

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



IV-VI: WHISTLEBLOWER

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...

WHISTLEBLOWER

WITH THEIR INFLUENCE AMONGST THE FOUNDING FAMILIES FALLING, THE DRUDS PLAN TO RECOVER GAYAL KARN FROM THE CRASSIS FAMILY AS A WAY OF REGAINING IT. BUT WHEN JEDI KNIGHT CAL UDRA BECOMES INVOLVED THE PLAN FALLS APART AND THE ACTIVITIES OF THE FOUNDING FAMILIES ARE THREATENED WITH EXPOSURE...

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

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1 .

At the sound of an approaching repulsorlift vehicle Kerden Larrenod looked up from the speeder he was working on to see which vehicle it was coming near. When his daughter married into one of the sector's richest and most famous families, the Druds, he had suddenly found himself able to occupy his passion for classic vehicles on the family's collection rather than working each day on more mundane models. "Millel." He called out when he saw his daughter get out of the luxury speeder, adding, "Heddren." When her husband got out after her.

"Hi dad." Millel replied, walking over to him and kissing him.

"Busy day lawyering?" Kerden asked.

"Extremely." Millel answered, "Heddren's helping with Trent's election campaign."

"Not that my help seems to be appreciated." Heddren added.

"Trent seems to think that he knows everything." Millel said.

"Huh." Kerden responded, "I remember that man well enough. Pompous, that's how he seemed to me."

"Well it's Kayza that's bearing the brunt of him right now." Heddren said, referring to his younger sister,

"She's handling his PR."

"Then its fortunate that she's good at her job isn't it?" Kerden commented, "That Kast fellow seems to be doing rather well so far." Then when he spotted one of the household staff appear in a nearby doorway he added, "Well you better get inside, it looks like the cook has your dinner ready."

"See you later dad." Millel replied and she and he husband headed for the house.

"He's right you know." Heddren said as he sat down in the dining room, "Your father."

"About what?" Millel asked.

"That Hyronymous Kast is doing well in the election campaign. Too well." Heddren answered.

"Well if Trent would just take your advice a bit more then he'd wouldn't have as much to worry about would he?" Millel pointed out and at that moment they were interrupted by their two adult children entering room.

"Jaynie." Heddren said to his daughter, "I didn't realise you were back from Delvad."

"Oh I came back on a flight this morning." Jaynie replied as she sat down.

"She's been kicked out of university." Her brother Hiran said, reaching out for a bread roll from a nearby plate.

"I have not." Jaynie said, "I'm doing an assignment here on Crassis major, that's all."

"A good job too." Millel said, "Your father would sue the university otherwise."

"And win." Jaynie added, "No matter what I'd done."

"Maybe." Heddren commented.

"Something wrong dad?" Hiran asked.

"The election campaign isn't going well." Millel explained, "Trent isn't listening to us."

"It's not just Trent." Heddren said, "It's all the Founding Families. Since the fiasco of Gayal Karn marrying Erill Crassis and Vorn Torin murdering his brother they aren't taking us seriously any more. Especially the Karns."

"But weren't they your biggest clients?" Hiran asked.

"They still are." Millel reminded him.

"But if they're not listening to our advice-" Jaynie began.

"Then there's not much we can do about it." Heddren interrupted.

"Are you sure?" Hiran asked, "I mean if Gayal marrying Erill is what caused all this then why not try and find a way to have the marriage declared invalid?"

"We thought about that honey." Millel said, "But Erill Crassis made sure that the judge who performed the ceremony was bribed."

"Well isn't there anything we could show to another judge? One that may not know what's already happened?" Hiran asked, "One that might not know how information was obtained?"

Heddren smiled.

"Son, I think you may just have hit the nail on the head there." He said and he got up.

"What about dinner?" Millel asked.

"Tell cook I'm sorry, but I think I'll be working in my office all night." Heddren said as he made his way to the door.

"So what's dad going to do then?" Jaynie asked her mother after Heddren had left the room.

"I'm not certain." Millel replied, "But I've got a very bad feeling about this."

In the office he maintained at home Heddren called up every record he had relating to Erill Crassis, the elderly head of the Crassis family and Gayal Karn, the eldest daughter of the Karn family. The Crassis and Karn families, like the Druds, were descended from the crew of the original survey ship that had charted the Narthis Sector and since that time they had been working together to uncover secrets that their ancestors had discovered hints about. There were always rivalries of course, but these had never been as severe as they were now with the Crassis family operating practically independently of the others while the Torin family had fallen thanks to the murder of its head at the hands of his own brother.

It had been discovered by her parents that Gayal Karn had been involved in a romantic relationship with the Jedi knight assigned to the Narthis Sector, a man called Cal Udra and in order to limit the chances of her revealing activities she did not understand Heddren had assisted the Karns in having her imprisoned in a high security asylum outside of the sector. However, Erill Crassis had discovered that part of the attraction of Gayal to Cal was that she was Force sensitive, a fact unknown to any of the Founding Families until then and he had conspired to have her released. In order to achieve this he had hired a force of Mandalorian mercenaries who had easily overwhelmed the asylum security to retrieve her. Then as a final act to prevent the Karn family from reclaiming her Erill, a man in his early seventies had married Gayal, a woman in her mid twenties. All of the Founding Families knew that this was nothing but a ruse, but in order to nullify the marriage it would be necessary to explain to someone outside of them how they had come to this conclusion whilst not giving away what it was that they were up to themselves and for that Heddren needed a new strategy.

Prior attempts to annul the marriage had failed because as far as the authorities were concerned Erill and Gayal were two consenting adults. Gayal's incarceration in the asylum had been done under a false name so that could not be used to have her ruled unfit to consent to marriage. But that was not to say that what the Crassis family had done could not be undone. There were certain weak links in what the Crassis family had done not least was the involvement, or rather the lack of involvement of Erill's daughter Charity. Charity Crassis had remained on the sidelines of her family's activities in recent years. She had never become involved with the attempts to unlock the sector's secrets and had not been informed about the wedding until another Founding Family, the Nautolan Runns, had told her. Now Heddren hoped that he could use her to his advantage.

From his records Heddren found the communication details for Charity's apartment here on Crassis Major and also for the Crassis family property on the ocean world of Delvad. Hoping that she would be on the same planet as he was, Heddren tried the apartment first.

"Hello?" Charity asked as her face appeared on the display, "Oh, hello Heddren." She added when she recognised him, "What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk to you about Gayal." Heddren replied and he saw Charity's expression change immediately to a scowl.

"Oh. Her." She said. It was well known amongst the other Founding Families that Charity had not taken the news of the wedding well and they had already been able to use her to discover Gayal's force sensitivity.

"Yes well I think that there may be some irregularities concerning the marriage and I'd like to discuss them with you." Heddren said and Charity's expression brightened, "I'd rather not do this over a comm. channel."

Heddren added, "Can you-"

"I'll be right over." Charity interrupted and the screen went blank.

By the time Charity arrived Heddren had finished reviewing his notes. The biggest problem he could find was that Gayal had not been seen by anyone outside the Crassis family since the wedding had been announced to the others. It could be that she was remaining shut away in their mansion not far from that of the Druds, but the building was being kept under surveillance by the other Founding Families so that seemed unlikely. What was more probable was that she had been spirited away by the Mandalorians and was now somewhere more secure.

"Charity how are you?" Heddren asked as she was shown into his office.

"Fine I suppose." She replied, "But I'd like to get this business over with. Put simply I want Gayal Karn out of my family's life before she takes my father for everything he's got." This was an exaggeration Heddren knew, the Crassis family had far more money than Gayal could spend in a lifetime but to Charity no credit should ever be given away or wasted, "You know he's already bought her a luxury mansion all of her own?" Charity went on and Heddren smiled. This was exactly what he needed to know.

"Where is this, Charity?" he asked, "If I can show that Gayal and your father are not living together then it will make this much easier."

“Oh it’s somewhere on Lovas.” Charity replied, “Luke told me that it’s all for the benefit of our family. But I’m not interested in that.”

Lovas was a newly settled world on the fringes of the Narthis Sector and it made good sense to try and hide someone there. There were a lot of places that someone could go to disappear. But its location also meant that it was far from help if anything untoward should happen there and another thought occurred to Heddren. Troops had been used to free Gayal from the asylum so why couldn’t they be used to return her to her on family? She may not be terribly co-operative at first, but Heddren was confident that some way could be found to persuade her to change her mind.

“Lovas?” he repeated, “I didn’t think that there was much out there at all.”

“Oh I think my father got some sort of discount from the agent for being one of the first to buy a property.”

And then she sighed, “Though anything saved has been eaten up by all the modifications he’s made.”

Heddren was about to enquire about these, but he could guess that many of the modifications would be to do with security.

“Lovas is still a big planet compared to a single estate.” Heddren said, “Can you narrow it down for me?”

2.

Gayal Crassis looked around at stack of texts on the table behind her. Ever since arriving on Lovas it seemed that she had done nothing but study ancient texts in half forgotten languages. The Founding Families had spent three centuries gathering these and during that time they had also been able to build up some limited translation information, but the texts were still useless to them without someone who was Force sensitive. That was what made Gayal so valuable. According to what she had been told, she was their only hope at present of getting into a storehouse filled with even more treasures and knowledge they sought to control.

The problem was that Gayal had never paid much attention at school, even when she bothered to attend classes and academic study did not come easily to her. What was worse was that even when she took a break from reading the texts there was little else to do on such a remote and lightly populated world. Especially when she was supposed to keep her presence here a secret. But then she remembered that there was someone who knew exactly where she was and that she would give almost anything to be near again and she turned and strode out of the room. As soon as she was through the doorway the pair of armed and armoured mandalorians standing guard right outside fell in behind her and followed.

"Really?" Gayal said as she continued to walk, "Are you really going to follow me to the communications room?"

"Mott's orders." One responded, "You are to be protected around the clock."

"Well it's nice to be wanted." Gayal muttered.

The mandalorians followed Gayal all the way to the room located at the top of the mountainside structure without a word. In the weeks she had been here Gayal had learnt that though the mandalorians would respond if she spoke to them, they were not great conversationalists. She had also learned to her surprise that under their helmets and their full-face masks they were not all of the same species. Apparently any individual who was willing live according to mandalorian tradition could join their ranks. Inside the communications room there was another mandalorian on duty, though this one had removed his helmet while he monitored all wireless activity in the surrounding areas.

"I need a communications channel." Gayal said, "A private one."

"Of course miss." the communications officer replied, "I'll patch you through to Mister Crassis."

"I don't want to talk to my husband or his family." Gayal told him, "I want a link to Aurek Station."

"I'm sorry miss." the communications officer said in response, "We're not to communicate with anyone that isn't already aware of our location."

"I want to contact Cal Udra." Gayal said, "He already knows that I'm here, he came here remember?"

The communications officer glanced at Gayal's two bodyguards. All three mandalorians knew exactly who Cal Udra was and had been present when he had infiltrated the house in the mistaken belief that he was rescuing Gayal. In fact she had refused to leave with him and he had been allowed to leave safely.

"That wasn't a suggestion." Gayal said sternly and the communications officer turned back to his console.

"I'll patch you through." He said, "But try and keep this short. Someone could detect out transmission even if they can't decode it."

"And a private place to speak?" Gayal asked.

"Over there." The mandalorian replied, pointing to a side office and Gayal headed towards it. Noticing the bodyguards still following behind her she paused.

"You do get the meaning of private don't you?" she said and then she headed into the side room alone.

Watched by the Udras' pet dog, Lara Udra performed backward flips across the padded floor of the room. When the Jedi had first occupied the spacious apartment it had been a well furnished living room but Tarris Blake, the Jedi shadow who had rented it had had all that removed to turn it into a training area that Lara now made good use of. One of the few items of furniture that remained was a table with a computer and communications terminal that suddenly began to sound.

Halting her exercise, Lara walked over to the terminal to answer the incoming signal. She was about to greet whoever it was that was calling when she saw Gayal's face on the display.

"Oh." She said, frowning and folding her arms, "It's you. What do you want?"

"Is Cal there?" Gayal asked.

"Yes." Lara replied simply.

"Well can I speak to him?" Gayal asked after a pause and Lara took a deep breath.

"Cal!" she bellowed.

"Lara what's wrong?" Cal asked as he rushed from his room. Simultaneously Tarris Blake also appeared in the doorway to his room, staring at Lara.

"It's Missus Crassis on the line for you." Lara told Cal, "Do you want to speak to the bantha cow or shall I hang up on her?"

"I'll speak to her." Cal replied, ignoring the stare that Tarris gave him and Lara stepped away from the console to make way for her older brother.

"Gayal." Cal said with a smile, "Is something the matter?"

"Yes. I'm terminally bored." Gayal replied.

"Married life not agreeing with her?" Lara muttered when she overheard this, but Cal ignored the comment. "I was wondering if you could come and visit me?" Gayal asked and Cal glanced at the disapproving look Tarris was still giving him.

"Gayal we've been over this." Cal said, "You're a married woman now and—"

"I'm not asking you to run away with me Cal." Gayal interrupted, "I just wanted you to come and visit for a while."

"I'm sorry Gayal." Cal replied, "I can't. I don't think it's such a good idea for you to call here either. I'll wager that there are people who'd love to be able to trace your signals." And then he broke the connection.

From the doorway to his room, Tarris nodded.

"Well done Jedi Udra. I could sense your feelings for that woman." He said, "But a Jedi must have the utmost commitment to our order."

"Plus she's no good for you anyway." Lara added and then Cal stumbled.

The blast from a pulse wave blaster struck the armoured mandalorian in his chest and the soldier collapsed. Then the unseen figure that had fired the shot knelt down and waved several of his comrades onwards. They rushed towards a doorway and halted looking through into the room beyond. Inside lay the body of another mandalorian and crouched beside him was Gayal. She turned and looked up as the soldiers in the doorway took aim...

"Cal what's wrong?" Lara asked as she tried to steady her brother.

"It's Gayal." He replied, "She's in trouble. Big trouble." Then he looked up at Tarris, "I need to go to her." He said.

"Tell me what you saw." Tarris replied, advancing towards Cal.

"I saw soldiers storming the house where she's living now. They killed the guards." He replied.

"And Gayal?" Lara asked.

"I don't know." Cal said, "My vision ended too soon."

"It is always difficult sensing the future." Tarris said.

"I have to go to her." Cal said, "She may die if I don't."

"You can't know that though." Lara said.

"But I'd never forgive myself if she did and I did nothing." Cal said.

"Jedi Udra, such attachment is not in keeping with the Jedi Code." Tarris warned him.

"Maybe not, but helping those in need is," Cal said, "and right now Gayal needs my help."

"Then go if you must." Tarris said, "But be careful of your feelings. Desire and attachment are a path to the Dark Side."

"I'll bare that in mind." Cal replied and he rushed to his room for his belongings.

Han Shill ran Shill Security, the private military company that provided the security for all of the Founding Families aside from the Crassis family, so it was to Han that Heddren went with his information about Gayal's whereabouts.

"Lovas?" Han asked.

"Yes. Charity tells me that Erill purchased a house there and that it's been modified to suit Gayal. I'm guessing that that means that it's been fortified to keep us out." Heddren replied.

"Most likely yes." Han said, leaning back in his seat, "Which could prove problematic. We may need to use some heavy firepower to suppress fixed defences, but at the same time we don't want to destroy everything if we're going to recover Gayal Karn. I doubt her parents would be too happy about us delivering her back to them as a corpse. Despite the trouble she's caused them over the years."

"Don't you have people who can infiltrate such places? Bypass the defences?" Heddren asked.

"Yes I do. But I'm concerned about what comes after that. There could be a significant force of mandalorians protecting her as well and that is going to need more than a small commando unit. Have you ever seen those war droids they ride?"

Heddren shook his head.

"Not in person." He replied.

"Well let me tell you that they're not something to be messed with." Han told him, "I think that for this mission I better go along to command it personally."

Cal was beginning the start up procedure for the *Bright Hope*, the vessel assigned to him by the Jedi Order when he sensed Lara's approach.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as she sat in the co-pilot's seat beside him.

"Well you don't think I'm going to let you go off after Gayal on your own do you?" she asked in return, "I know you big brother and when it comes to her you don't think straight. You need me there to keep you focused."

"You keep me focused?" Cal replied.

"That's right. Me."

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

"Yeah well I also noticed that you brought the grenade launcher with you and it's my turn to use it.

Remember? Lara said and Cal sighed.

"Whatever makes my baby sister happy." He said and Lara frowned. Then Cal looked up from the controls,

"What about Ghost? You've not left him with Tarris have you?"

"Of course not. He's back there in the lounge with Shorty." Lara said, "If this turns out to be a wild bantha chase then I want him there for company while you're disgracing yourself with a married woman."

"Well strap in." Cal told her, "Because we're ready for launch and we've got navigation data all the way to Lovas. We'll be there in a little over sixteen hours."

When Han's assault transport dropped out of hyperspace at Cresh Station, the last waypoint before the Lovas system it was met by another fast moving ship.

"Mandalorian daavab-class fighter approaching sir." The pilot warned him.

"Contact it." Han ordered and the pilot activated the ship's communications.

"Han, nice of you to finally make it here." A woman's voice said, though no image was transmitted with it,

"Keeping a low profile may mean spending a lot of time out on the fringes, but hanging around navigation beacons can attract attention you know."

"And it's good to see you as well." Han replied, "Do you understand what you have to do?"

"Sure." The woman's voice replied, "I need to locate a hidden fortress, disable any defences and generally make life difficult for any of the defenders who try to get organised against your assault."

"Very good." Han said, "Now get to it. Heddren's expecting results quickly."

"Oh well if Heddren's after results." The woman said and then the channel went dead right before the fighter turned sharply and then jumped into hyperspace with a flash.

Smiling, Han looked at the pilot.

"Belle should have everything ready for us by the time we get there." He said.

The problem for Belle was that she had only a limited amount of information to go on in her hunt for the estate owned by Erill Crassis on Lovas. Thanks to the information that Heddren Drud had obtained from Charity Crassis, Belle knew that the estate was located in a mountainous area so she was able to concentrate her search in regions of the planet with that sort of terrain, but the task was still too great to be achieved in the time available so she was going to have to take some significant risks.

Belle flew low over the mountains, with her sensors operating in passive mode only. She had to fly her fighter by eye much of the time, the mountains did not produce energy emissions that her systems would alert her to. But by limiting her speed she was able to wind her way between the peaks. Belle's plan was to use the mandalorian's own defences against them. Though exact details of the weapon systems installed were not available it was inevitable that there would have to be some sort of tracking system installed to allow them to be accurately targeted and so Belle intended to wait for this system to acquire her. The risk came from the fact that although initial detection may be achieved using undetectable passive sensors, the active sensor lock Belle was waiting for would indicate that the mandalorians already had a weapons lock on her. If she failed to shake the lock in time then she would be shot down.

Fortunately though, the daavab-class starfighter she flew was of mandalorian origin and Belle hoped that the mandalorians on the surface would hesitate long enough for her to escape.

Although the first mountain range that Belle over flew proved to be inhabited, none of the structures she saw had any form of defences and so she selected another set of mountains to try and here she had more luck.

An electronic squeal from her console alerted her to an energy pulse of the type used in modern military sensors bouncing off her fighter. Quickly she checked the rest of her sensors, looking for the tell tale signs of

a missile launch. But her fighter was alone in the skies and Belle banked sharply, cutting her speed and altitude even further. Then, spotting an area of level ground she braked sharply and set her fighter down. Climbing out of the cockpit, Belle sealed the ship and looked around. By her reckoning she was perhaps four or five kilometres from the location she had been targeted from but the terrain between here and there was rough and what should have been an hour's travel by foot was likely to take at least twice that. However, with no other options available to her Belle set off.

3.

Luke Crassis swung the racket to send the ball hurtling back across the court towards his wife Salla.

"Foul strike!" she cried out and Luke frowned.

"It was fine." He responded, pointing with his racket to where the ball had struck the ground.

"It was not." Salla replied, "It was clearly out of play."

"Father?" Luke asked, looking around to where Erill Crassis sat on a garden bench focused on the activities of the three young children playing in front of him.

"Why is it that you two are unable to play a single round without my supervision?" he asked as he looked up. Then he looked back at the children, "I cannot say how relieved I am that this behaviour has not been passed onto my grandchildren."

"Perhaps he can help us." Salla said as she then looked at the armoured mandalorian warrior standing behind the bench.

"Well?" Luke asked him, "Foul or fair?" but the soldier did not reply.

"I don't think he cares my boy." Erill said.

Salla stood up straight and looked back towards at Luke, but before she could say anything she saw more mandalorians approaching from the structure that functioned as a security control station for the Crassis estate. There were three of them altogether, two fully armoured while the man leading them wore no helmet.

"Ah Mister Mott." Erill said as he looked around at the mandalorians, "Is there a problem?"

"There could be sir." Kaylor Mott replied, "It's the estate on Lovas."

Forgetting their game, Luke and Salla approached.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked.

"Maybe nothing." Kaylor said.

"You wouldn't come out here yourself if it was nothing." Salla commented.

"Indeed." Erill added.

"The sensors tagged a starfighter flying low along the mountain range sir." Kaylor said.

"It was shot down?" Luke asked.

"No sir, I'm afraid not." Kaylor answered, "When the lock was achieved it was identified as a daavab-class vessel and the gun crew held their fire while they tried to determine if it was one of ours. It broke away and escaped before it could be brought down. I've ordered a search for-"

"No!" Luke snapped, "Order your men to remain within the perimeter."

"Luke, why?" Salla asked.

"A single daavab-class fighter?" Luke replied, "Who do we know that flies one of those?"

"Belle." Erill said, "That lady can be quite determined even when she's playing dead."

"One of the others must have sent her." Luke said.

"But how did they know where to look?" Salla asked, "We've not told anyone." And she glanced at Kaylor who scowled at the implied suggestion that one of his men was to blame.

"My men are loyal." He said sternly.

"Ah." Erill said and both Luke and Salla looked at him.

"Father who did you tell?" Luke asked.

"Well I may have mentioned buying the estate to your sister. I hoped that if she knew Gayal was not here then she might visit more often." Erill explained, "Though I made sure not to reveal the exact location."

"Oh great." Luke exclaimed, "Well it's been revealed now hasn't it." Then he looked at Kaylor, "Mister Mott, would you please alert your men to be watchful for an uninvited guest and perhaps you should order the reserve forces into position."

"Of course sir." Kaylor replied, nodding in compliance.

"What about Charity?" Salla asked.

"Oh I'll deal with her." Luke replied, scowling.

"Luke my boy, I would remind you that she is still family." Erill said.

"To you maybe father." Luke responded.

The mansion had been carved directly into the mountainside and at first glance it looked like any other such property. But when Belle used her wide scan binocs to get a magnified view she saw that the communications antenna on the tower that protruded out of the mountain had been significantly upgraded, offering more than just planet wide signalling capability. Belle paused for thought. It was quite possible that the mandalorians would have reported the presence of her starfighter to the Crassis family and there could

already be reinforcements on the way here. However, her brother would have had a significant headstart on any reinforcements coming from Crassis Major and so all this meant was that she needed to make sure that she achieved her task of disabling the estate's defences in time for Han to take full advantage of this.

Movement near to the main entrance of the building caught Belle's attention and looking through her binocs again she saw a pair of mandalorians walking away from it and she smiled. Everything so far had pointed towards this being the place where Gayal was being kept and now Belle had proof, according to Shill Security's sources the Crassis family had hired every last mandalorian in the sector at considerable expense to form their rival private military quickly. Remaining focused on the mandalorians, Belle watched as they made their way to what had at first just looked like a cluster of bushes but as they neared a part of the vegetation moved out of the way to reveal a concealed pulse wave cannon emplacement.

Belle turned, searching the approach to the mansion and she saw several more such clusters of bushes, almost all located in the perfect places for defensive weapons. Now that she knew where she had to get to, Belle just needed a way of getting there.

This came in the form of a lone mandalorian she spotted walking away from the mansion when he emerged from one of the concealed gun positions located close to Belle. For a moment she considered the possibility that he had become aware of her presence, but then she realised that if that were the case then the mandalorian commander would have sent more than one man. For now at least, Belle remained undiscovered. The mandalorian walked a short distance from the gun position and then sat down on a rock and removed his helmet. Then from inside a pouch he produced a cigarra and lit it.

Belle put her binocs away and instead drew a slug thrower pistol that had a silencer fitted to the end of the barrel. Training the weapon on the mandalorian as he continued to smoke she began to creep towards him from behind. As cautious as she was, something gave Belle away as she drew closer to him and he turned to look at her.

"Kriff!" He exclaimed, his eyes widened when he saw her aiming a gun right at him and he reached for the rifle he had set against the rock. However, Belle reacted instantly and she fired a single shot from her pistol, the bullet hitting the mandalorian right between the eyes and he toppled backwards to lie sprawled out across the ground. Belle then paused to see if anyone else had overheard what had just happened, but when nothing happened she put her weapon away and got to work stripping the mandalorian.

Charity rushed to the front door of her apartment when she heard the chime and opened it without first checking to see who was outside.

"Luke." She said when she saw her brother and then she looked at the two large men standing behind him. Though both were smartly dressed their faces were scarred and it was obvious that this was not their preferred form of dress, "And you brought some of your mandalorian thugs." She added. Frowning, Luke shoved Charity back as he strode into her apartment.

"Hey!" she exclaimed when the mandalorians also walked through the doorway and closed it behind them.

"Shut up Charity!" Luke snapped, grabbing her arm and dragging her to the lounge where he pushed her onto a couch, "Who the kriff have you been talking to Charity?" he demanded.

"Luke, I don't know what you're talking about." She replied as she got back her feet but as soon as she stood up Luke slapped her hard enough that she fell back onto the couch again, her hands clasped across her face where he had struck her.

"Tell me" Luke yelled, "Who did you tell about the house on Lovas father told you about?"

"Okay, okay. Heddren Drud asked me where Gayal was." Charity replied as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"And you just told him?" Luke said, snarling.

"He said he was going to get the marriage annulled. Gayal would go back to her own family before she took ours for all it's worth." Charity protested.

"And you believed that did you?" Luke said, leaning over his sister and resting one arm on the back of the couch, "Do you know what Heddren did with that information?" he asked and Charity shook her head, "He went to Han Shill with it. Does that sound like the sort of person to consult about an annulment? And Han's sent Belle to Lovas. The guards spotted her fighter."

"Good!" Charity snapped, suddenly pushing Luke away, "Then she'll take that rancor bitch back to her own family and leave ours alone."

"Stang Charity, is that really what you think? Do you know where they put Gayal? Where we found her?" Luke asked.

"No but-"

"In an asylum." Luke interrupted, "Just to keep her out of the way. They stuck her in a padded room and left her in a straight jacket twenty-four hours a day. That's where she'd still be if we hadn't rescued her. Then he

reached inside his jacket and produced a mem-stik that he tossed onto the couch beside Charity," Here, take it." He said.

"What is it?" Charity replied, leaving the mem-stik where it was.

"Travel arrangements to take you back to our estate on Delvad where you've been for most of the last two years. These two men will take you to the starport so that you can go back there and stay out of our way until father decides to invite you back." Luke told her.

"And what if I refuse?" Charity asked and Luke leant over her again.

"Oh you're leaving the Crassis system Charity." He said, "You either go first class back to Delvad or you go as cargo to whatever hellhole I can think of and I promise you it won't be as pleasant as where Gayal was sent by her family."

Though the mandalorian was not the same sex as Belle that would not be much of a problem. The man's helmet concealed her facial features while the armoured breastplate adequately concealed the curvature of her chest. When her disguise was complete Belle dragged the body of the mandalorian to a nearby fissure in the rocks and rolled it down out of sight. Then she returned to where the pulse wave rifle had been dropped, picked it up and headed for the hidden emplacement that she had seen the man emerge from minutes earlier.

Though Belle had not noticed any particular signals given by mandalorians she had seen approaching any of the hidden positions she could not rule out the possibility that there was some form of recognition to be given. Therefore she remained alert for signs of attack and continuously watched for places to seek shelter if needed. Fortunately however, no attack came and she soon found herself standing just outside the entrance to the emplacement.

"Jengo, get back in here." A voice called out from inside, "We've just had word handed down to us to be on alert. There's an infiltrator prowling about."

Belle nodded silently, whether she had done something to reveal her presence to the mansion's defenders or whether it was purely as a result of her over flying the area in her starfighter she did not know, but it seemed that the guards were now watching out for her.

Belle climbed down into the weapon emplacement where she found three more mandalorians clustered around a large calibre automatic weapon, one capable of tearing through personal body armour or thin skinned vehicles alike. One of the soldiers was sat just behind the weapon, ready to bring it into use at a moment's notice while the other two were either side of the muzzle peering through the camouflaging vegetation as they scanned the approaches with wide scan binocs.

"Are you feeling alright Jengo?" the gunner asked, "You're moving funny."

Belle nodded once as she made her way to the rear of the emplacement.

"What? That's it?" the gunner added, "Not even a-" but before he could finish Belle slipped her knife from its sheath and slashed his throat open.

Even as the other two mandalorians were turning around to see why their comrade had suddenly stopped speaking Belle was already drawing her silenced pistol and she opened fire at each man in turn. Both mandalorians were wearing their full armour including their helmets and the first two shots Belle fired were deflected harmlessly off the helmet of one. But the impact did make the mandalorian turn his head, exposing more of his neck and the third bullet Belle fired found this weak point in his armour and he fell, clutching at the wound and coughing. Belle turned to the final mandalorian just as he was raising his rifle, a weapon too long to be practical at such close quarters and dropping her knife Belle reaching out and pushed it aside before she pressed the muzzle of her pistol against his torso just beneath his chest plate and fired again, sending two bullets up into his heart. As the mandalorian fell dead Belle turned back to the one she had shot in the neck, just in case he was still active. But much to her relief he was also lay still and lifeless, slumped against the side of the emplacement.

This left only the gun to be dealt with. Belle could not afford to leave it intact just in case more mandalorians came to take over from the crew she had already killed. Luckily for her, weapons such as this were notoriously easy to disable if you knew what you were doing and Belle did know. Opening up the weapon's casing the metal bolt used to chamber and extract ammunition was exposed and Belle reached in to remove it. Throwing this component away would have been enough to render the weapon useless, but Belle hoped to make her sabotage less obvious and so she opened up the bolt as well and shook it until the firing pin dropped out. Then she put the rest of the bolt back together and returned it to its place in the weapon. Now ammunition from the belt could be loaded into the chamber, but when the trigger was pulled there would be nothing to ignite it. Importantly, without dismantling the weapon her interference would not be detectable. Tucking the removed firing pin into a pocket Belle then slipped back out of the gun emplacement and looked around for her next target.

4.

When the Shill Security transport ship dropped out of hyperspace in the Lovas system the flight crew immediately set to work shutting down every system not essential to keeping them alive and in a controllable ship. Lovas may have been only recently colonised but there were sensors both on the ground and in orbit that could detect incoming ships and the last thing Han needed was for the Republic to find out that he was about to launch an assault on one of its member worlds. It had taken some careful doing to make sure that only Belle had been blamed for the death of a Jedi knight and Han had no way of knowing how closely his company was still being watched.

"How far out are we?" Han asked the pilot.

"About twenty light minutes." He replied, "Coasting in at about point two of light speed."

Han leant back in his seat and stared out of the window at the distant planet. Somewhere on that world was his twin sister and a hidden fortress full of trained killers. Of course Belle was a trained killer as well and Han was willing to wager that she was better than any of the Mandalorians.

"Just be ready to power up as soon as Belle signals us." he said, "There's no time for us to waste."

Rather than waste her time in taking out every last one of the concealed weapon emplacements, Belle instead headed for the mansion itself. Along the way she took out each guard post and gun position she came across, including some that blended into the mountainside better than those camouflaged by false clusters of vegetation. These better hidden positions concerned Belle, had she attempted to take out all of the mansion's defensive positions individually then it was possible that she could have missed some of these or worse still exposed herself to one she had not noticed while she attacked one that she had. However, inside the mansion she was confident that she would find the key to taking them all out at once.

The interior of the mansion was unfinished, but even in its current state Belle could see that when finished it would be of the luxurious standard that the Founding Families typically demanded. For now though there were still unpainted walls and dust covered floors and this worked to Belle's advantage. Somewhere in this building she knew that there would be a command and control post for the Mandalorian security detail and Belle guessed that the guards would report to it before and after any duty shift, meaning that following the most trodden path should take her straight to it. Thanks to the dust on the floor this path was clearly visible.

The trail led Belle deeper into the mountain, not lower down as she would have expected in a free standing structure but straight back so that the hundreds of metres of rock above would provide some protection against bombardment. Against a modern capital warship bombarding the site from orbit a mountain overhead would not protect anything for long, indeed the molten rock produced by a concentrated turbolaser barrage could bury the occupants of an underground structure alive, but against a smaller scale assault it would suffice. Normally this part of the mansion would have been reserved for power generators, servants' quarters and all the other sorts of rooms needed to maintain such a building and care for its occupants.

As Belle wandered down the underground passageways she encountered more Mandalorians, most wearing their traditional style of armour though there were as many carrying their helmets as wearing them in here. Belle of course kept her stolen helmet on despite the limitations it placed on her vision.

A pair of Mandalorians stepped out of a doorway that the tracks led through and just before it slid shut behind them Belle caught a glimpse of a table in the centre of the room that had another Mandalorian leaning over it while another stood behind him. Realising that this was probably the command post she was looking for Belle looked around, watching as the two Mandalorians to have just left the room walked out of sight. Belle still had the problem that she did not know how many Mandalorians were inside the command post. There were at least two, she knew that but for all she knew there was an entire squad in there to support them. Ideally she would have liked to have used one of the grenades she carried. Each one of these had a plastic casing and was designed to create little in the way of shrapnel while producing a sudden loud bang and flash bright enough to stun by overwhelming the senses of anyone close by. In a confined space like the command centre they would be particularly effective even against armoured Mandalorians. However, the detonation of a grenade would undoubtedly bring even more Mandalorians running and so was to be avoided at all costs.

That left only one option, Belle was going to have to try and get in and out without a fight.

Standing right in front of the door as it slid open Belle saw that there were indeed more Mandalorians inside the command centre, a total of six of them around the room monitoring control consoles. But what really interested Belle was the table being studied by the pair that she had seen through the door earlier. This was a holographic tactical display that showed the terrain surrounding the mansion and had the positions of

every hidden bunker and gun emplacement clearly marked on it. Under her helmet Belle smiled at the sight of this and she looked at it closely, wishing she had some sort of covert imaging device with which to copy it. "Has the infiltrator been found yet?" the mandalorian commander asked and he looked in Belle's direction. This posed a dilemma for her. So far all of the mandalorian warriors she had encountered had been males of various species. Therefore if she spoke she ran the risk of the commander realising that she was an impostor.

"Well?" the command said sternly and Belle just shook her head from side to side slowly, "Then get back out there and find them." The commander ordered and Belle nodded once before turning on the spot and striding out of the doorway. Only when it slid shut behind her did she realise that she had been holding her breath from the moment the commander had asked her a question and she exhaled. Then while the hologram she had just seen was still fresh in her mind Belle took out her datapad and called up a map of the area she had placed on it. On this map she quickly began to mark the locations of the mansion's defences. Belle then hurried away from the command centre, hunting for a garage where there would be a vehicle that she could use to get away from the mansion as quickly as possible. With no signs up to point the way Belle had to spend more time than she wanted to wandering the unmarked passageways and what she saw worried her. Many of the rooms away from the exposed front of the mansion had been converted into living space for the mandalorian security detail and it appeared that they were capable of holding a sizeable force. Shill Security had monitored Kaylor Mott's mercenary force for some time, as it did with all such groups but it had never been suspected that it was more than two or three hundred strong at most. However, the barrack space here alone appeared large enough to hold about twice that number. It may have been that the rooms had been converted simply because there was no other use for them, but it was also possible that there were many more mandalorians serving the Crassis family than had previously been thought. It could also mean that rather than being a significant portion of the security detail here, the dozen or so mandalorians that Belle had already killed were just the tip of the iceberg.

Then Belle finally found what she was looking for, an underground vehicle hangar with two exits. One of these headed out horizontally, obviously for use by surface vehicles while the other was a vertical shaft for atmospheric craft or even small starships. But the layout of the hangar was not what bothered Belle, it was its contents. In addition to a handful of air and landspeeders that looked far more utilitarian than members of the Founding Families were used to and one luxury model there were rows of basilisk battle droids.

Mandalorians frequently rode these quadrupedal machines into battle. In addition to their four heavy duty legs the droids were equipped with both repulsorlift and compact ion drives that would allow them to fly both in an atmosphere and in space. Most importantly, in fitting with their role as battle droids basilisks carried a formidable array of weaponry. Right now there were seventy-two of the powerful fighting machines, which meant that there were at least that many mandalorians stationed here.

Belle headed for one of the landspeeders, a two seat open topped model and she leapt into the driver's seat before starting the engine.

"Hold your fire. It's one of ours." The mandalorian spotter said as the gunner turned his pulse wave cannon towards the speeder heading away. They had been given orders to fire on any vehicles, but since the driver wore the armour of a mandalorian and was heading away from the mansion, the spotter took it to be a scout heading out to patrol the surrounding area.

Picking up a point to point communication link the spotter activated the device.

"This is post four to command. Scout vehicle leaving perimeter." He signalled as the speeder vanished from view.

"Say again post four." The commander's voice responded.

"Scout vehicle leaving perimeter commander." The spotter repeated.

"What scout vehicle?" the commander asked.

"A landspeeder with a single occupant sir."

"I ordered no scouts despatched." The commander said, "Destroy it."

"But it's already out of sight sir." The spotter replied and there was a short pause.

"Prepare to repel assault." The commander ordered.

Belle brought the speeder to a halt beside her fighter and rushed from one vehicle to the other without bothering to turn off the engine. Unsealing the cockpit and climbing in, Belle plugged her datapad into the console.

"Okay Han, you better be up there." She said as soon as the communication antenna was on line, "Because I'm sending you the positions of all the mandalorians defensive positions. Plus there's a hangar full of

basilisks that you'd better take out. Oh yeah, and it looks like there are many more mandalorians than we figured on. I reckon at least sixty remaining, you better be ready for them."

Lovas was large through the canopy now as Han listened to Belle's brief transmission.

"There's a data file attached sir." The pilot told him.

"Let me see." Han replied and the pilot brought up the map Belle had sent on a display, along with various notes about what she had learned of the mansion's layout. Han then turned his head to where the transport's gunner was sat, "Key the marked locations into your fire control computer." He ordered, "We'll need a single shot against each of the bunkers plus enough to bring down that hangar."

"Yes sir, accessing the data now." The gunner replied.

"Good." Han said as he got out of his seat, "I'm heading back to the hold. Let me know when we're ready to go."

The hold of the transport held six armoured assault shuttles suspended from docking arms connected to the ceiling, each one big enough to carry about a dozen soldiers and their equipment. Though the equipment had been loaded before the transport had left Crassis Major, the soldiers assigned to each shuttle were instead sat on benches running down either side of the hold so that Han could address them all at once.

"This is it!" he called out as soon as he stepped into the hold and in an instant all of the soldiers turned to look at him before he continued, "We've received the co-ordinates of our drop zone and also of all its defences. This ship will suppress the fixed defences while we make the drop by shuttle. Then you'll deploy by line at low altitude and storm the building. Now you all know why we're here and you know what the target looks like. Under no circumstances is she to be harmed. Secure her for transport and then signal for a pickup. Oh and one last thing. It seems that there may be more resistance than we expected so you'll really be earning your pay today. Remember these are mandalorians so feel free to shoot to kill." Then he paused as he looked along each row of soldiers, "Now move. Load up and wait for the signal."

In the transport's cockpit the pilot and gunner watched their instruments carefully. They had ceased running silent to manoeuvre over the target zone, but they had kept their sensors in passive mode to make sure that the mandalorians did not detect any scans.

"Almost there." The gunner said as he watched the targeting screen and saw the pre-programmed target locations almost right underneath them now.

"Okay then, we're set." The pilot responded and he pressed a single button on his console.

5.

The floor of the hold suddenly opened up to reveal the planet Lovas beneath the ship. "You are cleared for launch." The transport pilot's voice then said over the intercom. "Punch it!" Han snapped and the shuttle he was in lurched suddenly as the pilot released the docking clamp. Behind it the other two pilots followed suit and the six craft headed towards the surface in a line. The lead shuttle lurched again as it hit the atmosphere and the view outside the canopy was suddenly blocked by flames caused by the heat of atmospheric entry. All of a sudden the ship was filled by the sound of several thunderclaps and several of the occupants flinched, wondering if they were coming under fire. "Those better be on target." Han said as there were more thunderclaps, knowing that they were the sounds of the transport's fire against the targets identified by Belle.

Gayal ate alone. The mandalorians were not the best of cooks and the food was plain, but it was still a marked improvement on the liquids that she had been tube fed with during her imprisonment so she was not likely to complain.

All of a sudden the mansion shuddered and there was the sound of an explosion from outside. Leaping up from her seat Gayal ran to the large window that looked out into the valley in front of the mansion. There she gasped as she witnessed one energy blast after another flash down from above the clouds and strike the mountainside, creating plumes of smoke and flame as the weapon emplacements they struck were destroyed.

All of a sudden a klaxon began to sound and Gayal heard shouts.

"We're under attack!"

"Incoming!"

"Secure the woman!"

Fear.

Cal's eyes widened as he felt the disturbance in the Force just as the *Bright Hope* dropped out of hyperspace, still some distance from Lovas.

"Cal what's wrong?" Lara asked.

"It's Gayal." He replied, "She's in trouble. I think we're too late."

The mansion shook once again and Gayal was knocked off her feet as a volley of precisely aimed fire went down the vehicle hangar's vertical shaft and collapsed the structure, burying the powerful basilisk war droids under tonnes of rock.

"Are you injured?" a distorted voice called out and Gayal looked up to see a group of fully armoured mandalorians rushing into the room.

"No, no. I'm fine." Gayal replied as she was helped back to her feet.

"Control, Missus Crassis is secure." The mandalorian reported into his PTP link.

"Good." The commander's voice responded, "Stay with her. We picked up three shuttles on approach just before they took out our sensors. They must not be allowed to harm her."

There was a flash from the ground, followed by an alarm as the mandalorians defending the mansion used a portable shoulder fired missile launcher to engage the rapidly approaching shuttles. Han tensed, well aware that the shuttles lacked shield generators that could stop a missile. But what they lacked in shielding the shuttles made up for in firepower and in front of him the pilot reacted quick enough to open fire with the nose mounted blaster cannon, a stream of bright red energy bolts streaking towards the missile and shooting it out of the air.

"Five hundred metres." The pilot announced, calling out the altitude of the shuttle, "Four. Three. Two. One."

"Drop stations!" Han ordered and in the compartment behind him the twelve soldiers got to their feet and hooked syntherope lines to the ceiling above them.

The shuttle came to a sudden halt, hovering in the air in front of the mansion and the two large side hatches slid open. The syntherope lines were tossed out of each side and six soldiers leapt out, sliding down the lines to the ground while the shuttle pilot provided covering fire with the blaster cannon.

Han heard the distinctive rattle of a heavy automatic weapon through the open doors, presumably one that Belle had missed in her data file and he turned to try and see when the attack was originating from. He did not see the hidden gun emplacement but as he turned he did see a volley of rockets fire from another of the

shuttles, their explosive warheads blasted massive craters in the mountainside and when the firing of rockets ceased so had the machine gun fire.

"Okay we're clear." The pilot announced and Han realised that all of the troopers carried by his shuttle were now on the ground and heading for the mansion.

"Then circle." Han ordered, "Watch for reinforcements and be ready to provide fire support for our people on the ground."

The front door to the mansion exploded inwards under a volley of fire from the pulse wave rifles that the Shill Security troops carried and immediately the mandalorians positioned behind a hastily improvised barrier returned fire. They fired short bursts of projectiles and energy blasts back through the ruined doorway and a scream from outside confirmed that at least one of the attackers had been hit.

But then there were several 'pop' sounds and a number of tiny canisters flew in through the doorway.

"Grenades!" a mandalorian yelled and the defenders took cover behind their barricade before the explosives could go off. However, the grenades contained no explosive that could potentially trigger a collapse of the mansion. Instead when they burst open they flooded the room with tear gas and under the cover of this cloud the Shill Security troops crawled forwards.

The helmets worn by both sides protected them from the disabling effects of the gas, but the Shill Security troops also had the benefit of thermal imaging goggles that allowed them to see through the cloud and as the mandalorians stood up to try and see what was happening they were picked off by well aimed pulse wave fire.

"Entrance secure." One of the troopers broadcast to the entire assault force as well as the six circling shuttles, "We are splitting up. Team two head for the command centre, team one with me. We're going after the woman."

In his command centre the mandalorian commander was desperately trying to assess the tactical situation. So far all he could tell was that it was bad. The communications tower had just had time to report that all frequencies were being jammed before the assault shuttles providing aerial cover had taken it out. The lack of a shield generator was something that had concerned the commander about trying to defend a fixed position, but the one scheduled for installation had not yet been delivered. The fragmentary reports currently coming from what remained of his men indicated that the attacking ground troops were splitting up. Some had remained outside the mansion to deal with the surviving mandalorians scattered around the mountainside while inside the unit deployed to defend the main door had been swiftly overwhelmed. One thing was clear though, the attacking force could have levelled the mansion from space with a more prolonged bombardment, so that meant that there was something inside that they wanted and that had to be Gayal. The commander could see no way of holding his position, but he could still deny his enemies their prize.

"Order all forces to fall back to the mansion." He ordered, "Then accompany me."

"Where are we going sir?" one of the command staff asked.

"Away from here and we're taking Missus Crassis with us."

Gayal stood by the window, looking out into the valley as the battle continued outside. The shuttles circling the mansion had come close enough for her to see that they carried no markings to identify them or who had sent them, but Gayal knew this anyway. They were from Shill Security and one of the Founding Families would have sent them, possibly her own but it could also be any of the others hoping to curry favour with her parents. Worse still was that if the fighting outside was not bad enough it seemed that some of the Shill Security troops had been able to break into the mansion. Gayal had heard the sound of weapons fire from floors below and she did not think that the mandalorians had resorted to firing from windows.

"Missus Crassis you should stand back from the window." A stern voice called out from behind her, "You may been seen and targeted."

"What?" Gayal said as she turned to see the mandalorian commander striding towards her, a bulky plasma carbine in his hands.

"Missus Crassis you must come with me." He announced and he held out one hand while keeping a grip on his carbine with the other.

"But where are we going?" Gayal asked.

"Anywhere away from here miss." the mandalorian said, "We cannot hold this location, but we may be able to evade pursuit long enough to-" and then he was cut short by a pulse wave blast that struck him in the back.

Gayal screamed as the mandalorian commander fell and she dropped to her knees to check for a heartbeat. Meanwhile in the passageway outside there were shouts as the mandalorian guards out there exchanged fire with the Shill Security troops. Hearing the sound of footfalls Gayal looked up and turned towards the door, but instead of the mandalorians she had hoped to see she instead saw a unit of masked Shill Security troops aiming their weapons at her.

The battle was definitely going his way, Han decided as he monitored the progress of his troops. Though there were still a few mandalorians holding out they were confined to areas that made no difference to the mission and he knew that Gayal would soon be in his hands. But he had learned never to take anything for granted in a combat zone and it was just as well when he saw one of the other assault shuttles vanish in a ball of flames.

"Incoming vessel! Delaya-class." The pilot snapped as he checked his sensor display.

"Delaya-class?" Han repeated, "It's the kriffing jedi!"

"See Cal? I told you I could hit him." Lara said, smiling at her brother.

"Great work baby sister. Don't get cocky." He responded, "Now take the controls and get us closer to the mansion. Level with that window there." And he pointed to where he could sense Gayal's presence in the Force.

"Closer?" Lara exclaimed, "Cal, where are you going?" she then added as Cal got out of the pilot's seat.

"Outside." He replied.

Han watched in disbelief as the Bright Hope manoeuvred between the remaining assault shuttles and then came to a complete halt facing the front wall of the mansion. Then he saw the ship's access ramp lowering while the transport remained in mid air and a figure came running down it with a rifle in his hands.

"Destroy that ship!" he ordered, "All shuttles attack."

As he ran down the ramp Cal raised his rifle and fired it on fully automatic, sending a stream of spatial distortions into the window he aimed at. Although it was armoured, the force of so many powerful impacts blew the window inwards and Cal ceased fire, letting the rifle drop to his side on its sling just as he reached the bottom of the ramp and leapt into the air.

Drawing and igniting his lightsaber as he flew, Cal reached out into the Force and let it guide him towards the destroyed window.

6.

Gayal and all of the Shill Security troops aiming at her flinched as the window behind her suddenly exploded inwards, showering the room with glass and from outside there was the roar of the *Bright Hope's* engines as Lara pulled away to avoid the assault shuttles. Gayal turned just in time to see Cal land inside the room with his lightsaber in his hands and a rifle at his side.

"Miss me?" he asked and Gayal nodded, "Good. Now get down."

Cal charged at the soldiers at the far end of the room and they opened fire at him. But unlike the mandalorians who had only armour that was ineffective against pulse wave fire at such short ranges, Cal had his lightsaber to protect him and as he let the Force flow through him he swatted each blast in turn before any could hit him. Then, as soon as the first of the soldiers came within reach he swung his lightsaber across in a horizontal arc, slicing through three of them in one go. Then he thrust the tip of his blade at the next nearest and impaled the man through his chest. This left only two more and both of them headed back towards the door, seeking to put as much distance as they could between themselves and Cal.

Knowing that he could easily chase them down, Cal instead opted to channel a blast of telekinetic energy into them instead, pushing both back out of the door and then with a flick of his wrist he used the Force to activate the door control, sealing it shut. Finally he leapt forwards and slashed the control panel to destroy the mechanism that would allow the door to be opened again before he turned around to face Gayal.

"Oh Cal!" she exclaimed as she rushed forwards and embrace him, kissing him on the lips, "I knew you'd come."

"Well we're not out of the woods yet." He replied and he took out his PTP link, "Hey Lara, how about a pick up?" he transmitted.

"Not now Cal!" Lara snapped as she banked sharply to prevent one of the assault shuttles from getting a lock on her. The *Bright Hope* was well armed with laser cannons and torpedoes, but aiming the cannons at anything not directly ahead meant risking ploughing right into a mountain while although the torpedoes could be guided by their onboard sensors alone their multi-megatonne warheads would level the entire estate if used so close to it.

"Lara we're kind of desperate." Cal said and Lara heard a pounding sound in the background of the transmission.

"Look Cal, I can fly or I can shoot and if I stop flying long enough to aim or pick you up these guys will be all over me. Is that what you want?" Lara responded before a bleeping sound alerted her to another incoming vessel that her sensors identified as a daavab-class fighter, "Oh great." She said, "Now Belle's here as well." But instead of targeting the *Bright Hope*, the daavab-class fighter flew straight past the canopy, firing at one of the shuttles. Then a second identical fighter flew past, followed by two more. Then something larger passed overhead and Lara looked up to see a pair of vessels in the shape of flying wings above her. Beneath each of these a hatch opened up and from inside mandalorians emerged either dropping to the ground with rocket packs to slow their descent or mounted on flying basilisk war droids.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Lara said to herself.

Another of the assault shuttles exploded as several war droid riders latched onto it just long enough to plant explosives and then flew away. Right in front of his eyes Han was watching his perfectly executed attack fall apart. Both in the air and on the ground his forces were outnumbered and outgunned and they did not even have custody of Gayal. The last reports regarding her were that she was sealed in a room with Cal Udra now protecting her.

"Your orders sir?" the pilot asked but Han did not reply, "Sir? Your orders?"

"I heard." Han replied and he paused for just a moment, "Signal all ships." He said, "Tell them to get back into space and rendezvous with the transport. We're heading back to Crassis Major."

"But what about our men on the ground sir?"

"Forget them." Han said, "If we try and evacuate them we'll all be killed. Now go."

Lara watched with a mix of relief and amazement as the remaining assault shuttles began to withdraw, leaving their troops trapped on the ground as even more mandalorians dropped from their ships.

"Jedi vessel!" a voice called out over the communications system, "Surrender now or we open fire. It's your call."

"Cal did you hear that?" she transmitted.

In the mansion Cal turned to look at Gayal.

"We need to get out of here." He said to her.

"No Cal." She replied, "I've already told you, I can't leave."

"You call this place safe?" Cal asked, waving at the bodies on the floor around them.

"Can you promise me that anywhere you take me will be safer? Honestly?" Gayal asked in response but Cal did not answer, "I thought so." Gayal said just as three mandalorians on basilisks came in through the window.

"Surrender jedi!" one called out.

"Don't hurt him!" Gayal yelled, positioning herself between Cal and the mandalorians.

"We have orders to secure this location." The mandalorian replied, "He must stand down."

"Do it Cal." Gayal said, looking round at him, "I won't let them hurt you." And Cal sighed before lifting his PTP link to his mouth again.

"Lara stand down." He transmitted, "Land the ship and surrender."

Cal and Lara sat back to back in one of the mansion's unused rooms, their arms linked together behind them and bound with plastic ties. Ghost had been removed from the Bright Hope and left in the room with them and right now the dog was licking Lara's face.

"Eww Ghost, no." she said, "Cal can't you do anything to stop him?"

"What happened to that rapport you're always saying you have with him?" Cal replied, "Besides I'd have thought you'd have been glad of his affection."

"Normally yes, but I saw what he was licking right before my face." Lara said and Cal winced.

"Ah, my poor baby sister." He said and then he added a sudden, "Ow!" as Lara elbowed him in the back. Just then the door to the room slid open to reveal Gayal standing outside with Salla Crassis and a pair of mandalorians.

"I'm so terribly sorry about this." Salla said as she walked into the room, "But if we'd known that you two were on your way here then we'd have modified our orders to Mister Mott's men."

"Oh so kidnapping us and leaving us tied up is just a misunderstanding then is it?" Lara asked.

"Trust me padawan Udra," Salla replied, "it's much better than what's happened to those men who attacked this place." And then she held out a hand towards one of the mandalorians who placed his knife in it.

"Why? What's happened to them?" Cal asked, feeling the plastic tie around his wrist being cut.

"Well we know exactly who is responsible for sending them here." Salla replied as she cut Lara free as well, "And let's just say that we're sending them a suitable message."

"Hand me that hydro spanner would you?" Kerden Larrenod asked his grand daughter.

"Sure." Jaynie replied, "This one?" and she held up one of the nearby tools.

"No, that's a vibro cutter." Kerden told her.

"He means this Jaynie." Her brother Hiran said as he also watched his grandfather at work. Then as he handed over the correct tool he asked, "So will it be ready in time?"

"Always in a hurry." Kerden said, shaking his head, "But don't worry, you'll have a fancy speeder for your-" and then he stopped and looked up into the sky as a starship shaped like a flying wing swooped down and hovered above them. A figure mounted on a basilisk war droid came out of the hovering starship and descended to ground level.

"What's going on here?" Kerden asked in amazement.

"I have a message from Erill Crassis." The mandalorian said.

"What is it?" Hiran asked, just as stunned as his sister and grandfather at the sudden appearance of the armoured messenger. But rather than speak, the mandalorian reached to the side of his basilisk mount to where a large sack was hung and releasing it from the droid he tipped out the contents.

Both Hiran and Jaynie leapt backwards, Jaynie screaming as the severed heads came rolling across the ground. Then the mandalorian's war droid suddenly leapt back into the air just as a group of armed guards came rushing towards them all.

"Are you alright?" one of the guards asked while the others just aimed at the mandalorian while he flew back to his ship.

"Alright?" Kerden snapped, "That lunatic just dumped a sack full of heads out in front of my grandchildren. So no, we are not all right. Go get the police."

The guards looked at one another.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" Kerden demanded, "I told you to get the police."

"We can't do that sir." One of the guards replied.

"What do you mean? That man comes here with a sack filled with heads from people he may have killed himself and you're telling me that you can't call the police? Then get out of my way and I'll do it myself."

"Grandpa no." Hiran said, "You can't."

"You too boy? What's going on here? Tell me." Kerden said.

"Grandpa we know what happened to these people." Jaynie said, "They worked for Han Shill and they were sent to get Gayal Karn."

"That stupid young woman?" Kerden replied, "What's so important about her?"

"We need her." Hiran said.

"Enough to start your own private little war? I don't think so." Kerden said.

"Grandpa it's true." Jaynie said, "She can get us something that our family's been trying to get hold of ever since the sector was first charted. Something that could make the money we have now look like small change."

"Don't be so cryptic girl. Tell me exactly what you mean." Kerden ordered and Jaynie paused.

"The sith were here a thousand years ago." She said.

"Jaynie no." Hiran interrupted and Kerden glared at him.

"Keep quiet boy, let your sister speak." He said and then he looked back at Jaynie, "Go on, explain what the sith have to do with this." He told her.

"They left behind a storehouse full of knowledge." She said, "If we can get into that then-"

"A storehouse of sith knowledge? Are you insane? There's a reason that sort of stuff is forbidden."

"Forbidden only by the jedi grandpa." Hiran said, "If we're careful then we can use it to-"

"Careful? Do you know what you're saying boy? You're talking about taking things created by some of the greatest tyrants that this galaxy has ever produced and using it to turn a profit. Isn't the money you have already enough? Now out of my way. I'm calling the police and putting an end to all of this."

"Grandpa no!" Jaynie snapped, stepping in front of Kerden as he took a step. But as he tried to move her out of the way she instinctive tried to push back using the hand that still held the vibro cutter.

"Jaynie!" Hiran exclaimed as he saw Kerden's eyes widen and his mouth drop open. Then as Jaynie stepped back they both looked down and saw the grip of the cutter still protruding from Kerden's stomach.

"Dad?" Millel's voice called out from the direction of the house and Hiran and Jaynie looked around to see their parents running towards them with more guards following, "Dad can you hear me?" she said as she took hold of her father while he slumped to his knees and stared at her, "Dad, please. Speak to me." Millel pleaded and then she looked up at Jaynie, "Oh baby what have you done?" but Jaynie did not reply, instead she just looked down at her blood soaked hand.