

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



IV-VII: UNCOVERED

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...

UNCOVERED

WHEN THE REMAINS OF A SITH OUTPOST THAT HAS LAIN BURIED FOR A THOUSAND YEARS IS UNCOVERED IT ATTRACTS THE ATTENTION OF BOTH THE FOUNDING FAMILIES AND THE JEDI ORDER. BUT THE OUTPOST IS JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG, LEADING TO FAR GREATER PRIZE ON A MYSTERIOUS PLANET...

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

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1 .

The planet of Dust was well named. A largely barren world, it was prone to violent windstorms that could hurl the surface sands through the air at frightening speeds. Even when the winds were low, wise inhabitants shielded their faces with whatever they could. Conditions were so bad that the planet would have been shunned altogether if not for the fact that beneath the violently shifting sands there were massive mineral deposits and prospectors came from across the sector to try their luck at striking it rich.

The klaxon sounded to warn the miners to get clear of the blasting area. A series of charges had been placed in a large mass of rock with the intention of shattering it so that its exact makeup could be studied. Sensor sweeps of the area had picked up a disturbance that was typical of metal deposits beneath the surface and the miners wanted to know precisely what it was that they had come across.

"Ready?" the foreman asked, glancing over his shoulder from the armoured viewport of the control tower.

"Ready sir." One of the miners replied, "Lookouts confirm all personnel are clear."

"There's still the matter of that void." Another miner commented.

"Yes well if we blast into it at least we'll know if there's anything else inside it won't we?" the foreman responded and then he looked at the miner sat beside the controls for the explosives and he nodded, "Do it." He added.

Despite expecting the explosion the foreman still flinched when the shock wave made the viewport rattle.

"Report." He said as he regained his composure.

"All charges confirmed good." One of the miners told him, "No hang fires."

"Good." The foreman said, "Then let's go see what we've got shall we?"

Their faces covered by goggles and masks with built in dust filters the miners calmly made their way across the sand to where their charges had blasted a series of craters in the ground.

"Hurry up!" the foreman shouted, "Collect those samples before we lose them." And he pointed to the fragments of rock that now lay scattered around. Fragments that were already starting to be buried by the sand being blown over them.

Immediately the miners began to gather up as many fragments as they could, studying each one for any signs of interesting metal deposits. Then the foreman noticed that one of his men had headed towards one of the craters themselves and was standing on the edge looking down into it.

"Hey! What are you doing over there?" he called out, "Do you want us to lose the samples?"

"I think you should come take a look at this." The miner responded, waving the foreman over, "Everyone should come take a look at this."

"Never you mind." The foreman told the other miners, "Keep working." And then he made his way over to the crater, "This better be good." He said, "You're not being paid to stare into holes you know."

"This isn't any hole though is it?" the miner said as the foreman reached him and he pointed down into the crater.

"Holy kriff." The foreman said as he looked down for himself, "How long do you reckon that's been down there?"

"Too slow Jedi Udra." Tarris Blake said as he easily sidestepped Cal Udra's lightsaber attack and then parried the younger jedi's blade with a one handed sweep of his own weapon.

"I'm just tired that's all." Cal said as he shut off his weapon and stepped back.

"No." Tarris said, "You are distracted."

"No I'm not." Cal replied.

"Oh yes you are big brother." A female voice called out, "You're thinking about her again aren't you?"

"Lara, Gayal made her reasons for staying on Lovas quite clear." Cal replied.

"Maybe, but you'd still rather have her here in your bed wouldn't you?" Lara said.

"Yes he would." Tarris said before Cal could reply, "That is why the Jedi Code forbids such attachment."

"Yes well the Jedi Code is only there to guide us isn't it?" Cal said.

"The shadows follow its teachings fully." Tarris said, referring to the group within the Jedi Order that he was a member of. The Jedi Shadows were fanatical in their quest to eliminate the influence of the Dark Side of the Force and they followed the Jedi Code to the letter, "Your feelings betray you." He added, "And you are unwise to lower your defences." And then he suddenly lunged at Cal with his lightsaber still active.

In diving out of the way Cal toppled over, landing heavily on the padded floor. Just in time he rolled onto his back and held up his lightsaber, activating it to block a blow by Tarris.

"You could have taken my head off." Cal said as Tarris backed off.

"Which would at least have removed all thoughts of the woman." Tarris replied and Cal frowned.

Just then the communicator sounded and Lara went to answer it.

"Hello?" she said.

"Lara is that you?" a man asked. The image on the display was of poor quality and the man's face was barely recognisable as such, "It's Dayle."

"Hi there doctor." She said with a smile when she realised that it was Doctor Dayle Larnson, a xenarchaeologist that she and Cal had had dealings with on Atch, a primitive world outside the Republic that had at one time been controlled by a sith warlord, "How are things going on Atch?"

"I'm not on Atch." He replied, "That's why the signal's so bad. I'm on a transport heading for Dust."

"Dust?" Lara said, "What's there?"

"Dust." Cal commented and Lara pulled a face at him.

"Some mining outfit working for Del Karn found something there." Dayle explained, "I've not been told much, but it looks like it's been hidden there for a long time. Since before the Republic came to the sector."

"So it's sith then?" Lara asked and this attracted the interest of Tarris as well as Cal and both of them made there way over to the communicator as well.

"I don't know." Dayle replied, "But the Founding Families want me on Dust to check it out so I thought that maybe you'd be interested as well." Then he paused and the jedi were just about able to make out that he had turned his head, "I have to go." He said, "I don't want anyone to know I've contacted you. I'll try and set up a beacon for you." And then the channel went dead.

"I guess this means that we're going to Dust doesn't it?" Lara asked.

There were rumours all across Dust's public computer network about the mining camp that had been suddenly evacuated after they uncovered something out of the ordinary. Of course there were many variants of this tale, some said that all the miners were dead while others claimed that they had been arrested to keep them from telling anyone what they had found. None of these gave an exact location for the camp, but an orbital sensor sweep was able to pick up a low powered signal that repeated every minute. "Dayle's beacon?" Lara said as she and Cal studied the sensor display of the *Bright Hope*, the delaya-class courier assigned to them by the Jedi Order.

"There's only one way to find out." Cal replied, "So go tell Tarris that we're heading in while I start the landing cycle."

"Where is he?" Lara asked, "I've not seen him the whole trip."

"Where else? In his cabin meditating of course." Cal replied and as Lara got up from her seat he steered the *Bright Hope* towards the planet below.

Cal had visited Dust before and he had an idea of what to expect from flying through its atmosphere.

Raising the ship's particle shields was the only way to prevent airborne particulate matter from battering it and instead Cal was treated to a light show as the shield flickered across the canopy above him from continual use.

"You have the target's location?" Tarris asked as he entered the cockpit in front of Lara and sat down in the co-pilot's seat that she had previously occupied.

"I think so." Cal replied, "There's a faint transmission coming from the middle of nowhere that looks like it could be coming from a PTP link."

Point to point communication links were compact personal communication devices. On their own these had a useful range of only a few hundred metres, but by using booster towers a message could be sent around a planet. Of course if sending data was not needed, the transmission range was far greater even without a booster and this seemed to be what was happening here.

"Look, I think there's someone down there." Lara said suddenly as the *Bright Hope* came in lower to the surface and she pointed to where a lone figure could be seen moving across the sand on a speeder bike.

"Then there has to be some sort of camp around here." Cal said, "We're too far from any settlement that's on the charts for someone to have come all the way out here on their own."

"Then I suggest following that speeder bike Jedi Udra." Tarris said.

Cal steered after the lone speeder bike, maintaining the altitude of the *Bright Hope* so that the rider would be unlikely to hear the ship's engines over the sound of his own. Just as the jedi had expected, the speeder bike made its way to a small camp set up in the desert that consisted of several prefabricated shelters that did not look to be strong enough to survive a serious wind storm. To protect against this there was instead a shield generator set up centrally so that it was capable of covering all the lightweight buildings in a protective energy bubble.

"I think we've found the place." Cal said, "Look." And he pointed beyond the camp where a group of people were clustered around a crater, "I'm taking us down."

Cal landed the Bright Hope between the camp and the crater and as the three jedi came walking down the ship's access ramp a small crowd was already gathering. None of them could help but notice that several members of the crowd were armed.

"Jedi Udra." Dayle called out from the front of the crowd, "What brings you here?"

"You do doctor." Cal replied and as one of the armed men glanced in Dayle's direction he added, "Whenever we notice the sector's foremost expert in the sith's settlement of the sector suddenly travel away from his research on Atch we like to find out why. Now perhaps you can shed some light on why the planetary computer network claims that a stable portal into hyperspace has been discovered here." And a hint of a smile appeared on Cal's face as he mentioned one of the most bizarre theories being put about.

"Well I can't help you with a hyperspace portal. But I can show you what has been found." Dayle said and he indicated the crater.

"This dig is a private operation." One of the guards said sternly, "You are not welcome here jedi."

"But this is not private land." Tarris said, "We have every right to be here." And Cal and Lara both noticed the way he waved the hand he raised and felt the slight tremor in the Force.

"This isn't private land." The guard told his comrades, "They have every right to be here."

Dayle led the jedi to the crater where a winch system was just being set up.

"As you can see we're still getting ready to go down there ourselves." Dayle explained, "But the miners sent down a probe droid and it sent back some rather interesting data." And he held up a datapad.

"Can I see that?" Cal asked, taking the datapad from Dayle and the three jedi looked at the display closely.

"That passageway looks artificial." Lara said.

"I can see that from looking down there." Cal said, pointing at the bottom of the crater, "But it doesn't give us any clues as to who built it does it?"

"Then perhaps we should take the obvious action." Tarris said and before anyone could stop him he leapt down into the hole.

"We're going to have to go after him aren't we?" Lara said to Cal and he grinned and nodded, "Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." She added as they both drew their lightsabers.

"Look on the bright side." Cal replied.

"What bright side?"

"At least Tarris went first." Cal said before he too jumped down into the crater.

Lara peered over the edge of the crater and she saw both her brother and Tarris standing in the underground passage.

"Here goes." She muttered to herself and then she jumped as well.

Danger.

The brief flicker in the Force took Cal by surprise and sensing that the threat came from above he looked upwards. He was just in time to see Lara descending towards him and attempted to dive out of the way but was just a fraction too slow and both he and Lara cried out in alarm as she landed on top of him.

"Hey! Is everybody okay down there?" Dayle called out from above.

"We are all fine thank you doctor." Tarris replied, "It was just a lapse of concentration. We are proceeding along the passageway." And taking out a small flashlight he began to walk away.

"Lara get off me." Cal said as he struggled to get out from underneath his sister.

"Hey it wasn't my fault you were stood right there." Lara said as she managed to get back to her feet and she held out her hand to help Cal up.

"Maybe if you weren't so heavy." Cal muttered and Lara frowned and let go of Cal, causing him to fall back to the floor.

"Oops. Silly me." She said and then she turned and followed Tarris.

"You did that on purpose." Cal said as he went after her.

"Yeah, I did." Lara replied.

"Pay attention." Tarris said sternly, "It is no wonder you have failed to uncover any concrete proof linking the Founding Families to the sith if you are always bickering like this."

"To be fair we don't always argue." Cal replied.

"Yeah we have to sleep sometimes." Lara added and Cal glared at her.

"Not helping, Lara." He hissed.

"Here." Tarris said suddenly and he came to a halt and trained his flashlight on the wall beside him. So far the walls had been flat and featureless, but this particular section had had something scratched into it.

"What is it?" Lara asked as she looked more closely at the crude carvings.

"Vandalism?" Cal suggested.

"Perhaps Jedi Udra." Tarris said, "But I think that there may be more meaning to them than some random act of criminal damage." Then he shone his flash light further along the wall, exposing more carvings, "Yes it is as I thought," he said, "This is writing."

"Writing?" Cal replied and he used his own flash light to illuminate the carvings. The crude nature of the scratches meant that it was difficult to tell where one character ended and the next began, but slowly he and Lara began to piece together several letters.

"Oh no." Lara said, "That's sith isn't it?"

"I think so." Cal said, "This was probably carved with a knife."

"I wonder what it says?" Lara commented.

"It says 'Behold, the Beast.'" Tarris told her.

"So you read sith?" Cal said.

"Enough to be able to identify genuine artefacts." Tarris replied.

"So could this beast still be down here?" Lara asked, "Hibernating maybe?"

"I hope not." Cal said, "Remember that thing we faced on Crassis Minor? We had to drop it from a bridge to destroy it."

"The Dark Side is not particularly strong here." Tarris said, "Whatever happened here, I think that this beast moved on long ago," and then he continued down the passageway.

"Maybe it went looking for someone to eat." Lara said.

"Well so long as it didn't come back here we may as well keep following Tarris." Cal said and he headed after him.

2.

The passageway ended in a doorway that did not open when Tarris tried the handle.

"Is it locked?" Lara asked.

"Possibly padawan Udra. "Tarris replied, "Though I think it more likely that either the door or the frame has warped over the centuries and then there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated his lightsaber.

Two quick vertical strokes both took of the door's hinges and cut the lock in half before a quick kick knocked it down, falling away from the jedi. As expected the chamber beyond the door was in complete darkness as the jedi entered it, but from the narrow parts illuminated by their flash lights the jedi could see that it was a sizeable room. Then Cal shone his flash light straight across the room and revealed what it held.

"Well this is interesting isn't it?" he said as he held the beam on the sith starship. The vessel was about the same length as the *Bright Hope* but it was more box-shaped, suggesting a cargo ship.

"Could the beast be aboard that?" Lara asked.

"I doubt it." Cal said, "This room's been sealed for about a thousand years."

"The ship on the other hand is not." Tarris said as he shone his flash light at the ramp leading up into the transport's cargo hold.

Aware that the ancient sith had been in the habit of booby-trapping equipment they abandoned the three jedi approached the transport cautiously, all holding their active lightsabers at the ready. However, on this occasion it seemed that the ship really was harmless and they proceeded inside and made their way to the cockpit.

"It's all dead. "Cal said as he sat at one of the control stations and tried to bring the systems on line.

"Unsurprising." Tarris replied, "If we wish to examine this ship properly then we are going to need a new fuel cell."

"Well we can get one from the *Bright Hope* can't we?" Lara asked.

"Providing we're careful yes." Cal replied, "Our fuel cells can kick out much more power than this old tub can take so we need to prevent any sudden surges. The last thing I want is to accidentally fire the ion drives while we're all cooped up in this hangar." Then he took his PTP link from his robes and activated it.

In the cargo hold of the *Bright Hope*, the massive LB-series loading droid lifted its head at the sound of the communication systems indicating an incoming message and it made its way to the cockpit and activated the receiving system.

"Shorty are you there?" Cal's voice asked and the droid gently tapped the control console once to indicate its presence, "Okay we need a fuel cell." Cal told the droid, "See if there's one that's mainly empty if you can then bring it to us. We're in a chamber at the end of the passageway heading east from the bottom of the crater that Dayle's team are clustered around. Do you understand?" and the droid tapped the console once again, "Good. Then get moving. Cal out." And then Cal shut off his PTP link.

Turning around, the droid known as Shorty despite its height of more than two and a half metres headed back towards the hold that adjoined the engine rooms where the *Bright Hope's* fuel cells were kept.

The fuel cell taken from the *Bright Hope* would fit into the ancient sith vessel directly, although the Sith Empire had been created using Republic technology the two had been isolated for thousands of years and during that time the sith had made compromises about design that meant their technology was no longer fully compatible. Therefore the new fuel cell had to be connected in a somewhat haphazard fashion, using bulky flying leads to connect its terminals to the power system of the transport.

"Okay here goes." Cal said as he readied himself to make the final connection. Then just as he was about to make it he paused.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked.

"I'm about to try connecting a fuel cell to a thousand year old system using spare parts." Cal replied, "Can you blame me for being a bit nervous?" then he glanced around, "In fact why am I even bothering?" he added and he got to his feet, "Come here Shorty." He said to the massive loading droid stood watching in silence and Cal held out the final cable, "Plug this into there." He instructed Shorty and the droid nodded in compliance before it bent down to make the connection that had unnerved Cal.

The instant that Shorty plugged in the cable the lights inside the transport came on brightly and there was a humming sound from overhead.

"Well that seems to have-" Cal began before there was a sudden 'Crack!' and the lights went out again.

"Oh nice work Cal." Lara commented.

"It's not my fault." Her brother replied, "Blame the sith who built this wreck."

"Oh yeah, blame the alien who's been dead for the best part of a millennium." Lara said but before Cal could respond his PTP link sounded.

"Cal." He said as he activated the device.

"Jedi Udra the flight systems are now on line." Tarris' voice told him from the cockpit, "Thought the lights appear to have burned themselves out rapidly."

"We got that here as well." Cal replied, "The power from the fuel cell must have been too much for them. We're on our way to you now."

Making their way back to the transport ship's cockpit Cal and Lara found Tarris already studying the ship's computer files.

"Find anything interesting?" Lara asked.

"Perhaps. I believe that this ship was used as a supply vessel." Tarris replied.

"How can you tell?" Lara asked, "The hold is empty."

"Because I have been able to access what passes for a navigation computer on this ship and it contains only two sets of jump data." Tarris told her, "One set to take to wherever it went when it left here and the other to bring it back afterwards."

"Supplying what though?" Cal asked, "And are we at the supply or the receiving end?"

"There is no way of telling." Tarris said, "However, it does yield a significant clue to us."

"What?" Lara asked.

"What's at the other end of the programmed jump?" Cal told her, "Remember, the sith probably won't have used the same routes as we do so we can't tell where it is just by comparing it to our own charts."

Lara frowned.

"I don't much like the idea of just keying a thousand year old jump plan into the *Bright Hope* though." She said.

"Nor do I." Cal agreed, "Even if we don't end up dropping out of hyperspace next to a sith battle station that's been waiting for a thousand years to blow something up there's no telling how much that route has shifted since the sith used it."

"You are both correct." Tarris said, "Simply following this route would be reckless, but we still need to determine where this ship went, there could still be sith artefacts remaining there that need securing before those less able to understand their power can locate them."

"Well the nav computer on the *Bright Hope* isn't up to figuring out where the place is." Cal pointed out.

"I am aware of that Jedi Udra." Tarris replied, "In order to determine the location of this ship's destination we will need to take this data to Aurek Station."

"Oh great." Cal said, "I'm sure the administrator will just love this."

"His feelings on the matter are irrelevant." Tarris said, "He is a servant of the Republic and he will render his aide to us."

"What about the ship and this place?" Cal asked, "We can't just let Dayle's team run loose down here."

"That's right. We've no idea how big it is or if there's anything left." Lara agreed.

"I will remain here." Tarris announced, "I will watch over it and keep others away while you signal Master Karas on Moldas. Tell him to send a force of freedom warriors to take over."

"What about us?" Cal asked.

"You are the Jedi knight assigned to this sector Jedi Udra." Tarris said, "So I suggest that you take the data we have already retrieved here and see where it takes you."

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

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

"You always say that." Cal replied.

Han Shill, CEO of Shill Security landed his airspeeder on the private pad in the grounds of the Karn family estate. The Karns were one of the Founding Families, the descendants of the first explorers from the Republic to chart the Narthis Sector. In the three hundred years since then the families had become extremely wealthy and the Karns' estate showed this off perfectly.

A pair of armed guards came rushing up to the speeder, but given that they were provided by Shill Security they halted, stood at attention and saluted.

"We're sorry sir." One told Han, "We didn't know that you were coming."

"No, I need to speak with Mister and Missus Karn without the meeting appearing on any official records."

Han replied, "I take it that they are home?"

"Yes sir. I'll take you to them." The guard replied and he led Han away while the other remained to guard the speeder.

The first member of the Karn family that Han met when he entered the house was Sial, the Karns' second daughter.

"Here to see my mom and dad?" she asked and Han nodded, "I'd be careful if I were you." She then told him.

"Why?" he asked her.

"Oh they're still mad about how you screwed up getting Gayal back. From what I hear the Crassis family are furious. How many of your men ended up being decapitated by those mandalorians they've hired to replace you?" Sial said, reminding Han how his company no longer provided the security for the Crassis family.

Then before Han could reply she added, "Mind you, they're even angrier with the Druds for starting the whole thing off without checking with them first." And then she simply walked on past him.

The guard then led Han into a spacious lunge where Faye and Del Karn waited for him. Faye Karn was the true head of the family; her husband had been born Del Farris and taken her name upon their marriage.

Though some of the companies he ran still used the Farris name to make them less easily identifiable with the Karn family.

"Ah Han." Faye said, "So what brings you here today?"

"An apology perhaps?" Del added.

"I've come to update you about the investigation on Dust." Han said, ignoring Del's comment.

"What have they found?" Faye asked.

"Nothing." Han replied and the Karns glanced at one another.

"Then why bother wasting our time?" Del asked sternly.

"Because of the reason they've not found anything." Han said, "Doctor Larnson and his team were preparing to go down into the complex your miners uncovered when the Jedi turned up."

"Stang." Del exclaimed, "How did they find out?"

"They told my guards that they've been keeping an eye on Doctor Larnson." Han said, "Though my men have noticed no such surveillance."

"Either way that still means the Jedi have access to the complex and we don't." Faye said.

"Maybe not." Han said, "The shadow Tarris Blake remained in the complex, but both Cal and Lara left fairly soon after. So although they've obviously found something down there it's something they need help to analyse. Also they obviously want to protect the site. Both those can work to our advantage."

"How?" Faye asked.

"Because of what the Jedi will have to do to analyse what they've found and protect whatever's still down there." Del said.

"Exactly." Han said, "The Jedi can't afford to have one of their number sitting in a hole permanently so they'll have to call in help from the enclave on Moldas and that will be in the form of Freedom Warriors. I'll let my sister Corlay know that she's to do whatever it takes to make sure that she's part of that security detail."

"But the Jedi will still have a hard start on us." Faye pointed out.

"But not by as much as they could." Han replied.

"You're forgetting about Erin." Del said, reminding his wife of Corlay Shill's twin who was a starfighter pilot for the Republic navy stationed at Aurek Station, "She's perfectly positioned to find out what the Jedi are up to."

"Meanwhile I'll put together a team of my best men to respond to whatever we find." Han said.

"I take it that these 'best men' won't be the same ones who lost their heads on Lovas." Faye commented.

3.

When they docked at Aurek Station, Cal and Lara headed straight for the space stations command and control section.

"We need to speak with the administrator." Cal told one of the command staff.

"He's busy." The woman replied.

Deception.

It was obvious to both Cal and Lara that the woman was lying about the administrator being unable to see them, but in all likelihood this was as a result of his instructions to the woman rather than any desire to lie on her part.

"So are we." Lara said, "So go and tell him that if he doesn't see us then we'll just have to go over his head."

Administrator Ishtel Varr'key was a bothan and in common with many of his species he saw plots against him everywhere, particularly where the jedi were concerned. This meant that although he believed that the jedi were not his allies, he would not be willing to risk them bad mouthing him to his superiors and sure enough shortly after the woman disappeared into the administrator's office she reappeared with the diminutive bothan behind her.

"Jedi Udra, padawan Udra. Do please come in." the administrator said, waving them into his office before closing the door behind them, "Now what may I do for you?" he asked.

Fear.

Clearly the bothan was unnerved by the jedi's request to see him and Cal sought to put him more at ease.

"Thank you for seeing us so quickly administrator." he said, "We have a problem and you're the only one who can help us solve it in a reasonable time frame."

"I see." Ishtel said, "And exactly what is it that you need me to do for you?"

Cal noticed the bothan's use of the word 'need' instead of want. It was a subtle suggestion that the administrator had the upper hand in this discussion. Cal then took out his datapad and handed it to Ishtel.

"There are the details of two hyperspace jumps held on there." He explained, "One starts at Dust and the other one ends there. We'd like to know where the other end of the journey is."

"Our navigational charts are a matter of public record Jedi Udra." Ishtel said, "Why do you need-"

"The data does not come from a Republic ship and is significantly out of date." Lara interrupted, "We require modern data."

"Discretely." Cal added, "There could be other interested parties."

Lieutenant Erin Shill yawned when the sound of her communicator woke her.

"What?" she asked as she turned on the device.

"Erin it's me." Han said, his face appearing on the monitor.

"Han? Look, I just got back from a nine hour flight and I'm very-"

"I don't care Erin." Han interrupted, "Something needs doing and you're the one that needs to get it done."

Erin sighed.

"Okay what?" she asked.

"The jedi just brought something back to the station with them." Han told her, "I need to know what that was."

"Fine, I'll just break into their apartment shall I?" Erin replied sarcastically.

"They weren't carrying anything when they were seen leaving the dig on Dust so it must be electronic data."

Han explained, ignoring the comment from his younger sister, "So just find out who they speak to about it.

That'll give us a clue as to what the data is."

Erin sighed again.

"Okay I'll do it." She said to Han, "But this better not be something that leads them right to me. It was close enough when the Jedi Order tried to shut your company down and take us all with it."

"They didn't manage to though did they?" Han said and as he smiled Erin shut off the communicator. Then she turned her attention to the nearby computer terminal. In addition to the standard software packages that it possessed, Erin had installed a counter security program custom designed in secret by Shill Security.

Using this she could monitor a great deal of the network usage on Aurek Station. Only the jedi, law enforcement and military parts of the network had adequate security to beat the program and her own clearance allowed her into most of the law enforcement and military files anyway. That still left the jedi's computer activity as something she could not monitor. However, the navigational calculations that the Udras required carrying out could only be done by Aurek Station's main navigation system and Erin had full access

to that. The calculation itself stood out easily from any others, it had been flagged as having high priority over any other network use and was flagged with the administrator's personal authorisation code. Erin knew that Ishtel rarely put his name to anything until there was a guarantee of success unless he was pressed to do so and only the Jedi had that sort of influence.

"What the hell?" she said to herself as she saw the calculations being run. It seemed that the Jedi had come across a long unused hyperspace route and were trying to find out where it went. They could have just tried flying along it of course, but as a seasoned pilot Erin knew how reckless that could be.

With Tarris still on Dust, Cal and Lara found themselves more able to relax than when the fanatical shadow was around. Lara was making use of the large exercise area of the apartment to play a game of fetch with their pet dog, Ghost while Cal had retreated into his room. Lara was tempted to call him out to join her and Ghost but she knew exactly what he would be doing and would rather not get into another conversation regarding his continuously reviewing the images and videos he had of himself and Gayal Karn together. The sound of the front door chiming made Lara look away from Ghost.

"Coming!" she called out as she got up and rushed to answer the door and she found a man in the uniform of one of the station's command crew standing outside with a datapad.

"Miss Udra?" he asked.

"That's me." Lara replied.

"My name's Fowler. The administrator asked me to bring you this." The man said, holding up the datapad, "The results of the navigational calculations you required."

"Great. Come on in." Lara said, standing back from the doorway, "Cal!" she shouted, "The results are here." And after only a few moments Cal emerged from his room.

"Okay then let's take a look." He said.

"Is there a projector I can plug this into?" Fowler asked.

"On the terminal." Cal replied and Fowler walked over to a desktop computer terminal and plugged in his datapad, "It should run automatically." Cal added just before a three-dimensional map of the sector was projected into the middle of the room. At the sudden appearance of the holographic planets Ghost began to bark and leapt up at the closest, trying to take hold of it in his mouth.

"Ghost no." Lara said, "Come here boy." And obediently the dog returned to her side.

"Okay so where did those navigation co-ordinates lead to?" Cal asked, looking up at the map.

"They lead to a system located about here." Fowler said and he pointed at a spot about half way along a line connecting the Crassis system to the Jovan one, "It's totally uninhabited and only exists in our charts because the handful ships taking that route have to drop out of hyperspace there to avoid its mass shadow."

"Why would anyone take that route?" Lara asked and she pointed to some of the other marked hyperspace lanes, "Go via Besh Station and you'd make the trip in under a third of the time."

"The route was charted before Besh Station was built and some people preferred to keep to it given that it was, err, well not as heavily travelled." Fowler said.

"You mean where they're less likely to come across a Republic patrol?" Cal asked and Fowler smiled.

"It is believed that a lot of contraband moves that way, yes." He said.

"So tell us about this system then." Cal said, "Does it even have a name?"

"It's called Shadowfall." Fowler replied, "In fact it's not even a proper system, just a rogue planet in interstellar space."

"So completely barren then?" Lara asked.

"That's right. It does spin on its axis, but there's no real day or night because of the lack of a star." Fowler said.

"What else?" Cal asked, "There's something you're not telling us."

"Well they're just stories." Fowler said, "Tall tales told in cantinas by spacers who've had too much to drink."

"But you've heard them haven't you?" Lara said, "So tell us." And Fowler took a deep breath.

"People say that they see lights there." He said.

"In space around the planet?" Cal said.

"No. On the surface. They appear and then vanish again for no reason. The planet's geologically stable so they aren't volcanic in nature. People say that they look artificial in origin."

"So why hasn't anyone ever gone down there to take a look?" Cal asked.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about what he's going to say now." Lara added.

"They have." Fowler said, "Every few years or so someone decides to send down a probe droid or even land there."

"And what have they found?" Cal asked.

"Oh don't ask him that Cal." Lara said.

“Nobody knows.” Fowler answered, “None of them ever came back.”
“You see?” Lara said to Cal, “You just had to go and ask him that didn’t you?”

4.

"Shadowfall?" Han said when his sister told him what the navigation computer at Aurek Station had discovered.

"That's right. It looks like the sith used to have a route direct from Dust to Shadowfall and I doubt they went to either place for the scenery." Erin said.

"And what are the jedi doing now?" Han asked.

"What else? Getting ready to head there." Erin replied.

"Do they know about the planet's reputation?"

"I've no idea Han. So what are you going to do about them?"

Han paused.

"I'm tempted not to do anything." He said eventually, "We could just leave them to vanish as well. But we just can't take the chance that they'll find out what's been going on down there and coming back to tell everyone. Particularly if it's something that we can present to the others."

"So you're going there as well?" Erin asked.

"Of course not." Han said, "But I'll be sending a team. A large and well-armed team in fact. I want to know what the sith were doing there and I think that Shadowfall's reputation can be made to work for us."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if two young jedi should happen to land on a planet that no-one has ever returned from then who would surprised if they didn't come back either?"

Even in a ship as fast as the *Bright Hope* it still took a little over a day for Cal and Lara to reach Shadowfall from Aurek Station. But when their ship dropped out of hyperspace the view from the canopy was not exactly what Lara was expecting.

"So where is it?" she asked, "The planet I mean. I don't see it."

"Of course not." Cal replied, "Remember where we are. We're in interstellar space."

"So? So what?"

"So there's no sun to illuminate the planet or even heat it up and make it glow. Shadowfall is just a lump of black rock floating in blackness." Cal explained.

"So how do we find an invisible planet then?" Lara asked.

"Well I was thinking of just using an active sensor pulse. Can you think of anything better?" Cal asked and Lara shook her head.

The throne room was only dimly lit as two armoured figures strode between the two rows of columns towards the third one that sat motionless in the ornate throne that dominated the far end of the room.

"Master." One of the figures said in a deep, echoing voice, "Intruders approach. They have scanned the planet and are coming into land. Should we allow them?"

The figures waited but no response came from the one on the throne.

"Very well," the figure that had asked the question said eventually, "we shall destroy them as we have all the others."

Though the magma beneath the surface of Shadowfall had long since cooled to the point that seismic quakes and volcanic eruptions were impossible, such events had taken place on the planet at some time in the distant past as well as collisions with other interstellar debris and all of these had combined to produce vast mountain peaks and craters thousands of metres across. On other worlds wind and rain would erode the edges and make their identification almost impossible. But here on Shadowfall there was no atmosphere to sustain clouds of water vapour even if the temperature had risen above freezing so every crater remained as proof of the impacts.

"Pleasant place isn't it?" Cal said as he flew the *Bright Hope* between mountains, repeatedly looking at the sensors display for any signs of anything out of the ordinary. Outside the searchlights mounted on the *Bright Hope's* hull were the only real source of illumination. So far from the nearest star there was too little light to see by clearly, even for jedi.

"I don't like this Cal." Lara replied, "There's something about this place that reminds me of that lake on Tepillos."

"You mean the one that had all those sith corpses in it?" Cal asked and Lara nodded.

"We should go back." She said, "We can wait for Tarris and some Freedom Warriors and come back here with them."

"Tarris told us to follow up the navigation co-ordinates and that's what we're doing." Cal replied, "Now help me find somewhere to land."

What he did not tell his sister was that he too felt that the planet below them produced a similar feeling to the Dark Side saturated pool they had found on the war torn planet Tepillos.

She will turn on you. Kill her first.

The warning from within the Force suddenly hit Cal. He had received this message before, while standing the poll on Tepillos and it had come with a vision of what Cal had taken to be an older version of himself battling against a woman that looked a lot like his sister. But instead of jedi robes the woman wore a skin tight black bodyglove and wielded a lightsaber with a bright red blade.

"Cal what's wrong?" Lara asked, noticing his sudden silence.

"Nothing." Cal said, hoping that she would not notice the lie.

The three transports sent by Han Shill dropped out of hyperspace in unison. These vessels were amongst the most heavily armed ships that Shill Security had in its inventory and in addition to the arsenal of weapons they sported each one could carry more than fifty soldiers.

In the cockpit of the lead vessel the mission commander looked at the display that showed an image of Shadowfall. The world was difficult to pick out against the background and the only way that the commander could be certain he was looking at something was from the absence of stars in a circular patch of the sky.

"I'm picking up an ion trail sir." The ship's pilot told the commander.

"That will be the jedi vessel." He replied, "Follow them but maintain a distance of at least three hundred kilometres until they land. I'd rather not let them know that we're here."

"Cal did you just see that?" Lara asked, pointing through the canopy.

"No. What was it?"

"A light."

"Are you sure it wasn't just a star shining between mountains?" Cal asked.

"Yes I'm sure. It was there one minute and gone the next. It was too bright to be a star." Lara replied as she tried to locate the light again.

"Well that looks like a good spot over there." Cal said, "We'll set down and see if we can find anything."

"Sir they've landed." The pilot of the transport told the commander.

"Scan the area. Are there any signs of anything out of the ordinary?" the commander replied.

"No sir. But perhaps if I could use the active sensors-"

"No. Absolutely not. The jedi will pick them up in a heartbeat and I'd rather not have to deal with that delaya-class ship of theirs. I'm sure we could take it out, but not without risking losing at least one of our ships. Find us somewhere to put down and we'll proceed on the ground."

Rather than using the *Bright Hope's* main access ramp Cal and Lara exited the ship by means of an airlock on the side of the ship. Each of them had swapped their usual robes for a tightly fitting vacuum suit. Cal's was bright white while Lara's was pink instead, both colours allowing them to see one another clearly against the barren landscape. Both had their lightsabers at their waists, but considering the reputation of Shadowfall they had supplemented their traditional weapons with pulse wave blasters and rifles. In addition the pulse wave rifle that Cal carried featured a grenade launcher clamped beneath its barrel and he had a bandolier of ammunition wrapped around him.

"Okay so you said you saw a light in this direction right?" Cal asked and he pointed towards a nearby line of hills.

"That's right." Lara said.

"Then let's go." Cal said, "I don't want to stay here a moment longer than I have to." And he began walking away. Anxious not to be left behind Lara hurried after him, her rifle held at her shoulder ready for use.

Cal and Lara walked for several minutes without incident. But as they made their way down a narrow passage between two steeply sloping rock faces Cal felt a tremor in the Force alerting him to danger and he looked up just in time to notice an armoured figure above him as it pulled back from the edge of the ledge it was standing on.

"There's someone up there!" he exclaimed and both he and Lara pointed their rifles at the ledge. But before they could search for any signs of being watched from elsewhere another armoured figure leapt down from further along the ledge and landed in front of them.

"Where did they come from?" Lara exclaimed, "I didn't sense anything."

"Me neither. Down!" Cal snapped and he ducked just in time as the figure raised an arm and fired a pulse wave weapon mounted into its armour. The spatial distortion fired by the weapon passed over the heads of the two jedi as another two armoured figures landed behind the first and they also raised their arm-mounted blasters.

"Fire in the hole!" Cal yelled despite the microphone at his throat being able to pick up a whisper just as easily and then he fired the grenade launcher.

"Commander I have a fix."

The message from the transport pilot reached the commander just as he was climbing onto one of the repulsorlift vehicles that the Shill Security force had brought with them.

"Confirm that." The commander replied.

"Confirmed sir. The jedi just used a tagged grenade." The pilot said, referring to a batch of projectile grenades that Han Shill had given to the Udras without telling them that they were all tagged with wireless transmitters that would be triggered as soon as they were fired.

"Bearing and distance." The commander said.

"Range two sixty four. Bearing seventy-two." The pilot said and the commander looked at the driver of the vehicle.

"You heard him." he said, "Drive."

The grenade detonated in contact with the rock face, producing a rockslide that buried the armoured figures ahead of Cal and Lara but apparently oblivious to the fate of their comrade two more jumped down to take their place. Cal let go of his rifle, letting its sling support it as it dropped to his side and in its place he drew his lightsaber.

The armoured figures opened fire and Cal used his lightsaber to block the shots, the spatial distortions bursting as they struck the blade. Then both figures did something unexpected, they ceased fire and reached to their backs where each one had a sword in a scabbard and drew the ancient weapons.

"Oh this is just too easy." Cal said and then he charged at them.

Another figure landed behind Lara and she spun around to fire a shot from her rifle into its chest, sending it tumbling backwards. Then as another figure landed she too switched to her lightsaber and it drew its sword. As Cal reached the figures ahead of him he swung his lightsaber just as the closest of his opponents raised its own sword and Cal smiled. But his smile vanished when instead of slicing straight through the primitive appearing weapon the lightsaber's blade locked against it.

There were only two things that Cal could think of that could stop a lightsaber blade without requiring a massive thickness of material. The first was an unusual metal alloy that came from Mandalore, the home planet of the infamous mandalorian warrior culture. However, Mandalore was many hundreds of parsecs distant and so the chances of these swords being made of such alloy were slim. This left only the second option, the alchemical blades created by sith lords.

"Oh kriff." Cal said before he took a step backwards to avoid a sword thrust from his other opponent. Then he swung his lightsaber again and this time he avoid his target's sword blade and struck the neck joint of its armoured suit. But the effect that this produced was not quite what Cal had been expecting.

He had been ready for the lightsaber to take the head off his opponent but he had expected a sudden brief plume of boiling blood to erupt from the two halves of the wound before the lightsaber blade cauterised it. But instead the result was a shower of sparks and the now headless figure staggered back.

"Lara! They're droids." Cal called out, "That's why we didn't sense them coming."

Fear.

Cal turned to see why he had sensed the sudden emotion from Lara and he froze when he saw her on her knees with her arms held out to her sides by two of the droids while two others held the tips of their swords against where her helmet joined to the collar of her vacc suit.

"Can you hear me jedi?" one of the droids asked, but given that the question was put to Cal via the wireless communicator built into his vacc suit he could not tell which droid was asking it. It may not have even been one of the four holding his sister hostage.

"Yes." Cal replied, "I can hear you."

"Then put down your weapon and surrender." The voice told him, though again Cal could not identify the source. Then after a moment's pause the voice added, "Do it or we kill your comrade." And Cal shut off his lightsaber.

Immediately another pair of droids rushed up to him and took hold of his arms while a third unhooked his rifle from its sling and pulled his pistol from its holster.

“You have trespassed in the domain of The Artisan and death is the only punishment.” The voice said, “However, because you are jedi we will take you before our master so that he may deal with you personally.” “Cal I don’t like the sound of that.” Lara said as she was pulled back to her feet and the droids began to drag the two jedi away.

“Personally I don’t think that things could be any worse than the whole penalty of death bit.” Cal replied.

5.

The droids took Cal and Lara to a concealed opening in the rocks and into an underground chamber. The door slid shut behind them and there was a hissing sound as air was pumped into the chamber. At the end of this process the droids removed the helmets from Cal and Lara's vacc suits and an internal door opened. Standing in the passageway beyond the door were more of the droids and these held a pair of metal poles about two metres in length, each of which had three metal clamps fixed to them. As the Jedi were taken from the airlock these poles were placed across their shoulders and the clamps used to secure them to the Jedi's necks and wrists so that they were forced to stand with their arms outstretched beside them. Then black hoods were pulled over their heads and they were plunged into darkness.

"Move Jedi scum" one of the droids snapped and it shoved Cal forwards along the passageway.

"Cal? Remember how I said we should have gone back for help rather than come here alone?" Lara said from beneath her hood.

"I do." Cal replied.

"Well I told you so."

The droids led Cal and Lara through the underground complex, neither of them able to see anything that would allow them to find their way back. Eventually the Jedi heard the sound of a heavy door opening and they were led through it.

"I bring you the intruders master." One of the droids announced before Cal and Lara were forced to their knees, "Prostrate yourselves in the presence of The Artisan, the Sith Lord Mortan Carvol." And the droids restraining Cal and Lara pushed them from behind. Unable to stop themselves both fell forwards and landed on their faces.

"Ow! Hey that hurt!" Lara exclaimed.

"Lara, they're Sith warbots. I don't think they care." Cal pointed out.

"These are their belongings master." A droid said and Cal and Lara listened as their equipment was carried forwards and set down, "We shall leave them for you to interrogate personally." The droid added and then there was the sound of the droids withdrawing from the room, followed by the heavy door closing behind them.

Still hooded, Cal and Lara waited in silence for their captor to speak. Then Cal noticed something odd.

"Lara?" he said softly.

"What?" Lara replied.

"Do you know where the Sith is?"

"How could I? There's a bag over my head remember."

"I know, but if we're in the same room as a Sith Lord then we ought to be able to sense him." Cal said.

"Unless he's strong enough to hide his existence in the Force." Lara pointed out.

"Stay still." Cal told her and he began to slide across the floor towards his sister.

"What? Why?" Lara responded before she felt Cal's hand touch hers, "Cal what are you doing?"

"Just stay still Lara." Cal repeated as he slid closer, moving his hand along her arm until he reached her neck and the bottom of the hood. Then he slowly peeled the bag upwards until it came free, "Okay now do me." He said.

"Sure." Lara replied, grasping Cal's hood in the same way and pulling it free. Then both lifted their heads to look forwards.

Ahead of them they saw their weapons and equipment laid out on the floor in front of an ornate metal throne and on that throne sat the armoured form of a Sith Lord.

"I guess that's the Artisan guy then." Lara said, "Quiet isn't he?"

"Yes he certainly is." Cal said as he struggled to his feet. Then as Lara carefully stood up as well he advanced towards the throne, keeping a close eye on its motionless occupant. Leaning over, Cal was able to take hold of the Sith's faceplate and lifted it open.

"Oh yeah this guy's dead." He said as both he and Lara looked at the skull inside the helmet.

"How long do you think he's been like that?" Lara asked.

"Well at a rough guess I'd say about a thousand years." Cal replied, "The only thing holding these bones together is the armour."

"Okay, so now what do we do?" Lara asked, "In case you hadn't noticed we're still stuck in an underground Sith fortress guarded by an unknown number of killer droids and our hands are chained to these things." And she shook her hands to demonstrate that the metal pole still held them fast.

"Give me a moment." Cal said as he looked around. Their lightsabers would easily be capable of slicing

through either the metal poles or the clamps around their necks and wrists, but the trick would be cutting through the metal without also taking off their heads. Then he noticed a cylindrical pendant hung around the neck of the centuries dead sith lord and he smiled, "A-ha." He said, "This looks good." And he reached down and took hold of the pendant.

"Oh great." Lara said, "We need a way to escape and your stealing jewellery to give to Gayal." Lara commented and Cal frowned.

"Just watch." Cal said as he felt the cylinder for any signs of imperfection in its shape. Finding a small lump near one end Cal squeezed it and instantly the clamp holding his wrist opened with a 'click', "See?" Cal said as he then held the pendant close to his other wrist and then his neck, squeezing it again to unlock them, "I figured that the sith lord in charge of this place would keep a key to his binders handy."

"Okay, so untie me and let's get out of here." Lara said and Cal repeated the procedure of unlocking each clamp in turn to set her free. Then both Jedi began collecting their equipment from on the floor, putting their helmets back on but leaving their visors open, "So what do you think happened to this guy?" Lara asked, pausing and looking at the corpse of the sith lord. Then Cal also stopped and looked at the body.

"I don't know." He said, "But in all likelihood he was injured in battle and made it back here before he died." "So how come the droids haven't figured out that they're waiting for a corpse to give them orders?" Lara said.

"You know how droids are." Cal replied, "Give them a situation they aren't programmed for and they'll just ignore it and try to carry on with what they were last told to do."

"But surely they must have noticed that he's dead." Lara said.

"Maybe not." Cal responded, "He's wearing a full suit of armour after all. The droids probably think he's just meditating. Even if they found out it may not make much difference. They've obviously been programmed to defend this place, so that's what they'll do until they receive new orders."

"New orders from who though? All the sith are gone aren't they? I mean apart from disembodied spectres hiding in space station computers of course."

"They're machines Lara. They'll respond to anyone with the correct authorisation codes." Cal said.

"Err hang on a minute Cal." Lara said, "So what if the Founding Families find some record of the codes to give the droids orders?"

"Oh I wouldn't worry too much about that." Cal replied, "We're only talking about a small garrison of droids that are a thousand years out of date. Now collect your things because I want to get out of here before we end up like everyone else that's come down here and found these droids waiting for them."

"Yes I suppose we've solved that mystery at least." Lara said as she picked up her rifle and checked it.

"Not yet we haven't." Cal replied, "We still need to get out of here and tell everyone remember?" then he looked back at the corpse of the sith lord and smiled.

"Cal what are you doing?" Lara asked as he strode towards it again.

"I just want a souvenir." He said as he plucked the sith's lightsaber from the corpse's belt and tucked it into a pouch in his vacc suit.

The Shill Security force continued to head along the bearing that the signal had been received from. Their speeders made good time across the uneven terrain, but it still took almost an hour for them to get close to the exact spot that they had picked up the transmissions from.

"Halt here." The commander ordered when they were still several hundred metres short of their destination and the speeders all came to a complete halt, "Everyone off. We're on foot from here." He added as he disembarked from his one speeder and he waved his troops onwards, still heading in the same direction.

The commander had hoped that there would have been some obvious feature to mark out where the grenade had been fired from, but instead he found just more barren terrain. However, the signs of his men not being the first ones to have been there were obvious. The ground was littered with footprints, many of them from very heavy individuals judging by their depth.

"Look sir droids." One of the soldiers broadcast as he located a badly damaged component from the warbot that Cal had decapitated.

"So this place isn't uninhabited after all." The commander said to himself, his words being broadcast to his men anyway. Then he looked in the direction that the tracks seemed to lead in, "The tracks head off in this direction." He said, "So let's get moving and everyone keep an eye out for whoever it is that lives here."

"Ready?" Cal asked as he stood beside the throne room door and Lara nodded, "Okay let's go." Cal said and he struck the control to open the door. It promptly hissed open and both of the Jedi leapt out into the passageway outside with their rifles held at their shoulders.

They found the passageway empty however, obviously the sith warbots had never been instructed to place a guard on the their master's throne room.

"So which way?" Lara asked.

"I don't know." Cal replied, "But did it feel to you like the last turn we made was to the right?"

"Kind of." Lara answered uncertainly.

"Then we go this way." Cal said, pointing down the passageway to the left, "Keep close and stay alert."

Though droids were more easily outwitted than most living opponents, the warbots protecting the underground fortress presented the jedi with other difficulties. Living guards had a presence in the Force that the jedi could sense, but there were none of those in this place and every corner that they reached could have an entire squad of droids waiting around it. This meant that Cal and Lara had to rely on their more conventional senses, listening for the sounds of heavy footfalls or shadows created by movement in the poorly lit passageways.

Unfortunately without any way of knowing exactly where the exit from the fortress could be found Cal and Lara were forced to wander around it by guesswork, hoping that they came across some clue about how to get out onto the surface again. There were doors of course, but opening any of them without knowing what lay beyond was a risk that the jedi were unwilling to take so instead they waited until they came across one that was already open. The first such door that they encountered led to a balcony that looked out over a massive chamber that ran for more than a hundred metres in each direction. But it was not the scale of the chamber that concerned Cal and Lara, it was the contents.

"How many do you think that there are?" Lara asked as they looked around the chamber.

Each wall was divided up into levels, a walkway running round each one with elevator platforms connecting them together and warbots standing shoulder to shoulder against the walls lined them all.

"Thousands." Cal replied, "Tens of thousands maybe. This isn't just some tiny garrison, this is an army."

"Well at least they seem inactive for now." Lara commented.

"And let's hope they stay that way." Cal said, "Because we can't fight them all if someone's stupid enough to wake them up." Then he saw a large doorway in the wall opposite on the lowest level of the chamber, "We should check that out." He said, pointing at the doorway.

"Are you insane?" Lara hissed, "Sneak past an entire army of battle droids?" and Cal grinned.

"Pretty much, yes." He said.

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

The lead Shill Security trooper suddenly dropped into a crouching position and raised his hand for the force following him to halt. The commander scurried forwards and connected a communications hardline from his suit to the lead trooper's, allowing them to communicate without using a wireless transmission that could be monitored.

"What is it trooper?" the commander asked.

"The tracks cease up ahead sir." He said, "Within that cluster of rocks." And he pointed ahead of them. The commander studied the ground and saw that the trail they had been following came to an abrupt halt right at the spot identified by the lead trooper. But before he could make any comment regarding it there was a sudden scream over the wireless communication net. Without an atmosphere to carry sound it was difficult to determine where the scream had come from.

"Report!" the commander broadcast, "What's happening?"

"Shayle is down! Contact left!" a panicked voice responded and then there was the sound of pulse wave fire over the communication net as it would sound through an armoured vacuum suit.

The commander disconnected himself from the other trooper and both raised their rifles, searching for the origin of the attack. This turned out to be a group of humanoid figures standing at the top of a rise and firing blasters mounted to their arms. As the commander watched one of these was struck by a pulse wave blast in the chest and exploded.

"Droids!" the commander broadcast to his men, "These must be what the jedi encountered."

The balcony was linked to the walkways by a short ramp and Cal and Lara rushed down it. Then they slowed their pace, moving cautiously past the unmoving rows of droids.

"These things are really creepy Cal." Lara said softly, as if she was concerned about causing the droids to come to life.

"Oh don't worry about them." Cal replied, "I seriously doubt that they going to suddenly turn themselves on." And then a klaxon sounded, "Though I could be mistaken." Cal added as the eyes of the warbots all lit up at the same time, "Run!"

Cal activated his lightsaber and held it out beside him as the two Jedi ran towards the nearest elevator platform on their level, slicing through each warbot as he ran past it. As each machine was cut in half it collapsed in a heap. However, nearing the elevator it became obvious to the Jedi that they were not going to get there in time when up ahead of them warbots began to step from their positions on the wall.

"Oh, I told you I had a bad feeling about this." Lara said, "What do we do now?"

"This." Cal replied, shutting off his lightsaber and unslinging his rifle, "Cover your ears." He added before he discharged the grenade launcher mounted beneath the barrel.

The explosive round was not targeted at the now active droids, but the walkway between them and the Jedi instead. The detonation of the grenade blew a large hole in the walkway and the droids came to a halt at its edge.

"Over the side!" Cal snapped, now dropping his rifle to his side and pulling a length of syntherope from the dispenser on his belt and he tied the end around the safety rail.

Lara copied her brother and unravelled a length of syntherope. With these two lines secured, Cal and Lara climbed over the rail and began to climb down. Some of the droids on the lower levels were already active but they did not expect the Jedi to suddenly drop down from above before vanishing just as quickly on their way down to the floor.

Aside from the rows of warbots, the large chamber was empty and as soon as Cal and Lara landed they cut through the syntherope still trailing from their waists and ran straight towards the doorway.

"They aren't shooting at us." Cal called out as he realised that out of all of the warbots not one of them had opened fire even now that he and Lara made such obvious targets.

"Quit complaining." Lara responded.

"Oh I'm not complaining, but I'd like to know why." Cal said and he suddenly stopped running and looked around, "Where are they going?" he said as he saw the warbots all heading towards the balcony where he and Lara had first entered the chamber.

"Who cares?" Lara replied, "Let's get out of here." And Cal nodded.

Reaching the massive door, Cal ran to the controls set into the wall beside it and activated them. For a moment nothing happened and Cal considered the possibility that after a thousand years the system had degraded to the point where it no longer functioned. But then there was a low rumble and the door began to open.

6.

Light spilled out from the rocks where the footprints ended and the commander of the Shill Security force glanced around to see what was happening. Though they had been caught by surprise, his men had accounted well for themselves and most of the droids that had ambushed them were now nothing but scrap while only a handful of his own men had been killed. But from out of the previously unseen doorway that had opened up in the rock face marched more of the killing machines.

"How many are there?" a nearby trooper said when he too saw the advancing warbots, "What is this place?"

"It's a droid foundry." Cal said as he and Lara looked around at the machinery beyond the door.

"So that's why there are so many droids here." Lara added, "This is where the sith made them."

"I guess that's why that droid referred to the late sith lord as 'The Artisan'." Cal replied.

"We need to destroy this don't we?" Lara said, "If the wrong people got control of—"

"With what Lara?" Cal asked, "It would take forever to disable this place with just the weapons we've got. Right now we just need to get out of here and we'll just have to trust that the droids will carry on keeping people away until someone can figure out what to do about it."

"So how exactly do you propose we get out of here then big brother?"

"Well this is a factory right?"

"Yes, I think we've already established that."

"Then the materials to make the droids from have to come from somewhere." Cal said, "So I suggest we follow this production line back to its start and look for the loading bay."

Combat in a vacuum was particularly deadly. Environment suits could not be opened to allow treatment of wounds and without treatment even a minor injury could quickly become serious and these conditions were now starting to take their toll on the Shill Security troops. On the other hand it seemed that for every droid they destroyed, three more appeared to take its place.

"Fall back!" the commander yelled over the communication net, "Fall back to the speeders!"

"But sir, what about the jedi?" one of his men asked.

"I'd say that the jedi aren't going to be a problem for us more." The commander replied, "There are too many of these machines even for them."

At one time the chamber that Cal and Lara followed the droid production line back to had been a hangar, the markings on the floor indicating the paths to be followed by transport ships as they arrived carrying the materials from which droids would be made and also where the completed machines would be loaded for moving off world. Now however the hangar was empty, the transport ships having been removed centuries earlier.

"I guess that's our way out." Cal said, pointing to a massive armoured door that filled most of one wall of the hangar.

"What if it won't open?" Lara asked as they ran towards it.

"It will." Cal replied, "I've got a key." And he drew his lightsaber, "Lower your visor." He told Lara as he closed his own helmet and then as soon as Lara had done as he told her he activated his lightsaber and plunged it into the door.

Straight away more alarms began to sound and there was the rush of escaping air as the energy blade punched a hole right through the door.

"How long will this take?" Lara asked.

"Err, I'm not sure." Cal replied as he dragged his lightsaber across the door to expand the hole, "This door is pretty tough."

"Well I think you need to hurry." Lara told him as she saw a group of warbots enter the hangar and raise their arms, pointing their blasters towards the jedi.

"Just hold them back!" Cal snapped as Lara blocked the first volley of pulse wave blasts.

"I'm trying!" Lara responded, "And don't quote that 'There is no try' line. It's nonsense."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Cal said as he continued to cut through the door.

The droids ceased fire and began to advance across the hangar, drawing their swords as they came.

"Err Cal, they're getting closer." Lara said nervously and Cal glanced around and saw that she was correct.

All of a sudden Cal pulled his lightsaber from the door and spun around, raising one hand towards the approaching droids. Lara flinched as she felt the sudden release of Force energy from her brother and then she saw the droids hurled back across the hangar, their swords being thrown from their hands as they fell. "Now keep watch." Cal said as he turned back towards the door, "I'm going to get this done as quickly as I can." And he pulled the sith lightsaber from his pocket and activated that also before he plunged both lightsabers into the door.

Lara held her own lightsaber at the ready, expecting the droids to open fire with their arm-mounted pulse wave blasters as they got back to their feet. But the droids seemed to have determined that blasterfire was ineffective against targets armed with and trained in the use of lightsabers and they instead moved to retrieve their swords. Then Lara felt a tremor as something heavy fell close by.

"I'm done!" Cal exclaimed as he completed the hole and the section of door cut loose fell away, "Let's go!" and shutting off both his lightsabers he climbed through the hole.

The Jedi emerged back onto the barren surface of Shadowfall and looked around for any familiar landmarks. "Where are we?" Lara asked.

"I don't know." Cal replied, "We must have travelled too far from the airlock the droids took us in through." And then he activated his suit's long-range communications, "Shorty come in." he transmitted.

On the *Bright Hope* Shorty raised its head at the sound of its name being called out.

"Shorty I need you to activate a homing beacon on this frequency." Cal continued, "And begin the start up procedure. Lara and I are on our way back and we need to get out of here as quickly as we can." And then the channel went silent.

Shorty strode out of the hold where the droid was kept and headed directly for the cockpit. Though the LB-series was only a fifth-degree loading droid and not a pilot droid, Shorty was still quite capable of carrying out some basic tasks relating to starship operation and activating a beacon and preparing systems for flight were amongst them. Therefore, after a few seconds of flipping switches the droid then stood back and waited in silence for its owners to return.

"Sir we've just picked up a signal on the Jedi frequency." The transport pilot signalled to the force commander, "They're withdrawing."

"Stang!" the commander exclaimed, aware that he would now have to explain his failure to deal with the Jedi to his superiors. Assuming of course that he was able to get off the planet alive.

"Sir, what are your orders?" the pilot asked.

"We're heading back to you." The commander replied, "But we're under fire. Lock onto my transmission and come get us. Be prepared to provide covering fire."

"Yes sir, I have your location now. ETA eight minutes."

Cal and Lara ran as fast as they could across the surface of the planet, following the beacon being transmitted by the *Bright Hope*. The ship was exactly where they had left it and when it came into view they could see that its systems appeared to be online, its engine exhausts were already starting to glow with waste heat.

"Shorty we're here." Cal transmitted, "Open up the door." And the outer airlock door slid open to reveal the droid standing inside. It stepped aside as the Jedi rushed into the airlock. They paused just long enough to allow the pressurisation cycle to run before dashing to the cockpit, casting their helmets aside as they ran. Behind them Shorty calmly picked up the helmets from the floor and stowed them in their proper place.

"Everything looks ready." Cal said as he sat in the pilot's seat, "Strap in."

"You don't need to tell me twice big brother." Lara replied as she fastened her harness.

One of the speeders suddenly listed as a pulse wave blast struck an engine and then it ploughed into the ground, hurling its occupants from it.

"Ignore them!" the commander ordered as the remaining speeders began to slow down to pick up the survivors, "We don't have time if any of us are to survive." And then as if to prove his point another speeder was hit by a volley of fire from a group of warbots that came marching over the horizon.

Then the warbots vanished in a sudden volley of energy blasts from the sky and the Shill Security transports swooped down to collect the soldiers they had brought here.

"Cal we've got company." Lara said as the *Bright Hope* accelerated away from Shadowfall. Then she frowned, "Cal they look like Republic ships."

"What?" Cal replied.

"Perhaps they're something that landed here earlier and the droids captured." Lara suggested, but Cal shook his head.

"No," he said, "From what I know about those droids, they weren't designed to be pilots. Those must be something else."

Then an alarm sounded, an alarm all too familiar to both Cal and Lara.

"Missile lock!" Lara exclaimed and she looked back to the sensor display, "Cal, I've got surface launches."

"Looks like The Artisan built more than just droids." He said, "He made certain that anyone who manages to get off the surface still isn't safe."

"I'm raising shields." Lara said.

"No!" Cal snapped.

"But Cal, if we don't—"

"If we don't raise shields then we can use the power for our engines instead." Cal interrupted, "We'll be in hyperspace before they reach us."

"Are you sure?" Lara asked.

"Err. No, not really. But it's the best chance we've got." Cal replied.

The sound of the *Bright Hope's* engines grew louder as the ship accelerated flat out at almost four thousand gees. Behind them the missiles were still struggling against Shadowfall's stronger gravitational pull at their altitude and Lara's eyes widened as she saw the gap between them widening.

"Cal it's working!" she exclaimed, but Cal remained silent, his view focused on the control console. Then as soon as the instruments indicated that the *Bright Hope* was free of Shadowfall's gravity well he reached out and triggered its hyperdrive.

In the cockpit of his transport the Shill Security commander also monitored the incoming missiles. Then the flash of light that marked the *Bright Hope's* departure into hyperspace attracted his attention.

"Sir I think we've got a problem." The pilot said.

"What is it?" the commander responded.

"The missiles that were going after the Jedi ship, they're coming around towards us."

"What's our shield status?" the commander asked.

"Operating at full power." The pilot told him.

"Then tell everyone to brace for impact." The commander said just before the first missile struck his ship.

"This is accurate?" Faye Karn asked, peering over the top of the datapad at Han Shill.

"Corlay relayed it to me." Han replied, "Cal and Lara found an army of Sith warbots on Shadowfall."

"Those could come in handy." Del Karn commented, "Very handy."

"But first we'll need to know how to control them." Faye said, looking at her husband before turning back towards Han, "I see that we have a name though, Mortan Carvol who was also known by the title The Artisan. I think we could do with finding out as much as we can about this individual."