

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



II-XI: MIGRATION

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...

MIGRATION

ATTACKS ON CIVILIAN SHIPPING IN AN ASTEROID BELT BRING THE UDRAS TO THE SYSTEM TO INVESTIGATE. BUT THE ATTACKER TURNS OUT TO BE SOMETHING OTHER THAN THE PIRATES THEY EXPECT TO FIND...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

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1 .

There was only a single planet in the Jovan system, an airless ball of rock by the same name and the only reason that it was labelled a planet was because its size set it apart from the billions of other airless lumps of rock that orbited the white star at the heart of the system. The system's population of about thirty thousand beings were concentrated on the planet and the shipyards that orbited it. But the minerals that fed the factories and shipyards had to come from somewhere and that somewhere was predominantly those same billions of lumps of airless rock and so hundreds of mining vessels belonging both to the shipyard owner as well as independent prospectors could be found swarming across the system.

One such vessel was the *Hope of Gold*, a vessel that belonged to the Jovan Mining Company itself. The ship was old but in good repair and had more than made up for its original cost in the ore it returned to be processed on Jovan. But today it would not be returning with its hold full of valuable ore because today it would not be returning to Jovan at all.

"Looks like a good haul." The comscan operator said as he looked at the results of the sensor sweep. This showed that the asteroid in front of them was rich in the exotic minerals essential for hyperdrive construction, "Could be up to three kilo tonnes. More than we can carry."

"Then we'll just have to go in closer won't we?" the captain replied from the pilot's seat and he began to cautiously guide the *Hope of Gold* closer to the asteroid. He knew that he and his crew would not be able to spend the credits this find would earn them if they were killed crashing into the asteroid first. As the ship settled into a low orbit around the asteroid the captain activated the ship's intercom, "All hands stand by. We'll be setting down any minute and I want a team suited up and ready to take core samples."

"Sir there's another contact." The comscan operator said hurriedly.

"Where?"

"To stern. Closing on us."

"What the hell?" the captain commented and he began to turn the ship, hoping to get a look at this interloper.

"Its coming right for us!" the comscan operator exclaimed and the ship suddenly lurched as it collided with the contact.

"What the kriff is going on?" the captain snapped as cries of panic started to be heard through the open cockpit door. A loud grinding sound drowned out the crew as something started to cut its way into the hull of the *Hope of Gold*, "Signal Jovan!" the captain yelled, "tell them to send help, tell them we're under attack!" But before the comscan operator could carry out the order the *Hope of Gold* was split wide open.

"Its not straight." Lara Udra said to her older brother and jedi instructor Cal.

"Its not meant to be." Cal replied as he held up the rifle against his bedroom wall, "I want it at an angle."

The weapon in question was a rocket assisted projectile rifle that the pair had taken from an insurgent sniper on the war-torn world of Tepillos. Given that the sniper had been killed in the encounter and the authorities had no need of the weapon for evidence Cal had been allowed to bring it back to their home on Aurek Station as a trophy.

"Well it looks stupid that way." Lara replied.

"Oh what would you know?" Cal asked and he looked at his younger sister who was stood in the doorway cradling a pulse wave rifle with an under slung grenade launcher fitted. Like the RAP rifle the grenade launcher had been taken from a fallen foe, a mandalorian warrior in this case. But unlike the RAP rifle neither the local authorities nor the Jedi Order knew that Cal and Lara had it, something the pair hoped to keep a secret given the attitude taken by Jedi Master Karas when Cal had tried to requisition ammunition for the weapon. He had believed that Cal wanted the ammunition for someone else and turned down the request and at the same time he had made clear his objection to the Udras having such a weapon given their lack of training in its use. Mercifully the breach of the launcher was open to expose its empty chamber so at least Cal knew that his sister was not about to accidentally discharge it in the apartment, "You're still carrying that thing around like you're in love with it. Why don't the pair of you get a room?"

"We've got one." She answered, glancing back toward her own bedroom.

"Yes I know." Cal said, "And I'm going to tell you again, no dancing around with it naked in there."

"You're no fun." Lara said and then the front door communicator chimed and she backed up and answered it, "Hello?"

"Hello Lara its Jule. Can I come in?" Lara's eye's widened, "Uh, hang on a moment." She aid and she rushed back to Cal's room, "Its Jule!" she exclaimed and Cal's eyes widened also.

"Quick!" he snapped as he tossed the rifle he held onto the bed, "Hide that launcher. I'll get rid of the grenades in the lounge."

Frantically the two Jedi rushed around their apartment, Lara returning the launcher itself to the closet where she kept it and Cal picking up every one of the grenades they had looted from an insurgent armoury on Tepillos from the table in the lounge. Then they stood side by side at the front door and opened it up, smiling.

In the corridor outside were three figures. The first was agent Jule Raser, the most senior member of the sector rangers in the Narthis Sector. With her stood a slightly older man with a bald head who was very smartly dressed who Cal did not recognise and behind him was a 3DO type service droid.

"Jule." Cal said, still smiling, "This is a surprise. Do come in."

"Can we offer you a drink?" Lara asked.

"Well I wouldn't mind a caf." The man with Jule said, "But Doc here can make it. Just point him towards the kitchen." Then he glanced at the droid, "Doc make drinks for everyone."

"Of course sir." The droid replied and it headed towards the kitchen area and began to prepare the drinks.

In the meantime Cal and Lara escorted Jule and the other man to the lounge where they sat down.

"I'm sorry about the state of this place." Cal said to the man, "But it's all we could afford."

This was in reference to the generally rundown nature of the apartment.

"Perhaps I could help out with that." The man replied, "I could probably claim the cost back off my taxes anyway."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be possible." Cal said, "The Jedi Order frowns on anything that could give the appearance that we are available for hire. But thank you anyway mister - Ah, I'm afraid I don't know your name."

"This is Hyronymous Kast." Jule said, "He owns one of the biggest multistellar corporations in the Narthis Sector."

"Call me Hyron." Hyronymous added.

"So what does a big businessman like yourself want with us?" Lara asked, "Like Cal said, we're not for hire."

"Actually it was Agent Raser's idea." Hyronymous said.

"Mister Kast's corporation owns a controlling interest in the Jovan Mining Company." Jule said.

"Yes and they're having trouble with pirates." Hyronymous added, "Well not just the company, several independent vessels have been hit as well."

"Sounds like a job for the navy." Lara said.

"Normally yes." Jule said, "But Captain De Kuun still has his squadron out at Teras."

"I thought the Kinnin had been quiet ever since we stopped he intrusions into their space." Cal said.

"Oh they have." Jule replied, "But the Captain wants to be certain. He's keeping his ships there until the navy's completed installing new detection equipment in some of the orbital platforms."

"Which leaves the rest of the sector somewhat vulnerable." Hyronymous said.

"Excuse me," the droid Doc said from the kitchen, "but I require information regarding how each of you takes their caf. I know Mister Kast takes his black."

"I'll have milk in mine." Jule said.

"Actually we're right out I'm afraid." Cal said.

"No we're not." Lara commented, "There's a fresh pack in the refrigerator, I put it there yesterday."

"I think you spilt that though." Cal replied.

"No I didn't. What are you talking about? Look I'll show you."

"No wait Lara-" Cal began as Lara got up and headed quickly to the refrigerator and began to open the door. Cal winced.

Lara suddenly stopped and her eyes widened when she saw that Cal had concealed the grenades from the lounge inside the refrigerator, packing them in front all the food including the carton of milk that she could see over the tops of several of the explosive devices.

"Oh wait you're right." She said, slamming the door shut again and turning back around, "That's right I accidentally spilt it when Cal tripped me last night. So it looks like we'll be having dark caf today." And then she made her way back to the couch as the droid loaded four mugs onto a tray and followed behind her.

"As I as saying." Hyronymous said as he took a sip from his drink, "Without a navy patrol group available to hunt down these raiders we're stuck. I've looked into private security, but Shill Security are far too expensive and there aren't any bounty hunters in the sector with the capability to go after pirates."

"What about system defences?" Cal asked, "Surely there must be some local military."

Hyronymous shook his head.

"I'm afraid not." He answered, "Well none worth mentioning anyway. Jovan uses fixed orbital defences to protect the planetary installations. The only official craft are rescue tenders outfitted for speed and manoeuvrability rather than combat."

"So you want us to go and hunt down the pirates then?" Cal said.

"I do." Hyronymous replied, "I'm informed that your ship is fast, manoeuvrable and well armed. Plus, as Jedi knights you're authorised to act in a law enforcement capacity. Trust me, you won't find me ungrateful Jedi Udra. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours and so forth."

Cal and Lara glanced at one another. Neither liked the sound of this final statement, but Hyronymous was correct about the investigative powers of the Jedi Order and the capability of the Udras' starship, the *Bright Hope*.

"Okay we'll do it." Cal said, "I take it that there'll be someone to brief us properly when we reach Jovan, yes?"

"Of course." Hyronymous said, "My people will give you every co-operation."

2.

Though the *Bright Hope* was amongst the fastest of Republic starships, it was still almost half a day's travel from Aurek Station to the Jovan system. To further add to the journey time this trip through hyperspace only brought the ship as far as the outer reaches of the system, the planet Jovan itself was deeper in system but surrounded by enough asteroids and other space debris to block hyperspace travel. Therefore, it was necessary to complete the journey at sub light speeds until the shape of Jovan and its orbital facilities came into view.

"Greetings Bright Hope." The flight controller of the primary orbital signalled, "It's good to see you. Please follow our docking beacon to bay nine. You are expected." And then the channel went dead.

"Well he seemed happy to see us." Lara said from the co-pilot's seat.

"Yes he did." Cal replied, "I just hope we can match up to their expectations of us."

Cal followed the beacon being transmitted by the station and flew the *Bright Hope* into a cavernous docking bay where several other transport vessels were docked. Some of these bore the markings of the Jovan Mining Company while others looked to be independently owned. Maintenance crews and droids swarmed over these vessels carrying out repairs and inspecting for mynock infestations. As he carefully piloted the *Bright Hope* through the bay towards the nearest available landing slot he noticed the name stencilled on one of the other docked ships and he slowed.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked.

"Nothing." Cal replied, "But take a look at the name of that courier out there."

Lara looked at the ship and smiled.

"I wonder what he's doing here?" she said.

"We'll find out later." Cal said, "I can see our spot and it looks like we're expected."

Sure enough, when Cal landed the *Bright Hope* and he and Lara disembarked they found someone waiting at the bottom of their ship's access ramp. The being was a vultan, humanoid but with a twisted cartilage formation in place of his hair. The species was well known for their interest in technology and they were frequently found travelling in space. But it was his clothing that made him stand out. Whereas all of the other station crewmembers in the docking bay wore functional overalls that allowed them to easily carry the tools necessary for their work, the vultan wore a more formal outfit that marked him out as one of the station's administrative staff. In keeping with this role the only equipment he appeared to carry was a datapad.

"Greetings Jedi Udra," He announced, "and welcome to the Jovan system. My name is Liss Nihlum and I have been assigned as your liaison."

"Thank you Mister Nihlum." Cal replied, "I take it that contains all the data on the attacks?"

"Yes of course." Liss answered and he held out the datapad, "We believe that there have been six attacks so far, all on the far side of the system."

"You believe?" Lara commented, "You mean you're not sure?"

"Err. No, sorry. But you must realise that communications within this system are prone to disruption. We've confirmed the destruction of one outpost and one transport, but we suspect that four more ships have been hit because they've failed to return as scheduled and we can't raise them."

Cal just nodded as he scrolled through the pages of data held in the device, but aside from profiles on the vessels that were missing there was little to go on.

"Thanks, we'll be touch." He said eventually, looking up from the datapad at Liss.

"Huh?" Liss said, startled by the Jedi's reaction.

"I said we'll be in touch." Cal repeated, "While your people are checking our ship there's someone else I'd like to talk to."

"Someone else? Liss said, "Who?"

"Hello Ren." Cal said, "So what brings you to this part of the sector?"

"Well hello there Cal." Ren Distler replied as he turned around in his seat at the bar, "And hello to you as well young Lara." He added with a smile, "So how did you find me?"

"Easy." Lara said, "We saw your ship, the *Distler's Luck* in the docking bay and then we started looking in all the run down drinking holes on the station."

"So can I get either of you a drink? Or would drinking with the likes of me compromise your Jedi reputation."

"A smuggler you mean?" Cal said.

"I move cargoes confidentially Jedi Udra. I seem to remember my occupation came in useful to you when you needed to obtain certain items. I take it Mister Shill delivered them to you?"

"So what confidential cargo are you moving this time?" Lara asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Weapons." Ren replied. Surprised at his openness, Cal and Lara glanced at one another.

"What sort?" Cal asked.

"Ship mounted of course. Oh and yes, they're all perfectly legal. With the attacks going on and your precious Republic not doing anything to stop them I thought that I'd do my civic duty and help these defenceless beings exercise their rights to protect themselves."

"And make a tidy profit no doubt." Lara said, "Ren, will those weapons even fire?"

"They are in need of some reconditioning, I'll admit that." Ren said, "But I'm not selling them as mint."

"So what do you know?" Cal asked, "About the attacks I mean. Who's doing this?"

"I've absolutely no idea." Ren replied, "None of my usual sources know a thing, though there are rumours of course."

"Tell me." Cal said.

"Of the usual conspiracy theories. The Founding Families, hutts, or even that it's all a scam on the insurance companies."

"So what do you think?" Lara asked.

"I think someone's out there with an impressive amount of firepower." Ren said, "They've taken out at least two targets, one of which was an outpost that supposedly had state of the art sensors to track all the debris and yet no-one was able to get off a distress call. Which means they didn't see their attackers coming."

"A cloaking device?" Lara exclaimed, "You can't be serious. If someone had the credits to pay for one of those they wouldn't need to go around stealing ore."

"And broad spectrum jamming would be detected, asteroids or no asteroids. The emissions would be visible across the system." Cal added more calmly than his sister's outburst.

Ren shrugged.

"I'm just telling you what I've heard." He said, "No need to blast the messenger."

"Well you're wrong about one thing at least." Lara told him.

"Oh and what might that be?"

"The Republic is taking an interest. It's sent us."

Ren's face fell.

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

"As well you might." Cal responded, "Ren Disler, in the name of the Galactic Republic-"

"Oh no." Ren said.

"I am hereby formally requesting your assistance." Cal finished.

"Oh I knew you were going to say that." Ren said, "Oh very well, but I'm not risking my ship."

"You won't have to." Cal reassured him, "I just want your input about who's doing this. We'll be taking the *Bright Hope*, she's manoeuvrable enough to get through even the densest asteroid field."

"I've heard that before." Ren said, "Normally from people who end up spread widely over a lump of rock floating in space."

A chiming sound interrupted the conversation and Cal reached for his point-to-point communications link.

"Cal here."

"Ah Jedi Udra," Liss's voice said, "I'm glad I've caught you. We've just received word of another attack."

Cal kept the *Bright Hope*'s speed low as he piloted a path through the asteroids. To save time crossing the system he had taken the ship above the orbital plane of the system and executed a micro-jump through hyperspace to the far side before re-entering the debris field closer to the last reported position of the most recent victim of the raiders.

"I don't get it." Ren said as they searched for signs of the ship, "The *Ran'devar* was well armed. The crew used blasters to crack open asteroids and they upgraded with ion cannons I supplied them."

"Well there you have it." Lara said from the seat behind her brother, "Those weapons you sold them probably back fired and they disabled their own ship."

"Those ion cannons were working." Ren replied, "I saw them tested after they were installed on the *Ran'devar*. A pirate ship would have to be crazy to risk attacking them in the asteroids. One ion blast and they'd wind up spinning into the nearest one."

"Well let's just hope that they don't mistake us for pirates as well and start taking pot shots at us." Cal said. Then something caught his attention on the sensor display. "Hang on, what's that on the scope?"

"Looks like an escape pod beacon." Ren replied, "Perhaps someone was able to abandon ship in time." "That's good right?" Lara said, "It means we've finally found someone to tell us what's going on. Like how these ships are being disabled so quickly."

"I'm kind of curious to find out that myself." Ren said, "If even a well equipped ship like the *Ran'devar* gets cut off before being able to identify their attacker."

"Assuming there's anyone left alive to tell us." Cal said and then he pointed through the cockpit canopy at a large asteroid up ahead, "Look." He added and the others saw that scattered across the surface of the asteroid were the remains of the *Ran'devar*.

"What could do that to a ship?" Lara asked as she stared at the wreckage through the canopy.

"A collision." Ren replied, "I think the ship simply ploughed right into the asteroid and the kinetic energy of its own momentum destroyed it. But that just raises another question."

"You mean why were they travelling so fast in the first place?" Cal said.

"Exactly. The crew of the *Ran'devar* were professional asteroid miners. They knew the dangers of flying too fast in the field. That's why they up-gunned their ship, they knew that they didn't need the power the weapons would take for their engines."

"Well something made them want to get somewhere fast." Lara said.

"There's still the beacon." Cal said, "And it's coming from the same asteroid. Perhaps whatever happened, one of the crew decided to abandon ship while the others made a break for it."

"There it is." Ren said and he pointed to a spot on the asteroid where a light could be seen blinking brightly, the visual distress signal from an escape pod.

"Then that's where we're going." Cal said, "You two go suit up and I'll be with you as soon as we've landed."

Cal landed the *Bright Hope* about fifty metres from the beacon and he, Lara and Ren walked across the asteroid to reach it.

"It looks intact." Cal said when the escape pod became visible resting in a shallow crater that presumably was a result of its own impact with the asteroid.

"Damaged though." Ren added as he studied the exterior and noticed that the tiny window was misted up, suggesting that at least some of the pod's environmental systems had failed.

"Someone's still alive though Cal." Lara said, "I can feel it."

"Me too." Cal replied and he banged his fist against the side of the escape pod then pressed the helmet of his suit up against it. In reply some one inside the pod banged on its hull form within and Cal smiled, "Okay," he said as he stood up straight, "there is someone inside. We need to get the pod over to the *Bright Hope* and set up a pressured corridor between its hatch and our air lock."

"Oh and how do you intend to do that exactly?" Ren asked, "Even in this gravity that pod's way too heavy to shift. We should signal for a proper recovery team."

"Watch and learn." Cal said and then he turned to Lara, "I'll need a hand." He said.

"Sure." She replied and then she added, "Watch and learn Ren. This is how the jedi do it."

Lara smiled and held out a hand that Cal gripped tightly. Then both jedi closed their eyes, raised their free hands and focused on the escape pod. Ren gasped and took a step backwards as the escape pod rose up out of the crater of its own making and hovered above the asteroid without any indication of support. As the Udras turned, their outstretched arms moving to face towards the *Bright Hope* the escape pod moved with them until it was less than ten metres from the much larger delaya-class vessel and they gently set it back down again.

As Cal and Lara let go of one another's hands Lara looked towards Ren who was still stood gaping at them.

"See." She said, "I told you it would work."

"I don't believe it." Ren said, "I mean you hear stories about how you guys can do that sort of thing, but you never really believe it. How big can you go?"

"It's not about size." Cal said and Lara smirked. Cal noticed this and frowned, then he went on, "It's about being able to control the Force that surrounds whatever you're trying to move."

It did not take long to set up an inflatable tube running from the *Bright Hope*'s airlock to the escape pod hatchway and pressurise it. Then, no longer concerned that forcing open the escape pod would expose its occupant to the vacuum of space Cal simply ignited his lightsaber and cut the hatchway open.

"Quickly, get him out!" Cal exclaimed when he saw the figure slumped in one of the escape pod's seats. He was human and it appeared that he had been badly burned before abandoning ship, his skin charred and badly blistered.

Releasing the man's harness, Cal and Ren dragged him from the escape pod.

"Okay where to?" Ren asked.

"The medical suite." Cal replied and looking at his sister he added, "Lara, go get it ready."

Lara simply nodded and ran off down along the inflatable tube while Cal and Ren followed more slowly with the injured man between them.

The man himself barely seemed aware of what was happening and the only sound to come from him was a soft groaning as he was set down on the treatment bed when they reached the *Bright Hope's* medical suite. The medical suite itself was somewhat Spartan, but it was the only option available to the Jedi so for now it would just have to do and Lara quickly set to work cleaning the man's burns.

"Can you hear me?" Cal asked, leaning closer to the man and he nodded briefly, gasping for breath, "What happened to your ship?" Cal then asked, "Who attacked you?"

"Didn't see." The man gasped, "Worked in engine room."

"You lasted long enough to send a distress signal." Ren said from further away, "Didn't your captain say anything?"

"Contact appeared suddenly." The man said, "Ion cannons did nothing."

"Told you." Lara said, glancing round at Ren, "You sold them dodgy merchandise."

"Now's not the time Lara." Cal commented.

"Guns worked." The man said, "Had no effect. The captain ordered full speed to try and escape."

"So it kept up with you then?" Cal said, but the man shook his head.

"No. They collided with us briefly and damaged the ship, but we were still able to outrun them. But the drives were fluctuating and the captain lost control. We were on fire and I knew we wouldn't make it through the asteroids so I ran for the nearest escape pod. Ejected just in time but got pulled into the asteroid after the ship." The man's eyes then closed and he lay still.

"Is he-?" Ren began.

"He's alive." Lara said, "Just barely. But Cal, we need to get him to a proper facility. He needs bacta immersion."

"Okay then." Cal replied, "I want you to stay here with him and keep him stable. I'll be back as soon as I can. Ren you're with me."

"With you? Where are we going?"

"Back to his ship. I want to take a look at the wreck, or what's left of it anyway."

3.

When the *Ran'devar* had crashed into the asteroid it had at first simply crumpled to produce a compact wreck embedded in the asteroid's surface. But as soon as the engines had begun to collapse they had exploded and the ruined remains of the ship had been sent flying in all directions. No doubt much of the debris had been thrown away from the asteroid and was now drifting in space but much more had simply been scattered over the nearby surface, pulled back down by the asteroid's micro gravity. Most of this wreckage was twisted beyond recognition. But here and there was something that could be identified, a seat cushion, a hatchway or a work tool from the engineering section.

"There's nothing here you know." Ren said, "It's not even economical to take this stuff back as scrap."

"The man in our medical suite said that the two ships collided." Cal said in response, "What does that tell you?"

"That not everything here comes from the *Ran'devar*." Ren said.

"Precisely." Cal said, "So keep looking and let me know if you see anything that looks out of place, because even a single scrap of metal from the other ship's hull could give us some idea of who we're dealing with."

Ren began to study the twisted metal wreckage, following Cal's advice to watch for anything that did not fit. But given the amount of damage caused by the crash he found it impossible to tell what he was looking at. Cal on the other hand was able to spot something that stood out. He did not know what it was, or what sort of ship it had come from but he knew that it was not part of any normal starship like the *Ran'devar*.

"Hey Ren!" he called out, "Come take a look at this." And as Ren came over to see what Cal had found the Jedi knight crouched down to pick it up, "Does this look normal to you?" Cal asked, holding up what at first looked like a piece of polished stone.

"Is that ceramic?" Ren asked.

"I think so." Cal asked, "But I'm not familiar with any component from a starship of this size that uses ceramic parts big enough for this to have broken off. It's clearly just a fragment."

"A fragment of the hull?" Ren suggested, "I've heard of totally ceramic starship hulls to fool sensors. They don't reflect energy the way that even coated metal hulls do."

"I think we've found our clue." Cal said, "Now let's get back to the Bright Hope. Given that there's a shipyard around Jovan they should be able to tell us what this thing is for."

"I'm sorry Jedi Udra." Liss said, "But the engineers here have been unable to identify the function of the object you brought back with you."

While Lara had gone with the injured man, Cal and Ren had taken the mysterious ceramic object to be examined by the shipyard engineers. After giving them chance to perform a preliminary analysis they had returned to Liss's office for the results.

"It could be military." Ren commented, "Some next generation stealth ship still on the secret list."

"Then what's it doing here?" Cal asked the smuggler, "That sort of technology is no less restricted or expensive than a cloaking device." Then he looked back at Liss, "What about the escape pod?" he asked, "Did you get anything from that?"

"Yes, we had more luck with that." Liss replied and he brought up a page of data on his desktop display,

"We recovered the copy of the *Ran'devar*'s flight log still intact. This shows a brief sensor contact immediately before the collision. Apparently their attacker was lay in wait behind an asteroid and emerged as they got close. But there's something that doesn't add up."

"What?" Cal asked.

"Well look at this." Liss replied and he activated a replay of the sensor log at the moment of the attack.

"What am I looking at?" Cal asked.

"The heat corona." Ren said.

"What?" Cal said, looking around.

"There's no heat corona coming from around the asteroid." Ren told him, "That ship came out of nowhere pretty quick. It must have had its engines doing more than just ticking over and that should have been putting out enough thermal energy to be detectable from the other side of the asteroid. The obvious answer is a baffled drive, compressed gas thrust. They're good for short bursts of speed, but over long distances they're pretty sluggish. Twenty or thirty gees tops."

"Not much of an issue in an asteroid field." Cal replied, "But again we're back to cost and availability. Baffled drives are expensive and hard to produce."

"Well do you have a better idea?" Ren asked, "Maybe whoever's doing this stole their ship so didn't need to pay for it. Now they need to steal to keep it running though."

"Actually," Cal said, "I do have a better idea. That ceramic lump could be part of a heat sink. Haven't you ever seen that trick where you shoot a heat shield tile with a blast rifle and even though its glowing red-hot you can still pick it up? Well perhaps someone's just built a big ceramic heat sink to hide their ship's heat signature."

"Or perhaps not." Lara suddenly announced as she entered Liss's office just in time to hear Cal's theory. Then she held up a small clear plastic bag, "I took a piece of that thing you found to the medical bay with me." She explained and I asked the doctors to take a look at it.

"The doctor's identified it?" Cal said, surprised.

"Not really." Lara replied, "But one of the dentists did, the material at least. She said it was some sort of enamel. You found a piece of a tooth."

"Something took a bite out a starship?" Ren asked.

"That would explain why it was so able to conceal itself." Liss said, "It is naturally made of substances that are difficult to detect."

"Yeah, but what sort of creature would attack a starship?"

"How about a space slug?" Lara asked and both Liss and Ren snorted.

"Padawan Udra," Liss said, "the fragment presented to my engineers for study was almost twenty centimetres across and was clearly not an entire tooth. For it to have come from a space slug the creature would have to be hundreds of metres in length. It is widely known that the species does not grow beyond around ten metres in length."

"And they don't attack ships in space either." Ren said, "They eat mynock's."

"Of which there are thankfully few in the system." Liss added, "Incoming traffic is thoroughly screened for them. Even if creatures of the size you are suggesting did exist, one could not find enough food in the system to survive off."

"But I've heard of them." Lara protested.

"We all have." Ren said, "They're just stories spacers tell in cantinas around the outer rim. The biggest ever recorded was still under twenty metres."

"So what do you lot think it was then?" Lara asked in frustration, folding her arms.

"A space wasp." Cal said, "A small one."

"They don't attack ships either." Ren said, "Except in self defence. Besides we're a long way from the Stennes Node. They don't live anywhere else."

"No they don't." Cal agreed, "But I've heard of them being turned into starships. You take an emptied out husk and add things like engines and life support and you get yourself a starship. Not cheap mind you, but I'm willing to bet that most spacers around here wouldn't know what to look for on their sensors."

"But aren't they more than a thousand metres long?" Liss asked.

"Once fully grown yes." Cal replied, "So an adult one would be far too big to manoeuvre in the asteroids, but a juvenile one could just be small enough,"

"So what are suppose to do?" Lara asked, "Roll up a really big newspaper and smoosh it?"

"No, blasters should work fine." Cal replied, "And stop saying 'smoosh', its not a real word."

"His ion cannons sure didn't." Lara commented, "And I'll say smoosh as much as I like, it is a real word. You're not the boss of me."

"The hull probably isn't sufficiently conductive." Cal said, "But don't worry, I'm sure our lasers will do just fine and yes, actually I am the boss of you."

"I still don't know about this Cal." Lara said, frowning, "I'm getting a very bad feeling about this."

"You still haven't explained how you intend to locate this mysterious raiding ship." Liss said, "If it only shows up on sensors at point blank ranges then—"

"It'll still have a crew." Cal interrupted, "So Lara and I should be able to locate them using the Force."

"Cal, I've got a really bad feeling about this." Lara said, still frowning.

"So where exactly are we headed?" Ren asked as Cal once again brought the *Bright Hope* out of hyperspace on the far side of the system and steered towards the asteroid field. As earlier Ren occupied the co-pilot's seat while Lara was sat behind her brother. Ren had significant experience operating starship weapons and so his skill with them made him a natural choice to operate the turrets and torpedo launchers that the *Bright Hope* carried while the two Jedi attempted to locate the raiders' vessel.

"I'd like to check out another one of the attack sites." Cal replied.

"But we don't have exact locations." Lara said, "The ship's just vanished."

"One of the attacks was on an outpost." Ren reminded her, "Its position is fixed."

“Precisely.” Cal said, “So I figured if we start there and then head towards the location where the *Ran’devar* was attacked we may come across some more clues.”
“Wrecks you mean?” Ren asked, but Cal did not reply.

4.

Details of the destroyed outpost were accurately recorded in the data provide to the Jedi by Liss. In addition to information about the actual outpost itself such as crew compliment and defences this included a profile on the asteroid on which it had been constructed. This was a fairly large example in the Jovan field at well over twenty kilometres across, but as Cal flew the *Bright Hope* towards its location no such asteroid appeared on the sensors.

"Where the hell is it?" Cal said to himself looking through the canopy, then down at the instruments and then back out of the canopy again.

"Nice one big brother. You brought us to the wrong place." Lara commented, "Perhaps we should try signalling Jovan and ask for directions."

"I don't think there's any need for that." Ren said as he too attempted to make sense of the sensor readings, "We'll figure it out."

"It has to be here somewhere." Cal said, "The jump coordinates were spot on and the navigation system confirms that this is the spot."

"Then where's the asteroid?" Lara asked, "You know, the big lump of rock?"

"Perhaps you could use the Force to divine its location." Ren said.

"It doesn't quite work like that." Lara said, "Using it is a fine art."

"A fine art my ass." Ren said, "All you do is get a funny feeling and then start hacking people up with your lightsabers."

"Well if it's so easy then why don't you try it?" Lara asked.

"Well maybe I'll give it a try." Ren replied, "Because I think I'm beginning to sense a bit of a disturbance myself. Are you ready? Because here it comes."

Lara clamped a hand over her nose and mouth.

"Stang that's gross." She said.

"Your last meal was strong in the Dark Side." Cal added, wincing and Ren just grinned.

"I'll be in my cabin." Lara said, still covering her nose and mouth with her hand and she stood up to leave.

"Oh no you don't young lady." Cal said, "You stay right there and help us find this asteroid. That's an order." Frowning, Lara sat back down, took a deep breath and pinched her nose shut.

"We're in the wrong place." She suddenly blurted out a few moments later.

"Oh no we aren't." Ren replied and he pointed through the canopy, "Look there."

Drifting in space ahead of the *Bright Hope* were numerous fragments of metal and plastic that could only have come from the destroyed outpost, but of the asteroid itself there was no sign at all.

"So where's the asteroid?" Lara asked.

"All around us. Look." Cal replied and he pointed to one particular piece of wreckage that was still set into a piece of rock. But instead of many kilometres across this was only a few metres.

"They blew up the whole damn thing." Ren said in wonder as he began to spot several more pieces of wreckage set into fragments of the asteroid.

"Is that difficult?" Lara asked.

"Not really." Cal answered, "Our torpedoes have more than enough firepower to shatter a twenty kilometre asteroid. But there are other things to consider."

"Like how stupid it is." Ren added, "Blow up an asteroid of that size in a belt this dense and you'll set up a chain reaction of flying bits of rock that could spread across tens of thousands of kilometres. Any ship that did it would risk being smashed apart itself."

"Hang on a moment." Cal said, raising his hand for quiet, "Ren, take a look at the outpost debris. Ignore the asteroid for now."

"Okay, what I am looking for?"

"Well look at what the wreckage is made of. Lots of plastics, some light metals and transparisteel. But where's all the heavy stuff? The outer hull should have been over a metre thick and heavily armoured. But there's not a trace of it left."

"There's no carbon scoring." Lara commented.

"What?" Cal asked, glancing round at his sister.

"I said there's no carbon scoring. If someone used turbolasers or explosives then there'd be residual carbon scoring."

"She's right Cal." Ren said, "The way this stuff has been ripped apart doesn't match pulse wave blasts

either. Someone literally tore through this outpost, scooped up the heavy metals and left behind the lighter stuff like it didn't matter. Then they destroyed the asteroid too, presumably in the same way."

Cal's face fell.

"Oh no," he said.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal said, gazing out into space, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Well do you care to let us in on your theory?" Ren asked.

"Sure." Cal replied, "Have you ever heard of a miner's horror?"

Ren gasped.

"You're kidding right?" he said.

"What's a miner's horror?" Lara asked.

"A very rare and very dangerous life form." Cal said.

"They were first discovered about a thousand years ago." Ren added, "Pirates first found them but there have been occasional sightings ever since then."

"So what do they do?" Lara asked.

"That." Cal said, pointing to the wreckage outside the ship, "They're like living metal refineries. They rip asteroids apart to get at the metals they eat. But if they come across a ship or outpost they'll go crazy to get at all the metals used in their construction."

"Fortunately they're solitary." Ren said, "No-one's ever seen more than one in a system. Or at least no one that's lived to tell about it. Also they're pretty slow, though that won't matter much in this asteroid field."

"So can we kill it?" Lara asked.

Cal shrugged.

"I don't know." He said, "If we can get a clean torpedo hit then easily. But I'm not sure we'll be able to lock onto it properly and our lasers may not be powerful enough."

"We're going to need a bigger ship." Ren commented.

Now working under the assumption that they were hunting one of the rarely encountered miner's horrors Cal opted to return to the sight of its last known attack, the Ran'devar.

"Okay Ren," he said, "I want you to watch the sensors. We're looking for returns that indicate the highest concentrations on heavy metals in the area."

"So you're looking for its food supply?" Ren asked, a slight smile appearing on his face and he nodded.

"Well the creature itself won't be easy to detect in the asteroids," Cal replied, "but since we can make an educated guess at what it's looking for we may as well try looking for the same thing."

"But hang on a minute Cal." Lara said, leaning between her brother and Ren, "If that creature eats metal then won't it have already eaten its way through the highest concentrations?"

"She has a point." Ren said.

"Yes she does." Cal agreed, "In that case look for two things. High metal concentrations that may attract the creature and also areas where there's a distinct lack of metal content. But only where smaller asteroids are involved, larger ones are more likely to have been mined out by our own people."

"Don't forget that thing." Lara added, "We should keep watching for the thing itself."

"That's where you come in." Cal told her, "I want you to concentrate on what's out there and let me know if you sense anything. My guess is that the creature will stick out like a wookiee at a bothan tea party."

"And what are you going to do while we're hunting for the thing?" Lara asked him.

"Flying the ship." Cal replied. Then he looked at Ren, "So which way?" he asked.

Ren looked at the sensor display in front of him. The *Bright Hope* was running with its active sensors running and the sheer quantity of returns from the asteroids around them made discerning details difficult. However, he was able to pick up on more general information such as the mineral density in a given direction.

"Straight ahead." He told Cal, "Nice and slow."

Though the manoeuvrability and shielding of the *Bright Hope* meant that Cal could have piloted the ship at fairly high speed through the asteroid field, allowing smaller pieces of rock to be deflected by the shields and only manoeuvring around the larger ones he kept his speed low to give him more time to avoid any impacts. The last thing any of them wanted was for the ship to be disabled here, leaving them at the mercy of a starship-devouring monster. This also gave Lara and Ren the chance to scan for the creature while he merely watched through the cockpit canopy just in case it was able to approach without either of them noticing. At the same time he left the communications system active, monitoring the emergency channels just in case there was another attack and the victims were able to get off a distress call.

Hunger.

Lara gasped as she felt the tremor. The sensation of an insatiable hunger hit her suddenly.

"Cal that way!" she snapped, slapping his shoulder with one hand and pointing with the other, "Cal it's over there."

"There's nothing on the scope." Ren said.

"That doesn't mean anything." Cal replied, "It could be behind an asteroid. We already know that they're not easy to spot. I'm heading in, so get ready with the cannons."

Ren nodded and placed his hands on the control column, activating the *Bright Hope's* targeting system.

Cal increased speed, heading in the direction indicated by Lara and he let the Force flow through him.

Hunger.

The same sensation that had alerted Lara now came to him also, but the creature itself remained out of sight.

"What the hell is that?" Ren exclaimed suddenly as a large asteroid, several kilometres across came into view. On the side facing the *Bright Hope* there was a gaping hole out of which a dense cloud of dust was rising.

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

"No." Cal said, grinning, "This is good."

"Good?" How?" Ren asked.

"Because it looks like we've caught the miner's horror while it's feeding. I don't think it knows we're here. Even if it does its more interested in its current meal. I think what we're seeing is all the debris left over after its ripped through a vein of metal in the asteroid."

"So what? We just shoot don the hole?" Lara asked.

"No." Cal replied, "We don't know if that shaft's straight enough to give us a clear line of fire with the lasers and we can't risk a torpedo shot."

"So what's your plan then?" Ren asked, "Sit here and wait for it to reappear?"

"No." Cal said again, "We're going in closer."

"Closer?" Lara exclaimed.

"Yes closer." Cal replied, "In fact we're going to land on that asteroid. Then you and I will go in for a closer look."

"Oh I see, we're supposed to go outside with a monster that can eat a starship are we? Count me out."

"Actually I don't think that a miner's horror is likely to attack a person." Ren said, "It may not even notice you."

"That's what I'm counting on." Cal went on, "We'll see if we can climb down that shaft its dug and get right up to it. Then we'll simply use our lightsabers to deal with it."

Fear.

Cal frowned and looked around at Lara.

"Really? You're afraid?" he said.

"Of the giant space monster? Yes." She answered him.

"Then its time to face your fear." Cal said, "Now suit up because we're going for a walk."

"I notice that I don't seem to be a part of this plan." Ren said as Cal got out of his seat.

"Yes you are." Cal replied, "I want you to take off and hold position about three thousand kilometres away. If the creature emerges and gives you a clear shot before we can deal with it then take it."

"And if anything happens to you two?"

"Leave." Cal said, "Head back to Jovan and let them know what we've found. Perhaps by deploying a few probe droids to keep an eye on this thing they can keep shipping away until the navy can deal with it."

"Doesn't sound too bad." Ren said, "Certainly better than staying here to face it alone and search through its poop for your remains."

Lara scowled.

5.

Both the brilliant white of Cal's vacuum suit and the bright pink of Lara's stood out against the dull grey of the asteroid's surface as they made their way across it. Beneath their feet they could feel a continuous vibration as the miner's horror continued to burrow its way through the rock, vibrations that grew stronger as they closed in on the pit it had dug and the billowing cloud of rock dust that continued to spew out of it. *Hunger.*

"This is definitely the place." Cal said, his words transmitted to Lara by their suits' built in communications systems. The vibration of the asteroid suddenly and briefly intensified and a moment later a wave of heat washed over the two Jedi as the *Bright Hope* lifted over and streaked overhead.

"Yeah." Lara said as she watched the ship fly away, "And we're here all alone with no way off until Ren comes back. If he comes back."

"Of course he will." Cal said, "Why wouldn't he?"

"Because when it comes down to it he is a criminal Cal." Lara pointed out.

"But not a murderer." Cal reminded her and then he halted beside the edge of the pit and looked down into it. Even here it was impossible to see much through the cloud of dust and Cal instead looked to each side, "Can you see a way down?" he asked, "I mean the gravity's not that high, we could probably jump but I'd rather not risk-"

"What's wrong?" Lara asked when Cal suddenly broke off.

"What do you feel?" he asked.

Lara closed her eyes briefly.

"No, not through the Force. Standing right here, what do you feel?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"Because I don't feel anything either. Like the asteroid shaking under our feet."

"Oh stang." Lara said.

"Get back!" Cal snapped and he grabbed his sister by the arm and they both rushed away from the pit.

Halting about a hundred metres away they turned and instinctively Cal drew his lightsaber and activated it.

Lara followed suit and they stood there staring at the pit as a shape began to emerge from the cloud of dust.

Like some gigantic deformed sea horse with prominent spikes running down its back and a gaping maw filled with rows of saw-like teeth the miner's horror emerged out of the cloud. At least twenty metres in length the creature towered over the Jedi as they stood open jawed and watched it. However, if the miner's horror was even aware of their presence it gave no indication of it as it spun around, blasts of propellant bodily gases clearing the dust cloud from around it.

"Cal what's it doing?" Lara called out, despite her suit's communication being able to pick up even a whisper.

"I've no idea." Cal answered, "No wait. Oh no. The *Bright Hope*."

Lara looked in the direction Ren had flown, but at a range of three thousand kilometres the *Bright Hope* was nothing but a tiny pinprick of light in space. However, it seemed that to the miner's horror it was easily visible as the creature suddenly shot upwards, scattering the dust cloud around behind it.

Ren watched in amazement as the miner's horror emerged from within the asteroid. Though he had heard tales of the strange, solitary creatures he had never so much as seen an image of one and he was unprepared for it. However, he quickly came to his senses and checked the sensor readouts. They showed the creature was in fact less than a third of the size of the *Bright Hope* and was moving towards him, though they seemed to be having trouble locking on to it given that the structure of its outer shell was so similar to the asteroids in the field surrounding it.

"Looks like I'll have to do this by eye then." Ren said to himself and he fired the *Bright Hope's* lasers at the beast.

The first few shots went wide, but Ren adjusted his point of aim and the continuing volley of bright red energy bolts found their mark. There were brief flares of heat and light as the shots struck the miner's horror's armoured shell. It shook under the barrage and veered off to one side, but aside from putting several deep pits into its shell, the attack did nothing.

The miner's horror ducked behind another asteroid and circled around it, clearly still heading for the *Bright Hope* but now keeping out the way of its weapons.

"Oh kriff." Ren exclaimed when he saw the creature darting from asteroid to asteroid, "Sorry Cal, Lara, but I'm out of here."

"No! Where's he going?" Lara yelled as she saw the brilliant flash of the *Bright Hope's* ion drives firing.

"He's getting to safety." Cal replied.

"But he's leaving us here to die."

"No, he'll be back. I'm certain of it. But if he lets that thing destroy our ship then we are done for. Now be patient and have faith in the will of the Force."

The *Bright Hope* had state of the art propulsion systems but here, surrounded by asteroids they counted for nothing. The combined mass shadow of all the floating lumps of rock prevented Ren from simply engaging the ship's hyperdrive to escape and the wreckage of the *Ran'devar* was proof of what could happen if he tried to fire the ion drives up to full power. Perhaps Cal or Lara could develop the reactions necessary to dodge all the asteroids, but Ren was no Jedi and so he had to hope that he could simply out manoeuvre the miner's horror long enough to get away from it. Though inside the cockpit proximity alarms sounded almost continuously as he sought to evade both the asteroids ahead of him and the miner's horror behind him. Unlike Ren, the miner's horror had no fear of the asteroids. It could easily fly around the larger ones, while its saw-like teeth ripped apart the smaller ones that got in its way as it focused on the bounty of refined metals that was the *Bright Hope*. Though the ship's lasers had failed to deal with the creature once already, Ren nevertheless angled the turrets to point behind the *Bright Hope* and laid down a continuous stream of fire as he retreated. He hoped that although the miner's horror had not been killed it would still feel pain when struck and that enough of it may convince it to give up the pursuit.

Though he was not flying in a straight line, Ren had a clear idea of where he wanted to get. The asteroid field that filled much of the Jovan system appeared as a flat disc when viewed from an extreme distance, so by heading upwards relative to the orbital plane he knew that he stood a good chance of reaching open space before the miner's horror could catch up with him. Once in open space he would then be able to make use of the *Bright Hope's* full engine and weapons power.

A sudden collision between two asteroids in his path forced Ren to steer sharply to avoid the cloud of smaller rocks that was hurled out in all directions and briefly he found himself facing back towards the miner's horror.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, "Wrong way." And he steered the ship back around, aiming to avoid the cloud of asteroids the collision created.

The ship shook violently as one of the asteroids slammed into its side and more alarms sounded. A brief glance at the console reassured Ren that the shields had held, but they're strength along the port side had been reduced and would need time to recharge. More hits on that part of the ship could prove fatal.

"Baby, baby. Hold together." He muttered and then from between two massive asteroids ahead he saw something that lifted his spirits

Open space.

The moment the *Bright Hope* burst out from the asteroid field Ren accelerated at full power, rapidly putting more than a hundred thousand kilometres between himself and the miner's horror before he spun the ship around on the spot and searched for the creature. Though much of the asteroid field was in motion, Ren soon picked out the distinctive shape of the creature as it loitered on the edge of the field and he tagged it with the *Bright Hope's* targeting system. Switching from the ship's lasers to its proton torpedoes he opened fire.

"Eat this." He said as the glowing white shape of a torpedo darted from underneath the *Bright Hope's* nose towards the miner's horror. Looking at the weapons display Ren saw the distance between the torpedo and its target rapidly counting down towards zero.

But the miner's horror did not just sit still as the powerful weapon rushed headlong towards it. Ren had put too distance between himself and the creature and now it was hunting for an alternative source of food. A source it found deeper within the asteroid field.

"No!" Ren exclaimed and he slammed a fist against the console as he watched the miner's horror move out of sight.

With the target information provided by the *Bright Hope* now cut off, the torpedo instead switched to its onboard guidance as it sought to reacquire the target. A typical starship would leave a trail of charged particles and residual heat in its wake that even the most basic of modern sensors could easily follow. But being a living organism, the miner's horror was quite different and with nothing to follow the torpedo simply locked itself into a straight course and flew right into the first asteroid it encountered, one about five kilometres across and detonated on impact.

The *Bright Hope's* cockpit canopy reacted automatically to the detonation by darkening, but Ren still blinked and held his arm in front of him as the asteroid was destroyed. A large part of it was totally vaporised by the multi-mega tonne explosion, but further away from the point of impact the asteroid was merely shattered into millions of fragments. Some of these were as large as the *Bright Hope* itself and as they flew outwards the destruction was spread even further.

Furious, Ren watched as the expanding scene of destruction steadily died away leaving an area filled with a far greater number of smaller asteroids than just a few minutes earlier. But of the miner's horror itself there was no sign at all.

Though the tight fitting vacuum suits Cal and Lara wore saved time in putting them on and allowed them much greater manoeuvrability than a bulkier pressurised space suit they were not designed to for spending prolonged periods in the freezing temperatures of space. To try and conserve more heat the two Jedi siblings sat huddled together while in front of them a distress beacon pulsed with light each time it emitted its signal.

"This is the *Bright Hope*," Ren voice crackled over the communications frequency, "Does anyone down there need a ride?"

"Ren yes!" Cal called out as he and Lara looked upwards, searching for their ship.

It appeared over the horizon behind them and Lara waved.

"Down here!" she said as they both got up and as Ren brought the *Bright Hope* in to land they ran towards it.

Ren was waiting just inside the airlock, clutching a pair of emergency blankets that he handed to the Jedi as the inner hatchway opened.

"Thanks." Cal said as he ripped open the packet and wrapped the foil sheet around himself, "Now what's going on with the miner's horror?"

"Did you kill it?" Lara added, spitting out the tiny piece of her blanket's packaging that had become lodged in her mouth when she bit it open.

"No." Ren answered, shaking his head, "I made it as far as open space, but the damn thing wouldn't follow outside the asteroids. I tried a torpedo shot, but it retreated before getting hit."

"But it must have been a pretty big explosion." Lara said, "Are you sure it didn't get caught up in it?"

"I'm certain." Ren said, "Though if anyone's been trying to map the asteroid field, they'll have to redo that bit."

Cal sipped at a hot drink, still trying to get the feeling of coldness from his body as he studied the records of Ren's encounter with the miner's horror.

"See?" Ren said to him, "The thing seems to avoid leaving the safety of the asteroid field."

"Hardly surprising." Cal replied, "They asteroids contain its food source. You were so far away it probably thought that it wasn't worth the trouble of continuing to chase you when there were easier pickings to be had."

"Yeah, well unless you can bring some serious firepower to bear that thing's going to keep on munching its way through the asteroids as well as any ship that's unlucky enough to get in its way. Your guns didn't even slow it down."

"But the torpedoes would." Cal replied, "And we still have nine of them left aboard."

"Torpedoes? Are you insane?" Ren exclaimed, "You saw what one torpedo did, even with a partial lock. Start firing those things off amongst all these rocks and you'll tear this ship apart before you hit that creature."

"I'm not planning on firing them." Cal said.

"Not firing them? What are you planning on doing then? Just hurling them at the thing and hoping you can teach it to go fetch? It's not a dog."

At that moment the cockpit door opened and Lara stepped in, her hair wet from the hot shower she had taken to try and warm herself up. She just about caught the word 'dog' from Ren's statement and she looked at Cal, frowning. Then she punched his arm.

"Stop telling people you told mom and dad that you wanted a dog but got me instead!" she snapped.

"Hey that hurt." Cal said, rubbing his arm where Lara had struck it, "And I wasn't telling anyone that. Tell her Ren."

"Sorry man." Ren replied with a smile, "I'm not covering for you." And Lara punched Cal's arm again.

"And that's for lying about it." she said.

"Will you sit down and stop hitting me?" Cal said to his sister.

"Yeah," Ren added, "he's got an idea. Allegedly."

Cal sighed.

"Look." He said, pointing to the images of the torpedo shot recoded by the *Bright Hope's* optical sensors, "That asteroid was several thousand metres across but the torpedo shot completely annihilated it."

"But Ren still missed the creature." Lara pointed out.

"Yes, but it only survived because it had put a few million tonnes of rock and a considerable distance between it and the explosion. Judging by the damage that the Bright Hope's lasers did to its shell even a near miss with a torpedo would crack it open like an egg."

"But how do you get a torpedo near it?" Ren asked, "Our sensors can't track it too well in here. The field's just too dense."

"I know." Cal replied, "So we need to bring the creature to the torpedoes."

"I tried that." Ren said, "It didn't follow me."

"Oh no." Lara said, "I think I know what my brother's talking about. No Cal, you can't do it. You saw what that torpedo did."

"What is he talking about?" Ren asked, looking from Lara to Cal and back again.

"Mines." Lara said, "He's thinking of dumping our torpedoes out in space and detonating them remotely."

"Holy poodoo! Are you out of your kriffing jedi mind?" Ren exclaimed, "You'll take us with that thing!"

"No I won't." Cal said, far more calmly, "We'll lay the mines near the edge of the asteroid field and do exactly what you did. We'll head for the edge and then put on a massive burst of speed to get us clear, half a million kilometres should do. Then we'll trigger all the mines together while the miner's horror in among them. The combination of the torpedo warheads and fragmenting asteroids should be more than enough to deal with it."

Both Lara and Ren frowned as they stared at Cal.

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

"I've got a really bad feeling about this." Lara added.

6.

Lara took the helm of the *Bright Hope* for the mine laying exercise. Meanwhile Cal and Ren stood in the hold along with the ship's remaining proton torpedoes. Each of these had been modified by connecting its data receiver directly into its firing circuit; as soon as the correct command was sent from the Bright Hope they would detonate. As Lara made low passes over several asteroids, selected for their size and proximity to the edge of the asteroid field Cal and Ren simply dropped the torpedoes through the cargo hatch in the hold floor and watched as they were caught by the weak gravity of the asteroids and dropped to the surface below.

"That's the last of them." Cal said as he closed the hatch and waited for the hold to pressurise.

Ren removed his helmet and looked at Cal.

"Okay, so your toys are deployed. Now what?" he asked.

"Now we head back to the cockpit and go hunting for that creature. Then we lead it back here."

"By 'lead it back here' I take it you mean we run away just fast enough to stop it tearing us apart, but not so fast we outrun it completely?" Ren asked.

"Well it worked the last time." Cal replied.

"Barely." Ren replied.

"Trust me." Cal said, "This will work. I've got a good feeling about this."

"Move over." Cal said to his sister when he and Ren arrived in the cockpit.

Lara frowned and got up from the pilot's seat. She was about to sit down in her usual co-pilot's seat when Ren appeared also.

"Not there." He said.

"But Cal said-" Lara began.

"Just get behind me." Cal interrupted, "I'm sorry but we can't use this run to teach you piloting. I want Ren ready to take over just in case."

"So how are we going to do this?" Ren asked, looking at Cal from the seat next to him.

"Same as before." Cal replied.

"Only without us nearly freezing to death hopefully." Lara commented.

"Yes, well of course without that." Cal said, rotating his chair so he faced Ren and Lara, "Once we've located the creature we'll get it to follow us and lead it into the area we've mined."

"Then we smooosh it?" Lara asked holding up her hands and spreading out her fingers as miming the effects of an explosion.

"Yes. But stop using that word. Its not real." Then he glanced at Ren, "A dog wouldn't keep saying 'smooosh'." He added and as Lara swung a fist at his arm Cal reached out and caught it, "Ha. You need to learn that if you keep on - Ow!" and Cal let go of Lara's fist to rub his shin where she had just kicked him. Meanwhile Lara just smirked.

"If you two are quite done." Ren said, "I'd actually like to get on with hunting that thing. Bizarrely going looking for a miner's horror worries me less than floating about in an asteroid field that's full of enough armed proton torpedo warheads to take out a small continent."

"We're ready." Cal replied as he turned to face the controls again, "Ren watch the sensors and Lara call out if you sense it. You know what to look for?"

"Yeah, hunger." Lara replied, sounding unconvinced about the whole scheme. Then Cal took hold of the control column and flew the *Bright Hope* deeper into the asteroid field.

Hunger.

When they found the miners' horror it was in the midst of devouring one of a cluster of smaller asteroids, barely larger than the *Bright Hope* itself.

"Looks like it's found itself quite a meal." Ren said, studying the data being returned by the ship's active sensors, "Those asteroids are full of metals."

"Though not as concentrated as us I'm guessing." Cal replied.

"But if it's busy eating how are we going to get it to come after us?" Lara asked, "Unless you're planning to fly right up to it."

"No." Cal replied, "I want to keep some distance between us. Ren let it know we're here."

"Gotcha." Ren replied and taking hold of the controls in front of him, he fired the *Bright Hope's* weapons.

The scarlet energy bolts blasted a channel across the surface of the asteroid currently being eaten by the miner's horror and pitted the creature's shell some more. As intended, this let the creature know that the *Bright Hope* was there and as it compared the contents of its current meal to the *Bright Hope* it determined that the starship was a far more tempting morsel.

"It's seen us!" Cal exclaimed as the miner's horror lifted away from the asteroid and turned towards them. At the same time he pulled on the control column and turned the *Bright Hope* around sharply, "Lara, Ren, keep an eye on that thing. Let me know if I'm getting too far ahead."

Though technically Ren was a better pilot than Cal, the young Jedi's ability to use the Force to guide his actions gave him an edge over pure skill and the smuggler noticed that Cal piloted the *Bright Hope* not only at a higher speed through the asteroids but also seemed to be able to anticipate the where they would appear and steered accordingly.

"We're pulling ahead." Lara cautioned her brother as she felt the sensation of hunger fading.

"We're fine." Ren said, "It's not showing any indication of giving up."

Cal said nothing however, instead focusing single minded on the task of piloting the *Bright Hope* towards the minefield. But a slight smile appeared on Lara's face as she noticed the sound of the ship's engines change slightly, indicating that he was following her advice over Ren's by cutting its speed.

"Mines ahead!" Ren snapped as the *Bright Hope's* sensors indicated the presence of the proton torpedoes still in place on the asteroids.

"I see them." Cal said, breaking his concentration right as the ship flew between the first of the mined asteroids, "Get ready."

Passing through the minefield the *Bright Hope* emerged into the open space outside the asteroid field and Cal increased engine power to maximum. This lasted less than a minute, long enough to put more than a light second between the ship and the asteroids when Cal turned the ship around and brought it to a complete halt.

"You've gone too far." Ren said, "It'll never see us this far out."

"I don't want it to." Cal replied, "I want it to have to stop and think. Right in the middle of our mines. Look, that's exactly what it has done." And he pointed to the optical sensor display that was focused on the area of the minefield. There the miner's horror waited motionless, searching for its prey. With a smile on his face Cal slammed his hand down on the communications controls and sent the signal to detonate the mines.

"What the hell?" Lara said as she watched the asteroid belt through the cockpit canopy, expecting to see the explosion, "Weren't those torpedo warheads supposed to explode?"

"Give it time." Cal replied.

"Time? But Cal-" Lara began and then she was interrupted by the cockpit canopy suddenly turning black to protect the occupants from the light brighter than a sun as the results of the explosion finally reached out as far as the *Bright Hope*. "Wow." Lara said then she looked at Cal and added, "You never said anything about a timer."

"Because there wasn't one." Ren said, "Look how far out we are. It took a second or so for the command to reach the mines and as long again for the light from the explosion to get back to us."

"Simple physics." Cal added, "Now let's go see how much damage we did."

Blasted by the torpedo warheads and bombarded by rock fragments, no asteroid larger than about a metre could be detected for almost a thousand kilometres in every direction. Likewise, the miner's horror itself had been ripped apart and more than a dozen pieces of it could be identified as they tumbled lifelessly through space, slowly getting further and further apart from one another.

"I told you it would work." Cal said with a smile.