Bright Hope* around to face the crescent-class ship.

"They're moving into attack position!" Dabb snapped as he saw the *Bright Hope* change heading suddenly.

"Captain they're heading right for us!" the co-pilot added as the first blasts of cannon fire from the *Bright Hope* hit their shields and Dabb tried to break off. However, with the pirate ships flying in a tightly packed formation to prevent any of the other Republic ships from isolating any of them a nearby armed transport was unable to move out of the way in time and the two ships collided.

Dabb's ship lurched and began to tumble as half of the large diagonal wing assembly was ripped free but the damage to the more lightly built transport was far more severe and the ship initially broke in two, the aft half exploding as the damage caused its engines to overload while the front portion flew right into the side of another nearby pirate ship. This one was a gunship and although it was armoured for combat the ship's hull could not withstand such an impact and it too exploded.

As the pirate formation began to descend into chaos Cal headed for the still tumbling crescent-class courier and Lara opened fire again. This time her shots struck the target and the rest of the wing assembly came free.

"Finish him off." Cal said and Lara fired again, allowing the turrets to shift slightly so that the stream of energy blasts struck the pirate ship in a line that blew off the main engine assembly. Lara then ceased fire and both she and Cal watched for a few seconds as the burning remains of the courier continued tumbling through space.

"Okay let's see how the others are doing." Cal said, breaking away from the courier and he steered the *Bright Hope* back towards the rest of the pirate fleet.

"Who's who, Cal?" Lara said as she looked out of the cockpit canopy at the flashes of light from weapons fire and engine thrust that was all around. Without Dabb to give orders none of the pirates had any idea who was in charge and it showed. Their formation had broken up entirely and now Captain De Kuun's gunships were picking them off individually while any that tried to flee were either shot down by the *Perseverance*'s heavy guns or chased down by its fighters.

"I'm not sure." Cal replied, "Perhaps we ought to give them another chance." And then he activated the *Bright Hope*'s communications again, setting it for a wide area broadcast, "This is the Jedi vessel *Bright Hope* to all pirate vessels. Stand down. I promise you will be well treated." Then he shut off the communications and looked at Lara, "Let's see what that does shall we?"

At first nothing happened, but when another of the pirate ships exploded as a torpedo tore it apart one of them suddenly decelerated.

"We surrender!" the ship's captain broadcast, "We are powering down our shields and weapons. I say again, we surrender."

One of Captain De Kuun's gunships flew past this pirate vessel, not firing but keeping its shields angled to block any attack and when none came it instead headed towards another.

"We surrender as well!" this next ship signalled as it saw the approaching gunship.

"And us, we give up." Another added and then the communication channels were suddenly filled with the sound of pirates broadcasting their surrender.

Cal and Lara looked at one another and smiled.

"So do you think that Hyronymous Kast will get us an expensive thank you gift for helping him out again?"

Lara asked.

"Lara we are jedi." Cal said in a stern voice, "We do not do what we do for riches and rewards."

"But it would be rude not to accept one." Lara said.

"Indeed it would." Cal replied.

Sparks flew from the console in front of Dabb as he attempted to restore some level of control to what was left of his ship. He had only two operational thrusters and he carefully fired each one in turn to stabilise his course, now the ruined remains of his ship at least drifted in a straight line. Dabb looked around him and took one last look at his crew, all of whom were dead. Only Dabb had survived the jedi's attack long enough to see the Republic taskforce withdraw and now was his chance to escape. He put on the helmet of his vacuum suit and pulled himself out of his seat, floating across the cockpit to the emergency hatch and he triggered the release before crawling out onto the hull. From here he could see Besh Station in the distance. Although it was unmanned, Dabb knew that it would have life support and adequate supplies to keep him alive for years if that was what it took for another ship to come along that he could get aboard.

Dabb leapt from the wreck of his ship, pushing himself towards Besh Station and as he drifted through space he thought about how the first thing he would do when he got back to civilisation was get his revenge on the jedi who had caused him so much trouble.