We were halfway to Mars when our fuel tank blew up! The force of the blast reminded me of my rugby days - it felt like I'd been tackled by the biggest player on the pitch. I picked myself up off the dusty floor. My walkie crackled.

"Mike, you all okay down there?" Silence.

"Mike? Come in..." Still nothing. I reached for my walkie and pushed the button.

"Saih, it's Jack. No sign of Mike. We're going to have to go down and check on them..."

It took a while for me to get my senses back in order. Saih and I were outside what was left of the cargo hold, where Mike and his team were guarding the dilithium. Since Saih had been promoted to Captain and I her First Mate, Mike had remained on our old vessel, working security. He had been worried about this new precious metal, which someone might attempt to steal it on route to Mars. He had insisted on being part of the security team. Saih and I had thought it would be great to have the team back together for one last job. Inside, it was a wreck - we could see that through the deflector glass - but we couldn't go in. Thick, choking gas was still pouring in from the explosion. The wail of the oxygen alarm told us all we needed to know; there was no one alive inside.

Drifting in space, the surveillance cams were about the only bit of tech left working on our now useless ship. The cameras had been tampered with, but Saih knew enough about digital recording to salvage some footage. We checked the external images. There it was, seconds before the blast... an escape pod fleeing. Saih and I looked at each other.

"This wasn't an accident," we both said together. Mike had been right. They came for the dilithium.

Saih and I let that realisation sink in for a few seconds. With a gasp, Saih looked at me, her eyes wide, like the moons of Saturn.

“Wait,” she exclaimed, “The escape pods have auto-navigation – they have to be pre-programmed!” I didn’t know what her point was. Today had been such a blur – I was finding it tricky to concentrate, let alone worry about auto-nav.

“So, erm…” I started.

“So, we have to get to the NavCom. If it’s still in one piece, we’ll be able to get the pod’s route and destination.” Saih’s point hit me. Square in the face. I got it.

“You don’t mean, we’re actually going after them?”  
  
“That’s exactly what we’re doing.” Saih said, with a hint of excitement in her voice that always makes me nervous. “We’re going.”

It didn’t take long for Saih to retrieve the data from the NavCom and programme another pod. The pods are designed for a whole team – 6 astros – so there was plenty of room for supplies. We both agreed there was no reason to come back to the ship. It probably wouldn’t be around for much longer anyway, fires were still raging on the upper decks and the main drive was critical. I sent an additional distress signal to Command to update them on our findings and our destination; secretly hoping that they were closer to the thief than we were, or at least that they’d be able to send back-up. I didn’t like the idea of going in without my team around me.

The trek across open space took a little over an hour. Our pod touched down directly next to the escape pod that the thief had used. I cursed myself for thinking of him as a thief – he’d killed my team. He was a killer. My hand shook as I reached for my blaster; we were going to get this guy one way or another.

“Over here,” Saih called to me. She’d been tracking since we came within range, meaning we knew exactly where Mike’s killer was hiding. It seemed too easy – they must have known about the NavCom and the escape pod routes being logged – or maybe they just hadn’t counted on anyone surviving the blast.

It was a short hike to the cave system. Saih had marked it on our NavGuides so at least we weren’t going to get lost. As we rounded the last cliff face, I felt a tickle in my chest – this just didn’t feel right. Before going into the Cargo Divison, Mike, Saih and I were assigned to Search and Rescue. The last mission we’d been on together nearly cost us our lives; Mike had been quick-thinking enough to act and saved us. Without him, I just felt under-prepared, like going out without my phone.

“What’s the plan?” I whispered to Saih. Saih drew her blaster – her intentions were clear. This wasn’t going to be a capture; we were here to avenge Mike.

Saih led the way into the caves. We could hear a conversation ahead, one side near-by, the other on a radio.

“…as soon as we can. Stay put until we get there. There were no survivors from the wreckage,” crackled the voice on the other end.

“You’re wrong!” shouted Saih, pointing her blaster at the shadowy figure, “just enough of us survived to see you pay for what you did to our friend!” She fired a warning shot to let them know she was serious.

“Saih?” came the shadow’s voice.

“Stay where you are, show me your hands!” demanded Saih. The voice was familiar, but it wasn’t possible…

“Mike?” whispered Saih. My head was spinning, this couldn’t be… “Mike, you’re…”

“Supposed to be dead… As are you two,” the shadow replied, stepping towards us. Stunned, Saih lowered her blaster. I began to lower mine when I noticed what was in Mike’s hand. I fired.

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The Official Report into the lost transport ship was published 23 days after the incident. Saih and Jack were hailed as heroes and promoted to Earth Command, saviours of the precious dilithium cargo after loading it onto escape pods and fleeing to the nearest planet. Mike had been killed in the blast, along with the security team, in the meteor shower which ignited the fuel tank. The Government’s Interplanetary Transport Division continues to be the most secure method for Earth to Mars shipping, its proud reputation intact, no cargo ever lost in its history.