

# STAR WARS

## TALES OF THE JEDI



V-X: STORMS

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...

**STORMS**

WHEN GAYAL HAS A VISION OF A WORLD CUT OFF FROM THE REST OF THE GALAXY THE FOUNDING FAMILIES TURN THEIR ATTENTION TO HERAS, A SYSTEM LONG ISOLATED BY A MYSTERIOUS DISTURBANCE IN HYPERSPACE. BUT TO REACH THE SYSTEM THEY MUST FIRST GAIN THE CO-OPERATION OF SOMEONE THEY HAD ALREADY ABANDONED...

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

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# 1.

The sound of laughter made Gayal look up from the datapad she was reading and she saw her two younger sisters returning to the mansion after spending the morning skiing in the surrounding mountains.

"Gayal are you still reading?" the elder of the other two young women asked when she saw Gayal sat surrounded by datapads as well as several very old looking printed books.

Gayal sighed.,

"I've got a lot to do Sial." she replied.

"So why invite me and Keera here if you're just going to sit inside all day?" Sial said, "Erill Crassis has given you a house in the mountains and you're wasting the opportunity."

"I never had you pegged as a dataworm Gayal." Keera added, "Marrying that old fart has changed you."

Gayal sighed. In truth she had not been the one to invite her sisters to stay with her on the remote and newly settled world of Lovas. Instead it had been jointly decided by her parents, Del and Faye Karn, and Erill Crassis, the elderly man that she had married less than a year earlier.

The Crassis and Karn families were descended from the crew of the original survey ship to have charted the Narthis Sector for the Republic. During that survey mission the crew had discovered a hidden storehouse of Sith knowledge beneath the oceans of the planet Delvad and ever since then their descendants had been working to gain access to the knowledge it contained. Gayal was key to this endeavour. Three hundred years of research had not uncovered any way for anyone who was not Force sensitive to gain access to the storehouse and alone amongst the Founding Families, the name given to the collection of families descended from the survey team, Gayal had such abilities. Unfortunately this had first been discovered by the Jedi knight Cal Udra with whom Gayal had become romantically involved and when her family had discovered this they had secretly placed her in an asylum to prevent her from accidentally revealing any of their secrets to him. But when Erill Crassis, the elderly and infirm head of the Crassis family had discovered that she was Force sensitive and what her family had done with her he had sent a team of mandalorian mercenaries to rescue her and offered her a deal. She would marry Erill to gain his protection from her family returning her to the asylum and in return she would help the Crassis family be the ones to gain access to the storehouse. Initially this had caused a split in the Founding Families as the others tried to gain access to Gayal for herself. But this had ended when two things happened in rapid succession. Firstly the Crassis family had gained control of a massive Sith droid army that had lain dormant for a thousand years and secondly they had gained control of a talisman that enabled the dying Erill to rejuvenate himself. The fully healed Erill had then presented the droid army to the other Founding Families and offered them a truce. With the droid army under their control and one of their number holding the position of Republic Senator for the sector the Founding Families had declared independence from the Republic.

But the Jedi Order was aware of the ambitions of the Founding Families and had remained in the sector, operating from a base that the Families had been unable to locate so far and when Gayal had encountered Cal again she had attempted to flee with him and this was the real reason her two sisters were with her on Lovas now. They were insurance against Gayal trying to escape or sabotage her own work. If she tried anything then accidents could easily be arranged for Keera and Sial.

"Come on Gayal." Sial said, "Go grab that ski suit you've got in your closet and come spend the afternoon with us."

"These mandalorians may look like savages but they know how to find decent slopes." Keera added, looking at one of the mandalorians standing guard in the room in his full enclosed armour that was covered with built in spikes and blades and had a skull design painted on his faceplate.

"Oh go on then." Gayal replied, tossing the datapad aside and she jumped up to her feet and headed for her bedroom.

As the daughters of a family worth more than ten trillion credits the Karn sisters were used to riding in style. Now however they rode in a more utilitarian gunship and surrounded by heavily armed mandalorians. Unlike the mandalorians in their imposing armoured suits the three young women wore brightly coloured bodygloves purpose designed for skiing. Each one included not only a thermal control unit to prevent hypothermia but also an automatic distress beacon that would activate if the wearer was caught up in an avalanche. The young women had also added one extra feature to their suits, worn on their backs were slim repulsorlift packs. These would act in a similar way to a parachute without the need to worry about opening altitudes or a large canopy dragging behind the user when they landed. The sisters' intention was to leap out of the side of the gunship and trigger their repulsorlift packs so that they could hit the ground and instantly begin to ski downhill.

"Approaching the drop site now." the gunship's pilot announced, "Exit in sixty seconds."

"Come on." Sial said, "Let's get our skis on." and she sat down near the door of the gunship and began to fit

her skis to her boots.

A short time later the gunship slowed and hovered about thirty metres above the ground where its own repulsorlift engines would not disturb the snow on the mountain below. By this time all three sisters were sat at the very edge of the gunship with skis on their feet and ski poles in their hands. Behind them some of the mandalorians looked out of the gunship, searching the ground for any signs of a threat.

"Clear." one of the warriors said and in an instant Sial pushed herself off the edge and gave a cheer as she plummeted towards the snow covered slope below. Keera followed next, both triggering their repulsorpacks just after leaving the gunship and finally Gayal leapt out as well and felt the air rush past her.

*A world isolated from civilisation.*

*No starship able to approach or leave the system.*

*Violent storms in hyperspace powerful enough to tear a ship apart*

*Anger.*

*Hatred.*

*Fear.*

A suddenly wailing sound brought Gayal back to the real world as the fail safe system of her repulsorpack triggered it before she could smash into the ground. But Gayal was caught off balance as she landed and she squealed as she tumbled downhill. There was a snapping sound as her skis were ripped from her feet and flew off in different directions while Gayal continued to tumble until she was brought to a sudden halt by a tree in her path.

"Gayal!" Sial called out and she and Keera both brought themselves to a halt and detached their skis before running towards their sister while overhead the gunship descended and the mandalorians began to disembark, "Gayal are you okay?" Sial asked, sliding to a halt.

"What?" Gayal responded as she lay in the snow, "What happened?"

"We were about to ask you the same thing." Keera replied, "You didn't trigger your pack. Why not?"

"I – I saw something." Gayal said.

"Saw something?" Sial repeated, "But Gayal, we're all alone out here. There's no one for hundreds of kilometres."

Just then the first of the mandalorians reached them and Gayal reached up to take the hand he offered to help her back to her feet.

"We need to get back to the house." she told the armoured warrior, "I need to speak to the others."

"So much for our skiing trip." Keera said to Sial, frowning.

Back at the mansion Gayal grabbed a datapad and hurried to the communications centre. From here she was able to establish real time contact with members of the Founding Families on the sector's capital world of Crassis Major or the ocean world of Delvad. There were seven others in all, Luke Crassis, who was technically Gayal's stepson despite being almost a decade older than her, Heddren Drud, the younger brother of General Josh Drud who led his family, Gayal's mother Faye Karn, Trent Narthis who had been the sector's senator and was now its head of state, Nissel Fayl who though younger than Gayal had been forced to take over the running of her family after her mother was judged to be too unbalanced and the nautolan Ket Runn whose family had kept watch over the storehouse since its discovery. Finally there was Natalay Shill. Her family was not known as one of the Founding Families, her ancestor Rodge Kenner having left the sector to build a mercenary army for the others. Being physically located on worlds many light years away each of these was present in the form of a hologram and each of them also faced a collection of holograms. Only the Torin family was missing from this line up. The head of that family had been murdered by his younger brother in a plot that had also dragged in their cousin, the then Senator Airia Torin. Now however, the head of the Torin family was just a teenage boy and his family's interests were represented by Heddren Drud's powerful law firm.

"What is so important that you've summoned us all?" Ket demanded.

"This." Gayal replied and using her datapad she projected a large image of the systems that made up the sector into the space between the other holograms. This showed not only the star systems known to the Republic but also the hyperspace routes connecting them together, most of which had been charted by the ancestors of those present at the virtual meeting.

"Gayal dear, we're all familiar with this map." Faye said and Gayal grinned.

"Then you should all have noticed this system right here." she replied and she zoomed in on one of the stars shown in the map that unlike the others had no charted hyperspace routes leading to it, "Heras." she said, "According to the notes about the system in our database the system was identified about two thousand years ago by a deep space probe."

"All very interesting." Luke said, "But by the time the *Starlight Glory* brought the survey team here seventeen hundred years had passed and the system could not be approached. Every attempt since then has resulted

in the ship or probe in question being forced out of hyperspace or destroyed.”

“Yes, it’s similar to the disturbance that surrounds the rim of the galaxy.” Heddren added.

“It’s artificial.” Gayal said and the holograms looked at her without speaking, “I had a vision,” Gayal went on, “and it showed me that the system was surrounded by some sort of Force storm.”

“A Force storm?” Luke asked, frowning.

“Such things are extremely dangerous.” Ket said, “Only a handful of Sith could create such things.”

“Well one of them created one big enough to surround an entire system.” Gayal said.

“An entire system isolated by the Sith?” Nissel commented, “But why would they do that?”

“My guess would be because whoever created that storm didn’t want his rival Sith getting at what was hidden in the system.” Natalay replied.

“Another library?” Trent suggested.

“It’s a possibility.” Luke said, “In case we need to find out.” then his image turned towards Gayal, “Gayal can you do anything to disrupt that Force storm?”

“I don’t know.” she answered, “You know my powers aren’t very well developed.”

“Maybe the storm has weak points.” Ket said.

“We’d need more information about it.” Faye added, “Who would have it?”

“What about the Republic’s navigational database?” Nissel asked, “When we seized Aurek Station we ought to have taken all of their navigational records.”

“We did.” Trent replied, “But Heras is well off any shipping lane. We’d need to find someone who travels beyond them.”

“Unfortunately we did have someone who met that description amongst us until recently.” Heddren said.

“Who?” Gayal asked.

“Corva Torin.” Heddren replied, “But since his death his personal navigational records have proved impossible to access. He did not share details of how to access them with his son before he died which leaves us at something of an impasse.”

“Not necessarily.” Natalay said, “There are other members of the Torin family left.”

“Who?” Faye asked, “Some distant cousins maybe, but no one close enough to have known how to access Corva’s records.”

“What about Vorn and Airia?” Natalay asked.

“But they murdered Corva.” Nissel pointed out, “Aren’t they both in prison?”

“Indeed they are.” Heddren said as a smile spread across his face, “For crimes against the Republic. But since we are no longer a part of the Republic the authority to grant pardons or parole falls to our esteemed head of state.” and then everyone turned to look at Trent.

“In which case,” he announced, “I think that there is a clear national interest in offering those individuals a limited release on the condition that they co-operate in our endeavour.”

“And if they turn on us?” Nissel asked, “They did murder Corva and his wife after all.”

“Then we kill them.” Natalay said.



## 2.

Seris Station orbited a gas giant of the same name. At one time the space station had been a mining outpost collecting valuable minerals first from the atmosphere of Seris and then from its moons. But the mineral deposits had soon been depleted to a level that made mining and shipping them to other systems uneconomic. At which point the only possible use for the station had been to refit it as a maximum security prison.

Guards brought two individuals in prison uniforms, a man and a woman, into the same interview room and secured their restraints to the table while they glared at one another. Unusually the guards then all departed, leaving the pair alone in the room.

"What's going on here Vorn?" the woman asked.

"How should I know Airia?" Vorn Torin replied, "The guard's don't exactly give me a running commentary of their actions. You were a Republic senator, perhaps you should try ordering them to tell you what's going on." and his cousin scowled.

Just then the door slid open again and Heddren Drud entered the room accompanied by Natalay Shill.

"Heddren." Airia hissed, "I thought your firm had decided that we weren't worth the trouble of representing. Part of being successful is knowing a lost cause when you see it." Heddren replied as he set his case down on the table and opened it to remove three datapads, "And your cause was utterly hopeless. The jedi caught Vorn in possession of classified information that he was trying to erase while the source was proven to be you Airia. The Families just couldn't afford to be tarnished by your foolishness."

"Didn't you stop for one second to consider what you were doing when you killed your brother?" Airia demanded as she turned her attention to Vorn, "Or when you dragged me into your ridiculous scheme? Now we get to spend the rest of our lives in this place."

"At least you'll have plenty more time to enjoy the hospitality." Vorn replied, "I'm the only one on death row after you made a deal to testify against me remember?"

"Well I have news about that." Heddren said, interrupting the argument and both Airia and Vorn turned towards him, "An opportunity to have you both released has come up."

"Just like that?" Airia asked, "The Republic will-"

"I take it you haven't heard then." Heddren said without waiting for her to finish, "The Narthis Sector is no longer part of the Republic. Senator Narthis declared us independent about a month ago."

"Senator Narthis?" Airia exclaimed, "You mean that pompous laser brain actually managed to get himself elected."

"And now he's offering us pardons." Vorn added with a smile.

"Not quite." Heddren replied and he slid a datapad out to each of Airia and Vorn. Both of them took hold of the datapads and angled them so they could read them easily.

"Is this for real?" Airia exclaimed, "Released into the custody of an appointed agent? What the hell does that mean?"

"I guess that we'll have someone watching over us everywhere we go." Vorn replied, "So who would it be?" he then asked Heddren who in turn glanced in Natalay's direction, "Her? Who's she?" Vorn asked.

"Ah of course, you've never been introduced. Airia and Vorn Torin, meet Natalay Shill." Heddren said and both Airia and Vorn stared at Natalay with open mouths.

"You mean that she's-" Airia began.

"The direct descendent of Rodge Kenner?" Natalay interrupted as she walked up to Heddren's side, "Why yes I am. My family is no longer just here to answer to the rest of you. We've taken our rightful place amongst the Founding Families you were a part of."

"That's it isn't it?" Vorn said suddenly, "There's something that we've got that you need for one of your plans." then he looked at Airia, "If we just both demand a full pardon then they'll have no choice but to give it to us. We must be the only ones who can help them if they're here asking us."

"Yes, we thought that one of you might think that." Natalay responded, "That's why we brought you both in here together so that you'd know exactly what we're saying. We only really need one of you. So the first to decide that the deal we're offering is good enough will be released into my custody. The other will go back to their cell for the rest of their life, whether that be the decades it takes to die of old age or the significantly shorter amount of time it will take to arrange a length of rope."

"You can make your mark with your thumb print on the displays." Heddren said and simultaneously both Airia and Vorn reached to press their thumbs against the datapads.

Dorn Station had been built by an unknown alien species a thousand years earlier. Attempts to turn it into a navigation beacon for the Republic had failed and after that it had become nothing but a meeting place for renegades and fugitives of all descriptions. Now though it was serving as the Republic's last toe hold in the

sector. Cal Udra and his younger sister and padawan learner Lara had hidden there when Lara was falsely accused of murder and so they knew the seclusion it offered and had recommended it when the need arose for somewhere to hide from the sector's new rulers.

Following his recent return to the station after his encounter with Gayal, Cal had chosen to meditate in solitude, ignoring efforts to communicate with him. He was not completely alone however, his dog, Ghost, had approached him hoping that he would play with the animal. But when this did not happen Ghost simply lay beside his owner, waiting patiently for Cal to end his meditation.

"Is he still at it?" Lara asked the diminutive green figure that was watching her brother as he sat in silence in the area he had prepared for his meditation, "But it's been three days now Tyshon. How long can he maintain a trance like that without needing to get up to eat or go to the refresher?"

"Much troubling your master there is." Tyshon replied and Lara winced. Her assignment as her brother's padawan had been a disappointment to them both and she had never been comfortable when people reminded her that he was her master, a term she had always refused to use when talking to or about him, "See now the dangers of attachment do you? The sorrow of loss he suffers. Find answers to it himself he must."

The ship selected for the Founding Families' mission to the Heras system belonged to the Crassis Major Defence Force. A lightweight frigate it combined speed with the ability to transport a full company of troops in addition to having a respectable weapons load. No chances were being taken at all. Though most of the crew of the frigate were its usual CMDF personnel, Natalay Shill had replaced its usual commanding officer and the entire marine contingent and attached fighter squadron had been replaced by mercenaries under her command. In addition Natalay had brought her four children along with her. Belle, the eldest of the four was an expert in covert operations and Natalay had assigned her to keep an eye on Gayal and her sister Sial who had been brought along as insurance against Gayal misbehaving. Meanwhile the twins Corlay and Erin would command the ground forces and lead the attached fighter squadron respectively. Finally Han, Belle's twin brother was on hand to watch over Vorn Torin who had narrowly beaten his cousin to the deal that saw him released from his cell.

The frigate's exit from hyperspace was rougher than normal, the entire vessel shuddering and groaning while alarms began to sound on the bridge and in the engineering sections.

"Report!" Natalay yelled, "What went wrong?"

"Nothing captain." the ship's navigator replied, "We're right where we should be and there are no stellar objects in proximity to project a gravity well."

"Then what was that I just felt when we left hyperspace? It sure as hell wasn't nothing." Natalay said.

"My guess is that it was the disturbance you need me to get us through." Vorn said as he was escorted onto the bridge by Han.

"We only need your brother's data to locate a potential weak point Vorn." Han told him, "After that we don't really need you for anything. Now open the files." and he shoved Vorn towards a nearby computer console that had copies of the Torin family's navigational logs loaded onto it. Corva Torin had spent most of his adult life travelling the Narthis Sector in his luxury space yacht, going beyond the regular space lanes that most other traffic stuck to. He did this in part to see what secrets of the Sith he could uncover, but also just to satisfy his taste for travel and unfortunately that had been his downfall. The other Founding Families resided in heavily fortified and guarded mansions. But Corva's yacht had lacked weapons and had only a limited amount of space inside for guards. When Vorn's mercenaries had attacked Corva stood no chance. Fortunately for the other Founding Families, Corva had not suspected his younger brother of plotting to kill him and so had trusted him with access to the navigational data he had compiled over the years. In just a few seconds Vorn had unlocked the files and open the one that dealt with Heras.

"There you go." he said as a map of the system appeared on the main bridge display. This showed the orbits of several planets that had been mentioned in the original report made by the Republic probe two thousand years earlier and surrounding these was a shaded region that represented the limit of the disturbance in hyperspace that prevented ships from approaching the system at faster than light speeds, an irregular shape about a light year in radius.

"Looks like your brother mapped the disturbance pretty thoroughly." Natalay commented but Vorn just shrugged.

"He never discussed it with me." he replied, "Or if he did I wasn't listening."

"Navigation, can you identify the narrowest point to the disturbance?" Natalay asked out loud.

"Perhaps captain." the navigator replied, "I would have to make a few assumptions though."

"Such as what?" Natalay asked him.

"Well that the interior of the disturbance has a regular spherical shape and that it is centred on the second planet of the system." the navigator told her.

"Why the second planet?" Vorn asked.

"Because that's the planet that the original probe suggested had a type one atmosphere nerf herder." Han

replied.

"Hey, need to be rude." Vorn said.

"So making those assumptions where is the narrowest point?" Natalay asked.

"Here." the navigator answered and using his own terminal he adjusted the image of the system to mark a point where the disturbance seemed to bend inwards, "That's six light hours away. At maximum sublight thrust we can be there in eight."

"Do it." Natalay ordered.

Travelling in realspace, the frigate had no need to move around the region affected by the hyperspace disturbance instead it just moved along the most direct course possible and just as the navigator had said it reached its destination in about eight hours. By this time the occupants of the ship were fully prepared to attempt to penetrate it. In particular Gayal now sat in what had been one of the ships dorsal gun turrets. This had been replaced by a transparent bubble that gave her the best possible view of space around the ship and she looked forwards in the direction of Heras.

"Ready?" Belle asked her and Gayal nodded, "Okay, she's ready." Belle told her mother over the intercom.

"Will raising our shields disrupt her attempt to nullify the disturbance?" Natalay asked in return and Belle looked at Gayal for an answer.

"I don't know. Why?" Gayal replied.

"She's asking why you want to raise the shields." Belle told her mother.

"Because I'm concerned that when she disrupts that disturbance then the energy held within it will have to go somewhere and I don't want it venting out here into realspace when our shields are down." Natalay replied.

As she said this Erin looked at her twin Corlay, both of whom were stood behind their mother at the time, and whispered to her.

"The energy in that storm? I doubt our shields would be worth a damn if it did strike us." she said.

"Nevertheless, I'll feel better taking the precaution anyway." Natalay said when she overheard this remark.

Then she looked at the defence control station on the bridge, "Raise shields." she ordered.

In the turret Gayal tried opening her mind to the Force and gasped as she was exposed to the full strength of the disturbance in hyperspace.

"Are you okay?" Belle asked.

"I think so. Why?" Gayal asked.

"There's blood coming from your nose."

Frowning, Gayal wiped a finger under her nose and looked at the blood now smeared across its tip.

"It's nothing." she said before leaning back in her seat, closing her eyes and reaching out into the Force once more.

The disturbance struck her like a wave. The amount of power it had taken to create this was far beyond anything that Gayal was capable of on her own, but she was not intended to wipe it all away. All she needed was an opening that the frigate could get through. But as she tried to push through the disturbance she sensed an intelligence within it. At first she thought that there was someone else maintaining the disturbance, but then she realised that it was an echo left behind by whoever it was that had created it in the first place many hundreds of years earlier.

*Go back.*

No. Gayal thought. I want to go forwards.

*I said go back!*

Then Gayal screamed as she suddenly felt a massive jolt of energy flow through her and she opened her eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" Belle asked as Gayal suddenly sat up. But before Gayal could answer her question she instead looked directly at Belle and vomited all over her.



### 3.

"Gayal!" Cal yelled as he suddenly opened his eyes and beside him Ghost sat up and wagged his tail, "Not now boy." Cal said as he got to his feet, wincing as he tried to move too quickly after spending such a long time in a meditative trance. Then, followed by his dog he ran from the room until he ran into someone, a pair of engineers working to make Dorn Station as habitable as possible, "Where's my father?" then realising that the engineers probably did not know who Cal's father was he added, "Master Udra. Where is Jedi Master Varn Udra?"

"The command centre I think sir." one of the engineers replied.

"Thanks." Cal said before rushing off in the direction of the station's main command centre.

The engineer turned out to have been correct and Cal found his father in the main command centre discussing the current situation with several other beings. First among these was Administrator Varr'kay, the bothan who had been in command of the Republic's primary navigational beacon until it had been besieged by forces loyal to the Founding Families. Now he was responsible for the day to day running of Dorn Station instead. Stood to one side of him were two military officers, the duros Captain De Kuun and Colonel Arion Jeck. Being representatives of the Republic all of these individuals were limited in what action they could take against the government of the Narthis Sector now that it had formally declared itself independent. However, because of their presence Dorn Station technically still counted as Republic territory and so they would act to defend it if necessary. The Jedi on the other hand had more freedom to act against what they saw as a Sith inspired threat and there were also three Jedi apart from Varn present. One of these was Neri Udra, Cal's mother who was an accomplished healer while the other two were the experienced Jedi knight Whillam Antress and the Shistavanen battle master Vrish Khal.

"Cal." Varn said when his son rushed up to the large console they were gathered around, "What's-

"I know where Gayal is." Cal exclaimed before his father could finish.

"I do not see what makes this Gayal important enough to warrant interrupting this meeting." Administrator Varr'kay said.

"We believe that without her the Founding Families cannot access the Sith library they have found." Whillam replied.

"Which is why they keep her well guarded." Vrish added.

"Well right now she's on a ship in deep space." Cal said, "There's a system that's been cut off from the rest of the sector by some sort of Force storm and right now the Founding Families are trying to get into it using her."

"A system cut off from the rest of the sector?" Varn responded.

"Do you mean Heras?" Captain De Kuun asked, "No ship has been able to approach it. There was a probe sent well over a thousand years ago, but that returned only enough basic information for the system to be entered into our records."

"A Force storm could have been created by the Sith." Whillam suggested.

"But to what purpose?" Vrish asked.

"There must be something there that they wanted kept hidden." Colonel Jeck suggested.

"I hope so." Varn replied, "Because if the Sith weren't trying to keep people out then they must have been trying to keep something in."

"Dagger Four you are clear to launch." Erin told the pilot of the stinger-class starfighter positioned for immediate launch in the frigate's hangar bay.

"Copy that Dagger Leader." the pilot said before accelerating out of the bay into space. With the frigate rapidly growing smaller behind him the pilot then looked at his navigation system, "Hyperdrive is reading green." he transmitted, "Standby for jump in five, four, three, two, one." and there was a sudden flash as he engaged his fighter's hyperdrive.

The jump lasted only a few seconds but this was enough to propel the starfighter from its original position to one just within the outer edge of the Heras system and prove that there was a breach in the hyperspace disturbance.

"Dagger Leader this is Dagger Four. The path is clear, I say again the path is clear."

In one of Dorn Station's numerous hangars Cal checked his ship, the delaya-class courier *Bright Hope*, while an LB series labour droid carried supplies aboard. Meanwhile Lara sat on one of the crates that the droid would soon need to load aboard the ship stroking Ghost who sat on the deck beside her.

"So I hear he's planning a trip." a voice said from behind Lara and she looked around to see another Jedi knight standing there.

"Oh hello Seth." she replied. Seth Ashran had worked with Cal and Lara on several occasions since their

arrival in the Narthis Sector and Lara knew that he was an expert pilot, "Yes, he's taking us off to the middle of nowhere to try and find his girlfriend. Not that I get a say in where he drags me to."

"That's what being a padawan is all about." Seth said, "But I'm here to offer my help."

"Did I hear the word 'help'?" Cal asked when he overheard this.

"You did." Seth replied, "I know you're heading off towards Heras. I've studied what little information there is about the place and of course the hyperspace disruption that cuts it off from the rest of the galaxy. So if you're going poking around there you're going to need my help."

Cal smiled.

"Glad to have you aboard." he said and then when he noticed Lara smiling as well he added, "And no, this doesn't mean you can stay here." and her face fell.

A short time later all three Jedi sat in the cockpit of the Bright Hope as Cal prepared for launch. Seth sat beside him in the co-pilot's seat while Lara sat directly behind her brother.

"You won't be able to approach within about a light year of the system." Seth warned Cal, "But personally, I'd drop back to realspace at about one and a half just to be sure. The last thing you want to do is run into the disturbance."

"Wouldn't our hyperdrive's automatic systems drop us out?" Lara asked but Seth shook his head.

"There's no mass to the disturbance so no gravity well to be detected. If you keep going you fly right into it." he told her.

"And what happens then?" Lara said.

"If you're lucky you get hurled a few light years in a random direction." Seth answered.

"And if we're unlucky?" Lara then asked.

"The ship gets ripped apart with us inside it." Cal responded and Lara's eyes widened.

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

Gayal had returned to her quarters to rest after opening a gap in the disturbance surrounding the system and Sial sat opposite her in their shared cabin while Belle cleaned herself up.

"So you really puked all over her?" Sial asked, grinning as she glanced towards the bathroom and Gayal nodded, "Good."

"I heard that." Belle called out.

"You were meant to." Sial shouted back at her, scowling. Then she turned back towards Gayal, "I don't see why that rancor cow made me come along as well." she said, "I don't know anything about space exploration."

"Because it's about time you learned that there's more to life than just spending money and partying." Belle said as she came out of the bathroom, "Just like your sister has. Isn't that right Gayal?"

Just then the frigate shuddered slightly as it jumped to hyperspace for a few seconds before returning to realspace at the outer edge of the Heras system just as the starfighter had done before it and Gayal gasped, her eyes widening.

*Anger.*

*Hatred.*

*Fear.*

"Gayal what's wrong?" Sial asked, getting up off her bunk to steady her sister as she looked about to fall.

"Out of my way." Belle told her, "Let me-" but then just as she knelt down in front of Gayal and looked her in the face she threw up once more and Sial laughed out loud as Belle was once again struck.

"There's something wrong here." Gayal gasped, "Something badly wrong."

"You don't say." Belle replied, wiping her face.

As soon as the frigate dropped out of hyperspace it began to scan the system. The only data that was available before the ship had left port was two thousand years out of date and so more recent information was essential for the mission to continue.

The scans soon detected the presence of a total of twelve planetary bodies, plus a number of dwarf planets on the edge of the system. There was an asteroid belt located between the orbits of the seventh and eighth planets but this was not especially dense, the mean distance between asteroids was enough for a typical habitable planet to fit through so it could not be considered a significant hazard to space travel through the system.

Importantly the second planet did appear to possess a standard breathable atmosphere just as the Republic's probe of two thousand years earlier had suggested. But more of greater note the readings indicated widespread energy sources on the planet.

"Is that planet inhabited?" Erin commented when she saw the readings.

"Comscan report." Natalay said, "Can you tell if the planet is inhabited?"

"Not yet from this distance." the comscan operator replied, "There are EM emissions that suggest the presence of technology, but it could be automatic."

"So the Sith hid an entire civilisation." Corlay commented.

"Or got one to protect something for them." Natalay said before Belle came rushing into the bridge, "Belle, what's wrong?" Natalay asked her.

"And what's that smell?" Erin asked, sniffing the air and Belle glared at her briefly.

"Gayal just freaked out." she told her mother, "Says that there's some serious Force activity going on here."

"The Sith?" Natalay asked, concerned. But Belle just shrugged.

"She didn't say." she said.

"Then we need to know." Natalay said, "If there are Sith here then we ought to have a technological advantage over them that should make seizing control of anything interesting much easier. Corlay, prepare your troops for ground assault. Helm, take us in nice and slow. I want to try and keep our presence here a secret for as long as possible."

#### 4.

"So where's this mysterious star system then?" Lara asked when the *Bright Hope* dropped out of hyperspace with just the darkness of space punctuated by distant stars visible outside.

Seth looked down at his console before pointing to a particularly bright star.

"Heras is that one." he said, "Remember it's two light years away from here."

"Okay so how do we get closer without -you know-" Lara said and she held up her fists before spreading her fingers to mimic an explosion.

"If your master is right then the disturbance is a result of someone or something messing with the fabric of hyperspace using the Force." Seth replied, "So if we open our minds to the Force we may be able to find a way through. It's probably how Gayal Karn-"

"Crassis. Gayal Crassis. She married Erill Crassis." Lara interrupted.

*Anger.*

"It's how she will have found a way through for the Founding Families." Seth said, ignoring the obvious reaction Cal had to his sister's jibe about Gayal's marital status.

"Assuming that she did find them a way through." Lara said, "How do we know that she didn't get them blown apart or hurled across the galaxy?"

"I know." Cal replied, "Gayal found a way in somewhere."

"Then we should be able to find it as well." Seth said, "Now focus. Focus on the disturbance in front of us."

The three jedi all stared through the *Bright Hope's* cockpit canopy and opened their minds to Force. All three sensed the sudden inrush of power from the hyperspace disturbance and Lara flinched. But whereas Gayal had received only the most basic of training in the Force from Cal during their time together all three of the jedi had undergone years of training and knew how to avoid being overwhelmed by such power. Each of them sensed a region of chaos as the Force tore apart hyperspace to make travel through it impossible. But Cal also felt something else, something familiar and comforting yet cold and dangerous at the same time.

"Gayal." he said to himself. Then he felt a blow to his arm, "Ouch! Lara why are you hitting me?" he asked.

"Because I can't concentrate properly when you're fantasising about your ex-girlfriend."

"I wasn't fantasising about her." Cal replied.

"Are you sure?" Seth asked, "Because from here it-"

"I felt her." Cal interrupted.

"Ugh, Cal we don't need to know that sort of thing." Lara exclaimed and Cal frowned.

"Oh grow up!" he snapped, "Gayal was here, well over on the other side of the system and she opened up a safe passageway through the disturbance. I can feel traces of her left behind."

"Woah, hang on there a moment." Lara said, "Gayal opened up a passage through a Force storm? How did she do that exactly? She's not had any proper jedi training."

"I don't know." Cal replied, "My guess is that she's trying to use her power based on instructions written down."

"By the Sith?" Lara commented, "Cal you know how bad that is."

"How far is this passageway?" Seth asked, "And which way?"

"One point six light years." Cal replied after confirming the location on the navigational display, "Bearing twenty six point four by eighteen point nine."

"Okay, that would take us through the disturbance if we tried to jump there directly so I'll have to plot us a series of micro jumps to take us around it."

"How many?" Lara asked.

"Three ought to do it. One to the side, one to go past and one back around. Then if there's a safe passage we should be able to jump straight through it from there."

The surface landmasses of the second planet of the Heras system, by standard galactic convention also designated as Heras due to being considered the most significant world of the system, were dominated by wide rolling plains in between mountain ranges that appeared to have been converted into subterranean cities by whatever civilisation existed or had once existed there. But as the frigate drew closer to the planet Heras, drifting slowly towards it on minimum power, Gayal's condition worsened and the coldness she sensed in the Force began to affect her physically as well. This meant that although the frigate had a perfectly functional climate control system when she was brought to the bridge she was dressed as if she had been when skiing and with the thermal control unit turned up to maximum to try and control her shivering.

"We'll be entering orbit soon," Natalay told her, "and I'd like your input on where we should land."

"What are you looking for?" Gayal asked.

"I want to know why the Sith decided that this system had to be cut off from the rest of the galaxy." Natalay

said, "You said that you could sense the Force emanating from this world so I want to know where from." and she activated a holographic display that projected a three dimensional image of Heras into the air. Still shivering, Gayal stepped forwards to study the image. It looked just like any one of hundreds of such planetary images she had seen over the years but this time she also felt a connection to the planet itself through the Force. However, there was also something at the back of her mind that told her she was not seeing what needed to be seen.

*Behind you.*

Gayal suddenly spun around on the spot.

"What's wrong with her now?" Corlay asked, "Is she going to puke again? Because I'm hitting her if I end up stinking like Belle."

"Behind us." Gayal said, "There's something behind us."

"Comscan." Natalay called out, "What's to our stern?"

"Nothing visible captain. The sky is clear. But there could be something hiding behind the moon."

Heras had a single moon that the frigate had not long travelled past. Like many such moons it was an airless ball of rock and appeared of no interest. But now all of a sudden it was all Natalay could think of, "Comscan I want sensor readings of that moon. Passive only for now, but I want a full sweep."

"Yes captain." the comscan operator replied and moments later he looked up from his console, "Err captain," he began, "I think I may have something."

"Show me." Natalay replied, turning her attention to the bridge's main display screen just as the comscan operator called up an image capture using the frigate's magnetic resonance scanners. These detected the fluctuations created in magnetic fields by ferrous objects and the object that was visible as a fuzzy outline against the surface of the moon contained plenty.

It was a crashed Sith battleship.

"Incredible." Erin said.

"I'm getting an energy reading from inside the ship captain." the comscan operator said and Natalay turned to her daughters.

"Erin, prep a shuttle. Corlay, take a squad down there to take a look. Make sure that they're well armed and equipped for combat in a vacuum. Oh and send Han to me. I have a little job for him as well."

The frigate carried two shuttles, each one just about big enough to carry a platoon of soldiers in armoured vacuum suits providing that they were all stood up. The troops that Corlay had gathered together were equipped to fight a boarding action, with short barrelled pulse wave carbines being the standard weapon. A handful also carried bulky plasma carbines slung over their shoulders or breaching charges for extra firepower in situations where the collateral damage to the Sith starship was acceptable.

Erin was just finishing the preparations to launch when Han came rushing into the hangar in the company of Vorn Torin, both of them also wearing vacuum suits though Vorn's was not armoured.

"Hang on!" Han called out as they ran up the access ramp at the rear of the shuttle, "Mom wants this nerf herder to earn his keep."

Standing in the shuttle, Vorn looked around at the heavily armed soldiers.

"Don't I get a gun?" he asked Han just as the access ramp began to close.

"Planning another murder?" Han responded.

"So if I'm not allowed a gun then what do I do if we're attacked?"

"Scream." Han told him, "And one of my little sisters will come and save you."

"Hey, don't look at me." Corlay commented as Vorn glanced in her direction.

The shuttle shook slightly as it lifted off without warning and accelerated out of the hangar before turning towards the crashed vessel.

"Three minutes." Erin announced from the cockpit. Ahead of her she could see the outline of the Sith battleship where it had come to a halt in a roughly upright position after ploughing across the surface of the moon as it crashed. In the airless conditions of the moon the wreck was still visible thanks to there being no wind to bury it. But as the shuttle drew closer Erin noticed something odd about the terrain behind the battleship. There was no way that a ship of the battleship's design could have crashed in the manner it did without large parts of it being torn off on impact and spread across the surface of the moon behind it. There was a deep furrow visible where the battleship had struck the surface before coming to a halt and the ground around this was churned up from the material that had been hurled outwards but there were no signs of any debris from the ship. Erin could think of only two possible explanations for this. Firstly the debris could have all impacted on the ground before being buried by the material spread behind the battleship as it ploughed across the surface but this seemed to be unlikely in the extreme. The far more likely answer was that someone had come along after the crash and removed all the debris, meaning that at least some of the crew may have survived.

"Thirty seconds." Erin then announced as she slowed the shuttle and began to descend towards the moon's surface.

She landed the shuttle about a hundred metres away from the battleship and from here it was possible to see that the prow of the ship was in fact buried under rock and dust that it had carved out of the surface as it crashed. The mid and rear sections remained visible however.

"Check your seals." Corlay ordered as a hissing sound in the rear compartment as it was depressurised. Then the access ramp dropped open and Corlay rushed down it, her troops following behind her in two orderly lines.

"So what am I expected to do?" Vorn asked as he was jostled back and forth by the soldiers rushing past him.

"Pick up those equipment cases." Han replied, pointing to several cases stacked up at the side of the room, "When we get the all clear you carry them over there." and he turned towards the battleship.

Meanwhile Corlay continued to lead her troops towards the battleship. Vessels of this class had been well known to the Republic and the Jedi Order so she was familiar with the best places to gain access. One of these was a cargo handling hatch located about half way along the ship that had ended up only about a metre above ground. Corlay dropped to her knee as she reached the hatch and aimed her weapon towards it.

"Charges." she ordered and a pair of troopers equipped with breaching charges ran all the way up to the hatch and fixed them to it. Arming the charges they retreat and just seconds later there was bright flare of light that caused Corlay's suit visor to darken as the charges burned through the hatch. Surprisingly this was accompanied by a blast of gas escaping into the vacuum outside the ship and this caused Corlay to activate the point to point communication link built into her helmet, "We've got atmosphere." she broadcast, "Secure first chamber and then bring up the air lock."

Back in the shuttle Han looked at Vorn.

"Okay that's our queue." he said.

The cargo hatch opened into a hold that was about the same size as the shuttle that had brought the landing party here so there was enough room for the entire platoon to fit while an emergency air lock was unpacked, inflated and sealed across the breached outer hatch before proceeding deeper inside.

"I notice we've got artificial gravity in here as well." Han commented to Corlay as he bounced up and down as if to demonstrate that the gravity was standard rather than the much lighter pull that existed on the moon's surface.

"This is no mere wreck." she replied, "Do you think that the descendants of the crew could still be living here after a thousand years?"

"Why don't we go and find out?" Han replied and he pointed towards the hold's inner door.

There was power in the mechanism to open the door and Corlay led her troops into the corridor outside.

They spread out to cover both directions with Corlay and her command section remaining by the door between the two groups. The troops still wore their full vacuum suits just in case they suddenly came to an area that was decompressed, but to save on life support they opened their visors and breathed the air that was far fresher than it ought to have been if it was the same air that had been continuously recycled for a millennium.

"Report." Corlay said and the trooper behind her looked down at his portable scanner pack.

"I'm getting energy readings from all over the ship." he replied, "Nothing from the engines though."

"So where's it all coming from if the engines aren't active?" Corlay asked.

"The strongest reading is that way." the other trooper replied, "It about fifty metres over and-"

"And? And what?" Corlay said when he suddenly stopped speaking.

"These readings." he replied, "They don't make sense."

"Let me see." Corlay said and she took the scanner pack from him and saw where it said the power to run the battleship's systems was coming from, "Two hundred metres down." she said, "That's well blow the lowest deck of the ship even before they got ripped apart." then she returned the scanner to the trooper and stood up facing in the direction of the energy source, "Okay, we're going this way." she announced.



## 5.

"I don't see anything." Lara commented as the *Bright Hope* moved towards the area of space where Cal believed that Gayal had cleared a passage through the disturbance.

"The disturbance is in hyperspace." Seth pointed out, "You wouldn't see anything you laser brain."

"Well according to the navigation system our hyperdrive is active." Cal added.

"Take us in a bit further." Seth said, "Without a gravity well to give it away we'd have to be right in the area affected before our instruments picked it up."

"Sure." Cal replied and he increase the *Bright Hope's* speed along the supposedly cleared route.

"Okay I'm satisfied." Seth said, "I'm inputting a jump that'll take us just to the edge of the Heras system, hopefully within the inner boundary of the disturbance. Assuming it has one of course. For all we know its a solid volume and your girlfriend just put a dent in the outside."

"It's clear ahead." Cal said, "I can feel it."

The *Bright Hope* lurched as it jumped into hyperspace and then again moments later as it dropped back out again.

"Got them." Seth said almost straight away, "There's an ion trail leading towards one of the inner planets. The second one it looks like."

"Then that's where we're heading." Cal replied.

"I wouldn't recommend using the hyperdrive." Seth warned him, "There's too much about this place we just don't know."

"Sublight it is then." Cal said, "A few more hours delay won't hurt."

The landing party made its way down through the battleship's structure using ladder shafts rather than risking any of the turbolifts. Everywhere they went they found that there was gravity and power for heat. Only the lights were inactive and the landing party instead relied on the compact lamps attached to their helmets to illuminate their path. The vessel had obviously been in battle before it crashed and there were signs that there had been fighting aboard the ship as well, with bullet holes and the scars of personal energy weapons on the walls. The landing party halted only when they reached the lowest intact level and following the energy source they came across a hatchway set into the deck. This clearly was not a part of the original structure of the ship, being made differently to anything that the landing party had encountered until now and marked with what appeared to be letters that were not of the Sith alphabet.

"Get pictures of this." Corlay said, stepping aside and Han shoved Vorn forwards.

"Go on, you've got the camera." he said.

Vorn frowned but did as he was told, taking out the video recording rod he carried and pointing it at the hatch. In addition to recording images on its internal memory chip the device was also fitted with a transmitter that sent the images directly back to the frigate waiting in orbit.

Aboard the frigate *Belle* brought both Gayal and Sial to the bridge, Sial there just to help her sister who was appearing much the worse for wear.

"Does that mean anything to you?" Natalay asked Gayal, pointing at the screen where the image of the writing on the hatch was shown, "It doesn't look like Sith to me but you've read more of their documents than I have."

"No." Gayal replied, shaking her head, "I've never seen anything like that before."

"Good." Natalay said, "Then we're the first to find this." and then she activated the communications link to the landing party, "Carry on." she ordered, "But proceed with caution."

Beneath the hatchway was another ladder shaft and unlike those in the battleship it was well lit. a single squad descended the ladder and formed a perimeter at the bottom before signalling that the area below was clear. This prompted Corlay to order most of the rest of her platoon down the ladder as well, starting with her own command section. Only a single squad was left at the top of the ladder to guard the hatch and ensure that the force that went below did not get cut off.

"Now which way?" Han asked as she looked around the chamber that the ladder led to. Roughly circular, there were six passages leading away.

"Well?" Corlay asked the trooper carrying the scanner pack.

"I'm getting strong thermal readings from that direction, but there are stronger EM emissions from that way." the trooper replied, pointing out two different tunnels.

"Sounds like generators and whatever equipment they power." Han said and Corlay nodded in agreement.

"Second squad go check out the generators." Corlay ordered, "Third stay here and hold this room. Everyone else with me. Let's go see what this place is for."

The force split up as Corlay had ordered, advancing slowly along the passageways chosen by Corlay. The walls of these were marked with lettering of the same style as was used on the hatch above and Han indicated that Vorn should record them.

As Corlay's group continued to advance a humming noise became audible from ahead and a sour smell became noticeable.

"That smells worse than Belle." Corlay commented quietly, grinning at Han.

"Wait here." Han replied, "I'll check it out." and Corlay signalled for the unit to halt while her brother went on ahead.

Creeping forwards Han noticed that the passageway became warmer as he went and the smell became more powerful. Then he heard something in addition to the humming, the unmistakable sound of talking. The voices were in no language that Han understood but he could recognise the random and organic pattern of speech over anything created by a machine. Cautiously he levelled his pulse wave blaster and paused to see if the owners of the voices were coming towards him. Then when no one appeared he continued to move forwards.

He stopped suddenly when he saw movement ahead. There was no door barring his path and from his current position he could see numerous fluid filled cylinders in the chamber that the passageway led to and in the transparent structure of these cylinders he could make out the reflections of figures moving about.

"We've got company." he whispered into his suit's PTP link.

"How many?" Corlay replied.

"Don't know."

"Armed?"

"Don't know."

"Then what do you know?"

"That we're not alone down here."

"Okay, we're on our way. Stay where you are."

Han waited until the rest of the group arrived, including Vorn with the recorder.

"Okay slowly." Corlay whispered, "And keep that recorder running." she added without bothering to look at Vorn.

On the bridge of the frigate Natalay watched the remote feed from the recorder carefully. Given the depth below the moon's surface that the landing party was operating at the image was now somewhat grainy and every so often it vanished altogether only to reappear after a second or so.

"We'll have to go over the original recording when they get back to make sure we haven't missed anything." she said to Belle.

"I should be down there." Belle replied, "Never mind a full platoon, I could scout that place out all on my own."

"Yes, I'm sure you could dear. But right now I need you here. Just in case we have need of your talents."

Natalay said and Gayal glanced at Sial when she heard this, wondering if her sister had guessed the real reason for her having been brought along.

"What the kriff are those?" Sial said suddenly and when Gayal looked back at the screen she saw that the feed now showed the entirety of the underground chamber and revealed that many of the cylinders had fleshy lumps floating in them that were connected to the base of the cylinder by a cluster of wires and narrow tubes. Some of these lumps were small and irregular in shape but their shape became more constant as they grew bigger, becoming about the size of a human head.

"Brains." Belle said.

"Those are cloning tubes," Natalay added, "and they're cloning brains."

In the cloning chamber Corlay's troops continued to sneak towards the far end where a small group of figures was clustered around a console beside another cylinder. Even viewed from behind it was obvious that the figures were neither human nor Sith. They had a humanoid form but were far too thin and possessed overly long limbs and narrow hairless heads. Their skin was a pale greenish grey and each wore an identical white jumpsuit that left just their hands and heads exposed. Chattering to one another in their own alien language the figures stayed focused on their console until Vorn accidentally banged into one of the cylinders and produced a dull 'thump.'

Looking over its shoulder one of the aliens now revealed its face that like the rest of it shared some basic similarities with most humanoids except that it lacked a nose, instead having its nostrils set directly into its face below the two massive pure black eyes and above the tiny slit of a mouth. The alien's mouth then dropped open, its jaw stretching far wider than would be expected from its previous appearance and pointed at the intruders as it let out a loud shriek.

"Drop them!" Corlay snapped and the soldiers around her opened fire. The volley of pulse wave fire slammed into the group of aliens, hurling them back into their console and the cylinder beside it. But they were not

quick enough to prevent one of the aliens slamming down a hand on the console and sounding an alarm. Now a loud wailing sound similar to the shriek that the first alien had let out filled the air.

"Fall back." Corlay ordered.

"Wait." Han replied, "Vorn make sure you've got some good pictures of those aliens.

"What are you playing at?" Corlay asked, "We need to fall back and assess the situation."

"Looks at those things." Han responded, pointing to the alien corpses, "Do those heads look like the brains in these jars would fit?"

Corlay looked at the floating brains and then at the bodies of the aliens and saw that her older brother was correct. The alien skulls were the wrong shape to fit the brains that they were cloning.

"The brains in these jars look more-" she began.

"Human." Han said, "I don't think the Sith were keeping people out of this system when they cut it off, they were keeping those things in." then he looked at the cylinder beside the console and the brain floating inside it, "I get the feeling that was the original donor." he added, "Vorn, get a shot of that."

*I will kill you all for this!*

Gayal screamed and collapsed, clutching at her head.

"What's up with her now?" Belle asked as she and Sial helped her back to her feet.

"How should I know?" Sial responded.

"It's that thing." Gayal replied, pointing to the image of the supposed donor brain on the display, "It's alive and its calling out to me. To anyone."

"What are you talking about?" Belle asked.

"I think its the brain of a Sith that the aliens have had since the ship crashed. They've kept it alive somehow."

Gayal answered, "And its not happy."

"Corlay," Natalay signalled to the landing party, "destroy that facility."

"Got it." Corlay responded and she reached out to take a plasma carbine from a nearby trooper. Then she began firing, starting with the console and the cylinder holding the donor brain before moving on to the other cylinders. The rest of her group joined in at this point, firing all around to smash open the cylinders and allowing their contents to spill out onto the floor where in some cases the troopers stamped on the cloned organs with their armoured boots.

Then came the sound of gunfire from the chamber at the base of the ladder.

"We're under fire." the leader of the squad Corlay had left behind reported, "They only look to have beam tubes, but there sure are a lot of them."

"Okay we're out of here." Corlay said, "All units fall back."

Rushing back to the ladder Corlay's group arrived at the same time as the unit that had gone to investigate the generators.

"Okay, everyone back up." Han said, waving soldiers up the ladder while others gave covering fire. But when Vorn stepped forwards to start climbing Han stopped him, "Give me that recorder." he said.

"What for?" Vorn asked.

"Just do it." Han replied and Vorn handed him the device. Han then slung its carrying strap over his shoulder before drawing his pulse wave blaster again and shooting Vorn in his knee.

"What the kriff are you doing?" Corlay exclaimed as Vorn collapsed, screaming in pain and clutching his ruined knee.

"Ask mom." Han replied, "He's outlived his usefulness to us." and then he began to climb the ladder.

## 6.

"We have multiple launches from the planet." the frigate's comscan operator announced and he called up an image of half a dozen vessels rising up from Heras itself. Each of these was about twice the length of the frigate and was shaped like the outstretched claw of a crustacean.

"We have to get away from those." Gayal exclaimed, "I can feel them, feel them in the Force."

"What do you mean?" Natalay asked.

"I don't know. But they feel like that brain in the jar." Gayal told her.

"They're using cloned brains to operate their ships." Belle said, "Like a living computer."

"I think its more than just command and control they're using them for." Natalay said, "Raise shields!" and moments later the entire frigate shook as it was struck by an immense blast of energy.

"You can't do this!" Vorn called out as the last of the troopers climbed up the ladder.

"Really?" Han replied as he peered back down through the hatch at Vorn as he lay helpless at the base of the ladder, "Because I think we just did." and then he slammed the hatch shut.

"No!" Vorn screamed and then he heard the sound of voices as the alien soldiers advanced, unsure of why he had remained behind. Grabbing hold of one of the lower rungs of the ladder, Vorn began to drag himself up it using just his hands. But just as he was about to pull himself off the floor he felt something grab his shoulders and pull him back off the ladder.

"What the hell was that?" Belle asked as she picked herself up.

"Force lightning I think." Natalay replied, "Projected on the scale of a starship. I think those aliens figured out a way of manipulating a cloned Sith's brain into exercising its powers at their command. Think about it, telekinetic propulsion and force lightning for weaponry. All drawing its power from an inexhaustible supply."

"Then we really do need to get out of here." Belle said.

"What's the status on our shuttle?" Natalay asked.

"Just lifting off ." the comscan operator replied, "They should be docking in five minutes."

"Navigation, plot a hyperspace jump back to the outer system. I don't see how they could use the Force to emulate a hyperdrive so we should be able to outrun them. Then after we've got back through the disturbance she can seal them in again." and she looked at Gayal before the ship rocked again as it came under fire from two of the alien ships simultaneously.

"Weapons are down!" one of the bridge crew called out.

"Without weapons we can't wait for the shuttle." Belle said to Natalay, "Our fighters aren't enough to hold off that many warships."

"We're not leaving them behind." her mother replied.

"Those ships will tear us apart." Belle replied as the frigate shook again.

Natalay glared at the display and was just about to give the order to abandon the shuttle and retreat into hyperspace when all of a sudden one of the alien ships exploded.

"Yee-ha!" Cal yelled and Lara flinched as the *Bright Hope* swooped down on the alien warships.

"Why are you whooping?" Lara asked, "It was Seth fired the torpedoes."

The *Bright Hope* was armed with high yield proton torpedoes that were capable of crippling ships far larger than the courier was and they had just demonstrated that they were more than enough to deal with the mysterious alien ships that to the three Jedi reeked of the Dark Side.

*Danger.*

Lightning erupted from one of the remaining ships towards the *Bright Hope* but given that it was a Force based attack Cal sensed that it was imminent and turned the ship sharply, causing the lightning to miss.

"Well it looks like we've drawn their attention away from that frigate." Seth said.

"And why is that good news?" Lara asked.

"Because Gayal's on that ship." Cal replied, "And I'm not leaving her to die."

"It's Cal!" Gayal yelled as the startled bridge crew watched the *Bright Hope* strafing a second alien ship.

"Get the pilots to their fighters." Natalay ordered, "If the Jedi try coming after us we'll need them to cover our escape."

"They won't fire on us." Belle said, "If they wanted us dead they'd have just let those aliens do the job for them. Cal's after her." and she looked at Gayal.

"Such a shame." Natalay replied.

"What do you mean?" Gayal asked.

"Well he's not going to get you is he?" Natalay said before looking towards the comscan operator again,

"Position of shuttle." she said and then flinched as the main display flared as a second alien warship exploded thanks to a torpedo strike from the *Bright Hope*.

"Requesting permission to dock now." the comscan operator replied.

"Lower our particle shields and allow them in." Natalay ordered, "But as soon as they're inside I want us out of here."

"Yes captain." the ship's helmsman responded and he and the navigator began to call off jump information between them.

"Shuttle is in the hangar." the shields operator reported, "Particle shields are back up."

"Jump." Natalay ordered and the frigate lurched as it entered hyperspace.

"There they go." Lara said.

"And we better get after them." Seth replied, "There's only one way out of this system and I don't like the idea of them getting there first."

"Course is already laid in." Cal replied as he turned the *Bright Hope* to face towards the edge of the system and then triggered the ship's hyperdrive.

Behind them the Jedi left four alien warships, one of which was burning badly. The other three then turned towards the outer system and ahead of them space began to warp and glow as it violently twisted by the Force. The distortions expanded and the ships were drawn into them, vanishing into hyperspace after the two fleeing ships.

When the *Bright Hope* dropped out of hyperspace the frigate was already manoeuvring into position to jump through the clear passage out of the system and the courier began to close with the frigate.

"Keep our shields up." Natalay ordered, "We can't give them the chance to dock."

"They're coming!" Gayal snapped.

"Maybe, but they're not getting aboard." Belle replied.

"No, not Cal. Them." Gayal said just as the trio of alien warships appeared.

"I thought you said they couldn't do that." Sial said and Natalay scowled.

"Keep quiet girl." she hissed, "Are we ready to jump yet?"

"In position now captain." the helmsman replied.

"Then jump." Natalay said.

The frigate vanished into hyperspace once more, emerging at the far end of the passageway and Natalay turned to Gayal, "Close it." she said.

"Close it?" Gayal repeated, "But what about Cal?"

"Do you really think I care about your Jedi boyfriend?" Natalay responded.

"I'm not-" Gayal began.

"You'll do what I tell you." Natalay interrupted, "Or else." and she nodded to Belle. In reaction Belle reached out and grabbed hold of Sial, pulling her closer and pressed a knife to her face, the tip of the blade just below her eye.

"Gayal!" Sial exclaimed.

"Close the path." Belle said sternly, "Or your sister loses her depth perception until someone can fit a bionic."

"Okay I'll do it." Gayal said and she closed her eyes and tried to focus on the Force like Cal had once taught her.

The *Bright Hope* dodged the blast of Force lightning unleashed by the alien ship, but Cal suddenly gasped.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked.

"It's Gayal." he replied, "I think she's about to shut down the passage through the distortion."

"Then we need to get out of here." Seth said, "All I need to do is reverse the jump that brought us in here."

"No." Cal said, "They must be forcing Gayal to trap us in here. Jump us a couple of light years further out."

"Got it." Seth replied, "Making the adjustments now."

"Just let me know when." Cal said, "I'll make sure Gayal gets the message."

"Ready!" Seth snapped, "Transferring the co-ordinates to you now."

Cal closed his eyes and reached out through the Force.

*Gayal. Now.*

Then he triggered the *Bright Hope's* hyperdrive.

Analysing the exit vector of both the Jedi vessel and the frigate before it one of the alien ships generated another Force storm ahead of it and leapt into hyperspace after them.

*Gayal. Now.*

Gayal suppressed a smile when she sensed Cal's call and then she focused her mind on the passageway she had created through the disruption in hyperspace, collapsing the stable zone she had created. The collapse of the passageway was invisible to the bridge crew of the frigate. But as Gayal relaxed, sensing that

her task was complete there was the flash of a hyperspace portal forming and a cloud of debris was ejected causing Gayal to gasp.

"Oh Cal." she said softly.

"Well it seems that is the end of Jedi Udra." Belle said, "I can't say I'll miss him.

The *Bright Hope* emerged from hyperspace deep in interstellar space, far from the Heras system.

"So now what?" Lara asked, "What do we do about those aliens?"

"Nothing." Seth replied, "We don't know anything about them and if your master's feelings are accurate then they're stuck inside their own system again."

"So what are we going to do now then?" Lara asked.

"Go home." Cal told her.