

# STAR WARS

## TALES OF THE JEDI



### CONFRONTATION

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...

**CONFRONTATION**

MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF EFFORT LOOKS LIKE PAYING OFF FOR THE FOUNDING FAMILIES. THEY HAVE SECEDED FROM THE GALACTIC REPUBLIC AND ARE POISED TO ENTER THE ANCIENT SITH STOREHOUSE THEIR ANCESTORS FOUND WHEN THEY FIRST EXPLORED THE SECTOR. BUT THE JEDI NOW KNOW THE LOCATION OF THE STOREHOUSE AS WELL AND ARE PLANNING HOW TO RETAKE THE SECTOR.

AT THE SAME TIME FORMER JEDI KNIGHT KYLE JENNER IS CLOSING IN ON THE STOREHOUSE HIMSELF, WILLING TO TAKE EXTREME ACTION TO GAIN ACCESS TO IT FOR HIMSELF.

BUT ALL OF THIS PALES COMPARED TO WHAT AWAITS THE FOUNDING FAMILIES INSIDE THE STOREHOUSE ITSELF, FOR THE ANCIENT SITH LORD WHO CREATED IT DID NOT LEAVE HIS LEGACY UNGUARDED...

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

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## PROLOGUE

"So have we found anything new?" Jayk Narthis, captain of the exploration ship *Starlight Glory* asked as he stepped into the turbolift with Yann Runn, the mission's nautolan surveyor and it began to descend. Yann was ideally suited to operations on the remote world they were currently exploring. Nautolans were an aquatic species and the planet was almost entirely covered in water. But it was not the oceans themselves that had brought the exploration team here. Ever since arriving in this unexplored backwater area beyond the border of the Republic the *Starlight Glory's* crew had discovered clues to suggest that they were not the first to visit and what the earlier explorers had left behind them held the promise of even greater riches than all the mineral rights and scientific discoveries from every world in the sector combined.

All those clues had led them to this ocean planet where they had found exactly what they had hoped to, a library of ancient knowledge that was ripe for plundering. But there were complications that meant they could not simply walk into the library and take whatever they wanted. Firstly the library was part of a complex that had been built on the seabed and before even approaching the library they had been forced to repair and pressurise a section of the complex around it. But more importantly the beings that had built the library had not left it unlocked.

"Nothing." Yann said in reply to Jayk's question, "Rodge still thinks that we can get in using a shaped charge but Bolatha doesn't want to risk bringing the roof down on us now we've finally got this place watertight."

Rodge Kenner was a mercenary that the crew had hired for security. Exploration could be a dangerous business, especially if hostile natives were encountered and having a professional soldier along was only sensible. However, Rodge did tend to approach most problems in terms of how best to blow them up.

Bolatha Drud on the other hand was the mission's geologist and if he was concerned that using explosives risked damaging the structure around them then Jayk was minded to pay attention to him.

"I was hoping that Bolatha would have been able to find out something more about the structure of the library itself." Jayk said, sighing.

"Geth and Trent haven't been able to get the sensors to work that deep down." Yann told him, the two men he was referring to being Geth Torin and Trent Callan, the mission's two engineers, "Koman and I have been conducting a physical exploration instead." Yann went on. Koman Delvad was a biologist and so a world teeming with life as this one did fascinated him even without the presence of the library and its secrets, "Problem is the pressure's limiting the amount of time he can spend outside just like it's disrupting the sensor probes."

The turbolift finally came to a halt and the moment the doors slid open Jayk felt the cool, damp air of the seabed complex.

"Oh, hi captain." a young woman stood checking cargo containers in the room outside said when she saw him, "More statues for the collection." This was Jo Karn and as the mission's supply officer she was also the one that had logged all of the ancient artefacts that the crew had discovered in their time in the sector.

"Are you doing that alone?" Jayk asked. Given the origin of the artefacts it had been decided that no-one should attempt to work with any of them alone, just in case they became adversely affected by them.

"Sort of." Jo replied and she looked to the side of the room. Turning to face that direction Jayk saw a man lay stretched out on a simple padded bench that had been set up by the crew. He was clearly sound asleep and on the floor beside him lay a bottle of whisky. Jayk frowned and marched over to the couch before kicking the bottle over.

"Corvis wake the kriff up!" he yelled and the sleeping man suddenly awoke.

"Hey!" he shouted when he saw the bottle rolling across the floor, its contents spilling out, "That's my last one." and he reached out to try and grab hold of it.

"You mean it was your last one." Jayk snapped, grabbing hold of Corvis before he could reach the bottle and dragging him to his feet, "Stang Corvis, I've had enough of your drinking. You need to focus on what we're doing here for once."

Corvis Fayl was the mission's medical officer and in the absence of serious injuries to treat had spent much of his time in the sector drinking, something that had prompted numerous arguments between him and other crew members who felt he was not pulling his weight. Bolatha especially now avoided the doctor as much as he could.

"Oh Jo's fine as she is." Corvis said, frowning, "In my medical opinion those artefacts are lifeless."

"Doesn't mean they're not rigged somehow doc." a large man in military fatigues who had a long dark sword strapped to his back said as he entered the chamber pulling a cart behind him while a man and woman followed behind that. These two were Bail and Leia Crassis, the mission's astrogation team. Newly-weds at the time the mission set out from Coruscant they had already marked out a spot on the first world in the sector that the team had explored where they intended to set up their family home.

"Not everything is booby trapped Rodge." Corvis responded as he sat back down.

"It only takes one." Rodge commented.

"Yes it does." Jayk added, "Now where's Ban got to?"

Ban Hollinis was the mission's twi'lek first officer and Jayk had been expecting him to be waiting when he arrived in the complex.

"I saw him and Geth heading for the portal." Leia answered, "My guess is he wants to take another look at some of the carvings around it to see if he can get any clues about opening it."

"Well I hope he-" Jayk began when all of a sudden there was an ear-piercing shriek from somewhere else in the complex.

"What the kriff?" Corvis exclaimed, clutching at his head.

"That came from the portal." Rodge said, his hand reaching to the plasma pistol holstered at his waist and resting on it.

"You say Ban and Geth are there?" Jayk asked and Leia nodded, "Then we better go." he added and dragging Corvis off the couch again he began to run towards the source of the scream.

As they ran the group encountered Bolatha, Koman and Trent coming from another way. From the look of the wetsuit Koman wore he had either just been outside exploring the seabed again or had been about to leave.

"What's happening?" the biologist asked.

"We heard a scream." Bolatha added.

"Ban and Geth are at the portal." Jayk replied, "It came from there."

"Oh stang." Trent hissed, "If Geth's messed anything up-"

"Never mind that now. We need to see what they've done." Jayk interrupted before leading his crew onwards. He slid to a halt when he saw Geth Torin slumped by a wall, staring down the corridor that led to the entrance to the library. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open and for a moment Jayk thought that he might be dead.

"Geth what happened?" Jo called out as she rushed to his side and crouched down. Then she looked around, "Corvis get over here. He needs help." she added.

"You heard her doc. Move." Rodge said, shoving Corvis forwards.

"Tell us what happened Geth." Jayk said sternly as he walked up to the engineer and it was just as Geth raised his arm to point towards the entrance to the library that Jayk became aware of the smell of burnt flesh, "Good God." he exclaimed when he saw the charred body of Ban Hollinis lying in the corridor not far from the door to the library.

"What did this?" Bail asked as he began to creep towards the body.

"He wanted to try spoofing the lock." Geth said, "And it killed him."

"The lock is booby trapped?" Koman asked.

"No." Geth replied, "No. It just appeared and killed him."

"What just appeared?" Leia asked.

"I did." a voice called out and a glowing holographic figure suddenly materialised just in front of the library door and Geth tried to move further back, his way blocked by the wall behind him.

Reacting quickly Rodge drew his plasma pistol and aimed it towards the hologram, though without a substantial target to attack he held his fire.

"Wherever you are we'll find you." Jayk told the hologram, "And then we'll make you pay for killing Ban."

"Ban. So that was his name then? I didn't quite catch it." the hologram said, "But your threats mean nothing to me little man, you are no more worthy of inheriting my legacy than he was. None of you are."

"Your legacy?" Bail commented.

"Correct. Everything that lies beyond this door was collected by myself and my followers over a lifetime." the hologram explained, "Or rather by the being that created me in his own image."

"It's a lousy AI." Trent said, "I can rig up an EMP that will-"

"Your crude technology is match for the power of the Dark Side." the hologram interrupted, "And I am no pale imitation of sentience, I am the stored personality, experience and power of Lord Slaydo Kreeyn and not just anyone may claim what is mine."

"He's one of them." Corvis said, rising to his feet, "He's a Sith."

"I've heard about this sort of thing." Koman said, "The jedi create holocrons that can store their personalities as well as hard data."

"So how do we get past this thing?" Jayk asked.

"We can't." Koman said, "It's not a true AI or droid so there's no programming to attack. If we want to get past it then it has to let us."

"And all you have to do for me to do that is to prove yourself worthy." the hologram said, looking down at the body of Ban once more. Then looking back up the image smiled at them, "Are you worthy?" it asked.

"So what now captain?" Corvis asked, "And the rest of you. What's this quest got you? Ban's dead and we've nothing but a hold full of trinkets to show for it."

"Oh shut up you worthless drunk!" Bolatha snapped, "Those trinkets will get us inside."

"How?" Corvis asked, "Go on, tell me."

"Because we can use them to gain knowledge of the Sith." Jayk told him.

"And knowledge is power." Jo added, "When we know enough and can prove we can handle the power that thing will let us in. Right?" and she looked around at the rest of the team."

"That's my guess." Bolatha agreed.

"So that's what we do then." Jayk said, "We'll scour this sector for every last Sith artefact we can find and see if they can tell us how to get through that door. Then we'll have access to the greatest store of knowledge outside the Jedi Temple."

"How long will that take?" Trent asked.

"Possibly longer than our lifetimes." Bail replied.

"I'd say definitely longer." Leia added.

"Then this will be our legacy to future generations of our descendants." Jayk said, staring at the hologram.

"What about the Jedi?" Yann asked, "If they find out they'll move against us."

"Then we'll do it quietly." Bolatha said, "The mineral rights in this sector alone will make us rich enough to finance our operation."

"There could be more clues back on Coruscant." Koman said, "If I go back then I can check out the libraries there."

"We'll have to act openly eventually." Jo pointed out, "And the Jedi will be sure to move then."

"Then we'll need an army." Rodge said, "I can do that. Though I won't be able to do it from here. I need to find places where I can recruit soldiers."

"You're all insane." Corvis said, "I want no part of this any more."

"Yes you do." Jayk hissed, "Because you want the wealth and power this will bring so you can drink yourself to death in style and also because if anyone tries to back out then we have to kill them. It's the only way."

"The only way." Bail agreed.

"Yes, the only way." Jo added and Corvis snarled.

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

# 1.

Three hundred and seven years later.

Settlers from the Republic headed for what became known as the Narthis Sector, establishing settlements in numerous systems of varying sizes. Most of the original explorers remained in the sector, their descendants becoming known as the Founding Families and using their incredible wealth to continue to seek out every scrap of Sith related knowledge they could.

But they could not keep their activities secret indefinitely and when the Jedi knight assigned to the sector vanished, his replacements uncovered the existence of the Sith library. However, before the Jedi Order could gather enough evidence of the Founding Families' activities to move against them the families gained control of an army of Sith war droids. With these under their control they engineered events so that the sector seceded from the Republic, officially placing the Founding Families beyond the reach of Republic law. But what was of greater significance was that the Founding Families now had within their grasp the means to finally enter the Sith library itself.

Or least that was what they hoped.

Representatives from all of the surviving Families gathered together in the estate of Ket and Fial Runn, heirs to Yann Runn who had made his home right on top of the Sith library on the world now named Delvad after the survey mission's biologist to watch over it while the other Families scoured the sector for clues about how get inside. In the intervening years Delvad had become a playground for the rich and famous with many of the wealthiest of the sector's inhabitants purchasing private artificial islands that hovered above the ocean waves on powerful repulsorlift fields. This made it easy for all of the Founding Families to justify maintaining a presence there and this gathering attracted no more attention than any others had done. Not all of the original Families were present however, in recent years both the Callan and Delvad lines had been lost, the bodies of their last remaining members now lying on some remote world or drifting in the depths of space. On the other hand although the Torin family did still exist, infighting had resulted in the death of its head and the position of leadership had passed to his young son and given his age it had been decided that he would be left out of this gathering, his interests instead represented by his lawyers from the Drud family. All of the other families were represented however, with twenty-two of them gathered together in total.

First among these was the Crassis family, led by the elderly Erill Crassis. For many years he had suffered from an incurable wasting disease that had come close to claiming his life before the power of an ancient Sith artefact had purged him of the condition and it was almost entirely due to his renewed determination that this gathering was taking place. Joining him were his son Luke, daughter in law Salla and daughter Charity. Luke and Salla had supported Erill throughout his illness and he still valued their advice even though he was no longer crippled. On the other hand Charity had avoided having anything to do with the Founding Families for as long as she could but it was thanks to her that they had gained control of the war droid army they now relied on to keep the Republic at bay.

From the Drud family there were five representatives. General Josh Drud was the head of the family and as the supreme commander of the Crassis Major Defence forces was also responsible for most of their military planning. His younger brother Heddren and his wife Millel ran the family's law firm, the most powerful in the sector and over the years this had been used to establish contacts on both sides of the law that could be exploited as needed. Their daughter Jaynie spent most of her time on Delvad studying and so she too had joined the gathering. Finishing off the Drud family's representation was the younger sister of Josh and Heddren, Kayza. Kayza worked in public relations rather than law and she had been influential in presenting the Founding Families to the wider population in the best possible light.

Only one of the Fayl family was present. Only just into her twenties, Nissel Fayl had become the head of her family when her mother Lorna had been committed to an asylum. The publicly stated reason for this was that she had suffered a severe emotional breakdown brought on by years of stress from her position, but in truth she had been judged a security risk and the other Families had stepped in to remove her before she could compromise them too badly.

Faye Karn headed the Karn family, currently the wealthiest of the Founding Families thanks in part to the business skills of her husband Del who stood beside her. Behind them two of their daughters, Sial and the younger Keera waited impatiently. Neither of them was certain why they had been brought along to this gathering, they only knew that they had been given no choice when the family's security staff escorted them to the ship that had brought them to this world.

Standing beside his wife Calleen, Trent Narthis was technically the most powerful of those gathered. As well as being the head of his family he had been elected as the Republic senator for the sector that bore his family name and when he had issued the declaration of independence he had become its de facto head of state.

The Runn family themselves came next. Ket and his wife Fial had rarely left their estate for many years and they took their duty to protect the library seriously.

Then came the descendants of Rodge Kenner. When Natalay Shill had married her late husband she had taken his name as a way of concealing her heritage in anticipation of the family's return to the Narthis Sector with the army it had been building for the past three hundred years or so. But Natalay had not led this return in person instead sending her own children on ahead and the two eldest of these were now present as well. Her son Han had been the public face of the Shill family, despite his family history being a closely guarded secret. As CEO of Shill Security, the largest private military company in the sector he had been responsible for most of the security duties of the Founding Families while his twin sister Belle who now stood close behind Sial and Keera Karn had been responsible for the more covert operations.

But there was one final member of the Founding Families present as well and if anything she was the most important person present. Both the Crassis and Karn families could claim Gayal as one of their own. She was the eldest daughter of Faye and Del Karn who over the years had escaped prosecution for a series of crimes purely due to her family's ability to pay off victims and witnesses. When the romantic relationship with Cal Udra, the jedi knight assigned to the Narthis Sector was discovered by her horrified family they along with the Drud and Shill families had arranged to have her secretly imprisoned in the same asylum that Lorna Fayl had later been sent to. However, the Crassis family had discovered that she was Force sensitive and, knowing that such an individual likely held the key to getting into the library had used a force of mandalorian mercenaries to break her out. To further protect her from her own family Erill Crassis had then married her, despite the nearly fifty year age difference and these two events had provoked a schism among the Founding Families that pitted the Crassis family against all of the others until Erill was healed and called a stop to the rivalry when he presented the war droid army to the other Families. Since then Gayal had studied every Sith text and artefact that the Families could provide her with until an attempt by a group of jedi to attack the Runn estate in search of the library had revealed that she was gaining control of her Force abilities, meaning that there was now every possibility that Slaydo Kreeyn's holocron would now allow her access to the library.

The members of the Founding Families present were gathered in a rough semicircle with Gayal at it centre, Han Shill's hand gripping her by the shoulder and several guards drawn from Shill Security's agents, mandalorian mercenaries and the war droid army behind them. The pair stood in front of a doorway that opened onto an ancient passageway, the only part of the original Sith structure that still remained and at the far end of this passageway was the library that the Founding Families so desired access to.

"I see no need to delay further." Ket said Sternly, "Send her in."

"Now, now Ket." Erill responded, "Our families have waited more than three hundred years and sacrificed a great deal to bring us to this point. A few more minutes to make sure everything is right won't make any difference." then he looked at Gayal, "Gayal my dear, are you ready for this?"

"Would it make any difference if I said 'No'?" she asked and Erill smiled.

"Not really." he said before turning to Han, "If you wouldn't mind helping the young lady." he said and Han nodded.

"My pleasure." he said and he tugged Gayal towards the doorway.

Gayal resisted at first and Han applied more pressure, pulling her through the doorway into the passageway. This was not the first time she had come down here and she knew exactly what waited for her at the other end.

"Go with her." Luke said, looking at one of the nearby mandalorians and without speaking the armoured figure began to follow Han.

"You can't make me do this." she told Han.

"Want to bet?" he replied and he glanced back over his shoulder, "Take a look at your two sisters back there. Do you really think that they have any real role to play in this?"

"No." Gayal said.

"Of course not. But mark my words if you don't do exactly as you're told then at least one of them will be dead before you can get out of here."

The mummified remains of Ban Hollinis still lay on the floor of the passageway where he had fallen so many years ago, no one willing to approach close enough to the library to remove it. Having watched Cal come this far before, Gayal knew what to expect.

"Ah, so you have returned little one." the voice of Slaydo Kreeyn announced before his holographic form materialised, "Do you seek to test yourself?"

"She does." Han replied and the hologram's expression turned to one of contempt.

"I did not address you." it hissed, "You are nothing to me. Take a look at what remains of the last unworthy supplicant to try my patience if you doubt my claim that I can end your life with a thought."

"Tell him." Han said, pushing Gayal forwards.

Staggering from the push, Gayal glared at Han and then turned to face the hologram.

"I am here to gain access to the library." she said.

"Then come closer little one. Come closer and prove yourself." Slaydo's image told her.

Gayal crept forwards and the hologram let out a laugh.

"Fear." it said, "You are afraid. Good. But there is more. Anger, yes anger, even better and hatred. Best of all hatred. The Dark Side flows through you like a river to the ocean."

"What do I have to do?" Gayal asked as she neared the hologram.

"Jump in little one." it said, stepping aside, "Jump in and swim." and all of a sudden the hologram vanished.

"What happened?" Han asked.

"I don't know." Gayal replied, "All I did was-" but before she could continue there was a grinding sound as the heavy stone doorway now just a few metres in front of Gayal began to move for the first time in centuries.

"She's done it!" Han called out, "The library is opening."

"Make sure its safe for us all." Josh responded, not wanting to risk the wrath of the library's guardian and in the passageway Han looked at the mandalorian.

"Mister Crassis did tell you to go with her." he said, also preferring not to take such a risk himself.

The mandalorian stepped forwards as Gayal did, bringing his pulse wave rifle to his shoulder out of habit rather than any expectation that it would protect him from whatever Slaydo's holocron was capable of.

Gayal held her breath as she stepped across the threshold of the library into the pitch black chamber beyond the doorway and as soon as she did so there was a humming sound that caused the mandalorian to drop into a kneeling position and search for a target. But rather than some defensive system the humming was just the sound of ancient fusion reactors that had lain dormant since the library was sealed and there was a flickering as the lights set into the ceiling activated to reveal the library and Gayal gasped.

Inside the entrance was a long passageway as wide as a city road that extended in both directions, curving away from her. From where Gayal stood she could see that this passageway was lined on both sides with large alcoves with floors set below that of the passageway that were reached by means of stone steps leading down from the main passageway. The purpose of these alcoves was obvious to see, even from standing just inside the library's entrance as each one that Gayal could see was filled with ancient books, scrolls and electronic data storage devices as well as other physical artefacts that all looked to be of Sith origin to her.

"The way is clear!" the mandalorian shouted before darted from the doorway to the opposite side of the corridor and standing watch in wait of his employers.

Moments later Han appeared in the doorway behind Gayal.

"Stang." he said as he saw what lay within the library, "This place is kriffing huge." and he stepped through the doorway and rushed to the closest alcove, eager to see what treasures the library held.

It took only a short time for the rest of the assembled members of the Founding Families to arrive, still accompanied by their guards.

"So this is what all the fuss has been about." Charity said as she closely inspected a row of statues, "I must say, even I'm impressed. Must be worth a fortune." and without noticing that Sial Karn was watching her she subtly removed a pendant from one of the statues and slipped it into her pocket.

"Where do we even start?" Nissel asked as she tried to comprehend the scale of the library, "I mean is there anything specific we should look for?"

*Come to me little one.*

Gayal shuddered as Slaydo called out to her through the Force and she felt a chill run down her spine.

"I suggest we just spread out and explore." Trent said, "Though I don't think anyone should touch anything just yet. Not until we can find out more about what we've found."

I am waiting for you.

"Yes, a manifest would be useful." Erill said, "For a number of reasons."

*The others are irrelevant little one.*

"You mean so we all know that no-one's helped themselves to a trinket or two without the others knowing?"

Natalay asked and Erill just smiled.

This way. Come quickly.

"Who cares about trinkets?" Del said, "There's more here than all of us could get through in a year. We're all rich beyond belief."

*Do you really want to remain their slave?*

"I thought we already were." Sial commented. Then she looked around and frowned, "Hey." she said,

"Where's Gayal gone?"

Everyone looked around, trying to locate the young woman who had finally enabled them to enter the library.

"Gayal honey!" Faye called out, "Where are you?" but there was no response.

"She didn't go back this way." Belle said from beside the doorway as she slowly drew a semi-automatic pistol from under her jacket.

"She could be anywhere." Han added.

"Well we can't let her just run around unescorted." Millel said, "Who knows what damage she could do?"

"Okay we split into two groups. Half go this way and half the other." Luke said.

While this was happening Gayal was making her way through the library, walking right past one alcove after another that was filled with priceless Sith treasures from simple amulets to cryogenic caskets containing samples of now extinct lifeforms or the products of Sith alchemy waiting to be unleashed onto an unsuspecting galaxy.

*Closer.*

Slaydo's words continued to draw Gayal onwards, leading her to the point where the two parts of the passageway that extended from either direction by the entrance met up once more and here Gayal found that in addition to the alcoves set below the floor level of the passageway there was one set above with a set of wide steps leading up to it. Positioned either side of these steps were rows of motionless Sith war droids, each of the humanoid machines holding a black bladed sword in front of them.

Gayal began to climb the steps and out of the corner of her eyes she thought she saw the heads of some of the ancient war droids turning to watch her though they took no action to prevent her continuing.

"Ah, so glad you could make it." Slaydo's hologram said as it materialised at the top of the steps to greet her, "I have waited a thousand years for someone worthy to arrive and give me the opportunity to rule again."

"What do you mean?" Gayal asked.

"Look." the hologram said, stepping aside and pointing to where a body lay sprawled out on the floor at the base of a crystalline column surrounded by machines, "That was me. Lord Slaydo Kreeyn, also known to both followers and rivals as The Scholar. I set myself the task of gathering together all the knowledge in the universe in one place. This place in fact. With it I would have ushered in a new age of science and enlightenment where the Force would be made to bend to my will. But what good did it do me? I was betrayed and my enemies sat in orbit and bombed this world. My followers were slaughtered and my palaces reduced to ruin. Only by fleeing here and finally giving my entire essence over to my holocron was anything of me able to survive. Now I am trapped in here forever and I need an apprentice to act as my proxy in the Empire I shall build. You shall be that apprentice."

"What? Never." Gayal replied.

"Oh I'm not giving you a choice." the hologram said, "You will agree to be my apprentice or you will die here today."

"Gayal what are you doing?" her father's voice suddenly called out as the other members of the Founding Families appeared at the bottom of the steps.

"Get down from there." Ket added and he started to climb the steps towards her. But as he drew level with the first of the war droids the machine stepped forwards suddenly and without warning it thrust its sword forwards to impale the nautolan through his chest.

"Ket! No!" Fial screamed as she saw her husband come to a sudden halt and slowly look down at the blade sticking into him. Then the droid retreated, withdrawing its sword as it did so and as the other members looked on Ket Runn, head of the Runn family and guardian of the Sith library collapsed in a heap before rolling back down the steps before coming to a halt at his wife's feet with his lifeless eyes staring upwards. As Fial dropped to her knees and cradled her husband's body in her hands the Families' guards reacted by rushing forwards to form a screen between the Family members and the now once again motionless war droids.

Meanwhile Josh Drud turned to the closest of the war droids that the Families had brought along with them.

"Engage and destroy." he commanded.

"Order confirmed. Engage and destroy." the droid repeated and the Families' war droids began to advance.

Watching this from the top of the steps the hologram of Slaydo let out a laugh.

"You think I can't tell how you're controlling those war droids?" he called out as the droids reached the bottom of the steps and started to climb, "When The Artisan created them he built a set of command codes into their base program structure and you don't have a full set. On the other hand I do." and all of a sudden the droids came to a stop.

"I order you to continue." Erill called out but instead the droids his family had delivered to the other Founding Families turned on the spot to now face the members of the Founding Families below them while those that had been lining the steps moved out of position to form a barrier that blocked the steps entirely.

"No! You can't." Gayal said and instinctively she lunged at the image of Slaydo, only to stumble right through the insubstantial hologram and fall flat on her face.

"Oh yes I can." the hologram replied and then looking down at the war droids he called out, "Kill them all. Wipe them out."

Belle was the first to fire, a sharp 'Crack' sounding as she put a bullet into the narrow slit in the faceplate of one of the droids now being turned against the Founding Families and the machine came crashing to the floor.

Drawing his pulse wave blaster, Han fired as well and he also targeted one of the droids being turned against them for the simple reason that they had been armed with ranged weapons while those that made up Slaydo's personal guard had only swords. The energy blast struck the droid centrally and it exploded, its limbs flying off and bouncing off other droids before falling to the floor.

"Fall back!" Natalay yelled as she drew her own sidearm and fired it and at that moment the living guards that the Founding Families had brought along with them also opened fire on the droids as they began to slowly walk backwards while the members of the Founding Families turned and ran. One of the turned war droids returned fire, a stream of energy bolts smashing the ribs of one of the Shill Security agents and he fell to the floor screaming.

"Leave him!" Han yelled as another agent paused to see if he could help the injured man and the agent continued to fall back, abandoning his comrade to the war droids as they started to march down the steps in unison, each simultaneous footstep produced a dull pounding sound.

The hologram of Slaydo stood at the top of the steps seemingly watching the war droids as they continued to pursue the fleeing Families and their remaining guards. Then the sound of a sob made Slaydo look down to the base of the steps where Fial Runn still cradled the corpse of her husband. Being unarmed and none threatening the war droids' relatively simple minds had ignored her in favour of targeting the mandalorians and Shill Security Agents protecting the other Family members who had left her behind.

"There is no need to cry." the hologram announced and Fial looked up from the body. Then Slaydo added, "You'll be joining him soon enough." before lightning leapt from the hologram's fingers and Fial shrieked as it consumed her just as it had done to Ban Hollinis just over three hundred years earlier.

Then the hologram turned towards Gayal and smiled.

"Rise, my new apprentice."

## 2.

"Can we seal this door?" Natalay asked as the fleeing Family members reached the entrance to the library after losing only two more of their guards to the relentlessly advancing war droids.

"It took us three hundred years to get it open." Luke responded, "I don't think we'll be able to close it quick enough to make any difference."

"We'll fetch heavy weapons and blockade the other end of the passageway." Josh said, "This is the only way out so we can keep those droids bottled up in there indefinitely."

Then there came the sound of panicked screams from the other end of the passageway, accompanied by distant gunfire.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Trent said as the group continued away from the Sith library.

Reaching the room at the far end of the passageway the group was met by another Shill Security agent as he staggered into the room, gasping for breath and bleeding from a wound to his head.

"What's going on out here?" Han demanded.

"It's the droids sir. The war droids. They've all gone berserk. They took out security control and we lost comms. They've already ransacked the Runn family quarters and killed everyone there and now they're moving through the servants' quarters."

"What about the children?" Calleen Narthis asked, aware that all of the Runns' offspring would have been in their quarters. But the injured agent shook his head.

"No one got out." he replied.

"Well we need to find a way." Kayza said.

"Can we still get to the submersible dock?" Salla asked.

"I – I don't know." the agent said, "The droids aren't focusing on that section of the estate but there were some stationed there before they all went mad. They could still be there."

"We'll have to try." Han said.

"I agree." Natalay added, "Belle, you bring up the rear to make sure we're not surprised and-"

"No." Jaynie Drud interrupted and Natalay scowled at her.

"What?" she said.

"I said 'No'." Jaynie replied, "Look, I've spent more time in this place than any of you and I know the layout by heart. The submersible dock is more than four hundred metres that way." and she pointed, "But if we go that way instead then we'll find a whole bank of escape pods less than a hundred metres away that will take us straight to the surface. There are enough for all of us."

"Sounds like a plan." Heddren said, smiling with pride at his daughter's resourcefulness.

"We'll stick with Belle at the rear and everyone else with a gun at the front though." Natalay said, "There could be more droids about looking for targets of opportunity. Family members will take the pods first and guards can take whatever room's left. After that anyone left should head for the submersible dock and try to get past any droids left there."

"Wait." Keera said suddenly, grasping her mother's sleeve, "Are we just going to leave Gayal behind?"

"Well if you want to go back into the library and face all those droids you're welcome to." Belle replied.

"We can come back later with a properly equipped team." Natalay added, "But for now we need to concentrate on saving ourselves. We're no good to your sister if we're dead."

"Okay you heard her." Han called out, "Let's move."

Led by Han and Natalay, the group headed out into the hallway and towards where Jaynie had indicated there were escape pods that would allow them to evacuate the estate. As they moved they continued to hear the sounds of fighting in the distance as the rogue war droids continued to make their way through the estate and kill everyone they encountered. Not all of the weapons fire sounded like the weapons that the droids typically carried however, suggesting that there were at least some guards still active. But with no time to try and link up with them the group just headed directly for the escape pods.

Just as Jaynie had promised these were located only a short distance away in a corridor lined with them. The doors to two were already sealed, suggesting that someone else had already chosen this method to leave the estate but the capacity of the remaining pods looked to be enough for everyone present, both Family members and guards.

"So we'll be picked up when we reach the surface right?" Nissel asked.

"Our ships in orbit ought to detect the distress beacons." Josh replied.

"What about the droids aboard the ships?" Sial asked, "What if they've gone rogue as well." and the other Family members exchanged nervous glances.

"Luke, there are war droids at home." Salla said, "The children are there with them."

"So is Mister Mott." Erill said before Luke could reply, referring to the leader of the force of mandalorian mercenaries that he had kept on to provide security after they freed Gayal from the asylum, "I'd wager that

he and his men are more than a match for the handful of droids that are there. Now get into the escape pod.” Under the watchful eye of their guards, the members of the Founding Families who had made it out of the library climbed into escape pods and as each of the compact vehicles was filled the hatch was sealed and it automatically ejected. Designed to be buoyant the pods promptly rose upwards to the surface where as soon as they appeared they began to transmit their automate distress beacons.

Given the importance of Delvad the Founding Families had dedicated a significant part of their available fleet, consisting mainly of several cruisers from the Crassis Major Defence Forces as well as a number of Sith battleships that they had been able to salvage following the discovery of an ancient battlefield in a remote system that still had many of the ships as well as numerous ancient Republic vessels drifting in it. Though obsolete and regarded as frigates under modern classifications they were still effective warships and the Founding Families had been quick to act to get them serviceable again. However, obtaining trained crews for the vessels was more problematic and so when the droid army had been discovered a large number of them had been pressed into service as crew under a living command staff. This staff consisted of just a few beings and so when the more than eight hundred droids aboard each one turned on them suddenly they stood no chance.

Meanwhile aboard the command cruiser from the Crassis major Defence Forces Erin Shill and her twin sister Corlay waited to hear from their mother and other siblings about what the Sith library held. Both twins had been used as spies prior to the Narthis Sector declaring independence, with Erin serving as a fighter pilot in the Republic Navy while Corlay had been a corporal in the Freedom Warriors, the non-Force sensitive soldiers who fought under the command of the Jedi Order.

“What’s taking them so long?” Corlay said, looking at one of the sensor displays positioned close to the command chair that Erin currently occupied in the absence of Josh Drud, “They should have checked in by now. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic Corlay.” Erin replied, “They’ve probably not replied because they’re all too busy trying to claim the nicest Sith treasures for themselves. You’ll see.” and then the ship rocked and klaxons began to sound.

“We’re under fire!” one of the bridge crew exclaimed.

“Shields up!” Erin ordered, “Comscan I want target identification ASAP. Who’s shooting at us? The Republic Navy hasn’t shown any signs of moving against us directly yet.”

“Captain it’s the Sith ships.” the comscan operator replied, “They’re firing on the other vessels in the fleet.”

“What the kriff?” Corlay exclaimed as all of a sudden the forward bridge viewport offered a perfect view as a concussion missile fired by one of the Sith battleships struck a heavy cruiser amidships and ripped it in half, sending the two burning halves spiralling towards Delvad.

“Hail them.” Erin ordered, “I want to know what’s going on over there.”

“Captain I can’t raise any of the Sith vessels.” the comscan operator replied, “I can see they’re communicating with each other but they aren’t answering us and they’re all manoeuvring to attack. Our other ships are requesting orders.” and then the ship rocked again.

“How about we shoot back?” Corlay asked.

“We can’t just fire on our own ships.” Erin said before there was another shudder that ran through the cruiser.

“Try telling them that.” Corlay exclaimed and then she looked at the weapons control station, “Give us a firing solution.” she said, “Now.”

“Captain I’m picking up signals.” the comscan operator said.

“From the Sith ships?” Erin asked.

“No, from the surface.” the comscan operator answered and after a pause he added, “They’re distress beacons captain. Escape pods from the Runn estate.”

Further out in the Delvad system a solitary starsaber-class starfighter drifted silently, most of its systems powered down. But this changed when its passive sensors detected the energy emissions of the weapons fire between the ships orbiting Delvad and an alarm sounded in the cockpit as other systems came back to life as well. The sound of this awoke the single pilot from his hibernation trance and Jedi Knight Seth Ashran studied the sensor displays, frowning when he saw what was happening.

“Well now,” he said to himself, “this is interesting isn’t it.” and he began to transfer the sensor data he was gathering to his long range communications.

The recent history of Tepillos was one of civil war. A succession of weak governments had lost control of what had been one of the sector’s primary worlds and rival factions had taken to openly fighting one another. The Republic had deployed a peacekeeping force to try and end the violence but there had never been enough troops available to truly end the violence and insurgent groups had continued to operate there. This state of affairs changed with the declaration of independence however, as the Founding Families deployed troops from Shill Security backed up by hundreds of thousands of Sith war droids to take control of the world

and seek out the Sith artefacts they knew existed there, the corrupting influence of these having contributed greatly to the collapse of the planet's society. This meant that when Slaydo took control of the war droid army he also took control of Tepillos and his army moved quickly against the government put in place by the Founding Families and against the remaining Shill Security agents still on the planet, none of which went unnoticed by the local inhabitants.

The vaya-class scout ship was docked in a hangar at a quiet starport where the operators knew not to ask awkward questions of customers such as who they were or why they were coming to Tepillos. As the zeltron infomerchant Kassa rushed towards the vessel it looked lifeless to her. But she knew enough to realise that one of her best customers frequently made his vessel look this way when he did not wish to be disturbed. Today however, Kassa thought that the risk of disturbing this man was worth it to deliver the news she knew he would want to hear.

"Are you in there?" she yelled, banging on the underside of the cockpit canopy while being careful not to shout out the owner's name just in case there was anyone nearby who might recognise it. As a fugitive from both the Founding Families and the Republic, he was highly sought after.

Then there was a hissing sound as the ship's access ramp began to lower and Kassa moved towards it, looking up into the ship to see whether its occupant would be standing at the top. But she found herself just staring up into darkness so instead she started to walk up the ramp, taking its lowering as an invitation to enter the ship.

"Hello?" she said as she climbed the ramp but with the interior of the vessel in darkness she could not tell where its owner was.

All of a sudden the ramp began to close behind her and Kassa gasped as it sealed, leaving her in near total darkness.

"Sit." a voice said in the darkness.

"Where?" Kassa asked and there was a flickering as the internal lights were promptly activated to reveal the ship's neatly ordered interior as well as the hooded figure sat in a seat in front of a set of inactive displays. The figure raised an arm and pointed to another nearby seat, "Stang Kyle," Kassa said, "sitting about in the dark isn't normal you know."

"But then again I am far from a normal person." the figure replied.

For many years Kyle Jenner had been the jedi knight assigned to the Narthis Sector but all that changed when he succumbed to the temptation of the Dark Side and began his search for the same Sith library that the Founding Families had been attempting to gain access to. Unlike them however, he lacked the knowledge of where it was located and discovering that had been the focus of his efforts at the same time as he had worked to prevent the Founding Families from gaining access to it.

"It's unusual for you as well." Kassa added as she sat down.

"The Force is in turmoil." Kyle said, lowering the hood of his robe so that Kassa could see his face and its bright yellow eyes at last, "Something has been disturbed."

"You can say that again." Kassa replied, "It's chaos out there right now Kyle and it's got nothing to do with the Force. Those war droids the Founding Families deployed to help them loot the planet have gone berserk. They're just marching around shooting at anyone who gets in their way."

"When did this start?" Kyle asked, leaning forwards in his seat, "Be as exact as you can."

"The past couple of hours. I saw a group of them fire at a bunch of goons from the new government." Kassa told him.

"But have they fired on any civilians?"

"No they haven't. Or least not as far as I know."

"And since you are the best infomerchant in the sector I can only assume that this means they have not done so at all." Kyle said, leaning back again, "That means they are still being controlled."

"But by who?" Kassa asked.

"I do not think that is the correct question." Kyle replied, "I think that a better question would be 'By what?'"

"Okay now you've lost me." Kassa said.

"The disturbance in the Force I have sensed feels like it is of Sith origin." Kyle said, "Just like the droids."

"But you're the closest thing to a living Sith in these parts." Kassa said.

"The key word being 'living'." Kyle said, "But a Sith could conceivably find a way to continue to exist after death rather than being consumed by the Force and such a being could be exactly what I am looking for." then he raised his hand and with a single wave of it systems throughout the ship began to come to life, "Are you coming?" he asked.

"Coming where?" Kassa asked.

"I must find out whether the war droid armies in other systems are in revolt as well." Kyle explained, "First I shall go to Crassis and then on to Delvad where they are present in large numbers."

"I guess so. I've got contacts on both." Kassa replied.

"Good, using them will speed things up and I want to get to the bottom of this before the jedi can find out and make moves of their own."

Josh Drud scowled as he stormed onto the bridge of the command cruiser after being delivered to it by one of the shuttles sent to rescue the members of the Founding Families in the escape pods.

"General." Erin said as she got out of the command seat, "What's going on?"

"We got into the library." he replied, "But the guardian was able to seize control of the war droids we take with us."

"Looks like what's happening up here." Corlay commented and she pointed through the viewport at the battle still raging.

"So what are your orders general?" Erin asked,

"We fall back to Crassis Major. All ships." Josh said.

"But what about the Runns?" Corlay asked, "Without our ships to protect them-"

"The Runns are dead. All of them." Josh interrupted, "And the library is lost. At least for now. We need to fall back and regroup and decide what we're going to do next."

"You heard the general." Erin announced to the bridge crew, "Order the fleet to make for the Crassis system."

Slowly at first, their manoeuvrability limited by the gravity well of Delvad, the fleet began to turn away from the planet, increasing the distance between them and the Sith warships that continued to fire on them.

However, the ancient warships did not give chase, apparently satisfied with simply driving them away from the planet for now and as soon as the Founding Families' vessels cleared the gravity well they vanished into hyperspace.

Watching the flashes of light that marked the entry of the fleeing ships into hyperspace, Seth Ashran scratched his head.

"Now that is even more interesting." he said to himself as the Sith warships now turned their attention to the crippled CMDF ships and escape pods that had been left behind, making sure that every detail his sensors captured was being sent on to those who would be able to make use of the information.

The Founding Families and the orbiting fleet of starships were not the only targets of Slaydo's wrath. All across the planet there were scattered landmasses, both natural and artificial where the planet's industries were concentrated in addition to the numerous floating repulsorlift islands and all of these now faced invasion by the Sith Lord's newly acquired droid army, some dropping from the sky in their battleships while others simply marched out of the warehouses they had been stored in on the surface.

The wealthy owners of the floating islands were slaughtered to the last, considered lazy and useless by Slaydo while servants and labourers were rounded up by the droids and given an explanation of how Delvad would now be run.

"Slaydo Kreeyn is your master now. Your lives and your property are his to do with as he pleases. You will do as he commands or you will die."

One island was considered an exception to this program of extermination and enslavement however, located hovering over a remote part of the planet's oceans this was a place that seldom saw visitors. Most of those who had business dealings with the island's owner preferred to conduct such dealing from a distance to avoid not only his anger but also the eyes of the law.

Uggaro the Hutt's name had never appeared on any formal charge sheet and his very existence in the Narthis Sector had been a mystery for some time. But nevertheless various law enforcement agencies had begun to take an interest in him in the months preceding the declaration of independence. But with no one able to directly link him with even any minor criminal activity Uggaro remained free to continue with his criminal endeavours.

Now though, the repulsorlift island owned by the hutt was under siege. Three escort gunships circled while a fourth descended to land on the main landing pad. Some of the many household guards positioned themselves around the newly arrived craft and crews rushed to man other concealed heavy weapons but none considered it likely that they would be able to fend off an assault force backed up by the firepower of the circling gunships and the fleet currently orbiting the planet. However, only a solitary war droid came walking down the gunship's access ramp when it extended and rather than a weapon it carried only an ornate looking staff tipped with a carved Sith face.

"You will take me to your leader." the droid announced, "You will take me to Uggaro the Hutt."

Watching this on a display screen in his throne room Uggaro looked at the human woman standing beside him.

"What do you think of this Saren?" he asked. For as long as anyone could remember Saren Keshistel had been by Uggaro's side but unlike any of the other underlings of the hutt she had never fallen foul of his temper. The reason for this was known only to the pair of them, quite simply Saren was the real leader of what everyone thought to be Uggaro's criminal empire. But a hutt carried with him a certain image and reputation and so when she had encountered the down on his luck, she had recruited him with the promise of a life of luxury in exchange for simply pretending to be a galactic crime boss.

"We have no choice but let the machine in but I have a very bad feeling about this." she replied quietly so that none of the guards in the room would overhear, "You see what the droid has to say and I'll watch from the other room."

The war droid was escorted through the hallways of the repulsorlift island to Uggaro's throne room where it stood in front of the hutt.

"Tell me why I should not have you reduced to scrap." Uggaro said, reverting to the role of crime lord he had played almost constantly for so long and in response the droid held out the staff it carried in front of its base and banged it on the floor. Instantly the carved face at the top glowed blue and expanded forwards to project a massive holographic image of Slaydo Kreeyn's face into the air between the droid and the hutt.

"Uggaro the Hutt," Slaydo's image announced, "I am the immortal Sith Lord Slaydo Kreeyn and I am the new master of this world. I know that you are regarded as powerful in the underworld of this sector and now I have need of this power. You will give me control of your organisation and return I shall allow you to live in the short term. When I have established my rightful place as ruler of this sector you shall be rewarded as befits one of my loyal servants.

"And if I refuse?" Uggaro replied and in the hidden room where Saren watched the exchange on a monitor she winced.

"You die." the hologram answered.

Hurriedly Saren got up from her chair and returned to the throne room, anxious to get there before Uggaro prompted the Sith to open fire on the island.

"Take the deal." she whispered to Uggaro in huttese on the assumption that the Sith would not understand the language as she stood by his side.

"You would give up everything we have?" Uggaro answered also in his own tongue.

"What we have is an island surrounded by a force that can blow it apart in minutes. Alternatively we have a deal that could let us finally see the end of the Founding Families and gain real power in the sector." Saren explained and Uggaro looked back towards the hologram.

"After evaluating your generous offer I, Uggaro the Hutt, do hereby agree to your terms Lord Kreeyn." he said, "My agents throughout the sector will be your eyes and ears as they have been mine."

### 3.

When the Narthis Sector declared its independence from the Republic, the Republic was compelled to withdraw its official presence in the sector. However, rather than surrender the sector to individuals known to be conducting illegal research into the Sith while at the same time unable to take action against them an alternative location was found for the Republic to set up a base of operations at.

This was Dorn Station. Built a thousand years earlier by a mysterious alien species that was long gone from the galaxy, Dorn Station had been their equivalent of the navigation beacons that were used to provide hyperspace co-ordinates for shipping throughout the Republic. When it had been discovered by Republic explorers two hundred years earlier an attempt had been made to bring it back on line and add it to the Republic's own network of beacons. However, a series of mysterious accidents had caused the project be abandoned and all but forgotten, visited for short periods of time only by renegades and outlaws looking for somewhere to meet that was well away from the watchful eyes of the Republic. More recently however, it had been discovered that the Sith had once controlled Dorn Station and when one of the Sith Lords in the sector had been defeated he had cheated death by placing his consciousness into the station's computer system in a similar way to the one used to encode a personality matrix into a holocron. Able to influence any system connected to the computer, the Sith Lord had been the cause of the failures and accidents that led to the station being abandoned once more. But with that personality driven from the computer system Dorn Station became usable at long last, even if it did remain almost unknown in the sector and though once a hideout for criminals fleeing the Republic, now it became the last holdout of the Republic in the sector.

The Jedi most responsible for the Republic now using the station was Cal Udra. Originally sent to the Narthis Sector to investigate the disappearance of his predecessor, Kyle Jenner, he had then been assigned to it on a more permanent basis along with his padawan and younger sister Lara.

Cal was currently sat in one of Dorn Station's medical facilities, staring at the bed his younger sister now occupied. There were traces of the bacta she she had been immersed in prior to this clinging to her hair and she was breathing on her own but this did not comfort Cal at all.

*There was nothing more you could have done to protect her.*

The voice that called out to Cal through the Force belonged to Jedi Master Ben Karas. Master Karas had been in charge of all Jedi activities not only in the Narthis Sector but also in several surrounding sectors as well when Cal was first deployed to the sector and he had never seemed to take a liking to either Cal or sister. However, following the death of Master Karas at the hands of Kyle Jenner that was followed rapidly by the fall to the Dark Side of his own apprentice Keana the spirit of the dead Jedi master had begun to communicate with Cal from time to time to offer advice. It was said that some Jedi masters became so powerful that their ghosts could literally appear like a hologram to communicate with the living but Master Karas was not one of these and his communication was limited to speech only.

"I could have taken more care in planning the mission." Cal said in response and the dog that lay beside him on the floor looked up for a moment, "Or I could have taken a platoon of freedom warriors with me. Then maybe three Jedi knights wouldn't be dead and Lara wouldn't have barely avoid the same. And maybe I could have saved Gayal rather than being forced to abandon her again."

"Who are you talking to?" a voice asked from behind Cal and even without looking around he knew that it was the voice of his mother Neri. A skilled Jedi healer, Neri had brought Lara back from the brink of death and was now simply waiting for her to finish her recovery on her own. Then she saw the dog on the other side of Cal and she folded her arms and frowned, "Get that animal out of here." she said sternly.

"Mom Ghost's just waiting to see if Lara wakes up." Cal replied.

"Now stop with that. There's no 'if' about it." Neri said, "Your sister was badly injured but she'll wake up in time. Although her healing isn't going to be helped by the presence of a germ-ridden animal."

Just then Lara let out a low groan and as both Cal and Neri swung their heads around to face her while Ghost suddenly leapt to his feet and began wagging his tail. Then before Cal could stop him Ghost rushed forwards, jumping up onto the bed where he began to lick Lara's face. Her eyes suddenly opening wide Lara looked up to see Ghost standing over her as he licked her and she tried to push him away.

"Ugh! Ghost get off me." she called out.

"But then what do I know?" Neri said to herself.

"Have faith in the restorative powers of dog spit mother." Cal added with a smile before walking up to the bed and taking hold of Ghost's collar, "Get off the bed boy." he said, pulling Ghost away from Lara.

"See?" Lara then said as she looked up at her brother, "He knows he's mine."

"No. He's mine." Cal replied.

"I don't care who's he is." Neri said as she walked over to the bed as well and began to inspect her daughter, "No dogs in the infirmary. Now get him out of here Cal and get yourself to the command centre. Your father wants to see you."

Varn Udra had been sent by the Jedi Council to replace Ben Karas in a move that had unsettled both Cal and Lara. Growing up as the children of a Jedi master had meant that even when not in classes their behaviour had been judged by the strictest standards of the Jedi Order. As the highest ranking Jedi in this region of space, Varn had naturally taken charge of the Republic's efforts to reclaim the Narthis Sector. However, since the sector's declaration of independence had been perfectly legal he could not make use of any of the small military and law enforcement force that had also fled to Dorn Station. Instead all he could do was have the Jedi under his command investigate the Founding Families' use of Sith artefacts, something that the Jedi Order claimed jurisdiction over even beyond the Republic's borders.

Despite not being able to make use of them in retaking the sector, Varn nevertheless included the various Republic officials in the briefing that Cal arrived in the command centre to discover about to take place. Most significant among these were the Duros Captain De Kuun and Lieutenant Commander Veers. These two naval officers commanded a gunship squadron and patrol frigate respectively and their presence on Dorn Station added significantly to its defences should they be needed. Also present was Colonel Arion Jeck who had commanded the peacekeeping force on Tepillos until forced to withdraw. No longer tied down to policing duties on just one world his troops were now available for operations anywhere in the sector, providing that there were grounds to involve the Republic military at all of course. The final two non-Jedi present were not military personnel. Agent Jule Raser had been the most senior sector ranger, the Republic's galaxy-wide law enforcement body, assigned to the Narthis Sector and ever since its secession from the Republic she and her agents had been hunting for any excuse to have it declared illegal. Such a declaration would nullify the sector's independence and allow the Republic's military to intervene directly in support of the Jedi. The final non-Jedi was a diminutive Bothan, Administrator Ishtel Varr'kay. He had been in command of Aurek Station, the primary navigation beacon in the sector before the Founding Families drove the Republic out of it and it had made sense for him to control the day to day running of Dorn Station while the various Jedi, law enforcement and military leaders concentrated on trying to take back the sector.

But the majority of those gathered around the central holographic display only recently installed by one of Colonel Jeck's technical crews were from the Jedi Order itself. Varn's younger sister Elle stood beside the Jedi master. A Jedi knight herself, Elle specialised in locating Force sensitive individuals in the galaxy so that they could be trained as Jedi. Her presence in the sector had been intended to allow the Jedi to locate any individuals who could potentially give the Founding Families access to the Sith library. On the other side of Varn stood Whillam Antess, the most senior Jedi other than Varn himself in the sector with many years of service behind him. Karrie Tyran was the next Jedi at the meeting. A respected diplomat she had spent her years as a Jedi knight trying to prevent situations such as the one they now faced and she was ill at ease being part of what was undoubtedly a council of war. The last Jedi knight present in person, other than Cal himself, was Dac Yale. A few years younger than Cal, when the Udras had first arrived in the Narthis Sector Dac had been a novice knight, only just elevated from the rank of Padawan.

Seeing all these Jedi gathered together reminded Cal of his most recent assignment and for a brief moment he once again wondered whether if he had acted differently there would also have been a battle master and two Jedi shadows, Jedi who dedicated themselves to tracking down anyone or anything under the influence of the Dark Side of the Force, present. Cal suspected that the loss of these three experienced Jedi would be felt in the days to come.

One final person stood around the display as well and although he was part of the Jedi Order he was not a Jedi himself. Master Sergeant Jerad Gall commanded the contingent of Freedom Warriors available to Varn and so his input was considered vital to any plan of action requiring military force.

"Ah Cal." Varn said when he noticed his son enter the room, "Jedi Ashran was just filling us in on the situation at Delvad." and he looked at the holographic image of Seth as he sat in his cockpit several light years away.

"Why?" Cal asked, "What's happened?"

"The Founding Families seem to have started shooting at one another." Colonel Jeck replied.

"I don't understand. Why would they do that?" Cal said, looking around the table.

"We were hoping you may be able to assist us with that question Jedi Udra." Whillam answered, "You have had more dealings with them than anyone else here after all."

"Can you show me what happened?" Cal asked and Varn nodded.

"Watch this." he said, activating a recording made by Seth's fighter. To begin with it showed part of the fleet of ships deployed by the Founding Families to protect Delvad when all of a sudden one of the Sith battleships unleashed a volley of blaster fire at a nearby gunship that bore the markings of Shill Security. Then another Sith vessel opened fire, this time sending a volley into the hangar bay of a CMDF cruiser. More and more vessels then began firing on one another as the neatly ordered fleet with cruisers at the centre and the frigate and gunship sized vessels positioned further out began to descend into a random chaotic brawl.

"The Sith ships are only firing on the other types of vessel and vice versa." Cal commented, "I don't see a single Sith ship firing on another Sith ship."

"A malfunction in the fire control of the older vessel perhaps?" Administrator Varr'kay suggested, "Something that would not affect the more modern Republic made ships."

"I'm not aware of any slicer ever having been able to disrupt the control systems of so many ships at once." Captain De Kuun replied.

"Or of all the crews being so asleep that they didn't override any errors." Veers added, "No, I'd say that the crews of those ships knew exactly what they were doing."

"The Karn family salvaged those ships." Elle said, "Perhaps this is some play by them to get Gayal back from Erill Crassis and take the library for themselves."

Cal shook his head.

"I left Gayal in the Runn estate." Cal replied.

*Guilt.*

"You did what you had to." Varn said when he sensed his son's feelings on the matter.

"It's funny you should mention that though." Seth said, "Because I've also picked up this. Or rather these." and he played back a recording made using his communication system rather than his sensors and the meeting room was filled with aloud bleeping.

"Is that a distress signal?" Karrie asked, "It seems very distorted."

"That's because there's more than one of them all transmitting together." Seth said, "All of them coming from the surface of Delvad right where I picked up Cal, Lara and Pedrus."

"The Runn estate." Whillam said.

"Exactly." Seth replied, "One of the cruisers sent a shuttle down to fish the pods out of the water and took them all back into orbit. Then this happened." and the holographic display now showed all of the Founding Families' vessels not made by the Sith that still had the ability pulling away from Delvad and jumping to hyperspace, "I'd say that their exit vector is taking them back to the Crassis system." Seth added.

"My people have been monitoring transmissions from Crassis Major." Jule said, "As well as other places in the sector and they say that there are reports of fighting between different military units. Whatever's going on it isn't limited to Delvad."

"I don't suppose these reports indicate whether the Sith war droids are the ones attacking the others do they?" Cal asked.

"I'm sorry, they aren't that detailed just yet." Jule replied, "Besides when it comes to Tepillos I'd expect any of the insurgents to have survived the invasion to be making the most of the confusion to start operating again. That's bound to make things even worse."

"I need to go to Crassis Major." Cal said, looking directly at his father, "Whatever answers we need we'll find them there."

"What about the library on Delvad?" Dac commented, "If half the fleet protecting it has gone there may never be a better time to attack it."

"Especially if one of the Founding Families is about to try and get inside." Elle added.

"It's at the bottom of the ocean." Cal pointed out, "We don't have the firepower to destroy it from space – not even the Sith managed that a thousand years ago – and the last time we tried to infiltrate a team only half of us came back." then he looked at Varn again, "Dad, I need to go to Crassis Major."

"Refer to Master Udra as such." Whillam commented.

"Sorry." Cal replied.

"That's alright Cal." Varn replied and then he took a deep breath and looked around, "We need more intelligence," he told them, "and the best place to try and get that is where the Founding Families are located. So since that appears to be Crassis Major that is where I propose to send a team to investigate. This team will gain access to as many of the residences and places of business of the Founding Families as possible with the aim of gathering as much information on their current activities as they can. The team will be authorised to whatever action they deem necessary to do this, including taking prisoners and bringing them back here for questioning."

"I'll go tell Lara." Cal said, "She's awake so-"

"I have not decided who will be assigned this mission yet." Varn interrupted.

"But dad – Sorry. Master. Like you said at the start of this meeting I've got more experience of dealing with the Founding Families than anyone else in this room." Cal protested.

"And your padawan is recovering from a near fatal injury." Varn replied, "You will take Jedi Yale with you." he added, glancing at Dac, "And also Padawan Ketam. Jedi Yale I am assigning him to you as your padawan now."

"A padawan?" Dac said, surprised at this turn of events, "But Jedi Ashran and Tyran are both more senior."

"But neither will be on this mission." Varn pointed out, "I have reviewed the notes left by your former master Jedi Khal before his death concerning his latest padawan and he noted that he intended to ask for your assistance in building Padawan Ketam's confidence. He had every reason to believe you could train another jedi and I am willing to put that to the test."

"What about Lara?" Cal asked.

"You may take your padawan as well." Varn told him, "But she is to act in an advisory capacity only. Is that clear?"

"Yes master." Cal replied.

"Then that's settled." Varn said, "You will have overall command of the mission and may the Force be with you."

The *Bright Hope* was a delaya-class courier that had been supplied to Cal as transport when he and Lara were first sent to the Narthis Sector. With speed and manoeuvrability that matched many starfighters as well as significant firepower in the form of two turret mounted laser cannons and a forward firing proton torpedo launcher the ship had repeatedly proven that it could outfight anything it could not outrun.

A naval ground crew was just completing refuelling and rearming the vessel when Cal entered the hangar and he paused to watch them.

"Not taking any chances I see." Dac said as he appeared in the hangar behind Cal and he tapped the pulse wave rifle with its under slung grenade launcher that Cal carried on his back.

"I've learned not to." Cal replied, "I've had more rifles loaded on the ship by the way. Though I wasn't able to rustle up any more with grenade launchers on them."

"I'm sure we'll make do." Dac replied.

"I can do it myself." Lara's voice suddenly called out and Cal and Dac both turned to see her and Pedrus Ketam, the padawan now assigned to Dac entering the hangar from another direction. Lara had dropped her bag and Pedrus had been about to bend down to pick it up for her. Instead she insisted on picking it up herself and Cal noticed her wince as she did so, the damage done by being impaled with a Sword of the Sith still affecting her.

"She's too stubborn." Cal commented.

"I noticed." Dac replied, "So do you have any hints about training a padawan?"

Cal paused and then smiled before looking down to where Ghost now sat beside him.

"You're better off with a dog." he said, "They take direction better and are often smarter." then he looked directly at Dac, "Has Pedrus mentioned the death of Vrish Khal to you?" he asked. The shistavanen battle master had been one of the three jedi killed in the mission led by Cal to infiltrate the Runn estate in search of the Sith library, the jedi not realising that it was located directly below the estate at the time. Ambushed by Natalay Shill, Vrish had been killed by the same Sword of the Sith that had almost ended Lara's life as well.

"No." Dac replied, shaking his head. Then he frowned, "Worried that he blames you?"

"I led the mission." Cal said.

But you did not kill Jedi Khal. Or Jedi Blake or Jedi Tyshon for that matter.

"I could have done more." Cal added.

"Like what?" Dac asked, "A larger force would probably have been detected sooner and you may not have found out where that Sith storehouse is. Face it Cal, your mission succeeded in its aim of discovering the location of the storehouse. Besides, who picked your team?"

"Dad." Cal answered, "He and Jedi Antress."

"So there you go. They determined what the mission was and who would be going. You did what you could with what you had and you still got Lara and Pedrus back here alive." Dac said.

"I suppose so." Cal replied, "Though I ought to point out that dad picked out this mission profile and team as well."

Dac's face fell.

"Stang." he muttered, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Returning to Crassis Major, the capital world of the Narthis Sector, the CMDF fleet was greeted by the remains of a battle that they had only just missed. Crassis Major was regarded by the Founding Families as second only to Delvad and as such had warranted the protection of a sizeable number of starships, including a contingent of Sith built vessels crewed mainly by war droids. At the same time as the war droids in the Delvad and Tepillos systems had turned on their masters, so too had those in the Crassis System rebelled. However, the war droids here represented a much smaller fraction of the military force deployed to defend the planet. In orbit there were warship patrols, orbiting weapons platforms and of course the availability of supporting fire from powerful ground based turbolaser and pulse wave batteries. Meanwhile on the surface itself most of the defence of the planet had been entrusted to either the CMDF itself or the private mercenary forces operated by the Founding Families. Therefore, when the war droids rebelled they did not seek to destroy the other forces. Instead although they did attack a handful of targets of opportunity their ships remained in orbit just long enough for them to evacuate as many of their number as possible from the surface before withdrawing into hyperspace, heading for Delvad. Finally, after the departure of the last of the Sith ships the remaining war droids left behind acted to cause as much damage as possible before they were finally destroyed.

"General Drud." another high ranking member of the CMDF said when his hologram appeared on the bridge of Josh's command cruiser right in front of the command chair, "When the droids went rogue we feared the worst. We knew how many were deployed to Delvad with you."

"Were they all affected?" Josh asked.

"As far as we can tell, yes sir. Certainly every unit here in the Crassis System. Even those that were shut down and in reserve self activated. We didn't even know that they could do that." the officer told him.

At that moment Josh's sister Kayza, who had been stood behind his chair when the fleet dropped out of hyperspace stepped forwards to address the hologram herself.

"What about casualties?" she asked, "Civilian and military."

"Tell her." Josh said when the hologram looked in his direction.

"We're still trying to get exact figures." the officer replied, "Military losses are around a thousand but some of the droids just went berserk, attacking anything they saw. Law enforcement tried to contain them at first but it wasn't until Shill Security could respond that the last of them were mopped up. So far we're looking at about six hundred dead and twice that wounded but that number could climb as we clear up and find more bodies."

"Stang." Kayza hissed, "This is a kriffing disaster." then she looked at her brother, "Josh we need to find a way of spinning this right. The public will be after answers. They'll want to know why this happened and how we're going to protect them from the droids."

"Colonel," Josh said, "I'll be heading down to the surface with President Trent. I want a full briefing ready by the time we get there. The President will want to know exactly what we have left and what the enemy now control."

"Yes general." the colonel replied before his hologram faded away and Josh turned to his sister.

"You better come as well." he told her, "As government press officer we'll need your input for all this spinning you say we need."

Escorted by fighters, a swarm of shuttles left the command cruiser for the surface. One of these shuttles, the one holding Josh and Kayza as well as Trent Narthis and Han and Natalay Shill headed for the government district and landed at the headquarters of the defence forces where there was a specially reinforced command and control centre that could put them in direct contact with any military force in the sector. On the other hand the majority of the shuttles turned towards the most expensive residential areas of the planet where the Founding Families maintained their private residences. Each of these was a fortified mansion protected by the best security available, security that since the declaration of independence had become even tighter as the need to limit the weaponry used to protect them in accordance of the Republic's laws vanished and the newly appointed 'President' Narthis allowed the use of heavier weapons. Thanks to these security measures most of the Founding Families residences had remained untouched by the droid uprising, with some of their defenders even acting to protect neighbouring properties when units of war droids approached them. All except the Crassis estate that was and as the shuttle carrying the members of the Crassis family descended towards the private landing pad they looked out of the viewports to see smoke rising from within the grounds.

"Luke." Salla in horror when she realised that some of this smoke was coming from the main house itself, but her husband did not respond.

When the shuttle set down and its access ramp began to extend both Luke and Salla ran down it as fast as they could towards the cluster of armoured mandalorians waiting for them at the bottom. One of these soldiers wore no helmet and it was to him that they headed.

"Mott," Luke said, "What happened? Where are the children?"

"Safe and sound sir." Kaylor Mott, leader of the mandalorians now contracted to serve the Crassis family answered.

"But the smoke and the damage." Salla said, looking at the damage inflicted to their home.

"Ah." Kaylor responded, "I regret to say that most of that was inflicted by my men and was done on my orders."

"What happened?" Luke asked.

"The war droids malfunctioned sir." Mott said, "I had four of them at the front gate and they suddenly started shooting at everything. They didn't limit themselves to the estate either. Two headed out onto the street. Fortunately one of the perimeter patrols handled them pretty quickly. But the units held in reserve in the main house and security control post all malfunctioned as well, self activating and arming themselves. As soon as I realised what was happening I ordered your children secured and removed to safety while we dealt with the droids. To accomplish that I authorised the use of grenades."

"Just as you should have Mister Mott." Erill announced as he descended the shuttle's ramp more calmly than his son and daughter in law had, "Now I suggest we go inside and wait for Josh and Trent to contact us."

## 4.

Two war droids had dragged Gayal to her feet and deposited her in a nearby chair while others set about removing the bodies of Ket and Fial Runn. Gayal had expected to hear the sounds of gunfire at any moment as the security forces protecting the Runn estate stormed into the Sith library to put down this machine uprising but nothing happened and with the hologram of Slaydo inactive for the time being she was left alone with the droids.

"Is this how you think a Sith should behave?" Slaydo's voice said as his image reappeared in front of Gayal as she continued to cower in the chair, "You are surrounded by knowledge that thousands died to bring here and thousands more died in defence of and yet you have not tried to make use of any of it."

Gayal looked up at the hologram but could not think of anything to say.

*Fear.*

"Ah, so you are afraid of me." Slaydo said, the hologram smiling, "Excellent. Fear is a great motivator. Many Sith have been driven to become powerful out of the fear of being eclipsed by their rivals or punished by their masters."

"What do you want from me?" Gayal screamed, finally plucking up the courage to speak, "Why does everyone try and force me to do what they want?" then she paused and averted her gaze again, "Everyone except-" she added quietly before trailing off.

"Everyone except who?" Slaydo asked, "Ah yes now I know, the Jedi. He showed strength, more than you have now but not more than you will have my young apprentice."

"Don't call me that!" Gayal snapped.

*Anger.*

"I'm not your apprentice. I'll never join you." she continued.

"Ah but you already have." Slaydo replied, "Anger, fear, hatred. I sense them all in you. You will serve me because you fear and hate me. You will accept my teachings out of fear of the consequences and in the hope that one day you will grow strong enough to destroy me and take my place as the master of everything you see here. And by serving me you will be able to take your revenge on all those who have wronged you. Including the Jedi."

"Cal's never done anything wrong to me." Gayal said, "He's always been there for me."

"Is that so young one?" Slaydo asked and the hologram turned its head from side to side, "Then where is your Jedi knight in shining armour? He abandoned you here didn't he? And it's not the first time is it?"

Prompted by Slaydo's goading, Gayal's mind suddenly brought back the memory of being imprisoned in the asylum by her own parents acting in concert with the Drud and Shill families and she remembered the feeling of being totally helpless as she spent day after day in a cell where she was kept permanently restrained. Every day she dreamed that Cal would come and rescue her but when rescue finally did come it came in the form of Mandalorian mercenaries sent by the Crassis family and the price of her rescue was to practically enslave by them instead. All of Gayal's memories of the Founding Families were of a similar nature. They had held her behaviour in contempt for a number of years right up until the moment they found out that she was the only one who could get them into the Sith library and then they all wanted to control her, seeing her as a means to a prize rather than a person.

*Hatred.*

Gayal wanted revenge. Revenge on those who had used her and on those who had failed her and Slaydo Kreeyn was offering her just that.

"No, it's not." she replied and she looked up, staring into the face of the hologram, "What do I have to do?"

"Get up." Slaydo told her, "Stop cowering in that chair and stand up proudly for you are Sith."

"Yes." Gayal replied, "I am Sith."

"Can someone tell me what the kriff is going on?" Trent demanded as he entered the briefing room and sat down at the head of the circular table. Around him sat various military officers and government ministers from around the sector both in physical and holographic form depending on how distant they had been when the meeting was called. Also joining the meeting were Han and Natalay Shill in their role as 'Government security contractors.'

"Every one of those antique war droids has gone rogue." the same CMDF colonel who had spoken with Josh aboard his cruiser replied, "It doesn't matter where they were in the sector or what they were assigned to do they turned on their controllers and then on anyone else unlucky enough to be in sight of them."

"The press are going wild." Kayza added, "There were more than a hundred messages in my system waiting for me when I got back and that number is growing all the time. People want to know why this happened."

"And how." one of the officers present only as a hologram added, "Those machines now control Delvad, Tepillos and Shadowfall."

"Shadowfall." Josh repeated, shaking his head, "Kriff."

Shadowfall was an orphaned planet, rather than orbiting a parent star it existed in interstellar space and had only been discovered by chance. Long regarded as nothing but a hazard to navigation it was revealed to have once been the base of operations of one of the Sith Lords who once controlled the Narthis Sector. Known as The Artisan, he had left behind the fully automated construction facilities responsible for manufacturing the war droid army and with that under their control the droids could produce almost limitless reinforcements.

"What do we have?" Trent asked, "Come on now. I know we still have some ships at our disposal, I came back from Delvad on one."

"We still have most of our planetary defence forces other than those units deployed to the three lost planets." another officer from the CMDF replied, "But the bulk of our vessels were the salvaged Sith frigates, carriers and gunships. Without them we are vulnerable."

"Vulnerable to who?" an individual present only as a hologram asked, "The Republic has recognised our independence. All we have to contend with are a handful of jedi troublemakers."

"And a legion of droids." Kayza added.

"So what ideas do you people have?" Trent asked, "They don't need to be perfect, just credible so we can tell the people that everything is under control."

"And hope none of them have relatives on Delvad or Tepillos." Han muttered.

"We fight fire with fire." Natalay said calmly and the gathered military commanders and ministers all glared at her.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" the CMDF colonel asked, "We lost all of the war droids. We don't have any left. Nor do we have the factory where even more of the damned things are being undoubtedly being churned out." then he looked at Trent, "Mister President, perhaps it would be better not to discuss military strategy while there are civilians in the room."

"Miss Shill has my full confidence colonel." Trent replied, "Unlike the officers who failed to prevent so many rogue droids escaping from the most heavily defended planet in the sector."

"The military may not have any war droids left in its armoury but Shill Security does." Natalay pointed out, "Furthermore we have full construction schematics for them. Now, I do believe that the Narthis sector government now controls the industrial facilities of a certain individual who ran against our respected president for the position of Republic Senator does it not?"

"Yes we do." Trent replied, "Plus Karn Industries has significant manufacturing capability if we need to contract out to the private sector."

"We also have shipyards." Josh added, "We need to start converting suitable vessels into warships and building new ones."

"The Crassis family's shipping company operates a number of class six freighters." the hologram of another military officer commented, "Those vessels share more than eighty percent of their components with praetorian-class frigates."

Trent nodded.

"I'll get in touch with Erill Crassis." he said, "I'm sure he'll be willing to turn over the ships for conversion."

"And all of this needs to be communicated to the people. They must know we are reacting to this new threat." Trent said, turning his head towards Kayza.

"Should be easy enough." she replied, "But it won't explain how this happened to begin with. Any suggestion that we missed some part of the droids' programming that made them go rogue will likely result in the media demanding heads roll and I don't think any of us want that do we?"

"An external influence." Natalay said, "Something from the Republic."

Han looked at some of the military officers present.

"Have there been any attempts to slice into defence systems that can be traced back to the Republic?" he asked.

"No, just the usual slicing attempts we get." one of them replied, shaking his head.

"What about Tepillos?" one of the holographic ministers asked, his image looking around, "Can we blame it on something to do with that planet?"

"That is where the majority of the droids were deployed." the CMDF colonel commented, "And we know that some of the insurgents survived their purge."

"That could work." Kayza replied, "It'll take me a few hours to come up with something proper but in the meantime you need to make a public statement to reassure people that everything is under control." she added, looking at Trent.

"You know," Han commented, "lie."

For all the military starships in orbit around Crassis Major when Kyle's ship, the *Destiny's Shadow*, arrived in the system the starport where he landed was remarkably quiet with only a handful of vessels either landing or taking off. However, Kyle was not here to observe commercial shipping. He wanted information and that

could be obtained at the starport at almost any time.

Kyle let Kassa enter the starport cantina first to check whether any of her contacts were inside, following her when she signalled him that they were and that there was no-one there who might recognise him. Inside the cantina was mainly filled with off duty maintenance crews rather than the spacers that normally made up the bulk of its clientele. Keeping his hood up to hide his features, Kyle followed Kassa to the bar and watched as she ordered two drinks before ordering one for himself. Then he followed her across the room. Kassa made her way towards a private booth in the far corner where a solitary figure sat hunched over a half filled beverage. Kyle on the other hand turned to the adjacent booth and set down his drink on the table there.

"Hey." one of the worker occupying the booth said, "This booth's taken. Go."

"You are all finished here." Kyle said, waving his hand in front of him.

"We're all finished here." the worker replied, "The booth is yours buddy." and without finishing their drinks or food all of the workers got up and left the booth. Seeing no point letting it go to waste as he sat down immediately behind where Kassa was located in the next booth Kyle pulled a plate of food towards him and began to eat.

"Need a refill?" Kassa asked her contact as she put a drink in front of him and sat down.

"So what do you want Kassa?" he asked as he took the drink and used it to top up his own glass.

"I need to know about the droids." she replied, "What happened to make them all go berserk? The news is saying it's sector wide."

"It is." her contact said, nodding in agreement, "I've a buddy works loading ore freighters and he says that all the shipments heading out to Shadowfall have been told to stop. All contracts set aside. Delvad looks to be at the centre of it though."

"What makes you say that?" Kassa asked.

"When the fleet here turned out to be too much for those tin cans to handle they bugged out like a jawa caught stealing a moisture vaporator and they headed right for Delvad. They won't make it there for a good few hours yet but when they do there'll be more than twenty of those battleships ships there. Plus more than a hundred smaller vessels. Looks like all those rich posh boys are going be seeing the value of their properties there taking a dive. Possibly literally as well as financially."

"So they didn't just start shooting at random here either?" Kassa said, "On Tepillos they only fired at what they seemed to considered to be threats."

"Oh there was some random violence later on." Kassa's contact told her, "After the droids' ships left the machines left behind acted like they had nothing to lose and went on the rampage. That's when most of the damage was done."

"What about the Founding Families?" Kassa asked, "What are they doing?"

"Hey, now everything I've just told you is worth the drink but that sort of information costs more. Not many people know how to get in touch with members of the Families' staff but far more want to know what can be found out from them."

"How much?" Kassa replied.

"Ten thousand." her contact told her, "This information is good. I got it right from someone on the cruiser that brought the President and his pals back from Delvad."

"Then you will give it to me." Kyle said suddenly as he got out of his own booth from where he had heard every word and moved to sit beside Kassa, "Now."

"Who the kriff are you?" Kassa's contact asked.

"I am the man who wants the information you have." Kyle replied, "But I'm not paying ten thousand credits for it. In fact I'm not paying anything for it at all."

"Then you can just kriff off can't you." the contact said. Then he looked at Kassa, "Go on, get rid of your friend. Oh and don't expect any more help from me in the future." then he raised his glass to take another drink.

Kyle took a quick look around to see if anyone was watching the booth and when he saw that the other cantina patrons were more interested in their own drinks he held up his hand as if he was about to reach out and physically grab hold of Kassa's contact by his throat but instead used the Force to do this. The man immediately spat out his drink and dropped his glass as he began to claw at his own throat, instinctively searching for whatever it was that was choking him.

"Perhaps I can be more persuasive." Kyle said to him calmly.

"He can't tell us anything if he's dead." Kassa said but Kyle ignored her, "Kyle, release him." she added, frowning and as Kyle released his telekinetic hold on the man's throat Kassa's contact gasped for air.

"So do we have a deal?" Kyle asked, "Tell me what I want to know and I shall let you live. Surely that is worth far more than a mere ten thousand credits you would not live to spend."

"No chance I-" the contact began before Kyle renewed his Force attack and he began to choke once more.

Nervously, Kassa looked around but it appeared that none of the cantina's other patrons had noticed anything amiss, all of them being too caught up in their own activities, "I'll tell you." the man suddenly croaked and Kyle let him go once more.

"Speak." Kyle said.

"The Families were all on Delvad when this thing kicked off." the man replied, struggling for breath still, "And they all came scurrying right back here."

"Understandable." Kassa said, "But hardly worth ten thousand credits."

"How about the fact that they all needed fishing out of the ocean?" her contact replied, "The Runn estate was destroyed and they all had to abandon it in escape pods. Looks like the Runns themselves weren't so lucky though. The entire family is dead."

"Drowning a nautolan is not easily done." Kyle commented.

"I never said they drowned." Kassa's contact said, "But whatever went on down there killed every last one of them. Now that's all I know. We're done here." then he looked at Kassa, "I mean that Kassa. You and me, we're done."

"Unfortunate that you would think way." Kyle replied, "I could have made use of you again."

"Like hell." the man said, snarling, "I know who you are. Jedi don't act like you so that means-" and all of a sudden he stopped talking as Kyle glared at him, eye-to-eye and he raised his hands to his temples and grimaced as some dark liquid that resembled blood only thicker began to drip from his ears, eyes and nose. Kassa double checked to make sure that no-one had been watching as Kyle murdered her former contact. Then leaving the man's body slumped forward across the table both she and Kyle got up and headed for the exit.

"What's up with him?" a waitress said just as the pair were walking past her and Kassa saw her looking towards the body.

"Drunk probably." Kassa said, "Dead drunk."

Outside Kassa and Kyle paused in a quiet spot where they could talk without being overheard or watched.

"So what now?" she asked, "I suppose we're heading on to Delvad right?"

"We?" Kyle asked.

"You brought me here in your ship. I'm sticking by you until you can get me back to Tepillos." Kassa told him.

"As you wish." Kyle said, "But no, we are not going to Delvad. At least not just yet. I need more information first."

"And how many more of my contacts are you planning to kill? I'd got a lot of useful information out of that last one over the years.

"I doubt the information I seek will be widely available." Kyle replied, "I need to know exactly what happened at the Runn estate and for that I shall require someone who was there."

"Are you insane? You're talking about kidnapping a member of the Founding Families." Kassa exclaimed.

"It will not be the first time I have done this." Kyle reassured her, "But first we must find out exactly who was there. It would not do to abduct someone who could not tell us what happened. At the very least it would be a waste of effort and at worst would tip off the Families that we are here and coming for them."

Cal brought the *Bright Hope* out of hyperspace at the edge of the Crassis system to begin with, directing its sensors towards both Crassis Major and the far more lightly populated Crassis Minor in turn to assess the state of the enemy defences.

"That's a hell of a lot of warships." Lara commented from the hatchway at the rear of the cockpit and both Cal and Dac glanced round at her.

"Should you be up and about?" Dac asked, "I thought you were supposed to be taking things easy."

"This ship is seventy metres long." she replied as she sat down behind her brother, "I'm not going to drop dead of exhaustion just because I walked from the galley to here. Besides I'm fine. I won't slow you down when we-"

"We?" Cal interrupted, "My instructions were clear. You stay put and watch the ship."

"Shorty can watch the ship." Lara said, referring to the labour droid in the hold, so called both because some of the characters of its designation T1-LB-5RTY looked like letters from the word and also as a pun on its almost two and a half metre height.

"The answer's still no." Cal told her, "Dac, Pedrus and I can handle the infiltration just fine while you watch our backs from in here."

"Infiltration?" Lara asked, "So you're going after the Crassis estate then?"

"Actually we haven't selected a target yet." Dac replied, "Any of them would do."

"Yes, but Cal's going to go after the Crassis estate. Aren't you Cal? Or if he doesn't get what he wants there he may try the Karn estate instead."

"What makes you think that?" Dac asked.

"Because my dear brother is in love with the wife of Erill Crassis." Lara said, grinning and Cal frowned, "Oh come on brother." Lara added, reaching out and rubbing the top of his head, "You can't deny you want to get her back."

"See what I mean?" Cal said, looking at Dac while he straightened his hair again.

"I do." Dac responded with a smile.

"What?" Lara asked, frowning, "Cal, what did you tell him about me?"

"There." Cal said suddenly, pointing to the sensor display without responding to Lara, "There's a bulk freighter on approach to Crassis Major. Looks like its heading to dock at one of the orbital platforms."

"But we need to get to the surface." Lara said, "Unless you want to risk a shuttle ride."

"We don't need to." Cal replied, "The platform it looks like it's going to dock at is less than a thousand kilometres above the surface and there's a gap in the warship patrols where they're relying on the platform's sensors to cover it. If we follow it in close and then cut in a full power thrust at the last minute we can be through before they can react."

"And if they do see us?" Dac asked.

"We can fight our way through a small fighter patrol." Cal pointed out, "Or if there are too many of them we can pull back and think up something new."

"I'll go stand by on the landing claw." Dac said and he got up and left cockpit, allowing Lara to take his place in the co-pilot's seat. Meanwhile Cal began piloting the *Bright Hope* towards the massive bulk freighter.

"I never got chance to say thank you." Lara said to him.

"Thank you for what?" Cal asked.

"For saving me." Lara replied, "When I got stabbed with that sword I thought I was going to die. But you saved me and you left Gayal behind to do it."

Cal smiled.

"You're my baby sister." he said, "What else could I do?" and Lara frowned, "What's wrong?" Cal asked before Lara suddenly punched his arm, "Ouch!" he exclaimed.

"Stop calling me a baby!" Lara snapped.

## 5.

This time the Founding Families gathered together they did so in a virtual form, each of those involved in the meeting being located in their own home while the others appeared to them as a hologram. There were fewer of them than there had been at the opening of the Sith storehouse. Josh Drud and Han and Belle Shill were busy organising the defence of the parts of the sector not yet controlled by the Sith war droids, while Charity Crassis, Jaynie Drud and the Karn daughters were considered unnecessary.

"We need to act quickly." Trent announced, "The only way we can offset the losses we've suffered is to start manufacturing our own army of war droids."

"Juggernaut war droids to be precise." Natalay Shill added, "We have full specifications for them."

"We also need to begin a program of militarising civilian starships as well as building new ones." Trent continued.

"Our manufacturing facilities can be tooled up to start making droids and ship in under a day." Del Karn said.

"That's good." Trent said, "But we also need to reactivate the Kast Industries facilities."

"That shouldn't be too much of an issue." Heddren Drud said, "Legally they are now under state control."

"The civilian population will probably be glad of the extra employment." Millel added.

"Plus it'll make our bottom line look better." Faye Karn added, unaware that she and her husband were being observed covertly.

Sial looked round at her younger sister.

"Okay Keera, they've started." she said quietly, "We can go."

Along with their older sister Gayal, the pair had sneaked out of their home on many occasions so that they could go to various nightspots that their parents would not approve of or the law technically barred them from entering. However, on this occasion things were different. As soon as the Karns had returned to their homes they had put their security forces on full alert with every single person wanting to enter or leave the premises having to be authorised by either Faye Karn or her husband. But with the meeting of the senior members of the Founding Families now in progress neither of them could be interrupted and Keera and Sial knew that this was their moment to act.

Heading to the parking garage they selected one of the smaller landspeeders and rather than try to sneak past any of the guards simply drove straight to the front gate where a Shill Security agent armed with a pulse wave rifle and wearing full body armour waved for them to stop, something that they obediently did.

"Can't let you leave miss." the guard said to Sial as she looked up at him from the driver's seat.

"Are you kidding me?" Sial replied angrily, "Mom and Dad agreed to this. Your supervisor should have been told all about it. Just check with her."

The guard stepped back from the speeder for a moment and Sial saw him bring his hand up to activate the comlink built into his armour as he signalled the guard control post. Then she looked around, picking out where she could see additional guards and the places where she knew more were hiding with heavier weapons than just pistols and rifles.

"The supervisor doesn't know anything about it." the guard replied eventually.

"Well then tell her to go and ask our parents. They want us out of the way while they discuss business." Sial hissed at the guard and he activated his comlink again.

"Sorry miss but your parents can't be disturbed." he told them.

"Then bring your supervisor here." Sial said sternly, "I want her to explain why she's countermanding my mother's orders to me in person. Then when the meeting is over she can explain it all again to my mother."

Once more the guard activated his comlink. But it took far less time on this occasion for him to address Sial again.

"My supervisor has ordered me to let you leave." he said, "Enjoy your evening."

"Sial just smiled as she accelerated through the gate. Then when they were a safe distance from the gate she glanced at her sister and smiled.

"I told you it would work." she said.

"Yes you did." Keera agreed, "Normally when we sneak out there's a lot more sneaking going on. So where to now?"

"I was thinking that place on Eighth Street." Sial replied.

"But they always check IDs Sial."

"Don't worry about that. You can use mine. You're only a few months short of twenty-one so I doubt they'll look too hard." Sial told her.

"And what about you?" Keera asked and Sial smiled.

"I've still got Gayal's. Don't worry, I've got everything under control."

Cal carefully manoeuvred the *Bright Hope* in close to the bulk freighter, approaching from behind where the

energy flare of the freighter's ion drive would mask their presence and equalising their speeds and headings before narrowing the gap even further. Folding up the ship's large angled wings, Cal also extended the landing gear and this was Dac's signal to stand by. The sound of the two ships making contact echoed through the interior of the Bright Hope and Cal winced, hoping that no-one was in that particular cargo module of the freighter or they too would have heard the sound of the impact. The noise did tell Dac when it was the exact time to activate the magnetic clamp of the landing claw, however and with the two ships now locked together Cal began to shut down all unnecessary systems.

"Now we wait." he said to Lara.

Just as Cal had calculated the freighter was following a course that took it to an orbital docking facility around Crassis Major and it did so avoiding the defence force patrols that were far heavier than usual. Sat quietly in the cockpit that was illuminated only by whatever light from outside could get in Cal and Lara looked out and watched the stars.

"Is it just me or is there less civilian traffic than normal?" Lara asked and Cal frowned as he looked for signs of engine flares. As the sector capital as well as sitting on the main hyperspace route through it, Crassis Major was a major transport hub for vessels heading to or coming back from the other worlds in the area. This had continued to be the case even after the Narthis Sector seceded from the Republic

"Yes there is." he said, "A lot less. I'd say most of what's left is heading for the planet though so that should make things easier. But I wonder why people aren't leaving."

*Unable or unwilling? Use the Force. Search their feelings and you will have your answer.*

"You're right." Cal said softly in response to the message from Master Karas.

"I am?" Lara said, "About what?"

"Nothing. Ever." Cal said, "I was just remembering something Master Karas told me." and Lara snorted.

"All he ever seemed to say was that he wasn't happy with our behaviour." she said.

"Your behaviour maybe. But I think he liked me more." Cal commented, grinning.

*An opinion that can still be reassessed.*

"Just let me concentrate." Cal said and he took a deep breath and let the Force flow through him.

Given that there were two and a half billion people living on Crassis Major they had a significant effect on the Force and if enough of them felt the same way then this could be sensed from a considerable distance. Now was one of the occasions on which a single feeling had taken hold over a massive portion of the population and Cal felt a shiver run down his spine as he felt the influence of the Dark Side falling over the entire world.

*Fear.*

The people of Crassis Major were afraid and this fear was leading them to stay exactly where they were.

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

"Cal we're coming up on the dock." Lara warned him, pointing to the space station that was getting bigger through the cockpit canopy.

"Okay this is it." Cal replied as he began to bring the Bright Hope's systems back online, activating the intercom as soon as it was ready, "Okay Dac. This is it, release the landing claw on my command." and then he waited as the orbital dock grew even closer. Double checking the Bright hope's passive sensors he saw that there were no other vessels for several thousand kilometres all around, "Now!" he called out far louder than was needed for the intercom to pick him up and the *Bright Hope* suddenly lurched as it broke free of the freighter

Cal immediately fired the ship's engines and it leapt away from the freighter, diving for the upper atmosphere as fast as Cal could manage. Being so close to the atmosphere to begin with meant that even though the orbital dock tried to warn the defence forces as soon as they detected the engine flare there was too little time to either arrange for an interception or bring up the planetary shield to block the *Bright Hope's* path. The ship shuddered as it entered the atmosphere, flames appearing outside the cockpit caused by the friction of the atmospheric entry.

"Cal, shouldn't we be switching to repulsorlifts about now?" Lara asked nervously. Given the extreme heat and moderate radioactive emissions from an ion drive, starships used repulsorlifts like those used on many modern surface and atmospheric vehicles while operating in an atmosphere but Cal had kept the main ion drive active even as they cleared the stratosphere.

"Not yet." Cal replied and ahead of the ship the clouds gave way to reveal the ocean below.

"Cal." Lara said nervously, reaching for the safety harness built into her chair and fastening as the waves grew closer.

"What's going on?" Dac asked as he and Pedrus suddenly appeared in the hatchway and their eyes widened as they saw the rapidly approaching ocean as well, "Holy kriff." Dac exclaimed.

"I think Cal may be about to test how water tight the *Bright Hope* is." Lara commented as Dac and Pedrus leapt into the two vacant seats and began to strap themselves in.

"Assuming we survive the impact." Pedrus said.

"Now!" Cal snapped as he reached out for the drive controls and suddenly switched from the ion drive to the repulsorlifts and the *Bright Hope* lurched and groaned as it decelerated far too quickly for the artificial gravity

field to cope with properly, coming to a halt just a few metres above the ocean waves and from the rear of the ship there was a yelping.

"Oh nice one big brother." Lara said, "You've scared Ghost."

"Better a scared dog than a ship full of jedi shot down before it could get under the planetary scanners." Cal pointed out, "Now let's find somewhere to land and unpack the speeder bikes."

Cal set the *Bright Hope* down on a small rocky island just off the coast of the continent on which Crassis Major's capital city was located. The ship contained three Republic military issue speeder bikes, each one armed with a light pulse wave cannon and a simple unarmed grav sled. All of these vehicles used repulsorlift engines, meaning that the water separating the jedi from the capital was no barrier at all.

"Stay here Lara." Cal told his sister as he and the other two jedi watched Shorty unloading the speeder bikes from the *Bright Hope's* small cargo hold.

"And do what exactly?" Lara asked.

"Jule gave us that communications interception package." Cal replied, "See if you can get anything out of it. It would be nice to know what the Founding Families and the local military are up to. Plus I'd appreciate any warning you can give us if they figure out that it's us that just raced through their orbital security net." Then Cal climbed onto one of the speeder bikes and pulled a pair of goggles over his eyes, "Ready?" he asked Dac and Pedrus.

"Ready." Dac replied while Pedrus just nodded, "But where are we going?"

"Like Lara said," Cal told him, "We're going to the Crassis estate. Don't worry, I've broken into there before."

In rapid succession the three speeder bikes then sped off, racing over the water towards the mainland. Lara watched for a while and then looked up at Shorty.

"Okay Shorty," she said, "time to get back inside." then she looked down at Ghost who looked back up at her and wagged his tail, "You too Ghost. I'd let you play out here but I know you'll end up in the water and I don't want the ship stinking of wet dog."

The landspeeder had the capability to easily outrun the repulsortruck Kyle and Kassa had stolen, its owner's body now lay in a waste disposal unit. However, neither of the Karn sisters suspected that the vehicle that had been behind them for more than a kilometre was actively following them.

"This section has cameras all the way along." Kassa pointed out as she saw one of the surveillance devices clamped to a street light.

"It is irrelevant." Kyle replied, "When I do this the Founding Families will know that I am coming for them but it will be too late. All I care is that this place offers the minimum chance of escape." and then he took one hand off the steering controls and extended it towards the landspeeder before focusing his mind on it.

All of a sudden the landspeeder spun out of control as it was assailed by an unseen telekinetic blast. Struggling to keep the vehicle on the road, Sial was unable to prevent it from smashing into the street light on which the surveillance camera was mounted and as the light came crashing down the speeder itself buried its nose in the ground and flipped over.

Kyle slammed on the brakes and brought the repulsortruck to a halt before both he and Kassa leapt out and began to approach the speeder.

"what if you killed them both?" Kassa asked and Kyle grinned.

*Fear.*

*Pain.*

"They live." he replied, "Though they will soon wish they had not." and he reached under his cloak and drew his lightsaber. Walking up to the passenger side of the speeder he ignited it, producing a 'snap-hiss' sound as the glowing blade extended and he brought it down on the edge of the door so that it dropped away from the wrecked vehicle. Inside Keera was snapped out of her confused state by this and, still held in place by her seatbelt she stared up into Kyle's face and screamed as the lightsaber blade came down again. But the weapon was not aimed for her and instead it sliced through one of the points at which the seatbelt was secured to the speeder's chassis and Keera dropped to the ceiling that was currently below her.

"Out you get." Kyle said, reaching down and dragging her from the vehicle.

At the same time Kassa headed round to the driver's side of the speeder with her pulse wave blaster in her hand. However, Sial had been alerted to the danger by her sister's screams and she reached for her bag and felt inside where she quickly located the compact semi-automatic pistol she frequently carried when away from home. So as Kassa pulled open the speeder door Sial was already prepared and there was a sharp 'Crack!' as the pistol fired.

"Stang!" Kassa exclaimed as she jumped backwards and took cover at the rear of the speeder, "She's got a kriffing gun!"

"Then I suggest you don't get shot with it." Kyle said as he shut off his lightsaber and pinned Keera to the ground face down as he began to bind her wrists behind her.

Sial released her seatbelt and dragged her way out off the speeder. Turning as she heard Kassa rushing back towards her and before the zeltron could grab hold of her she fired her pistol again and Kassa dived

aside, saved from being shot only by the fact that Sial remained partially stunned by the crash. However, she was aware enough of her surroundings to see the gap in the barrier beside the road and she knew roughly where she was. Therefore, abandoning Keera she got to her feet and began to run, pointing her pistol behind her and firing without aiming to keep off any pursuit.

"I'm after her." Kassa hissed as Sial vanished through the gap in the barrier, "I'll make that little bitch pay for shooting at me."

The gap in the barrier allowed Sial to access a footpath that ran through an area of carefully maintained woodland. Unfortunately the wide spacing between the trees offered no hiding places from Kassa as she also came through the gap.

"No point in running." she called out before firing a single blast from her pulse wave blaster. The compact spatial distortion the weapon fired struck the ground close by Sial and spread lumps of dirt around. In response Sial fired her pistol again, pulling the trigger until the weapon's slide locked back as the last round in the magazine was spent. With the extra ammunition for the weapon still in her bag in the wrecked speeder, Sial just tossed the useless pistol aside and continued to run as fast as she could. She emerged from the woodland in one of the capital's most exclusive residential areas, still not as fancy as the one where her family lived but most of the Founding Families had riches beyond what even those who lived in this area could dream of. All of the residences here were surrounded by tall walls and other physical barriers such as shield generators and heavy gates so just running up to the front door of one and asking for help was out of the question. Fortunately though Sial knew this area well and she knew exactly which of the fortified mansions to head for.

As soon as Kassa emerged from the woods she realised that she could not just simply run through the streets of this neighbourhood while waving a gun around. The local police would undoubtedly respond very quickly if even one of the local residents saw her and summoned them, so instead she tucked the weapon back under her jacket and set off after Sial again.

The residence that Sial was heading for looked much the same as many of the others in the area, but that was because the family that lived there had suffered from the poor business decisions of their ancestor Corvis and more recently suffered further loss when the father of its current resident abandoned his family and made off with a significant amount of money. The gate to the Fayl mansion was sealed, just as all of those to the neighbouring ones were but like the other Founding Families, Nissel Fayl did not rely solely on a wall and gate for protection and as soon as Sial ran up to the gate and grabbed hold of its metal bars a pair of Shill Security agents in full body armour appeared and aimed their rifles at her.

"Stay where you are!" one yelled, her voice amplified by her armour, "This is private property and we are authorised to use lethal force to protect it."

"Help me!" Sial shouted, "I am Sial Karn and I'm being chased."

"Step back from the gate miss." the guard replied while her companion waved at someone out of sight and when Sial let go of the bars the gate slid open and the guard stepped forwards to pull her off the street.

"Her!" Sial snapped as she saw Kassa appear on the street, "She's part of this." and the guard raised her rifle and fired without warning. The blast struck Kassa in the chest and as her ribs were smashed by the pulse wave blast she was thrown backwards, landing out of sight, "Keera." Sial exclaimed, "The other one has my sister."

"Where?" the female guard asked and Sial pointed back to where she had been forced off the road.

"That way. On the main road. He's a jedi, I saw his lightsaber." she said.

"Seal the gates." the guard ordered.

"What, aren't you going to help her?" Sial asked.

"We can't miss. We can't take on a jedi without risking the mansion's security. But I'll inform headquarters and they'll send a response team. Now let's get you inside."

Nissel breathed a sigh of relief when the meeting was finally called to a halt, the row of miniature holograms lined up across her desk fading away and she looked up and smiled.

"Dad really can go on can't he?" the dark skinned man sat on a nearby couch said as he poured a drink. Barely more than a year earlier the idea of a member of the Drud family being in the Fayl mansion would have been impossible to conceive of. The Fayls had laid much of the blame for their losses on the Drud family for hundreds of years and Nissel's mother Lorna had held those beliefs close to her heart. But Hiran, the son of Heddren and Millel had been secretly friends with Nissel for a long time and following Lorna's removal they had become even closer.

"I can't say I blame him right now." Nissel said as she got up and walked over to the couch to join Hiran, "We were supposed to be dividing up the spoils of the library by now." then she reached out and took the drink from Hiran and took a sip before adding, "At least mom isn't around to say it's all your family's fault."

The pair then leant closer to one another, intending to kiss. But all of a sudden the door to the room opened and a guard marched in.

"What do you want?" Nissel demanded, "I asked not to be-" and then her jaw dropped as she saw the

somewhat dishevelled Sial Karn behind the guard, "Sial! What happened?"

"It was Kyle Jenner." Sial exclaimed, "He's got Keera."

Nissel and Hiran looked at the guard.

"An accomplice was shot in the street outside." he said, "A response team is on its way from headquarters right now to track down the jedi and rescue the other Miss Karn."

"Has the Karn family been told?" Hiran asked.

"We've been in touch with their security detail." the guard answered, "Their commander will inform Missus Karn at the earliest opportunity."

## 6.

Kyle dragged Keera back to her feet and towards the repulsortruck. Though she kicked and screamed she had no hope of escaping him, even had she not been bound he was much bigger and stronger than she was in addition to his decades of experience as a Jedi knight that included handling prisoners far more dangerous than an unarmed twenty year old woman. Opening the back of the van, Kyle tossed her inside before he slammed the door shut again and then he looked around. He was not worried about being observed, everything that had transpired had most likely been caught on multiple public surveillance cameras and he was confident in his ability to handle any law enforcement unit that arrived to investigate. However, he had no intention of just abandoning Kassa. She had served him well for many years as both Jedi knight and Sith warrior and was a valuable resource.

### *Danger.*

His senses told him that something was amiss moments before he heard the sound of airborne repulsorlifts and he looked up into the night sky to see the bright flood lights mounted on the front of three approaching gunships. The heavily armed vehicles were obviously heading right for him and Kyle doubted that they held mere police officers. Instead his instincts told him that he was facing troops from Shill Security and he smiled.

Had the Founding Families been serious about trying to catch him then they ought to have sent some of their Mandalorian mercenaries, he thought to himself.

Then his expression changed to a snarl as he reached out with one hand and using the same telekinetic ability he had used to cause Sial to crash the speeder he lashed out at one of the gunships, targeting one of the two at the rear of the triangular formation. To the surprise of its pilot the vehicle was suddenly tossed to one side in mid air and collided with the other gunship to the rear.

### *Panic.*

Even from as far away as he was Kyle felt the moment that the occupants of both gunships realised that they were doomed and he almost felt as if he could hear their final screams just moments before the sky was lit up with fire from the explosion before the entangled wreckage of both gunships plummeted to the ground and landed on one of the nearby mansions.

This left only one gunship filled with soldiers to deal with. Under normal circumstances the crew would have utilised the gunship's heavy weaponry to take Kyle out from the air. But they knew that they were dealing with a hostage situation and so did not dare use such firepower until they could confirm that they would not accidentally harm Keera Karn. However, the pilot was unwilling to risk his gunship against Kyle's obviously powerful abilities and so he decelerated and descended, bringing the gunship down to ground level still more than two hundred metres down the road from where Kyle stood by his van.

"Out! Out! Out!" the pilot yelled over the intercom as the gunships touched down and the squad of troops it carried leapt out of the large hatchways and formed up to face Kyle while the gunship rose back into the air and began to circle at a distance.

"Advance." the squad leader ordered his men, "Fire at will but make sure you have eyes on what's behind the target. Prime objective is to recover the hostage, everything else is secondary. She is not expendable." Kyle stood with his back against the repulsortruck and facing the approaching agents. He knew that they would not fire unless they could be sure of not hitting Keera and by keeping what was behind him hidden he knew that they would err on the side of caution. With his arms by his sides Kyle watched as they drew closer, waiting for them to get close to him and when they were perhaps only ten metres away he acted, raising his hands up above his head.

"I surrender." he said.

The squad of armoured soldiers came to a halt, all aiming their pulse wave carbines at him.

"Down on your knees!" the squad leader yelled and Kyle complied, lowering himself down into a kneeling position, "Secure him." the squad leader added and two of the soldiers began to creep forwards. But just as they were about to take hold of his arms Kyle suddenly lowered them, pointing directly at the two soldiers and unleashed a storm of lightning at them. Pushing his arms out straight, Kyle added another telekinetic blast to the Force lightning and the two screaming soldiers were hurled backwards into their comrades.

Before any of his opponents could react Kyle then leapt to his feet and reached both arms under his cloak to produce not only his lightsaber but also a plasma carbine that he wielded one handed, aiming it at one of the soldiers and unleashing an energy blast that burned a gaping hole all the way through him, armour and all.

A single swing of his lightsaber sliced another soldier in two before Kyle dropped his carbine and lunged forwards to impale another soldier while kicking the legs out from under a second before decapitating him.

"Back!" the squad leader yelled as he realised that six men, more than half his squad, had been killed in a matter of seconds. Then he fired at Kyle but the former Jedi sensed the attack coming before it took place

and he had his lightsaber blade positioned perfectly to block the shot, the spatial distortion bursting apart when it struck the field surrounding its blade.

Using the Force again Kyle picked up the squad leader and with a wave of his hand hurled the man against the side of the repulsortruck, a move that provoked a squeal from Keera inside the vehicle. Though not killed by the throw the squad leader was stunned, dropping his carbine as he fell to the ground and lay still.

Another soldier took aim and Kyle knew that he could not get his lightsaber into position to parry the shot in time so instead he extended his other hand towards the man and reached out through the Force.

Immediately Kyle's opponent dropped his carbine and fell to his knees as he desperately clawed at the latches to his helmet, hoping that by removing it he would be able to breathe while at the same time Kyle struck at another soldier with his lightsaber. This strike cut a soldier's carbine in half as well as slicing off his hands but Kyle was not done there and he swung his lightsaber back again and decapitated the soldier.

Now only one soldier remained and Kyle turned to give him his undivided attention. But the soldier did not attack, instead backing away slowly while keeping his carbine trained on Kyle while the former jedi just glared at him with his inhuman yellow eyes.

"I won't follow you." Kyle said, shutting down his lightsaber and the moment he did this the soldier turned and ran, at which point Kyle summoned his plasma carbine back to his grasp using the Force and simply shot the fleeing man in the back, "All too easy." he then said to himself as he put both his weapons away again.

*Fear.*

Kyle turned around as he sensed the squad leader regaining consciousness and strode towards him. The soldier reached for his sidearm but as he drew the weapon from its holster Kyle swatted it from his grasp before grasping him around the throat with one hand and lifting him up off the ground. Then as he stared at the soldier Kyle began to release the seals on his helmet.

"Now tell me about the zeltron." he said, "My need for information about her is all that is keeping you alive."

"I don't know what you're talking about." the soldier gasped as his helmet fell to the ground, "We saw no zeltron."

*Deceit.*

"You're lying." Kyle said, "Lies will only make this hurt more and he held up his other hand so that the squad leader could see the lightning arcing between his fingers.

"She's dead." the squad leader croaked, his eyes wide as he stared at the lightning, "She was shot by one of the guards at the Fayl mansion."

*Anger.*

The news of Kassa's death was not what Kyle wanted to hear and if he decided that those responsible for costing him such a useful ally would be made to suffer for their insolence. But right now he needed to focus on what he had set out to do this night and although it appeared Sial had escaped he still had Keera and she would probably be enough for what he wanted.

Snarling, he thrust his hand forwards, pressing it against the squad leader's face and allowing the lightning to flow over his head.

Letting go of the corpse, Kyle got back into the repulsortruck and started the engine. He knew that the gunship was still circling but he also knew that it would not risk firing on him while he had Keera in the back of the vehicle and also that having seen him destroy the other two gunships its pilot would not risk coming too close. This made following the repulsortruck from the air difficult and Kyle was confident that he could loose the gunship easily.

"I've got a bad feeling about that." Dac said as he Cal and Pedrus looked up at the sudden explosion in the sky from the seats of their stationary speeder bikes.

"What caused it?" Pedrus asked.

"Looks like a ship exploding." Cal replied and he pointed, "See how the flames are falling to the ground in an irregular pattern? That's from pieces of debris being differently affected by air resistance."

"So are we going to investigate?" Pedrus suggested but Cal shook his head.

"No." he said, "We've got a job to do and its not air crash investigation. Now follow me." and he set off again, the other two jedi following close behind him.

Cal led them to the edge of the capital city where the most expensive residences could be found, several of them of course belonging to the Founding Families and from there to one residence in particular before coming to a halt.

"So this is the Crassis estate then is it?" Dac asked as he looked through the fence at the mansion they had stopped outside.

"No. I'm not sure who owns this one." Cal replied, "But what's important is that their next door neighbours are the Crassis family."

"Ah and you intend to cut through their grounds to get into those of the Crassis mansion yes?" Pedrus asked.

"Not quite. The grounds of the Crassis mansion don't adjoin directly onto any of the neighbouring properties but from that tower-like structure up there we can shoot a line across to the Crassis house. Then we'll get

inside with our master keys.”

“Master keys?” Pedrus asked, “I don’t understand.”

“A master key.” Dac told him as he unhooked his lightsaber from his belt and held it up in front of the padawan, “Opens almost any known door.”

“Oh right.” Pedrus said.

“But first we need to get inside there.” Cal said, looking at the mansion they were outside.

“What were you planning?” Dac asked.

“Well I thought we could knock and ask nicely.” Cal replied. Then, diverting as much power to his speeder bike’s engine as he could he leapt the lightweight vehicle over the perimeter fence and rode it up to the front door. Dismounting from the speeder bike while Dac and Pedrus followed he walked up to the door and rang the bell. The door was soon opened by a grey haired man and before he could ask who Cal was or why he was there the jedi just waved his hand in front of the man’s face.

“You need to let us into your house. We will cause no trouble.” he said, using the Force to project the thought into the man’s mind.

“Come in, come in.” the man said, “I’m sure you’ll be no trouble.” then as the three jedi entered the house he added, “Do wipe your feet though.”

“This is a disaster.” Luke Crassis said as he sat reviewing the reports from around the sector.

“Yes it is.” his father agreed, “Those droids have this system almost completely surrounded.”

“Actually I was thinking about our shipping fleet. Those thirty-four class six freighters represent the bulk of our capacity and Josh and Trent want us to just hand them over.”

“On the other hand Luke dear, the modifications to the engines that are going to be made will allow them to haul five times the mass of cargo at almost three times the speed.” Salla said, “Plus without converting them to warships we’d be badly outnumbered.”

“We’ll still be outnumbered.” Luke replied, “We need cruisers. Not light frigates.”

Then there was a knock at the door and it opened to reveal Kaylor Mott.

“Mister Crassis.” he announced, facing Erill and bowing his head slightly.

“Yes Mister Mott, what is it?” Erill asked.

“We have just heard from Shill Security headquarters.” Kaylor answered, “It seems that the daughters of Del and Faye Karn were assaulted by an individual wielding a lightsaber. Sial Karn was able to escape and from her description it seems that it was Kyle Jenner. He had an accomplice but she is now dead.”

“What about Keera?” Salla asked.

“Unknown.” Kaylor replied, “But the scene is still being searched.”

“Didn’t anyone try to stop him earlier?” Erill asked.

“Yes sir. A team was sent by Shill Security but he was able to destroy two of the three gunships in the air and the troops from the third were all killed.”

“Well what did they expect?” Luke said, “Kyle Jenner is a killer pure and simple.”

“But why go after Keera and Sial?” Salla asked.

“Perhaps to get our attention.” Erill said, “Which means he could strike again if the reaction is not what he wanted.” then he looked at Luke, “Where is your sister?” he asked.

“Oh don’t worry, she’s still here. I advised her against heading back to her own apartment.”

“Good. Then at least we can be sure she is safe.” Erill said as he turned back to Kaylor, “Mister Mott I want you to go to your headquarters and take a platoon of your best men. Find Kyle Jenner and find out what happened to Keera Karn. If she is alive then bring her back here to us.”

“Not back to her family?” Salla asked, “Bringing another of their daughters here could just make things worse between us.”

“If we bring her back here then she will be surrounded by mandalorians.” Erill replied, “Her family is welcome to take her back any time they want but right now I feel safer knowing that the people protecting me have experience in battling jedi.”

“There is one other matter sir.” Kaylor added.

“Oh really? And what would that be?” Erill asked.

“A ship was observed making an unauthorised entry into Crassis Major’s atmosphere.” Kaylor replied, “It used a bulk freighter to cover its approach through the sensor network and then made a dash for the surface. Intercept command say it came down using ion drive all the way.”

“Dangerous.” Luke commented, “You need good reflexes to avoid ploughing into the ground.”

“Yes, jedi reflexes.” Salla agreed.

“Intercept command were able to identify the vessel as a delaya-class courier.” Kaylor said and Erill smiled.

“So, Kyle Jenner is not the only jedi we have to contend with.” he said, “It looks like Cal Udra has come looking for revenge for what happened to his sister.”

Keera was still kicking and screaming as Kyle dragged her from the back of the repulsortruck and into the

*Destiny's Shadow*, taking her into the vessel's hold where he dropped her onto the floor.

"What do you want?" she yelled.

"Information." Kyle answered.

"But I don't get told anything." Keera replied.

"Yes, I know how irrelevant you are Keera." Kyle said, snarling, "But you are the key that will allow me to get at someone who will be able to answer my questions."

"But how?" Keera said and Kyle grinned.

"Give me the access codes to your family's security grid." he replied.

## 7.

Using the communications package provided by Jule, Lara did her best to monitor signals between the Founding Families and the government. The problem was that with access to the technology of the local defence forces the Founding Families were able to employ some rather sophisticated surveillance countermeasures. But Lara was still able to monitor the volume of traffic for sudden spikes and when any signals needed to be sent to someone without access to the countermeasures being employed for top level messages they became readable and what Lara saw then concerned her.

"Cal are you there?" she said, activating the *Bright Hope's* communications.

"Right here baby sister." Cal's voice replied and Lara frowned.

"What have you done?" she asked.

"What do you mean what have we done?" Cal said, "We've not done anything yet. We've set up an observation point but have yet to take any action."

"Well all stations have been alerted to your presence and they're saying you've kidnapped Keera Karn." Lara said.

"What?" Cal exclaimed, "We haven't been near Keera Karn or any of the Karns for that matter."

"Well Shill Security just issued a general alert for all law enforcement to be on the lookout for her and the jedi that's believed to have taken her hostage."

"Jedi?" Cal said.

"That's what it says right here." Lara told him.

"Then if we didn't do it and dad hasn't sent any more jedi to back us up that leaves only one possibility." Cal said, "Kyle Jenner."

"Kyle Jenner?" Pedrus repeated when he heard the former jedi knight's name mentioned, "But what would he want with Keera Karn?"

"My guess would be the same thing we're after. Information." Cal told him, "Though if I know Keera then the only thing he'll get from her is a list of cantinas that will serve minors with alcohol."

"Cal look at this." Dac said suddenly from by the window he was watching the Crassis estate from.

"Hang on Lara, something's happening." Cal said before shutting off his point to point communication link and rushed to Dac's side. Looking out into the ground behind the Crassis mansion Cal could see the row of basilisk war droids that belonged to the family's mandalorian guards. Part war droid and part assault vehicle each basilisk was heavily armed, could travel on land in the air or in space and carried significant weaponry, effectively giving a single man the firepower of an entire squad. Most of the basilisks lacked riders and sat motionless, waiting for orders. But three mandalorians had come marching out of the mansion towards them with rifles slung over their backs so they would not interfere with them riding one of the basilisks. One of the three mandalorians carried his helmet under his arm rather than wearing it and Cal immediately recognised the man.

"Kaylor Mott." he said, "That's the mandalorians' commander."

"So where's he going then?" Dac asked.

"Perhaps his shift is over." Pedrus suggested.

"No." Cal replied, shaking his head, "He wouldn't just abandon the Crassis family while Kyle Jenner's around. He's being sent to deal with Kyle and get Keera back." and as Cal continued to watch all three mandalorians climbed up onto their basilisks and the droids instantly came to life, raising themselves up from the squatting position they had maintained while inactive before leaping up into the air whereupon their replusorlift engines kicked in and they off over the house, "Okay this is it." Cal said, "We're going in now while Mott's away."

"What's happening?" Belle Shill asked as she entered her brother's office to find both him and their mother waiting for her.

"Your ex-boyfriend has shown his face again." Han replied, pressing a button on the console in front of him to project an image of Kyle dragging Keera from the wrecked speeder as it had been recorded by a traffic camera.

"Stang." Belle exclaimed, "Wasn't there anyone around to do anything?"

"The watch commander despatched an air mobile platoon as soon as the guards at the Fayl residence called in to say that Sial Karn had arrived with them requesting help." Han told her.

"And how many died?" Belle asked in response.

"All but the crew of one gunship." Natalay told her.

"We lost two of the gunships as well." Han added, "The surviving crew say it was like he just swatted them out of the sky."

"The Karns are understandably upset dear." Natalay said, "While Erill Crassis is despatching a force of mandalorians."

"Mandalorians?" Belle responded, "They're just thugs."

"But they can get the job done." Han replied.

"Providing they can find Kyle of course." Natalay added, "Which is where you come in my dear. I want you to track Kyle down and then bring in Mott's men to deal with him."

Belle frowned and folded her arms.

"You think I can't handle him?" she asked.

"I think I don't want to risk you when I can risk a bunch of thugs as you term them." Natalay replied, "Now go and find him before those mandalorians manage it and make us look like fools."

Cal stared out of the window at the neighbouring Crassis mansion as he unravelled a length of syntherope he judged to be enough to extend all the way across the gap. Accepting the gyro-grappler that Dac handed him, basically a grappling hook with micro thrusters built into it, Cal fixed this to the end of the line.

"Stand back, I need room." he told Dac and Pedrus who responded by retreating away from the window to allow Cal to throw the line and the grappling hook, the thrusters built into the hook triggering shortly after it left his grip to help propel the line as far as the Crassis mansion. Using the Force to help guide the grappler, Cal guided it towards a sturdy looking antenna array mounted on the near side of the mansion just below the rooftop and he smiled as the line wrapped around this, secured by the grappling hook, "Now bring that bed over here." Cal added, looking at the bed on the far side of the room and while he kept hold of the syntherope line the other two jedi repositioned the bed right under the window so that he could secure the other end of the line to it.

"Okay, we'll cover you." Dac said as he unslung his rifle from over his shoulder and Cal just nodded before climbing out of the window and sat on the ledge. Wrapping his legs around the syntherope line and grabbing it with his hands he then let himself hang underneath it, pausing briefly to make sure that it really was secure and he was not about to plummet to the ground.

"Here goes." he said, looking back through the window at Dac and Pedrus and then he began to pull himself along the line towards the Crassis mansion.

The Crassis mansion was surrounded by motion detectors but all of these were aimed downwards at the ground on the assumption that an intruder would attempt to scale the perimeter wall and then approach the house itself at ground level. So as Cal pulled himself towards the mansion three storeys higher not one of them detected him. Upon reaching the antenna Cal could not simply enter the Crassis mansion however, the wall here was solid with the antenna array the only feature. Keeping one hand firmly holding the syntherope Cal took out his PTP link and activated.

"Lara do you read me?" he asked.

"Right here big brother." Lara's voice replied.

"I'm about to make a entry into the Crassis place." Cal told her, "If I trigger any sort of alarm I want you to let me know the instant you see it."

"Sure thing Cal." Lara replied, "I won't leave you hanging."

Cal sighed.

"You just had to say that didn't you?" he said, looking down at the ground far below.

"What? What did I-" Lara began but Cal just shut off his PTP link and swapped it for his lightsaber.

Cal reached out through the Force, searching for signs of life either in the grounds nearby or inside the house on the other side of the wall he was hanging outside. When he sensed nothing he pressed the emitter of his lightsaber against the wall so that when he activated it there was no bright blue flash of light to give away his presence before he began to drag the blade in a circle.

The structure of the mansion was heavily armoured but there were only a handful of materials in the galaxy that could resist a lightsaber blade and to make an entire building, even one half the size of the Crassis mansion out of any of these would have been costly even for one of the Founding Families. Cal heard a groaning sound as the circle he was cutting in the wall neared completion as the weight of the section he was cutting loose began to pull at what remained of its connection to the rest of the wall. Focusing his mind on the section he was cutting loose, Cal shut off his lightsaber and pushed against it using the Force. There was another groaning sound followed by a tearing as the section of wall finally broke free. Continuing to use the Force to keep hold of this Cal pushed it back inside the mansion and lowered it to the floor while making as little noise as possible. With a way into the building now available to him Cal leapt from the syntherope line and rolled as he passed through the hole before coming to a halt. The room that Cal had arrived in appeared to be a large walk in closet that adjoined one of the mansion's many bedrooms. But from the look of the empty storage racks and shelves Cal guessed that this particular bedroom was unused at present. Holding his lightsaber in front of him ready to be activated at the first sign of discovery Cal reached out through the Force again to see if there was anyone close enough to be aware of his presence but once again he sensed no one near to him and he stood up and returned to the hole.

Dac smiled as he saw Cal wave from the hole and he slung his rifle over his shoulder.

"Wait here until I'm across." he told Pedrus, "Then follow me."

"But what if the people downstairs come up here?" Pedrus replied, "I may not be able to convince them to just ignore me."

"Well lock the door then." Dac replied as he climbed onto the window ledge, "And hope they don't have blasters." then he took hold of the syntherope line in the same way Cal had done and began to pull himself towards the Crassis mansion as well.

Meanwhile Pedrus hurried to the bedroom door and made sure it was locked before returning to the window to stand watch.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." he said to himself.

While first Dac and then Pedrus followed him across from the neighbouring property Cal stood by the door leading from the closet to the bedroom outside. This was made from sliding sections, each one of which was made of multiple horizontal strips of wood that allowed Cal to see through the gaps between them.

"Anybody home?" Dac whispered as he climbed in through the hole behind Cal.

"Not that I can see." Cal answered, "But given the number of rooms in this place there could be dozens of people about and we still wouldn't see anyone."

It was then that Pedrus arrived, his entry through the hole slower than either of the Jedi knights who preceded him.

"Okay, lets get that back into position." Cal said, pointing to the section of wall he had cut free when he made the hole.

"But it won't fit properly now." Pedrus said, "It's too small."

"Doesn't matter." Dac replied, "It'll disguise the hole well enough. Now Cal and I will move it back into place and you just be ready to use your lightsaber to fuse it to the wall again."

"Okay I understand." Pedrus said, drawing his lightsaber as Cal and Dac used the Force to lift the section of wall cut free and guide it back into the hole. Just as Pedrus had pointed out the loose section now longer fit exactly into the hole, there being a slight gap all around it where Cal had cut through the wall with his lightsaber. To create a physical connection between the loose section and the rest of the wall Cal and Dac lowered it until it rested at the bottom of the hole and held it in place. Without needing to be told, Pedrus then activated his lightsaber and used the tip to melt the edge of the hole to hold the loose section in place even after Cal and Dac released their grasp on it.

"Okay that does it." Cal said, "Now let's get a move on, we can't stay in the closet forever." then he noticed the hint of a smile on Dac's face and he frowned, "That wasn't the way I wanted that to come out." he added and Dac's smile widened.

"Just get on with it." Dac said as Cal drew in breath to speak again, "I think you've dug yourself a deep enough hole already."

Cal sighed and turned to face the closet doors, sliding one of them aside slowly before stepping out into the bedroom beyond them. As he stepped into the bedroom and looked around he saw that there were several suitcases resting against the wall beside the closet door, suggesting that the room was in fact in use but that whoever was staying in it had not yet had time to unpack.

"Come on." he whispered, "We need to find somewhere with a computer terminal." and as he headed for one of the two doors leading from the bedroom, the one that he assumed led to the hallway, he beckoned for Dac and Pedrus to follow him.

Quietly the three Jedi crept across the room when all of a sudden they heard the sound of sloshing water from beyond the door they were heading towards just as Cal was about to reach it. All three Jedi immediately froze in place and Cal turned to look at Dac.

"Quick." he whispered, "That-" but before he could finish the door Cal was stood in front of opened to reveal Charity Crassis wearing just a robe and rubbing her hair with a towel. Realising that she was not alone, Charity looked up at Cal and gasped.

Surprise.

"Cal?" she said but before she could say anything else Cal dived at her, pushing her to the floor and holding her down with his hand clamped over her mouth.

"Quick!" he hissed, "We need some syntherope."

"Got it right here." Dac replied as he reached for the dispenser on his belt and he began to unravel a length of it.

The Jedi quickly bound Charity's hands behind her back, her ankles and stuffed a wash cloth from the bathroom into her mouth to stop her raising the alarm before sitting her on the side of the bed.

Anger.

"Okay so now what?" Dac asked as they stood back while Charity glared at them.

"We could just leave her here." Pedrus suggested.

"Risky." Cal replied, "She could be found in a few minutes and give us away." but Charity shook her head and Cal frowned, "Are you saying you wouldn't give us away?" he asked and Charity nodded.

*Perhaps she is not your enemy after all.*

"She took the Sith lightsaber from me." Cal said in reply to Master Karas' suggestion though both Dac and

Pedrus thought he was addressing them.

"What Sith lightsaber?" Dac asked and Cal realised what he had said.

"I found a Sith lightsaber on Shadowfall that belonged to the Sith lord known as The Artisan." he said, "She stole it from me and gave it to her father who used the data hidden inside it to take control of the war droid army."

Charity shook her head again and tried to speak.

"Did anyone get that?" Dac asked.

"I think she was saying that she didn't steal the lightsaber." Pedrus said and Cal frowned.

"But I know she did." he said, "But I didn't sense any deception." and then he leant close to Charity, staring her in the face, "Charity did you or did you not take the Sith lightsaber from me?" he asked and she nodded in reply. Cal took a deep breath and thought for a moment before speaking again, "Okay then I'll give you a chance." he said and he reached out to take hold of the wash cloth preventing Charity from speaking, "But if I sense you so much as think about raising the alarm I'll stuff this back in and then see if any of those cases over there is big enough to stuff you into. Understood?"

Charity nodded and Cal promptly pulled the wash cloth from her mouth.

"Thanks." she said, gasping for breath as Cal straightened up.

"Never mind that. What do you want to say?" Cal said sternly.

"I didn't want to steal that lightsaber from you Cal." Charity replied, "It was my only choice."

"What do you mean 'your only choice'?" Cal asked and Charity scowled.

"They were going to cut me off." she said, "Do you understand? No more money and no home either. I was going to be exiled from Crassis Major entirely. Getting that lightsaber for them was the only way my family would let me stay around. How was I supposed to know that it would allow them to take control of an army of war droids?"

*You didn't even know.*

Cal frowned, knowing that Master Karas was correct. As far as he had been concerned the lightsaber was nothing more than a weapon. It was only thanks to Gayal that he had discovered otherwise when she told him how the Founding Families had been able to take control of the droid army on Shadowfall.

"Can you tell us where to find a computer terminal?" Dac asked and when Cal looked at him he shrugged, "We may as well ask someone who might know." he added.

"What do you need a computer for?" Charity asked in return.

"Charity we need to know what happened on Delvad." Cal told her, "The retreat of your fleet from there was monitored. We know that the Founding Families are fighting one another again and since you're here I'm guessing the Runns now have control of the droid army."

"The Runns are dead." Charity replied and the three jedi exchanged glances.

"Charity, what happened?" Cal asked.

"Gayal." Charity answered, "That little rancor opened the door to the Sith library everybody's been so keen on finding all these years and then led us right into a trap. The Sith that made it had turned himself into a hologram and he took control of the droids. Right after one of his own had already stabbed Ket Runn to death that is."

Cal leant closer to Charity again.

"What about Gayal?" he asked, "Where is she?"

Charity did not reply.

"Answer me." Cal said sternly.

"She's dead." Charity said suddenly, "Or least as good as. When that Sith took control of the droids we all ran. All except Fial Runn and her that st. So they were left behind and those war droids were killing everyone."

*Rage.*

Cal scowled, glaring at Charity.

*Cal no!*

Ignoring the warning from Master Karas, Cal reached down and grabbed Charity by the throat with one hand before dragging her to her feet.

"Because of you!" he hissed at her, "The only reason the Families were in a position to declare the sector independent and go into that place is because they thought they had an army of droids to protect them from the Republic. An army you gave them."

"I didn't know." Charity croaked.

"Cal no." Dac said, echoing the words of Master Karas. But unlike the deceased jedi master who could only advise Cal through the Force, Dac was able to step forwards and he took hold of Cal's arm to try and make him let go, "This isn't the jedi way." he added.

Search your feelings Cal. Don't just accept her word that Gayal is dead.

Cal let go of Charity and she fell backwards, unable to stop herself from landing across the bed as Cal still glared at her.

"I'm sorry Cal." Charity said hoarsely as she tried to catch her breath again, "Really I am. I never meant for anyone to get killed. Not Gayal and not Lara."

"Lara?" Pedrus said.

"I heard about your attempt to rescue Gayal from the Runn estate." Charity said, looking at Cal, "I know Natalay Shill stabbed her with her sword."

"But-" Pedrus began but Cal held up his hand for silence.

"Don't say a word." he ordered the padawan and Pedrus stopped speaking. Then he turned his attention back to Charity, "So where can we find a terminal?" he asked, "One in a nice quiet spot where we won't be disturbed."

"I'll help you if you'll take me with you." she replied and then she added, "Look Cal, I've never wanted anything to do with that damned library and now that people are dying I just want to get away before I'm next. I saw my own father drain the life from someone to cure his illness."

"No deal." Cal replied.

"I can pay." Charity said and she looked towards the bags stacked beside the closet door, "Look in that small one on top." she said, nodding towards the bag.

"Worth a look." Cal said, "Dac, see what she's got in there."

"Sure. I got it." the other jedi knight replied and he walked over to the bags and picked up the smallest, opening it and looking inside, "Well what do we have here?" he asked as he took out a small silver case that when he opened it was revealed to contain several credit sticks.

"There's five hundred thousand credits on each of those." Charity said, "Take me with you and you can have one."

"Each?" Dac asked.

"Dad will kill us if he found out." Cal said.

"But you'll take me with you?" Charity asked hopefully.

Cal walked over to the stack of cases and picked one up, carrying it to the bed before opening it up and rummaging through the contents.

"There's just clothes in there." Charity said, "I promise."

"I know." Cal replied, "But I just thought you'd rather not have to escape from this place wearing just a robe." and Charity smiled, "But trust me on this," he went on, "we will be locking you in your cabin for the trip just in case. Unless you misbehave of course, in which case I'll find a nice box about the size of this suitcase to lock you in."

"There." Kyle said to Keera as she wept, "That wasn't very difficult now was it?" and he turned towards the exit from his ship's hold.

"Wait." Keera called out after him as he walked through the hatchway, tugging at the binders that tied her wrists to the chair Kyle had sat her in, "You can't just leave me here like this. I gave you what you want, now let me go."

Kyle smiled as he turned back around.

"You didn't really think that I had any plans to release you did you?" he asked and then he closed the hatch.

He could still hear Keera's shouting through the hatch as he headed for the *Destiny's Shadow's* cockpit.

Once there he began to bring the ship's flight systems online and while he waited for them to warm up he entered the code Keera had given him into the communications buffer, ready to be transmitted at the press of a button.

"Now all I need is something to distract them." he said to himself.

## 8.

Charity dressed quickly and stuffed her credit sticks into her pocket along with the pendant she had removed from the Sith storehouse.

"Okay I'm ready," she said.

"Just remember," Cal warned her as he took hold of her arm, "even think about betraying us again and we'll know about it before you can do anything."

"I get it. But you don't need to worry about me," she replied.

"Coast's clear." Dac said quietly from the door leading from the bedroom.

"Okay which way?" Cal asked Charity.

"Right." she answered, "There are terminals in the room at the very end of the hallway. It's where Luke and Salla's children do their schoolwork. At this time of night it'll be empty."

"Go." Cal told Dac, "Pedrus, you bring up the rear."

The three jedi and their somewhat willing captive Charity slipped out of the bedroom and made their way along the hallway. Fortunately this section of the house had carpeted floors that absorbed much of the sound of their movement, allowing them to move quicker than on a hard floor and they were soon at the door to the room indicated by Charity. Opening this up allowed the jedi to see that Charity had been truthful when she had told them the purpose of the room, inside were several desks arranged in a circle around a holographic display and on each desk sat a computer terminal intended to be used in the children's lessons.

"These are all connected to the house network." Charity said.

"Seriously?" Dac asked, "You let children have access to all your research on Sith lore?"

"Not me." Charity replied, "But yes. The Founding Families have always taught their children about the Sith. Though I don't think they're depicted as quite the bogey men you jedi tell people they are."

"Let's just do this." Cal said as he headed for the nearest desk and sat down, frowning as he realised just how uncomfortable the undersized furniture was. Then he stood back up and produced a portable computer drive from under his robes, "If Jule is right this should download everything from the network as soon as it's plugged in." he said as he hooked the device up to the computer and turned it on.

Just as Cal had hoped the slicing program on the portable drive began to run automatically and it began to search through the Crassis family network for files that appeared to match criteria that had been set before leaving Dorn Station. Given that the jedi were looking for recent intelligence the drive was set to hunt for files that had been accessed, created or modified in the last few days rather than attempting to determine the subject matter of the contents. This made the program's task much easier and thus faster and after barely a minute had passed the program began to copy the most recent files to the drive.

"How long will this take?" Pedrus asked.

"About ten minutes I think." Cal replied, "There's a lot of data."

But all of a sudden the computer screen went blank before the words 'SECURITY ACCESS VIOLATION' appeared on it.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Dac said and Cal turned towards Charity.

"It's not my fault!" she protested.

"We go with what we've got." Cal said as he ripped the portable drive from the computer.

"But you believe me when I say I had nothing to do with this don't you?" Charity pleaded.

*Fear.*

Cal and the other two jedi could sense how afraid she was, though there was still the question of whether this was because she feared what her family would do to her for helping the jedi or what the jedi would do to her for betraying them. However, Cal sensed no dishonesty in her protests and so he was inclined to believe what she was saying.

"Come on, let's go." he said and he looked at Charity, "All of us."

Exiting the schoolroom the jedi hurried down the hallway.

"What's the fastest way out of here?" Cal asked Charity.

"Aren't we going back across the syntherope line?" Pedrus asked in response.

"We'd be too vulnerable." Dac pointed out, "We need to go out across the grounds."

"But there's a wall." Charity replied, "We'll never get over."

"We won't need to." Cal said as he took out his PTP link, "*Bright Hope*, we need a pick up." he signalled, deactivating the device without waiting for a response, "Now which way?" he repeated.

"Down there." Charity said, pointing to a set of stairs, "They lead right to – Look out!"

*Danger.*

Cal felt the tremor in the Force at the same time as Charity pushed him aside just moments before the mandalorian who had appeared at the top of the stairs raised his pulse wave rifle and fired it. Cal reacted by activating his lightsaber and using it to burst the spatial distortions before any could hit him or any of the

others.

"Down!" he snapped as he dropped into a crouching position and swapped his lightsaber for his own pulse wave rifle and lined it up on the top of the stairs, "Fire in the hole." he said.

"Cover your ears, open your mouth." Dac added as he clamped his hands over his ears just before Cal fired the grenade launcher mounted beneath the rifle. The explosive projectile struck the wall just behind the startled mandalorian and began to bounce down the stairs before detonating and sending a cloud of shrapnel and flames back up the stairs to consume the mandalorian.

"Are you crazy?" Charity yelled over the ringing in her ears, "It's a wonder the whole neighbourhood doesn't know we're here."

"Give him time." Dac muttered as he and Cal got back to their feet and advanced towards the stairs, both aiming their rifles towards them, "Well," Dac said when they saw the damage that the grenade blast had inflicted, "it looks like we're going to need an alternative escape route."

Still in Erill's study as they discussed how they intended to turn recent events to their advantage, Erill, Luke and Salla looked upwards when they heard the sound of the explosion.

"We're under attack." Luke exclaimed.

"But surely the war droids couldn't have reached us without us knowing." Salla added before the door to the study suddenly opened and one of Kaylor's most trusted lieutenants rushed in with a group of his men behind him.

"Sir!" he exclaimed, looking at Erill, "The jedi are assaulting the building. We need to get you to safety."

"Of course." Erill replied, "But what about Charity? Is she safe?"

"Miss Charity appears to be assisting the jedi sir." the mandalorian replied, "One of my men saw her warn them before he could open fire."

Erill scowled and clenched his fists.

"She's gone too far this time father." Luke said, "You must see that."

"I want her brought before me." Erill hissed, "I will deal with her personally."

"Yes sir." the mandalorian replied.

"Commander, you need to hear this." the pilot of the krath assault ship carrying Kaylor and his team along with Belle called out before he transferred the message he was receiving to the intercom system.

"-under attack by jedi. At least three confirmed, maybe more. Backup is required."

Kaylor recognised the voice as belonging to one of his men that he had left back at the Crassis estate to guard his employers.

"Turn us around." he ordered the pilot, "Take us back to the Crassis estate immediately." then he looked at Belle, "I'm sorry Miss Shill but this takes priority over recovering Miss Karn."

"Don't worry." Belle replied, "Taking out three jedi is more important than rescuing spoiled brat to me as well."

With the codes provided by Keera giving him access to the Founding Families' supposedly secure communications, Kyle heard the call for help from the Crassis estate as well and he smiled when he heard the news.

"Ah Cal, it's you isn't it?" he said to himself, "Well all I can say is thank you for distracting my enemies for me." and then he placed his hands on the control column in front of him and the *Destiny's Shadow* rose into the air.

Though most of the signals she intercepted remained indecipherable, Lara could make out enough to know that the discovery of Cal's presence was triggering a massive response from both law enforcement and the military while the *Bright Hope's* sensors indicated a large number of aircraft heading for the airspace over the Crassis estate. Some of these she knew would be civilian craft, most likely operated by local news media who would have observed the build up for themselves and be looking for a story but the majority would be armed military vehicles. Lara knew that so long as the *Bright Hope* remained over inhabited areas, especially those inhabited by the Founding Families the defence force and police would be unlikely to fire on the ship for fear of the collateral damage that would be caused by the ship crashing into the ground. But any vehicles operated by either Shill Security or the Crassis family's own mandalorian mercenaries were unlikely to have such qualms about potential civil losses except where the Founding Families were concerned. The drawback was that Lara also needed to consider civilian casualties when she engaged a target and this meant that using any of the *Bright Hope's* weapons was out of the question as she flew over the capital city of Crassis Major. Instead she would just have to rely on the ship's strong shields and impressive manoeuvrability to protect her.

"Shorty!" she called out, "Stand by on the access ramp. Lower it as soon as I give you the word."

Cal sensed the mandalorians lying in wait at the bottom of the stairs Charity led the jedi to and he signalled

for them to retreat back to the floor above.

"Is there another way?" Pedrus asked.

"They'd probably have that covered as well." Dac pointed out.

"There are at least forty guards here at any time." Charity said, "With more available to come if the alarm is raised."

"As it undoubtedly has been." Cal said, "That's a lot of mandos to fight our way past though." and Charity nodded.

"Father takes his security seriously." she said and then she held out her hand, "Perhaps if you gave me a blaster-"

"No." Cal said sternly, "Charity you're lucky you're not still bound and gagged and being carried over my shoulder. I may be trusting you for now but that doesn't mean I'm going to arm you. Now everyone in here." and he pointed to a nearby doorway.

"What's in there?" Dac asked.

"A window." Cal replied, "If the mandos are covering all the stairs then we'll just have to jump."

Rushing into the room and up to the window Cal first tried to open it. But finding that it had been locked shut he drew his lightsaber and activated it.

"Mandalorians coming up the stairs." Pedrus said from by the doorway.

"Hold them off." Cal replied and Dac joined the padawan by the door, both aiming their rifles out into the hallway and as Cal began to cut around the window frame he heard both of them open fire, followed by the sound of someone falling down the stairs as he was hit.

"Hurry up Cal." Charity said, flinching at the continued gunfire from behind her.

"I'm going as fast as I can." Cal said just as he was moving onto the second side of the window frame.

Despite the window being a relatively weak point in the construction of the fortified mansion it was still designed to resist damage and so Cal could not simply slice through it with a single stroke of his lightsaber and unfortunately this gave the mandalorians protecting the mansion the chance to figure out what the jedi were up to and more of them came rushing out of the main security post, a smaller building that stood separately to the mansion itself in the grounds nearby just as Cal finished cutting away the window.

"They're all around us!" Charity exclaimed as several volleys of pulse wave fire came through the window and both she and Cal leapt out of the line of fire.

"This ought to even things up a bit." Cal replied as he swapped his lightsaber for his rifle once more and loaded an incendiary grenade into the launcher mounted to it. Taking a deep breath to help focus his mind Cal then spun around, pointed his rifle out of the window and fired the grenade launcher directly at the armoured mandalorians rushing towards him. Leaping back out of sight before the mandalorians could fire at him, Cal did not see the grenade detonate but he did hear the sudden 'Whoosh!' as the volatile chemical contents were spread around where the projectile burst open and then ignited, followed by screams as the mandalorians unfortunate enough to be coated in the chemical started to burn and their comrades hurried to try and extinguish the flames.

"You set them on fire?" Charity gasped, "Is that really how jedi do things?"

"It may be painful but it gives them a better chance of survival than if I used an explosive round to blow them apart." Cal replied, slinging his rifle over his shoulder, "Now come here." and he reached out and pulled Charity towards him, picking her up before climbing up onto the window frame and leaping out of the window. Charity screamed as the pair dropped to the ground but Cal kept his composure and his landing looked effortless.

Setting Charity down he kept hold of her wrist and began to drag her towards the private landing pad that sat in the grounds of the Crassis estate, hidden from view from the mansion by a row of trees. Leaping from the window mere seconds after Cal made the jump, Dac and Pedrus also landed safely and immediately broke into a run as they headed for where Lara would be coming to pick them up. However, in order to reach this location it was necessary for them to go past where the basilisk war droids were all lined up.

The droids were all motionless, waiting for orders from their mandalorian riders. But as the jedi appeared several of them turned their heads to face them and recognising their traditional enemy they began to move.

"So now what?" Charity asked, "We can't go back."

"We don't need to." Cal said, smiling as he felt the approach of a familiar presence in the Force, "Listen."

"What? I don't hear anything." Charity replied but then there came the sound of powerful repulsorlift engines from overhead.

"Down!" Cal shouted, pulling Charity to the ground with him.

"I have you now." Lara said to herself as she lined the Bright Hope's lasers up on the basilisks below her. Turret mounted, they could be used to fire in any direction if a dedicated gunner was available to operate them but with only Lara in the cockpit she was limited to firing directly ahead of the ship. However, this was still good enough for her to perform a strafing run over the rows of basilisks and the powerful energy blasts ripped through even the armoured bodies of the war droids.

Looking up Cal saw that most of the droids were now nothing but burning wrecks while others had suffered damage severe enough that they were no longer a threat.

"Move!" he shouted, dragging Charity back to her feet and towards the landing pad with Dac and Pedrus following them. Reaching the landing pad before Lara was able to bring the *Bright Hope* back around to pick them up the three jedi formed a line between Charity and the mandalorian troops now running towards them and all drew their lightsabers.

"Wouldn't your rifles be better?" Charity asked, "Or that grenade launcher?"

"We don't need to kill them." Cal answered, "We just need to defend ourselves and you until the ship can get here." and then he suddenly swung his lightsaber blade to block a blast from one of the mandalorians.

From the cockpit of the *Bright Hope*, Lara could see the three jedi working together to parry the pulse wave fire being directed at them by the advancing mandalorians and although they were holding their own for now it was clear that they would soon be overrun.

"Shorty now!" she called out and the labour droid began to lower the access ramp at the same time as Lara began to bring the *Bright Hope* down low enough that the jedi on the ground could leap up to the ramp. But as she descended Lara noticed the fourth figure cowering behind the jedi and she winced as she realised who it was.

"Oh stang Cal. Why her?" she said to herself and sighing she added, "Oh well, here goes."

Knowing that Charity would not be able to leap twenty metres into the air Lara began the landing cycle. With no intention of actually landing the ship she did not need to deploy its landing gear, but she did need to fold the large diagonal wings mounted either side of the hull before she could get low enough for Charity to be able to get aboard.

"Get ready to run." Cal told Charity as the *Bright Hope* continued to descend. But the delaya-class courier was not the only vessel nearby and there was the flash of blaster fire as the krath assault ship carrying Belle, Kaylor and his team and his team closed in. Fortunately Lara had seen fit to raise the *Bright Hope's* energy shields and the blasts were absorbed, causing nothing more than some slight buffeting as the access ramp neared the ground.

"Now!" Cal yelled and as Charity ran towards the *Bright Hope's* access ramp the three jedi began to back up, continuing to block the weapon fire from the mandalorians. Then at the last moment they too turned and ran up the ramp and upon reaching the top Cal slammed his hand down on the intercom panel, "We're all aboard. Get us out or here." and the ship suddenly rose into the air.

As Shorty sealed the access ramp behind them, the three jedi and Charity hurried to the cockpit where Charity gasped when she saw who was sat in the pilot's seat.

Surprise.

"But you're supposed to be dead." she said to Lara.

"You wish." Lara responded as Cal sat down in the co-pilot's seat, "Oh and by the way there's really no need to thank me for saving your life back there."

"But I didn't." Charity said.

"I know." Lara replied.

"Lara, give me control." Cal said, "We need to get out of here as quick as we can."

"But what if they raise the planetary shield to keep us trapped here?" Pedrus asked.

"They won't." Cal answered.

"Yeah, that's been tried before and it didn't work out too well." Lara added as she relinquished control of the ship to her brother.

"Now go and find somewhere for Charity to stay." Cal told her, "We've got a two day trip ahead of us."

"Her?" Charity asked, frowning at Lara.

"Me?" Lara added, "Cal, why do I always get stuck babysitting your girlfriends?"

"She's not my girlfriend Lara." Cal replied, "Now do it." and Lara sighed.

"Come on then." she said to Charity, "Let's find somewhere you can't cause me any trouble. An airlock maybe."

"Get after them." Belle ordered the pilot of the assault ship.

"No!" Kaylor snapped, "Take the ship down."

"The jedi are getting away." Belle said sternly, "We have to go after them."

"No we don't." Kaylor replied, "Their ship is faster and better armed than this one. Going after them will only get us killed. What we need to do is land and make sure that Mister Crassis is safe." then he looked at the pilot again, "Take us down." he repeated and as Belle scowled at Kaylor the assault ship headed for the landing pad recently used by the jedi in their escape.

When Lara returned to the cockpit the *Bright Hope* was already out of Crassis major's atmosphere and

accelerating away from its gravity well before any of the fighter patrols ordered to give chase could get within firing range. Even if they had been able to catch up to the delay-class courier the Jedi at the controls would not have given up without a fight.

"Well don't everyone thank me at once." Lara said as she sat down behind Cal.

"We're not out of the woods yet." he replied, "There could still be something waiting for us up ahead."

"Yeah right." Lara said, "Now does someone want to tell me what Cal's new girlfriend is doing aboard?"

"Stop calling her that Lara." Cal said, "There is nothing between us." and Lara smiled.

"Tell her that." she said, "I don't need Jedi senses to see it."

"Really?" Pedrus asked.

"Oh yeah." Lara replied, "If Cal here wasn't pining for his lost love Gayal she'd be all over him. Trust me."

"Think she'll cause us any trouble on the way back to Dorn Station?" Dac asked.

"I doubt it." Lara responded and Cal frowned.

"I've got a bad feeling about that answer." he said while priming the *Bright Hope's* hyperdrive, "What did you do with her?"

"Oh I got some cable ties from the engine room." Lara replied and then as the *Bright Hope* jumped into hyperspace she added, "And then I tied her to your bunk."

## 9.

Kyle watched the military patrols chasing after the *Bright Hope* as he piloted his own ship towards the Karn estate. Then there was a bleeping sound from the console as the Karns' security system detected him and automatically requested that he identify himself.

"Now I find out if this code is worth it." he said to himself. He already knew that the code was genuine, all he had sensed from Keera when she gave it to him was abject terror rather than deception but that was not to say that there was some kind of procedure that she was unaware of that would render the code useless and so he prepared himself to turn the *Destiny's Shadow* around quickly should the code fail to do what he needed from it. But as soon as the code was transmitted the automated security system responded with an acknowledgement and landing instructions and Kyle grinned.

Though the *Destiny's Shadow* was given permission to land at the Karn estate there was still a team of four armed Shill Security agents waiting as the ship descended onto the landing pad and they watched as Kyle strode down the access ramp with his features hidden by his hood.

"Your arrival is not scheduled." one of them called out to him, "What is your business-" but then all four suddenly dropped their weapons and fell to their knees, clawing at their throats as they unexpectedly found themselves unable to breathe. Meanwhile Kyle just continued to walk towards the nearest entrance to the house, a side door that the security team at the landing pad had used and left open behind them. But as he approached the door another agent appeared just inside the building and Kyle saw him reach for the emergency seal.

Unleashing a telekinetic blast that hurled the agent back from the door, Kyle broke into a run and drew and activated his lightsaber at the same time. This attracted the attention of another guard that rushed to seal the door himself before Kyle could reach it. But he was just a fraction too slow and as he reached out his hand to seal the door he felt a searing pain when his arm was severed just above the wrist by Kyle's lightsaber as he made it to the doorway and barged his way inside. Screaming in agony as he clutched at the stump of his wrist the guard collapsed before being silenced by another swipe of Kyle's lightsaber. Kyle then turned his attention to the guard he had hurled away from the door and he reached out through the Force to pluck the man's blaster from its holster while he was still trying to draw it before holding out his lightsaber so that the tip of its blade was right in front of the guard's face.

"Where are your masters?" he hissed.

"What's going on?" Del Karn demanded when the door to the lounge where he and his wife waited for word of their youngest daughter burst open and a squad of half a dozen armed and armoured guards rushed in. "We have an intruder." one of them replied, "He's armed with a lightsaber. We should move you somewhere safer."

Del and Faye looked at one another and Faye nodded as she got to her feet.

"Okay, let's go." she said and four of the guards stepped aside to allow the Karns to pass while the other two took the lead. Surrounded by the armed team the Karns were escorted out of the lounge and to the nearest staircase and to an upper floor. As they were being escorted along a hallway however, there were cries of panic and pain from below and looking over the bannister rail the Karns and their guards saw one of the household staff come flying out of a room on the floor below before a figure in a dark hooded cloak stepped into view.

"There he is!" one of the guards snapped as he aimed and fired a burst from his carbine. But Kyle sensed the imminent attack and rolled out of the way, pulling his plasma carbine from under his cloak as he went and when he came to a halt he already had the bulky weapon aimed upwards at the guard. He fired once, the powerful bolt of energy ripping apart the bannister rail and also burning its way through the guard's armoured chest plate. Even before the plasma bolt had burned all the way through the armour the intense heat being given off by it had already reached the guard inside and he let out a shriek as his flesh began to burn before the bolt made it all the way through and his torso was burned away to nothing.

"Keep going!" another guard shouted as she dropped into a kneeling position and began to fire repeated short bursts from her pulse wave carbine.

As the Karns were hurriedly escorted out of sight Kyle rushed across the hallway below and leapt up through the gap in the bannister, landing right in front of the kneeling guard and kicking her carbine from her hands. Shocked, all the guard could do was watch as the weapon flew from her grasp and as she turned her head back towards Kyle he was already bringing his lightsaber down in an arc that sliced clean through her neck. "All too easy." he said to himself as he returned his plasma carbine to its hiding place under his cloak and began to follow after the Karns.

A guard appeared in a doorway ahead just long enough to hurl something down the hallway towards Kyle but with a flick of his wrist the former Jedi used the Force to send it right back towards its owner and just after the

grenade bounced off the door frame into the room where the guard was hiding there was a loud 'Boom!' and a flash of light. Kyle sensed the momentary confusion of the guard but his presence in the Force did not disappear following the detonation. This did not surprise Kyle, the guard had obviously used a stun grenade to try and minimise the damage to the mansion and now had been merely incapacitated rather than killed. Kyle could of course have finished him off but that would only slow him down and give his real target a better chance of escaping so he continued past the doorway while ignoring the incapacitated guard. A rumbling sound from ahead alerted Kyle to a concealed blast door being deployed to block his advance. But while this could slow him down it could not stop him entirely and he thrust the blade of his lightsaber into the armoured metal alloy of the blast door and began to cut through it.

On the far side of the door the Karns finally reached their private suite and while they went inside the remaining guards stayed in the hallway instead. Del closed the door behind them while Faye rushed to the side of the bed where a small control panel was set into the wall and pressed a button on this she caused heavy metal shutters to emerge from where they were hidden and extend to cover the doorway and all of the windows, sealing them inside their armoured refuge. Then Faye went to a nearby cabinet and began to enter the access code to unlock it.

"What are you doing Faye?" Del asked, "Do you really think those will do us any good if he gets in here?"

"You don't expect me to wait and find out what'll happen if he gets in while we're unarmed do you?" she replied as she took a compact pulse wave blaster from the cabinet and loaded it.

Del sighed.

"Fair enough." he said as he walked over to the cabinet and removing his own military pattern pulse wave blaster from it, followed by a power cell that he inserted into the grip.

#### *Danger.*

Kyle turned and raised his lightsaber just in time to block the pulse wave blasts aimed at him by the two guards who had suddenly appeared behind him. Then he extended one arm and Force lightning leapt from his fingertips to engulf both men. Then with them both despatched he turned his attention back to the blast door that he was almost done cutting a hole in. As the lightsaber came close to completing the circle that Kyle was cutting in it he placed his free hand against the metal so that the moment the cut was complete he could unleash a powerful telekinetic blast that sent the loose lump of metal hurtling back down the hallway. Expecting Kyle to use his lightsaber to cut through the blast door two more guards had positioned themselves in the hallway on the opposite side and they were caught completely by surprise when the section of the blast door that had been cut free suddenly flew towards them, crushing them against the wall behind them.

Then Kyle simply stepped through the hole he had created, looked at the mangled corpses of the two guards and smiled as he continued to walk down the hallway.

#### *Fear.*

Now that the Karns knew Kyle was in the mansion and coming after them their reaction made them easy to track through the Force and he was able to navigate the hallways of the mansion as if he had been given a map to lead him directly to their location. Turning the final corner before reaching the Karns' suite Kyle found himself confronted by the four guards who had hurriedly escorted them away from him earlier, all aiming their carbines towards him. Before any of them could open fire Kyle reached out through the Force and used it to drag the furthest guard towards him, knocking the others out of the way as his arms and legs flailed about in a panic as he found himself flying through the air only to abruptly drop to the floor as Kyle let go of his grip and broke into a run. Charging towards the startled and confused guards Kyle swung his lightsaber as he leapt over the guard he had just dragged down the hallway, slashing through his chest. Then he brought the blade up again to block a burst of pulse wave fire directed towards him from one of the other guards and at the same time unleashed a blast of Force lightning at another.

The lightning convinced the two surviving guards to seek cover rather than fire at Kyle and this allowed him to get closer, close enough that he was able to cut down another of them with a single stroke of his lightsaber that also cut through the statue the guard was attempting to use for cover. Then as the statue toppled over and smashed as it struck the floor Kyle swung his lightsaber at the final guard and cut through his carbine as well as the arms he was holding it in. Screaming as he stared at the burned stumps that his arms now ended in the guard dropped to his knees and looked up at Kyle, expecting the next swing of his lightsaber to bring death. But instead Kyle stepped back and shut off his weapon.

"How do I get inside?" he asked.

"You can't." the guard replied, "The Karns will have sealed it from the inside and only they can open it."

"Then I suppose I need to find a way to make them want to come out here then don't I?" Kyle said before crushing the guard's throat with just a wave of his hand. Then he stepped up to the door leading into the Karns' private suite and placed the emitter of his lightsaber against the door at about chest height and then pressed his free hand flat against the door beside it and reached out through the Force.

"I've got a bad feeling about this Del." Faye said when the sounds of fighting right outside their armoured sanctuary stopped, "The guards would have signalled an all clear."  
"I don't see anyone trying to cut through with a lightsaber though." Del replied, "Maybe he's not interested in us after all. So long as we stay in here we'll be safe. You'll see."

Del, come closer.

Del frowned as he felt the urge to approach the sealed and blocked doorway.

"What's wrong?" Faye asked when she saw this look on his face.

"I'm not sure." he told her, "I just get the feeling I ought to see if I can tell what's going on out there." and he began to creep closer to the door.

"Del don't." Faye warned him.

Closer.

"Don't worry, it's not like I'm going to open the door." Del responded as he continued to make his way towards the door until he was stood right next to the metal barrier and he leant closer and pressed his ear up against it.

Kyle smiled as he felt the presence of Del on the other side of the door and he flipped the activation switch of his lightsaber, causing the blade to suddenly extend and punch a hole right through the ordinary door visible from in the hallway, the reinforced barrier behind it and finally through Del himself.

"No!" Faye screamed as she watched her husband collapse after being impaled by the lightsaber blade that was shut off as quickly as it had been activated and she rushed to his side, dropping her blaster at the same time as she dropped to her knees to cradle him in her arms.

"Faye." he gasped.

"Del no." she responded as tears began to pour from her eyes at the sight of her dying husband.

Then there was a sound that made her look upwards and she saw the muzzle of a plasma carbine poke through the hole Kyle's lightsaber had made in the blast door. A flash of light from the weapon as it was fired made Faye flinch but the shot was not intended for her. Instead the packet of super heated matter sped across the room and struck the bed, causing the sheets to suddenly burst into flames.

"Get out of here." Del strained to say as the fire began to spread and smoke began to fill the room.

"I can't leave you." Faye replied.

"You have to. Now go." Del told her, "Find a way to save our daughter. Save Keera."

Wiping tears from her eyes Faye got to her feet and rushed to the control panel beside the bed, the heat from the flames almost forcing her back. But she was able to leap forwards just long enough to press the button that would retract the blast doors covering the doors and windows and she turned towards the balcony and ran towards it. But just as she reached the transparisteel doors she heard a voice call out from behind her.

"Leaving so soon Faye?" Kyle said as he took advantage of the blast door having retracted from the door leading to the hallway as well to enter the room, "It would be rude of me to not accompany you outside on a night like this."

Faye backed away from Kyle, moving towards the balcony. But Kyle juts stepped over Del's body and advanced towards her with his lightsaber humming away in his hand. Then he broke into a sudden run, dashing across the burning room to grab hold of Faye around her waist and he dragged her out onto the balcony.

"Help me!" she cried out when she noticed several security agents in the grounds below.

Still holding onto Faye Kyle then leapt up onto the balcony safety rail and then down towards the ground, pulling her along with him and she screamed as she fell.

The security agents rushed towards them as they landed but Kyle simply strode directly towards them and cut them down the moment they came within reach. Some raised their weapons but hesitated for fear of accidentally hitting Faye if they fired and their hesitation proved fatal for them all. Kyle then headed back towards the *Destiny's Shadow*, leaving behind him a building that was now steadily burning and domestic staff and guards were rushing out of every available exit of the mansion while paying no attention to either Kyle or Faye whose screams were drowned out by the shouts of those trying to escape the fire.

The *Destiny's Shadow* remained right where Kyle had left it with the bodies of the security team who had met him on his arrival still lay at the bottom of the access ramp and it was only when he reached the safety of his ship did Kyle shut off his lightsaber and put it away. With his hand now free he waved it towards the control panel for the ramp and it began to close while he dragged his captive towards the hold.

"Keera!" Faye exclaimed as the door opened to reveal her youngest daughter still bound to the chair.

"Mom?" Keera responded, lifting her head and revealing the bruises and swellings inflicted by Kyle during his interrogation of her.

"How touching." Kyle said as he pushed Faye up against a bulkhead where a narrow pipe ran from floor to

ceiling and he picked up a set of binders he had left on a nearby crate before using them to lock Faye's wrists around it, "I'll leave the pair of you catch up with one another. Don't worry though, I'll be back to talk later. I need information and you are the perfect person to give it to me." he added, stroking the side of Faye's face before exiting the hold.

Natalay sat in silence as she stared at the various monitors in the Shill Security command centre.

"Ah," Han said as he exited his office, "you've seen it then.

"If by 'it' you mean a bunch of jedi penetrating the security of the Crassis family and escaping with Charity in addition to Kyle Jenner swatting aside our troops to murder Del Karn, abduct his wife and burn down their home then the answer is yes, I have seen it." Natalay replied.

"At least the Crassis family wasn't using us to-" Han began as he approached his mother but she turned towards him, glaring as she interrupted angrily.

"Is that all you care about Han?" she snapped, "Whether or not it was your men who were supposed to be protecting the Crassis family? The jedi have Charity and if Belle's reports are accurate they also managed to download a large chunk of data from the Crassis server. We have no idea how badly compromised we are. Supposing they got details of how we manufactured the crisis that led to the declaration of independence. Do you really think that the Republic will sit back and do nothing about that?"

"Right now I'm more worried about those war droids." Han replied, "Even if the Republic does decide to involve itself they don't have any forces close by to use against us. On the other hand the war droids control three systems in close proximity to us and they could be here in a matter of hours."

Natalay took a deep breath as she considered this.

"You're right of course." she said, "Han, the jedi came looking for information and we need to do the same. We know absolutely nothing about what's going on on Delvad now and we need to. I want you to put together a team to go there and scout out what that Sith spectre is doing. If possible try to gain access to the storehouse itself but avoid engaging those droids at all costs. It'll only take one of them to discover you're there and they'll all know. Then you'll never get out alive."

Han smiled.

"I've got an idea." he said, "I'll need to bring in someone from outside Shill Security but I think we can rely on her."

"Whatever. Use any resource you have to." Natalay replied, "Just get the job done."

Though the Tepillos system was now controlled by the Sith war droids its defences remained as inadequate as ever. Approaching the primary world of Tepillos itself would be fraught with difficulty given the number of ships in orbit but the ground based sensors still covered little beyond the atmosphere. This meant that when Kyle came out of hyperspace close to the main gas giant of the system he could be fairly confident that he was not being observed.

Moving the *Destiny's Shadow* into the rings around the gas giant Kyle positioned his ship in an orbit that matched the rotation of the rings to keep it hidden and then set the controls to automatic so that the flight computer would take action to avoid colliding with any of the lumps of ice that made up the rings without him there to do it himself. Then he headed back to the hold where he found Faye desperately trying to break the pipe she was tied to away from the wall.

"You're wasting your time." he told her, "This ship is quite sound. Though I do need you to be able to step into the corridor with me." and then he produced the key to the binders and released them just long enough to pull her hands away from the pipe before locking them together again. Then he pulled her into the corridor and closed the door behind them, "Watch." he said, pointing through a small viewport set into the door and Faye peered through. From this position she could see Keera still bound to the chair and as Kyle activated a control panel mounted on the wall beside him the exterior cargo hatch slid open. Keera turned to look at the opening hatch but nothing happened, the magnetic field across the opening preventing any decompression from occurring.

"What do you want?" Faye asked.

"First to show you what will happen if you don't answer my questions to my satisfaction." Kyle replied and he touched the control panel again. Immediately the magnetic field across the external door shut down and there was a rush of air as the hold de-pressurised. Keera tried to scream but the lack of air in her lungs silenced her cries.

"No!" Faye yelled and she tried to reach for the control panel to reactivate the magnetic field but Kyle grabbed her wrists and held them just short of the panel.

"It takes about ninety seconds for the damage from decompression to become fatal." he said to her, "So the quicker you can answer my questions the better. Do you understand?"

"Yes, now turn the field back on!" Faye shouted and Kyle smiled as he did just that. Quickly Faye turned to look through the viewport and saw that the magnetic field had indeed been reactivate and Keera was gasping for breath as air was pumped back into the hold.

"Now tell me what happened on Delvad." Kyle said before shutting off the magnetic field again. "It was the Sith!" Faye shouted as she watched her daughter struggling to breathe with no air around her, "The Sith that built the storehouse in the first place. He's still down there as a hologram and he took control of the warbots. He killed Ket Runn and if we hadn't managed to get out of there we'd all be dead as well. Now turn the air on again, she can't breathe." Kyle studied Faye through the Force. In all his years in the Narthis Sector he had found most members of the Founding Families difficult to read. But right now Faye was too distracted by what was happening to her daughter to be thinking about guarding her thoughts.

*Fear.*

Faye was afraid, partly for herself and partly for Keera but Kyle could detect no signs that she was trying to deceive him.

"Interesting." he said, "I expected the Sith who created the storehouse to have set some sort of defences but I must admit even I did not expect him to be in personal control, even if it is just the guardian of his holocron at work."

"Turn on the air!" Faye shouted, "She can't breathe!" and she tried to reach the control panel again but once again she was stopped by Kyle.

"I am a man of my word." he said as he reactivated the magnetic field. Then he took out the key to the binders and unlocked Faye's wrists. When the binders were removed he gave the key to Faye and unsealed the door to the cargo hold, "And since you have given me the information I require there is no need for me to hold you any longer. Untie your daughter and I will let you both go."

Clutching the key to the binders, Faye rushed to her daughter who was still gasping for air after being exposed to the vacuum of space.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she crouched by her daughter's side and Keera nodded. Then as Faye unlocked the second of the two sets of binders holding Keera to the chair and helped her to her feet she heard the sound of the door behind her closing, "What are you doing?" she shouted at Kyle as he looked at her through the viewport.

"Exactly what I said I would do." he said, "Letting you go. You really are too trusting." and then he shut off the magnetic field and watched as both Faye and Keera were blown out into space by the rush of escaping air.

The new household servants averted their eyes as Gayal walked through the hallways of the Runn estate flanked by two pairs of war droids armed with Sith swords. The bodies of its previous occupants had already been removed but now Slaydo wanted the estate linked into the same system that allowed the holocron's guardian spirit to observe and interact with the storehouse and the press-ganged servants had been given orders to install the necessary equipment. In order to instil in them the correct respect for their new master they had been commanded not to look upon the image of Slaydo Kreeyn or his apprentice on pain of death. Already a handful of dissenters had been decapitated by the war droids for failing to observe this rule.

In the few days since she had become the apprentice to the long dead Sith Lord little had actually changed for Gayal. Prior to that the Founding Families had set her to work for many months studying every Sith text and artefact that they had been able to acquire since their ancestors had first come to the Narthis Sector while after becoming his apprentice the library's guardian had explained how he expected her to master as much of the knowledge in the library as she could between travelling beyond the Runn estate as and when he commanded it.

All of a sudden she staggered as she felt a disturbance in the Force that she could not quite identify and a nearby servant reached out to steady her. In response to this act of laying his hands on Gayal the war droids all turned towards him and dragged him off her.

"Leave him." Gayal ordered, "He was helping me." and for a few moments the war droids hesitated.

Why the concern for him?

"It was my fault he acted. I stumbled." Gayal said in response to Slaydo's question.

A Sith needs no help from lesser beings. Now return to me, I wish to continue your training.

"Yes master." Gayal replied and she turned to leave. But as she walked back down the hallway in the direction of the entrance to the storehouse she realised that only two of the warbots were still with her. Just as she was starting to wonder what the rest of her escort was doing she heard screams from behind her as the droids began executing everyone who had witnessed what had just happened to her.

Returning to the storehouse Gayal made her way to where Slaydo's holocron was physically connected to its systems. The ancient body that had lain on the floor was gone now, having been moved to a spare alcove where it lay in state while war droids watched over it as they had done before the Founding Families had come blundering into the storehouse without any real idea of what they were facing.

"A Sith is a warrior." Slaydo said as his hologram materialised in front of Gayal at the top of the steps, "Even a lowly apprentice. Normally we expect our students to assemble their own but time demands that you be given a head start and with that in mind you will need this." and then one of the warbots guarding the holocron itself stepped forwards and held out its hand. Gripped in it Gayal saw that it held a lightsaber. But this particular example looked radically different to any such weapon she had seen before. True it had the same grip approximately thirty centimetres long most other lightsabers possessed but at the opposite end of the grip from the emitter crystal Gayal saw that this lightsaber had a thick cable that extended from it that led to a box about the size of a printed book that was mounted on a belt.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"It belonged to a jedi knight who was foolish enough to try and challenge me in life when he followed us to this region of space with the Republic's soldiers." Slaydo told her, "As you can see it is primitive but it remains deadly and it will be adequate to teach you to defend yourself. After I took his head I took his weapon as a trophy and it has resided here since then. Now take it and put it on."

Gayal took the weapon from the droid and wrapped the belt around her waist. The activation switch was easy to find and she flipped it, producing a 'snap-hiss' as a bright green blade extended from the grip. Slowly she swung the weapon around, getting used to the weight of it.

"Good. Now prepare to defend yourself." Slaydo said as a war droid stepped forwards wielding a sword.

Gayal smiled. She may not have been an experienced duellist but she was well aware of how a lightsaber blade could cut through almost anything. However, as she swung the weapon at the droid it parried with its Sith sword and the two blades locked together.

*Surprise.*

"Really did you expect me not to provide your opponent with a weapon that yours can just cut right through?"

Slaydo asked as Gayal disengaged, stepping away from the war droid, "You must be quicker than it is."

"I'll stop before it takes my head off though, right?" she asked in reply.

"Why should it?" Slaydo responded, "I want a strong apprentice, not one incapable of defending herself against even one war droid."

"But what if it kills me?" Gayal asked.

"Then I shall find a better apprentice." Slaydo told her before the war droid lunged towards her, the point of its sword aimed right at her heart and Gayal did her best dodge the blow. She was only partially successful

however, with the edge of the blade clipping her arm and slicing through her sleeve. Gayal winced and gasped.

*Pain.*

"No." Slaydo said sternly, "You must do better."

*Anger.*

Gayal glared at the hologram.

"I don't see how dismembering me is going to help you." she said, "If there were so many other prospective apprentices for you around then how come the Founding Families needed me? Perhaps I should just ram this lightsaber through that holocron of yours and see how well you can manage without it." and the hologram smiled and laughed.

"Good." he said, "Hold on to that anger and let it flow through you. It will make you strong." and just then the war droid struck again. Only this time Gayal was able to step aside and bringing up her lightsaber she sliced off the machine's other arm while Slaydo continued to laugh.

Dropping out of hyperspace near Dorn Station the *Bright Hope* was challenged by a squadron of Republic aurek-wing fighters almost immediately.

"This is the jedi vessel *Bright Hope*, Cal Udra commanding." Cal signalled to the fighters as they swooped overhead.

"Copy that *Bright Hope*." the squadron leader responded, "Continue on course and dock in bay forty-seven." and then the fighters peeled off, leaving Cal to fly towards the space station.

Approaching Dorn Station he saw a cluster of figures standing in the docking bay waiting for their arrival and he carefully manoeuvred the ship to land as close to them as possible before deploying the access ramp.

"Okay everybody out." he announced over the intercom, "And look sharp. Dad's waiting for us."

Cal led the other jedi down the access ramp while holding onto Charity by her arm. Given that she had left her home with only the clothes on her back Charity now wore a set of jedi robes borrowed from Lara and the significant difference in their heights meant that she had to roll up the sleeves and legs of the robes.

Varn Udra stood at the base of the ramp and watched as his son descended it towards him while either side of him stood Jule and Whillam.

"You weren't sent to abduct anyone Cal." Varn called out as he looked at Charity.

"I didn't need to." Cal replied, "She asked to come with us."

"Begged apparently." Lara added, "It appears that Charity has decided to switch sides. Again."

"Here." Cal then said as he held out the portable drive to Jule, "See what you can make of what's on here."

"It worked then?" Jule asked as she took the device from him.

"After a fashion." Dac replied.

"They detected it after a few minutes and it triggered the alarm." Pedrus added.

"Very well." Varn said, "If Agent Raser wouldn't mind inspecting the data you were able to obtain, Cal can bring Miss Crassis to be debriefed."

Lara smiled and leant close to her brother.

"As if she'd take much convincing for you to do that." she whispered and Cal frowned.

"Is there a problem with that order Jedi Udra?" Whillam asked.

"No, no problem with the order Jedi Antress." Cal replied, "Just with my apprentice's ability to sense what people are thinking. She clearly needs more practice." then he smiled, "In fact Padawan Udra while I take Miss Crassis to explain what she knows I want you to meditate on the subject of emotional detection and report to me when I'm done."

Lara was about to complain when she remembered the presence of her father and Whillam, neither known for their tolerance of insubordination.

"Actually I want Lara to accompany us as well." Varn said, "Her knowledge of the sector is too useful to be ignored." and a smile spread across Lara's face as she looked at Cal.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal muttered to himself. Then he looked at Charity, "Come on then." he told her, "I'm sure that we have rather a lot of questions for you."

Varn and Whillam escorted Cal, Lara and Charity to the same briefing room where Cal had been given his instructions before leaving for Crassis Major. This time though only jedi were present with Elle, Karrie, Neari and Seth waiting for them.

*Fear.*

Cal sensed the sudden apprehension from Charity as she suddenly found herself confronted by more jedi than she had encountered in her entire life so far.

"I think your new friend is worried about what we might do to her Cal." Elle commented.

"There's no need to be afraid dear." Karrie added.

"That depends on what she has to say." Seth replied, "After all, isn't this the same Charity Crassis who is responsible for the Founding Families getting their hands on the control codes for the droid army?"

"That's the one." Lara said, smiling as she looked at Charity.

"Perhaps we should all listen to what Miss Crassis has to say before we rush to judge her." Varn said as he took his place around the display.

"An excellent suggestion." Whillam said and he looked directly at Charity, "What can you tell us about the recent events on Delvad that led to the evacuation of the system by the Founding Families Miss Crassis?" but rather than reply right away Charity looked around at the gathered Jedi nervously.

"Just start at the beginning." Neri said.

"Okay." Charity replied, "Well here goes. Natalay had told us that Gayal was ready to try and open the library for us."

"Natalay?" Seth asked.

"Natalay Shill." Cal told him, "The true head of the Shill family and a direct descendant of Rodge Kenner, one of the original survey team."

"Okay." Seth replied before looking at Charity, "Go on." he told her.

"Well she went to the library ahead of us with Han, that's Han Shill by the way and he came back to tell us that she'd done it and the library was open. So then everyone went in for a look."

"You were inside the Sith library?" Whillam asked and Charity nodded.

"It's huge. Full of things I couldn't even start to understand." she answered. Then she smiled, "Though I saw a few nice pieces of jewellery I was hoping to be able to take for myself."

"Describe the library for us." Varn said.

"Well it's sort of like a ring," Charity explained, moving her hands around in a circle to demonstrate, "and the walls were lined with alcoves filled with all sorts of stuff."

"Stuff?" Whillam asked and Charity shrugged.

"I didn't really pay that much attention." she said.

"Except to the jewels." Lara muttered.

"You have something to add padawan?" Karrie asked.

"No, just noting her priorities." Lara replied.

"Tell us what you saw." Cal told Charity, "It doesn't have to be a detailed description, just give us a basic idea of what's in there."

"Well some of the alcoves were filled with old books and scrolls as well as what looked like some sort of primitive mem-sticks while others had things like art or weapons in them. Oh, and some had all this science equipment in." Charity said.

"Sounds like the library's creator went to the trouble of organising his collection." Neri said to Varn.

"All the better for a bunch of amateurs to go poking about with things they don't understand." Seth commented.

"But none of this explains why you left the system." Elle pointed out.

"No, that came soon after." Charity replied, "Everyone was busy trying to take in what we'd found, the Families have been trying to get into that library for three hundred years or more after all. But then Sial noticed that Gayal was gone."

"Gone?" Varn asked.

"She'd gone wandering off on her own while everyone was distracted." Charity replied, "So we split into two groups and each one took a different route around the library. That's what proved it was a complete circle because we met up again at the far side and that's where we found Gayal. She'd walked all the way around to where there was a set of steps lined with war droids holding swords. That's when he appeared, the creator of the library."

"The Sith lord is still alive?" Seth asked but Charity shook her head.

"No he's dead. But it looks like he created some sort of computer program that mimics his personality." she said, "The Sith appeared as a hologram."

"Sounds like a holocron to me." Cal said.

"Sounds like what the Sith who came here did to me." Lara added, remembering battling to purge Dorn Station of the Sith intelligence inside its main computer.

"Well the Sith set its droids on us." Charity continued, "One of them ran Ket Runn through with a sword before he even knew what was going on. Then when we tried to use our own war droids against them he was able to gain control over them and they turned on us. That's when we ran, all but Gayal and Fial that is. The pair of them stayed behind so I guess they're both dead by now."

Cal frowned briefly.

*Remember, search your feelings. You know whether or not this is true.*

"She's alive." Cal said out loud in response to Master Karas, "I can feel it."

*Jealousy.*

Lara sensed the flash of emotion from Charity and noticed her turning away from Cal.

"Emotions can cloud judgement." Whillam said, "Are your feelings on this clear?"

"They are." Cal replied, "Gayal is alive."

"But beyond our ability to help at present." Varn said.

"She could have been corrupted." Elle commented, "The Sith would need a reason to keep her alive and making her his apprentice would be justification enough."

"Can a spirit in a holocron really do that?" Karrie asked.

"I've never heard of it being done by the Jedi." Neri added.

"Why would we?" Elle replied, "There are plenty of us to train new padawans. But supposing all of the Jedi suddenly vanished overnight. By finding one or more holocrons a Force sensitive individual could use the spirit of its creator as a teacher."

"Gayal could become the Sith's link to the outside world." Whillam suggested, "Transporting it around the sector if necessary or just acting as its agent."

"Importantly we now know that the war droids are not acting under the control of one of the Founding Families." Varn announced, "Since we now know that they are instead controlled by a Sith intelligence they present a clear and present danger to the Republic itself and the Jedi no longer need act alone."

"And since we know where the Sith library is we can bombard it from space." Seth pointed out.

"No!" Cal snapped and everyone looked towards him.

"Your concern for Gayal Crassis is noted Jedi Udra." Whillam said, "But that is the reason why the Jedi Code cautions against emotional attachment. Sometimes we must give up those we love so that more do not suffer."

*The library has already been bombed from space.*

Cal smile briefly when Master Karas pointed out the obvious.

"As I understand it," he said, "when the Sith came to the sector they went to war with one another. That's how the library got hidden in the first place. The Sith already bombarded it from space and it didn't work. The only way to deal with the Sith in the library is to go down there ourselves and deal with it in person. Then we can make sure that all of the library's contents are dealt with as well rather than letting them just start washing up on beaches around the planet."

"He does have a point." Neri said to her husband.

"We must also consider that we are not just facing this Sith spirit." Karrie added, "There's still the issue of the Founding Families to deal with. Park a fleet around Delvad and I'm sure they'd respond to it."

"What can you tell us about the preparations being made by the Founding Families?" Varn asked, looking directly at Charity.

"Nothing." she replied, "Look, I agreed to come here because I've had enough. I tried to stay out of all their scheming and it just blew up in my face. Now you're my only hope to avoid ending up with a sword stuck through me or literally sucked dry by my father if he decides I'm the most expendable one around."

"Has he had to repeat the procedure he used to heal himself?" Cal asked but Charity shook her head.

"No, he seems just fine." she replied, "But I don't want to have to bet my life on that staying so. When we got back from Delvad I didn't ask to be involved in any of their meetings and they didn't invite me either."

"But they have met to decide on a course of action?" Elle asked.

"Yes and I think they're bringing in the military as well. Now that the sector's independent of the Republic they haven't been hiding the fact that they're all working together. Of course as far as the public are concerned it's because our beloved President Trent Narthis invited them to advise him. Josh Drud is the only other one of them that has any real authority."

Varn sighed.

"Then hopefully Agent Raser will be able to come up with something from that drive." he said.

"I can go and see how she's doing." Cal suggested.

"No, Lara can do that." Varn replied, "I want you to find somewhere suitable for Miss Crassis to stay. Oh and find her some alternate clothing as well. Those are Jedi robes and she is not a Jedi. Then keep an eye on her until you are sent for."

"Perhaps Lara would be better watching over Charity." Cal suggested and both women frowned at him.

"You have your orders Jedi Udra." Whillam said.

"Yes you do." Varn agreed, "Now carry them out. Both of you." and he looked from Cal to Lara and back again.

"Yes master." Cal said, nodding slightly and he turned to Charity and added, "Come with me." and he led her from the room. Meanwhile Lara smiled.

"I'll let you know if Jule's found anything." she said before she too turned and left the room.

As the door closed behind her Neri looked at her husband.

"Why did you do that Varn?" she asked, "Surely you sensed her attraction to our son."

"One he does not return." Elle added.

"Members of the Founding Families have proven notoriously difficult to read." Varn replied, "Charity on the other hand may be convinced to give up more than she intends to if her feelings for Cal get in the way of her self control."

"Oh I think we all know what she'd like to give up to Cal." Seth commented.

Walking through the corridors of Dorn Station, Charity linked her arm with Cal's.

"So where will I be staying?" she asked.

"Colonel Jeck's men have been setting up living quarters in an area not far from here." Cal replied.

"And just how private will they be?"

"You'll have a room to yourself. It's nothing like the sort of quality you're used to I'm sure but it's all we have."

"I spent weeks locked in a cell by Kyle Jenner." Charity pointed out, "Until you rescued me of course. I'm sure I can handle some plain accommodations for a while."

Turning a corner they encountered a group of soldiers in Republic army uniforms.

"Sergeant." Cal called out to one of them, "I need to find some quarters for Miss Crassis."

"We've just completed work on the cabins along that corridor commander." the soldier replied, pointing in the direction of a nearby side passage, "The three nearest this end have private bathroom facilities." and Cal nodded.

"Thanks." he said before leading Charity to the closest of them. Upon opening the door to the room however, Charity's jaw dropped.

"You're kidding me." she said as she and Cal entered the room and looked around. The furnishing of the room was limited to a fold up bed with a rolled up sleeping bag and a pillow on it, a lightweight table with one chair and a single narrow locker fixed to the wall. In addition the private bathroom facilities that the soldier had referred to turned out to be a portable chemical refresher unit and a self recycling shower fed from a compact water tank, "My closet was bigger than this."

"I know." Cal responded, "I was in it."

"And what an amazing new smell you've discovered." Charity added, holding her nose as she approached the 'bathroom' for a closer if still disapproving look.

"That'll be the chemicals in the refresher." Cal told her.

Then Charity smiled and turned around to face Cal again.

"How about I stay on your ship with you?" she asked, "That way you can keep a proper eye on me."

"I don't think so." Cal replied and her face fell, "Now wait here while I go and find something for you wear.

Dad meant it when he said he didn't want you dressed like a jedi." and he turned to leave.

"I'll be waiting right here then enjoying all the exciting things to see and do." Charity said as the door slid shut behind him and she walked over to it after him. But when she tried to open the door the control panel simply buzzed at her to indicate that Cal had locked it from the outside and she scowled.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

Meanwhile Cal headed for the nearest quartermaster's store. There were several of these for both the army and navy scattered around the areas of Dorn Station now used by the Republic and as a jedi knight he had access to them both. The nearest store was an army facility where Cal drew out a set of plain overalls in what he guessed to be Charity's size, devoid of any unit or rank insignia that could give the impression that she had any sort of authority. He also requisitioned several ration packs along with several pieces of fresh fruit from the limited supply that remained available and with these in his possession he returned to the cabin he had left Charity locked inside.

"Charity I'm-" he began as he entered the room before he ground to a sudden halt and gasped.

"What's wrong?" Charity asked from the bed. She was lay inside the sleeping bag with just her head visible while the robes she had been wearing were now folded neatly on the table on the far side of the room.

"I thought you'd wait until I got back with these before taking off the robes." Cal responded, carrying the food to the table and then taking the overalls to the bed and offering them to Charity.

"Hang on." she said as she started to wriggle out of the sleeping bag, "I'll just get out of-"

"No." Cal said suddenly, averting his gaze.

"Are you really that shy Cal?" she said, mocking him as she lifted herself into a sitting position. Then she frowned, "It's Gayal isn't it? Your jedi honour won't let you be alone with another woman without feeling guilty even though she married my father." at which point her frown turned to a smile, "Hey, that means you're in love with my step mother." and now Cal frowned, "My most likely dead stepmother." she added.

"Gayal only did the things she did because she had to." he said.

"And so did I." Charity replied, "Only I didn't unleash a Sith onto the sector and I wasn't some juvenile delinquent either. So how come I don't get treated like her?"

Cal glared at her.

"No answer huh?" Charity went on, "Well then mister jedi you have two choices. You've been ordered to stay here with me so you can either be a gentleman and help me put those dreary clothes on or I'll just sit right next to you dressed as nature intended and do everything I can to plant a kiss on those lips of yours. Heaven knows you could use a good kiss. So what's it to be?"

Cal smiled.

"Neither." he replied and he waved his hand, focusing his mind on the drawstring around the top of the sleeping bag and using the Force he pulled it tighter around Charity's neck. Not so tight that she would choke, but tight enough that she was unable to get her fingers to the toggle gripping the string that was now

positioned at the back of her neck.

“Oh ha ha. Very funny Cal.” she said, scowling as she tried to loosen the string but without success.

Then Cal sat down beside her and began to unwrap a ration bar.

“Food?” he asked, holding it out to Charity, “It's meiloorun fruit flavour.”

Charity frowned at Cal but then leant forwards to take a bite of the bar.

Lara looked at the display screen and watched as line after line of 1's and 0's scrolled by.

"Do you understand any of this?" she asked Jule, but the sector ranger just shook her head.

"No, I leave that to my tech people." she replied, glancing at the nearby forensic technician, "The issue is that the files Cal copied are locked to a specific network meaning that every time someone tries to open one of them it checks with the operating system to see where it is and if it's not on it's home network it locks you out."

"So all Cal managed to get hold of was a bunch of worthless data and another Founding Family floozy?" Lara asked and Jule smiled.

"Not quite." she said, "There are always ways of getting around the lock. That's what's happening here. We're trying to determine exactly where the security lock is in the file code. Then we can delete it and read the files as normal."

"We?" the technician commented unexpectedly and Jule turned from the main display to look at Lara.

"See?" she said, "That's the problem with being stuck on a place like this. Everyone thinks that I can't transfer them somewhere worse."

"I think I may have something here." the technician then said, "I've isolated a common code string in six different files. Now it could be an author identification but the file navigation system indicates they were created on different terminals."

"Try it." Jule said.

"Okay, I'll just take another copy." the technician said, copying the files in question to a mem-stick and moving to a different, isolated computer to ensure that nothing he did would affect the data cloned from the Crassis family computer. At this isolated terminal the technician read the raw digital data from the files and deleted the sections he had identified as being of interest. Then he attempted to open one.

"Well?" Lara asked and the technician grinned at her.

"Got it." he said, turning the monitor so that Jule and Lara could see it.

"Looks like a set of accounts." Lara said.

"Yes it does." Jule replied smiling as she rushed to the display for a closer look, "And accounts can tell you a lot of interesting things."

"Really? Because accountants have always seemed really boring to me." Lara commented.

"What if that accountant could tell you that the Crassis family expects to lose a lot of money on their shipping interests?" Jule asked.

"Understandable." Lara replied, "With most of the systems around Crassis controlled by Sith war droids its going to introduce delays to freighters that have to find alternate shipping routes."

"No." Jule said, "These accounts say that every single class six freighter they own is about to be taken out of service."

"Class six?" Lara repeated, "But they're basically just praetorian-class frigates with more primitive drives."

"Exactly." Jule replied, "And it will only take a few weeks at a shipyard to turn them into a functioning warship."

"During which time a crew can be trained." Lara added, "Not a very good one, but good enough to push buttons when ordered by someone more experienced." and she took out her PTP link, "Dad are you there?" she signalled.

"I'm here." Varn's voice replied, "Have you and Jule found anything?"

"Oh yeah, we've found something alright. I think Seth and Captain De Kuun will want to see this as well."

Lara told him.

"Very well, meet us in the briefing room. I'll assemble the others." Varn said and the channel was shut off.

"We'll need a copy of that file." Lara told Jule.

"You heard the jedi." Jule then told her technician before looking at Lara and adding, "Shouldn't you let Cal know as well?"

Lara thought for a moment.

"I suppose it would be fun to rub my success in his face." she said and Jule and the technician glanced at one another briefly as she referred to 'her' success, "Cal come in." Lara signalled and after a brief delay he responded.

"What is it Lara?" he asked.

"How are things going at your end?" Lara asked back but it was not Cal's voice that answered.

"Cramped." Charity said, "This bed isn't made for two."

"Oh Cal." Lara said, wincing.

"What do you want Lara?" Cal asked.

"Never mind. You're obviously busy." Lara said and before he could say anything more she shut off the PTP

link.

In Charity's cabin Cal looked at her and snarled.

"Not funny." he said as she smiled at him.

"What?" she replied, "I was only telling the truth. From a certain point on view."

"I hate that phrase." Cal said.

By the time Jule and Lara arrived at the briefing chamber Varn and Seth were already there along with Sergeant Gall, Captain De Kuun, Lieutenant Commander Veers and also a tall man that Lara recognised as Master Sergeant Wedge Keltan of the Republic's Marine Corps.

"I invited the commander and Sergeants Gall and Keltan to join us as well." Varn said, "You seemed to have information of a naval nature and they have some knowledge of such matters."

"Actually Lieutenant Commander Veers' knowledge could be very useful." Jule replied as she plugged a mem-stick into the briefing room's holographic display and the accounting file appeared projected into the air between them all.

"Doesn't look very naval to me." Veers said.

"Actually it's very interesting." Lara replied, "Supposedly."

"What are we looking at here?" Varn asked.

"Like all the Founding Families, the Crassis family has a wide range of business interests. "Jule began, "Including a moderately sized commercial shipping fleet that consists mainly of class six freighters."

"Class six?" Veers commented when he heard this and Jule smiled.

"I thought that would get your attention Austin." she said, "Yes, class six. So with just a little rework they can be modified to become praetorian-class frigates."

"Just like the *Perseverance*." Veers added in reference to his own ship.

"Quite." Jule said before pointing to the holographic projection, "And this spreadsheet indicates that the revenue from the Crassis family's class six vessels is due to fall to zero as they are all removed from commercial service."

"They're expanding their fleet." Lara said.

"Makes sense." Seth added, "They've just lost all those Sith ships and they need to make up the numbers."

"What about our own fleet?" Varn asked Captain De Kuun.

"The Republic was reluctant to deploy a military force close to the Narthis Sector for fear that it would be interpreted as an intention to override a democratic decision to secede." the duros captain replied, "This has unfortunately left us short of assets in the region."

"But they must be sending something surely." Lara said.

"Indeed they are Padawan Udra." De Kuun told her, "But the task force must first muster for deployment and that will take at least eight weeks, followed by a week or more for them to reach us here."

"And in nine weeks those war droids could have overrun the entire sector if they put their artificial minds to it." Seth commented.

"Or the Founding Families could have retaken the Sith library." Varn added, "I'm afraid that we must plan only with the resources we already have."

"So what's our priority?" Seth asked, "The Sith or the Founding Families?"

"For now the Sith is keeping to the territories that his droids have seized and appears to be just securing them." Captain De Kuun pointed out, "Whereas it now looks as if the Founding Families are planning a massive expansion of their forces."

"The Sith warships are also a thousand years out of date." Veers added, "I'd rather deal with the more modern threats first."

"The question of course is where will the refitting of the ships take place?" De Kuun said, "There are several facilities in the sector capable of undertaking such a task."

"Jovan would be the most obvious for new construction." Veers responded, "But Teras would be better for the conversion work given all the tibanna gas mining that goes on there. Or there's the moons of Karn in the Xyros system."

"Plus there's Jaynas." Lara added, "Providing someone keeps all the mynocks away."

"Perhaps further examination of the data Cal brought back would be beneficial." Jule suggested.

"I'd also recommend a few reconnaissance flights." Seth added, "It's not exactly easy to hide major warship construction."

"Depends on how you define 'major'." Veers replied, "One or two ships in dry docks scattered around the sector could be hidden pretty well."

"Then I suppose we just need to hope that the Force is with us and the Founding Families put all the information right out where we can find it." Lara said.

"Just sit beside me and pay attention." Nissel told Sial. As the only remaining member of the Karn family

known to be at liberty Sial was now in effect solely responsible for all of its assets. This was not a role she had been well prepared for however, so she was nervous at the idea of joining in the conference even in holographic form.

"You'll do just fine." Hiran added as he sat down out of sight of the holo-scanner.

"Just remember that it's better to keep quiet than say something impulsive that you'll regret." Nissel said.

"Okay I get it." Sial replied, "Keep my mouth shut and be good. Stang, this is just like how mom and dad treat me."

"Trust me," Nissel said, "your mom and dad were nothing compared to what could happen now." and then before Sial could reply a row of holograms appeared along the desk in front of the two young women as the heads of each of the other Founding Families joined the conference.

"Well it looks like we're all here." Erill Crassis said and his hologram looked around at the others, "So who wants to go first?"

"I think that should be me." Josh Drud said. Dressed in his defence force uniform he appeared to be speaking from his personal command ship, "So far the droids haven't made any moves to leave the systems they control and I really mean any. No scouting mission, no covert raids, nothing."

"And what of the scouting missions you've launched general?" Natalay Shill asked.

"Shot down." Josh told her, "I need to send a larger force to distract the droids from the arrival of a scout ship elsewhere in the system but I daren't weaken our defences just in case they choose that moment to attack elsewhere."

"Well I may have a solution." Natalay announced, "Han has been putting together a plan to land a small team on Delvad itself. Let's face it we need to know what's going on there and Shill Security is well practised at such operations."

"I take it that Han will lead this mission personally?" Trent asked.

"He will." Natalay replied, "But he'll need help from some of your families as well."

"Such as?" Nissel enquired.

"He wants a Sith ship." Natalay answered, "One of the smaller ones salvaged from Phillos but not yet put into service with those droids. He'll use that to get to the surface. But once there he wants a guide who is familiar with both Delvad in general and the Runn estate in particular."

"Well obviously." Trent commented, "But the Runns are dead so they can't be there to show him around."

"But there is another who has spent a great deal of time there over the last four or five years." Natalay responded and she looked at Josh, "Your niece."

"Jaynie?" Josh said.

"She has demonstrated dedication to our cause." Natalay said, "Killing her own grandfather to keep—"

"There's no need to remind us of that." Josh interrupted, "I'll speak to her, though I can't promise that Heddren or Millel will be keen on sending her out on a military expedition."

"So don't let them find out." Sial said suddenly and beside her Nissel winced briefly.

The the hologram of Erill leant closer and instinctively Sial tried to lean back in her chair.

"An interesting idea young lady." he said, "I was due to send Luke to oversee the converting of our transport fleet. Perhaps if Jaynie's parents went as well they could help smooth things along."

"The guilds aboard Kast's old facilities have not been as forthcoming with their labour as we had hoped."

Trent added, nodding, "The legal training and experience of the Drud family could benefit our cause greatly."

"I take it that we will be able to rely on the discretion of everyone listening in though?" Erill asked, looking at Nissel, "Hiran is with you right now I take it?"

"He is." Nissel replied and she looked across the room at him.

"Don't worry." he told her, the microphone set into the desk picking up his voice and broadcasting it to the other participants in the conference, "I'll keep quiet."

"Then it's settled." Trent announced, "Luke Crassis will go to Teras with Heddren and Millel Drud to get the Kast Industries shipyards back into action while Han Shill will take Jaynie Drud to Delvad to determine what is happening there. Now is there anything else that anyone has to say?"

"What about my mom and Keera?" Sial asked suddenly and there was a pause. Knowing that they were both prisoners of Kyle Jenner, most of the others in attendance had already given them up for dead and considered Sial the rightful head of the Karn family. But that was not to say that none of them had planned any action.

"Belle is hunting for Kyle still." Natalay replied.

"And she has a squad of mandalorians assisting her." Erill added, "Mister Mott has vouched for them all." Then Trent smiled.

"You see Sial," he said, "none of us have given up yet." and then one by one the holograms faded away as the conference was brought to an end.

Sat in his study Trent Narthis leant back in his chair and looked at his wife.

"You lying bastard Trent." Calleen said, "You gave up on Faye as soon as you heard she was gone."

Meanwhile back in the Fayl mansion Sial breathed a sigh of relief.

"That was better than I was expecting." she said, "Erill Crassis scares me most of the time."  
"Oh don't worry about him." Nissel replied, "He was a real help when my mom was taken away."

"So how long do we have to wait here Cal?" Charity asked.

"Until my father says otherwise." Cal answered and Charity nodded.

"Jumping to your father's every word." she said, "Something I know only too well." but then before either she or Cal could say anything else Cal's PTP beeped.

"Cal here." he said, holding the device to his mouth.

"Cal it's Lara." Lara's voice said, "I'm sorry to interrupt your hot date but dad wanted me to bring you up to date with what's going on."

"I'm not on a date Lara." Cal replied.

"Oh so it's just a one night stand then?" Lara asked and Cal frowned.

"Just give me the message Lara." he said sternly.

"Fine. It looks like the Founding Families are trying to increase their fleet by converting a bunch of freighters belonging to the Crassis family." Lara said, "So now everyone's rushing about trying to figure out where they're going to be doing the work so we can try and stop them. That's about it really. Not exactly worth interrupting you for in my opinion but as I said, blame dad."

"Thank you Lara." Cal said and then he switched off the PTP link and shook his head, "My dog is so much better behaved." he muttered.

"So are those ancient freighters really that important?" Charity asked, "I always thought they were junk when my father showed me around them."

"What, you've been aboard them?" Cal asked.

"Oh yes, several times. Mind you it was mainly for Luke's benefit at the time. It was just after father was diagnosed with his illness and we weren't sure how long he had to live so he wanted Luke to know everything about all our business holdings. I think he took me along to try and convince me that I could be a part of it as well but it just put me off even more."

"But you went aboard the ships and saw how they operate?" Cal asked, looking Charity directly in the eyes,

"Now this could be important. Do you know any of the access codes to there systems?"

"Of course I do." Charity replied, "I spent days watching them be taken apart at one of the Kast Industries facilities that serviced them." and a smile spread across Cal's face.

"Charity that's brilliant!" Cal exclaimed and all of a sudden he leant forwards and kissed her.

"Wow." she said as he then leapt to his feet, "I wish I'd said that earlier."

"Get dressed." Cal said as he rushed to the exit from the cabin, "I need to tell dad about this."

"Wait Cal!" Charity shouted as she tried to flex her arms inside her sleeping bag and he disappeared through the door but it was too late and as the door slid shut again Charity sighed, "I'm still stuck." she muttered to herself.

Varn was in Dorn Station's command centre with Administrator Varr'kay when Cal burst in. the jedi master was quizzing the bothan administrator about likely locations for refitting starships but even Varr'kay's extensive knowledge of the sector was not enough to provide any definitive answers.

"Dad!" Cal called out as he raced across the command centre, dodging past the various staff.

"Yes, what is it Cal?" Varn replied.

"Charity's been aboard the Crassis family's freighters." Cal exclaimed, "Plus she says that it was Hyronymous Kast's company that serviced them."

"Kast Industries has a large starship construction and servicing yard in orbit around Teras." Varr'kay said, pointing to the representation of the Teras system on the holographic map of the sector he and Varn were studying.

"And Teras is right next door to us." Varn said, smiling.

"But it is well defended." Varr'kay pointed out, "Most of the facilities orbiting Teras itself are armed and there is a defence force."

"That's why Charity's important." Cal said, "She can get us aboard one of the freighters while it's on its way to be refitted and we can infiltrate the station where the work is being done."

"But what then?" Varr'kay asked, "The shipyard will have a crew of thousands. A force large enough to defeat that would be too large to sneak in aboard a freighter."

"We only need to gain access to the sensors." Cal said, "Then we can convince the computer to identify one the *Perseverance* as a cleared ship. A brigade of rocket jumpers combined with the ship's marines and our freedom warriors should be able to take the shipyard easily."

"But how will you gain access to the sensor system Cal?" Varn asked, "I don't see the station's computer being easy to manipulate."

"Same way as we get aboard the freighter." Cal replied, "We get someone who knows all the access codes already. Or at least he should."

"Who?" Varr'kay responded and Cal smiled.

"Who else?" he said, "Hyronimus Kast. It's his station after all."

"Hyronimus Kast was arrested for treason shortly after the Narthis Sector declared independence." Varr'kay pointed out.

"Yes and he's being held here at Seris." Cal replied, pointing to the location of the sector's infamous maximum security prison. Then he looked at Varn, "Dad, I'm sure that Dac and I could break him out and then-

"I've already sent Dac and Seth to carry out surveillance on systems likely to be used for refitting the freighters and manufacturing new warships." Varn interrupted, "Your aunt as well."

"So that leaves mom, Karrie and Whillam." Cal said, "Though I'm not sure this mission is suited to mom or Karrie."

"You don't need another jedi knight Cal." Varn replied.

"A padawan? So Pedrus then, unless Whillam is willing to send Rich along." Cal said but Varn shook his head, "Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal muttered.

"Your sister appears sufficiently healed now." Varn said and Cal winced, "Take her with you. In the mean time I'll have Colonel Jeck prepare an assault force to go in as soon as he gets your signal. It'll be waiting a light year outside the Teras system."

"Understood." Cal replied, nodding.

## 12.

The Sith escort gunship was designed for a crew of eighteen and capable of carrying thirty passengers and two hundred and fifty tonnes of cargo in addition to that. This meant that the vessel was capable of carrying a respectable commando team and all of their supplies. Erin Shill piloted the ship as it dropped out of hyperspace with her brother Han and twin sister Corlay sat behind her in the cockpit.

"Looks like the Sith fleet is still in orbit around Delvad." Erin said as she looked at the sensor display.

"Can you get us past without them noticing us?" Corlay asked but Erin shook her head.

"No, they've got the whole of the planet covered." she replied.

"I guess this is where we find out whether being in a Sith ship counts for anything then." Han said, "Take us right through the middle of them. Try to keep your distance from the larger concentrations of ships but don't make it look like you're keeping your distance. Try to fly casual."

"Hey, it's me." Erin said, "I know how to avoid being noticed. Now sit back and watch."

"Are we there yet?" Jaynie then said as she appeared in the door leading from the cockpit to the gunnery control room located immediately behind it. With the gunship's weapons inoperable, which was why it had not been given a droid crew and pressed into service before the war droids revolted the room was currently being used to store more equipment instead.

"Almost." Han replied.

"What if they realise we're not on their side?" Jaynie asked, "We've no working guns on this thing."

"Then we find out how good my sister can fly." Corlay replied.

"Don't worry, I know a few manoeuvres." Erin added, "This ship was built to be agile. Certainly more agile than any of those battleships or carriers. If it looks like they're moving to attack I'll get us out of here."

"No." Han said, "If it looks like they've spotted us you're to get us into the atmosphere as quickly as you can and we'll bail out. Reaching Delvad is of prime importance."

"So we'll be in free fall while war droids are shooting at us?" Corlay asked, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"We're coming up on the sentry ships." Erin announced before activating the intercom and adding, "Everyone get their masks on." and she lifted a breath mask that was connected to an oxygen cylinder over her face before reaching out to the console in front of her and shutting off the gunship's life support system. As well as saving on power this meant that if the war droids scanned the vessel and saw that it was without life support they would be unlikely to believe that there were any living crew members aboard it. Then she locked onto one of the repulsorlift powered islands scattered around the planet, the one belonging to the Drud family and set a course directly towards it.

### *Fear.*

Gayal gasped and opened her eyes.

"They're here." she said.

"Are your feelings clear my young apprentice?" Slaydo asked, his image materialising in front of her as she sat crossed legged in an alcove in the storehouse that had been configured for the purpose of meditation.

Gayal nodded.

"They are." she answered, "One of them is afraid." then she frowned, "I think it's Jaynie Drud."

"Then the time may soon come to put your skills to the test." Slaydo told her, "And with that in mind you will need this." and the hologram extended an arm to point up the stairs leading to the main circular passageway of the storehouse. At the top stood a group of nervous looking slave workers, all female, watched over by four war droids and when Slaydo pointed, the droids ushered the slaves down the stairs towards Gayal. As they came closer she saw that one of the slaves carried what looked like a black bodyglove made from some form of animal hide while each of the others held a single rigid piece of black armour.

"What is this?" Gayal asked.

"The Sith do not go into battle defenceless." Slaydo replied, "Now take off your clothes and these worthless minions will help you into your new armour. After which we will return to your training, you must be ready soon to lead our army into battle if we are to rebuild the Sith Empire."

The agents of the Founding Families were not the only ones attempting to penetrate the atmosphere of Delvad at that time though. Arriving in the system shortly after ejecting Faye and Keera Karn into space, Kyle had positioned the *Destiny's Shadow* in orbit around one of its outer planets, a frozen ball of methane that had been largely ignored by the Republic since the sector had been settled. But Kyle was not content to just sit and watch as more Sith war droids were brought in from the automated factories on Dust and he set his plan to reach the ocean world itself into motion as soon as his ship was properly positioned, eclipsed from direct view from Delvad. Using the forward firing laser cannon the *Destiny's Shadow* was armed with Kyle

fired a blast at one of the methane world's moons, producing a flare of energy that spread across the system at the speed of light and several hours later this was detected by the Sith vessels orbiting Delvad and just as Kyle expected them to they moved to investigate.

Moving at sublight speeds it took several hours for the Sith carrier and escorting squadron of starfighters to reach the outer edge of the system but Kyle was ready for them when they did arrive. Clad in a vacuum suit and standing on the upper hull of the *Destiny's Shadow* he watched as the Sith vessels circled the uninhabited moon, scanning its surface for signs of trouble and while the vessels' droid crews were preoccupied with this task Kyle jumped from the hull of his ship and, using the Force to guide him, he hurled himself across space towards the carrier.

Designed to carry six drop pods docked with its outer hull the carrier had access points at each of the docking ports and the moment Kyle made contact with the vessel he began to move across its hull towards the closest of these. The port was closed and sealed, but to someone of Kyle's experience and skill it took only a few seconds to override this and enter the ship. As expected the interior of the transport lacked any active life support and with only a limited amount of air remaining in his vacuum suit's supply Kyle quickly made his way to the oxygen tanks that would have been used to provide breathable air for the massassi warriors that the ship was originally designed to transport into battle. Kyle then connected his suit to one of these tanks in two places, the first at his helmet and the second at his own nearly empty oxygen tank to refill it. All that then remained was to tap into the ship's computer network using his datapad. He did not need to take control of any part of the system so this was relatively straight forward. Instead all Kyle wanted to know was the current position and heading of the carrier before he settled down to wait for it to return to Delvad. Once back in orbit around Delvad, Kyle disconnected himself from the carrier's air supply and headed back out onto its hull, waiting there until he finally saw one of the Sith vessels start to manoeuvre to enter Delvad's atmosphere. Repeating his earlier jump Kyle then leapt onto the hull of that ship and forced his way inside before it could begin its atmospheric entry and allowed it to take him all the way to the surface.

Putting on even vacc suits or armoured space suits that did not require pre-breathing of oxygen to avoid gas bubbles forming in the wearer's blood stream had always seemed like more effort than it was worth to Belle and so when the crew of her ship informed her that they had detected what looked like two corpses drifting in space around the main gas giant of the Tepillos system she decided to wait inside while four of them suited up to go outside and retrieve what they had found.

"Yes, that's them." she said as she crouched by the bodies laid out in the hold. The eyes of both Faye and Keera Karn were bloodshot where the capillaries inside them had burst after prolonged exposure to vacuum while there were traces of blood coming from Faye's ears, all of which suggested they had been alive when ejected into space and had died as a result of prolonged decompression. Then Belle sighed and shook her head, "Kyle you always did have that flare for doing something dramatic." she said to herself, "Spacing? Why not just use your lightsaber and be done with it?"

"Where to now?" one of the mandalorians provided to Belle by the Crassis family asked from behind her. "Back to Crassis Major." the captain of the CMDF scout ship that had brought Belle and the mandalorians to the Tepillos system, "We've got what we came for."

"No we haven't." Belle replied as she got to her feet.

"We came to find Missus Karn and her daughter." the captain said, "Now if we stay here much longer those war droids may notice us even this far out. As long as I'm in command of this ship we do as I say."

Belle glanced at the nearby mandalorian and nodded at him. In response the armoured warrior drew his knife and plunged it into the captain's back. Then as he fell dying with his shocked crew looking on Belle looked around.

"We are hunting Kyle Jenner." she told them, "If we don't find him and stop him then he'll be back to do this to more people." and she pointed at the bodies of the Karn women, "So we'll keep hunting him until we have him right where we want him and then we'll get justice for these two innocent women he's murdered and all of the others who's deaths he's caused. I'm in command now so when I give you an order you follow it. Any questions?"

None of the crew spoke.

"You still haven't answered my question." the mandalorian said though, "Where do we go from here?"

"I knew Kyle would come here because he's lived on Tepillos for years and this is where he hid the assassin droid he used to fake his own death." Belle replied, "I thought maybe he'd want to use Faye and Keera as hostages to bargain with but now I'm thinking he was just after information."

"Information about what?" the mandalorian asked.

"What else? The Sith library. He wants it as badly as we do. My guess is that he tortured these two until they gave him the location. He's heading for Delvad so that's where we need to head as well."

"There will be even more Sith ships at Delvad than there are here." the mandalorian pointed out.

"Well hopefully Kyle will be keeping his distance from them." Belle said, "On the other hand if he has found a way through their blockade then I'm sure we'll be able to do it as well."

There were no signs of life from the artificial island hovering over the ocean as Erin performed a low level pass above it.

"That's weird." Jaynie said, "Normally the guards signal any incoming vehicles."

"My guess is that the guards are all dead." Han replied, "With all the war droids stored on Delvad I should think it took only a few hours for them to wipe out everyone."

"I'll take a team in." Corlay said, "Just to make sure that none of the droids hung around."

"Good idea." Han responded with a nod, "Pick out seven men to go with you."

"Exactly what I was thinking." Corlay said as she got up and then exited the cockpit.

"Let me know when you're ready." Erin called out after her, "I want to be able to get airborne again as quick as I can."

Corlay and her squad were ready by the time Erin brought the gunship back around and descended over the landing pad that adjoined the main residential structure on the island and as the gunship came to a halt the soldiers jumped down and charged towards the entrance. Corlay was equipped with an access key that would allow her to enter the residence and open any door within it but this turned out to be unnecessary when the main door was revealed to have been blown off when the war droids struck.

"The way is open." Corlay signalled to the now circling gunship, "Proceeding inside."

There was more damage inside the residence where the on site security force had attempted to hold back the vastly larger number of war droids and the bodies of these guards remained where they had fallen. There were also several bodies of servants who had died with weapons in their hands scattered here and there but not nearly enough to represent the entire household staff.

The answer to this mystery was revealed when Corlay and her team headed down to the vehicle hangar located on the lowest level of the island. Here there were docking bays for skiffs and various aquatic vehicles but where the hangar should have been full there were several berths for skiffs that now stood empty.

"Looks like everybody else left." Corlay commented and when she looked down at the floor and saw traces of blood she added, "And I don't think they left willingly."

### 13.

At one time the gas giant of Seris had been a profitable source of chemical compounds created by a comet impact. But when these had run out and the remaining mineral deposits on the planet's numerous moons proved insufficient to warrant keeping a paid workforce in the system it had come close to being abandoned. But then someone in the sector government had hit upon the idea of turning the mining platform into a maximum security prison and using the convicts as forced labour to gather the remaining minerals and since then it had gained a reputation as a prison almost impossible to escape from.

In the cockpit of the *Bright Hope*, Cal and Lara wore nondescript combat fatigues rather than their normal jedi robes as Cal piloted the ship towards the orbiting space station while Lara stroked Ghost who sat between the two jedi.

"At last." Lara exclaimed, "Two days of watching Charity fluttering those fake eyelashes at you was really starting to get dull." then she paused before adding, "Are you sure we can't leave her here? A nice little cell for one?"

"Sorry no, we still need her." Cal replied.

"On the way back maybe?" Lara asked hopefully and Cal frowned.

"Ask me later." he replied before the *Bright Hope's* communication system activated.

"Attention unidentified delaya-class vessel, you are approaching a restricted area of space. If you do turn away you will be destroyed." a stern sounding voice told the jedi.

"Cal they're locking weapons on us." Lara warned.

"I know." Cal replied before activating the *Bright Hope's* transmitter, "Seris station this is the private vessel *Dark Hunter*. We are licensed bounty hunters and are transporting the fugitive criminal Lacko Dabb. We wish to claim the bounty for his capture."

"Stand by *Dark Hunter*." the voice from Seris station said before the channel went quiet as the station crew checked on both the *Dark Hunter* and Lacko Dabb. Cal and Lara knew that both searches would yield the results they needed. The *Dark Hunter* was registered to an independent bounty hunter who had passed through the Narthis Sector some time before they had arrived and had claimed at least one bounty from Agent Raser while Lacko Dabb was an aqualish pirate who the Udras had helped capture before he became one of the few to escape from Seris station, although he managed this only with outside help. Now Cal and Lara hoped to assist another inmate with his escape.

"*Dark Hunter*, you are cleared for docking at bay twelve." the station instructed and Cal smiled.

"I told you it would work." he said to Lara who rolled her eyes.

"No blasters." Cal told Lara as he joined her and Charity at the access ramp, "Weapons are forbidden on Seris station."

"What about your lightsabers?" Charity asked.

"We'll be fine so long as we keep them out of sight." Lara said as she slipped her traditional weapon into a pocket that had been specifically modified to hold it without producing a significant visible contour, "Scanners don't register them as weapons."

"Now give me your hands." Cal told Charity.

"What for?" she replied.

"Because we promised them a prisoner and you're it." Cal said as he produced a set of binders.

"Why me?" Charity responded, frowning.

"Because you look most like an aqualish out of all of us." Lara said with a smirk, "Although admittedly you're about thirty centimetres too short and not as handsome as the guy they're expecting."

"How am I supposed to pass for an aqualish?" Charity said as Cal locked the binders around one of her wrists.

"You just need to be there. We'll make sure the guards see you as an aqualish long enough to get us inside." Cal replied, moving around behind her to bind her wrists together.

"You know this is the third time in a week you've tied me up Cal." Charity said.

"Keeping count Charity?" Lara commented, "I expect you're getting to like it by now."

"Let's just get on with this." Cal said as he locked the binders in place and then with a wave of his hand he opened the access ramp.

With Charity between them, Cal and Lara strode down the ramp to the prison guards waiting for them at the bottom. There were seven of them in total, six armoured guards holding stun batons with side arms on their hips while the seventh was an officer with a datapad and a sidearm of his own.

"What is this?" the officer called out, scowling as he saw Charity, "You were supposed to be delivering the aqualish Lacko Dabb."

"This is Lacko Dabb." Cal said, waving his hand in front of him.

"This is Lacko Dabb." the officer repeated, looking around at his men and all of them remained silent as Cal's suggestion affected them all at once. Then he stepped forwards and looked over the top of Charity's head as if he was staring into the face of someone much taller than she was, "Lacko Dabb, you will be placed in solitary confinement until the charges relating to your unlawful escape can be processed and punishment determined." at which point he looked round at the guards and added, "Take him to detention block A-A-twenty-three."

"Hey hang on a minute there." Cal said, "You don't get the fish man until we get our pay. In gold. Narthis Sector credits are no good where we're going."

The officer frowned.

"Come with me." he said and as he turned to leave he beckoned the jedi to follow him and keeping Charity between them they did just that with the armoured guards taking positions behind them in turn.

The officer led them to a turbolift that was designed to hold a large number of people without being so cramped that a prisoner could attempt to steal a weapon from a guard. As soon as he stepped inside the turbolift the officer placed his identity card into a slot to activate the controls while Cal and Lara followed him inside with Charity. At that moment Cal waved his hand again and the doors suddenly slid shut before any of the guards could enter the turbolift as well and the officer gasped as Cal dropped his mental influence over him and he realised that their prisoner was not the aqualish pirate he had been fooled into thinking it was. The officer dropped his datapad and reached for his sidearm believing his opponents to be unarmed but Cal reacted sooner and knocked the weapon aside before head butting him. Grabbing hold of the dazed officer Cal spun him around and wrapped an arm around his neck to cut off the flow of air to his lungs. The officer struggled briefly, trying his best to escape Cal's grip but a lack of oxygen quickly caused him to lose consciousness and he went limp in Cal's grip.

"Okay, what section?" Lara asked as she looked at the turbolift controls.

"Check the datapad." Cal replied as he crouched down beside the unconscious guard and began to undo his uniform.

"So who's going to untie me?" Charity asked.

"No one yet." Cal replied, "We still need a prisoner." and then he began to take off his clothes.

"At least I get a decent show." Charity said with a smile as she watched Cal continue to undress before he tossed his shirt over her head.

The officer was slightly heavier than Cal but the difference was small enough that when the door to the turbolift opened again his disguise was enough to convince the guards in the control station outside.

"What is this?" the guard at the control console itself asked when he saw Cal, Lara and Charity exiting the turbolift.

"New prisoner for you." Cal replied, "This bounty hunter just brought her in." and he glanced at Lara.

"I've no record of a new arrival." the guard said even as two others were walking over to take Charity into their custody.

"Well I better get my money." Lara said.

"What's she done?" the guard asked as he continued to try and find any indication in his computer system that a new prisoner was being sent to him.

"She's a thief and a whore." Lara answered before Cal could say anything and Charity snarled.

*Anger.*

"She tricks wealthy gullible men into letting her into their homes where she steals everything she can." Lara went on, "Leaves them with just an empty credit account and a nasty case of something that makes you itch in unfortunate places."

*Rage.*

"Hang on." the guard announced, "We've got an alert."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Lara muttered, her hand sliding to the pocket that held her lightsaber.

"What's wrong?" Cal asked as he made his way closer to the control console.

"Control is saying there's a fugitive loose on the station. Lacko Dabb the aqualish pirate plus two accomplices."

"Then let's get her processed quickly." Cal said before suddenly grabbing hold of the guard, drawing his stolen sidearm and pressing it to his hostage's neck, "Drop your weapons!" he yelled, looking round the room at the other startled guards. One standing near Lara reached for his own weapon and she leapt towards him, delivering a blow to his neck that made he stagger backwards gasping for breath while Lara use the Force to pluck the weapon from its holster for herself.

"You heard him." she said loudly, pointing the weapon at one guard after another, "Lose those gun belts now."

Slowly the guards released their gun belts and let them drop to the floor before raising their hands over their heads.

"Now get over into that corner there." Cal said, nodding and the guards began to move, "You too." he told his

hostage as he removed the guard's gun belt himself before shoving him in the direction he wanted him to go, "Okay Lara, I'll keep them covered while you find Kast. Oh and be quick about it, the security cameras in here will have let station control know what's going on and a hostage rescue team is probably on its way already." Cal said, stepping away from the console while keeping his weapon aimed at the guards and Lara dashed forwards to take his place by the console.

One of the displays was the security camera feed from the cells and Lara selected each cell in turn to get a view of the prisoner inside.

"Hey!" she said suddenly, "I just found Senator Torin."

"Figures." Cal replied, "She did help murder her cousin."

"So are we going to let her out as well?" Charity asked and both Cal and Lara glanced at her and frowned.

"Why?" they asked together before each returned to their individual tasks.

"Oh, okay then." Charity said.

"Got him!" Lara snapped, "Detention cell sixteen."

"Then go get him." Cal told her and she hurried along one of the corridors lined with cells that extended outwards from the control station until she found the one she wanted and pressed her hand down on the control panel beside the door. Then as it slid open she rushed inside and looked at the dishevelled appearing Hyronymous Kast as he sat on the bunk that aside from a compact refresher unit was the only item of furniture in the room.

"Mister Kast," she exclaimed, "it's me, Lara Udra, I'm here to rescue you. I'm with Cal."

"Cal Udra?" Hyronymous said as he got to his feet, "Then let's get out of here."

"Cal I've got him." Lara called out as she helped Hyronymous out of the cell.

"Good." Cal replied and still looking at the guards he was holding at gunpoint he added, "Now all of you into the cell." and he waved his weapon in the direction of the cell.

Lara and Hyronymous stood back and watched as the guards were ushered into the cell before the door was sealed behind them and it was only then that Hyronymous noticed Charity standing close behind Cal, her wrists no longer bound.

"You brought a hostage?" he asked.

"Actually she's helping us." Cal replied.

"Cal and I are partners." Charity added and Lara winced.

"Oh give me strength." she said.

At that moment there was the sound of the turbolift door opening and a squad of heavily armed and armoured prison guards burst out of it.

"Company's here!" Cal exclaimed as the first bursts of pulse wave fire headed towards them.

"Well shouldn't you shoot back?" Hyronymous asked as the group all dived to the floor for cover.

"I'd rather not if we can help it." Cal replied.

"So how do we get out of here then?" Charity asked and Cal looked around.

*Sometimes a jedi must follow a path that is not pleasant Cal.*

Prompted by the advice of Master Karas Cal saw a hatchway in the wall nearby about half a metre square that was labelled 'GARBAGE' and he pointed his pulse wave blaster towards it.

"What are you doing?" Charity asked.

"Saving our skin." Cal replied as he fired a single blast that blew a gaping hole in the hatch, "Now into the garbage chute." then pointing his weapon towards the advancing guards he fired again, aiming high so that the spatial distortions passed harmlessly over their heads but forced them to take cover and hold position. Lara joined in giving covering fire but both Hyronymous and Charity held their positions.

"What are you waiting for?" Lara shouted at them, "We can't hold them back forever."

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Hyronymous said before he scabbled across the corridor and vanished into the hole.

"You next." Cal told Lara and she nodded before leaping into the hole as well, "Okay now you." he then said to Charity.

"Why me?" she asked and Cal frowned.

"Would you rather stay here and face those guards alone and unarmed?" he asked.

"Okay I get it." Charity said before she too crawled into the hole and disappeared, screaming as she slid down the chute. Cal then stood up and fired another rapid salvo from his weapon and threw himself into the chute as well.

Inside the garbage chute was in pitch darkness and Cal could feel himself hurtling downwards with no idea of where he was or how much longer he had to wait until he reached the bottom. All of a sudden he felt the walls around him vanish and he flew through the air until he landed face first in something relatively soft. Then there came a 'snap-hiss' as Lara located her lightsaber and activated it to illuminate the pitch black chamber that they had landed in and as Cal raised his head he discovered that he had landed with his face in Charity's lap.

"Making yourself comfortable down there Cal?" Lara asked as Cal started to get to his feet.

"Well I must say Jedi Udra," Hyronymous began, "what an amazing new smell you've discovered." and he placed a hand over his nose and mouth. Hyronymous was right, the air was foetid with the smell of rotting waste and Cal could practically taste it in his mouth.

"Let's get out of here then." he said as he began to rummage through his pockets.

"But where exactly are we?" Charity asked as she tried to get up as well, only to slip on something unpleasant and fall flat on her face.

"Somewhere in the lower decks of the station." Cal replied as he took out his own lightsaber and activated it, "Now it's not going to take the guards long to figure out where we are so I suggest we hurry." and he began to wade through the foul smelling waste that came up to his knees towards what appeared to be an inspection hatch.

*The guards will also know the way out.*

"Yes they will." Cal muttered in response to Master Karas and he turned away from the door and instead waded up to a wall and began to use his lightsaber to create an alternate exit.

The chamber where the garbage was stored was located on one of the station's lower levels along with much of the machinery required to keep it operating.

"What happens if we sabotage some of this stuff?" Charity asked as she looked around at some of the massive machinery.

"We risk letting some of the sector's most hardened criminals escape." Cal replied as he advanced holding his lightsaber out in front of him. He was not concerned about his use of the traditional jedi weapon giving away his identity now since the effect on his disguise of landing in the foul smelling waste that still clung to it made it obvious that he was not who he had been pretending to be.

"The hangar shouldn't be too far away anyway." Lara added, "All we need to do is-

*Danger.*

Cal sensed a tremor in the Force and spun around.

"Down!" he yelled, interrupted Lara just as the guard he saw behind them drew his sidearm and fired. Cal parried the shot, the spatial distortion bursting open when it struck the energy field around his lightsaber blade but the guard continued to fire, "Lara, I could your use your help right now" Cal added.

"Got it." Lara replied and she extended a hand towards the guard and focused her mind on his weapon. The guard felt a brief tug as Lara pulled on it through the Force before a second much stronger pull ripped it from his grip entirely. Suddenly disarmed and facing two jedi, the guard turned and ran.

"Nice work." Cal said, relieved that the guard had been dealt with without the need to harm him, "Of course it won't be long before he brings reinforcements down here."

"There's a turbolift just around that corner." Hyronymous said, pointing back in the direction they had been heading in.

"How do you know?" Charity asked.

"Because I've ridden in it." Hyronymous replied, "I've scrubbed this entire corridor. The guards called it my exercise period."

"Handy." Lara said as they set off again.

Sure enough the turbolift was located right where Hyronymous said it would be and Charity hit the button to summon it.

"Get back from the door." Cal said, waving everyone aside and while he and Lara positioned themselves either side of the door both Charity and Hyronymous positioned themselves further away behind Cal. Both Cal and Lara shut off their lightsabers and waited until the turbolift door slid open at which point they stepped in front of it, revealing their presence to the two armoured guards inside. But before either guard could react the jedi reached out towards one of them each and using the Force they dragged them from the turbolift and hurled them across the corridor.

"Inside quick!" Cal yelled as he and Lara jumped into the turbolift and then as he held the door open with one hand he selected the hangar level on the control panel with the other. Then as soon as Charity and Hyronymous were inside he let the door slide shut and the turbolift began to move.

"Won't they be expecting this now?" Hyronymous asked.

"Of course they will." Cal replied as he looked up and located the hatch in the ceiling of the turbolift car and using the Force once again he pushed it open and then leapt up through it. Then Lara stepped forwards and without a word she too jumped up through the hatchway.

"Come on." she called out, peering back down into the turbolift, "It'll be a lot safer up here."

"Ladies first." Hyronymous said before Charity stepped forwards and Cal and Lara pulled her up onto the roof of the turbolift. Then Hyronymous stood beneath the hatchway and moments after he too was pulled on top of the turbolift it came to a halt and the doors open.

"Fire!" a voice yelled and there was a volley of pulse wave fire that filled the turbolift car below until the same voice shouted, "Cease fire!" before asking, "Where did they go?"

Cal held up three fingers and Lara nodded. Then Cal lowered his fingers one by one until he had no more held up and at that moment both he and Lara activated their lightsabers, sliced an opening in the ceiling of the turbolift car around themselves and dropped straight back down into it.

The leader of the guards was currently stood right in front of the turbolift, obscuring his men's line of fire and preventing them from shooting at the Jedi. On the other hand the Jedi were able to focus their minds on the guards behind their leader and simultaneously unleash a telekinetic blast that took all of them off their feet and sent them flying away from the turbolift.

"Come on." Lara called out to Charity and Hyronimus who followed the Jedi down into the turbolift car as Cal charged out and slammed into the still startled guard leader and knocked him out of the way. Then he pulled his PTP link from his pocket and activated it.

"Shorty, open the door and start the launch sequence." he signalled.

The four fugitives then raced across the hangar towards the *Bright Hope* as its access ramp lowered. Cal and Lara kept Charity and Hyronimus between them and when the guards started to recover and opened fire they used their lightsabers to parry the poorly directed shots. Cal was the last one up the ramp and he slammed his hand down on the controls to close the ramp behind him while Lara raced to the cockpit and leapt into the pilot's seat, raising the *Bright Hope's* shields and starting up its repulsorlifts.

"We need to angle our shields to face the station." Cal said as he joined her and sat in the co-pilot's seat, "Then just get us as far from here as you can and take us into hyperspace."

"I know the plan Cal." Lara replied as she backed the *Bright Hope* out of the docking bay on its repulsorlift engines before switching over to the powerful ion drive. The ship rocked as Lara began to accelerate away and the crew of Seris station opened fire. Fortunately they had little chance to bring the array of weapons at their disposal on line before the *Bright Hope* was far enough away to be out of Seris' gravity well and there was a brilliant flash of light as the courier ship disappeared into hyperspace.

## 14.

The *Perseverance* had come out of hyperspace at the outer edge of the Teras system where the cloud of debris common to most systems obscured its presence. It was soon joined by more Republic military vessels from Dorn station. Captain De Kuun and his squadron of gunships exited hyperspace along with the aurek-wing fighters that had survived the forced evacuation of Aurek station where the Republic had based its operations in the Narthis sector prior to the declaration of independence. Then behind them a pair of troop transport ships dropped into realspace carrying the bulk of the soldiers who would be taking part in the assault on the shipyards.

But they first needed to be transferred to the *Perseverance* and on the bridge of the frigate Veers turned to Whillam who was sat in a seat that was one of two that had been installed on the bridge either side of his.

"With your permission General Antress we'll dock with the transports and take on their troops." he said.

"Of course captain." Whillam replied, addressing Veers by his position rather than rank, "It is your ship after all."

"And then all we have to do is wait for Cal and Lara to signal us." Veers added, "Otherwise this could be one of the shortest offensives of all time."

Seventeen hours in hyperspace gave the occupants of the *Bright Hope* plenty of time to clean themselves up and gather for something to eat while Cal explained his plan.

"We'll come out of hyperspace outside the sensor range of any of the outposts in the Teras system." he explained, "Then we'll wait for one of the class six freighters operated by the Crassis family to arrive for refitting and that's where Charity comes in. She knows all of the access codes to the freighters' command and control systems so we can convince its sensors to ignore us while we slip in close and get aboard without any alarms being raised. After that we let the freighter take us to the ship yards and basically do the same thing again. Only this time we're convincing the shipyards to identify the *Perseverance* as another of the Crassis family commercial fleet so it can bring in an assault force."

"I still can't believe that my own shipyards are being used against the Republic." Hyronymous said angrily. Then he looked at Charity and added, "Or that any of us are trusting a member of the Founding Families to act against their own."

"It was Charity that led us to find out that your shipyards were the ones being used to refit the freighters." Cal told him, "Without her releasing you from prison wouldn't have a priority."

"Yeah." Lara commented, "There's only one person you'll make rescuing a priority. Right?" and Cal frowned at the obvious reference to Gayal.

Just then an alarm sounded and Cal leapt to his feet.

"We're coming up on Teras." he announced, "Hyronymous, Charity, we're going to need you both."

"Of course." Hyronymous replied, "But how many times do I need to remind you to just call me Hyron?"

Hurrying to the cockpit before the *Bright Hope* could emerge from hyperspace Cal sat in the pilot's seat while Lara sat beside him and Charity and Hyronymous behind them. Then all of a sudden the swirling light of hyperspace gave way to the stars of realspace. The star at the heart of the Teras system was almost impossible to pick out from this location given that Cal had plotted a course that brought the ship out of hyperspace at the system's edge just as the Republic battlegroup had done, only in a different part of the system.

"I'm picking up several commercial vessels heading towards Teras itself." Lara said, studying the sensor display in front of her.

"Got any transponders?" Cal asked.

"Hang on. They're pretty far away, I'm trying to match the ship positions with the identity information from a couple of hours ago." Lara answered then a few moments later she smiled and added, "Got one. The class six freighter *Magnificent* registered to Crassis Major Shipping Incorporated."

"That's dad's company." Charity commented.

"Position?" Cal asked.

"About forty million kilometres at bearing six four by twelve. Well outside of the tracking range of any of the in system assets." Lara told him as he input the information into the navigation computer to get the best course to intercept the freighter.

"Okay Charity we're going to need those codes soon." Cal said as he fired the ion drive and the *Bright Hope* began to accelerate rapidly towards the freighter.

Closing in from behind, where the interference from the freighter's own engine exhaust would obscure their presence Cal reduced the *Bright Hope's* speed to match that of the freighter while Charity leant forwards over his shoulder to input the access codes for the freighter's main computer into the communication system of the *Bright Hope*.

"There you go." she said, still leaning over Cal's shoulder, "You can link your ship to the freighter any time now."

"And you can sit back down rather than clinging to my brother like a mynock in heat." Lara added and the two young women glared at one another.

"Lara make the link." Cal said, "Let me know how much access we have." and Lara activated the *Bright Hope's* transmitter, linking it into the main computer to bring up a list of every system that was accessible.

"Okay, we've got a handful of local public data exchanges and all of our stuff." Lara said as she read down the list, "Oh and that looks like the freighter." and she pointed to a entry in the list on the screen in front of her. Tapping on a keyboard she then selected the freighter's computer and began to search the systems that were available to her, "There it is. Sensors. I'm inserting a filter to prevent them from noticing us." She added with a smile and looking at Charity she added, "Now sit down and get your chest out of my brother's face." Cal accelerated again, but gently this time so that the gap between the *Bright Hope* and the *Magnificent* narrowed at a controlled rate.

"I'll align our cargo hatch with their upper docking port." he said.

"And what about this ship?" Hyronymous asked.

"We'll leave it drifting." Lara replied, "Shorty can keep an eye on it and activate the autopilot to take it back to base if needed."

"Aren't you going to disguise yourselves?" Charity added, looking at both Cal and Lara's Jedi robes.

"No need." Cal answered, "We'll be keeping out of sight anyway and this way we can take all our gear with us, not just what we can conceal." and Lara's eyes lit up.

"My turn with the grenade launcher!" she exclaimed.

"Grenade launcher?" Hyronymous said, "I thought the idea was to capture my shipyard intact, not blow it up." Cal shrugged.

"With us there isn't always a lot of difference." he said, "Okay, we're coming up on the docking port now. Lara help me focus on the crew." and both Jedi raised hands and pointed them towards the freighter that was visible through the canopy.

"What are you doing?" Charity said as she watched this.

"My guess is that they need to distract the crew of the freighter." Hyronymous told her, "Even though we're hidden from their sensors they'd be bound to notice us making physical contact with their ship." then as if to prove his point there was a dull 'clang' as the *Bright Hope* and the *Magnificent* came into contact.

"Right that's it. Let's go." Cal said.

The pulse wave blaster holstered on his leg was not in keeping with the finely tailored suit that Luke wore as he studied the display in front of him but the weapon had been suggested by Natalay Shill given the light defences of the Teras system and the generally uncooperative nature of many of its inhabitants. The display detailed the work schedule for refitting the Crassis family freighters into frigates but there was no escaping the fact that this schedule was becoming ever more unlikely to happen. The workers at the shipyards who had laid down their tools in protest when Hyronymous Kast had been arrested for treason were still refusing to return to work.

"Any luck?" he asked when he heard the door to the shipyard command centre open and Heddren and Millel Drud entered together.

"None." Heddren replied, "The guild foremen were willing to meet with us but they had absolutely nothing to say."

"Nothing of any worth anyway." Millel added, "All they said was that they did not recognise the government of Trent Narthis as legitimate and that they wouldn't make warships for him."

"Their men haven't worked in months though." Luke said, shaking his head in disbelief, "How are they keeping from going broke? They can't have savings that big."

"Even if they did I doubt they'd want to expend them for the sake of Hyronymous Kast." Heddren commented.

"Well I did a bit of digging." Millel added, "Like all guilds and labour groups the one here maintains a hardship fund and it appears that theirs got a big influx of funds a couple of days after the senatorial election."

"How big?" Luke asked.

"About a hundred and fifty million credits. Enough to keep the labourers going for a long time." Millel answered.

"Kast!" Heddren hissed, "It must have been him. He guessed that we'd do something to remove him from his place and he made sure that we wouldn't get his resources afterwards."

"Plus he's the only one outside of the Founding Families with that sort of cash to throw around." Luke added.

"Smart move though." Millel said, "It's the sort of thing I'd try. Why would those workers come back to work when they are getting paid for doing nothing all day?"

"What if we could find some way of disbanding the guild?" Luke asked, "Nationalise it and all of its assets would become government assets instead. Bye bye hardship fund."

Millel looked at Heddren.

"Oh I can just picture your darling little sister trying to spin that one to the public." she said.

"Millel's right Luke." Heddren added, "We'd probably provoke a riot anyway and then we'd have to bring in troops to help the local defence forces restore order. The Farris Industries plants may be starting to turn out their first regiments of war droids but we need those to defend Crassis Major just in case that Sith ghost decides to launch an offensive." then Heddren paused while he looked at the display as well, "Of course," he commented, "what really interests us here is the shipyard itself, not the workers. I'd estimate that we could produce enough droids to replace ninety percent of them in a single day if we held up war droid production." "And ninety percent is enough." Luke said, "Droids don't need breaks or get sick like organic workers."

"Josh won't like it." Millel said.

"No but I'd rather annoy Josh with a one day delay in getting his droids than anger Kayza with the need to explain why we're having rioting dock workers shot." Heddren replied.

"Vessel approaching." one of the command centre staff called out.

"One of ours?" Luke asked.

"One of yours sir." the comscan operator replied, "The *Magnificent*, right on schedule. I'm about to clear them for bay one aurek."

"Do it." Luke ordered and he looked around at Heddren and Millel, "At least our freighter crews are doing their jobs. I've got half of them already sat in the dry docks waiting to be upgraded."

Cal, Lara, Charity and Hyronymous had concealed themselves close to a viewport towards the rear of the freighter. With only four crew to operate the one hundred and fifty metre long vessel it had not been hard for the four stowaways to avoid being detected and their position afforded them a view of where the ship was. "Look." Lara said, "You can see the storms from here." and she pointed at where the gas giant Teras was visible outside the viewport. The planet was prone to violent storms that produced spectacular light shows in the upper atmosphere and in turn these attracted tourists in liners that orbited the planet so that their passengers could observe them.

"You've been here before?" Hyronymous asked her.

"Lara came here as bodyguard to Senator Torin." Cal replied, "She got to spend her time on a luxury liner sipping drinks with an actress and two of the Karn sisters."

"And fought space pirates." Lara added, "And what were you doing in the meantime anyway?"

"Tracking down pirates who wanted to use a hyperspace cannon to hold the sector to ransom." Cal replied.

"Yeah and making out with Gayal." Lara added.

"We're there." Hyronymous said suddenly as he saw the dockyard he owned come into view, "Looks like we're heading for the dry dock section."

"Makes sense." Cal said, "Makes working on the ship easier if you don't need to do it wearing a pressure suit."

"Plus it makes it easier for us to get off." Lara added, "We can just fire a line from any point on the hull we want rather than just use whatever access points dock with the station."

"Let's see where we end up first." Cal said, "I'd rather not jump if it can be helped."

The massive doors of the dry dock opened to allow the freighter inside and as it passed by several other such vessels already inside the hangar Hyronymous frowned.

"That's odd." Cal said.

"What is?" Charity asked.

"Well look at those ships." Cal replied, "They're all completely intact."

"So what?" Charity asked.

"Well surely if they were being modified then someone would have started to take them apart and Hyronymous smiled.

*Happiness.*

Both Cal and Lara looked around, looking at the businessman directly.

"What did you do?" Lara asked.

"Well I may have considered the possibility that after I lost the election to Trent Narthis that the Founding Families would try to come after me for opposing them." Hyronymous explained, "So I made a few deals with the leaders of labour guilds to convince them not to co-operate with the government if anything untoward happened to me. I made a few payments to the guilds and more than a few to their leaders and they swore their loyalty to me come what may."

"Does that mean we can just get out of here?" Charity asked, "if the ships aren't going to be refitted then—"

"It's just a temporary setback." Cal interrupted, "Sooner or later the Founding Families will bring in other workers. But it does at least mean that we don't need to worry so much about civilian casualties when Whillam and Colonel Jeck lead the troops in."

A dull pounding sound then indicated that the freighter had just made contact with the dry dock moorings and Cal and Lara peered out of the viewport to assess their situation. From this point they could see a sealed

walkway extending from the wall of the dry dock to connect to one of the freighter's air locks while from the look of the other freighters in the dry dock there would be open walkways all around the ship.

"I think we can drop onto a walkway from the hold." Cal said, "We'll be under the ship there so less likely to be seen from any observation posts."

"We need to get to a computer node for me to access the network." Hyronymous added.

"Where's the nearest one?" Cal asked.

"Dry dock control. But even without any workers in the dock there will be station administration staff and security there. They work for the government, not me."

"How many?" Lara asked and Hyronymous shrugged.

"I'm not sure." he said, "The last time I was here there were about a dozen staff and two or three guards. But that may have changed."

"Two jedi against two guards?" Charity commented and she looked at Cal, "You can handle that can't you?"

"Easily." Cal answered, "But the trick is making sure that no one raises an alarm. It's probably better to try and slip by them." then looking at Hyronymous he added, "Do you know how many people will be in the computer node itself?"

"No one normally. They'll all be in the control room unless there's a problem with the computer." he told Cal.

"And if there is a problem with the computer?" Lara asked.

"Well then they'll call for an engineer to fix it." Hyronymous said and Cal and Lara looked at one another and smiled.

"Fancy a career in computer repair?" Cal said.

"I'll give it a go." Lara responded.

Dropping the distance of about ten metres from the cargo hatch on the underside of the freighter to the walkway beneath it bot Cal and Lara paused, crouching down and looking around with their rifles ready to fire. Then once they were satisfied that they had not been detected they waved for Charity and Hyronymous to follow them.

"What are we supposed to do? Jump?" Hyronymous asked, concerned about the possibility of injuring himself.

"Don't worry." Cal replied as he slung his rifle over his shoulder, "Lara will keep us covered while I catch you." Hyronymous frowned.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." he said before stepped off the edge of the freighter's deck and dropping through the hatch. At first he felt himself accelerate and he gasped but then all of a sudden he felt himself begin to slow down again as Cal reached out through the Force to slow his descent to the point where he could safely catch the man.

"Okay Charity now-" Cal began but she had already jumped and Cal had to react quickly to slow her down and catch her. Even so she landed in his arms with enough force that she knocked him over, ending up on top of him as they both landed on the walkway.

"If you two are quite done we do have a job to do." Lara commented and Cal grunted as he picked himself up from the walkway.

"That way I think." Hyronymous said, pointing towards a hatchway at the far end of the walkway that ran beneath the freighter, "It should take us into the main section of the station about three levels below the dry dock control."

"Then that's where we head." Cal replied, nodding.

"If we see anyone those rifles may attract attention." Hyronymous warned, "Can you manipulate everyone's minds so they don't notice them?"

"No." Lara answered, "But we can do this." and she tucked her rifle and its attached grenade launcher under her cloak and smiled, "Out of sight."

"Out of mind." Cal added as he too concealed his rifle under his cloak.

With the jedi's weapons now hidden beneath their robes the group headed for the hatchway and paused just inside it while Cal checked to see if there was anyone on the other side. When he saw no one he stepped through and beckoned the others to follow him.

"Which way to the turbolift?" he asked and Hyronymous pointed, "Thanks." Cal replied as he set off again. The turbolift was just a short distance away but the group was unable to reach it without encountering some of the other station occupants. They did their best to ignore these beings who were just going about their normal business and tried to avoid even making eye contact. However, this changed when a door slid open nearby and the twi'lek who appeared in it frowned as he looked at them.

"Mister Kast?" he said in surprise.

With no one else in the corridor at that moment Cal and Lara acted quickly, shoving the man back through the doorway and pressing him up against a wall.

"Mister Kast it's me." the twi'lek gasped as Hyronymous followed the jedi into the room beyond the doorway, a small nondescript office.

"You know this guy?" Cal asked.

"Tel? Tel Hortona?" Hyronymous asked and the twi'lek nodded, "He's one of the guild foremen I paid off." Hyronymous added.

"Okay let him go." Cal said and he and Lara released their grip on him.

"Could I have a few minutes alone with him?" Hyronymous asked.

"Sure." Cal replied, "We'll be right outside, But don't take too long."

Waiting until the Jedi had left the room and the door closed again Hyronymous turned to the twi'lek.

"I take it I have you to thank for there not being any work going on in the dry docks right now?" he asked.

"Yes Mister Kast." Tel answered, "We got the workers all riled up about you're being arrested and they downed tools. Of course having enough funds to cover their lost wages for about a year helped."

"That's not a problem Tel. But I may need some more help from you very soon." Hyronymous said.

Meanwhile in the corridor outside Lara was becoming more and more impatient.

"What's going on in there?" she hissed, "I don't trust that guy."

"Do you trust anyone?" Charity asked.

"I trust me and I trust Cal. Oh and mom and dad. But that's it." Lara said.

*Cal beware.*

Cal suddenly turned his head to look in both directions down the corridor at the warning from Master Karas and he thought he felt a slight tremor in the Force as a group of station engineers walked past them, their faces hidden behind bulky helmets with blacked out visors. But apart from one who looked right back at Cal briefly the group continued on its way, chatting to one another casually.

*You need to go.*

"We need to go." Cal said and he stepped to the door and was about to knock when it opened and Hyronymous and the twi'lek Tel emerged.

"Okay we can go now." Hyronymous said as Tel headed down the corridor after the engineers.

"Good." Cal replied, "Because I've got a bad feeling about staying here any longer."

As Tel rounded the corner he came face to face with one of the masked engineers who looked as if he had been about to head back towards the Jedi. However, during the few seconds of delay as the pair repeatedly tried to move round one another but only succeeded in continuing to block one another's path the Jedi and those accompanying them were able to reach the turbolift and step inside.

The engineer then wandered up to the nearest intercom panel and activated it, calling the command centre as he removed his helmet to reveal the sunken and empty eye sockets he possessed in place of eyes in his otherwise human face.

"Command." a voice stated from the intercom.

"I need to speak to someone in charge." the engineer said, "Tell him that there are Jedi aboard the station."

## 15.

"Jedi?" Luke exclaimed when Heddren told him.

"The engineer is a miraluka." Heddren replied, "They can see the Force so he knew instantly that they were Jedi when he saw them. He also said that there was someone else with them. A human woman who was not Force sensitive. Unfortunately he couldn't give us a full description that we'd be able to understand but from what he was able to tell us I'd say that it was-

"Charity." Luke hissed and he snarled, "That treacherous little gravel-maggot must have helped them stow away aboard one of the freighters."

"They're probably planning on sabotaging the ships or the dry dock facility." Millel said and Luke nodded.

"We need to get a security team down to the dry dock now. They have to search every ship in there."

Two guards stood just inside the dry dock control room as Cal and Lara approached it and both tensed up when they saw the two Jedi.

"Who are you?" one demanded, "This area is restricted."

"We're here to fix the main computer." Cal said, waving his hand in front of the guard.

"There's nothing wrong with the computer." one of the control room staff replied.

"You told us it crashed completely." Lara said, also waving her hand but making the motion less obvious than her brother had done."

"Completely." the technician responded, "My screen just went blue."

"I take it that the core is there right?" Cal asked, looking towards a plain looking doorway and the guard in front of him nodded.

"Right through there." he said and Cal and Lara led Charity and Hyronymous into the computer core room.

"Okay Hyron, it's your show from here." Cal said and Hyronymous took a seat at the terminal that granted access to the main server for the dry dock and began to type as he explored the computer network.

"The system's been updated since I last checked it out." he said.

"So what does that mean?" Lara asked, "Can you rig the station's sensors or not?"

"Yes, yes I can. But I need to check how this server is talking to the rest of the network now." Hyronymous replied, "And for that I need to bounce a few signals off it from another terminal, one not directly linked to it."

"What about the computers out there?" Cal asked, pointing to the door they had come through.

"They ought to do." Hyronymous said and he nodded, "Wait here while I go and see what I can do. Keep an eye on those monitors for any error messages." then he got up and headed for the door. However, just as he was about to open it he paused.

"What's wrong?" Charity asked.

"Those guys out there will still think I'm here to fix the computer won't they?" he responded, pointing at the door.

"Yes, they'll keep on thinking that unless they see anything that directly contradicts that thought." Lara told him.

"Thank you Padawan Udra." Hyronymous said, "You and your brother continue to impress me at every turn." and then he opened the door and left the room.

While Heddren and Millel went to oversee the search of the dry dock Luke remained in the station command centre and now studied projections for replacing organic workers with droids when one of the command staff walked up to him.

"What is it?" Luke asked.

"Sir we've just received word from the dry dock control room. Just an regular update you understand-"

"Spit it out. What's wrong?" Luke interrupted.

"Well sir they say that the maintenance team has arrived to fix the server they reported as broken." and Luke frowned.

"So what?" he asked, "The sooner it's fixed the better. Just because we're not-"

"I'm sorry sir." the man said, "The dry dock control room never reported a faulty computer core and maintenance did not send a team there."

Luke's eyes widened.

"Guards!" he yelled, "With me. I need a full tactical team at the dry dock control ASAP."

Ignored by the control room staff, Hyronymous sat hunched over a spare terminal in the control room doing his best to remain inconspicuous just in case he accidentally said or did something that would break the mental conditioning placed in them by the Jedi. All of a sudden there was a commotion from by the door and as he glanced over his shoulder a squad of heavily armed men rushed in led by a man in a suit who was

flanked by a pair of armoured mandalorians and that Hyronymous recognised instantly as Luke Crassis. Knowing that the team had been discovered he quickly got to his feet and slipped out of the control room through a side doorway.

When the door to the server room opened Charity looked towards it, expecting to see Hyronymous re-entering the room. But instead she saw a squad of station security guards burst into the room with rifles and her brother follow them with his pulse wave blaster in his hand and a mandalorian either side of him. "Luke!" she yelled, "Look out, they've got rifles." and she suddenly pushed Cal into Lara, sending both jedi sprawling across the floor and exposing the weapons they had concealed under their robes. The two mandalorians reacted immediately, diving forwards and pouncing on top of the jedi before they could get back to their feet and holding weapons to their heads.

"Disarm them." Luke ordered as both Cal and Lara stayed still and raised their hands and two of the station security staff darted forwards, slinging their own rifles over their shoulders before relieving the jedi of their weapons. As they retreated the mandalorians relaxed their grips and pulled Cal and Lara into a standing position between them.

"Well isn't this nice?" Luke said as he looked at the two jedi and his sister, "All three of you caught at once. Father will be so happy."

"Three?" Charity exclaimed, "Luke what are you talking about?"

"Oh come off it Charity we know you helped them slice into our computer system at home. You were seen." he replied and Charity scowled.

"Three armed jedi burst in on me in the shower. What was I supposed to do?" she asked, "Ask Cal to scrub my back?"

"What are you saying Charity?" Luke responded.

"Figure it out big brother. I'm saying that they kidnapped me. They've been holding me hostage ever since then."

"Why you stuck up nerf herder!" Lara yelled and all of a sudden she pushed the mandalorian standing between her and Charity out of the way and lunged at her just as Charity had done to her and Cal and both women fell to the floor.

"Get off me!" Charity yelled as she lashed out at Lara.

"No chance laser brain." Lara hissed, blocking Charity's attack and launching one of her own as she pushed her head against the deck.

"Lara stop it." Cal said as the pair continued to fight on the floor nearby but she paid no attention to him.

"Stop pulling my hair." Lara called out as Charity grabbed a handful of Lara's hair and pulled it as hard as she could.

Cal looked at Luke and sighed. Then he looked back down at Lara again.

"Lara you are embarrassing me in front of the evil super villain and his henchmen." he said.

"Will someone get her off me?" Charity called out, "Her nails are sharp."

Cal looked at Luke again.

"I propose an agreement. I'll grab mine, you grab yours." he said and Luke slid his pulse wave blaster back into its holster.

"Agreed." he replied and both men reached down and grabbed their sisters by the ear.

"Ow!" Lara yelled as Cal started to pull.

"Luke get off me!" Charity added as her brother did likewise.

Both men then pulled their sisters up off the floor so that they stood beside them.

"There, that's better." Cal said, still holding Lara by the ear.

"She deserved it." Lara said, glaring at Charity, "Changes sides every kriffing chance she gets."

"Don't believe her Luke." Charity responded, "Remember it was me that got you that lightsaber."

"You mean the one that activated the droid army that is now controlled by a holographic Sith?" Luke pointed out as he let go of his sister and she stepped back from him, rubbing her ear, "Charity if father hadn't specifically asked for you to be brought back to him alive I'd be putting you against the same bulkhead as these two when I have them shot."

"I wouldn't if I was you." she said, "You think these two are the only ones coming here? You may want to get some information out of them first."

"Maybe you're right." Luke said, looking at Cal and Lara, "Of course we'll need to bring in someone who can get answers out of a jedi. Natalay Shill perhaps."

"Commander Mott can get information out of anyone. Even jedi." one of the mandalorians said.

"Then let's get them stashed somewhere safe until someone qualified can get here." Charity said and looking at two nearby security guards she added, "Give me those binders you've got." and without waiting for them to react she reached out and unhooked the pouches on their belts that held a single set of binders each before walking around behind Cal and Lara and securing their arms behind their backs.

Peering around a corner Hyronymous watched as Cal and Lara were led out of the dry dock control centre disarmed and bound and taken towards the nearest detention facility. He waited a short time, wondering whether anyone would be coming after him as well, especially when he saw Charity exit the dry dock control centre in a manner that did not make her look like a prisoner and Hyronymous scowled.

"Just like the Founding Families." he muttered, "Always looking out for their own."

Knowing that he could not get off the station without help and that he could not return to the computer room to complete the modifications to the sensors and signal the waiting Republic battlegroup Hyronymous turned and hurried away, heading for a part of the station that was owned by his company. Hyronymous had travelled to almost every Republic member world in the sector prior to his arrest and had never enjoyed staying in hotels. Instead he made sure that everywhere he went he had somewhere to stay that he owned and thus controlled completely. In the Teras system this was a private section of the station converted into a luxury residence. Protected by a state of the art security system and containing nothing of strategic use the Founding Families had left it alone and this meant that Hyronymous had a place where he could not only work knowing that he was not going to be disturbed but where he could work in the luxurious surroundings that he was used to being in before his imprisonment.

Cal was the first to be pushed into the holding cell, followed by Lara.

"Is holding them both in here a good idea?" Luke asked, looking at one of the station security officers.

"This is a maximum security holding unit sir." he replied, "It has stronger walls and a door designed specifically to resist not only physical attack by the strongest known species but also the corrosive juices that some are capable of projecting."

"There is no internal security camera though?" Luke commented.

"No sir." the guard responded, "It wasn't in the budget."

"I see." Luke said, nodding and he turned to the two Jedi now standing in the middle of the room while the security guards all aimed their weapons at them, "Then I guess that you two are going to be room mates for a little while."

"Any chance of taking these off now?" Lara asked, turning and shaking her wrists to emphasise the fact that she and Cal were still bound.

"I think not." Luke answered, "Your brother is far too dangerous."

"And you're just annoying." Charity added.

"Annoying? You mean like someone throwing themselves at a guy day after day no matter often she gets knocked back?" Lara said and she looked at Cal.

"Knocked back?" Charity responded and all of a sudden she strode up to Cal and wrapped an arm around his waist to pull him close, slid her other hand between his legs and kissed him.

*Surprise.*

Cal's reaction was obvious for everyone to see, even without being able to sense it through the Force as Lara could, his eyes widening as Charity continued to press her lips against his. But then Lara sensed his reaction change.

*Relief.*

*Gratitude.*

*Pleasure.*

"Oh give me strength." Lara said, wincing. Then she looked at Luke, "Could one of your goons shoot me so I don't have to watch this?" she asked.

"Charity stop messing around." Luke ordered and Charity backed away from Cal and waved at him from the doorway.

"Bye bye Cal." she said, "Feel free to drop by for more." and then the heavy door slid shut to seal the Jedi inside the cell.

"Is it unJedi-like for me to say that I really hate her?" Lara asked.

"Yes it is." Cal replied, "Especially after all the help she gave us."

"Help?" Lara exclaimed, "Cal maybe you haven't been keeping up on current events while she was sticking her tongue down your throat but we are locked in a cell while she's getting all friendly with her family again."

"Have faith my young apprentice." Cal said, "Hyronymous is still out there after all." and then he walked over to the bunk that ran along the back of the cell and sat down on it.

"Hyronymous?" Lara asked, "You're kidding right? That guy's no secret agent. He'll be caught in minutes."

When Hyronymous reached the entrance to his private quarters aboard the station he was relieved to find them unguarded and still sealed. Making sure that he was not being observed, he entered personal access code into the control panel beside the door and hurried inside as the lights came on automatically.

"Good day Mister Kast." a protocol droid said, activating at the same time as the other systems in the room,

"I determine that it has been several months since your last visit."

"I've been busy." Hyronymous replied, as he headed towards the bedroom "Now I need to change and I have

work to do. Prepare me a quick meal and fetch me a small bottle of wine. Any will do, I can guarantee it'll be better than what I've had to put up with recently."

A short time later, after washing and changing from the overalls supplied by Cal and Lara into an expensive suit Hyronymous emerged to find that the droid had laid out a meal on the large table in the centre of the main room beside a portable computer terminal and was just beginning to pour a glass of wine.

"Excellent." he said as he sat down and sipped the wine. Then he looked at the computer terminal, "Now let's see if all those software systems my company supplied to this station are still in place."

"Would you stop pacing up and down like that?" Cal asked as he watched his sister walking back and forth in the cell.

"How can you be so calm?" Lara responded, "We're stuck in a cell with no way out."

"Actually I'm planning our escape right now." Cal said, "But your pacing is disturbing my concentration."

Lara walked over to the bunk and sat down beside Cal.

"Okay big brother, let's hear this brilliant scheme of yours to get us out of these binders and out of this cell." she said.

"Well it's not quite finished yet, but I'm working on it." Cal said as he put an arm around his sister and she gasped.

"How the hell did you get loose?" she exclaimed and Cal smiled as he held up his other hand, the binders still locked around his wrist and held between his finger Lara saw a key, "Where did that come from?"

"You were watching when Charity kissed me." Cal said.

"And felt you up. Yes." Lara replied.

"Well while you and everyone else was focused on that she was passing me the key to these binders behind my back." Cal explained.

"And here was me thinking the only thing she was slipping you was her tongue." Lara said and she turned away from Cal, "Now untie me."

"Of course." Cal said, unlocking the binders from his own wrist before releasing his sister.

"Right, so now how do we get out of here?" Lara asked, rubbing her wrists.

"We need the guards to open this door for us." Cal replied, getting up and walking over to the heavy cell door. Then he placed his hand against it and closed his eyes as he let his mind reach out through the Force. Beyond it he could sense the presence of just two guards, including one standing right opposite the door and Cal smiled.

"Cal, what have you sensed?" Lara asked.

"There's a guard right outside." he replied, "And I think he's about to open the door. Get ready." and as Lara approached the door Cal reached out for the guard's mind and tried to place a single thought in his head. Red.

Standing watch over the cell containing the jedi, boredom was a becoming a problem for the guard and he yawned. All of a sudden he thought he saw the light that indicated the status of the door change from green to red, letting him know that the locking mechanism had just turned off. The door remained closed, but now there was apparently nothing keeping it closed other than its own weight and the guard knew that to a jedi this meant little. Leaping forwards, the guard slammed his hand down on the door control in an attempt to re-engage the seal. But just as his hand began to strike the control he saw the light turn back to green and he realised what had just happened, the red light had been an illusion and he had just opened the door for the jedi.

Expecting them to still be bound as the door slid open the guard was about to press the control again when all of a sudden he felt himself being lifted up off the floor and dangle in mid air.

"Thanks for opening the door." Cal said as he came out, his arm pointing directly at the guard as he held in in a telekinetic grip. The guard's sidearm then leapt from its holster and flew to Lara as she followed her brother out of the cell and stood beside the control panel.

"Ready when you are Cal." she said and Cal tossed the guard into the cell behind him, Lara sealing the door the moment he was through.

"Okay this way." Cal said quietly, beckoning Lara to follow him towards the detention section's control station, "We need to get our gear back and find Hyronymous."

With access to his own computer Hyronymous had no difficulty in accessing the station's sensors and modifying them so that the *Perseverance* would be misidentified as the class-VI freighter *Silver Lining*, one of the Crassis family's fleet that had yet to arrive for refitting. Then he turned his attention to the signal he needed to send to the waiting Republic battlegroup. His personal residence featured its own private communications antenna so there was no need for him to try slicing into the main station array without being noticed. All he needed to do was input the message into the subspace buffer and set the antenna to broadcast it over a wide area rather than towards a specific target.

There was one last thing that Hyronymous needed to do before he would be satisfied that he had done

everything he could to ease the taking of the station though and for this he activated the internal communication system and waited until Tel Hortona appeared on the display in front of him.

“Mister Kast.” Tel said.

“Hello again Tel.” Hyronymous replied, “The time has come. Is everyone ready?”

“They will be sir. They will be.”

With Republic rocket jumpers crammed into every available space the interior of the *Perseverance* was very crowded. On the bridge Colonel Jeck now occupied the other vacant seat beside Veers while Whillam was still sat in the other and so both were on hand to hear the announcement from the ship's comscan operator. Unlike the duty uniform he had worn to the briefings about this mission the full set of white armour he now wore with his helmet resting in his lap made it obvious that Colonel Jeck intended to lead his men into battle personally.

"Incoming transmission from the station captain." the officer called out, "We are cleared to approach under the identification *Silver Lining*."

"Well this is it gentlemen." Veers said to Whillam and the colonel. Then turning his attention back to his crew he began to issue the necessary orders, "Astrogator, input co-ordinates for hyperspace jump. Comscan inform Captain De Kuun that we are moving in and to await our signal. Helm engage hyperdrive on my command."

"Co-ordinates locked in captain." the ship's navigator responded.

"Then may the Force be with us." Veers said, "Engage hyperdrive."

"Incoming vessel sir. It's the *Silver Lining*."

"I thought there were no more ships due in today." Heddren said to Luke when the arrival of the ship was announced by the station's comscan operator. The two men along with Millel were still stood around the central display in the command centre while Charity was sat to the side of the room, watched over by the same pair of mandalorians who had escorted her brother to the dry dock control.

"Perhaps father was able to get them to divert here faster." she suggested as she stood up and one of the mandalorians placed a hand on her shoulder, "Luke is all this really necessary? Are you planning on having them follow me into the refresher as well?"

"Stand down." Luke told the mandalorians, "After all, what harm can she do?" and the mandalorian removed his hand from Charity's shoulder and took a step backwards.

"So how many is that now?" Charity asked as she approached the central display.

"We still have another-" Luke began before one of the station staff interrupted him.

"Sir! Security reports a large number of the dry dock labour force gathering at the access points to the dock facility and demanding to be admitted.

"Stang." Millel hissed, "It's a kriffing occupation. If they get in we can bring in all the droids we want but they'll never be able to do any work with that lot stopping them."

"Shall I order security to open fire sir?" the technician asked.

"No. absolutely not." Heddren said, "Tell them I'm on my way down there now."

The single guard at the detention section control station was easily distracted and then overpowered before he could raise the alarm. With him locked in one of his own cells like his comrade Cal and Lara were then free to start searching the various lockers filled with seized items in search of their own weapons and other belongings.

"A-ha!" Lara exclaimed excitedly as she found their rifles in one of the lockers and removed the one with the underslung grenade launcher fitted. Then her face fell, "No ammo though." she added.

"Not surprising." Cal replied, "Makes sense to store it separately and he hurried to his sister's side, removing his own rifle from the locker and then searching the next one alone where he found the rest of their belongings apart from the grenades for the launcher or power packs for the pulse wave weapons.

"Still no ammo?" Lara asked, continuing to open lockers in search of them.

"Perhaps the guards sent them to the armoury for safe keeping." Cal suggested as he slung his rifle over his shoulder and hooked his lightsaber back on his belt, "At least we have the power packs from those two guards for our blasters and our lightsabers haven't been touched."

"I'd rather have my rifle working and a bandoleer of grenades to go with it." Lara commented.

"Well come on. Maybe we can find some somewhere." Cal told her.

The *Perseverance* flew straight towards the space station orbiting Teras where the dry dock was located and Veers studied it carefully. The station was constructed from half a dozen large vertical tube-shaped structures that were linked together by a network of smaller tubes. At the very ends of each of these tubes were clusters of communication and sensor antennas and, more importantly, defensive turrets.

"Defensive status?" Veers asked.

"Inactive captain." the comscan operator replied, "Station is taking no hostile action."

"Then our plan has worked." Whillam said, "They think we're a freighter."

"In that case I suggest you get to the troops." Veers said, "As soon as we're in the dry dock we'll take out the control room to stop them shutting off the magnetic fields and blowing you all out into space and then pop the hatches for you."

In the dry dock control the staff watched as the vessel they believed to be the *Silver Lining* slowly made its way through the magnetic field that held the atmosphere inside the dock itself and manoeuvred to position itself alongside the other freighters. However, as one of the staff walked past the large viewport that gave them a commanding view of the dry dock he looked out through at the newly arrived starship and saw the dorsal and ventral mounted turbolaser turrets as well as the smaller laser cannons, one of which suddenly turned to point directly towards the viewport.

"What the—" he began as his eyes widened at the realisation that this was no freighter. But before he could warn anyone else about the warship now within the dry dock the laser cannon fired and the powerful energy blast smashed through the viewport, filling the control room with flames and incinerating everyone inside.

"What the kriff was that?" Luke exclaimed as he felt the station rock beneath his feet.

"Explosion reported in the dry dock sir." one of the command crew called out in reply.

"Some of those damned dock workers must have gotten past the guards to sabotage the equipment." Millel said, scowling.

"Sir! Security reports intruders in the dry dock. Republic marines and rocket jumpers. Dry dock control itself is not responding. Sir, the intruders are being led by jedi."

All of the *Perseverance's* hatches opened simultaneously and the heavily reinforced contingent of troops that it carried came rushing out into the dry dock. From several dorsal hatches squads of elite rocket jumpers appeared and immediately triggered the rocket packs that gave them their name and hurtled through the air towards the gaping hole blown in the internal wall of the dry dock. Their armour and the flame resistant suits they wore underneath protected them from the effects of the remaining flames while breath masks kept out the smoke as they rushed through the wrecked control room and burst out into the area of the station beyond. Meanwhile the *Perseverance's* own marine contingent, joined by Sergeant Keltan's squad and the rest of the rocket jumpers were spreading out around the dry dock itself. One unit of rocket jumpers used their rocket packs to take them directly to the external doors that were currently covered only by the magnetic fields and they quickly located the emergency controls to lower the actual physical doors as well, thus ensuring that no one could just cut off the power to the dry dock in order to vent all of its atmosphere into space.

The seizure of the dry dock did not go unopposed however, with a small group of security guards who had been stationed there to try and prevent any further groups of stowaways gaining access to the station on the freighters yet to arrive. But they had been deployed in the expectation that any such groups would contain only a handful of people and so when hundred of Republic troops charged out of the frigate they were swiftly overwhelmed.

"Rich!" Whillam shouted at his padawan as he blocked one of the last few desperate pulse wave blasts fired towards him, "Take a platoon of men and try to find Jedi Udra."

"Yes master." the padawan replied and he waved to a nearby rocket jumper platoon leader for his men to follow him.

"Pedrus take another platoon and head for the engineering sector. We need to secure the reactors." Whillam added and Pedrus nodded. Then the senior jedi knight looked at Colonel Jeck, "And I suggest we head for the main command centre." he added.

"Yes general." Jeck replied.

Once more Cal and Lara covered their weapons with their robes as they emerged from the detention section and looked around.

"So where to now?" Lara asked.

"We need to find Hyron." Cal replied, "Maybe he'll have headed back to the dry dock."

"Or for an escape pod to try and get out of here now that security will be hunting for him." Lara said.

"Maybe not." Cal said, "Remember Charity didn't say anything about him to Luke that we heard. It's possible that we're the only ones who know that he's—" and then all of a sudden the station shuddered around them and a klaxon began to sound.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this Cal." Lara said, "Could they know we've escaped already?"

"I doubt it given that the detention section is less than twenty metres behind us and we've not heard anyone shouting about a break out." Cal replied right before he felt a slight disturbance in the Force, "There are more jedi here." he added.

"Here? Now?" Lara asked and Cal nodded.

"I just felt them using their powers." he told her, "Didn't you?"

"If I say yes would you believe me?"

"No."

"Okay, no I didn't. But we need to work on our trust issues more." Lara said.

"Hyron must have found another terminal and rigged the sensors." Cal said, "Come on, let's get to the dry dock to join up with the assault force." but as he and Lara turned in the direction of the dry dock they saw a blast door sliding shut to block the corridor further on.

This was not an isolated incident. All over the station blast doors were being sealed to try and contain the invaders while the defending security forces could request that they be opened to allow them to redeploy from one section of the station to another. But this was an issue that Hyronymous had foreseen and it was for this reason he had encouraged the dry dock workers to suddenly try forcing their way into not only the dry dock itself but also other key areas of the station including the main reactor and life support sections. This meant that the limited security force had to be spread more thinly, something that they could ill afford given the superiority in firepower and armour protection that the Republic troops had over them.

The crowd of workers trying to get into the dry dock presented the greatest problem to the security forces since they had been able to jam the blast door open and the sheer number of them had so far prevented the security guards from moving them back far enough to clear the obstruction. As he looked at the jeering crowd Heddren knew that it would only be a matter of minutes before the Republic troops made it this far and if the blast door was not sealed by then they would be able to spread out over a large area of the station that they would be difficult to clear from.

"Do you hear that sound?" Heddren said to Tel, the twi'lek foreman standing right in front of him and glaring at him while he spoke, "The station is under attack and we need to seal that blast door. Now if your men would."

"My men are going nowhere." Tel interrupted, "This dock is ours and we'll decide who gets in and out."

"It's treason then." Heddren replied.

"Treason?" How do you figure that out?" Tel asked.

"We are at war with the Republic." Heddren said, "And by blocking the security forces from defending this station against the enemy you are providing them with aid and comfort. I can have you arrested along with every last member of your guild if you continue to refuse my orders."

"You hear that?" Tel called out, "We're giving aid and comfort to the enemy."

"Jedi aren't my enemy." one of the workers shouted just before there was the distant sound of fire from a blast rifle, indicating that the Republic forces were getting close.

"Hear that?" Tel asked Heddren, "You and your wannabe commandos might want to get out of here before those soldiers arrive."

Heddren turned towards the security guards who were lined up across the corridor behind him with their rifles held pointing downwards to avoid any accusations that they had threatened the dock workers with being shot. Reaching their commander Heddren paused to whisper in the man's ear and he nodded. Then as Heddren moved to the far side of the line of guards the commander drew his sidearm.

"Take aim!" he ordered and the guards raised their rifles.

"According to my sister shooting striking workers is bad PR." Heddren called out towards the dock workers, "Shooting traitors on the other hand is not."

"Fire!" the guard commander yelled and there were several blasts of pulse wave fire that blew workers off their feet. But the reaction of the remaining workers was not quite what Heddren had hoped for. Rather than turn and flee, trampling one another underfoot as they tried to escape they held their ground and several produced various weapons of their own.

"Get at them!" Tel bellowed as he looked up from the corpse of one of his men and drew a pistol from his pocket.

Heddren froze, unable to believe what he was seeing as the mob rushed towards the security guards. The guards of course reacted by firing again but this time they were not the only ones shooting and there were several slug thrower shots that echoed down the corridor as guards fell to the floor.

"Fall back!" the commander shouted, his hand clamped over a bullet wound to his arm that had made him drop his own weapon.

"No!" Heddren shouted, "We have to get them back." but the guards were already retreating, leaving Heddren behind. Quickly he reached out to pick up the pulse wave blaster that the guard commander had dropped but just as his fingers touched the grip something heavy struck the side of his head and he fell sideways. As he landed Heddren looked up and gasped as he saw Tel and several of his dock workers glaring down at them.

"Still think you're in control mister lawyer?" Tel asked as he aimed his pistol at Heddren's head and before he could answer Tel pulled the trigger.

Elsewhere in a corridor that led away from the dry dock a technical team attached to Colonel Jeck's

command section had ripped a panel from the wall beside the blast door blocking their path and was connecting a device designed specifically to override the door controls and release it. Sealing blast doors was an obvious tactic and so the Republic assault forces had come equipped to counter it. But as the crew continued to work the Colonel's PTP link activated.

"Colonel Jeck this is Sergeant Keltan. Blast door in sector eight did not seal. Local workers have held it open for us. They claim to be acting under the direction of Hyronymous Kast himself."

Whillam and the colonel looked at one another.

"Is there any word of Cal or Lara?" Whillam asked so that the colonel's PTP link picked up the question.

"Apparently they've been captured by the local forces sir." Keltan said, "Charity Crassis may have betrayed them." then before either the jedi or the colonel could reply he added, "Oh and Hedden Drud is dead, shot by one of the workers."

"We need to send Rich to the detention section where Cal and Lara are being held." Whillam said.

"What about Miss Crassis?" Jeck asked.

"Something about her betrayal seems odd to me." Whillam told him, "But I expect we'll find her in the command centre or at least close to it so we can take her into custody ourselves. But first we need to get through this door."

"Got it." one of the technicians exclaimed and the blast door began to slide open.

*Danger.*

Whillam sensed the threat from beyond the door and in response he let loose with a telekinetic blast through the widening gap that sent the grenade that had just been fired by one of the security guards on the far side flying back towards its owner. Then there was a 'snap-hiss' as Whillam activated his lightsaber and the moment that the grenade detonated, producing a flash of light and blast of sound that disorientated the nearby security guards he leapt through the still expanding gap between the segments of the blast door and charged into battle.

Cal thrust his lightsaber into the blast door where the four segments met and watched as the metal around the blade began to glow red hot and melt away. Meanwhile Lara stood close behind him with her PTP link in her hand and scanning the frequencies used by both the Jedi Order and Republic military.

"Got anything yet?" Cal asked, glancing back at his sister but she shook her head.

"There's too much interference from the bulkheads around here." Lara replied.

"Well I think I've almost got this." Cal said and right on queue a large chunk of the blast door suddenly fell free and Cal had to leap back quickly to prevent himself from being splashed by the molten metal. Peering through the hole he had created he saw that the corridor beyond the blast door was empty and being careful not to touch the hot edges of the hole he clambered through.

"Come on." he told Lara.

"Hang on Cal, I've got something." she replied and she lifted the PTP link to her mouth, "This is Padawan Udra, respond." she transmitted.

"Lara? Lara, it's Rich." the voice of Whillam's padawan answered, "Where are you?"

"Just leaving the detention section two decks down from dry dock control. What's going on?" Lara responded.

"There are workers rioting all over the station." Rich told her, "They held one of the blast doors open and now there's a brigade of troops spreading out. Jedi Antress has ordered me to locate you."

All of a sudden there was an energy blast from down the corridor that Cal only just managed to deflect with his lightsaber before diving back through the hole in the door.

"We've got company." he told Lara as more pulse wave blasts struck the other side of the door, "Tell Rich to hurry."

"Did you get that Rich?" Lara asked, "We need back up quick."

"Got it, we're about three minutes out." Rich replied and Lara shut off her PTP link and drew her sidearm instead.

"Okay, let's see how they like being shot at." Cal said as he aimed his on pulse wave blaster through the hole in the blast door and fired two rapidly aimed shots back down the corridor. He and Lara then alternated, firing two or three shots from each side of the hole before pulling back and allowing the other to fire from the other side. However, this was not enough to keep the security team back and in the corridor beyond the blast door the heavily armed guards advanced slowly towards the blast door.

"Maybe cutting a hole in this thing wasn't such a good idea after all." Lara commented. But then there came the sound of another energy weapon discharge from the other side of the door that differed from the dull 'thunk' of a pulse wave weapon. Instead this had the much higher pitched sound of a blast rifle, the state of the art plasma enhanced particle beam weapon that had become the standard issue armament of Republic troops and Cal smiled.

"Or maybe you should just have faith my young apprentice." he said as there was more gunfire from beyond the advancing security guards as well as the characteristic hum of a lightsaber blade in operation as Rich led

his platoon through them.

“Cal! Lara!” he called out, “Are you there?”

“Right here.” Cal replied, “Rich, your timing is perfect.” and he began to climb back through the hole in the blast door, no longer concerned about burning himself on the metal that it had had time to cool down.

“So how many of us are here?” Lara asked as she followed Cal through the hole.

“Jedi Antress is leading the assault and Pedrus has been sent to secure the engineer section. Last I heard he was making good progress thanks to rioting workers keeping security occupied but the main command centre is better defended.” Rich explained.

“Then that’s where we’ll head.” Cal replied, “I wouldn’t be surprised if Luke Crassis was there and capturing him would be a major success.”

“Plus Cal wants his new girlfriend back.” Lara added and Cal frowned.

“Charity is not my girlfriend.” he said.

“Tell her then.” Lara replied, smiling at her brother.

“Oh just come on.” Cal said as he began to walk through the rocket jumper platoon towards the main command centre.

## 17.

"Millel I'm sorry." Luke said, placing a hand on her shoulder as she continued to stare at the security feed from the dry dock section. She had frozen the image at the moment her husband was shot and had said nothing since. The command staff had indicated that the feed from the camera had ceased soon after as the Republic troops arrived and acted to prevent their activities or numbers from being monitored by the station's defenders.

"Don't." Millel replied, brushing his hand away and she turned around, "Just tell me how this happened. How did the Republic get a frigate into the dry dock disguised as one of your ships?"

"Yes, that is a good question." Luke replied and he turned to look at Charity, "Care to enlighten us?"

"What?" Charity responded, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Luke pointed to more displays that showed the extent of the Republic's progress through the station.

"I'm talking about that Charity!" he yelled, "The Republic is here and you brought them. What sort of game are you playing here?"

"Contact the detention section where the jedi are being held." Millel ordered before Charity could reply to Luke's demand.

"No response from the detention section. Or from the security team sent to reinforce it. Their last report indicated that they were being fired on from within it." one of the command staff replied and Millel glared at Charity.

"The jedi got out of their cell didn't they?" she said, "And you helped them."

"Luke this is ridiculous." Charity said, backing away, "There's no proof I've done anything. She's just hysterical over Heddren's death."

Luke frowned.

"Proof?" he asked, "Charity, we don't need proof. This isn't a court of law." then he looked at the two mandalorians, "Seize her." he ordered and they stepped forwards to take hold of her arms. Then smiling at Charity he added, "Father will know how to deal with you. I'm sure a mind probe will be able to get us the truth of the matter."

"No!" Charity shrieked, "No, not the mind probe!"

"We need reinforcements." Luke said, turning his back on Charity as she struggled against the mandalorians, "Comscan, contact the other stations in the system and tell them we need back up. Tell them there's a hostile warship in the dry dock and they need to come ready for it."

"Captain I'm picking up multiple launches." the *Perseverance's* comscan officer announced. It was inevitable that the Founding Families would send for help when the Republic attacked and so Veers had ordered his crew to be on the look out for it. Of course, being inside the dry dock limited the field of view of their sensors but with lookouts placed just inside the magnetic field as well they were still able to get the early warning they needed.

"Send the signal." Veers replied, "We need De Kuun's ships now."

Outside the station several clusters of ships from other orbital and lunar facilities sped towards it. Most of them were transports carrying security forces to reinforce those defending the station but there were also several squadrons of fighters intended both as escorts and for use against the *Perseverance*. But as they were still rushing across the space between them and their destination there were multiple flashes of light as De Kuun's gunship squadron and fighters dropped out of hyperspace with several large troop transports behind them.

"Gunship squadron," De Kuun signalled, "target enemy transport ships and station defences. Fighters knock out their escorts. Troop transports track enemy vessels back to their point of origin and engage. With any luck they'll have stripped their defences too bare to offer significant resistance. Now break and attack."

The Republic fighters and gunships then accelerated towards their targets, unleashing a torrent of laser and torpedo fire that the local forces were totally unprepared for. Meanwhile the Republic troop ships made for the stations and outposts that had launched ships to support the primary station. Now lacking fighter defences and with few troops left to defend them they were vulnerable to the soldiers carried aboard the transports and their limited weaponry posed little threat to them. Captain De Kuun's plan was to use the Founding Families' desperation to keep control of the dry dock as an opportunity to seize control of the rest of the system as well.

With Republic troops and rioting dry dock workers now swarming all over the station the security force gave up on trying to contain them and instead opted to fall back to protect key locations until their reinforcements could arrive and this meant concentrating their troops around the engineering and main command sections.

Just as before blast doors were closed but in addition many of these were welded shut and the motors operating them destroyed to prevent them from opening at all. Only a handful of doors were left functional and behind every one of these was an ambush waiting for the Jedi and the Republic troops following them. At the far end of a corridor leading towards the main command section a barrier had been erected by the security troops and behind this they had set up a pair of automated sentry guns, each one mounting a drum fed magnetic accelerator weapon. This made advancing down the corridor an impossible task even for Whillam, the rate at which the weapons could fire their projectiles was too great for him to stand a chance of blocking them all and despite the best efforts of Colonel Jeck's troops to destroy the guns with their grenade launchers they remained in action.

"Status report." Whillam signalled using his PTP link on a Jedi frequency.

"Enemy troops are dug in all around the engineering section." Pedrus responded first, "We are advancing but our progress is slow. We have some of the local workers advising us on how to bypass the station's built in security measures."

"From the dry dock?" Whillam asked, wondering how men whose job it was to upgrade and repair starships would know so much about the rest of the space station.

"No Jedi Antress." Pedrus answered, "They are station engineers." and Whillam looked at Colonel Jeck.

"Now isn't that interesting?" he said, "Maybe the Founding Families' control over the sector is not as strong as we thought."

"Any help is better than no help." the colonel replied, "Plus maybe this means we won't need as many troops to keep control of this facility afterwards."

"This is Cal. We're heading for command right now. We're two decks below you and so far there's hardly anyone around." Cal reported next.

"Understandable." Whillam replied, "The remaining defenders appear to have withdrawn to fortified positions and barricaded themselves in. Even most of the blast doors can't be opened."

In the corridor where he and the others with him were advancing Cal came to a sudden halt and smiled.

"Cal what's wrong?" Lara asked.

"Nothing." Cal replied, "In fact we may be able to end this quicker than I thought."

"How?" Rich asked and Cal turned towards him.

"Station security have barricaded themselves inside key areas right?" he said and both Lara and Rich agreed, "So that means that they're concentrating on defending the few access points they've deliberately left available and that means that there's no one or perhaps just a handful of them protecting the other approaches."

"But there are blast doors in the way Cal." Lara pointed out, "And by the time we cut through them they'll have noticed what's going on and send guards to stop us."

"But not if we cut through the bulkheads between decks somewhere out of the way." Cal replied, "Which with three lightsabers shouldn't take that long at all."

Cutting from one deck to another involved more than just slicing a hole through a single piece of metal. Avoiding areas occupied by guards and command staff was easy enough for Jedi who could sense such presences in the Force but the ceiling of the deck below was separate to the floor of the deck above and between them were assorted ducts and cables that the Jedi had to be careful about severing just in case one of them was carrying a data signal or power that the sudden interruption of would alert the occupants of the command centre to what was happening.

With the help of the troops accompanying them, including some with technical training, the Jedi were still able to locate a suitable place to cut through to the command section from the deck below, however. After cutting through Cal then climbed up through the hole to determine where they had emerged. As planned they had made their entry into a room that was unoccupied and from the appearance of it it was intended for use as a meeting or briefing room.

"Clear." Cal said quietly and he reached back into the hole to help Lara up followed by Rich. Some of the troopers then positioned themselves to climb up after the Jedi but Cal held up his hand for them to stop, "No." he told them, "We can move quicker alone. Leave a squad there to make sure the hole isn't discovered from underneath and the rest of you move to hook up with Jedi Antress and the colonel."

"Yes commander." the platoon leader replied before backing away from the hole and Cal got to his feet.

"Okay let's go." he said, "Stay quiet and stay alert. We'll use distraction and stealth rather than brute force. I want us to get to the command centre itself before anyone realises that we're here."

The Jedi cautiously left the meeting room, closing the door behind them to cover their tracks. As a non-critical location the corridor they emerged into had no automated surveillance system meaning that the Jedi were in no danger of being detected so they hurried down the corridor. From around the corner they heard the sound of running feet and Rich raised his lightsaber, preparing to ignite it. But Lara placed a hand on his wrist and just shook her head before looking towards her brother. Cal took a deep breath and held up his free hand and as the detachment of security guards ran past he reached out through the Force to make certain

that not one of them so much as glanced down the side corridor to look at the jedi. Then when they had run past Cal peered after them before waving the two padawans after him and darting around the corner towards the main command centre itself.

The occupants of the main command centre felt the station shudder as a proton torpedo fired by one of Captain De Kuun's squadron slammed into it, demolishing one of the pulse wave cannon turrets at the top of the module housing the command centre.

"What's the ETA on those reinforcements?" Millel asked, "Shouldn't they have been here by now?"

"The Republic naval vessels are preventing them from docking." one of the command staff replied, "If they try to slow down and align themselves with us they'll be easy targets and their escorts are being engaged as well."

"Stang." Luke said, "Isn't there anything we can do to cover their approach?"

"I'm sorry sir but our point defence batteries are already firing at maximum capacity."

"What about the heavier guns and missiles?" Millel asked, "They're too big to be fired at fighters and gunships right?"

"Accurate targeting with the main guns is difficult." the station's weapons officer agreed.

"But what about those troop transports heading for the other stations?" Millel then said, "Fire at them and it may force the Republic's fighters to break off to protect them."

"The transports are beyond the range of our heavy guns and the missiles could be intercepted at this range as well." the weapons officer replied.

"But like she said, it would force the Republic's fighters to disengage to protect the transports." Luke said, "Do it."

"Luke just surrender." Charity exclaimed and as Luke turned and strode towards her she continued, "The Republic will treat us well. There's no reason to-" then she shrieked as her brother struck her with enough force to push her backwards despite being held by the two mandalorians. At the same time the station shook again as it suffered another torpedo hit and the mandalorians lost their grip, causing Charity to fall to the floor.

"Get up you little slime beetle!" Luke snapped and he reached down to drag his sister back to her feet. But as he pulled her up off the floor she stumbled forwards, slamming into him and his eyes widened suddenly as he released his grip on her.

"Luke, what's wrong?" Millel asked before he staggered backwards to reveal the mandalorian blade stolen from one of the two either side of Charity when she fell buried up to its hilt in his torso just beneath his ribcage. Then as both Charity and Millel looked on in horror he glared at his sister one last time before collapsing to the floor, "Kill her!" Millel yelled at the mandalorians as she rushed to Luke's side. But by the time she reached him he was already dead and looking around she saw that the mandalorians had done nothing more than take hold of Charity again, "What are you waiting for?" she demanded.

"Mister Crassis ordered that she is to be taken back to Crassis Major." one of the mandalorians answered and Millel scowled.

"Someone get me Erill Crassis now!" she snapped. Then an evil smile spread across her face as she got back to her feet, "Actually I'll just do it myself." she hissed before lunging at Charity and wrapping her hands around the younger woman's throat.

"Okay this is it." Cal whispered as he pulled his hand back around the corner after taking a quick look around it, "The main command centre is just around this corner."

"Guards?" Lara asked and Cal nodded.

"Of course." Cal answered, "Four of them." and Lara smiled.

"May as well just open the door and let us in." she said as she raised her lightsaber.

"Okay, on my command." Cal said and then he yelled, "Now!" and all three jedi ignited their lightsabers together and rushed around the corner.

Startled, the four guards hesitated before opening fire with their pulse wave rifles and they got off only a handful of shots that were all either dodged or blocked with lightsabers by the jedi. Cal was the first to come within arms' reach and he charged right through the middle of the guards, swinging his lightsaber back and forth to cut down two of them. Behind him Lara and Rich each charged one of the two survivors. Blocking one last shot from her opponent, Lara swung her lightsaber back to cut his rifle in half and before the shocked man could draw his sidearm she slashed her blade across his chest and he collapsed. On the other hand Rich used his own body to slam into the final guard, knocking his rifle aside before the padawan thrust his lightsaber straight ahead and impaled the guard through his chest.

"Keep watch." Cal said without bothering to check any of the guards now lay dead at his feet and he plunged his lightsaber blade into the final blast door separating the jedi from the main command centre.

Charity's vision blurred as the supply of air to her lungs was cut off and she tried desperately to fight Millel

off. But she still had some awareness of what was going on around her and so she heard it when one of the command staff called out.

"They're outside! They're cutting through!"

The two mandalorian warriors had until then been stood back wondering what to do about Millel as she looked certain to choke Charity to death in violation of their orders to keep her alive but also aware of the consequences of assaulting a senior member of the Founding Families. But now that the command centre was directly threatened they hurried to position themselves closer to the blast door, the centre of which was now glowing brightly as Cal's lightsaber melted the metal and aimed their rifles towards it.

"Oh this is taking too long." Lara said and she turned back towards the door and pushed her own lightsaber into it close to the edge of the glowing area. Already seriously weakened by Cal's lightsaber the addition of a second blade was too much for the armoured door to resist and a large section suddenly fell inwards.

"Back!" Cal yelled as a volley of pulse wave fire came from within the command centre. But Rich was too slow to avoid the blasts entirely and one of them struck him in the side.

*Pain.*

"Rich." Lara said as he fell.

"I'll be fine." he gasped, clutching his side where the blast had caught him.

"Lara, come on." Cal said, sending a telekinetic blast through the hole in the blast door that knocked both mandalorians off their feet before he dived through and charged at them before they could recover and start firing again.

Lara followed, wincing as she accidentally touched the edge of the hole and burned her hand on the still hot to the touch metal. Looking around she saw Cal decapitate one of the mandalorians and turn his full attention to the other. Then she felt a tremor in the Force.

*Fear.*

*Panic.*

Looking around she saw Millel Drud kneeling over Charity in the act of strangling her and Lara charged.

"Let her go Millel!" she shouted as she ran but Millel ignored her and so Lara struck, plunging her lightsaber down through Millel's back. In an instant Millel's grip on Charity's neck weakened but Charity still stared straight ahead, her attention now focused on the tip of Lara's lightsaber blade that hovered just a few centimetres from her face.

Millel fell forwards, landing on top of Charity who pushed her body aside and dragged herself back as she continued to gasp for breath now that she could finally breathe again. Lara turned in time to see Cal pulling his lightsaber back after impaling the other mandalorian and both jedi then looked around at the command staff.

"Surrender." Cal called out, "I promise you will be well treated."

The command staff paused and looked at one another, none of them wanting to be the first one to give up just in case no one else followed. But as Cal approached one of the larger clusters of them with his lightsaber held straight out in front of him one suddenly raised his hands into the air. Spurred on by this first surrender the rest of the command staff also began giving themselves up, moving away from control consoles and raising their hands.

"I guess this means I missed it all." Rich said, peering through the hole in the blast door and still holding his side.

"Lara go see to him." Cal said and Lara nodded before shutting off her lightsaber and rushing to check Rich's injuries.

"I'm fine too by the way." Charity croaked, "Just a bit of a sore throat."

Cal nodded.

"Where's the communications panel?" he asked her and she pointed towards the comscan consoles,

"Thanks." Cal said as he moved over to it and activated the station wide intercom, "This is Jedi Knight Cal Udra." he announced, "This station is now under Republic control. All local security forces still at large are ordered to surrender themselves to the first Republic forces they encounter. All station defences are to be deactivated immediately." then he smiled and shut down his lightsaber as he turned off the intercom, "There, that should do it." he added.

*Guilt.*

*Sadness.*

Cal turned around when he sensed the sudden burst of emotion and he saw that Charity had crawled over to where Luke lay dead, his lifeless eyes staring up at the ceiling. He could see the mandalorian weapon sticking out of the body but could not understand why one of the mercenaries would have turned on him.

"Oh Luke." Charity said hoarsely, "What have I done?"

"Charity, are you-" Cal began.

"I killed him!" she exclaimed, "Cal I killed my own brother." and cradling Luke's body in her arms she began to weep.

"I will see that traitor dragged back here and nailed to a wall before I personally skin her alive!" Erill Crassis shouted out across the room as he was brought the news of Luke's death while Salla sat and just stared out ahead of her. In front of him stood one of his household staff, the young woman quivering after delivering the contents of the part of the message that had made it to Crassis Major before being cut off and either side of her stood an armoured mandalorian, "Go." Erill then said as he sat back down, "Get out of my sight." and the terrified woman nodded before scurrying out of the room, followed by the two guards.

"The Republic now controls the Teras system." Kaylor commented from where he stood by the door, "Getting to your daughter-"

"She's no daughter of mine any more," Erill interrupted, "and I don't care what it takes. I want Charity back here to face justice for what she's cost us."

"I've already heard from Natalay Shill." Kaylor said, "She wants a report on our ability to launch a counter attack."

"Oh kriff Natalay!" Salla snapped, "For years she skulks about on the rim before turning up here and expecting us all to dance to her tune."

"I have just lost my son. Salla her husband and young Hiran and Jaynie Drud have lost both their parents thanks to Charity's actions." Erill said, "For now Mister Mott your one priority is to ensure her capture. Natalay can make do with her own troops and whatever Josh is willing to give her. You work for me remember?"

"Of course sir." Kaylor replied, bowing slightly, "I will make the necessary arrangements." and then he too left the room.

With none of the staff left to see her, Salla burst into tears. Seeing this Erill got up from his chair and made his way over to the couch she was sat on and sat down beside her before putting an arm around her.

"Charity will pay for what she has done. I promise you." he said, "And when I am done with her Cal and Lara Udra will be next."

Seth watched the activity in the Delvad system carefully. It was obvious that the Sith lord had instructed his war droid army to reinforce the defences of the planet and weapons were delivered by Sith transports that appeared to be coming from the factories on Shadowfall despite there not being a direct hyperspace route between the two systems that the Republic knew of were being installed on the handful of orbital facilities around Delvad as well as on some of the larger repulsorlift islands. Few other vessels attempted to run the blockade of Sith warships in either direction and those that did were invariably shot down or intercepted and boarded. That was until a small courier vessel dropped out of hyperspace and hurtled towards the ocean world, its course taking it right past a gunship squadron. Seth waited, expecting the Sith vessels to move to engage this intruder at any moment but surprisingly they ignored the courier entirely. Checking his sensors Seth saw that the courier was showing up clearly so electronic jamming could not explain how this ship was able to pass by a squadron of Sith warships.

Rerunning the sensor footage from the moment that the courier arrived revealed more, however. Just a few seconds after the ship dropped out of hyperspace it transmitted a burst of data towards the closest Sith warship and just a few moments later there was a second data burst sent in reply. After this the Sith ships continued orbiting Delvad as if nothing had happened while the courier flew past. Moving on through the sensor recording Seth saw that the courier did not head towards any of the landmasses on Delvad, nor did it steer towards where the Sith storehouse was known to be located. Instead the vessel flew towards one of the few repulsorlift islands that had yet to be plundered for parts or turned into a floating gun platform. "Master Udra will want to see this." Seth said to himself as he made a note of the island's position before powering up his starfighter and turning to leave the system.

Seth was not the only one watching what was going on around Delvad, however. The ship carrying Belle Shill and the mandalorians assigned to help her track down Kyle Jenner held position off the orbital plane monitoring the movements of the ships orbiting the planet. Belle's intention had been to determine whatever patterns there were to the orbital paths of each Sith ship and use this data to plot a course that would exploit any gap they found to take them through the blockade. But when Belle was shown the record of the courier entering Delvad's atmosphere without being fired on another idea came to mind.

"Get me Shill Security headquarters." she said, "And I'll need a copy of that exchange between the courier and the Sith."

"I have it right here for you." The scout ship's pilot replied as a tiny holographic image of her mother appeared in front of Belle.

"Belle thank goodness." Natalay said, "Everything's going crazy here right now."

"What's wrong?" Belle asked, confused.

"The damned jedi have hit Teras. They took the dry dock in about an hour and most of the rest of the system is under Republic control as well now." Natalay told her, "To make matters worse Luke Crassis and Heddren and Millel Drud are dead. It seems that Luke was killed by his own sister."

"You're kidding me." Belle said.

"No. Please tell me you're calling with good news."

"Of a sort." Belle replied, "I've tracked Kyle to the Delvad system but there's no sign of him in space so he must have found some way to get through the Sith blockade to the surface."

"Go on." Natalay said.

"Well we just spotted a courier ship fly right through the blockade without the Sith even bothering to blink."

"Clever." Natalay commented.

"Very." Belle responded, "But there was a brief exchange between the courier and a Sith ship that we were able to record, I'm sending a copy to you now. If you could run this through the cryptology computers we may be able to figure out how to get through ourselves."

"Okay I've got it here now." Natalay said as she looked at her computer monitor and saw the data packet that accompanying the transmission from Belle, "Just one more thing though, you're brother and sisters were able to sneak through the blockade by using a Sith gunship we still had. They're on the planet somewhere."

"Well if that transmission I just sent you is any good we won't need to worry about using Sith ships, we'll be able to fly our entire fleet through." Belle replied before ending the transmission.

The Dark Side was strong on Delvad. Kyle could sense the fear and anger from almost everyone he encountered. The vast majority of the surviving population had been rounded up for use as forced labour by the Sith war droids but there remained isolated pockets of resistance here and there as well as individuals who had managed to avoid being captured themselves and were now using this to try and make a profit from those who wanted help in escaping. In the past two days Kyle had seen five ships other than Sith ones

launch from the surface of Delvad and every single one of them had exploded soon after, shot down by Sith fighters launched to enforce the blockade. Kyle wanted to meet the beings arranging these suicidal escape attempts, not because he needed a way off the planet or because he wanted to aide them but because he knew that the resources needed to obtain a starship to be used to try and escape the planet could also be used to get Kyle into the Runn estate unnoticed and with this in mind Kyle had come to one of the large camps established by the war droids for housing their labour force.

The camp, like all of the others of its kind on the planet was not guarded, the only war droids present were there to ensure that any disputes between the prisoners did not spill over into violence and so Kyle was able to walk right up to the perimeter of the camp where he found a hiding place in a wrecked military speeder and waited, using the Force to search for signs of life nearby.

As it happened it was his conventional senses that were triggered first as the sound of an air cushioned vehicle approaching from the ocean and he repositioned himself so that he could watch the vehicle drive up the shore and come to a halt a short distance from the camp. Several men armed with a variety of weapons, most of which looked like slug throwers, then jumped out of the hovercraft and positioned themselves around it while a group of people from the camp approached.

"So what are you looking for tonight?" another of the hovercraft's occupants called out as she disembarked and stood in front of her guards. Though she was not carrying a weapon openly Kyle did notice that there was a bulge under her jacket that suggested she was concealing a pistol there.

"Do you have drink?" one of the camp inmates asked and Kyle snarled when he heard this. The inmates could have been attempting to procure weapons with which to fight back against the droids but instead they appeared concerned only with luxuries. Emerging from his hiding place Kyle approached the inmates gathered close to the black marketeers and mingled in amongst them, slowly making his way through the crowd and watching as the woman selling the smuggled goods held up one item after another and exchanged them for whatever valuables the crowd had been able to lay their hands on. Standing right at the front of the crowd he was able to see into the hovercraft and he noticed a gap between some of the stacks of boxes it held that looked large enough for him to hide in. But he could not simply climb aboard the vehicle while it was surrounded by guards so instead he focused on the minds of the crowd around him.

"You're charging too much!" one suddenly called out, a man who had already made several purchases, "I want my money back."

"If you don't want those then give them to me." another man replied and he pushed the first who in response pushed him back and in moments the crowd were either fighting one another or pushing forwards in the hope that they could force their way past the guards onto the hovercraft to loot its contents.

There were several sharp 'cracks' as the guards fired into the air and the crowd fell back, pushing one another out of the way in their efforts to get clear. But the distraction was just enough that Kyle was able to mask himself in the Force and as the guards advanced they ignored him, stepping around him instead of trying to push him back with the others and he hurried to the hovercraft and climbed in.

"Let's go." the woman called out to her men, "We'll not do any more business tonight." and she climbed back into the hovercraft as well, followed by her guards.

Hidden amongst the boxes Kyle smiled as he felt the cushion of air beneath the vehicle inflate before it backed out onto the ocean and sped away.

Gathering intelligence on what was going on at the Runn estate meant getting close to it and that was easier said than done. One of the most important features about the estate to the Founding Families had always been the seemingly absolute level of security a facility more than a hundred metres beneath the ocean surface provided. In three hundred years it had been breached only once and that had required a team of half a dozen Jedi, three of whom had paid for their intrusion with their lives.

But the water that protected the estate from intrusion also limited the ability of its occupants to observe the world around them. A warship in geostationary orbit could keep watch for any aircraft or surface vehicle to attempt to approach the estate while sonar could listen for anything approaching from beneath the waves. But against an observation post set up on a cluster of small islands close by the estate's defences were useless.

The islands were ones that Jaynie had spent a great deal of time exploring over the past few years as part of her studies of the biology of Delvad and she had built up an intimate knowledge of them that was put to use in selecting somewhere that their speeders could be concealed as well the best locations to place sensor arrays to observe the Runn estate without being seen in return.

"I'd feel happier with the gunship here." Erin said to Corlay, using a set of wide scan binocs to look out over the ocean in the direction of the estate while her twin waded out just far enough to set up a passive sonar receiver.

"And I'd feel happier if you concentrated more on the ocean around here rather than out there Erin." Corlay replied, "Remember what Jaynie said about sharks in these waters. I don't fancy being lunch. Besides, that gunship's too big for us to hide."

"I suppose so." Erin said and then excitedly she added, "Of course if I wasn't watching what's going on out there I wouldn't be seeing that." and she pointed to where in the distance a repulsorlift vehicle was heading directly for the estate. Hurriedly Corlay abandoned positioning the sensor and raised her pulse wave rifle to make use of its optical sight to observe the vehicle for herself. Open topped, it was easy to see that the occupants were not war droids but a pair of living beings that from this distance both appeared human. The speeder slowed down as it neared the ocean directly above the Runn estate before coming to a complete halt. It was then that a submersible vehicle appeared from beneath the water and the speeder moved towards it until it was close enough for one of the occupants to leap down to the deck of the submersible and climb inside. The speeder then retreated so that the submersible could safely disappear back beneath the waves and waited.

"Han needs to know about this." Corlay said.

The messenger sent by Uggaro the Hutt was allowed to enter only the outer part of the Runn estate where an image of Slaydo was projected by a newly installed holographic emitter while Gayal stood further back, flanked by several sword armed war droids.

"Speak your piece." Slaydo told the messenger, "What does the hutt have to say?"

"The great Uggaro bids you greetings lord." the messenger replied, dropping to one knee.

"Ah, respect. Good." Slaydo said, "But get on with it. My time is precious."

"Of course my lord. Spies working on behalf of the great Uggaro have brought word from the Teras system. The Founding Families intended to use its shipyards to refit some of their vessels as warships to challenge your force."

"Understandable." Slaydo said, "But you said 'intended' not 'intend'. I take it that something has happened. Have your master's spies sabotaged the shipyards?"

"No lord. The system has fallen to the Republic. Jedi knights infiltrated the shipyards ahead of a Republic military task force." the messenger replied, "In addition to this my master's spies have learned that Luke Crassis and Heddren and Millel Drud have all been killed in the attack."

The image of Slaydo smiled and turned towards Gayal.

"You see my young apprentice?" he asked, "Our enemies fight among themselves and grow weaker. Is there any better sign of our destiny to rule?"

"Heddren Drud is definitely dead?" Gayal asked, looking directly at the messenger.

"Yes my lady." he replied, "Some say he was killed by Republic marines, others say he was killed by rioting workers. But he is definitely dead."

"You don't still hold some sentimental attachment to that man do you?" Slaydo asked Gayal and she scowled.

"No master." she said, "When I was imprisoned by my family it was Heddren Drud that arranged it. I spent six months bound and helpless in a cell because of him. I'm glad he's dead. I just wish I could have been there to see it."

"And what of the other Founding Families?" Slaydo asked, "Have the hutt's spies learned anything of what they are doing?"

"They continue to try and build up their forces my lord. Those that are left."

"Those that are left?" Slaydo commented.

"My lord the Karn family has been almost entirely wiped out. Only Sial Karn remains, hiding in the Fayl family mansion." the messenger said and Gayal gasped.

"Gone?" she said, now realising what the tremor she had sensed earlier was. She had felt the deaths of her family, "How? Was it the jedi?" she asked, fearing that the messenger would tell her that her parents had died at the hands of Cal.

"Kyle Jenner attacked the Karn residence single handed." the messenger told her and Gayal felt strangely relieved, "He killed Del Karn there while the bodies of Faye and Keera were discovered floating in space in the Tepillos system."

"Tepillos?" Slaydo said, "I control that system."

"Forgive me my lord," the messenger said, "But your droid army controls only the planet itself and space close by. The rest of the system is unsecured."

"In any case the Founding Families and jedi seem to have been occupied with one another so far. As has this Kyle Jenner." Slaydo said, "The lasting implications of this are not trivial, however."

"I do not understand master." Gayal replied.

"The jedi will be emboldened by their victory and seek to push onwards towards us. On the other hand the Founding Families will be panicked by their losses and become more desperate. We already know that a small group of their agents is at work here. Perhaps more will soon follow." Slaydo explained.

The hovercraft next came ashore on a beach that had hundreds of boxes piled up on it. Some were unmarked, their contents unknown but others clearly indicated that they held more of the luxury goods that

Kyle had seen the black marketeers selling near the camp. There were other hovercraft and skiffs present as well, suggesting that this was a central location for the operation used to store the goods that would then be loaded onto the vehicles to be taken to the camps to be traded. But from his hiding place Kyle could not see any sign of a larger transport that had been used to deliver the goods here, nor could he see any submersible vehicles that he could use to take him to the Runn estate.

Disembarking from the vehicle Kyle darted from one stack of crates to another, making use of the Force to distract any of the black marketeers who looked as if they might notice him. Along the way he scooped up a box of ration bars and then ran inland, taking cover amongst some rocks before turning to watch the black marketeers.

"Are you okay?" Sial asked when she saw Hiran steadying himself against the washbasin in the bathroom and staring at his reflection in the mirror, "Sorry, dumb question."

"No it's okay." Hiran replied and he turned around, "I mean I guess at least I'm not the only one of my family left."

"There's some guy to see you." Sial said, "He's downstairs with Nissel."

"Okay I'm on my way." Hiran said and he followed Sial down to the lounge where Nissel waited with the visitor, a male vultan with a mass of twisted cartilage covering his head where a human's hair would be. Hiran recognised the man straight away, he worked for Drud Legal the Drud family's law firm.

"Mister Drud." the vultan said, "I'd like to start by telling you how everyone is sorry for your loss."

Worried about their jobs. Hiran thought, knowing how his father had done everything he could to encourage his employees to put the company before everything else, "But I need to give you this as soon as possible." and he tapped his hand on a portable computer on the table in front of him, "This will give you full access to the company system."

"Me?" Hiran replied, "But there are dozens of more experienced lawyers in the company."

"But none of them are Druds and this is Drud Legal." the vultan told him, "Your father's instructions were quite clear. In the event of his death you become the new owner."

"You can do this Hiran." Nissel said.

"I guess so." Hiran replied as he slid the computer across the table and opened it up, the machine turning on as soon as he did, "I mean at least I'll have the other lawyers to advise me and I'm not taking over the entire family or anything."

"Why not?" Sial asked from behind him.

"Because my uncle Josh is the older brother anyway." Hiran reminded her, "My dad may have done most of the day to day running of the family but Uncle Josh was always in charge. So long as he's around I can focus on running the company." then he looked at the vultan, "Thanks." he said, "That will be all. I know where to look if I need anything more from you."

"Of course Mister Drud." the vultan responded as he got to his feet, "And once again I'd just like to wish you my deepest condolences on your loss."

Hiran began to look through the computer even as the vultan was still being shown out and he quickly saw that his father had divided the system up so that files for each of the Founding Families were kept in their own specific directories. Interested to see just how closely he would be working with Nissel, Hiran opened up the directory for her family. Given the poor relationship that had existed between the Drud and Fayl families for many years there were relatively few files in this directory, the first of them relating to the issue of Lorna Fayl's breakdown and Hiran started here. But as soon as he opened this file and began to read it he realised that there was more to Lorna's fate than the mental breakdown and hospitalisation publicly given as the reason for her disappearance. Contained in this file were all the records detailing how Heddren Drud had falsified medical data and identity documents before having her placed in a maximum security facility outside the Narthis Sector and it also contained copies of correspondence between Heddren and senior members of other Families that proved there had been no breakdown at all and the real reason for Lorna's removal was because the other Families felt threatened when she had tried to lure Cal and Lara Udra into her service.

"Hiran is something wrong?" Nissel asked when she saw the look on his face.

"What?" Hiran replied and he tried to determine whether he should tell her the truth or let her continue to believe that her mother had been mentally ill.

"She asked if something was wrong." Sial said, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I have in a way." Hiran replied and he looked at Nissel, "I think you should take a look at this." he said, "It concerns your mom." and he turned the computer so that Nissel could see the screen.

"Welcome to Teras Master Udra." Hyronymous said as Varn stepped off his ship accompanied by his sister Elle and his wife Neari as well as Agent Raser. It had taken more than two days for the Jedi Master to reach the system from Dorn Station in Elle's courier and in that time Hyronymous Kast had been installed as its new administrator, an appointment that owed much to his influence with many of the labour guilds he had paid off as a precaution against his arrest.

"And congratulations on your new position." Varn replied, shaking hands with Hyronymous. Then he looked at Captain De Kuun who was stood just behind Hyronymous, "And what is the military situation?" he asked.

"There have been a handful of scouting missions launched by the Founding Families general." De Kuun answered, "But no signs of any attempt to take back the system by force yet."

"Perhaps if you'd like to come with me we can brief you on the situation fully." Hyronymous suggested.

"Of course. Lead the way." Varn replied.

Hyronymous and Captain De Kuun led the Jedi to a turbolift that took them to the main command section and from there directly into the command centre itself. In here numerous Republic military technicians were busily familiarising themselves with the station systems and determining which were in need of repair following the battle for control of the station. All of this was being done under the watchful eye of Colonel Jeck while clustered around the main holographic display in the centre of the room were the Jedi that had taken part in the assault.

"Hi mom. Hi dad." Lara called out when she saw her parents enter the room, "Hi aunt Elle."

Whillam frowned briefly at such informality but then relaxed.

"Good morning master." he said to Varn.

"Good morning Jedi Antress." Varn replied while Neri went to embrace Lara, "Now what is our status?"

"All of the system's facilities are secure." Whillam answered, adjusting the display to show a diagram of the system that showed the positions of each outpost and space station, all of them marked with the Republic emblem and a note of what military forces were deployed there.

"We look spread pretty thin." Varn commented.

"We are." Colonel Jeck agreed, "Though many of the workers aboard this station have proven supportive of our invasion that has not been the case everywhere."

"I made sure my employees were loyal." Hyronymous commented, "Unfortunately I couldn't do anything about the wider population. However, I do have some of my people working right now to try and convince the crews of other stations to join with us."

"In the mean time I've got garrisons at every space station and outpost just to keep them from being sabotaged." Colonel Jeck added.

"And Lieutenant Commander Veers is patrolling the area that intruders from Aurek Station are most likely to arrive in." Captain De Kuun added, "But our forces are insufficient at present to even consider pressing on towards Crassis Major."

*Crassis Major is not the problem. The Sith is.*

"We shouldn't be bothering with Crassis Major." Cal said following Master Karas' message, "We need to focus on Delvad. Take out the Sith storehouse and we can deal with the Founding Families at our leisure. But if they get there first they'll gain control of everything it contains. Including whatever's left of the droid army."

"But if we can't get through the defences of Aurek Station, what hope do we have against a Sith fleet?" Elle asked.

"What's the status of the reinforcements that the Republic is supposed to be sending us?" Neri asked.

"The deployment is being disputed in the senate." Captain De Kuun replied, "It may be possible to divert a squadron of smaller vessels but the capital ships we really need are not coming any time soon."

"So we're still on our own then." Whillam said.

"It looks that way." Colonel Jeck agreed, "The Founding Families still have some friends in the senate it seems."

"More than us." Lara muttered.

Varn looked at Cal.

"So do you have a way for us to get past the Sith fleet surrounding Delvad?" he asked.

"I may have." Seth suddenly announced as he appeared in the doorway of the command centre, holding up a mem-stick, "I spotted a ship fly right through that blockade without the Sith even blinking." he went on as he walked up to the central display unit and plugged in the mem-stick. Immediately the display changed to show a hologram of Delvad with more than a hundred Sith vessels orbiting it around the equator from where they could react to any attempt to approach it, "Now watch this." Seth added as a new ship appeared in the hologram, heading towards the planet, "This is where it signals the Sith." Seth said, "I have it recorded as well as the response." and then the ship proceeded to fly through the blockade unmolested.

"How is that possible?" Rich asked.

"Was the ship controlled by droids?" Pedrus suggested.

"That's one possibility." Varn said, "But there is another."

"The Sith have allies." Elle commented.

"Exactly." Varn replied.

"Where did that ship go?" Cal asked.

"To one of the artificial islands." Seth replied.

"Could someone have bought off the Sith?" Hyronymous asked.

"The Sith cannot be bribed or blackmailed." Whillam replied.

"At least not as far as we know." Varn added, "If they decide that you have something they want they tend to just take it."

"Can someone show me which repulsorlift island the ship landed at?" Cal asked.

"Sure, I think so." Seth answered and he adjusted the display. Given the distance from which the images had been recorded the view of the island was somewhat blurred but there was enough detail for both Cal and

Lara to identify it.

"Oh no." Lara said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"About what?" Neari asked.

"We've been to that island mom." Cal told her, "While we were on the run. We thought that its owner may be able to help us clear our name using his underworld contacts."

"Who does it belong to?" Varn asked.

"Uggaro the Hutt." Cal replied.

"So the Sith has done a deal with a hutt crime lord." Whillam said, "But why?"

"Information." Jule said, "Uggaro's got people all over the sector. For every one my agents uncovered and removed from the picture another two sprang up it seemed."

"That makes sense." Cal said, "That Sith can't know what's going on anywhere that he doesn't have droids so a network of underworld thugs could tell him a lot."

"Like the fact that we've liberated Teras." Elle said.

"Exactly." Lara replied, "The Sith probably knows all about it by now."

"This gives us an opportunity though." Cal said.

"How Jedi Udra?" Whillam asked and Cal turned towards Jule.

"Agent Raser, do you still have all your files on Uggaro the Hutt's criminal enterprise?"

"It's all still at Dorn Station." Jule told him, "But yes, I took everything from my office when we evacuated Aurek Station, including case notes."

"Then surely there were beings that you thought were part of Uggaro's operation but didn't have enough evidence to move against." Cal said and Jule smiled.

"You're thinking you could use them to get through the blockade?" she asked.

"If we could gain control of one of their ships then a small force could perhaps penetrate it." Colonel Jeck said.

"Jedi I suppose?" Captain De Kuun added.

"We do it just like we did here at Teras." Cal said, "Sneak a few of us through the blockade and see if we can do anything to deal with the droids."

"And if you can't?" Varn asked.

"Then we keep doing the same, bringing in a few jedi at a time until we're strong enough to take the storehouse." Cal responded.

"It sounds risky." Neari said, "The Sith may sense your presence."

"The Sith is long dead mom." Lara said, "All that's left is a holocron. It can't manipulate the Force."

"I thought Charity Crassis described the hologram making use of Force lightning." Pedrus pointed out.

"Probably just channelling conventional high voltage electrical energy through the holographic emitters." Whillam said.

"It belongs to the hutt." the technician told Natalay as he handed her a datapad that contained his full report on both the ship observed running the Sith blockade and the transmissions it exchanged with the Sith vessels, "We've seen the ship several times before."

"Tell me more about the hutt presence in the sector." Natalay said.

"It was confirmed only recently." the technician replied, "Uggaro the Hutt is based on Delvad on one of the artificial islands."

"Not surprising." Natalay replied as she studied the report at the same time as she listened to the technician, "Obviously the Sith is making use of the hutt's network of agents. This makes him more dangerous. Until now we thought he wasn't able to monitor our activities outside the planets under his control. Obviously we were wrong."

"Shall I ask our draw up a list of suspected members of Uggaro's organisation for termination?" the technician asked.

"Yes." Natalay replied before an idea occurred to her, "No, wait. Have them draw up the list of suspected personnel and their bases of operation but do nothing further for now. This may just provide us with the opportunity we've been looking for."

The reptilian cha'a moved quickly and quietly through the darkened corridors of the space station until he reached the data terminal he was looking for and plugged his datapad into it. From this point he was able to access a wide range of official station records but the only ones that interested him on this occasion were those relating to the stocks of fuel cells in the hangars. From this he could tell whether the Republic was planning a major operation, with a lower level of reserves indicating that they had been plundered to provide extra fuel for warships. Then the sound of something falling to the floor behind him made the cha'a turn and he saw Lara attempting to creep up on him.

"Found what you're looking for?" she asked as she produced her lightsaber.

"Jedi slime!" the cha'a hissed and from under his jacket he produced a small sphere that he hurled at the

floor between him and Lara. Upon impact the sphere shattered and released a thick yellow foul smelling mist that obscured Lara's view.

"Cal he's on the move!" Lara shouted as she backed away from the noxious mist.

"I've got him." Call called out from an overhead walkway as he ran parallel to the cha'a before leaping from it and landing right in front of the fleeing alien, "Stand down." he ordered, igniting his lightsaber. But the cha'a was ready with a second one of his mist filled spheres and he just crushed this one with his bare hand before changing direction and leaving Cal coughing as he retreated from the cloud.

Familiar with this section of the station, the cha'a knew every way in and out as well as dead ends to be avoided. However, this did not stop him from using a third sphere to create a cloud of mist that blocked off a passageway that led to a dead end in the hope that the Jedi he knew would be looking for a way around the first two would assume he had gone down there when in fact he was heading in a different direction altogether. Veering towards the station's hull the cha'a entered a corridor lined with viewports that looked out into space and he hurried down it, hoping to reach the emergency air lock not far ahead. Here he knew that he could obtain a vacuum suit that would allow him to leave the station and re-enter it through another air lock while the Jedi continued to hunt for him here. But as soon as he opened the door at the far end of the corridor he felt a hand suddenly grab hold of him and drag him aside before he was pushed up against the wall.

"Leaving so soon?" Elle Udra asked as she held her lightsaber close to his throat though it remained inactive. For a moment the cha'a considered the possibility of fighting Elle off given his advantage in size and apparent strength but then he became aware of more Jedi as Pedrus emerged from his nearby hiding place and both Cal and Lara came running down the corridor behind him.

"You got him then." Cal said, breathing heavily.

"Easy." Elle replied, "Don't know what your problem was."

"Hissk T'Ror." Cal said out loud to the cha'a, "You are under arrest for espionage and assault against Republic officers. I'd read you your rights but the amount of times you've already been arrested makes me think you know them by heart already."

The four Jedi escorted Hissk to the nearest security section, now controlled by Jule Raser's sector rangers backed up by a small force of marines from the *Perseverance*.

"Give me my lawyer." he hissed as he was made to sit in the interrogation room.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible Mister T'Ror." Cal replied, "You see we're in a state of war here and you have been caught trying to unlawfully access information of use to the enemy. Now if you were a soldier in uniform then you could at least claim to be a prisoner of war. But since you're not that means you are a spy and I can have you summarily shot."

"But let me guess, you're not going to." Hissk responded in a manner that made Cal think he would have been snarling had his species been capable of the expression.

"He must have Jedi senses." Cal said, looking around at where Elle, Lara and Pedrus waited behind him.

"Can you guess what number I'm thinking of?" Lara asked and the cha'a let out a low growl.

"We know you're working with the Sith." Cal said suddenly, turning back towards Hissk and leaning close to him but the cha'a just stared at him blankly.

Do not forget he serves the Hutts. He may not know where his master sends the information he obtains.

"Uggaro takes what you find and gives it to the Sith lord on Delvad." Cal added.

"Nice theory. Try proving it." Hissk said,

"We don't need to." Elle commented, "We found you accessing the computer and we have your datapad to prove it. That's enough to have you shot right there."

"Unless you help us get through the blockade around Delvad." Cal replied.

"I do that I'm dead." Hissk said.

"We'll protect you." Lara told him.

"How? The Hutts are everywhere. Even your Sith bogeymen don't have the reach they do." Hissk replied,

"You'll get nothing from me so you may as well shoot me now."

"Big mistake." Cal said, "We were just being nice. One way or another you'll tell us how to get through that blockade." and then he reached out through the Force, concentrating on the cha'a's thoughts, "You will tell me how to get past the blockade." he said.

The courier bowed as she entered Uggaro's throne room.

"What have you brought me?" Uggaro asked from the ornate platform he rested on.

"A messenger brought this mighty Uggaro." the woman replied, holding out a handheld holographic projector, "It is keyed to Hutt DNA."

"Intended for you only." Saren commented.

"Do you think it's a trap?" Uggaro replied.

"Has the device been scanned?" Saren asked the messenger.

"It has. It contains no explosives or toxins." she answered and Saren walked up to her and took the projector

from her.

“Stay here.” she said, wanting the messenger close at hand just in case she had been lying about it being safe. Then she passed the device to Uggaro and the instant he took hold of it there was a humming sound that made everyone in the room tense up. However, the sound was merely the internal power cell switching on and on top of the small disk shaped device a hologram of a human female appeared.

“Mighty Uggaro, my name is Kayza Drud and I wish to meet with a representative of your powerful organisation to discuss an arrangement that will be mutually beneficial. As a member of one of the Founding Families I have been authorised by the others to negotiate with you on their behalf as well and you may rest assured that they will honour any deal we make. Details of how to reply to this invitation are included on a data drive that was enabled as soon as you held this device in your hand. I look forward to hearing your response soon mighty Uggaro.”

The hologram then faded away and Uggaro looked at Saren.

“What would the Founding Families want with me?” he asked.

“I don't know.” Saren replied, “But if they think I'll agree to anything they offer after the way they treated me in the past then they are sadly mistaken.”

“Then I should refuse their offer.” Uggaro said.

“Wait.” Saren said just as Uggaro was turning back towards the messenger and she smiled, “There may be some value in meeting with Kayza Drud to find out what the Founding Families are up to. I'm sure Lord Kreeyn would be pleased to hear about it, whatever it is.”

“Then we should inform our agent on Crassis Major to-” Uggaro began.

“No.” Saren said in an interruption that made Uggaro's guards tighten their grips on their weapons, half expecting him to order her execution for doing so, “I think that I ought to go to Crassis Major myself to hear what this Drud woman has to say.”

## 20.

The black marketeers had started to notice the supplies that Kyle stole were going missing but they assumed that it was some sort of local scavenger rather than someone spying on them. To help reinforce this belief Kyle himself had left a few pieces of food or even full ration bars still in their wrappers in places he could tell were frequented by some of the animals that live on the island so that when the black marketeers found the remains it matched their assumptions and they spent no time in trying to find him. He had spent several days watching them and listening to their conversations but so far he had gained no useful information about their operation. Each day some of the hovercraft and skiffs had left laden with supplies and returned carrying items of value but there had been no other contact with the outside world and Kyle was starting to wonder whether this group was operating alone. Abducting one of the black marketeers and interrogating him would get Kyle the information he needed but the former Jedi knew that it would also risk exposing his presence here and he was not ready for that to happen yet.

Then at long last he saw another vehicle, a bulky shuttle fly low over the ocean towards the island before landing on the beach and the black marketeers began to gather around, carrying with them the boxes filled with the valuables that they had taken in payment for what they sold. When the shuttle's access ramp lowered the crew immediately began to unload more supplies to be sold while the black marketeers Kyle had been observing handed over their loot. It was obvious to Kyle that this shuttle originated wherever the goods were coming from and that meant a location likely to have far more resources available. The shuttle was a class that lacked a hyperdrive, meaning that it had to come from within the system and given the lack of any other habitable planets that meant it had come from somewhere else on Delvad.

Kyle breathed deeply, allowed the Dark Side to flow around him and cloak him in its power as he emerged from his hiding place. He kept to the shadows where his concealment would be most effective as he made his way towards the shuttle and at the last minute he used the Force to hurl a rock into some bushes where he knew a cluster of local lifeforms nested. The impact of the rock panicked the creatures and they scattered, producing a series of shrill squawks that diverted the attention of everyone close to the access ramp long enough for Kyle to leap up onto it and dart inside before he could be seen. From there he located a quiet spot where he could conceal himself and waited for the ship to take off again.

The take off occurred soon after, just as soon as the new shipment of goods to be sold had been unloaded. There were still numerous crates in the hold of the shuttle though and Kyle guessed that it was supporting more than one group of black marketeers. With more stops to make there would be a delay before the shuttle returned to its base but Kyle decided not to interfere with its mission just in case it brought attention to him. He could feel himself getting closer to his goal of reaching the Sith storehouse and despite his eagerness to take control of it he could afford to wait a short while longer yet.

The shuttle made two more stops at which crates were unloaded and valuables brought aboard. After this second stop the hold was empty of cargo to be unloaded and Kyle knew that the next stop would be wherever the shuttle's base of operations was located. Given his knowledge of Delvad from his years representing the Jedi Order in the Narthis Sector, Kyle expected this base to be located on another of the islands scattered about the planet. Even though it had been a playground for the rich and famous there had been some industrial facilities and underworld hideouts that made use of the many scattered islands that would offer useful hiding places to the leaders of the black market operation. So when the shuttle instead touched down on a landing pad that was located on one of the many artificial islands that hovered above the ocean on repulsorlift fields Kyle was genuinely surprised. These made obvious targets and he had assumed that all of them had been overrun by the rampaging war droids. However, now that he found himself standing on one he was faced with the fact that there was more going on here on Delvad than he had realised.

"How much did you get?" Kyle heard someone ask on the landing platform.

"Not as much as last time, but the return compared with what's been sold is about the same." someone replied and Kyle recognised the voice as the person who appeared to have been in command of the shuttle crew.

"Better make it sound more convincing than that for the boss." the first voice said, "The boss wants to see you now and he's not in a good mood. The Founding Families have requested a meeting and he thinks they're up to something."

Kyle's eyes widened when he heard this. He knew that his enemies would be looking for a way to retake the storehouse but had expected them to make a direct military assault. If they were going to try and cut a deal with the black marketeers themselves then not only were they closer to getting into the storehouse than he had thought but they also seemed to know more about what was going on on Delvad than Kyle did. Quickly he emerged from his hiding place and made his way to the access ramp. He could sense a pair of guards on the landing platform below and he calmly walked down the ramp towards them, keeping one hand on his lightsaber and another on his pulse wave blaster just in case either weapon was needed.

The guards were positioned either side of the large semicircular door that led into the residence and they stared at Kyle as he approached them.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded as both activated the long handled vibroaxes they were armed with and Kyle heard the humming of the quivering blades.

"I'm one of the crew." Kyle replied, waving his hand as he pushed the suggestion into the minds of the guards. Then he added, "You've seen me here before."

"I've seen him here before." the other guard said, "He's one of the crew."

"Better get inside then." the first guard told Kyle, "The boss will want you ready for the next run soon."

Entering the residence, Kyle lifted his hood over his head to cover his features. In his experience there were plenty of people who visited places such as this who would not wish to be recognised by everyone who happened to walk past them in a hallway and so it seemed easier to just hide his features than have to continually rely on distraction to make certain that no one realised he was not supposed to be there.

A submersible vehicle of the type Kyle sought would undoubtedly be kept on one of the lower levels of the residence, either on the very bottom for deployment by being dropped into the ocean or around the edge of the artificial island to be deployed using either a crane or tractor beam. However, simply stealing such a vehicle was risky. If the island was equipped with any defences or better yet combat capable watercraft then Kyle would most likely be sunk before getting a few kilometres away in a stolen submersible. Instead the best course of action was to find out as much as possible about the island and its owner as he could, after which he could determine the best way to get his hands on a submersible. There was also the added bonus that Kyle could perhaps find out just how close the Founding Families were to gaining access to the storehouse as well.

With no map available to him Kyle went by the standard of decoration to determine which way he such go in his quest to find the owner of the island. Service areas that were meant only for menial staff were sparsely decorated whereas those places where the owner would frequent were far more luxurious, so providing Kyle stuck to these sections he could not go far wrong. One thing that Kyle noticed as he made his way through the hallways of the residence was the scale of it all. Hallways, doorways and chambers in the more opulent areas were noticeably larger than those meant for the staff and although this could have been a matter of personal taste, with a humanoid crime lord preferring such designs, it suggested that whoever was in charge here was significantly larger than an ordinary human and this had significant ramifications for Kyle. If this was the home of a hutt crime lord then he could not rely on his ability to use the Force to manipulate him into giving Kyle what he wanted.

From ahead he heard the sound of music and he made his way around a corner towards it. There was a large archway set into the wall along one side of the hallway he now found himself in and either side of the arch stood a pig-like gamorrean clutching a primitive but none the less dangerous looking axe. Each also had a heavy slug thrower pistol holstered on their hips but Kyle knew that they would be unlikely to draw the ranged weapons, preferring to rely on their axes in combat. Kyle walked down the hallway towards the arch, ignoring the two guards and as he neared it he glanced through the archway. The first thing he saw was a troop of near-naked humanoid females dancing while the crowd in the room watched. But then as he drew level with the arch he saw what he had feared, at the far end of the room on a raised platform lay a hutt. But Kyle was not prepared to give up yet and he slipped into the room, taking advantage of the fact that the majority of its occupants, including the slug-like hutt crime lord was too focused on the dancers to pay any attention to a solitary humanoid entering the room and making his way to the back of the crowd. Taking a drink from a tray being carried around by a serving slave, Kyle found a spot behind a supporting column from where the hutt could not see him and like almost everyone else in the room he turned around to watch the dancers, waiting to see what he could learn.

"I don't know." Cal said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

The long range shuttle owned by the cha'a looked as if it was in need of a significant amount of maintenance but Seth assured both Cal and Lara that it was flyable.

"Maybe that's because we're about to fly into enemy territory in a ship with no weapons or combat shields to face an army of war droids." Lara replied. Then she looked at Seth, "Are you sure we can't just make the *Bright Hope's* transponder look like the one from this hunk of junk?" she asked him.

"Oh you could fake the registration ID but there's no way that you could fool a visual scan and believe me you will be getting close enough to those Sith ships for them to get a good look at you."

"So we have to spend the best part of a day in that." Lara commented, frowning as she looked back at the dilapidated shuttle.

"Two." Cal told her.

"Two!" Lara exclaimed, "What, are we stopping off for bantha burgers on the way?"

"No but given the lack of speed, firepower or shield protection I want to avoid even the outer edge of the Crassis system. We just can't take the chance on running into a patrol. So we'll go around past Dust instead." Cal explained.

"I don't see how this can get any worse." Lara said.  
"It's my turn for the grenade launcher by the way." Cal commented.  
"Okay. Now it's worse." Lara responded before she noticed their parents walking across the docking bay towards them, "Mom and dad are here." she whispered and both she and Cal straightened up.  
"Too late. We saw you slouching." Neri called out.  
"Most unjedilike posture." Varn added. Then he looked at the shuttle for himself before turning to Seth, "You are certain this is safe?" he asked.  
"It may lose one or two bits along the way but it'll get Cal and Lara to Delvad in one piece." Seth answered.  
"Good, because I am trusting my offspring to your assessment." Varn said.  
"Are you two sure about doing this?" Neri asked, looking at her children.  
"Someone's got to go and keep Cal out of trouble mom." Lara replied.  
"More like I'll be protecting you." Cal said.  
"Yeah right." Lara said sarcastically, "Without me there to remind you of our mission you'll just go running off to the Sith storehouse to try and rescue Gayal."  
"She's alive." Cal replied, "I can feel it."  
"Even if she is," Varn said sternly, "you must consider the fact that to survive for any length of time in the stronghold of a Sith means she may have been turned to the Dark Side."  
"I can save her." Cal replied, "I'm certain of it."  
"Your sister is correct." Varn said and Lara's eyes widened and she smiled in surprise, "There is a risk that you will abandon your mission in favour of trying to rescue Gayal."  
"The odds are far better that I'll be able to save her with you watching my back." Cal told his father, "Believe me I'm in no hurry to throw away my life for nothing."  
"What about mine?" Lara asked but both Cal and their father ignored her comment.  
"In that case I shall just say good luck and may the Force be with you." Varn said.

Saren's scout ship was able to reach the Crassis system from Delvad in just a few hours. Dropping out of hyperspace close to the newly settled and lightly defended world of Crassis Minor she landed there to rendezvous with some of her agents and swapped her scout for a sublight shuttle that was able to slip through the screen of warships around neighbouring Crassis Major without raising any suspicions that she had come from Sith controlled territory. Once on Crassis Major it was then simple enough for her to head for the safe house that had become known to the Founding Families and wait for Kayza Drud to arrive. Like many of the safe houses operated by Saren's organisation the one where she waited used an apparently ordinary business as a front to cover the coming and going of a wide range of beings. This particular one masqueraded as a supplier of laboratory animals that had proven useful for many years when needing to move contraband items. There were very few customs officials willing to open a container marked 'DANGEROUS SPECIMENS' while small items could even be hidden inside the animals themselves. Saren regretted having to abandon this front but now that the Founding Families were aware of its true nature she could not risk keeping it running. However, that was a matter that could wait until the meeting with Kayza Drud was over.

Kayza arrived under cover of darkness, an unmarked speeder with blacked out windows arriving at the main gates and being waved through by the guard who had been told to expect her. As the speeder drove up to the building the guard called ahead to inform his superiors not only that Kayza was on her way but also to provide details of the security arrangements he had been able to detect. In this case these consisted of additional armour plating on the speeder and a single armed bodyguard. Clearly Kayza did not expect any serious trouble despite the fact that she was walking into a building filled with armed criminals.

Kayza herself was dressed as if she was about to attend a function attended by members of high society in a dress that cost more than some families would earn in a year and jewellery that sparkled brightly in the lights mounted outside the building.

"Raise your hands." one of the group of thugs that waited outside the building for her said. He was a nikto, one of the species that had been effectively enslaved by the hutt's since before the dawn of the Republic more than twenty thousand years earlier, "I need to search you."

"I'm not armed." Kayza replied and then looking at her bodyguard she added, "And he can remain here if you wish."

"Miss Shill's orders were-" the bodyguard began but Kayza cut him off.

"This is my business." she said, "If they don't want you inside then you stay out here."

"Very well Miss Drud." he replied.

"I still need to search you." the nikto said and Kayza sighed and raised her hands.

"Go ahead." she replied.

The nikto stepped closer and began to move his hands over her. Kayza frowned as he applied particular pressure in more intimate areas, guessing that he had been ordered to do so to see how she would react while whoever she was supposed to meet watched the feed from the security droid that hovered nearby.

"She's clean." the nikto said as he stepped back and the other thugs parted to allow her access to the door, "Go straight in. You are expected." he told her.

Kayza nodded and walked into the building. Inside she immediately found herself surrounded by cages filled with various animals. Most of them were common enough but there were a handful of more obscure and even unidentifiable species present as well. There was no one around to tell Kayza where she should go but instead a path through the building had been marked out by doors being left open while others remained sealed. This path led her down a set of stairs behind a doorway that looked as if it would be almost invisible when closed and into a basement level that had only minimal lighting. Advancing along the corridor at the bottom of these stairs Kayza heard a sudden cackling laughter and the lights were turned up to reveal the individual she would be negotiating with.

Wearing a dark bodyglove that in terms of practicality versus luxury was the polar opposite of the dress Kayza wore, Saren sat on a large chair positioned at the far end of the room she found herself in while more cages intended for transporting lined the walls either side of the room. Some of these were empty while others contained more laboratory specimens and one particularly large enclosure held a group of kowikian monkey lizards that glared at her through the bars and laughed. There were more guards either side of Saren and Kayza also became aware of yet more emerging from hiding behind her, leaving her surrounded. "We are delighted that you could join us." Saren said as she rose to her feet, "Now perhaps you can tell me what the mighty Founding Families want with a businessman like my employer Uggaro."

"We know that your master has made a deal with the Sith that now controls Delvad." Kayza said.

"The Sith?" Saren responded, "But the Sith are extinct. The Jedi hunted the last of them down a thousand years ago. All that remain now are few deluded fools who attempt to bring back their old religion."

Kayza smiled.

"Indeed. But nevertheless Delvad is now controlled by Sith forces and your master has managed to survive." she said.

"A good businessman can find opportunity everywhere." Saren said.

"And it is business that I wish to discuss with you tonight." Kayza replied, "Very lucrative business."

"Go on, I'm listening." Saren told her, sitting back down and reaching out for a drink that was resting on a table beside her.

"We know that your master has made a deal with the Sith." Kayza repeated and Saren frowned.

"Yes, you've said that already." she said before taking another sip of her drink, "Get to the deal you want to make."

"As part of your master's deal with the Sith his ships are able to move through the fleet orbiting Delvad unmolested." Kayza said, "The Founding Families would like to book passage on these ships for some of their employees."

"Mercenaries you mean? Mandalorians and the glorified thugs of Shill Security." Saren responded, "You want the great Uggaro to turn on his business partner and help you overthrow him."

"I think we both know that Uggaro is no partner to the Sith. When he has outlived his usefulness he and you will be disposed of." Kayza said.

"And how is that any different from how you treat people?" Saren asked.

"We offer you ten million credits for-" Kayza began before Saren scowled and put down her drink as she got back to her feet and began to walk towards Kayza.

"I worked for the Crassis family." she hissed, "I gave them years of loyal service until Salla Crassis decided to fire me. I lost my employment as well as my home. Then to add insult to injury the Crassis family accused me of stealing from them and left me unable to find any other work. Until Uggaro found me a position that was." now standing right in front of Kayza, Saren came to a halt and glared into her eyes, "Hyperspace itself will freeze before I work for any of you again."

"I can see you are upset at your treatment." Kayza said, now starting to be concerned about being surrounded by armed criminals while her only bodyguard remained outside. For all she knew his throat had been slit the moment she entered the building, "However, you are throwing away a fortune here."

"I don't think so." Saren replied, grinning, "How much would your family pay to get you back do you think?"

"Nothing." Kayza answered, "But they would hunt you to the end of the galaxy to take revenge. Your crude threats are meaningless and you are naïve to think otherwise."

"Naïve? My you do have a way with words don't you Miss Drud? That's something we're going to have to do something about." Saren said and she nodded at one of her guards. Immediately he and a second guard leapt forwards and grabbed Kayza by her arms before forcing her to her knees.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. Then staring at Saren she added, "You'll pay for this."

"Actually I'm rather hoping that someone will pay for you." Saren replied as she retreated away to allow more of her men to close with Kayza, "But I don't think they'll pay as much for a slave who answers back so regularly."

"What are you-" Kayza began before guard took hold of her head from behind with both hands and gripped her jaw tightly to hold her mouth open as he tilted her head back. Seeing another guard step forwards in front

of her holding a pair of pliers and a knife Kayza began to struggle but it was to no avail as the pliers were inserted into her mouth to grab hold of her tongue and stretch it out before the knife came down and her mouth suddenly filled with blood while the caged kowikian monkey lizards cackled once more. The guard released his grip on Kayza's head at this point and it fell forwards as she spluttered and blood splashed down her front and onto the floor. Then she watched in horror as the guard who had just cut out her tongue walked over to the cage containing the kowikian monkey lizards and tossed the severed lump of flesh through the bars, provoking the creatures into scrabbling for it and knocking one another out of the way until the strongest grabbed hold of the tongue and gobbled it down.

"Get her on her feet." Saren ordered and the guards holding Kayza lifted her back up as their employer walked forwards again, drawing a stiletto from a sheath built into her bodyglove, "I suppose you still think that someone will come rushing to your rescue don't you?" she said to Kayza as she began to cut at her dress, slicing through it at the shoulders and down the front so that she could rip it away before rubbing the remains of the already bloodstained garment in Kayza's face so that even more blood was smeared across it, "Well I'm afraid that's just not going to happen." she added, tossing the dress to one of the guards behind Kayza, "Go tell her driver that she angered me and is dead. Then send him away." she said.

"What do we do with her?" one of the guards holding Kayza then asked and Saren turned towards the cage holding the kowikian monkey lizards.

"Put her in there." she said.

Kayza shook her head furiously and screamed as she was dragged over to the cage. The monkey lizards retreated towards the back and watched as the guards opened it and dragged Kayza inside, using binders to secure her wrists to the top of the cage and her ankles to the bottom. Then leaving her there with her arms and legs spread apart the guards exited the cage and locked it again. Seeing that the guards were gone the kowikian monkey lizards moved forwards again to investigate their new cellmate and Kayza tried in vain to move away as they began to climb over her, tugging at her hair and prodding her with their clawed hands. "You know I don't think I will sell you after all." Saren said to Kayza as she watched from outside the cage, "I think you'd look good on my wall, frozen in carbonite. You know some people say that people frozen in carbonite remain conscious throughout. They're unable to see, hear or speak, not that that's a problem for you now, but still aware of the passage of time. What do you think?"

## 21.

"They disabled all of my man's communications." Natalay said as she addressed the heads of the other Founding Families, their holograms giving the appearance of them sitting in a row in front of her in the office. On the desk in front of her lay Kayza's ruined dress, now sealed inside a plastic bag, "And by the time he was able to alert us to what happened the hutt's people had evacuated the building and set it alight."

"So my sister's body was not recovered?" Josh asked. Natalay had broken the news of the death of his remaining sibling privately before the conference had begun but had spared him some of the details. "I'm afraid not." she replied.

"So where does this leave us?" Sial asked, looking at the others in turn, "How do we get through the blockade?"

"We can't." Trent replied, "We don't have enough ships to defend the sector as well as overwhelming the Sith fleet."

"It is my belief that we shouldn't try." Natalay said and the others stared at her.

"You mean just give up?" Josh said, "After three hundred years and all the loses we've suffered? If we stop now then every sacrifice was for nothing and my sister died in vain."

"I mean we forget about defending the sector." Natalay said.

"The Republic will overrun it." Trent said.

"Not just yet they won't. They don't have the ships." Erill pointed out.

"Neither do we." Sial commented.

"Once we have the contents of the Sith library what does the rest of the sector matter?" Natalay asked, "Leave it."

"What are you saying?" Erill asked.

"I'm saying that we should gather together every ship we can lay our hands on and launch an all out attack on Delvad. Force the Sith fleet to engage us as close to the planet as we can and while their attention is focused on us we send a ship, just one ship around the other side of the planet where it can land without being intercepted. The team that ship carries can then hook up with Han's group and assault the library. With the Sith destroyed we can take control of the war droids once more and hold the planet just long enough for us to empty the library vaults and leave. I mean leave the sector entirely, go out beyond the borders of the Republic and set ourselves up out there. By the time the jedi find us we'll have access to the knowledge of the ancient Sith."

For a short time there was silence as the other Family heads considered this.

"There's nothing left here for me." Sial said, the first to break the silence, "I say we go."

"Such certainty from one so young and only recently inheriting her position." Trent commented. Then he sighed, "But I must agree with Miss Karn. The Narthis sector is lost to us. Better to start over somewhere else."

"I agree as well." Josh added, "It's only a matter of time before the Sith starts to move against us and we can't hope to fight him and the Republic at the same time. But one swift strike could end this conflict in our favour."

"And what about you?" Natalay asked, looking at Nissel who had not spoken so far in this meeting, "You look as if all this troubles you."

"Are you intending to just abandon my mother in that asylum you sent her to when she became inconvenient?" Nissel asked in return and Erill, Josh and Trent exchanged nervous glances.

"Your mother was not just inconvenient she was a danger to us." Erill said eventually, "We had two choices, imprison her or kill her. This way we have always had the option of releasing her when she can no longer threaten our position."

"Then that's what I want." Nissel said, "I'll go along with this plan just as long as my mother comes with us."

"And if she refuses to do so?" Trent asked, "She may not want to come with us."

"Then we'll go our separate ways." Nissel answered, "You can have everything my family has related to the Sith and we'll find somewhere else to settle down where we won't be found."

"I can live with that." Trent said.

"As can I." Josh added.

"That just leaves you Erill." Natalay said.

"Oh I agree to the plan." Erill answered, "But Salla and I will not be there to take part in the attack. We have unfinished business in the Teras system."

"Teras?" Sial asked, "But the Republic controls it now."

"Yes and that is where I can find my treacherous former daughter Charity." Erill said, "I promised Salla that I would make Charity pay for killing Luke and I am a man of my word. While you attack Delvad I shall take a force to Teras to locate Charity and exact my vengeance."

"We may need your mandalorians." Natalay said.

"I don't doubt it." Erill said, "You will have Mister Mott, the majority of his men and all but one of their ships. I will require only a handful of men and a single ship."

"It's agreed then." Trent said, "We attack as soon as possible."

Kyle could not help but smile as he watched the hologram being played in the centre of the room. There he saw a life size image of Kayza Drud, stripped to her underwear, bound and caged while a group of kowikian monkey lizards tormented her relentlessly. Despite the image not being in full colour he could still make out the blood smeared around her mouth as evidence of how she had been mutilated and to see one of the Founding Families brought so low amused him greatly.

"I'm taking her to the facility in the Jovan system." Saren announced, "I intend to place her in carbon freeze so she can be hung on the wall."

This caught Kyle's interest as well. When he had taken control of the Sith storehouse and all the treasures it contained it would probably be worth it to add the carbon frozen Kayza Drud to the collection as well.

"And what did she have to say?" Uggaro asked, "While she was in a position to say anything that is."

"The Founding Families are looking for a way through the blockade." Saren's voice answered, Saren herself not being projected as part of the hologram.

"Hardly surprising." Uggaro commented.

"No, but the fact that they know about the deal made with the Sith means they could be coming after more of our people. It will only take one to betray us."

This caught Kyle's attention. The existence of a formal agreement between the Sith lord and Uggaro the Hutt meant that there had to be a line of communication between them and if there was communication there was the potential for face to face contact that Kyle could exploit to get into the Sith storehouse.

"A courier will be heading out to deliver the next update to Kreeyn soon." Uggaro said as if he knew exactly what Kyle wanted to hear, "I will include this information in the packet. Plus a copy of this hologram of course."

This was exactly what Kyle needed, a courier taking information to the Sith storehouse itself would require a submersible vehicle with the added bonus that even if there were anti-submarine defences in place the vehicle would be expected and thus would not be fired upon. Looking at the hologram once more before moving, Kyle slipped out of the throne room and headed down through the structure of the artificial island in search of the submersible hangar.

As expected Kyle found this on the bottommost level of the island, located between the main reactor and one of the primary repulsorlift units that kept the island aloft over the water. The hangar held several submersibles from compact vehicles that had barely enough room for a single occupant up to a large model that was obviously designed to be used by Uggaro himself. Several engineers worked on these vehicles, ensuring that they remained ready use when needed and it was towards one of these individuals, a vultan, that Kyle headed. The man briefly looked up from the engine unit he was servicing before returning to concentrating on his work.

"Which of these vehicles will be used to take the courier to see the Sith." Kyle asked him, not bothering to use the Force just yet.

"That one." the vultan answered, pointing to a mid sized vehicle that looked big enough to hold about a dozen human sized beings.

"And is it ready for launch?" Kyle added.

"It needs fuelling." the vultan told him, "Why? It's not due to be launched for another couple of hours yet."

"No, but Uggaro wanted to be sure that everything will be ready on time. The next courier will be taking news of special interest to the Sith."

"Well you can reassure him that it's in perfect working order. The fuel cells will only take about ten minutes to charge and then it will be ready for launch."

"Excellent. That's all I needed to know." Kyle replied and he waited for the vultan to get back to work before boarding the submersible and concealing himself within it.

"That's a lot of ships." Lara said to Cal as their shuttle came out of hyperspace in the Delvad system.

"And it looks like they've seen us already." Cal replied when he saw a gunship and squadron of fighters break away from the blockade to intercept them, "Now we find out if the transponder code on this ship works."

"Perhaps we should keep our distance." Lara suggested, "That way we can jump back to hyperspace if they realise we're not supposed to be here."

"Just keeping our distance could look suspicious." Cal pointed out.

"So don't look like we're keeping our distance." Lara replied and Cal sighed.

"How about I just fly casual?" he asked.

"Good idea." Lara said.

"I know it was. It's one of-" Cal began but all of a sudden his eyes widened and he gasped, "Gayal." he said.

"Cal." Gayal exclaimed suddenly, breaking off her attack on the droid sparring with her in what had been a gymnasium used by the Runn family. In response the machine leapt forwards and Gayal only just recovered in time to avoid being stabbed through her arm.

"What do you sense?" Slaydo asked, his image unexpectedly appearing to the side of the combat area.

"Nothing master." Gayal lied and the hologram scowled.

"Do not think you can lie to me." he hissed, "You will suffer if you continue. Now tell me what you sensed."

"Someone I used to know." Gayal replied.

"Close by?" Slaydo asked.

"I don't know." Gayal said and Slaydo paused.

"Continue with your training." he commanded, "But if you sense anything else you are to tell me immediately. Do you understand my young apprentice?" and when Gayal nodded the hologram faded away.

"Cal wake up!" Lara yelled, leaning over to pull on the shuttle's control column just in time for it to avoid crashing into the Sith gunship that was now right in front of them.

"What happened?" Cal asked as he regained his senses.

"You called out Gayal's name and then acted like you were frozen in carbonite." Lara said, "If I hadn't been paying attention then who'd have sent the ID signal?"

"And?" Cal asked.

"And they cleared us through the blockade." Lara said, "Though I doubt that included ramming one of their ships. Now are you going to be able to get us down to the surface without crashing into anything?"

"I'll be fine." Cal replied, "I just got a bit of a shock that's all. I felt Gayal."

"Do you think she felt you as well?" Lara asked.

"Maybe. Why?"

"Because if she has turned to the Dark Side then-" Lara began.

"She hasn't. She wouldn't." Cal interrupted.

"Whatever." Lara responded, looking straight forwards through the viewport just as the shuttle started to enter Delvad's atmosphere.

Cal piloted the shuttle down to a low altitude before levelling out and steering it towards the location of the Runn estate. Along the way this course took the Jedi close by one of the artificial islands that had been home to someone whose incredible wealth had been insufficient to save them from the Sith's droid army. But the island was clearly far from deserted and both Cal and Lara could sense a large number of people there, all afraid of whatever was going on.

"Cal look at the power output of that place." Lara said when she checked the shuttle's sensors. Though the instruments were far from being to the same standard as those aboard the *Bright Hope* they were good enough to show that the power being generated on the island was far beyond what was needed to operate its repulsorlift system.

*Think Cal. What sort of technology requires such power?*

"Hold on, I'm changing course." Cal told Lara after Maser Karas' intervention, "Power like that is only needed for starship drives or weapon systems and I doubt that the Sith are fitting improved engines to that island."

Lara smiled.

"Turning the island into a weapons platform? That sounds like the sort of thing we could use to punch a hole in that blockade." she replied.

Alone in his almost totally powered down starsaber-class starfighter Dac watched as more ships dropped out of hyperspace near to Crassis Major. The motley collection of vessels had been growing non-stop for several hours now and Dac could make out the markings of vessels from all of the remaining planetary defence forces in the sector as well as more generic combat capable craft operated by groups such as the Mandalorians or Shill Security.

Gathering so many ships here in the Crassis system meant that the other systems in the sector must be being depleted of their defences so whatever the Founding Families were plotting by doing this had to be important.

Dac's immediate concern was that this fleet was intended to retake Teras and with the number and type of ships he could see arrayed in front of him he could see little hope that the Republic would be able to hold them off with the forces they had at their disposal. But then all of a sudden the fleet began to move out of orbit of Crassis Major and their vector was not taking them in the direction they would be heading if they intended to travel to Teras.

"President on the bridge!"

The bridge crew of Josh's command ship all rose to their feet as he entered the room in the company of Trent and Calleen. Rather than taking his usual seat Josh just walked to the central raised platform where it

was located and rested himself against the waist high safety railing that surrounded it while Calleen sat down in the seat with her husband beside her.

"At ease." Josh called out, then adding, "Status."

"Fleet is on course to jump for Delvad on your command general." the ship's navigator answered, "All ships have checked in and are ready to jump with us."

"Excellent." Josh responded, "Then alert me when we are clear of Crassis Major's gravity well and we will jump on the President's order."

One by one the fleet of warships vanished into hyperspace as Dac watched. As quickly as he could he keyed the course they had followed into his navigation computer and this revealed that there was only one star system in the sector that they could be heading for.

Delvad.

"Stang." Dac exclaimed, "They're going to hit the Sith now." and he brought his fighter's engines up to full power before turning it around and flying away from Crassis Major, no longer concerned about maintaining stealth now that the warships defending the planet had departed. Setting a course for Teras, Dac jumped into hyperspace as soon as he could to take word of what was happening back to the Republic forces.

However, had he waited just ten minutes more he would also have seen another vessel take off from Crassis Major and set a course almost identical to his own as Erill and Salla Crassis set out to hunt down Charity and take their revenge.

The landing pad was deserted when Cal set the shuttle down on it and he and Lara cautiously exited the craft, aiming their rifles towards the doorway leading into the main residence. From here they could hear the sounds of cutting and hammering as something large was being assembled.

"Let's take a closer look." Lara said softly and Cal smiled.

"Are you reading my mind?" he asked.

"Well you make it so easy." Lara responded, "Big print and lots of pictures." then she too smiled, "Though a lot of pictures are disgusting." she added.

The two jedi then crept towards the open door and as they stepped through they suddenly sensed a disturbance in the Force.

*Fear.*

*Anger.*

*Pain.*

"That way." Cal whispered, pointing towards the source of the disturbance and Lara nodded.

Advancing through the hallways of the artificial island the Udras saw that although all of the expensive decorations appeared to still be in place many of them had suffered damage and the pieces had not been cleared away. The sounds of labour, as well as the suffering the jedi could feel through the Force led them towards the centre of the artificial island where they found themselves looking out of a window into a large courtyard at one point a fresh water pool had dominated this but since the war droids had taken over it had been drained and now the pool contained a massive turbolaser that was currently in a horizontal position. All around this Sith war droids watched as living workers as well as several droids of Republic manufacture worked to install what looked like shield generators to protect the weapon they had been forced to install.

"That thing looks like it could knock out a cruiser with one shot." Lara whispered, "Our way to take down the blockade perhaps?"

"It could be." Cal said, "Providing it's operational of course. Plus we need to get rid of all those droids."

"I don't see that many." Lara said, "A dozen at most. We could pick them all off from here."

"There may be more we can't see though." Cal pointed out, "Plus it only takes one to raise the alarm. We need to find a way of taking them all out fast enough that we can start firing that gun before more of them turn up. We'll check out the rest of the island and see what we can find."

When Dac's fighter came out of hyperspace the first thing the young jedi knight saw was that there were far more warships around Teras than there had been when he had left and for a moment he considered the possibility that he had been mistaken and that the fleet he had observed orbiting Crassis Major had instead come here and arrived before him.

"Attention saber-class starfighter. This is the Republic naval vessel *Perseverance*. Identify yourself."

Dac breathed a sigh of relief at the demand from the Republic warship and only then did he notice that the other vessels he could see were also Republic ships. Half a dozen foray-class blockade runners, smaller but faster and more heavily armed than the praetorian-class *Perseverance*, as well as another pair of frigates had arrived while Dac had been gone and a bulky transport ship appeared to be offloading more starfighters to the station itself.

"This is Jedi Knight Dac Yale." Dac responded, "I have urgent news for Jedi Master Udra and Captain De Kuun."

There followed a brief pause before Dac received a reply from the frigate.

"Confirmed Jedi Yale, you are cleared to dock at Teras station. Proceed directly to main command upon your arrival."

"Understood *Perseverance*. Thanks." Dac transmitted as he headed for the station at full speed, weaving in and out between the Republic warships.

Upon landing his starfighter in the main hangar Dac leapt out of the cockpit before the ground crew had even had chance to place a ladder next to his ship and he started to run as soon as his feet hit the deck, heading for the closest turbolift. He halted only while the turbolift was in motion and its doors were shut, breaking into another run as soon as they opened again.

"Master Udral!" he called out as he rushed into the main command centre, "You have to see this." and he held up a mem-stick.

"Calm down Jedi Yale." Whillam said from beside Varn. As well as the two senior Jedi, Seth, Captain De Kuun, Colonel Jeck and Hyronymous were all gathered around the main display console in anticipation of Dac's report, "Tell us what you have found."

"The Founding Families have launched an all out assault on Delvad." Dac replied as he inserted the mem-stick into the console and the holographic display changed to show the fleet he had seen around Crassis Major.

"That's a lot of ships." Seth commented.

"How can they be defending the rest of the sector if they have placed so many together?" Hyronymous asked.

"I don't think they are." Dac replied, "I saw ship after ship appear over the space of several hours from all over the sector. I think they've brought together every combat capable ship they can get hold of."

"I think Jedi Yale is correct." Captain De Kuun added, "The number of ships seen here matches the approximate number we know to be available to all of their defence forces. The only possible explanation for such a gathering of force is to launch an all out attack on either us or the Sith."

"And attacking us would gain them little." Varn said, "On the other hand if they retake Delvad they take the Sith storehouse."

"They jumped in the direction of Delvad right before I headed back here." Dac said.

"But they'll lose a lot of those ships." Seth commented, "That blockade the Sith have put in place is pretty tight. They'd make themselves vulnerable to attack by us."

"Then perhaps the Founding Families are no longer concerned with defending themselves against us." Whillam suggested.

"All they've ever been interested in was the contents of that storehouse." Varn said, "They don't care about the Narthis Sector itself."

"What are you saying?" Captain De Kuun asked.

"He's saying they're willing to sacrifice control of the sector so they can loot that storehouse." Colonel Jeck replied. Then he looked at Varn, "Right general?" and Varn nodded.

"Right." All they need is a few hours to load everything it contains into their ships and they can be gone, let loose on the galaxy with the knowledge of the Sith at their command." he said.

"Then we have to stop them." Whillam said.

"They both outnumber and out gun our forces." Captain De Kuun pointed out.

"But they won't just be fighting us will they?" Seth responded, "They'll be trying to fight their way through the Sith blockade at the same time."

And caught between two separate forces they will be vulnerable." Varn said. Then he rested his hands on the edge of the holographic display and looked around, "It seems our plan has changed. I want every fleet ship and starfighter ready for deployment. All Jedi present are join this mission as well. We will end the threat of the Founding Families today."

"They'll have a significant head start on you." Colonel Jeck pointed out.

"Yes but look at the ships they have." Seth replied, pointing to the holographic display, "They're a lot slower than us. In fact I'd say our slowest ships are three times faster than theirs. Adding to which I can guide us through hyperspace better than their nav computers will be able to manage on their own. I'd say that we won't be more than an hour or two behind them by the time we reach Delvad."

"What about Teras?" Hyronymous asked nervously.

"Don't worry, my men will still be here to protect you Mister Kast." Colonel Jeck replied.

## 22.

As he had already done several times before to get to Uggaro's island, Kyle waited patiently as the submersible was lowered from the hangar and launched to take the courier to the Runn estate. Most of this journey actually took place on the surface where the submersible's repulsorlift engines allowed it to travel just above the waves far faster than it could beneath them but when it drew closer to the Runn estate it suddenly dived beneath the waves, its engines switching into an underwater operating mode. As the submersible continued to descend towards the estate Kyle felt the power of the Dark Side grow in strength. Then he sensed something unusual in this. The power emanating from the estate was not limited to that held within artefacts a thousand years old or more, there was definitely something alive and channelling this power. At first Kyle considered the possibility that when the Founding Families had opened the storehouse their lack of understanding of what they were dealing with had released a number of Sith guardian creatures from hibernation but then he felt the unmistakable presence of intelligence at the centre of this power. As Kyle considered the ramifications of this he felt the submersible suddenly lurch as it docked at the estate and he peered out of his hiding place and watched as the courier exited the vehicle. Kyle heard voices as the courier spoke with the war droids waiting for him outside the submersible and Kyle reached for his lightsaber, preparing to have to fight his way out of the vehicle. But as he cautiously approached the hatch he found it unguarded. The courier had been led away by the droids and no one had been left to watch the hatch. Seeing his opportunity Kyle took it, slipping quietly out of the submersible and heading through the air lock to the chamber beyond. This looked to be some sort of loading bay with several binary load lifters lined up along one wall. There were two other exits from this room, one a standard sized doorway while the other was a much larger door located beside the row of powered down droids. Kyle darted across the room towards this larger door, reasoning that there would be less likelihood of there being someone on the other side of it rather than the door the courier had probably been escorted through. When the door slid open it revealed a storage room on the other side and Kyle smiled as he stepped through, knowing that he was now very close to achieving his goal. Starting from the storage room Kyle could move through the Runn estate, exploring it until he finally found the Sith storehouse that he considered his by right.

Josh's cruiser was one of the first vessels of the Founding Families' fleet to emerge from hyperspace and almost immediately klaxons began to sound as the Sith ships orbiting Delvad locked their weapons onto it. "What's happening?" Calleen exclaimed.

"Sensor locks from the enemy fleet." Josh replied, "No need to panic." then in a loud and clear voice he addressed the bridge crew, "Raise shields and sound battle stations. All weapons are to fire on targets as they come to bear. The enemy fleet has no specific chain of command that we know of so just do as much damage as possible. Scramble all fighters."

"And here come the others." Trent commented, looking up through the large viewport that formed the ceiling of the bridge as more ships dropped out of hyperspace to join the battle, both fleets rushing headlong towards one another and opening fire as soon as they were able.

"It has begun." Slaydo said to Gayal while she attempted to translate an ancient Sith text from memory. "What has?" she replied.

"The Founding Families have begun their attack on us. Their fleet is strong, perhaps strong enough for some of them to be able to get through our blockade. You must arm yourself and be ready to protect this place."

There was a sound like thunder from overhead and Cal and Lara both looked out of a nearby window. But there was no sign of bad weather at all.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal said and with Lara following he rushed to a nearby set of stairs that led up onto the roof of the island residence. From here the two Jedi could make out plumes of smoke overhead that were obviously the remains of a ship that had broken apart as it entered Delvad's atmosphere.

"Looks like someone tried to run the blockade." Lara commented before there was another clap of thunder and more burning debris started to fall from the sky.

"Or maybe not." Cal replied, "Look." and he pointed to a patch of sky where even in broad daylight flashes of fire from turbolasers being fired in space could be seen, "The planet's under attack."

"Dad wouldn't order an attack though." Lara said, "He was going to wait for us."

"Then that only leaves the Founding Families." Cal replied, "Lara we can't afford to wait for anyone else. We need to get to the storehouse now and make sure that they don't get to it ahead of us."

Lara frowned.

"Oh I knew you were going to say that." she replied.

"Come on, let's get back to the shuttle. Our suits are there." Cal said and the two Jedi siblings hurried back to the landing pad where they had left the shuttle and raced aboard. Taking off Cal turned the ship towards the Runn estate and accelerated, "Okay, the autopilot's set. Let's get suited up." Cal then said and he and Lara made their way into the hold.

Here they had stored a pair of heavily armoured diving suits of a type they had worn once before when infiltrating the Runn estate. On that occasion three Jedi had been killed and Lara seriously injured and Cal had a sense of foreboding as he climbed into his. To accompany these suits there were two armoured equipment cases into which they loaded all of their weapons and other equipment. All of this was made necessary by the sheer pressure of the water at the depth the Runn estate was located at, more than a hundred metres beneath the surface.

"So I guess we're going in the same way as last time then?" Lara asked as she lifted her helmet and prepared to put it on.

"That's right." Cal replied, nodding, "I'm hoping it will be unguarded again."

"And if it isn't? We can't just take our weapons out of those cases you know." Lara pointed out.

"Then hopefully the only guards will be droids." Cal said, "Using the Force to smash machines apart isn't inherently evil so we won't risk falling under the influence of the Dark Side." Then he locked his helmet into place and leant over slightly to pick up his equipment canister, strapping it to his suit before striding over to the cargo hatch set into the floor.

Lara was just completing putting on her suit as well when they both felt the shuttle come to a halt and the hatch opened automatically to reveal the ocean just a few metres below.

"Ready Lara?" Cal asked and he held out his hand towards his sister.

"Not really Cal." she replied as she took his hand.

"It's easy. Just one small step." Cal told her.

"More like a giant leap." Lara responded and then they both stepped over the edge of the hatch and plummeted into the water.

Once in the water the two Jedi continued to fall, sinking ever deeper and before long they were surrounded by nothing but darkness. The lights mounted on their suits came on automatically at this point and they just happened to reveal a swarm of multi-limbed creatures swimming past them, one of which inadvertently collided with Lara, wrapping its limbs around her helmet while its central mouth snapped at her faceplate and she screamed.

"Lara it's okay." Cal said, using the Force to apply a slight push to the creature that dislodged it and it swam off with the rest of the swarm.

"Thanks." Lara said, "You have no idea what I was picturing happening to me there."

"Never mind that now. We'll be at the seabed soon. We walk from there."

There was a brilliant flare of light as a volley of turbolaserfire from the surface of Delvad itself tore one of Josh's cruisers in half.

"That blast came from the planet!" Trent exclaimed.

"The Sith have obviously set up more defences than we gave them credit for." Josh replied. Then turning to his crew he added, "Instruct all capital ships to pull back from the planet, stay out of range of those surface weapons."

"General!" one of the crew at a comscan station then called out, "Sensors indicate that the enemy fleet is now entirely deployed on this side of the planet."

"Then send the signal." Josh ordered.

Behind one of Delvad's moons Natalay and her team waited in a ship built primarily for speed. Arriving ahead of the rest of the fleet they had rendezvoused with Belle and her team, with Belle joining her mother while the rest of her crew waited for the arrival of the assault fleet to join them instead. Belle was in the rear of the ship, discussing the plan with Kaylor while Natalay sat in the cockpit when all of a sudden the communication system came to life.

"The subject is attentive. Your door is open." a voice stated and Natalay smiled as she recognised the code phrase to indicate that the Sith forces had been fully distracted and were no longer defending the other side of the planet.

"Go." she told the pilot and she felt the sudden acceleration of her ship as it emerged from behind the moon and rushed towards Delvad.

There was a flash of light from the planet as a surface based turbolaser spotted the ship and opened fire. But the weapon was intended for use against relatively slow moving capital ships, not a much smaller and faster vessel such as this and the shot missed by a wide margin. However, it did prove that the Sith war droids were now aware of the presence of the ship heading towards them even if their fleet was in no position to intercept it.

"Keep going." Natalay told the pilot.

"Incoming." he replied as a pair of fighters began to rise up from the surface.

"Stang." Natalay hissed. Then she turned to face the rear of the ship where her team waited. A team that included Kaylor and three other mandalorians, all of them with basilisk war droid mounts, "I'm afraid it looks like you and your men will have to disembark early Mister Mott." she said and he nodded.

"You heard the lady." he told his men, "Mount up."

The four basilisks and their mandalorian riders dropped through the hatch in the transport's floor, spreading out to provide a screen in front of the ship. For the time being the pilot of the transport reduced the power being provided to the ship's engines so that the basilisks would not be left behind. But that changed when the approaching fighters came within range of the mandalorian' weapons.

"Break and attack." Kaylor ordered and his men broke into pairs, with one pair heading for each fighter to engage it and while the Sith war droid pilots were focused on the mandalorians the transport suddenly accelerated again and hurtled between the two fighters unmolested.

Natalay watched on the transport's sensors as the basilisks continued to engage the Sith fighters. One of the mandalorian war machines was blown apart in seconds but its wingman swooped in on the starfighter that had killed it, latching onto the upper hull and slicing through its armour to expose the engine core within. The basilisk war droid then ripped this from its mounting and the ship began to tumble helplessly through space. Meanwhile Kaylor and his wingman arranged themselves one behind the other and jinked back and forth as they flew to try and confuse the Sith war droid pilot of the starfighter they were targeting. This obviously worked because the starfighter did not even try to open fire on the mandalorians and as the two basilisks flew past they both directed rapid volleys of pulse wave fire into the side of the fighter, detonating the volatile blaster gas stored in one of its weapons and causing an explosion powerful enough to tear the ship apart. By this time however, the fast moving transport was so far ahead, just starting to enter the atmosphere of Delvad, that there was no way the three surviving mandalorians could catch up with it.

"Keep going without us." Kaylor signalled, "There is another fight we can join." and he turned his basilisk towards the battle raging in space where more of his men were riding their basilisks into the fray.

"Understood. Good hunting Mister Mott." Natalay replied as her ship continued to rush towards Delvad. Then she glanced at the pilot, "You know the target site?" she asked and he nodded.

"An island just north of the equator." he replied, "Our ETA is fourteen minutes."

"Where is everybody?" Salla asked as the mandalorian ship carrying her and Erill towards the shipyards around Teras rounded the gas giant and the station appeared ahead of them, apparently all alone in space. Their ship was hugging the outer edge of the gas giant's atmosphere and taking advantage of the electrical disturbances in its atmosphere to mask their approach.

"Gone it would seem." Erill replied, "Something which may herald a problem for the others but will hopefully work to our advantage. If the jedi are attacking elsewhere in the sector then they are not here to try and stop us." Then he pointed to a docking port on one of the lower levels of the station, "Pilot, take us there and I want a boarding party ready by the time we dock."

"Yes sir." the pilot answered, keeping the ship just within the atmosphere as it headed in the direction of the shipyard. Then as the station loomed directly above them he added, "Activating jamming now." and the ship rose up out of the atmosphere and headed for the docking port. Under normal circumstances electronic jamming was a poor way of escaping detection. It could prevent the exact location or identity of a ship becoming known to an enemy but the presence of the jamming itself revealed that there was something present. However, in orbit around Teras there was so much natural interference from the planet's atmosphere that the mandalorians and their employers were betting that the jamming would be mistaken for such naturally occurring interference, especially given the current command crew's lack of local experience. The jamming appeared to work and the mandalorian ship made it to the docking port without being challenged or fired upon. Erill and Salla then made their way to their ship's own docking port where they waited surrounded by their mandalorian assault team while one of the mandalorians overrode the station docking port's lock.

The door suddenly slid open and the mandalorians rushed forwards with their weapons at the ready. But the docking port was unguarded and they halted just inside and waited for Erill and Salla to follow them through.

"Where to now sir?" one of the mandalorians asked, glancing back at Erill.

"Good question." Salla added, "This is a big station to be looking for one person aboard."

"Ah but we know what Charity is like." Erill replied with a smile, "She will be in the most luxurious place she could find. Therefore, I suggest we head for the first class apartments on the side of the station that faces the planet and start our search there. Though first something must be done about our appearance so we will not attract quite as much attention as we would now."

A figure standing by the shore waved as the transport sped towards it and Natalay recognised her daughter Corlay.

"This is the place." Natalay told the pilot, "Take us in."

"Yes ma'am." he replied before he brought the transport in to land.

On the beach Corlay shielded her face against the sand kicked up by the transport's repulsorlifts with her hand and waited for the access ramp to lower.

"Corlay!" Belle called out as she came down the ramp first with several Shill Security commandos following her.

"Belle. Finally made it I see." Corlay replied, "Did you manage to catch Jenner then?"

"I may as well ask you the same." Belle replied, "He's somewhere on Delvad."

"Oh great." Corlay said, "So we may have to deal with him as well?"

"I wouldn't worry about that." Natalay said as she too came down the ramp, "I doubt he'd be stupid enough to try and take all of us on together. Once we're done here he's welcome to whatever scraps we leave behind. Now where's Han?"

"Still watching the estate with Jaynie as best they can." Corlay replied, "Though the news about the Drud family hasn't gone down too well with her. It's just her and her brother now isn't it?"

"Just so long as she can still guide us through the Runn estate I'll be happy." Belle responded.

"I think she'd rather us be attacking the jedi or the hutt, but she'll do her job." Corlay said.

"Good. Now there is no time to waste. Take us to them." Natalay replied.

They found Han with Erin and Jaynie in a clearing with their commando team watching the live feed from the sensor system that Corlay and Erin had set up earlier.

"Hi mom." Han said when he looked up to see his mother entering the clearing with his other sisters, "Not much to report. If the Sith is worried about what's going on he isn't showing it."

"There's a disturbance on the seabed there though." Erin added, pointing to a reading on the sensor display.

"It's too slow and too small to be important." Jaynie commented, "Most likely some creature walking about. There are plenty of them here on Delvad."

"So not another attempt to gain entry to the Runn estate by walking across the seabed then?" Natalay asked.

"Who'd be stupid enough to do that?" Han asked, "Half a dozen jedi tried it and half of them died when they got there."

"Well we won't be." Natalay replied, "We've brought a submersible with cutting equipment. We'll dock against the hull of the estate and just make our own way in." then she looked at Jaynie, "Hopefully you'll be able to tell us the best place to do that. We need somewhere that the structure is sound enough to support the submersible when we're gone or we risk the whole place imploding."

"I think I can manage that." Jaynie responded, nodding.

"Good." Natalay said and then she looked at Erin, "As for you I suggest you get back into space. Take the ship I arrived in. I'm sure Josh will have more use for your skills as a pilot than we will on the seabed."

"About a dozen I'd say." one of the mandalorians escorting Erill and Salla said as he came hurrying back towards them. The mandalorians had discovered a team of Republic army engineers working to repair some of the damage caused to the station in the Republic attack and the accompanying rioting and it was obvious that this group presented an opportunity to obtain disguises.

"Armoured?" Erill asked, knowing that the enclosed armour worn by Republic troops would make it more difficult to obtain disguises, not only because of the protection it would afford them greater protection against the mandalorians' weapons but also because the damage that would be inflicted on the armour itself would reduce its value as a disguise. But given that they were engineers, there was a fair chance that they would be unarmoured.

"No." the mandalorian answered, shaking his head as he confirmed what Erill wanted to hear.

"Then I suggest you limit yourselves to your pulse wave weapons unless you can guarantee a head shot."

Erill said to the leader of the mandalorian squad.

"Just leave it to us." the armoured warrior replied before waving his men forward.

The mandalorians moved slowly and quietly down the corridor towards the engineering team, not wanting to give away their presence before they were ready. Their advance was helped by the noise created by the Republic engineering team themselves as they worked to remove and replace damaged components. The mandalorians were just a few metres from their targets when the squad leader raised his fist for them to halt as he studied the engineers before ordering the assault. Each of the Republic engineers was armed with a sidearm as well as the assortment of heavy power tools that could be used as weapons if needed but they had not set any lookouts and clearly were not expecting trouble. Satisfied with this, the mandalorian leader promptly lowered his fist and leapt forwards.

"Drop your weapons!" he yelled, "Get down on the floor!"

The startled engineers turned to face the armoured mandalorians that had suddenly appeared behind them and one reached for his sidearm. In response three mandalorians turned their pulse wave rifles on the man and opened fire, the barrage of energy blasts hurling him backwards and sending his sidearm spinning across the floor as it fell from his grip.

"Anyone else?" the mandalorian leader asked, aiming his rifle at one engineer after another.

Then another engineer moved his hand towards his weapon but he did so slowly and rather than attempt to draw it he unhooked the holster from his waist and tossed it towards the mandalorians. Then one by one the other engineers did the same, disarming themselves before lying face down on the floor," Good. Now strip. Give us your uniforms." the mandalorian ordered.

Erill and Salla emerged from hiding as the engineers were removing their coveralls and boots and handing them over to the mandalorians.

"Very good." Erill said, "And all done without raising the alarm."

"What about them?" Salla asked, looking at the Republic engineers.

"Oh now that we have their uniforms I don't think they matter any more." Erill replied. Then he looked at the mandalorian squad leader, "Do you?" he asked.

"No sir."

"Then deal with them." Erill said before the mandalorians opened fire.

A short time later, with the bodies of the engineering team and the mandalorians' armour concealed, the now disguised mandalorian squad along with Erill and Salla Crassis headed towards the closest turbolift.

Erin picked a course out of Delvad's atmosphere that would avoid the Sith fleet that remained gathered to battle the Founding Families' forces and from there circled around in a wide arc that took her around the engagement zone. She had just identified Josh's command ship amongst the fleet when a flash of light further away from the planet caught her attention. This was followed moments later by more such flashes as the combined Republic Navy and jedi task force dropped out of hyperspace. The sensors Erin had on the transport quickly identified the newly arrived vessels as Republic types, praetorian-class frigates, foray-class blockade runners, gunships as well as aurek-wing and starsaber-class fighters all now heading straight for the Founding Families' fleet, trapping them between two opposing forces.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Erin said to herself.

## 23.

"Targets locked." Seth broadcast to the rest of his squadron. Aside from the expert jedi pilot, Whillam, Karrie and Dac were all piloting starsaber-class starfighters of their own while Varn and Neari rode in Elle's starstorm-class courier with Pedrus and Rich, "Follow me in." and he accelerated towards the nearest of the Founding Families' vessels, a light corvette that bore the markings of the Jovan Defence Force.

"Copy that saber leader." Whillam replied, "I have your wing." and the jedi vessels charged towards the unsuspecting corvette.

Meanwhile behind them the Republic forces turned their attention to the heavier ships in the enemy fleet, the five hundred and fifty metre long supremacy-class cruisers of the Crassis Major Defence Force that not only carried the bulk of the enemy's firepower but were also the bases for more than a hundred starfighters each. By positioning themselves to avoid the Sith's surface mounted defences with only a minimum of screening vessels they had left themselves exposed to attack from further out in space and this was a flaw that the Republic forces were keen to exploit before anything could be done about it.

"It's a trap!" Calleen exclaimed when she saw the Republic fleet open fire on that of the Founding Families and the cruiser rocked, "They knew we'd be here."

"How could they?" Trent asked.

"They must have monitored our fleet building up around Crassis Major." Josh replied.

"But I thought your patrols were supposed to prevent that." Trent said.

"Obviously they failed." Josh said.

"Well at least we won't be doing this again so they'll have failed us for the last time." Calleen commented.

"How many Republic warships and what classes are we talking about?" Josh demanded.

"I'm reading three praetorian-class frigates and a dozen foray-class vessels. Plus numerous gunships and fighters." the comscan officer responded.

"Have the *Fortune* and *Judgement* form up on our flanks." Josh ordered, "We'll hold back the Republic while the rest of the fleet continues to concentrate on engaging the Sith."

The three cruisers began to come about, turning to face the Republic task force now firing on them and they returned fire.

Aboard the *Perseverance* Veers watched the enemy cruisers turning towards his ships. While Captain De Kuun focused on commanding the gunship and fighter squadrons of the task force, Veers commanded the precious few capital ships available to them.

"Captain one of the ships turning towards us appears to be the hub of enemy fleet communications." the comscan officer reported.

"A command ship?" Veers responded.

"It appears that way sir. Though we can't break the encryption on their transmissions."

"Not to worry lieutenant." Veers said, "I think that will be enough. But get me General Udra."

"Putting you through now sir."

"General Udra this is Lieutenant Commander Veers." Veers said, "I believe we have located the enemy command ship."

"Excellent." Varn's voice responded, "Give us its transponder details."

Aboard Elle's ship she looked at her console and then at her brother.

"Got it." she said, "I can have us there in a couple of minutes but there are a lot of fighters buzzing around."

"This is Master Udra." Varn broadcast to the jedi fighters, "We need a path clearing to the lead enemy cruiser."

"Understood Master Udra." Seth replied, "Just follow us in." and the four starsaber-class fighters peeled off, heading directly for Josh's command ship. In response to this manoeuvre a swarm of fighters launched by the cruisers moved to intercept them.

The submersible mounted power flood lights on its prow that illuminated the Runn estate.

"Well?" Natalay asked Jaynie. Having spent several years on Delvad she was familiar with operating a vehicle like this and so a specialist pilot was not required, leaving more room for the commandos accompanying them.

"That passageway there dead ahead." she replied, "Its got a reinforced structure. I think one of the Runns once considered using it as the basis of a turbolift to the surface but they never built it. Plus it's not far from the library entrance. I'd says it's about five minutes away once we're inside."

Natalay nodded.

"Do it." she said.

Jaynie brought the submersible in close to the structure of the estate and when the viewport was filled by a view of the passageway she extended the large handling arms mounted either side of the vehicle and used them to secure the vehicle, retracting them to pull it closer until a seal was established between the estate and the forward docking port on the lower deck of the submersible.

"That's it." she told Natalay, looking up at her, "Seal confirmed."

"Engage the cutter!" Natalay shouted down through the hatch leading to the lower deck and Corlay did as she was ordered.

The cutter consisted of a ring set into the docking port that unleashed a rapid blast of plasma into the estate wall it was pressed up against, slicing a perfectly circular hole in it in a fraction of a second. Verifying that the seal remained intact, Corlay then opened the hatch and the commandos rushed forwards, leaping into the passageway they had broken into.

"Clear." one called out and the members of the Founding Families accompanying them followed.

Then there came the pounding of heavy feet on the metal floor of this section of the estate and a force of Sith war droids came marching around the corner towards them.

Han was the first to fire, a blast from his pulse wave rifle causing a droid to explode in a shower of sparks.

But then the other droids returned fire with their own weapons and several of the commandos fell.

"That way!" Jaynie shouted over the noise of the shooting and she pointed down the passageway away from the droids, "We can cut through the servant's quarters and reach the library down there."

"Fall back." Natalay ordered, firing on the droids and the boarding party started to retreat down the passageway.

Cal and Lara broke the surface of the moon pool together and climbed out of the water. The air pressure in this section of the residence was lower to that of the water, with a magnetic field preventing the compartment they now found themselves in from flooding. But it was still far too great for them to be able to remove their armoured diving suits just yet. Instead they had first to walk down a long corridor that was lined with active shield emitters. Each shield marked a transition from one atmospheric pressure to another, becoming progressive lower as they went along to allow divers to decompress until finally they reached the end of the corridor and a storage area for diving equipment that was at normal surface pressure. Immediately Cal removed the helmet from his suit and tossed it aside, not worrying about damaging it.

"Hurry up." he told Lara as he began removing the rest of the suit, "We've still got to get to the storehouse."

"At least we know the way this time." Lara replied as she too removed and discarded her helmet before she shuddered, "I feel cold." she said. Although the temperature of the compartment was rather cool, Cal would hardly have described it as cold. However, this was not what Lara was referring to.

*The Dark Side is growing in strength. Unless it is stopped the entire sector could fall under its sway. You must be careful that you are not tempted by it yourselves, it will offer you what you want most.*

Cal nodded at Master Karas' warning.

"It's the influence of the Dark Side." he said before they both heard the sound of firing in the distance.

"Cal, is that what I think it is?" Lara asked and Cal nodded.

"Gunfire. We're not the first ones here." he said and Lara winced.

"I was afraid of that." she said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Kyle also heard the firing and realised that his enemies had made it to the estate. Not knowing whether these newcomers were Jedi or agents of the Founding Families he decided to change his approach. No longer would he skulk in the shadows as he hunted for the Sith storehouse, instead he drew his lightsaber and headed for the nearest life form he could sense. In this case it was a small team of slave workers guarded by a pair of Sith war droids. Emerging unexpectedly from behind the droids he decapitated one and then impaled the other through the chest with his lightsaber before turning his attention to the slaves.

"Oh thank you!" one exclaimed, "We knew that the Jedi would not leave us to-" and then Kyle cut him down as well.

"I am no Jedi." he declared to the others, "Now tell me where I can find the Sith or you will share his fate." and he looked down at the corpse at his feet.

"I've got fighters coming in behind me." Karrie exclaimed as a volley of blaster fire narrowly missed her fighter.

"Break right. I'm on them." Dac replied as he turned his fighter to assist her.

"I can't." Karrie told him, "They're already-" and then a second volley of blaster fire tore into her fighter, filling the cockpit with fire before it flew apart.

But killing Karrie did not protect the enemy fighter pilots as Dac unleashed a pair of concussion missiles that demolished two of them before strafing the others with his quad mounted laser cannons.

"Sorry I couldn't get them sooner Karrie." he muttered.

"We're coming up on the command ship now." Elle broadcast from her courier, "Just give us another ninety

seconds of clear sky and we'll be there."

"Cease treating the ship as a priority target when we get aboard." Varn added, also broadcasting to the Republic fleet as a whole, "But do not ignore it completely. Return fire if fired upon and target key systems such as engines and weapons if you can."

"Sure you don't want us there with you master?" Seth responded.

"I'm sure." Varn replied, "The five of us should be enough to fight our way to the bridge."

"Coming up on the hangar now." Elle told Varn, "Deploying landing gear."

The courier raced into the expansive hangar bay, scattering panicked ground crew in all directions. Elle brought her ship to a rapid halt and the access ramp opened while it was still hovering above the deck. This allowed the other four jedi it carried to leap down and take the hangar crew by surprise, cutting down the handful of security guards that attempted to stop them. Elle then brought her ship into land and came rushing down the ramp herself just as the remaining hangar crew were starting to flee.

At the same time a second vessel bearing markings of the Jedi Order flew into the hangar, this one a heavily armoured assault shuttle. This touched down immediately and as soon as the access ramp dropped Master Sergeant Gall led a platoon of freedom warriors out of the vessel.

"Reporting for duty Master Udra." he announced as his men formed a perimeter around the jedi.

"Excellent." Varn replied.

"So where now master?" Pedrus asked.

"This is a supremacy-class ship." Varn said, "Which means the quickest way to the bridge is that way."

"So we'll be going that way instead." Neri added, pointing to a different exit to the one indicated by her husband, "Right?" and she looked at him and smiled.

"Correct." he replied, "It will make them think our target is something other than the bridge. But when we reach the main life support control centre we will be able to access the ventilation system that will take us directly to the command and control section." then he looked at Sergeant Gall, "In the meantime I want your men to head directly for the command centre. Try to get them to deploy their defences further out so we can bypass them."

Pursued by the Sith war droids, more commandos fell to their gunfire before Natalay's team reached the room that had been the Runn family's most private library where they kept the most interesting Sith texts they had been able to gather over the years, leaving only four of them left alive. The library was also where the entrance to the Sith storehouse itself had been concealed and the first two commandos who rushed into the room ahead of Natalay and Han found it guarded by a pair of Sith war droids armed with machine guns. There was a roar of gunfire as the droids reacted immediately and the commandos were both hit, one almost right away with several rounds punching through his armoured vest at close range while the other tried to dive out of the way and take cover but the upturned table he selected proved inadequate to protect him. Natalay leant around the door frame and fired at the droids but she had insufficient time to aim before they both turned in her direction and a volley of bullets erupt through the doorway as she retreated.

"Corlay." she said, "Would you mind being a dear and dealing with this?"

"Got it mom." Corlay replied, plucking a grenade from her webbing and removing the pin before throwing it through the open doorway, "Fire in the hole!" she yelled, ducking back before the grenade exploded. Then she and Han rushed through the door, aiming their weapons towards the source of the machine gun fire. But now instead of two war droids standing at the far side of the room there were just two small piles of debris that included a pair of machine guns now damaged beyond repair.

Belle, Jaynie and Natalay followed them into the library and they crept towards the opening that led to the Sith storehouse. This was as dark as it had been before and all of them aimed their weapons towards it, expecting more droids to appear from within it at any moment.

"Is it safe?" Jaynie asked nervously before there were two screams from behind them as the last two commandos died.

"No Miss Drud." Kyle said out loud as the two bodies fell to the floor, "It is anything but safe."

Natalay and Belle both fired their pulse wave blasters but Kyle did not even bother to use his lightsaber to block the attacks, instead just raising his free hand and appearing to pluck the spatial distortions out of the air harmlessly.

"Really Belle?" he asked, "Did you honestly think that would work against me?"

Natalay looked around.

"Han, take Corlay and Jaynie and get inside. Secure the storehouse. Belle you're with me." she said, returning her blaster to its holster and drawing a long narrow sword.

"A sword of the Sith?" Kyle said, "You are not worthy to wield such a weapon."

"Then come and take it." Natalay told him.

Charity sipped at the wine she had poured herself and stared at the items lined up on the table in front of her. There were several credits sticks on which she had several million credits, the sum total of her funds now

that her accounts on Crassis Major were beyond her reach and also the pendant she had taken from the Sith storehouse. Even if the Republic was successful in retaking the Narthis Sector she doubted that she could return to her life of luxury on Crassis Major now that her family would be tarred with the reputation of traitors and killers and this meant that these few items were all she had with which to build a new life elsewhere. A life that despite her best efforts so far would probably not involve Cal, who remained convinced that he could somehow get Gayal back for himself.

Charity tilted her head back and looked out through the transparent ceiling. This offered an excellent view of the light show created by the powerful storms in the upper atmosphere of Teras but right now Charity found them less than inspiring. Then the sound of the intercom to the door of the suite of rooms she had been provided with attracted her attention. Since being told to stay here she had received no visitors and for a moment she paused, wondering who it was that would have come to see her and why. Then the intercom sounded again and Charity picked up the datapad that was configured as a remote control unit for all of the suite's systems and brought up the intercom screen. This showed an image of two men in Republic uniforms standing outside her door.

"Yes?" she asked, wondering what business they had with her and concerned that the Republic's authorities had decided she could be connected with some of her family's crimes and the men were here to arrest her. "Maintenance." one of the men replied, "We need to inspect the viewport in your quarters for damage suffered in the battle."

"Damage?" Charity responded nervously, "Sat surrounded by luxurious furnishings she had not considered the possibility that she could be blown out into space at any moment if the viewport sudden cracked, "Come on in." she added and without bothering to get up she just pressed the button on the datapad that would open the main door and it promptly slid upwards.

The two men in Republic uniforms entered the room before the door slid shut behind them and the first Charity noticed was that they were larger than she had been expecting from the tiny image on the datapad. "Just do what you need to." she told them as they walked towards her. But then she noticed that both men had identity badges clipped to their uniforms, one of which was aligned so that she could see the photograph attached to it and she saw that this did not resemble the man wearing the uniform, "Who are? What do you-" she began before both men suddenly lunged towards her, pinning her to the couch. One clamped a hand over her mouth to stop her crying out even though there was no one close enough to hear her scream while the other snatched the datapad control unit away from her and used it to open the door again.

"Why hello my dear Charity." Erill said as he and Salla entered the room along with the rest of the mandalorian squad, "I'm sure your brother would love to have been present for this reunion but thanks to you he's otherwise engaged."

Belle fired her compact pulse wave blaster at Kyle until the power cell was depleted but the former jedi knight simply parried each shot with his lightsaber. Belle had not expected any of her shots to actually hit him though and the only purpose of the volley had been to get Kyle's attention focused on her while her mother charged towards him, sword in hand.

At the last moment however, Kyle saw how close Natalay was and he unleashed a sudden telekinetic blast that hurled Belle back against the far wall and gave him enough time to turn to face this new threat. Natalay swung her sword as she ran, hoping to catch Kyle by surprise but he was able to place his lightsaber in her path in time to parry her attack as well. Had Natalay's weapon been a mundane sword then Kyle's lightsaber would have sliced right through it and most likely bisected Natalay as well. But the blade of a Sword of the Sith was crafted by means of their ancient alchemy as well as conventionally forged and so the two weapons locked together instead as their wielders both attempted to push their opponent's blade back towards them. Such a contest of physical strength was one that only Kyle could win and so as her ancient blade moved ever closer to her own throat Natalay looked for another way out. Her only hope was to try and use Kyle's own size and strength against him and so she deliberately gave ground in the contest of strength before moving aside, hoping that Kyle would stumble when she was no longer where she had been and leave himself vulnerable. Kyle did indeed move forwards suddenly as he was left with nothing to hold him back but rather than do so randomly he was able to control his movement enough that he was able to strike out with his elbow to his side and he struck Natalay in her face.

"Mom get back!" Belle shouted as she started to pick herself up and while she was still in a crouching position she drew a silenced slug thrower pistol and opened fire at Kyle.

Just as he had done against the pulse wave blasts Kyle swung his lightsaber to block the bullets, ignoring the heat of the tiny metal fragments that peppered him as they emerged from the other side of the blade. He quickly realised that this was meant to be just another distraction and so before Natalay could recover from the blow he had inflicted on her already he suddenly extended his free hand out towards her and released a storm of bright blue Force lightning.

Already dazed from being elbowed in her face and with blood pouring from her nose Natalay shrieked as she was engulfed by the lightning and the Sword of the Sith dropped from her grasp as she doubled over in pain

and fell to the floor. Kyle acted quickly to take advantage of this and he ceased the lightning to instead reach towards the fallen sword and through the Force he summoned it towards him, plucking it out of the air. Then as Belle paused to reload her pistol Kyle charged towards Natalay who in turn was just able to roll out of the way before he brought both sword blades down right where her torso had been. Before he could straighten up and turn towards her, Natalay lashed out with a foot and kicked Kyle in the side of his knee and knocked his leg out from under him unexpectedly.

Kyle gasped and winced as he fell, using the pain he now felt to draw more of the Dark Side into himself and used that to guide his hand as he swept his lightsaber to his side and he was rewarded with the sound of Natalay screaming in agony as he sliced off the leg she had just used to attack him below the knee.

*Anger.*

*Danger.*

Kyle sensed the imminent attack from Belle before she could even pull the trigger of her pistol. This time though the volley of projectiles was intended just to keep Kyle from either turning on Belle or finishing off her mother while Belle darted across the room towards the doorway where the two commandos lay dead. This time when she found her weapon empty of ammunition she simply dropped it to the floor and dived towards the nearest of the dead commandos. It was not the body she was interested in however, instead Belle wanted to make use of his weapon and scooping up the pulse wave carbine he had been armed with she turned towards Kyle and took aim before opening fire with the weapon set to fully automatic.

Rather than attempt to block the barrage of spatial distortions fired at him Kyle dived for cover behind a fallen bookcase and deactivated his lightsaber, returning it to his belt while putting down the Sword of the Sith he had taken from Natalay just as she had dared him to try doing. Then he reached under his cloak and drew his plasma carbine, checking the state of its power cell before closing his eyes and reaching out through the Force to determine the exact positions of both Belle and Natalay. Then without looking he held the powerful weapon around the bookcase and fired twice. Both shots were aimed towards Natalay as she lay close to where she had fallen, trying to drag herself towards her daughter. Both blasts of superheated matter struck her in the back and she screamed briefly as the intense energy cooked her internal organs, being silenced only when her lungs were incinerated and she could no longer force the air out of her mouth.

"No!" Belle screamed as she saw her mother slump forwards, dead and in the moment she was distracted Kyle leapt from his hiding place and casting his carbine aside he charged towards her as fast as he could. Belle swung her own carbine towards him but she was too slow and Kyle knocked the weapon from her grasp.

Belle reacted by diving aside before Kyle could slam right into her with his full weight and she attempted to deliver a punch to the same knee that her mother had struck earlier. But Kyle expected such a move and he reached down and grabbed hold of Belle's wrist and twisted it, causing her to fall backwards. Landing on her back, Belle kicked upwards and delivered a blow to Kyle's stomach with her heel that then sent him flying over her to also land on his back. Grabbing hold of a nearby piece of broken furniture, Belle tried to swing it like a club at Kyle's head but he saw the attack coming and rolled away before lashing out to knock the improvised weapon from her hand.

The pair of them both jumped back to their feet at the same time and Belle aimed a rapid blow towards Kyle's solar plexus, hoping to disable him long enough to follow up with a more lethal blow. But once more Kyle was able to predict the move and he moved his body aside just far enough that Belle's fist passed beneath his arm and by suddenly pressing it to his side he was able to trap her limb.

"You're too predictable Belle." he said, snarling.

"I fooled you for long enough." she replied as she aimed another blow at his throat. But yet again the attack failed as Kyle simply grabbed hold of her wrist before releasing his grip on her other arm and spinning her around before letting her go so that she was hurled away from him.

Belle heard whatever she had landed on break beneath her and as she looked up she saw Kyle charging towards her again and she tried to get to her feet again, knowing that if he reached her while she was still lay prone she would stand very little chance. She had just made it onto all fours when Kyle reached her but rather than strike he grabbed her in both hands and lifted her up before continuing to rush forwards with her held tightly until he slammed her into a wall and there was a sharp 'crack' as her head struck it.

Kyle then held Belle up against the wall with one hand while the other reached for his lightsaber at his belt. The pair looked one another in the eyes and hesitated.

"I really did love you." Kyle said, breaking the silence first.

"I know." Belle replied and then with Belle still held against the wall they leant closer to one another and kissed. The kiss continued to for several seconds until all of a sudden there was a 'snap-hiss' as Kyle's lightsaber activated and Belle's eyes widened suddenly as the blade extended from the emitter that had been pressed to her chest, impaling her through the heart. Then as her body went limp the narrow bladed fighting knife she had been poised to thrust into Kyle's back clattered to the floor.

Kyle shut off his weapon and returned it to his belt. Then he took hold of Belle's body in both arms and carried her to a nearby couch that had somehow managed to survive the fighting and laid her out on it,

folding her arms across her chest and closing her eyes before planting one last kiss on her forehead. Then he stood up straight once more, picked up his carbine and the Sword of the Sith before calmly walking towards the opening that led to the Sith storehouse.

## 24.

Kaylor flew his basilisk war droid between a pair of corvettes that were shielding larger cruisers from a wing of Sith fighters. Behind him the droid carrying one of his men exploded as it was struck by laser fire from above and Kaylor looked up to see a squadron of republic gunships swooping down towards them. There were more turbolaser blasts from the gunships directed at the corvettes but these did not concern Kaylor. What did was what came next as a proton torpedo burst out of a launch tube and sped towards one of the now damaged corvettes.

"Maximum acceleration!" he barked, his order being broadcast to every one of the mandalorians accompanying him as well as their mounts and in response they did their best to get out of the way of the torpedo. Some were not fast enough though and when the torpedo detonated against the hull of one of the corvettes and split it in half the blast wave also vaporised several of the mandalorian droid riders behind Kaylor.

Looking around Kaylor saw that the Founding Families' losses were mounting steadily. Already well over half of their starfighters had been lost and several of their capital ships had been reduced to drifting wrecks. The greatest threat to the Founding Families' fleet remained the Sith battleships that still numbered almost twenty. These ships were holding in a low orbit around Delvad meaning that any other capital ship wanting to engage them would be forced to come within range of the powerful surface defences as well. On the other hand the battleships were able to make use of their missile launchers to bombard the Founding Families' cruisers from well outside the range of their own turbolasers. Each battleship also mounted a number of auto blasters for protection against small craft such as starfighters or the war droids ridden by the mandalorians. But the relatively dense formation that the Sith vessels had adopted meant that they obscured one another's lines of fire other than directly forwards. This meant that attacking the formation from the side would allow the mandalorians to concentrate their fire on just one or two battleships while in return only two could fire on them. However, the mandalorians' basilisk war droids lacked the speed necessary for such an attack without giving the Sith crews chance to redeploy their fleet

"All mandalorian droid riders to me." Kaylor ordered, "Prepare for a slingshot manoeuvre around Delvad. We will engage those enemy battleships from their flank."

"Sir the mandalorians are withdrawing." the command cruiser's comscan officer announced.

"Withdrawing?" Calleen exclaimed, "But we need them."

"Correction, only the war droid riders are withdrawing. Their attack ships are still engaging the Republic fleet." the comscan operator said.

"That still costs us most of our remaining anti-fighter cover." Trent said.

"No it doesn't." Josh responded as he studied the tactical readouts scattered all over the bridge, "Look at where they're heading."

"Towards Delvad itself." Trent said, "So what? There aren't enough of them to take on all the droids down there and Natalay's team is dealing with the primary target."

"No. Not towards Delvad, at a tangential angle to its atmosphere." Josh said, pointing to a nearby display.

"Forgive me general, but I'm not an expert in starship operations." Calleen replied.

"A slingshot?" Trent asked and Josh nodded.

"One that will bring them right around the planet," Josh began, his finger tracing a route around the holographic image of Delvad in front of them, "and smashing right into the enemy formation right here." and his finger stopped pointing at the Sith battleship squadron, "Kaylor Mott may just save us all."

"What about the intruders?" Calleen asked, "There are jedi troops loose on your command ship general."

"Maybe so, but we have them confined to the workshops and lower cargo hold. They aren't a threat to us there."

Kaylor felt the pressure of the sudden acceleration as his basilisk war droid was propelled around Delvad to emerge around the other side of the planet closing rapidly with the Sith battleship formation that was now right in front of them. As expected the mandalorian commander could see only two of the vessels clearly while the others were obscured behind these. But Kaylor intended to attack only one at a time in any case. Reacting to the sudden reappearance of the mandalorian basilisk riders the battleships opened fire with their auto blasters, but with only two of them having a clear line of fire to the rapidly approaching mercenaries the volume of fire the formation could generate was limited. Nevertheless it was enough firepower to tear through several squads, reducing them to just one or two men each before they could get within firing range of the battleships.

"Now!" Kaylor ordered as soon as he saw that his men were in range of the nearest battleship and every one of the surviving mandalorians, still more than a hundred in number, opened fire in unison. Individually the

laser cannons mounted on the basilisk war droids were too weak to damage a vessel as heavily armoured as a Sith battleship but when fired in unison their combined firepower inflicted massive damage, blasting off sensor antennas and rendering weapons useless as the mandalorians continued to close in, "Dive!" Kaylor called out as his men reached the battleship and the mandalorians swooped down to land on the vessel where they could make use of their claws and heavy shock wave generators to further rip the ship apart.

The handful of crewmen in the life support control section were no match for the five jedi that burst in unexpectedly. Those that resisted were cut down before the survivors were marched into a side office where all the communications could be disabled and the door fused shut with a simple sweep of a lightsaber blade where it met the frame.

"This looks like the best route to take." Neri said as she studied a schematic of the ship's ventilation system and she pointed to a particular set of ducts.

"Looks like they lead straight to the bridge." Varn said, nodding in agreement. Then he looked around at the others and added, "Locate the main access for vent forty-two while we download this schematic." and while he and Neri worked to copy the details of the ventilation system Elle took Pedrus and Rich from the control room into the actual ventilation plant where the pumps and scrubbing units were located.

"This isn't exactly my area of expertise." Rich commented, "We didn't have any machinery this big back home."

"Just look for a number forty-two." Elle replied.

"Like this one?" Pedrus asked, looking towards a carbon dioxide scrubbing unit with the number stencilled on it in paint. Elle hurried back to take a look for herself and smiled when she saw it.

"Just like that." she replied as she took out her PTP link, "Varn, Pedrus has found the scrubber for vent forty-two. We should have the access point in a couple of minutes."

"Good work." Varn replied, "We're on our way now."

Connected directly to the air scrubber was a large pump mechanism designed to be capable of circulating air all around the ship while beyond that was the vent duct itself. About a metre in diameter the pipe had a large access panel set into it that Elle and the padawans removed easily using the handles built into it for just that purpose.

"Not much room in there." Rich commented.

"More than enough padawan." Varn responded as he and Neri appeared behind them, "Now I'll lead the way with Neri behind me. Ell, I want you to bring up the rear. Now let's move, we have about three hundred metres to cover on our hands and knees." and then he climbed into the duct.

"Colonel I think you should see this." one of the station's bridge crew said to Colonel Jeck, handing him a datapad.

"Problem colonel?" Hyronymous asked from the opposite side of the holographic projector when he saw Colonel Jeck frown.

"I'd say." the colonel replied. "A dozen of my men have been murdered and their uniforms stolen."

"What?" Hyronymous exclaimed, "But how? My people assured me that all of the station security personnel were accounted for by your troops."

"That was what I thought as well." Colonel Jeck replied, "In any case those men were all armed and whoever killed them had access to some impressive firepower according to this report. I doubt that a handful of stragglers from the station's security force would have been able to overwhelm them so easily. I think we're looking for a unit of special forces that the Founding Families have been able to infiltrate onto the station since we took control."

"So they're trying to retake it?" Hyronymous asked but Colonel Jeck shook his head.

"I doubt it. Unless they've somehow managed to bring at least a company of troops aboard then they won't have a hope of being able to secure even a single sector of the station and no key areas have come under attack. There must be something else aboard that they want."

"But what? Tactical information perhaps?"

"Possibly. But if that were the case then one or two agents would be better than a special forces team. They came expecting to have to overpower someone." Colonel Jeck said and then his eyes widened, "They aren't here for something." he exclaimed, "They're here for a person." and he turned towards his men at the internal communication consoles, "Have a security team meet me in the first class accommodation area. Charity Crassis is in danger."

Corlay and Han led the way through the Sith storehouse while Jaynie followed close behind, a pulse wave blaster she barely knew how to use in her hands while her escorts both carried rifles.

"Why aren't there any droids?" Corlay whispered as they reached the half way point between the entrance to the storehouse and the control point where they had earlier encountered the Sith hologram.

"Perhaps because no one is meant to get this far." Jaynie suggested.

"No self respecting warlord would ever omit to include a final layer of security against attack." Han responded, "Especially not one from a society as well known for inter factional warfare and assassination as the Sith. Corlay's right there ought to be more defences. I've got a very bad feeling about this." All of a sudden the ceiling mounted lighting, that had illuminated the storehouse as though it were daylight flickered and failed to leave only the smaller and less powerful lights that shone from the alcoves lining the passageway around the storehouse.

"Not a coincidence?" Jaynie said as both Corlay and Han activated compact flash lights mounted on their rifles to better light their path and Han shook his head before continuing to advance.

When they reached the stairs that led up to the mysterious crystalline column and the machinery that controlled the storehouse the war droids that had been positioned there when the Founding Families had first entered it were missing.

"Far too easy." Han said as he began to climb the stairs, keeping his rifle aimed towards the column. When he was about half way up there was a flickering blue light at the top and Slaydo appeared, looking down at Han and smiling.

"Ah, so you have returned." he said as Corlay dropped to her knees and took aim at the image hut held her fire.

"The column." Han said, "Target the column." and he swung his rifle towards the massive lump of crystal that now pulsed with an eerie green light and he continued to climb the stairs.

"You think that you can defeat me with just two real warriors when so many failed last time?" Slaydo asked as his image looked at both Corlay and Han before glancing only briefly at Jaynie.

"If you're so confident then how come you haven't attacked yet?" Han asked in response.

"Because I intend only to watch." Slaydo answered, "My new apprentice will be the one to deal with you." and upon being mentioned by the Sith lord, Gayal stepped out from behind the column of crystal and there was a 'snap-hiss' as she activated her lightsaber.

Whillam turned his starfighter as tightly as he could. Starsaber-class fighters were notoriously lacking in this regard and they remained in use with the Jedi Order purely because of the superior reactions of their pilots. But when facing the war droids that were piloting the Sith fighters it was harder to predict their next move and Whillam had been caught by surprise when a pair of the machine flown craft emerged from behind the Founding Families' command cruiser and opted to target his ship instead.

"They're all over me." he broadcast as flashes of blaster fire shot past his canopy.

"Almost there." Seth responded as he put his starfighter into an even tighter turn, rolling at the same time.

"Hang on Seth, you're leaving me behind." Dac added as he tried to keep up.

Then another burst of blaster fire erupted from one of the Sith fighters and the wing was ripped of Whillam's fighter.

"I'm hit!" he exclaimed as the sound of alarms filled his cockpit.

"I've got a lock." Seth broadcast as one of the Sith fighters drifted into his field of fire and before it could try to evade him the jedi pilot had already fired a synchronised volley from his quad laser cannons that blew the enemy fighter apart. The second rolled aside but as it did so it brought itself into the path of Dac and a sustained burst of fire from his laser cannons ripped through it.

"Got the other." he called out.

"Whillam I see flames all down your starboard side, can you hold it together?" Seth asked.

"I don't think so." Whillam replied, "And I've no suit so I can't eject."

Most jedi went without vacuum suits when they piloted starfighters and although this meant that they had more freedom of movement within the cockpit it also prevented them from ejecting anywhere that lacked a breathable atmosphere.

"Can you make it back to one of the frigates?" Dac suggested.

"I doubt it." Whillam said, "But there is another alternative." and then before either Dac or Seth could reply he turned his fighter directly towards the nearby command cruiser.

"Stang!" Dac exclaimed, initially thinking that the older jedi intended to ram his stricken starfighter into the larger vessel. But rather than carrying out a suicide run Whillam was aiming for the opening that was the entrance to the ship's hangar bay, aligning it to be at a right angle to the cruiser orientation.

"Okay Dac it's your turn now." Seth transmitted, "So try and keep up or you'll be on your own."

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Dac responded.

The moment that Whillam's fighter passed through the magnetic field that held the atmosphere inside he pulled on his fighter's ejection handle and he was blasted sideways across the hangar while his fighter ploughed into a bulkhead at the far end of the hangar. Releasing his harness while still in flight, Whillam used the Force to guide his fall so he landed on his feet and with his lightsaber in his hand just as a small group of freedom warriors who had been left to watch over the two jedi vessels in the hangar came rushing up to him.

"Commander are you okay?" one asked.

"Fine, yes." Whillam responded and looking towards the burning wreck of his fighter he added, "At least

better than can be said of my ship. Now where is Master Udra?"

"Master Udra and the other jedi have gone to try and find a way into the bridge while Sergeant Gall and the rest of us make a direct assault to draw out the enemy," the freedom warrior answered and Whillam nodded. "Which way did the sergeant go?" he asked.

"That way. Towards the workshops."

"Then call ahead and let him know I'm on my way. I'd hate to get shot at by my own side. Having the enemy do it is bad enough."

"Please, I'll do anything." Charity begged as two mandalorians forced her to her knees and held her arms out wide.

"Oh I do like hearing her beg." Salla said.

"Then I shall do my best to ensure she is able to do so for as long as possible my dear." Erill replied as he unrolled a fabric pouch to reveal the assortment of bladed implements it contained. He picked one out and smiled as he tested the sharpness of the blade while he walked round behind Charity. Then as he pressed the tip of the blade up against her ear he added, "Now hold girl still or this won't be straight."

But before he could draw blood the door to the suite suddenly slid open as the Republic troops outside overrode the lock and there were several bright flashes from blast rifles that struck the mandalorians nearest the door.

Without Erill having to order it the mandalorians returned fire but the Republic troops had the advantage of both surprise and effective body armour and although one of the soldiers fell as a pulse wave blast struck the weak point of his armour between his helmet and chest plate the best the mandalorians were able to do was prevent any of them from entering the room.

"I've got her. Go help them." Erill said to the mandalorians holding onto Charity as he grabbed her by the throat. Then he and Salla retreated away from the doorway while their remaining troops engaged the Republic soldiers outside.

Erill shoved Charity behind a large solidly built table before he and Salla also took cover behind it out of the line of sight of the Republic troops.

"I wouldn't count on them saving you." Salla hissed, glaring at Charity, "He'll slit your throat before they get anywhere near us." and she glanced towards Erill.

However, at the same time that one group of his men were assaulting the front door to the suite Colonel Jeck had led a second unit into a neighbouring suite and even before the shooting started they had already deployed a shaped charge ring against the wall that separated them. A large water filled sack had then been placed over this to further focus the blast as well as protecting the Republic troops behind it from any of the blast wave that may be reflected back at them off the wall. Right as Salla was looking at her father-in-law, Colonel Jeck turned to the combat engineer holding the remote trigger for the charge and he nodded.

The blast from the shaped charge punched a neat rectangular hole in the wall it had been placed against and hurled the section of wall in the middle of this across the room. Entirely directed through the hole, the sound of the blast was overpowering to everyone in the room. This included the mandalorians who, devoid of their traditional armour had no protection against the concussive wave.

"Go!" Colonel Jeck yelled and despite being the only member of the assault team not wearing full body armour, he had only had time to don a simple armoured vest in the time available since leaving the station's command and control centre, he leapt through the hole in the wall first and fired his blast pistol into the chest of the nearest mandalorian.

While his men surged through both the front door and the hole blown in the wall and engaged the rest of the mandalorians, the colonel looked around for any signs of Charity. Noticing what was obviously a female arm protruding from behind a table he rushed towards it, hoping to secure Charity and be able to get her to safety. But as he rounded the table he saw that the woman whose arm he had seen was in fact Salla Crassis and he paused. This gave Erill enough time to come to his senses and he looked up at Colonel Jeck before leaping to his feet and lunging forwards, the blade he had been going to use on Charity extended out in front of him.

The blade caught on Colonel Jeck's armoured vest and was pushed aside and the colonel started to take aim at Erill with his blast pistol. But the older man reacted far quicker than Colonel Jeck had expected and he struck again with the blade, this time catching his wrist and causing him to gasp as he dropped his pistol to the floor. Not wanting to give Erill another chance to stab him he swung his elbow around and struck him in the side of his face, knocking Erill off balance for just long enough that the colonel was able to reach out and wrap both his hands around Erill's wrist. But while Colonel Jeck had assumed that the elderly man would be easy to overpower physically Erill proved to be stronger than he appeared and slowly he was able to bring the blade towards the colonel's throat.

"There's more to you than meets the eye isn't there?" Colonel Jeck said to Erill and in reply he smiled.

"You'll find I'm full of surprises." he said and for just one moment Colonel Jeck thought he saw Erill's eyes turn solid black. Startled by this, Colonel Jeck relaxed his grip just enough that Erill was able to thrust the

blade forwards, stabbing the colonel in his neck.

Colonel Jeck's eyes widened and as he staggered back he lashed out one last time, striking Erill with enough force that he overbalanced and as he fell backwards there was a sudden 'Crack!' as the base of his skull struck the side of table.

"Colonel!" Charity called out as she recovered just in time to see Colonel Jeck collapse with blood pouring out from behind his hands as he tried desperately to stem the bleeding at his neck while her father lay motionless on the floor beside her, his eyes open wide and staring up at the ceiling while a pool of blood started to form under his head, "Colonel Jeck what can I do?" she added as she crawled across the floor towards him. But just as she came close enough to reach out and touch the colonel she felt someone grab hold of her ankle and pull her back.

"Where do you think you're going slaymo?" Salla exclaimed as she pulled Charity closer. Letting go of Charity's ankle, Salla then grabbed hold of Erill's blade from his lifeless hand and lunged forwards. Leaping on top of Charity, Salla held her sister down on the floor and raised her hand to display the blade while she held Charity's neck with the other.

"Drop the weapon!" a voice suddenly called out.

"Put it down!" another added and both Charity and Salla looked around to see the armoured Republic troops now starting to surround them and all aiming their blast rifles towards Salla.

"Drop it! Drop it now!"

Salla looked back down at Charity and a smile spread across her face.

"We die together." she hissed before there was the sound of several blast rifles firing in unison.

Charity screamed and closed her eyes but all of a sudden she felt the pressure of Salla's weight on top of her vanish and heard the sound of something hit the floor close by. Opening her eyes again she saw Salla lay dead with a cluster of burns inflicted by blast rifles in her chest while the soldiers looked down at her.

"Miss Crassis, are you injured?" one asked and Charity shook her head. Then she remembered Colonel Jeck and looked around, "The colonel." she added, "Is he-"

"I'm sorry miss. The colonel didn't make it." the soldier replied before she could finish.

## 25.

The first things Cal and Lara noticed when they burst into the library that held the entrance leading to the Sith storehouse were the bodies of Belle and Natalay.

"Looks like we're not the first ones here." Lara said as she advanced slowly towards Natalay's body while Cal headed for Belle instead, "Wow. That's a lot of damage." she added when she saw the effects of the plasma carbine. Meanwhile Cal focused on the wound on Belle's torso. A wound that looked all too familiar.

*You know what sort of weapon can inflict an injury like that and who carries one.*

"A lightsaber." Cal muttered in response to Master Karas.

"What?" Lara asked, turning towards him.

"Belle was killed by a lightsaber." Cal answered, "Kyle Jenner got here before us."

"Oh kriff." Lara exclaimed, "Cal, if he's got inside-"

"I know." Cal interrupted, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and drawing his lightsaber.

Cal be careful. I underestimated Kyle Jenner and it cost me dearly.

"Kyle has to be stopped at any cost." Cal said and then he headed towards the passageway that led to the Sith storehouse.

"Gayal what the kriff is going on here?" Han asked as she advanced towards him, watched from the top of the steps by Slaydo's hologram and from the bottom by Corlay and Jaynie.

"I've got a shot." Corlay called out, her rifle lined up on Gayal.

"No." Han told his sister, "Gayal's one of us. Aren't you Gayal?"

"One of you?" Gayal asked, "Was I one of you when your sister and her father took me to that asylum? You left me there to rot and the only reason Erill Crassis sent anyone to release me was because he wanted to make use of my power."

"Power I have been teaching her to make use of." Slaydo added, "And now my young apprentice the time has come for you to put your lessons into practice. Kill them all."

"With pleasure master." Gayal replied and she broke into a run, heading straight for Han.

Han fired a single shot from his rifle at close range, expecting the blast to take Gayal off her feet as it smashed her ribs. But even in the limited time available for her to train she had learned to channel her fear and anger into something usable and the power this gave her enabled her simply swat the spatial distortion in flight, bursting it as soon as the field surrounding her lightsaber blade struck it.

"What the kriff?" Han exclaimed in shock moments before Gayal slammed into him and knocked him back down the stairs.

Hoping that being focused on her older brother would make Gayal vulnerable, Corlay opened fire with her rifle set to automatic. But once again Gayal was able to place her lightsaber in the line of fire and blocked every one of the shots. Then she let out a sudden scream and at the same time she unleashed a crude blast of power that manifested itself as a barely controlled telekinetic wave. This wave travelled down the stairs and struck both Corlay and Jaynie, hurling the pair of them backwards.

"Excellent!" Slaydo called out from the top of the stairs, "You have learned well my young apprentice."

*Danger.*

Gayal sensed trouble and she turned to see that Han still lay on the floor at the bottom of the stairs but had drawn his pulse wave blaster and was just pointing it in her direction. Gayal leapt straight up into the air just before he fired, the shot passing harmlessly underneath her. Han lifted his aim, trying to follow Gayal as she spun in mid air before landing on the steps again only this time much closer to him. As she began to advance down the stairs Han fired again and again but each shot was deflected by Gayal's lightsaber while Slaydo looked on and laughed.

"Good. Good. Now kill him." Slaydo said, his hologram smiling.

"With pleasure master." Gayal replied and she extended her free hand towards Han.

All of a sudden Han found himself unable to breathe and he fell back again, dropping his weapon as he clawed at his throat.

"Han!" Corlay shouted and Gayal looked around just in time to see her getting to her knees and picking up her rifle. Before Corlay could fire Gayal let go of her grip on Han and leapt back into the air. This time she landed right in front of Corlay and she swung her lightsaber in a downward arc that sliced right through her rifle, prompting a surprised gasp from Corlay. Dropping her ruined weapon she instinctively lashed out at Gayal with one hand while the other reached for her sidearm instead, but Gayal was ready for this and with a second swing of her lightsaber she sliced Corlay's hand off at the wrist.

Corlay screamed in agony, clutching the cauterised stump of her wrist and staggering backwards while staring at Gayal. But Gayal was not prepared to let her opponent escape merely maimed and she pressed her attack, lunging forwards with her lightsaber extending out in front of her to impale Corlay through the

chest.

With Corlay dealt with Gayal then turned back towards Han and saw him crawling across the floor towards his pulse wave blaster and she smiled. Then reaching out with her hand she channelled the Force in the most controlled fashion she had attempted so far and summoned the weapon to her own hand just as Han was about to reach it.

"Thanks Han." she said.

"Gayal no. Wait just a-" Han croaked but before he could finish whatever it was he had to say Gayal shot him in the head.

"Gayal."

Gayal heard Jaynie's voice from behind her and she turned around. The other young woman had lost her pulse wave blaster when she had been thrown through the air and was just now getting back to her feet.

"Gayal I don't want to fight you." Jaynie added.

"You can't fight me." Gayal replied, tossing the pulse wave blaster she had taken from Han aside and walking slowly towards Jaynie with her lightsaber held extending out to her side, "You can only die."

"But why?" Jaynie asked, backing slowly away as Gayal continued to advance, "Why me? What have I ever done to you? We were friends growing up remember?"

"Why me?" Gayal repeated, "What did I do? I had six months to ask myself that question over and over again in the cell your father put me in."

"But that wasn't me. I didn't know." Jaynie said, knowing that she was pleading for her life.

"You know they kept me in a straight jacket the whole time?" Gayal said, "Do you know what it's like to have no use of your arms at all?" and then before Jaynie could reply Gayal leapt forwards and with two strokes of her lightsaber she severed both Jaynie's arms at the shoulder. Jaynie shrieked, turning her head in disbelief to look at the severed limbs now lying on the floor beside her.

"I couldn't even ask why I was being kept locked away either." Gayal added, "You see they kept me gagged as well." and then all of a sudden she thrust her lightsaber forwards so that it entered through Jaynie's mouth as it hung open and exited through the back of her head.

"Excellent." a voice called out from behind Gayal, "Exactly the sort of strength I want in an apprentice." But this was not the voice of Slaydo Kreeyn and when she turned around she found herself standing facing Kyle Jenner.

The ventilation duct became narrower as it approached the bridge. Evidently the designers had foreseen the possibility that someone may try and use them to bypass the ship's internal defences and taken steps to prevent this.

"Okay this is as far as we go." Varn said when he found the vent closing in too far for him to be able to carry on.

"I don't sense anyone around." Elle commented from the rear.

"Good." Varn replied before pressing his lightsaber against the side of the duct and igniting it. The duct as made from a lightweight alloy and so the blade punched through effortlessly before Varn used it to slice a hole large enough for the jedi to exit the duct into the corridor below.

They paused when they landed, all five jedi holding their lightsabers at the ready just in case they had been overheard leaving the duct. But all they could hear was the sound of weapons fire in the distance as Sergeant Gall and his freedom warriors, now joined by Whillam Antress fought against the marine detachment defending the cruiser.

"This way." Varn said, looking away from the noise of battle, "Before anyone realises that we're here."

The jedi hurried along the deserted corridors of the cruiser. With the vessel at battle stations most of the crew were at their duty stations rather than wandering around while the on board marines had been drawn away by the freedom warriors. Combined this meant that the jedi reached the door to the ship's bridge without seeing a single crew member.

The door itself was typical of such obstacles, a heavily armoured blast door blocking an enlarged doorway and Varn inspected it closely for weak points.

"Looks strong to me dear." Neri commented.

"Since when has that stopped me?" Varn replied and then he plunged his lightsaber into the centre of the blast door.

"Jedi!" Calleen exclaimed when she saw the centre of the blast door start to glow from the inside, "They're right outside."

"I wouldn't worry if I was you." Josh replied.

"Don't worry?" Trent asked in amazement, "There's a jedi knight right outside that door."

"Maybe so Mister President, but among the Sith artefacts my family recovered over the years was a supply of an alloy that had some very interesting properties. Resistance to high energy attack for example and I thought it prudent to use some of that stockpile to reinforce the door and walls of the bridge and my quarters

aboard my personal command ship. It will take much more than a single jedi to get through that in a hurry.”

“This is tougher than it looks.” Varn said, holding his lightsaber blade in the door as he looked around at the other jedi.

“Then maybe five of us will be able to make more progress.” Neri suggested and she stepped forwards to stand beside her husband before she too plunged her lightsaber into the metal of the armoured door.

“You heard her.” Elle told Pedrus and Rich and all three then joined Neri and Varn in attacking the door.

“So what about five jedi general?” Trent asked as more glowing spots appeared on the inside of the blast door, “Will your door keep them out forever?”

“For long enough.” Josh replied before activating the ship's intercom system, “Marine units pull back to the bridge. We are under attack by jedi.”

Whillam helped Sergeant Gall drag one of his injured men out of the line of fire. The freedom warriors were still deployed in the same positions they had occupied for most of the last half an hour but this did not concern them, their orders were simply to keep the cruiser's defending marine contingent occupied while Varn and his team of jedi dealt with the bridge. However, the volume of fire from the enemy suddenly began to decrease and there were shouts that were accompanied by the sounds of running from their direction.

“They're falling back.” Sergeant Gall said as he looked around the container he was using for cover.

“Now I wonder why that can be?” Whillam commented, “I don't need to be a jedi to sense that this means trouble for Master Udra.”

“Shall we go after them commander?” Gall asked and Whillam nodded, “We have to. Leave enough of your men here to care for the wounded but have the rest follow me.”

“Behind us!” Neri called out when she sensed the approaching marines and withdrawing her lightsaber from the door she turned to face them just in time to block the first pulse wave blast fired towards the jedi.

“Hold them back.” Varn ordered, “I'll deal with the door.” and the other jedi all turned to face this new threat.

With four jedi working together to block the pulse wave fire coming towards them not one of the marines' shots got past their lightsabers. But at the same time Varn was now struggling by himself to try and cut through the door that had proven startlingly resistant to lightsabers.

“We can't keep this up forever you know.” Elle said as she continued to swing her lightsaber to parry the incoming pulse wave blasts.

“We can't go anywhere else either though.” Neri pointed out.

“What if we charge them?” Pedrus asked.

“No.” Elle replied, “We can't cover Varn if we're running down the corridor and we need him to get through that door.”

“Master.” Rich said suddenly.

“What?” Varn responded.

“No, sorry master. I meant my master. Jedi Antress is coming.”

“Whillam's here?” Elle asked and Rich nodded, “But he's supposed to be out there in a starfighter.”

“I can sense him aboard the ship and he's getting closer.” Rich replied right before there was an explosion from within the enemy position as a grenade went off.

Some of the remaining marines then turned away from the jedi as the freedom warriors led by Whillam and Sergeant Gall arrived. Knowing that there were jedi on the far side of their enemies the freedom warriors chose their targets carefully and fired volleys of single shots while Whillam advanced ahead of them, using his lightsaber to protect himself against the pulse wave blasts fired more rapidly in return by the now surrounded marines.

“Okay now we can advance.” Elle said and leaving Varn to continue with his efforts to cut through the blast door the other jedi began to walk towards the marines.

“Surrender!” Whillam called out to the enemy troops the jedi were getting ever closer to, boxing them in with no where to retreat to, “You are surrounded.”

“Fight to the last man.” he leader of the diminishing number of marines responded but just moments later he was shot by one of the freedom warriors and collapsed in a heap. Knowing that they were indeed surrounded and that there were no reinforcements coming that could get to them before the jedi did the marines ceased fire, lowering their weapons and raising their hands.

“Whillam.” Neri said as the freedom warriors quickly advanced to secure their prisoners, “You're a sight for sore eyes.”

“Glad to be of help.” he replied, “Now what is our status?”

“The access to the bridge is blocked by a blast door made of an alloy resistant even to lightsabers.” Neri explained, “Though with six I think we should be able to get through.”

Gayal raised her lightsaber, ready to engage Kyle but in return he just halted and looked at her.

"Come now, is that any way to greet your new master?" he asked.

"I already have a master." Gayal replied.

"Indeed she does. A genuine Sith at that, not some pretender with a fraction of the power I command."

Slaydo added, the hologram remaining at the top of the stairs to observe.

"A genuine Sith?" Kyle exclaimed, "The Sith lord who built this place died a thousand years ago Gayal. What you are serving is nothing more than an echo that has yet to come to terms with that. Serve that thing and you will never be anything more than you are now. Its slave. But join me and together we can rule the galaxy. With the knowledge contained in this place not even the Jedi will be able to stand against us."

"Lord Kreeyn needs me." Gayal said, "No matter how powerful he is he cannot leave this place and because of that he cannot do without me. On the other hand you would get rid of me as soon as you suspected I was strong enough to threaten you. No deal."

"Then today is the day you join your master in death." Kyle said, "Only you won't even continue to exist as a hologram." and then he activated his lightsaber, standing in front of Gayal with it in one hand and his newly acquired Sword of the Sith in the other.

## 26.

The blast door was glowing brightly now as the combined energy of six lightsabers heated it and the small number of marines deployed on the bridge stood back and took aim towards it. On the far side of the door a pulse wave weapon was fired at the now severely weakened structure and despite the unnatural material used in its construction it shattered, hurling red hot fragments across the bridge.

Varn led the other Jedi in leaping through the opening that had just been created, their lightsabers deflecting the pulse wave blasts fired at them by the marines guards before they were cut down. Seeing the intruders, Josh pushed past Calleen and Trent to face the Jedi and he drew his sidearm. Rather than the pulse wave blasters that were standard issue to the CMDF or even one of the state of the art blast pistols used by Republic forces, Josh carried an archaic beam rod fitted with a pistol grip for easier aiming. This primitive laser weapon was fed from a belt mounted power supply and had been developed during the early years of the Republic more than twenty thousand years earlier. It was still an effective weapon, however and Josh had used his to great effect over the years. Taking aim at Varn himself, Josh fired. But now the limitations of the weapon were cruelly exposed as Varn placed his lightsaber blade in the path of the beam. Had Josh used a pulse wave blaster or even a slug thrower the shot would have simply been blocked by the blade of high energy plasma. But as the laser beam interacted with the field surrounding Varn's blade it was not absorbed but deflected and by carefully angling his weapon Varn was able to send the beam right back at Josh.

Josh's eyes widened as the beam burned through his chest and almost immediately after his weapon fell from his grasp, the cord leading to the power supply on his belt supporting it as it fell and preventing it from hitting the floor until Josh himself collapsed in a heap as Trent and Calleen looked on in horror.

"Senator Trent Narthis!" Varn called, advancing across the bridge while behind him freedom warriors now poured through the breach in the blast door to secure the remaining command crew of the cruiser, "Calleen Narthis. You are both under arrest."

"Arrest? Who are you to arrest me? I am the President of the Narthis Sector." Trent demanded.

"And what are the charges supposed to be?" Calleen added.

"I am Jedi Master Varn Udra." Varn said, "And the charges are conspiracy to commit murder, the possession and transportation of prohibited Sith artefacts and oh yes, my favourite, treason against the Republic."

Trent turned to look out through the bridge's viewport at Delvad.

"You haven't won anything yet Jedi." he said, "When the Sith library is ours we'll have our victory."

"Oh I wouldn't worry about that." Neri said, "Cal and Lara have dealing with the Sith library well in hand."

Cal and Lara made their way around the storehouse. Their curiosity led them to want to investigate more closely many of the treasures they saw in the dim light but this was not why they were here.

*Hurry. She is in grave danger.*

At Master Karas' urging Cal suddenly broke into a run, now ignoring the alcoves and their contents.

"Cal wait!" Lara called out after him, "What's the big hurry?"

Kyle charged at Gayal, attacking with each of his blades alternately. Gayal moved to parry each blow with her own lightsaber but Kyle had many years more experience with a lightsaber than she did and the ferocity of his attacks pushed her back further away from the stairs leading up to the crystal column and the storehouse's control systems with each deflected blow while giving her too little time to even attempt to strike back.

All of a sudden Kyle ceased his attacks and came to a halt staring at Gayal.

"Surely now you see that your supposed Sith master has been unable to teach you enough to defeat me." he said, "So I make the offer again. Join me or die."

"Back away from her Kyle." Cal called out as he came rushing towards them, grinding to a halt a few metres away.

"Cal!" Gayal exclaimed, turning around as she heard his voice.

"I promised I'd come back." he replied, smiling.

"Oh good grief." Lara commented from just behind Cal, "Perhaps we should delay the flirting while we deal with the psychotic killer?" then when she looked at Gayal again and saw how she was armed she added,

"Wait, when did she get a lightsaber?"

"Cal. Lara." Kyle called out, "It is good to see the pair of you again. Have either of you reconsidered my offer to become my apprentice?"

"He asked me to become his apprentice as well." Gayal said as she backed further away from Kyle.

"Wow, you'll ask anyone to be your apprentice won't you?" Lara responded and Kyle sighed.

"Then if none of you will join me, all of you must die." he said before charging forwards.

Cal and Lara immediately rushed forwards as well, placing themselves between Kyle and Gayal and he struck at them both simultaneously. The Jedi blocked his attacks and moved apart, forcing Kyle to focus his attention on just one of them and he opted to turn towards Cal, swinging his lightsaber at the Jedi knight. Cal parried the strike and the pair remained locked together, each one trying to push the other's lightsaber blade back towards him.

"Cal hang on!" Lara called out as she charged, holding her lightsaber up high. But Kyle swung his Sword of the Sith around and pointed the tip of the blade straight towards her, forcing Lara to break off the attack before she was impaled on it. Before she could make another attempt at attacking Kyle he swung his foot out in front of him, hooking it around one of Cal's legs and tripping him. However, rather than finish Cal immediately Kyle leapt backwards and turned towards Lara, crossing his two blades and swinging them down together in an attempt to get one either side of her head before decapitating her. Lara avoided this fate by dropping to her knees and holding her lightsaber up over her head with both hands to block Kyle's blades in their path. But this left her trapped while he continued to try and force the weapons down on top of her. Help came from an unexpected source as Gayal rushed forwards.

"Get off her!" she yelled and Kyle leapt back to avoid the crude lightsaber attack.

Leaping back to her feet Lara stood side by side with Gayal just as Cal picked himself up as well and joined them.

"Looks like you're outnumbered Kyle." Cal said, "Give up."

"Did Hargood not tell you what happened when he and Master Karas' former padawan tried to challenge me boy?" Kyle replied and he smiled, "Of course he didn't. I defeated them both and he was a much finer swordsman than any of you."

"Together?" Lara asked and Cal nodded.

"Together." he replied, "Now!" and all three of them charged.

Knowing that he could not fight three at least semi-skilled opponents armed with lightsabers at the same time Kyle tossed his Sword of the Sith aside and with his now free hand he reached forwards and used it to channel the Force, lifting both Gayal off her feet and hurling her into Lara as he turned to meet Cal's charge alone.

"You should choose your fighting companions more carefully." Kyle said as he and Cal traded blows.

"I'm fine with the ones I have thank you." Cal replied.

"Cal get down!" Lara shouted and Cal dived aside. Turning to face Lara, Kyle saw that she had drawn her pulse wave blaster and was aiming it directly at him. Then she fired. Kyle easily blocked the shot but this did not stop her from firing again and again, each shot forcing him to focus on her while Cal and Gayal moved into position to strike again.

But Kyle realised what was about to happen and he extended his hand towards Lara again and unleash a storm of Force lightning. With her lightsaber inactive, Lara was defenceless against this and she screamed as the Dark Side energy washed over her.

"Lara no!" Cal yelled, diving towards his sister and placing his blade in the path of the lightning. With no time to properly angle his blade, Cal deflected the energy of the Force lightning at random, some of it splashing towards him and burning his skin while more of it was sent back where it had come from and Kyle flinched as it struck him. Ceasing his attack on Lara he instead turned his attention back to Gayal while she was isolated from Cal and Lara. She attempted to pre-empt his charge by rushing headlong towards him at the same time but Kyle reacted by breaking off his attack, sidestepping her charge and elbowing her in the face as she passed him before tripping her. He was just about to bring his lightsaber down on her as she lay helpless at his feet when he felt a tremor in the Force.

*Danger.*

Kyle spun around only just in time to parry Cal's attack.

"Get off her!" Cal shouted right into Kyle's face.

*Rage.*

Kyle was taken aback by the fury within Cal at the thought of Gayal coming to harm and now it was Kyle that was forced back with each blow.

"Good." Kyle hissed, "Use your hatred. It makes you strong and with each blow you come closer to being my apprentice."

*Cal no! The Dark Side saturates this place. You must not let it inside you or you will become just like Kyle Jenner.*

"Cal no!" Lara shouted as she got back to her feet following the lightning attack, echoing Master Karas' warning as she too sensed the Dark Side gathering around her brother.

Realising what he risked, Cal stepped back and lowered his weapon.

"Too bad." Kyle said, "Just as you were showing some promise." and he swung his lightsaber at Cal. In response Cal raised his own weapon but rather than simply try and block Kyle's attack he waited until the two shining blue blades were locked together and then stepped sideways, dragging his blade along Kyle's until it struck the emitter in its grip and there was a sudden flash as Cal's lightsaber destroyed Kyle's.

Kyle jumped back before Cal could strike again now that he was defenceless.

"Give up Kyle." Cal said.

"I think not." Kyle replied, "I can always get another." and reaching out with the Force he tore Gayal's lightsaber from her grasp. But in the fight he had overlooked how her weapon was powered and in tearing it from her grip he also tore out the connection to the power pack on her belt and when he caught it and tried to reactivate the weapon he found it inoperative. So instead he dropped the lightsaber grip, leapt straight up into the air and as he spun over Cal's head he summoned his discarded Sword of the Sith back to his grasp. Lara rushed to where Kyle looked likely to land and the moment his feet hit the ground she struck out with her lightsaber. But Kyle blocked the attack easily and responded with an attack of his own that pushed Lara back.

Meanwhile Cal bent down to pick up the grip of Gayal's weapon and tossed it back to her. Then he turned towards Kyle and his sister and saw Lara giving more ground she was forced back with each sword stroke from Kyle.

*Time to return the favour Cal.*

Cal frowned, puzzled at Master Karas' somewhat cryptic comment. But then he remembered Lara using her pulse wave blaster to distract Kyle. Those attacks had been stopped by the former Jedi's lightsaber and that was a weapon he no longer had. Smiling, Cal reached under his cloak and drew his own sidearm.

"Lara! Down!" he shouted and Lara ducked just as Cal fired.

Kyle turned to face the direction of the attack and instinctively he placed his blade in front of himself to block it. But the blade of a Sword of the Sith was a physical object rather than a blade of energy wrapped in a magnetic field and so although it was quite capable of withstanding the impact of the artificial spatial distortions fired the force of the impact knocked the blade backwards as well as travelling along the blade into Kyle who staggered back as Cal continued to fire as he rushed forwards to attack with his lightsaber. Kyle parried this attack and once again Cal found his blade locked against Kyle's. But this time Cal wasted no effort in trying to push Kyle's blade back towards him, instead just making sure that the two weapons remained in the same place even if this meant retreating as Kyle tried to push against him. All this was so that Cal could slip his other hand beneath the two blades and press the muzzle of his pulse wave blaster against Kyle's stomach.

Feeling the pressure of this Kyle looked down and then with his eyes wide he looked back up at Cal who smiled back at him.

"Got cha." he said as he pulled the trigger.

The point blank blast took Kyle off his feet and hurled him backwards, his sword flying from his grip and clattering to the floor some distance away. Cal and Lara then advanced towards him slowly. They could sense that he was still alive but also that he would not be for long, the internal damage inflicted by the pulse wave blaster was just too great for him to be able to recover from it. Kyle gasped for air and coughed up blood as Cal and Lara arrived to look down at him. Then he waved his hand at the alcoves around them filled with Sith artefacts.

"I would have shared it all with you." he gasped and then he was gone.

Meanwhile Gayal had gone to retrieve the Sword of the Sith Kyle had dropped and as she picked it up there was a glowing light as Slaydo's hologram appeared.

"A fine weapon." he said, "One suitable to use to end the lives of these Jedi."

Cal and Lara both turned towards the hologram, holding up their lightsabers.

"No. I can't." Gayal said.

"You can't?" Slaydo responded angrily, "Who are you to deny me? I am your master. When everyone else turned their backs and abandoned you I took you in and trained you. Now you will do as you are told."

"Cal didn't abandon me." Gayal replied, "He came back for me every time because he loves me. I can feel it. So no, I won't kill him."

"Then I shall kill you all!" Slaydo yelled and the hologram held out its hands and let loose with a storm of lightning.

"Gayal look out!" Cal yelled rushing forwards to push her out of the way but the lightning struck them both and they lay on the floor screaming together.

Then Lara rushed forwards as well, holding up her lightsaber as she placed herself between her brother and Gayal and the ancient hologram. The storm of electricity rebounded back towards the hologram but Slaydo just laughed as the energy passed right through his image.

"The crystal column." Gayal gasped, "That's his holocron, how he controls everything."

Cal struggled to his feet, unslinging his rifle and picking a grenade round from the bandoleer under his cloak.

"Lara." he said, "I'll protect Gayal, you end this." and he tossed her the weapon.

Catching it in one hand, Lara broke into a run and headed further along the storehouse's main passageway in the direction of the stairs.

"Crystal column, crystal column." she said to herself, "If I was an essential crystal column then where would I be?" and then she ground to a halt as she saw the stairs that led up to the pulsing crystal column, "That's

where." she said as she dropped to her knees and raised the rifle and its underslung grenade launcher. "No!" Slaydo called out as his hologram reappeared at the top of the steps, "I can give you anything you desire." but Lara ignored this and fired the grenade launcher. The tiny projectile flew straight through the hologram of Slaydo and struck the centre of the crystal column. The grenade Cal had selected contained a shaped charge intended to penetrate the protective armour of fighting vehicles and the blast of molten metal along with the shock wave the detonation generated blasted into the crystal structure and blew it apart. "No!" Slaydo screamed again as his hologram flickered and then faded away. "I love this gun." Lara said to herself, grinning as she looked at the rifle.

"Cal I did it!" Lara called out as she rushed back to where she had left her brother and Gayal, "The column was destroyed." she added as she found them both sat on the floor supporting one another. "Then the droids should just shut down." Gayal said, "Slaydo was controlling them directly." "So the war's over then?" Lara asked. "It looks that way." Cal replied, "At least the war against the Sith. Though there may be more of the Founding Families left to be dealt with. Speaking of which." and he looked at Gayal and smiled, "So what's your answer then?" he asked. "Answer?" Lara said, frowning, "Oh no, Cal what have you done?" "Yes." Gayal said, smiling back at Cal, "My answer's yes. I will marry you." "Oh no." Lara said, her frown deepening, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

In orbit around Delvad the Sith vessels had stopped firing and were starting to just drift at random. Meanwhile more and more of the ships of the Founding Families' fleet were starting to surrender to the Republic forces. Watching from the cockpit of the transport ship Erin Shill searched for any signs of survivors. When the Republic fleet had arrived Erin had shut down as many systems as she could aboard the transport, running silent to escape detection rather than attempting to reach the command cruiser and now it appeared that she could be all that remained of the Founding Families in the Delvad system. The fact that the Sith vessels had failed to join with the Founding Families when they stopped firing told her that the team sent to take the Sith storehouse had failed and that it was now in the hands of the Republic as well. It was amongst the remains of the Sith battleships that Erin found a small holdout force still fighting the Republic craft sent to route them out. From the size of the vessels and the way in which they were being flown Erin guessed that they were mandalorians riding basilisk war droids.

"Commander Mott, this is Erin Shill. Do you read me?" she transmitted, hoping that the mandalorian leader would still be alive.

"I'm here lieutenant." Mott responded, "Though there are few of us left now. Perhaps the time has come to consider a withdrawal."

"I completely agree commander. I'm just beyond the battle zone, can you get to me?"

"Unlikely lieutenant. There are numerous Republic warships between us. However, we should be able to make it to the inner moon. If you can-"

"I can make it. I'll swing around behind it and meet you there. With any luck we'll be able to get out of the system before the Republic can react."

"Understood lieutenant. See you soon." Kaylor said. Then he switched his communications to broadcast to all his remaining men, "We are leaving." he announced, "A transport will meet us beyond the inner moon. Accelerate now."

The remaining basilisk war droid riders, a little under twenty of them now, turned and accelerated towards Delvad's inner moon. But this sudden co-ordinate manoeuvre caught the attention of the Republic and they moved to intercept.

"I've got a group of signals heading for the moon." Dac told Seth.

"I see them too. Looks like mandos." Seth replied, "Captain De Kuun can you give us some back up?"

"Moving into position now Jedi Ashran." the captain replied and his squadron of gunships turned to join the two jedi in their pursuit of the mandalorians.

Kaylor could see the moon ahead of him but it was obvious to him that the Republic forces behind him would catch up to his men before they could reach it. There were several wrecked ships from both the Sith and Founding Family fleets drifting nearby but using them to hide from their pursuers would be unlikely to gain the mandalorians much time and it certainly would not save them. The only way out that Kaylor could see was for his men to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

"Prepare to come about." he broadcast to them, "We will target the Republic gunship squadron first. Remember they carry proton-"

"No commander." one of his men interrupted and Kaylor recognised the voice as belonging to one of the men recruited from the Narthis sector rather than a native born mandalorian.

"What? We are mandalorian. We do not flinch from battle regardless of where we were born."

"Indeed commander." the warrior replied, "But as long as you escape our deeds will be remembered. We will

hold back the jedi and their Republic lackeys while you get to the rendezvous.”

“I do not fear death.” Kaylor said.

“He speaks for us all commander.” another mandalorian replied, a man that Kaylor had known since his time growing up on Mandalore, “Go, tell the galaxy how we fought to the last against our jedi enemies.” and all of a sudden all of the other basilisk war droids veered off, turning as tightly as they could and rushing towards the approaching Republic ships.

“I shall remember you.” Kaylor said as he continued towards the moon.

“Here they come!” Dac called out as he saw the mandalorians turn towards them.

“Don't let them get too close.” Seth said, “Open fire as soon as they come within range.”

“Confirmed Jedi Ashran.” Captain De Kuun added, “All ships open fire as soon as possible.” and moments later the small Republic force opened fire, laser blasts erupting from the jedi starfighters' wing mounted cannons as well as the turbolaser turrets mounted on the gunships. Maintaining a direct course towards the Republic fleet made the mandalorians easy targets and the powerful energy blasts ripped apart their droid mounts and incinerated the riders themselves. But a handful survived, getting close enough to the Republic ships that they were forced to scatter to avoid coming too close to the mandalorians and risking being hit by their own weaponry. The scattered Republic ships did not stay scattered for long though, swiftly regrouping and turning to make another pass that finished off the remaining mandalorians.

“That was the last of them.” Captain De Kuun announced.

“No it wasn't captain.” Dac replied, “I've still got one left on my scope. Looks like he's still making for that moon.”

“And he'll get there ahead of us.” Seth added, “It's just one man captain, I suggest we break off our pursuit and get back to dealing with the rest of the fleet yet to surrender.”

As Kaylor circled the moon he saw Erin's transport heading straight for him. She decelerated quickly and turned around, matching her course and speed with Kaylor's, opening the transport's cargo hatch to allow him to dock. Then after he was inside the ship she looked around to see him entering the cockpit behind her.

“So where to?” she asked as he sat beside her.

“Back to Crassis Major.” he said.

“Crassis Major? But the Republic are bound to come looking for us there.” Erin pointed out.

“Let them.” Kaylor replied, “All that remains of the Founding Families will be there now and we belong with them. But by the time the Republic gathers enough troops to take the world we will be long gone.”

Erin sighed.

“Crassis Major it is then.” she said, turning the transport away from the moon and towards the nearest point in space that would allow an easy jump through hyperspace to the Crassis system.

“Still no word from Delvad?” Hiran asked as he entered the lounge where Nissel had been waiting all night and she shook her head.

“Nothing.” she replied, “Though Shill Security has intercepted a transmission from the Teras system that confirms both Erill and Salla Crassis are dead. For all I know we're all that's left, us and Sial that is.”

At that moment Sial burst into the room.

“There's a ship approaching.” she exclaimed, “A transport, one of ours.”

“Where's it heading?” Nissel asked as she got to her feet.

“Your people cleared it for the main landing pad.” Sial said and the three of them rushed outside into the morning air.

As they ran towards the nearby landing pad they were joined by several armoured security guards, there to protect against any sort of trap. But when the transport touched down it was Erin and Kaylor that came walking down the ramp with solemn expressions on their faces.

“What's wrong?” Nissel asked.

“We lost didn't we?” Hiran added and Erin nodded.

“The Republic ambushed us as well.” she said, “Our forces were caught between them.”

“What about the storehouse?” Sial asked, looking at Kaylor, “Didn't you make it there?”

“My men were forced to deploy in space to protect the transport on its way down.” he replied.

“And we didn't hear a thing from the surface after I was ordered back to the fleet.” Erin said, “So given that the Sith forces suddenly just shut down the only explanation is that the attack on the storehouse failed and that the Republic controls that as well.”

“So what do we do now?” Sial asked, looking around, “They'll be coming for us next.”

“We carry on with the plan.” Hiran said, “We get out of here and start over somewhere else. Right?” and he looked at Erin and Kaylor.

“Right.” Kaylor replied, “Gather everything you can in an hour. We need to be long gone before the jedi arrive.”

When the Udra family came walking down the access ramp of the shuttle that brought them back to Teras with both Trent and Calleen in binders they found Hyronymous waiting for them along with Jule and several of her agents while Charity watched from close by.

"We heard the news a few hours ago." Hyronymous said, "Well done Master Udra."

"The job's not quite done yet." Varn replied, "The sector has not yet been returned to Republic control and that may take some time yet."

"But the Founding Families and the Sith have been defeated." Hyronymous said, "And that is a good start at least."

"Yes, good start." Neri replied, "Though I think my son and daughter are going to have their work cut out for them after we leave as the sector's official jedi."

"Here you go Agent Raser." Varn then said as he and Elle escorted Trent and Calleen to the sector rangers "They are all yours now."

"Thank you Master Udra." Jule replied, "I'll get things started arranging a prosecution immediately." then she looked to where Cal and Gayal stood arm in arm, "What about her?" she asked.

"Gayal's with me." Cal replied, "She'll be with me for a very long time."

"Oh give me strength." Lara said.

"So you did survive then." Charity commented, looking at Gayal, "Cal never lost hope you know."

"He told me." Gayal said, "He told me about you as well, what you wanted."

"So what will you do now Charity?" Cal asked.

"Well I can't stay here in the Narthis Sector can I?" she replied, "My family name is going to be like an asteroid around my neck so I think I'll head off somewhere else."

"Where?" Lara asked.

"Well my mother came from Estran so I may just head there. There are friends of hers there can help me. It'll mean using her name though but I think I can live with that." and then she smiled, "And who knows, maybe one day you can come and visit. Maybe some of your descendants and mine will get together just like I tried with you Cal."

"Maybe." he replied with a smile and Charity turned to walk away, "Just one thing." Cal called out after her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Supposing we do come to Estran, what was your mother's family name?" Cal asked her.

"Larcus." she answered. Then as she continued to walk away Lara leant in close to Cal.

"So are we both going to warn all our descendants to avoid anyone with the surname Larcus?" she asked softly and Cal nodded.

"Oh yeah." he replied, "Nothing good is ever going to come from an Udra getting together with a Larcus."

## EPILOGUE

Lorna Fayl barely reacted when she heard the door to her cell opening in the middle of the night. Being secured into a straitjacket and gagged meant that there was little she could do in any case, regardless of what her visitors intended. But she was not expecting what happened next.

"Mom?" Nissel called out as she and Hiran rushed over to her while Erin, Kaylor and Sial all remained by the door.

Lorna's eyes widened and she attempted to say something.

"Hold on." Hiran said, "Let me get this." and he reached behind her head to remove the gag.

"Mom? Are you alright?" Nissel asked as her mother gasped when the gag was taken from her mouth and both Hiran and Nissel began to get to work on undoing the straitjacket.

"Oh my baby girl, what's going on?" Lorna asked. Then she glared at Hiran, "And why is he here?"

"Mom we don't have time for your feud with the Druds now." Nissel replied, pulling the straitjacket from her mother, "We're here to rescue you."

"The Founding Families are gone." Kaylor said, "As is the Sith library."

"Gone?" Lorna repeated.

"Everyone's dead." Sial said, "My parents, Hiran's, all of the Torins."

"We heard Trent and Calleen Narthis were arrested for treason." Hiran said while he and Nissel helped the weakened Lorna to her feet.

"So what do you intend for us to do now?" Lorna asked.

"We have a ship waiting." Kaylor told her.

"And we have money as well as as much information on the Sith as we could fit aboard, texts, artefacts, whatever." Sial added.

"The Sith?" Lorna responded, "Why?"

"Because the Sith didn't just go to the Narthis Sector mom." Nissel said, "Somewhere out there there could be more hidden libraries of their knowledge and even if it takes our families another three hundred years we intend to find them and claim them for ourselves."