

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

5-10: LOOT & PLUNDER

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When a garbled call for help is received from a newly established colony Teron Sharr is suspected and the Udras sent to investigate. What they find is a disturbing pattern of death and destruction along with the removal of all advanced technology...

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1.

The sound of multiple explosions boomed out as the man ran into the colony's primary building while blaster bolts flew through the air behind him. The colony was too new to have a standing defence force and protecting it came down to a handful of light anti-space weapons and whatever small arms could be put into the hands of whoever was willing and able to put up a fight. None of this was enough to keep the colony's attackers at bay though and the only hope seemed to be that the very same Republic that the settlers had turned their backs on could send help before they were overwhelmed.

"Have you got through yet?" the panicked man exclaimed as he burst into the nearly deserted control centre while reloading the hunting blaster he held. Behind him the door dropped shut again and another of the staff engaged the security lock out, sealing them all inside.

"No, they're still jamming us. I'm trying to find a clear channel." the woman at the communication console responded.

"Well hurry. They've landed and they're making their way through the colony." the man said.

"So much for our vaunted defences. One missile battery and a pair of blaster cannons." the woman commented.

"Have they made any demands yet?"

"No, there's nothing from them at all. They didn't identify themselves when they came out of hyperspace, issue any warning before they fired and as far as I can tell they're keeping radio silence. The only channels with anything on are just computer chatter." the woman said before a smile suddenly appeared on her face, "A-ha!" she exclaimed, "I've found a channel that's outside their jamming."

"So get us some help. Quickly." the man told her.

"If you'll be quiet for a moment I will." the woman replied as she activated the colony's subspace communications array, "This is Hestra colony control. We are under attack. Four unidentified spacecraft. Our defences have been destroyed and the enemy is landing ground forces. We need help. Can anybody-" and then she was interrupted by the sound of an explosion from outside the colony control building as the subspace antenna was hit by a powerful energy blast fired from orbit, "Stang! They got the antenna." she said in dismay.

"Did the signal get out?" the man asked.

"I think so but whether anyone is close enough to get here in time is another matter." the woman said before there was a banging sound at the door as someone on the other side attempted to get in, "They're right outside." she whispered.

"Grand Master Ress." Jedi knight Jayk Udra said when the intercom in his quarters in the Jedi temple on Coruscant sounded and an image of the grand master of the Jedi Order himself appeared on the screen.

"Jedi Udra we've just picked a transmission that I think you ought to hear." the grand master replied.

"Of course grand master." Jayk said and then Ress began to play back the distorted message.

"This – Hestra – attack – four unidentified – destroyed – help." Jayk heard with varying amounts of static between each of the words.

"Hestra? I'm not familiar with the planet." Jayk said.

"No, I had to consult the archives as well. It seems that it's a new colony, less than a year old right out in Wild Space. Some bunch of idealists who wanted to get as far away from the Republic as they could and it looks like that idealism has turned around and bitten them. This came to us via the Sector Rangers. The Republic is sending a frigate from its anti-piracy force and I want your team along with them." Grand Master Ress told Jayk.

"You suspect Teron Sharr is involved?" Jayk asked and at the mention of the supposed Sith apprentice the grand master nodded.

"The Sector Rangers have been feeding us intelligence about shifts in the power structure of the underworld for weeks now and we know that Teron is at the heart of it. The region of space that the settlers on Hestra established their colony in is not known for raider activity, that's why they chose it. There just aren't that many targets out there to make piracy pay." he said.

"Yes I suppose even criminals have bills to pay." Jayk commented, "And you suspect that Teron is spreading his empire?"

"Possibly. Or alternatively these raiders could have lost out in a power struggle and are trying to get beyond his reach." Grand Master Ress answered, "The *Durrant* will be leaving orbit in twenty minutes. Can you get your people there in that time?"

"I think so. Everyone should be right here in the temple. I'll get them together and we'll leave immediately." Jayk said.

"Then get going and may the Force be with you." the grand master added before he terminated the link.

The YT-700 class light freighter *Swift Exit* left the Jedi temple's hangar less than ten minutes after Jayk and Grand Master Ress ended their conversation. Aboard were Jayk and his padawan Brae, who was also his daughter and the ship's owner Tylo Kurrast. Tylo was a former smuggler who had worked for the same criminal gang as Teron Sharr but had agreed to help the Jedi Order as part of a plea deal to avoid prison for his part in the stealing of artwork related to the ancient Sith. The three of them had travelled together for over two years now but recently they team had expanded when what the Jedi Order saw as the growing threat from Teron Sharr and his mysterious master had resulted in Jayk being given permission to add a third Jedi to their crew. This Jedi was Kat Maran, with whom Jayk had shared a romantic relationship for some time. For a number of years she had not operated regularly in the field except for occasions when she had been able to join Jayk and Brae. Other than this she had taught marksmanship to padawans at the temple firing range, a duty widely regarded as of low priority given the Jedi's only occasional use of ranged weapons.

"Any idea how long this will take?" Tylo asked when the frigate *Durrant* came into view ahead of them.

"No. It could be some time. Given how remote Wild Space is I doubt it will be less than a week." Jayk replied and Tylo winced.

"Oh that's just great." he said, "I told Zara it wouldn't take long."

"Tylo you didn't leave her tied to the bed did you?" Brae commented.

"No I did not. It's just that Zara is a real high class lady who-" Tylo began.

"Likes being-" Brae interrupted.

"Might just decide that she isn't really interested in a reformed criminal like me." Tylo in turn said over Brae.

"I am sure she will wait for you Tylo." Kat said.

"Really? You got that from her when you were talking?" Tylo asked.

"No but since her former employers have frozen all her assets she's still stuck in quarters at the temple. Where's she going to go?" Kat responded and Tylo sighed.

"As if it wasn't bad enough with two Jedi. No I have to put up with three." he said, shaking his head.

"Don't forget Cal." Brae pointed out, "He may be dead but he's still one of us."

"One of you? Listen kid I'd take Cal over any of you. At least he had a life before he died." Tylo said.

"*Swift Exit* this is *Durrant*." a voice said over the communication system suddenly, "You are cleared for docking. We'll be underway as soon as you're aboard."

"Copy that *Durrant*. We'll be aboard in two minutes." Jayk responded.

The *Durrant* was a militarised version of the consular-class cruisers often used to transport Republic diplomats around the galaxy. This was a well proven design that boasted a fast hyperdrive and sufficient firepower to deal with the converted transports and obsolete gunships that most pirates used. One thing that the ship did lack however, was an internal hangar and Tylo had to dock with an external port on the frigate's ventral hull before the freighter's occupants climbed up into the warship.

"Lieutenant Harn at your service master Jedi." the Bothan officer who met them as they were helped aboard by a pair of enlisted crewmen said, "I'm the *Durrant's* first officer. Captain Trasem has instructed me to make sure that you are properly looked after."

"Sounds like the captain is palming us off on a subordinate while he gets on with his job." Tylo commented.

Embarrassment.

The three Jedi all exchanged looks when they sensed Harn's reaction to Tylo's statement that made it obvious that it was true. The captain of the *Durrant* would obviously rather have been left to deal with this situation without having Jedi knights looking over his shoulder.

"Lieutenant Harn I am Jedi Knight Jayk Udra and I am in command of this mission. This is my padawan Brae and Jedi Knight Kat Maran is my second. Captain Kurrast is our pilot."

"I am pleased to be of service to you Jedi Udra. Perhaps I should show you to your quarters." the lieutenant suggested.

"I think that would be a good idea." Jayk replied and the Bothan officer pointed in the direction of the frigate's prow.

"This way please." he said.

As the Jedi had expected Harn led them to the detachable pod mounted directly beneath the frigate's flight deck. On the civilian model of this type of ship this was intended as a combination of luxury living quarters and escape pod for VIPs but on a military craft such as the *Durrant* it was far more functional than luxurious, with the example on this ship being designed to hold two dozen troops and if necessary act as a drop pod so that they could be deployed to a planetary surface without the frigate itself even having to come close to it.

"Well it's no worse than the *Swift Exit*." Brae said and Tylo frowned.

"Hey kid if you don't like my ship you're welcome to walk everywhere from now on." he said.

"This will do fine." Jayk told Harn, "Now if you don't mind we would like to review our mission briefing in more detail. There was little time before we left the temple."

"Of course master jedi. You may contact me on the intercom if you need me." Harn responded before he left the pod and closed the door behind him.

"So what do you think Jayk?" Kat asked, "Will this captain be a problem?"

"I doubt it Kat. We will leave him be for now and if it comes down to taking this ship into combat we'll defer to his experience for as long as possible. I'm sure he knows what he's doing. Now if the information Grand Master Ress gave me is accurate we won't get to Hestra for at least eight hours so I suggest we all make ourselves comfortable until then."

"Yeah I think there are some cabins over there with lockable doors if you and Kat want to make yourselves really comfortable together." Tylo said, smiling and Brae winced.

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

The jedi and Tylo entered the *Durrant's* flight deck just before the frigate dropped out of hyperspace and the white haired human sat in the captain's seat looked around at them.

"Jedi Udra is there a problem that my first officer can't handle?" Captain Trasem asked and then he glanced to one of the two rear duty stations when Harn sat.

"Captain I-" Harn began.

"I just wanted us to be present when we dropped out of hyperspace." Jayk interrupted the bothan, "Being able to see what is going on for ourselves is always better than waiting for information to be relayed from someone else. Especially if they suddenly find themselves with more serious matters on their minds."

"Fine but stay back there and try not to get in the way." Trasem said, turning to face forwards again just as the *Durrant* dropped out of hyperspace in the Hestra system.

"Shields up. Power to weapons." Trasem ordered, "Lieutenant Harn what do we have on comscan?"

"Nothing captain." Harn responded, "Sensors aren't reading any other vessels in the system and no energy pulses from the surface that would indicate weapons fire."

"Looks like we missed it." Tylo commented.

"Helm take us into orbit around the primary world. Lieutenant Harn get me communication with the colony. I don't want them thinking that we're the raiders coming back for another attack." Trasem said.

"Course laid in captain." the helmsman replied as he turned the ship towards Hestra. Meanwhile behind them Harn attempted to communicate with the colony.

"This is the Republic vessel Durrant calling Hestra colonial command do you read me? Hestra is anybody there?" he said before switching channels and continuing to broadcast his message, "Come in Hestra this is the Republic frigate Durrant. What is your situation?"

"I have a very bad feeling about this." Jayk said.

"Me too." Brae added.

"Do you sense something?" Kat asked, knowing that Brae's ability to sense the Force was unusually strong even for a jedi but Brae shook her head.

"No, that's just it. I'd have thought that a colony full of people would give off more of a presence in the Force. Especially one that ought to be afraid of an attack by pirates." she said.

"Tylo perhaps you should return to the *Swift Exit* and prepare it for launch." Jayk suggested.

"I give the orders on my ship Jedi Udra." Trasem said when he heard this.

"The *Swift Exit* is not your ship captain. It has been chartered by the Jedi Order." Jayk pointed out.

"Chartered, right. More like requisitioned." Tylo said.

"You could always have gone to prison. Then dad and I could fly your ship wherever we wanted while you weren't using it." Brae said.

"I'm going. The ship will be ready in ten minutes." Tylo responded.

"Captain Trasem regardless of whether we are able to make contact with the colony we are going to have to go down to Hestra to investigate. Surely you must agree that it would be better to have the *Durrant* hold position in orbit where it can provide orbital cover and react immediately should the raiders return?"

Irritation.

It was immediately obvious that Captain Trasem agreed with Jayk's assessment but he did not like having it pointed out to him on his bridge.

"Very well Jedi Udra you may take your ship to the surface. But it's my job to get boots on the ground as well so I want you to take a squad of judicial marines with you." he said.

"Of course captain. Their presence will be most welcome." Jayk replied.

2.

There was still no contact with the colony on Hestra when the *Durrant* entered orbit, nor did the frigate's sensors pick up any signs of activity on the surface and the crew of the *Swift Exit* prepared to journey down to find out what had happened for themselves. They were joined by a unit of ten Judicial Department marines, all of them armed with blaster rifles and wearing vacuum resistant armour. Ordinarily the *Swift Exit* could not carry fourteen people but for the short hop from orbit to the surface this was not an issue.

"Are you sure you don't want someone on the turret?" Tylo asked over the intercom while the three Jedi and the marines gathered in the transport's cargo hold and he manned the controls in the cockpit.

"No not this time Tylo." Jayk responded, "If we do come under attack then the *Durrant* can provide us with fire support from space and I want Brae and Kat here with me and the marines so we can disembark as soon as we touch down."

"Okay then. In that case hold on because I'm going to take us down quickly so this might get a bit bumpy." Tylo said before he shut off the intercom and there was the sound of the *Swift Exit* disengaging from the *Durrant's* ventral docking port.

Tylo fired the freighter's ion drive at full power just briefly, sending the ship racing towards the atmosphere of Hestra, bringing the repulsorlift engines on line as soon as it was deep enough within the atmosphere for them to function.

"I'm not picking up any kind of beacon." Tylo announced over the intercom as the *Swift Exit* continued to descend through the atmosphere, "If it weren't for the concentrated metallic mass that I'm taking to be the colony our sensors are picking up I wouldn't have a clue where to head."

It did not take long to get to a low enough altitude that he could attempt to use the *Swift Exit's* visual sensors although the timing of their arrival, during the hours of darkness, did not make this very easy and Tylo had to make use of a combination of the *Swift Exit's* running lights turned up to full power and the night vision system added to the ship by the Jedi Order.

"Stang Jayk you should see this." he said into the intercom when he looked at the screen in front of him. This showed the shape of the colony structures, all of which appeared to be the usual pre-fabricated types used when setting up new settlements or outposts far from modern construction facilities, "This place really took a pounding."

The colony was built around a large hexagonal based pyramid that tapered inwards for about half its total height before an upper spire section that contained communication and tracking equipment made up the rest of the building. Or at least that was how Tylo assumed it would have appeared if he had been looking at it a day or two earlier. Now most of the spire had fallen to the ground and that was only the start of the damage that the nascent colony had suffered. A number of the other structures were also either partially collapsed or reduced to burned out wrecks while the remains of a number of vehicles could be seen scattered around. This included several that looked as if they had been lined up to try and create a barricade close to the central pyramid but it was obvious that this improvised fortification had failed to protect the building.

"Are there any signs of life?" Jayk asked.

"None that I can see." Tylo answered, "Pretty much everything looks smashed. Unless-."

"Unless what?" Jayk said.

"For all the damage I can't make out any bodies. Someone must have survived to clear them up."

"Is there somewhere to set down?" Jayk said.

"Yes, I can see a landing platform that looks reasonably intact. I'll set us down there."

"Good. Give us enough time to disembark and then take off and circle. I want you to be our eyes in the air." Jayk told him.

"Understood. Stand by for landing in thirty seconds." Tylo replied.

The landing platform consisted of a raised platform covered in metal plating that as Tylo had said seemed to have suffered little damage during the attack and there was no indication of what had happened to whatever craft it had been intended for before the attack. This did mean that there was ample room for Tylo to set the *Swift Exit* down though and as soon as he did Jayk opened the access ramp in the cargo hold.

"Go! Go! Go!" the leader of the marines shouted while this was still lowering and the armoured soldiers all brought their rifles up to their shoulders as they charged down the ramp and jumped the final half metre to the platform before spreading out to watch in as many directions as possible while the Jedi followed them.

"Sergeant we'll start with the primary building." Jayk ordered and the Jedi and soldiers sprinted towards the pyramid directly ahead of the *Swift Exit*.

Because Tylo had landed the ship facing in this direction he was able to see the landing party as they rushed towards the pyramid, illuminated by the glowing blue blades of the Jedi's lightsabers as well as the smaller

lights of the glow rods mounted to the marines' rifles and as soon as he saw they were clear he closed the access ramp remotely and took off again. He kept the *Swift Exit* at a reasonably low altitude though so that he could continue to monitor what was going on on the ground simply by looking out of the cockpit's transparent canopy as well as using the ship's optical sensors.

On the ground below as the landing party rushed towards a doorway they saw leading into the pyramid, it was wide open and when they reached it the marines deployed either side before one of them tossed a chemical light stick inside.

"Judicial marines!" the squad leader yelled to announce their presence as they then went inside the pyramid themselves to any survivors and hopefully convince them to come out of hiding. However, as they made their way deeper inside no-one revealed themselves.

"This place is a mess." Brae commented and Kat nodded as she studied their surroundings as well.

"It looks like everything has been taken." she said, noticing that wherever there ought to have been some sort of control panel in the walls it had been ripped out. In addition to this every doorway that the landing party passed either stood or had been forced open and the motors used to move the doors themselves had been removed along with the controls.

"If the schematic is right then the colony control is five levels up and there should be a turbolift at the end of this hallway just around the corner." the marines' squad leader said.

"An if my guess is right then I doubt that the turbolift will be functional Sergeant Enopa." Jayk responded.

"Looks like we're using the stairs then. Assuming those haven't been stolen as well." Brae commented.

As Jayk expected the turbolifts had been stripped of components just as everywhere else the landing party had seen had been and they were instead forced to use the emergency stairs located beside it.

"Advance by sections." Sergeant Enopa ordered and while half his men remained just inside the stairwell, watching the hallway outside and also the stairs down to the basement sub-levels he led the other half up to the next floor before the two groups swapped roles. The three jedi would have simply kept moving had they been alone but to avoid splitting the landing party any further they waited for each group of marines to catch up and continued up the stairs with them so that they were always in the lead until they reached the floor on which the control centre was to be found.

This part of the colony building was in the same condition as the previous areas that the landing party had seen with instrument panels torn out of their mountings and missing. Upon reaching the entrance to the command centre itself the marines repeated what they had done at the entrance to the pyramid and positioned themselves either side of the destroyed doorway.

"Judicial marines!" Enopa shouted as he tossed another chemical light into the room and then the three jedi led the way into the room.

"It's gone. All of it gone." Kat said as she looked around the room. Ordinarily a colony command centre would have been full of electronic equipment. Directing a newly established colony was highly centralised and this one room would have been used for controlling utilities, logistics, record keeping and handling communications. All this required the extensive use of computers but now there was not a single piece of electronic equipment left in the room. Emergency shutters had been closed over the windows that ran all the way along one of the command centre's walls but the windows themselves were still smashed, the transparent material scattered on the floor nearby. The presence of large black marks on the inside of the shutters indicated that these had been shot out after the shutters closed and there were more such marks on other surfaces in the room.

"There is a significant amount of carbon scoring in here." Jayk said.

"They went down fighting." Brae commented.

"But where are 'they'? We still haven't seen a single body since we got here." Kat pointed out.

"Maybe not but we have blood stains." Enopa said as he crouched down beside a dark patch on the floor beside a mounting for a computer console that now stood empty.

"I think that whatever happened here finished well before we arrived." Jayk said, shutting off his lightsaber and returning it to his belt, "Sergeant Enopa we need to conduct a full search of this colony starting with every room in this building There may be some piece of equipment somewhere that the raiders missed that will contain some record of what happened. Plus the Republic's records suggest that there were more than five hundred beings living here. We need to find them as well."

3.

For a single squad of marines and three jedi to search the entire colony was possible only by dividing their force considerably and the marines broke into pairs while the jedi searched as individuals. They began by searching the rest of the level on which the command centre was located before moving down through the pyramid. Each level painted the same picture however, with rooms devoid of any signs of either technology or the settlers until the search reached the basement sub-levels. Here one of the marine search teams found a large chamber that looked as if it had housed the colony's main fusion reactor before it had been removed just like all of its other technology. In its place were the bodies of hundreds of people laid out in neat rows. "Is this everyone?" Kat said in amazement when the entire landing party gathered to inspect the corpses, "All the colonists I mean."

"We don't have an exact number but I think so." Jayk replied.

"Even younglings. Look." Enopa added and he pointed to where a number of smaller corpses had been lined up as well. Disturbingly these looked to have been arranged in order of size. All of the corpses appeared to have suffered violent deaths but the injuries inflicted on them varied from energy burns to blast injuries and blunt force trauma. Disturbingly a number of them had precise blaster burns to their heads in addition to various other injuries that suggested they had been finished off after being injured.

"Why would someone do this?" Brae asked.

"I think they were searching the bodies. Arranging them in an orderly fashion made sure that none of them were missed." Jayk said.

"But looking for what?" one of the marines added.

"Technology." Kat said, halting and crouching down beside one of the bodies.

"What have you found Kat?" Jayk said as he walked over to her.

"Take a look at this guy's eye." she replied, turning the head of the body beside her so that Jayk could see the empty socket.

"What eye. I can see from here he doesn't have one." Enopa commented.

"No, he lost it some time ago I think." Jayk responded.

"What do you mean?" Enopa asked.

"He means that this guy had an artificial eye. A proper cybernetic implant." Kat told the marine sergeant.

"Let me guess, someone ripped it out." Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"Yes, they left the nerve interface but the eye itself is gone. I expect anything like this on any of the others that had any sort of medical technology in their bodies." he said.

"I need to call this in." Enopa said, reaching for his comlink, "Enopa to *Durrant*." he said into the device.

"Go ahead sergeant." Lieutenant Harn's voice responded.

"Lieutenant we've found hundreds of bodies in the basement of the central building. It looks like all the colonists were slaughtered." Enopa told him.

"Can you confirm that sergeant? Did you say all of them?" Harn asked.

"That's our estimate sir. They're all lined up down here. Whoever did this went over every one of them and took any technology they found. The same goes for everywhere else. This place has been completely stripped. Of anything useful."

"Is Jedi Udra there with you?" Trasem's voice added.

"I'm here captain." Jayk replied.

"Jedi Udra we'll need to take those bodies back to Coruscant for a proper examination. From the numbers I saw I doubt that your little freighter will take them all. That means I'm going to have to land the *Durrant* whether you like it or not." Trasem said.

"Yes captain I understand. In the mean time Kat, Brae and I will continue to explore the colony to see whether there are any clues about the identity of the raiders who did this." Jayk said.

"Very well. *Durrant* out." Trasem replied and the channel went dead.

"Sergeant we will leave you and your squad to deal with these bodies. Brae, Kat, with me." Jayk said and as the jedi headed back up the stairs the marines began to organise themselves to move the corpses of the colonists to the surface where they could be loaded aboard the *Durrant* once it touched down.

When the jedi entered one of the outlying buildings they found that the interior was in exactly the same state as the main pyramid with the only remaining contents a few pieces of overturned furniture and Jayk picked up a chair before sitting down on it.

"Both of you find a seat. Brae I'd like to consult with Cal." he said and after the other jedi sat down Brae reached inside her robes to take out the fist sized crystalline cube she had under it, holding it in her lap. As

soon as she did this the cube glowed and a hologram of an older man in Jedi robes appeared. This was Cal Udra, a distant ancestor of Jayk and Brae who had when he was alive millennia earlier had created a virtual version of himself to act as the gatekeeper to his holocron.

"You require my advice?" Cal said as he looked around.

"Yes. Cal have you ever heard of any groups that loot all technology from a planet?" Jayk asked.

"That's a tough one Jayk." Cal answered, "Back when I was alive there were all sorts of tales floating around about alien raiders. Some wanted technology, some certain minerals and others were slavers." then he smiled and added, "There were a fair few movies about the last one. Typically involving aliens with a specific interest in young women."

"Yeah, we still get those." Kat commented.

"I think Tylo has a collection of some of the more exotic ones." Brae added, "Of course now he has Zara he won't be needing them any more."

"Cal we've got a colony of corpses that has been plundered for every last piece of modern technology. The raiders even went so far as to tear prosthetics out of people's bodies." Jayk said.

"I thought it was odd that I couldn't pick up any wireless networks anywhere." Cal said, "What about vehicles?"

"The only ones left are burned out wrecks. Nothing in them worth taking." Brae replied.

"The nearest thing to this I ever heard about was an incident involving a species that had only just obtained hyperspace technology. They bought it from free traders from the Republic and the price they paid was anything but free. They almost bankrupted their entire planet to get the technology. After that they wanted more Republic technology but weren't in the mood to pay for any of it so they started sending out raiding parties looking for remote outposts that they could plunder before Republic forces could respond." Cal said.

"So what happened to them?" Brae asked.

"The usual. Eventually they were identified and a Republic task force launched retaliatory strikes that took out all of their hyperspace capable ships." Cal said, "Of course I wasn't actually involved in the operation, it was centuries before my time."

"This is Wild Space. Lots of the systems aren't properly charted. There could be a civilisation like that nearby." Kat pointed out.

"I'm not so sure." Jayk said.

"Why not dad?" Brae responded.

"Because the blast marks we've seen all appear to come from weapons with a level of technology equal to our own. I'd have expected a more primitive species to be using more primitive weapons." Kat said.

"Exactly." Jayk added.

"Like pulse wave weapons?" Cal suggested, "The effects of those are pretty easy to recognise. It looks like a Wookiee swung a very big hammer."

"So if an alien raiding force is out then that brings us back to criminals." Kat said, "Maybe the council is right. They were either driven here to get away from Teron Sharr or maybe he sent them."

Just then Jayk's comlink sounded and he raised it to his mouth.

"Yes?" he said.

"Jedi Udra it's Lieutenant Harn we've just picked up a distress signal from an independent scout ship in a neighbouring system, they're under attack." Harn said.

"We're on our way." Jayk replied as he got back to his feet, "Have Tylo rendezvous with us in the air."

4.

As soon as they returned to the *Durrant* the trio of Jedi hurried to the flight deck to discover exactly what was happening and before they even got there they felt the frigate taking off.

"What can you tell us captain?" Jayk asked.

"Nothing much Jedi Udra. We received a brief distress signal that gave us the name of the ship under attack, the *Pree-Val* and a location in a system three parsecs from here." Captain Trasem told him.

"Course laid in captain. ETA nine minutes after jump." the *Durrant's* navigator said.

"We'll be out of the gravity well in four minutes." the helmsman added.

"Four minutes?" Trasem responded, "We should be able to do that in two."

"Yes captain but we have to rendezvous with the *Swift Exit* and docking will take time." the helmsman pointed out.

"Jayk people's lives are at risk." Kat commented and Jayk nodded.

"Lieutenant Harn could you contact the *Swift Exit* and give Tylo the jump co-ordinates? We'll meet him at our destination instead." he said before he looked at Trasem and added, "I think that will buy you your extra two minutes captain."

"Helm get us out of this gravity well. Full burn and jump as soon as we're clear." Trasem ordered.

"Yes captain." the helmsman said.

The *Durrant* quickly cleared Hestra's gravity well and as soon it was outside it the helmsman engaged the frigate's hyperdrive, propelling the ship into hyperspace.

"I want all weapons ready by the time we drop to normal space," Trasem told the *Durrant's* small command staff, "and make sure that our shields are raised as soon as possible. If we're coming out in the middle of a firefight then I don't want our ship to be disabled by a fluke shot before we're ready."

"Lieutenant Harn could you tell whether Tylo managed to jump the *Swift Exit* in tandem with us?" Jayk asked, leaning over Harn's console.

"I'm sorry Jedi Udra, I'm not sure. Our last readings did show a build up of power in the hyperdrive of your vessel but we definitely made the jump before it did so I can't confirm anything." the bothan answered.

"He did, I'm certain." Brae commented.

"A light freighter with its turret unmanned isn't going to make any difference to us." Trasem added.

The *Durrant* came out of hyperspace just a few minutes later, almost exactly when the navigator had said it would and now the ship found itself heading towards a large frozen planet orbited by two barren seeming moons. Also in orbit above the planet was a small starship that had obviously been attacked.

"Weapons powered and shields up captain." the combat officer reported seconds after the frigate returned to realspace, "Just the one target on our scopes though."

"Captain I'm picking up a transponder." Harn announced as soon as he scanned the other vessel.

"Is it the *Pree-Val*?" Trasem asked and Harn nodded.

"Yes captain. These readings indicate she's taken a beating but she's intact and she's got atmosphere."

"Then the crew could still be alive." Kat said in relief.

"Second contact, just exiting hyperspace." Harn added as the *Durrant's* sensors detected the burst of cronau radiation that indicated a ship either entering or exiting hyperspace.

"Lock weapons. Helm bring us about." Trasem said.

"Captain it's the *Swift Exit*." Harn announced.

"Stand down weapons." Trasem ordered, "Lieutenant Harn get me comms with the *Pree-Val*."

"Yes captain." Harn responded as he activated the *Durrant's* short range communications, "*Pree-Val* this is the Republic Judicial frigate *Durrant*, do you read me?"

"*Durrant* thank the Force." a relieved sounding voice replied moments later, "We were starting to think that we'd all die out here."

"*Pree-Val* what is your status?" Harn asked,

"Our hyperdrive is out. They disabled it with their first shot while we were trying to plot a jump out of here.

The back up as well. Then they took out our subspace communications and sensors right before they withdrew." the voice from the scoutship said.

"They just withdrew?" Trasem commented, "It's not like pirates to abandon a helpless target like that."

"Especially not ones as bloodthirsty as the group we seem to be dealing with." Jayk added, then he frowned.

"What's wrong?" Kat asked when she noticed this.

"Captain may I use your communications?" Jayk asked.

"Be my guest." Trasem replied.

"Thank you." Jayk said as he leant over Harn's station again, "*Pree-Val* when exactly did the pirates withdraw?" he transmitted.

"We'd just got off our distress signal a few seconds earlier." the crewman from the scoutship answered.

"Interesting." Jayk said, turning to Harn, "Lieutenant did you reply to the *Pree-Val*'s distress call?"

"Not in person, no. But the computer sent the connection confirmation." Harn told him.

"Captain that is your answer." Jayk said, "The raiders knew that the *Pree-Val* had got off a distress signal and detected the connection, possibly even identifying it as coming from a Republic Judicial Department vessel. They destroyed the *Pree-Val*'s long range communications to prevent them from alerting us to the fact that the pirates had gone and then left before we got here."

"So now they know they're being hunted." Kat said.

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

"Why not just destroy the ship?" the combat officer said.

Frustration.

"Because this way they know we have to wait here while we get that ship able to travel again. In the meantime they can attack any target they want." Trasem said, knowing that by leaving the scoutship just about intact and its crew alive it would cost him time that he could have better used trying to track down the pirates.

"They may have slowed us down captain but in leaving the *Pree-Val* intact they have left something that we did not have at Hestra." Jayk said.

"You mean living witnesses?" Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"Quite correct Brae." he responded, "Even if their sensor logs have been destroyed the crew of the *Pree-Val* will have seen their attackers themselves. Captain Trasem I'd like to go over to the *Pree-Val* with the relief crew."

"Be my guest." Trasem told him.

The *Swift Exit* docked with the *Durrant* before the frigate manoeuvred to dock with the crippled *Pree-Val* and this meant that Tylo was also able to join the boarding party that consisted of the three jedi, an engineering crew from the frigate and also one of the warship's medical officers. Although the *Pree-Val* was significantly larger than the *Swift Exit*, providing enough internal volume for everything that was needed to support its crew on an extended voyage through uncharted territory and without resupply from a base, the scoutship was still dwarfed by the Republic frigate as it pulled alongside. The *Durrant* then docked with the scoutship and the air lock slid open to reveal two of the crew.

Surprise.

"Jedi." one of them exclaimed when they saw Jayk, Brae and Kat.

"Is one of you the captain of this ship?" Jayk asked and one of the two men from the scoutship nodded.

"Yes, I am. Nolton Granner." he said.

"Captain Granner I am Jedi Udra. This is my padawan Brae, Jedi Maran and Captain Kurrast of the *Swift Exit*. The crew of the *Durrant* will see to any injuries or damage that you have suffered but I would like to talk to you about the pirates who attacked you." Jayk said.

"Of course. Come this way and I'll show you where we can talk." Nolton replied and while the other crewman showed the engineering team from the *Durrant* to the *Pree-Val*'s own engineering section he took the jedi and Tylo forwards to the flight deck.

As had been the case on Hestra there were signs of damage throughout the ship as the jedi and Tylo were led through it but this time it was much less extensive. Although the scoutship had been hit repeatedly by external weapons fire the pirates had not been able to get a boarding party aboard and so none of the *Pree-Val*'s internal systems had been ripped out.

"Here, I'll see if I can call up the sensor logs." Nolton said as he sat down at a console in the flight deck, "I've not had chance to check if the logs survived yet though. The pirates only left about ten minutes ago or so and I've had bigger things to worry about than checking the logs."

"That's alright captain. Any information will be helpful, even if it is just the testimony of the crew." Jayk told him.

Accessing the *Pree-Val*'s computer system showed that the data captured by the scoutship's sensors prior to them being disabled by the pirates had remained intact and Nolton brought up an image of the vessel that had attacked them.

"Looks like an old dimel-class assault ship." Tylo said when he saw the long tubular hull that tapered at the front. This class of warship was bigger than the *Pree-Val* but it would be no match for the *Durrant* in a fight and it was understandable that they would withdraw rather than risk fighting against it.

"It doesn't look in very good shape either." Brae commented, "Captain Granner can we zoom in on the forward section?"

"Sure." Nolton replied, adjusting the image to focus on the front of the attack ship where it narrowed to a point.

"Now that's strange." Kat said, "Their hull is holed."

"Yeah and right where their bridge would be." Tylo added, "The command crew of that ship were fighting in a vacuum."

"That doesn't make any sense." Nolton said, frowning, "Even if they were wearing vacuum suits they couldn't fly that ship for more than a few hours."

"Maybe they were using an auxiliary control centre." Brae suggested but Nolton shook his head.

"Even ships that have something like that don't run as efficiently from them as they do the main flight deck." he told her.

"You know I met a guy once who looked like a walking skeleton." Tylo said, "His species could survive in a vacuum for days on end without a suit."

"Yes, givin." Kat said.

"Well I met one once. He was a ship jacker who used to stow away aboard ships that he wanted to steal and plant charges to decompress them. Of course he'd survive when everyone else aboard suffocated and he could fly the ship back to his fence." Tylo said.

"Do you think this person could be supplying the pirates?" Brae asked and Tylo smiled.

"Not really kid. You see he made the mistake of stealing a ship that belonged to the brother of a friend of mine at the time." he replied.

"So another criminal." Brae commented.

"Yes so my friend wasn't about to go to the police. Instead she came to me and a bunch of her other friends and we tracked this givin down. Then we clamped him in binders and locked the guy to a seat in the cockpit of a ship that we opened to space." Tylo said.

"But what good would that do if givin can survive in space?" Brae said.

"Only for a few days." Kat pointed out.

"Exactly." Tylo said, "You or I would have died in about three to five minutes. I expect he was still desperately trying to get loose a week or so later when the oxygen he was able to store in his body would have finally run out."

"Givin would still prefer to repair the damage to their ship," Jayk pointed out, "and with everything that was taken from Hestra I don't doubt that they would have the resources to do it now."

"Hestra? They hit that colony as well?" Nolton said.

"I'm afraid so captain." Jayk answered, "The colonists were able to get a distress call out to the Republic though and that is what brought us and the *Durrant* here in the first place."

"I bet having to call you for help must have really irked them though. The settlers on Hestra really don't like you." Nolton said.

"You mean they didn't like us." Tylo said.

"By the time we arrived the raiders had killed everyone." Kat added and Nolton frowned.

"We've seen Hestra. There are younglings there. Are you saying that they're dead as well?" he said.

"Yes I'm afraid so. Your crew were very lucky Captain Granner." Jayk said and then Nolton's eyes widened.

Anger.

Fear.

"Is something wrong captain?" Kat asked.

"I have two smaller survey ships out there. Each with a four man crew. They scout out ahead of us and look for systems with promising resources. If those raiders have been monitoring us then they may have been able to establish connection traces to those ships."

"Stang." Tylo said.

"Can we recall them?" Kat suggested, "I know your transmitter is out but we can use the one on the *Durrant*."

"Sure, I'll give you the details." Nolton responded and Jayk took out his comlink.

"*Durrant* this is Jedi Udra." he said into it.

"Go ahead Jedi Udra." Harn responded.

"Lieutenant the *Pree-Val* has two advanced scouts assigned to it. We need to contact them and get them to return here. I'll forward you the communication details shortly. We also have visual footage of the vessel that the raiders are using." Jayk explained.

"Understood Jedi Udra. We'll issue the order as soon as you send the information." Harn said.

Jayk forwarded the information that the *Durrant* needed to get in contact with the two advanced survey ships and then waited for the response. However, this was not what they had hoped for.

"Jedi Udra we've been able to contact the Besh vessel and it's on its way back here now but the Aurek surveyor isn't responding." Harn told Jayk.

"So either they didn't get the message, aren't able to respond or they're already under attack." Tylo said.

"Captain Trasem has asked me to point out that we can't abandon the *Pree-Val*." Harn added.

"Understood lieutenant. We'll have to take the *Swift Exit*." Jayk said.

"Take the *Swift Exit*? Hey look Jayk my ship has one little laser cannon. Something that I would have upgraded if not for the Jedi Order deciding that that would be tantamount to turning her into a gunship and refusing to cough up the weapons or the permits for me to do it myself." Tylo said.

"I don't intend using the *Swift Exit* to attack the pirates, merely to make sure that the survey ship and her crew are alright. We'll jump to the system and try contacting them via radio. They may even already be back here in which case the *Durrant* can let us know and we can return." Jayk said.

"And if the pirates are waiting for us?" Tylo asked.

"As far as we know they don't know about the *Swift Exit*." Kat reminded him, "If they're expecting a ship to come and investigate then they'll be expecting the *Durrant* and they ran before we could get here the last time that happened."

"We'll am for a point a couple of light hours away from where the survey ship ought to be. That will give us the chance to spot the pirates before they spot us." Jayk said.

"And if the survey ship is under attack?" Tylo asked.

"Then we'll make a judgement about whether or not we can help." Jayk answered.

"Those are my people out there. Are you saying that you'll just abandon them?" Nolton said.

"We can't fight a warship with one puny laser cannon." Brae pointed out.

"Rest assured Captain Granner, we will do whatever we can." Jayk reassured him.

5.

Climbing into the *Swift Exit's* turret, Jayk double checked the freighter's only weapon while it was still in hyperspace. Just because he had told Tylo that they would not be performing a suicidal assault on a warship no matter how out of date it might be he saw no point in not preparing their defences just in case the pirates turned out to be closer than the jedi hoped.

"Realspace in five." Tylo said over the intercom, "Four. Three. Two. One."

The light of hyperspace then gave way to the blackness of realspace dotted with millions of stars and Jayk turned the turret through three hundred and sixty degrees in search of a target. However, as he had hoped he found nothing in range.

"Do we have a fix on the survey ship?" he asked.

"Jayk I think I've got her." Kat responded, "Only she's not alone. She's under attack."

"Okay I'm plotting the jump out of here. They must have seen our arrival." Tylo said.

"Wait." Kat added, "These readings aren't right. This isn't the same ship that attacked the *Pree-Val*."

"Let me see." Tylo said, leaning across to look at the display Kat was watching beside him and he saw that the sensor readings did not match those of a dimel-class attack ship.

The vessel that the *Swift Exit's* sensors had detected was clearly far larger than a ninety metre long attack ship, appearing to be more than twice as long as the Durrant as well as much bulkier. However, the energy blasts being fired at the survey vessel which was obviously flying in an evasive pattern were not capital scale weapons.

"What sort of ship is that?" Brae said.

"It's a freighter kid." Tylo replied, "A Rin Assid bulk hauler that someone's stuck a couple of blaster cannons onto. Pretty good for storing plunder but it can't manoeuvre for poodoo. I'm plotting a micro jump to take us in closer."

"Closer? I thought you didn't want to take the *Swift Exit* into combat." Kat said and Tylo smiled.

"That was against a warship. This is a bulk freighter that I can fly rings around. Jayk do you think you can take out those cannons if I can get you close enough?" he said.

"Tylo you may not be able to use the Force but you are starting to think like a jedi." Jayk replied and Tylo winced.

"What a dreadful thing to say about a man. Okay here we go." he said he engaged the *Swift Exit's* hyperdrive again for the short jump of a few tens of millions of kilometres that took the freighter within range of the survey ship.

Although Tylo had only had a few seconds in which to work he was able to get the *Swift Exit* between the survey ship and the pirates and he raised his ship's shields before the pirates could target it. Then he turned the ship around and charged towards the bulk freighter.

In the turret Jayk turned the *Swift Exit's* laser cannon towards the pirate ship and started firing immediately to divert the pirates' attention away from the unarmed survey vessel. This had the desired effect and the bulk freighter turned its fire on the much smaller light freighter and several energy blasts impacted on the *Swift Exit's* shields. None of these were able to penetrate the shielding though and Tylo performed a rapid flyby of the bulk freighter while Jayk turned the turret to keep the pirate vessel in his sights.

"Something's wrong." Brae said as the *Swift Exit* passed close by the bulk freighter.

"What do you mean kid?" Tylo asked.

"I mean I can't sense anyone aboard that ship." Brae answered.

"Brae's right." Kat added, "I don't sense anyone either. That ship must be running on automatic."

"Then let's see if the autopilot can handle this." Tylo said a he performed a sharp turn and headed back towards the bulk freighter as it was ponderously turning to face its attacker.

"Try and take us over the upper hull." Jayk said over the intercom.

"Will do." Tylo said, guiding the *Swift Exit* towards the bulk freighter's dorsal hull and spinning the ship so that its turret remained facing the larger vessel.

Jayk fired a rapid burst of energy blasts into the bulk freighter and there were several small explosions as these penetrated the minimal shielding it was equipped with. Then Jayk spotted one of the bulk freighter's turrets though and he he turned his own weapon towards it before firing again, at which point there was another explosion as the blaster cannon was destroyed.

"Great shooting dad." Brae exclaimed when she saw this.

"That ship still has another two guns that we know of kid." Tylo pointed out as the *Swift Exit* shot past the bulk freighter, "Jayk are you up for another run?"

"Ready when you are Tylo." Jayk replied but as Tylo was turning around for a third strafing run the bulk

freighter abruptly vanished in a flash of light.

"Looks like they decided they'd had enough." Kat said before the *Swift Exit's* short range communication system activated.

"I don't know who you are but this is *Surveyor Aurek* and I think we owe you our lives." a female sounding voice said.

"This Jedi Maran aboard the *Swift Exit*. What is your status *Surveyor Aurek*?" Kat responded.

"Their first shots took out our hyperdrive and subspace comms. Fortunately our pilot used to fly fighters for the Trade Defence Force and those pirates weren't good enough shots to hit us again. Quite how long our luck would have held out though is another question." the woman aboard the surveyor said.

"Okay we'll pull along side and you can transfer to our ship. We can't do anything about your ship but we'll get you back to the *Pree-Val*." Kat said.

"How do you know that we came from the *Pree-Val*?" the woman asked.

"Because that's where we've just come from. Those pirates tried to hit her as well." Kat explained.

"Okay we're coming in. *Surveyor Aurek* out."

"I'm guessing you don't think this is a trap of any kind then?" Tylo asked as he watched the survey ship turn towards them.

"Kat told them we are jedi. Have you ever known pirates willingly mess with jedi knights?" Brae asked.

"Anyone working for Teron Sharr. What if this is one of his set ups? You said that bulk freighter had no-one aboard. Supposing it wasn't supposed to destroy the survey ship because the people aboard it are plants? We don't know what the original crew look like." Tylo said.

"I don't sense a trap." Brae said.

"Okay Tylo how about you lock yourself here in the cockpit while Jayk, Brae and I keep an eye on our guests? It's only an hour or so's flight back to the *Durrant* after all." Kat suggested.

"Fine but leave Cal with me. I want some company and he's the most normal one out of the lot of you." Tylo replied.

"Did you hear that Cal?" Brae asked as she took Cal's holocron from her robes, "You're normal."

"Well it's a step down from the near perfection I achieved in life I suppose but then again I am dead now." Cal responded as his hologram materialised in the cockpit.

Jayk, Brae and Kat met the crew of the survey ship inside one of the *Swift Exit's* airlocks, ready to draw their lightsabers if there was any indication of an ambush but when the airlock door slid open it revealed just four beings who were relieved just to be alive.

"You must be Jedi Maran. I'm Dassie Kel." the woman who was their leader said, stepping forwards to shake Kat's hand.

"Yes I'm Jedi Maran and this is Jedi Udra. He is in command of this mission and Brae is his padawan learner." Kat replied, pointing to Jayk and Brae in turn.

"Just how many jedi are there aboard this ship?" one of the other crew from the survey ship asked.

"Just us three. Why?" Brae answered.

"Our pilot isn't a jedi. He'll be staying in the cockpit for the flight. You'll meet him when we get back to the *Pree-Val*." Jayk added.

"Right okay. It's just that I thought you guys always go around in pairs." the man who had asked the question said.

"Well this time there are three of us. Now if you'd like to follow us we'll show you to the lounge and you can relax." Kat said.

"Hopefully you'll be able to come back and recover your survey ship later on but I'm afraid I can't guarantee it." Jayk added as they all began to walk towards the lounge.

"Jedi Udra you said that the *Pree-Val* had been attacked as well. What's her status?" the leader of the survey ship's crew asked while they walked.

"Like your survey ship she was damaged in the attack, losing both her hyperdrive and subspace communications capability." Jayk answered.

"These pirates don't like their victims being able to run or call for help." Brae added.

"Then she's helpless." Dassie said.

"No. There's a Republic frigate guarding her while repairs are made." Kat said as she opened the door to the lounge and they went inside.

"The Republic sent one of its few warships this far out? I've got a very bad feeling about this." the man who had spoken earlier commented.

"You're just naturally paranoid Stanza." another of the surveyor's crew commented.

"It's kept me alive until now." Stanza responded, "That and my ability to out fly a pirate gunner."

"Yes, I'd like to ask you about what happened." Jayk said while they all sat down, "Could you describe exactly what happened here? Did the pirates make any attempt to communicate with you?"

"None whatsoever." Dassie replied, "They just dropped out of hyperspace, scanned us and started shooting before we could get away."

"What I don't get is what they wanted with our little ship." another of the survey crew said, "We just conduct scans for the *Pree-Val* to follow up on. The only cargo we carry is our rations."

"They may have been after your ship itself." Kat said, "We've seen their handiwork and they seem very interested in stripping targets of any usable technology."

"They'd probably have stuck a blaster cannon on the front of your ship and added it to their fleet." Brae said.

"Fleet? So there's more than one pirate ship involved?" Stanza replied.

"At least two." Jayk told him, "The other one that we've seen is a dimel-class attack ship."

"And if that had attacked you then we probably wouldn't have been able to help you at all." Brae commented,

"Even if someone has already shot a gaping hole in it."

Jayk frowned when Brae mentioned this.

"What's wrong Jayk?" Kat asked, noticing the change in his expression.

"The dimel-class attack ship has a hole where its bridge is located so it would be difficult for most species to operate the ship efficiently." Jayk responded, "But what if it didn't have a crew at all?"

"You mean it could have been operating under remote control as well?" Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"Yes. A worrying possibility. Autopilot systems aren't supposed to be able to conduct combat operations. If someone is creating fully autonomous warships then this could represent a serious threat. Pirate fleets are limited by their ability to recruit crews who can be relied on to follow orders but with fully automated warships and a small band of pirates to carry out boarding actions and raids then there is no limit to how large their fleet could grow."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kat said, sighing.

6.

When the *Swift Exit* returned to the *Durrant* Tylo saw that the frigate was still docked with the *Pree-Val* and now there was also the other survey ship docked to the scout as well.

"For those of you wondering," Tylo said into the intercom, "the *Durrant* and the *Pree-Val* are still here safe and sound and the other survey ship looks to have made it back as well."

Then before any of the *Swift Exit*'s passengers could respond the freighter's external communications activated.

"*Swift Exit* this is the *Durrant*." Harn's voice said.

"Go ahead *Durrant*." Tylo replied.

"Captain Trasem would like to know what happened to the second survey ship." Harn said.

"You can tell your captain and also Captain Granner that the other survey ship is currently adrift. We managed to pull the crew off her but she was under attack when we found her and without hyperdrive or long range communications." Tylo explained.

"Understood. Pull alongside again and we can get the crew back to the *Pree-Val*, but not until Captain Trasem has had the chance to debrief them." Harn told him.

"Copy that *Swift Exit* out." Tylo responded as he flew towards the *Durrant*, lining the *Swift Exit* up with the ventral docking port again.

When the *Swift Exit* docked with the Republic frigate the occupants were led to the forward pod rather than the bridge where they found Captain Trasem waiting.

"Welcome back Jedi Udra." he said, "But wasn't your plan to avoid combat with the pirates?"

"That was my plan captain." Tylo replied before Jayk could answer, "A plan that was based on us thinking that the pirates were using a dimel-class attack ship."

Captain Trasem frowned,

"Aren't they? That's what we saw on the *Pree-Val*'s logs." he said.

"It appears we are dealing with more than one pirate vessel." Jayk told him and he walked over to a display screen mounted on the wall of the compartment. There was a small socket beside this that would accept a memory stick and Jayk took one from his belt and inserted it into the socket, "This recording was made by the *Swift Exit*'s sensors and it shows the vessel used in the attack on the survey ship. As you can see captain it is clearly not a dimel-class attack ship."

"Looks like a bulk freighter." Trasem commented.

"It is. A Rin Assid bulk hauler to be exact." Tylo said, "Room for a hundred thousand tonnes of loot providing you're not too worried about getting it to its destination quickly. Those things handle like dead banthas."

"Which is why we're still here." Stanza added.

"It doesn't seem like a very practical pirate ship to me. Even a lot of commercial ships could just outrun it." Trasem said.

"No but there is additional information to be considered Captain Trasem." Jayk replied.

"Such as?" Trasem asked.

"Such as the fact that it was unmanned." Brae answered and Trasem frowned.

"Unmanned?" he said, "What on Coruscant do you mean?"

"The kid means it didn't have a living crew. Not a single one. Unmanned as in not manned." Tylo said, smirking at the judicial officer.

"That may also explain the hole in the hull of the dimel-class attack ship." Kat added, "The pirates could have captured it by punching a hole in the hull to kill the crew then outfitted it for automated operation."

"But a warship without a crew? That's preposterous." Trasem said, "The nature of space combat is too shifting. No-one could write an autopilot program that could handle all the possibilities and civilisations have been trying to for thousands of years."

"I don't think that the pirates intend for these ships to go into battle against warships captain." Jayk said, "Consider the way that the dimel-class attack withdrew when it suspected that we were coming. Then after we demonstrated that the *Swift Exit* was capable of inflicting damage on it the bulk freighter quickly withdrew from combat as well."

"I'm sure you see the problem though captain. If the pirates are able to modify any ship to operate automatically then every ship lost to them is another in their fleet. They don't need to wait find a crew for them. Even an unarmed ship like a bulk freighter can be pressed into service as a carrier."

"That's probably why they gutted the colony of Hestra." Tylo said, "They wanted the parts for their autopilot system."

"Which could mean they already have other ships they are converting." Brae added.

"And if they get enough of them then they'll have a battle fleet that can attack military targets despite the limitations of an autopilot system." Jayk said.

"Stang. We need to tell the Republic, but what to tell them? We've no leads." Trasem said.

"We have at least one Captain Trasem." Jayk said, turning back to the footage playing of the bulk freighter on the display beside him and he jumped to a part of the video compilation that showed a close up of a relatively small area of the bulk freighter's hull, "This came from the *Swift Exit*'s gun camera and shows a partial registration number. Trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight. If we can run this against the Bureau of Ships and Services database then we might be able to identify the vessel and track its recent movements. At the very least it could get us a short list of possible vessels." he said.

Trasem reached out to a nearby intercom and activated.

"Lieutenant Harn this is the captain." he said into it.

"Yes captain?" Harn responded.

"Lieutenant there's an image on the monitor down here that I want you to pull. Run that partial serial number through BoSS and let me know what they come back with." Trasem ordered.

"Yes captain." Harn replied.

"In the mean time I think we should get you back to your own ship." Trasem added, looking at the crew of the survey vessel and then he pressed another button on the intercom that summoned one of the frigate's crewmen into the room, "Crewmen please escort these people back to the Pree-Val." he ordered and the crewman nodded.

"This way please." he said, beckoning for the four surveyors to accompany him, leaving Trasem alone with the crew of the *Swift Exit*.

"Captain we just got a response from BoSS." Harn's voice said over the intercom a few moments later.

"That was pretty quick." Kat commented.

"What did they say lieutenant?" Trasem asked.

"They identified six Rin Assid bulk haulers that have had the sequence trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight as part of their registration numbers. Two of these have been confirmed as scrapped and the locations of three others are all known."

"That only leaves one vessel." Tylo said.

"What do they have on the sixth vessel lieutenant?" Trasem said.

"She was last reported in the Corulag system about a year ago carrying a cargo of droids." Harn answered, "The last transmission was about fifteen minutes before the ship jumped into hyperspace when the crew reported finding a drifting escape pod that wasn't broadcasting a beacon and were about to bring it aboard." Harn said.

"A escape pod in the Corulag system." Tylo said, wincing.

"Oh no." Brae added.

"What's wrong?" Kat said as she and Captain Trasem looked at Jayk, Brae and Tylo, all of whom seemed to find this disturbingly familiar.

"About a year ago we encountered a droid designated K-six. It's life preservation programming had been removed and it saw all organic beings as enemies. It was modifying droids to kill their owners and stealing their property as it built up an army." Jayk explained.

"Let me guess." Kat replied, "You're about to tell me that the last time you saw this thing it was in an escape pod." and Jayk nodded.

"Ejecting from a ship it had just set on a collision course for one of Corulag's cities. Thanks to Tylo we were able to prevent the ship crashing and killing millions of beings but while we were distracted K-six disabled the beacon on its escape pod and vanished." he said.

"And obviously that thing got picked up by a ship that could have been carrying ten thousand droids it could turn into the army it wanted. Now it's on the loose out here in Wild Space and I'm willing to bet that it's working on expanding that army as well as building a fleet." Tylo said.

"So there is no autopilot system. The ships are being operated by droids programmed to kill." Kat said.

"It certainly seems that way." Jayk replied.

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