

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-I: ARRIVAL

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...

ARRIVAL

A JEDI KNIGHT IS MISSING AND PRESUMED DEAD. CAL UDRA IS SENT BY THE ORDER TO TAKE THE MISSING MAN'S PLACE AND INVESTIGATE HIS DISAPPEARANCE. THE PROBLEM IS HIS APPRENTICE IS NOT QUITE WHAT HE EXPECTED...

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

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1 .

The sound of the submersible's hull making contact with the habitat's docking ring echoed through the hull. Luke Crassis stood up as he then heard the sound of water being pumped out of the space outside the hatch to allow access to the structure beyond. He reached out his hand towards his wife Salla who took hold of it and the pair stepped towards the hatch.

There was a hiss as the submersible hatch opened at the same time as that of the habitat and the Crassis' saw the figures waiting for them. Ket and Fial Runn were both Nautolans, an aquatic species that was why they were quite comfortable living here on the ocean bed and like Luke and Salla were man and wife. Just behind them several other figures were visible, all of them also members of various aquatic species. These were some of the private security personnel employed by their Nautolan hosts. Normally their own guards would also accompany the Crassis' but on this occasion they had no need for them. Like the Crassis family, the Runns were one of the Founding Families. Their ancestors had charted this region of space three centuries earlier and now the Founding Families were reaping the benefits of much of what had been found. "Luke." Ket Runn spoke as the human couple stepped from the submersible into the habitat and both of the Runns smiled at their guests. "It is good to see you again. How may we be of service?"

"Did you do it?" Luke asked.

"Who asks?" Fial asked in response, tilting her head slightly as she did so, "You? Or your father?"

Unlike Ket Runn, Luke was not the head of his family. That title belonged to his father, but the old man was terminally ill and rarely left the grounds of his own home let alone travelled to other star systems as Luke and his wife had done to visit the Runns.

"My father sends me," Luke replied, "but I wish to know also."

"And have you make accusations against the other families? Or are you singling us out?" Fial asked.

"We have spoken with them all." Salla added, "You are the last. None of them admitted to any involvement. Now what do you know?"

"Nothing more than you." Ket answered, "The Jedi is dead."

Cal Udra stepped into the turbolift and was about to let the doors shut behind him when he heard a familiar voice call out to him.

"Cal! Wait there!"

Dashing down the corridor, dodging temple staff as she ran, Cal saw his younger sister Lara heading for him and he placed his hand in the doorway to prevent the door shutting.

"Thanks." Lara said as she got into the turbolift.

"Mom and Dad send for you too then?" Cal asked as the doors shut and he pushed the button for the floor he wanted.

"I guess they want this to be a family celebration." Lara replied, nodding.

Cal smiled.

"At least one of us has something to celebrate." He said.

"What's that suppose to mean?" Lara asked. She knew exactly what it meant of course. Several Jedi masters had passed comment on her impatience, while Cal was widely praised.

The turbolift doors then opened to reveal a garden area on a balcony of the Jedi temple. Two Jedi were waiting for them here. Like Cal and Lara both were humans with blonde hair and pale eyes.

"Hi Mom." Lara said, leading the way out of the turbolift and embracing her mother, then she stepped towards her father and kissed him, "Hi Dad." She added.

Behind her Cal stepped from the turbolift calmly and looked at his parents.

"Mother. Father." He said, nodding at each of them in turn.

"Son." Varn Udra, Cal's father' replied and he nodded back.

"What sort of greeting is that?" Neari Udra said and she stepped forwards to embrace her son, "You've done well. The council is impressed."

"Has the council said anything about me?" Lara asked.

"Yes." Varn replied flatly, "They have talked about you a lot recently." Then he turned towards Cal. "The council has a new assignment for you," he said and he handed his son a datapad.

"It says here I'll be operating without a more senior Jedi." Cal said as he glanced at the datapad.

"Yes," Neari said, "you'll be the only Jedi knight assigned. You've earned it."

Behind her, Lara frowned.

"The Narthis sector?" Cal said, "Where's that?"

"The rim." Varn answered, "Its been settled for about three hundred years. The master responsible for that region recently requested that the temple send another jedi to cover the sector. Apparently something's happened to the one that was there."

"Tell him the good news." Neri said to her husband, "I know you're dying to."

"Good news?" Cal asked, "You're saying that getting a solo assignment isn't even the good bit?"

"Its not quite a solo assignment son," Varn said, "its just that you'll be the only jedi knight there. The council has decided that you are to be assigned a padawan learner to instruct."

"A padawan?" Lara interrupted, "He gets a padawan as well as a juicy assignment? This is so unfair."

"You shouldn't be so impatient." Neri said, stroking her daughter's hair.

"You're kidding me." Cal said as he scrolled through the information on the datapad until he reached the section on his padawan, "This has to be a joke right?"

"The council is not known for its sense of humour." Varn said.

"That's true." Lara added, "They wouldn't know a joke if you pinned it to the back of their robes." Then she looked at Cal, "Its someone rubbish isn't it?" she asked.

"The worst." Cal replied.

"Not Mel Cubra?" Lara asked, "She nearly decapitated herself with her lightsaber in practice last week."

"No." Cal replied.

"Gexis? I don't know what species he's from but they stink. I can't concentrate around him at all its so bad." Cal shook his head.

"Ooh, I know," Lara said, "its that kid who thinks its really funny to get his friends to levitate him outside third floor windows isn't it?"

"No." Cal said.

"Oh give that here." Lara then snapped and she snatched the datapad from his grasp and looked for herself.

"Oh no." she added as she saw her own name on the display.

"Where did you learn to fly?" Lara asked, grabbing hold of the doorframe as she entered the cockpit of the ship that she and Cal had been assigned by the jedi order for the trip as it lurched suddenly.

"Just a bit of turbulence. That's all." Cal replied as his sister sat next to him. Glancing at her he noticed that in addition to her lightsaber she was carrying one of the sidearms they had been given, "Do you really think you'll need the blaster?" he added.

"Hey have you read about this place?" Lara asked, waving her arm towards the canopy, "Whatever jedi wrote the entry on this place in the temple records actually used the phrase 'wretched hive of scum and villainy.' Does that sound like somewhere we can take personal security lightly?"

"I'm sure it won't be that bad." Cal reassured her, "After all, we'll be setting down in the Republic's Green Zone. We'll be surrounded by our own troops."

"Yeah well the last jedi here, that Kyle Jenner and his padawan lived in the Green Zone and it doesn't seem to have done them any good does it? I'm telling you, I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Well keep you feelings to yourself for now, I want to find out what the locals know before we start insulting them. Oh and one more thing."

"What?"

"Remember I'm in charge."

"I'm not calling you master."

"You don't have to. I think it would be weird anyway."

Then the ship lurched again and Lara placed a hand on the console in front of her to steady herself.

"Are there any air pockets you're not planning on flying through?" she asked.

"Shut up or your going to find yourself walking home. We're nearly there. Look, that's the landing field."

Lara looked out of the cockpit to see the rapidly growing dark shape that was the landing strip Cal was guiding the ship towards. Almost immediately the ship's communication system came to life.

"Approaching Delaya-class vessel, this is Republic control tower. You are approaching restricted airspace, identify yourself immediately."

"Republic control, this is *Bright Hope*." Cal replied, "We are here on the authority of the Galactic Republic and the Jedi Order. Please transmit landing instructions."

There was a brief pause, during which the channel buzzed with static.

"Bright Hope, follow beacon to pad six. You are expected." The controller said abruptly, then the channel went silent.

"Well that sounded friendly." Cal said as he steered the ship to follow the beacon.

"In what way exactly?" Lara asked, "I've heard friendlier firing squads."

Cal frowned and ignored her. Instead he concentrated on piloting his ship towards the landing pad below.

"Looks like there's a welcoming committee waiting for us." He said when he noticed a group of people standing beside the pad and Lara leaned forwards to see for herself.

"Ooh, an honour guard." She said, noticing a row of soldiers in battle armour lined up. Then she looked at Cal, "Hurry up, I want to find out who's waiting for us."

Cal rushed down the *Bright Hope's* access ramp behind Lara.

"I'm the senior jedi here." he said, "I should be in the lead."

"Age before beauty huh?" Lara commented as she halted until Cal caught up.

"That's enough of that." Cal said, pointing at Lara, "Neither of us is particularly happy about this I know, but you can at least act like a grown up even if you're not one."

"Not a grown up?" Lara replied angrily.

"Control that anger padawan." Cal said, only feel his sister become angrier.

Lara inhaled; ready to argue when both she and Cal suddenly sensed the presence of other people and turned to face them.

"Are we interrupting anything?" one of the figures asked. This was a middle-aged woman in the uniform of a Republic Sector Ranger. Beside her stood a muscular man in the uniform of a Republic Army colonel.

Immediately, both Cal and Lara stood up straight and adopted a more formal pose.

"I am Jedi Udra," Cal said, "and this is my padawan learner, Jedi – uh – Jedi - "

"Udra." Lara interrupted.

The sector ranger and colonel both frowned momentarily.

"My padawan is my younger sister." Cal said reluctantly and the officials' puzzled frowns vanished. Then Cal changed the subject, "I'm sorry I wasn't briefed on your names."

"Agent Raser, Jule Raser." The sector ranger said, she held out her hand and Cal shook it, "I'm the senior Sector Ranger here." She continued.

"And I'm Colonel Jeck." The officer added, standing straight, "I'm in charge of the local peacekeeping force."

"Well I wish we could be meeting under better circumstances." Cal said, "But we really should get started. Is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

There were only three chairs in Colonel Jeck's office and after the colonel and Jule had sat down both Cal and Lara put a hand on the remaining one. They stared at one another.

It's mine. Cal mouthed. Lara stared at him and shook her head slowly.

"Can I have another chair brought in?" Colonel Jeck asked.

"No." Cal answered, "My padawan will be just fine standing." and he sat down.

"As you wish." Colonel Jeck said and he spun the display mounted on his desk around so that everyone could see it, "This is what we have. Jedi Jenner entered the Green Zone eighteen days ago and made his way directly to the buildings he and his padawan occupied here-"

"Occupied?" Lara interrupted, "As in doesn't occupy any more? You're assuming they're dead?"

"I'm sorry about that Colonel." Cal said, "I'll have words with my padawan about interrupting later. Please go on."

Lara scowled.

"Well shortly after he entered his building the two starfighters that he and his padawan kept there launched three minutes apart without prior clearance or any response to calls from the control tower. They headed straight out of the atmosphere and into space. We haven't seen them since."

"They entered hyperspace then?" Cal asked.

"We don't know." Colonel Jeck replied, "Our sensors here don't extend much past high orbit. By the time a ship gets far enough away from the gravity well to make the jump they're out of range."

"One thing's for certain," Jule said, "they didn't make planet fall on any other Republic world in the sector."

Cal was about to speak when Lara got there first.

"Could they have met with another ship in the system?" she asked and Cal sensed that she had known that he had been about to ask that question.

"We've no data on traffic in the system." Colonel Jeck said, "You could try asking Captain De Kunn."

"Captain De Kunn?" Cal asked.

"He's in charge of the Republic's naval squadron hereabouts." Jule said, "He's based on Aurek Station like me. I can liase with him for you."

"Thanks, but I think it's better if we do it ourselves." Cal said.

"Your funeral." Jule muttered.

"Huh?" Lara said.

"The captain is not fond of jedi." Colonel Jeck said.

"Why not?" Cal asked.

"Yeah, we're so likeable." Lara said, "Me anyway."

"The captain believes that the Jedi should come under the military's chain of command." The colonel said, "He does not give co-operation with the order a high priority."

"In that case we'd appreciate any help you can offer." Cal said, looking at Jule, "Is there anything else you can tell us about Jedi Jenner's activities here? Did he meet with anyone regularly?"

"He co-ordinated with me on occasion." Colonel Jeck said, "But he operated independently mostly."

"Same here." Jule said, "Either I'd ask him for help or sometimes he'd ask me, but he was a Jedi and Aurek Station is six parsecs away so our contact wasn't exactly regular."

"Okay then," Cal said, getting to his feet, "then if you could check with Captain de Kunn about local starship movements I'd like to take a look at Jedi Jenner's building."

"I don't mean to be pessimistic," Colonel Jeck said as he shook Cal's hand, "But eighteen days is a long time to spend in a starfighter. A Starsaber-class ship doesn't have life support for a third of that."

"Unless the pilot had knowledge of Jedi hibernation techniques." Cal said.

"They would be usable for that long?" Jule asked.

"Possibly." Cal replied, "Right now we just have to hope."

2.

The building that Kyle Jenner occupied was a squat duracrete structure. It had only a single storey above ground, but the adjoining hangar was taller than the other sections. Two Republic soldiers stood guard outside the front door.

"I'm afraid we haven't been able to gain access." Colonel Jeck said as he led Cal and Lara to the door, "There's no visible lock and I didn't want to risk forcing an entry just in case we disturbed anything."

"Hmmm." Cal said as he studied the door closely. It was clearly well built and designed to swing open rather than slide under power. A handle was located about half way down one side and Cal reached out and rattled it, "Definitely locked." Cal said, "But with no visible means of unlocking it."

"Let me." Lara said and she took her lightsaber from her belt.

"Not necessary." Cal said and he waved his hand across the door. There was a heavy 'clunk' from the other side, "Kyle was a Jedi." He said, "The door is fitted with a telekinetic lock, only another force user can release it." and then he opened the door.

Inside the building was in darkness and Cal rummaged through his pocket until he found a compact torch. The first thing he checked was the inside of the door where he saw a heavy bolt that had retracted when Cal had reached out through the force. He also spotted an electronic device mounted just above the bolt itself.

"I was right about the lock." He said, "Though it looks like Kyle didn't just put his faith in his mastery of the force, there's a wireless receiver here too that would have unlocked the door by remote." Then he stepped inside cautiously, moving the torch as he looked around the room.

Behind him Lara stepped inside and placed a hand on the wall beside the door. Instantly the room lit up.

"Light switch works." She said, grinning as Cal frowned and put his torch away, "Wow." Lara said, looking around the room, "This place is a dump."

Lara was right. Everywhere around the room furniture was upturned and Kyle Jenner's belongings were scattered across the floor.

"I assume that it wasn't normally like this." Cal said, glancing over his shoulder at Colonel Jeck as he stood in the doorway.

"No." the colonel answered, "This place was tidy every time I came here. I doubt they cleaned it up especially for when I came around."

"Well it's a dump now." Lara said and she picked up an upturned chair and sat down, "So someone trashed the place."

"Did Jedi Jenner have an office?" Cal asked Colonel Jeck.

"Yes, through there." Colonel Jeck replied and he pointed at a closed door.

Cal tried the door and it opened without resistance. Looking into the room beyond he saw that it was in a similar state to the other room. A desktop computer had been broken open and its hard drive ripped out. Of the drive itself there was no sign. Looking from the office to the outer room something occurred to Cal, both rooms had the look of a place of work, not a residence.

"Did they live here?" he said.

"No." Colonel Jeck replied, "They would sometimes spend the night here, but Jedi Jenner thought it best to maintain a permanent residence elsewhere in the capital city. I'm afraid I don't know where."

Cal looked at Lara.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked her.

"Yes thanks." She answered.

"Shame." Cal said, "Because I want you to head back to the ship."

"What for?"

"Get in touch with the enclave on Moldas. See if anyone there knows anything about this residence. Kyle may have been running the costs through the order, in which case they should have an address."

"And what will you be doing while I'm playing messenger?"

"Searching through this lot." Cal said, waving his arms at the mess. Then he looked at Colonel Jeck, "I don't suppose you have a couple of men you could spare me?"

"You can have the guards on the door." Colonel Jeck offered.

"Thanks, that'll be fine." Cal said, then he looked at Lara, "Why are you still here?" he asked.

Lara stood in front of the holopad and waited for the connection to be made. Impatiently she looked down at her chronometer just as a translucent blue image appeared.

"Did I keep you waiting young one?" the figure asked and Lara looked up suddenly.

"Oh, no. Sorry." She said, "It's just that communications are patchy this far out."

"I take it that you are Padawan Learner Lara Udra." The figure said.

"That's me."

"Master."

"What?"

"That's me 'master'. I am Jedi Master Ben Karas. Remember that."

"Oh, err sorry. I mean sorry master." Lara said, shaken, "I didn't expect you to answer my call personally."

"Jedi Knight Kyle Jenner and Padawan Learner Lom Des are both valued members of the order, their disappearance is of great concern to me. That is why I requested your presence and that is why I am keeping a close watch on your activities padawan. Now tell me why you are making this call."

"Well it's just that we found out that Kyle-

"Jedi Jenner."

"Yes, that's him." Lara said, not noticing the image of Master Karas scowl as she failed to use Kyle Jenner's title, "Well he has a home somewhere on Tepillos, but no one here seems to know where. Can you tell us?"

"Can I tell you what?"

"Tell us where it is? Wasn't I clear?"

"Tell you where it is what?" Master Karas said, his voice getting louder and even though Lara could not sense his emotions through the hologram she could tell that he was getting angry.

"Oh, sorry. Could you please tell us if you know where Jedi Jenner's home is master?"

"I do not know." Master Karas answered, "But I will make further enquiries here among the other jedi. In the mean time I suggest you make contact with the local aid organisations. I know that Padawan Des assisted them from time to time."

"Thank you master." Lara said before the image faded away. Then, once she was sure that he could no longer see or hear her she slumped her shoulders, exhaled and said, "Great work Lara, at this rate you'll never be a jedi knight."

When Lara returned to Kyle Jenner's building she heard her brother call out in frustration before she stepped through the front door.

"Mind that anger Cal." She said, "It's a path to the dark side. Oh." And she stopped as she saw her brother's legs dangling from a hole in the ceiling, lashing out as the two soldiers tried to grab hold of him. On the floor at their feet Lara saw a chair that had splintered into pieces, "Too much of mom's cooking?" she said as she made her way over to help the soldiers lower Cal back to the floor.

"Oh ha ha, very funny my padawan learner." Cal replied as he found himself back standing on the floor, "So what did the enclave have to say."

"Err Cal." Lara replied and she tapped her nose with her finger.

"I'm not being nosy. Tell me what they said. That's an order."

"No Cal." Lara said and she tapped her nose again.

"What?" Cal demanded.

One of the soldiers coughed and held out a deactivated datapad. Cal glanced at it and in the reflective surface of its interface he saw the large smudge on his nose.

"So what did they have to say?" Cal asked again as he frantically wiped the smudge on his sleeve.

"Well I spoke with Master Karas," Lara said, "and he's really grouchy by the way."

"Get on with it." Cal said sternly.

"Well Kyle never said anything about having another place here to him, but he's going to ask the others if they know anything. He did say that Kyle's padawan had a lot of contact with the aid agencies here though. He suggested that we should check them out. So what have you found here?"

"Nothing." Cal told her, "Well nothing relevant anyway. Anything that held any sort of electronic data has either been removed or destroyed. No simple erasing, just actual physical destruction of the storage devices. We've been searching for any backups that Kyle or his apprentice may have secreted away."

"Well if so few people know where his other place was then maybe whoever did this won't have been there." Lara said.

"We can hope." Cal replied, "In the mean time we'd better go and see the colonel. We need to know who these aid workers are and we'll need a speeder."

"You want to leave the Green Zone?" Colonel Jeck asked when Cal announced his intention to visit the local aid workers to him.

"They're the only lead we have now." Cal replied.

"Well I can provide you with the address of the group that Mister Jenner and his student typically associated with."

"So you know them then?" Lara asked.

"Oh yes." Colonel Jeck said, "I see them myself quite often, sitting where you are now demanding that I deploy my troops to assist them when I've barely enough men to keep the local police on the straight and narrow let alone stand watch over fifty tonnes of tinned soup just in case one of the local gangs decides to run off with it."

"Running with fifty tonnes of soup? That would be impressive." Lara commented before she noticed both Cal and the colonel glare at her, "Sorry. Go on."

"Well as I was saying, I can give you the address of these people and the transport you require of course. I'll contact the guard room to arrange an escort for you as well."

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary." Cal said, getting to his feet, "We're Jedi after all. I think we can take care of ourselves."

"I bet that's what Kyle Jenner thought." Lara muttered and Cal glared at her again.

3.

The speeder was an old model. In fact Cal thought that it was probably older than he was. Clearly the colonel had his doubts about providing them with a more valuable vehicle given where they were going. However, despite the vehicle's age it had a functional navigational system and with the address provided by Colonel Jeck Cal was able to steer a course through the unfamiliar streets.

"Cal, do you think that these streets ever see a cleaning droid?" Lara asked as she looked at their run down surroundings.

"I doubt it." Cal said, "If that report we were given was accurate then the locals would probably steal it if one ever did make an appearance."

"Starting to think my blaster was a good idea?" Lara asked and she removed the weapon from its holster and held it up between them.

"Put that away." Cal told her when he noticed passers by suddenly ducking out of the way, "I think you're scaring the natives."

"Jumpy lot aren't they?"

"Fifty years of social collapse can have that effect. I think I'm starting to see why Kyle Jenner decided to set up here. Lots for a Jedi to do."

"Delivering food parcels? Hardly Jedi work."

"Well we can ask what they did to help now, look I think this is the place." Cal replied, pointing at the building ahead.

The building was a large multi-storey structure surrounded by a tall razor wire fence with metal mesh placed over every window. A large sign over the main door simply read 'EMERGENCY CENTRE.' Cal pulled the speeder up just outside and got out.

"Will we be all right leaving this here?" Lara said as she got out.

"It'll be fine." Cal said, "We'll only be a couple of minutes. If someone needs us to move it they can just ask us."

"Actually I was just—"

"It'll be fine my padawan. Now follow me." And Cal calmly walked up the steps to the main door and went inside.

"Wow." Lara said as they both looked around the room they had just entered.

It seemed that at one time the building now used by the aid agency had been a hotel and the room they were now standing in had been the lobby. A massive fountain still dominated the room, though water or whatever exotic fluid had been pumped through it no longer flowed over the layered bowls. Discoloured patches on the walls clearly indicated where artworks had been either removed for safekeeping or simply stolen from. There were several people sat on furniture that was now covered in old sheets, none of whom bothered to look up at the Jedi as they walked across the room. The only being willing to make eye contact with them was the insectoid appearing arcona standing behind the reception desk.

"My name is Cal Udra, Jedi knight." Cal announced to the arcona.

"Yes, I noticed." The arcona replied and he pointed at the lightsaber hanging from Cal's belt, "Now what can I do for you?"

"We need to speak to someone in charge around here." Cal said, "I was told that's a Miss Lynn Kerr."

"It is." The arcona said, "What's this about?"

"Jedi business." Lara said, trying to sound like she knew what she was doing.

"Isn't it always." The arcona muttered. Then he pointed and added, "Through that door. She uses conference room one as her office."

"So you'll let her know we're on our way?" Cal asked.

The arcona let out a laugh.

"You think the comm. system works around here?" he asked rhetorically.

Cal headed through the door indicated by the arcona, followed by Lara, into another room that had once been intended as a lounge area but was now in a similar state to the lobby. Most of the doors exiting this room were signposted as conference rooms, though some of them had the signs missing.

"Here's the room." Lara said as she saw the door with 'Conference Room 1' written above it.

Cal said nothing; instead he just walked up to the door and pushed it open.

"Lynn Kerr?" he called out as he stepped through.

"Over here." a woman's voice replied, "Come on over."

Lynn Kerr was actually the only person in the conference room. She was standing looking at a chart laid out on a table. As Cal and Lara approached her they saw that every table had some sort of chart, map or other diagram on it.

"I hope we're not disturbing you-" Cal began.

"You are." Lynn replied, "But then again there's never a time when you wouldn't be. What can I do for you?"

"We're here on behalf of the Jedi Order." Cal said.

"Yes, I have eyes; I saw your laser swords. Though I've never seen a jedi that needed a blaster as well."

She said, eyeing up Lara's weaponry.

"Yes well we were informed that you have had frequent dealing with Padawan Learner Lom Des and also with Jedi Kyle Jenner." Cal said, "Is that correct?"

"Yes is it. They provided security for me on occasion, something the local police and Republic forces should be doing but won't."

"Why?" Lara interrupted.

Lynn sighed.

"Because the local police are corrupt and the Republic forces would rather pretend to be maintaining the peace than actually doing something useful."

"What happened here?" Lara asked.

"What's happened all across the sector." Lynn told her, "Only its more serious here. The Founding Families took this place for all it was worth and now that they're done with it they've moved on to another world."

"Founding Families?" Lara said.

"Yes. They're the descendants of the original survey crew that charted this entire sector. They think that gives them the right to run the place."

"Oh right," Lara replied, "I saw something about them in our briefing pack." And she pulled a datapad from her robes briefly before putting it away once more.

At that moment the door opened again and a human male entered the room.

"Hey Lynn!" he called out, "Some idiot's left a speeder out front."

"Oh I'm sorry." Cal said, "That was me. Do you want me to move it?"

"No need buddy." The man said, "Some of the locals already have."

"But I've got the access key right here." Cal replied, "How did they – oh." And he realised that the speeder had been stolen.

"Bad luck." Lara whispered to Cal, placing her hands on his shoulders, "Oh well, at least I don't need to be the one to tell the colonel how I left the speeder unguarded on the street."

Cal just frowned back at her.

"Jondo," Lynn said, "allow me to introduce our guests – I'm sorry I didn't catch your names."

"Cal Udra." Cal said, reaching out to shake Jondo's hand.

"And I'm Lara. Lara Udra." Lara added as she too shook Jondo's hand, "Yes we're related. Unfortunately."

"I was just telling them about what the Founding Families have done to this world." Lynn told Jondo.

Deceit.

Guilt.

Cal felt them instantly when Lynn mentioned the Founding Families in front of Jondo he glanced at Lara, but she gave no indication of having picked up on them herself.

"You're here to investigate the Families themselves?" Jondo asked and Cal felt the same feelings again.

"Are you?" Lynn asked hopefully.

"No." Cal replied, "Jedi Kyle Jenner has disappeared along with his padawan learner. They left in their fighters and never returned. We're here to discover what happened to them."

Both Jondo and Lyn stared back in disbelief.

"Disappeared?" Jondo said, "I mean, I hadn't seen them in awhile, but there's nothing odd about that. They've more than just this world to worry about after all."

"Did either of them mention anything about what they were working on when you last saw them?" Lara asked him.

"No. No, they never discuss jedi business." Jondo said.

"That's right." Lynn agreed, "They just turn up every now and again to see if we're having any trouble."

"Do you have a lot of trouble around here?" Cal asked, "Perhaps from someone who would take action against the jedi?"

Jondo snorted.

"Look Jedi Udra," he said, "the people round here aren't going to knowingly take on a jedi, let alone two. Even if they were dumb enough to try the locals don't have access to the sort of weaponry needed to bring down a starfighter."

"What about the residence we're told they maintained in the city?" Lara asked, "Do you know where that is?"
"No." Lynn said, "I thought they lived in the Green Zone."
"I do." Jondo said, "I gave Lom a ride home once, I kept the route stored in my truck's nav system. Would you like a lift there?"
"Yes please." Lara replied. Then she looked at Cal and added, "Someone stole our speeder."

The repulsorlift truck that belonged to the aid organisation run by Lynn and Jondo had seen much better days and it shook as Jondo drove it through the streets.
"Why do people keep stopping?" Lara said as she looked out of the window. Cal looked at the passers by to see for himself. Sure enough when people noticed the van they were halting until it had gone past.
"They're waiting to see if we stop to give them anything." Jondo told her, "In this neighbourhood our organisation is the only thing between most of them and starvation. Look, Kyle's place is just up ahead." Jondo steered down an alleyway just wide for the truck, at the far end it was blocked by a barred metal gate.
"I hope you've got a way through." Jondo said.
Cal closed his eyes and reached out a hand.
"Telekinetic lock." He said as the gate swung open and Jondo drove into the courtyard beyond it.
"Oh this looks bad." Jondo said as he brought the truck to a halt.
"This looks very bad." Cal agreed, jumping out of the truck, followed closely by Lara.
The courtyard was littered with debris. Two burnt out speeder bikes lay in one corner, while the wreckage of furnishings and electronics were scattered all around.
"I take it that this isn't what it was like the last time you were here?" Lara said, delivering a kick to a rodent scavenging from a nearby food container.
"No it wasn't." Jondo answered, looking around.
Cal took in the surroundings for himself. Like the headquarters of the aid agency, this place must have once been a luxurious place to be. All around the courtyard was a raised balcony with doorways leading to the rooms on the upper storey. Now though the paint was faded and chipped and the building was a mere shadow of its former glory.
"What's that smell?" Lara said suddenly.
"Smell?" Cal said, "I don't- wait yes I smell it now. Oh no."
"Oh that's not good." Jondo said and he reached back into the truck from where he first pulled out a brightly coloured armoured vest.
"What is it?" Lara asked as Jondo put on the flak jacket
"The smell of a dead body." Cal said, creeping towards the nearest staircase up to the balcony.
"Something all too common around here." Jondo added and in addition to his flak jacket he now pulled a compact slug pistol from the truck and checked to see that it was loaded.
Cal led the way up the stairs, followed first by Lara and then Jondo. The smell was much stronger on the balcony and Cal followed the trail towards an open doorway, the smell getting stronger all the time. When he reached the doorway he looked into the darkened room beyond and halted.
"What is it?" Lara asked.
"I think it's Lom Des." Cal replied.
He tried the light switch, but the room remained in darkness so Cal pulled out his pocket torch and switched it on before he approached the corpse of the sullustan padawan. The beam of light disturbed a swarm of insects crawling over the body and taking tiny bites from the decomposing flesh. As they scattered, Cal waved his hand to keep them clear of his face.
"I've got a bad feeling about this." Lara said as she walked behind her older brother, also waving her hand to keep away flying insects.
"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Jondo added from the doorway, "I don't think it looks like he died easily."
"Lara," Cal said, turning around to face her, "get in touch with the colonel. We'll need someone to remove the body."
Lara nodded and left the room. As soon as she stepped onto the balcony she took in a deep lungful of air that was not as pungent with the smell of death as that inside the room. Reaching to her belt she produced a point-to-point communicator and held it up to her head.
"Padawan Udra calling Green Zone control." She said and when there was no reply she repeated herself, "Padawan Udra to Green Zone command. Do you read me?" Again there was no reply and she checked the signal indicator on the device. According to the display there was no trace of the network that a PTP depended upon, "Hey Cal!" she called out, "There's no signal!"

"Someone's jamming us! It's a trap!" Cal exclaimed and he pushed past Jondo to stand on the balcony beside Lara. Both Jedi plucked their lightsabers from their belts and with a double snap-hiss they ignited them and looked for any signs of attack.

"Hey calm down!" Jondo called out as he joined them on the balcony, "The PTP network hasn't worked around here in decades. There's a radio in my truck, you can use that."

Cal and Lara shut off their lightsabers. Cal looked at Lara and she nodded before heading back to the truck that had brought them here.

"So what's with you and these Founding Families then?" Cal asked.

Guilt.

"What?" Jondo asked.

Deceit.

"Every time they're mentioned you give off all sorts of interesting feelings." Cal told him, "So what's the story?"

Jondo sighed.

"I went to university with Vorn Torin." He said, "And I kept in touch. Lynn doesn't know."

"Who's Vorn Torin?"

"One of the Torins of course. He may not be the head of their family or anything, but he lets me use his name in fund raising. His brother and sister in law delivered a whole load of relief supplies about four weeks ago. Without the Founding Families giving us money our operation here would be shut down. But given Lynn's feelings about them I don't mention them. It keeps things simpler."

"You say they were here about four weeks ago?"

"Yeah, they were in system for about a week in all. Unlike the others, the head of the Torins prefers to travel about with his wife and kids in their private yacht."

A smile spread across Cal's face.

"What is it?" Jondo asked.

"It means that they may have witnessed Kyle Jenner leaving the planet. If so then I've finally found a witness."

"Couldn't his droid tell you?"

Cal frowned.

"Droid? What droid?"

"They had a droid. Some sort of housekeeper I think. I wasn't familiar with the type, I only saw it a couple of times. That sort of thing tends to stand out round here. There aren't many droids outside of the Green Zone."

"How long did they have it?" Cal asked.

"Oh I don't know. Less than two months. Why?"

"Both of the starfighter fighters assigned to Kyle and his padawan left the planet eighteen days ago and Lom Des is lying dead in that room behind us."

"So who flew the other fighter?" Jondo asked.

"Exactly." Cal replied, "I think that droid was in the other fighter."

"But housekeeping droids can't fly starfighters."

"No. But some assassin droids can." Cal said, then he leant on the safety rail around the balcony and looked down to where his younger sister was just exiting Jondo's truck, "Hey Lara!" he shouted, "What's happening?"

"The colonel's sending a unit to recover the body and help us search this place." She called back towards him, "They should be here within the hour."

"Great, we'll head straight back to the Green Zone then."

"Huh? Aren't we going to search this place?"

"Anything useful here will have been taken or destroyed, just like in the place in the Green Zone."

"So where do we go next?" Lara asked.

Cal grinned.

"We're off to meet one of the Founding Families." He replied.

4.

"Let me get this straight," Colonel Jeck said, sitting down, "now that you've lost the speeder I lent you, you want me to put out a bulletin that requests the location of Corva Torin and prevents him from leaving whatever system he's in? Why?"

"We think he was in this system at about the time Kyle Jenner vanished." Cal said.

"Chasing this alleged assassin droid?" the colonel asked.

"That's our current theory, yes." Cal replied.

"His theory anyway." Lara interrupted, "He won't explain it to me properly."

"I'm your master, I don't have to explain anything to you." Cal said, turning towards Lara.

"No, but it might help a bit. Supposing you get killed by the assassin droid too? Shouldn't I be told enough to continue with the investigation?"

"No. You should call for another qualified jedi to come and take my place."

"If I might interrupt right here." Colonel Jeck said suddenly and both Cal and Lara turned their heads towards him, "Thank you. Now the Torins are important people. The Founding Families may not have any formal power, but they have the influence that their sort of wealth buys and just in case you'd forgotten the name of the Narthis Sector's Senator is—"

"Airia Torin. Corva Torin's cousin." Lara interrupted, smiling. Then when Cal looked at her she produced her datapad and added, "I looked up the Founding Families while we were waiting to be picked up."

"If I may be allowed to continue?" Colonel Jeck said.

"Yes do go on." Cal said, "I apologise for my padawan's insolent behaviour." And Lara scowled at him.

"If I send your message on the basis of the evidence you've got then I'm not putting my name on it. If there's any trouble it will all be on you. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Cal said and he stood up, "We'll head back to our ship and take off now. We'll hold in orbit until you can give us a location on the Torins' ship."

"As you wish." Colonel Jeck said, also getting to his feet as Lara stood up alongside her brother. Then as the two jedi made to leave his office he added, "Oh and one more thing."

"Yes?" Cal asked, looking back over his shoulder.

"You owe me a speeder."

Cal's face fell as a grin appeared on Lara's.

At seventy metres long, a *deleya*-class vessel like the *Bright Hope* possessed more than enough room internally to accommodate Cal and Lara. As was traditional on vessels operated by the Jedi Order a great deal of the excess room had been dedicated to enabling the ship's occupants to train during their time aboard. Cal chose to remain in his cabin, sat cross-legged on the floor and meditating while Lara decided to make use of the equipment provided for physical training while they waited for a signal from Tepillos. It was three hours later that the signal finally arrived. An alert sounded throughout the ship and both Cal and Lara dashed towards the cockpit.

"Out of my way old man!" Lara shouted as she ran past Cal who was just emerging from his cabin, shaking cleanser from his hands after using the refresher.

"Hey!" he called out as he set off behind his sister, "I'm in charge around here!"

Lara made it to the cockpit ahead of Cal and she sat down at one of the flight stations and activated the ship's communications system.

"Bright Hope." She said, "Lara Udra here, begin your message."

"Lara," Colonel Jeck's voice replied, "is your master not around?"

"Oh he's about somewhere." She replied just as Cal burst through the hatchway, frowning.

"I'm right here colonel. Go ahead." He said as he sat down beside Lara and wiped his hands on her sleeve. Lara gazed at him and then at her sleeve, trying to determine if it was marked.

"Corva Torin is in the Crassis system." Colonel Jeck said, "He requested clearance and navigation data to leave for Delvad, but local nav control put a block on him. Apparently he's furious. I suggest you get there as quick as you can and sort this out, from the time stamp on the message on my desk he's been stuck there for more than an hour already."

"Copy that colonel." Cal said as he began to bring the *Bright Hope* out of the standby mode it had been in while orbiting Tepillos, "We'll need navigation data for the jump."

"Already prepared." Colonel Jeck replied, "It should be accompanying this transmission as a data attachment."

Cal glanced at Lara who had lent forwards in her seat and was studying the communications system. Looking back at Cal she nodded.

"We've got it colonel; we're on our way. Thanks for the help."

"Don't forget," the colonel said, "you owe me for a speeder." Then he broke the link.

"Told you." Lara said, leaning back in her seat again and strapping herself in.

"How would you like to find yourself floating home?" Cal asked before he powered up the *Bright Hope's* drives.

The Crassis system contained two settled planets. Crassis Minor was a sparsely populated agricultural world, while the far more heavily populated Crassis Major was the capital world for the sector. Unlike at Tepillos, the *Bright Hope* was challenged almost as soon as she left hyperspace. Also unlike Tepillos, the communication was video rather than simple voice contact.

"This is the *Bright Hope*." Cal signalled when instructed to by Crassis Major's orbital space traffic control, "We are a jedi vessel on official business. I believe you've been holding a vessel for us."

"One moment please *Bright Hope*." The controller said and on the display Cal and Lara watched as she got up from her chair and walked out of shot.

"How rude." Lara commented just before another person sat down where the controller had been. This was a dark skinned human male in a uniform that clearly belonged to a high-ranking military officer.

"My name is General Drud," The man said, "can you explain why you had us hold Mister Torin here?"

"No general I can't." Cal said sternly, "All you need to know is that we need to speak to this Mister Torin. Now where is he?"

"In an equatorial orbit. In an Empress Teta-class space yacht." General Drud answered, scowling over the video link, "He is expecting you." Then the screen went blank.

Cal noticed that Lara was rummaging through the pockets of her robes.

"What are you looking for sis?" he asked.

"My datapad." Lara replied.

"Why?"

"Because that general's name sounded familiar, I want to look it up. Ah here it is." And she began to scroll through the files on her datapad. When she found the one she was looking for she smiled and let out a brief laugh.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal said, "Who is he?"

"General Josh Drud, chief of the Crassis Major Defence Forces." Lara replied.

"So what's so funny about that?"

"He's also one of the Druds. As in Bolatha Drud, the geologist who was part of the original survey mission." Cal slumped back in his seat.

"Oh no." he said.

"Oh yes." Lara said, still smiling, "That's two of the Founding Families you've pissed off today. Want to try for the other five?"

Corva Torin's vessel was not alone in its orbital spot above Crassis Major; a second vessel was attached to one of the yacht's docking ports.

"I wonder who that is?" Lara said.

"Honestly I don't really care." Cal said, cutting the *Bright Hope's* speed as he approached the two ships.

Then he signalled the Torin's vessel, "This is the jedi vessel *Bright Hope*, clear us for docking and prepare to be boarded."

"Confirmed *Bright Hope*." A woman's voice replied, "Starboard docking port is available, my husband will meet you there."

After docking with the Torins' vessel Cal and Lara stood side by side in front of the hatchway on the port side of the *Bright Hope*.

"What are you waiting for?" Lara asked, "Open the door."

"I'm getting to it." Cal replied adjusting his cloak, "I want to make the proper impression."

"Oh I think you've already made an unforgettable impression dear brother." Lara replied and before Cal could stop her she reached out through the force and activated the hatchway control. There was a hissing as the heavy door retracted and in front of them the two jedi got their first look at a member of the Founding Families in the flesh.

Deception.

Anger.

Cal felt them both emanating from the people now standing in front of him. As well as the fair haired Corva Torin there was a bald, dark skinned man stood beside him. Cal ignored this other man and concentrated his attention on Corva.

"Mister Corva Torin," Cal said sternly as he stepped from the *Bright Hope* to Corva's vessel, "I am Jedi Knight Cal Udra and-

Before Cal could continue the other man stepped between them.

"Jedi Udra, my name is Heddren Drud." He said, holding out a small rectangle of plastic that Cal took from him, "I am Mister Corva's legal representative. My client does not consent to be interrogated and nor does he consent to any search of either his vessel or his person without legal order. Since you have only just arrived in the system I assume that you do not have such an order issued by the authorities on Crassis Major?"

Cal looked at the piece of plastic. It was a business card of a style common across the galaxy. It identified the man as Heddren Drud of Drud Interstellar Legal Services and gave an address and communication data.

"Heddren Drud?" Cal said softly, looking in Lara's direction.

Lara stepped forwards.

"Younger brother of the general who greeted us earlier. Lawyer."

"Your sister is correct Jedi Udra." Heddren said, overhearing the exchange and both Cal and Lara looked directly at him, "Yes I know all about your relationship." Heddren went on, "It pays to know as much about one's adversaries as is possible. My brother and I both protect the people. He protects them from physical threats to our world while I protect them from undue harassment from an over mighty government."

"Actually," Cal said, "we're here to offer your client our protection."

"You are?" Heddren said and Cal sensed the confusion from both men immediately. He also sensed it from Lara.

"We are?" she said and when Cal threw a glance in her direction she added, "Oh yes, we are. We're here to protect you sir."

"Protect me from what?" Corva asked both Cal and Lara sensed Heddren's irritation that the man had spoken at all without going through him.

"I'll let Cal tell you." Lara said.

"It is our understanding that you were in the Tepillos system approximately four weeks ago." Cal said.

Corva looked at Heddren.

"My client was in the Tepillos system at about that time." Heddren said, "He and his family remained aboard their ship at all times. They were there on humanitarian grounds to deliver relief supplies to-

"Your client may have been present at a murder." Cal interrupted and both Corva and Heddren looked back at him in silence.

"Accusing my client of murder-

"I'm not accusing him of anything." Cal said, cutting off Heddren's reply, "But I consider it likely that his vessel's sensors may have tracked two jedi starfighters leaving Tepillos. One of which was piloted by an assassin droid that was able to kill two jedi and now has access to a hyperspace capable combat vessel. Mister Torin's vessel is unarmed isn't it?"

"Yes." Corva said, "It is." And he glared at Heddren.

"If we could see you sensor records we could try and track down the assassin droid before it comes after you." Lara suggested in a friendly manner.

"Alternatively we could just stay right here with you and wait for it to show up." Cal said in not quite such a friendly tone.

"If I might be allowed to consult with my client?" Heddren asked.

"Of course." Cal replied, "But don't go too far, we can't protect him if we don't know exactly where he is."

Heddren forced a smile before he and Corva walked away from the jedi.

"Nicely handled." Lara whispered, "I can feel the fear coming off the pair of them."

"Yes." Cal agreed, "But the thing is what are they afraid of? The assassin droid or us?"

At that moment Corva and Heddren returned.

"My client will allow your apprentice to inspect his ship's sensor logs and copy data recorded in the Tepillos system on his last visit." Heddren said, clearly not happy about this.

"Me?" Lara asked.

"Yes." Heddren said, "You're master will wait here with me where he can better react should the assassin droid make a sudden appearance."

"You heard the man." Cal said to his sister, "Go check out the log."

"If you'll come with me." Corva said to Lara, "I'll show you the way to the bridge."

Walking through the Torins' private yacht, Lara noticed that unlike the more functional décor of the *Bright Hope* everything about this ship was geared towards luxury. Artwork was everywhere and surfaces not covered by fine carpets or other decorations were polished to a reflective finish.

"I bet this set you back a bit." She said to Corva, mainly just to break the silence. She could sense his discontent at her presence and she hoped to put him at ease.

"Yes, it did." He replied abruptly, "Ah, here we are. The bridge." And he waved Lara through a hatchway.

"Corva have you got rid of-" the woman sat at one of the flight stations began as he and Lara entered. She stopped speaking as soon as she looked up and caught sight of Lara.

"My dear," Corva said, "this is Jedi Padawan Lara Udra. She will be examining some of our sensor logs. Miss Udra this is Deesa my wife."

"You fly the ship yourselves?" Lara asked.

"Of course." Deesa replied, "What did you expect?"

"I expected you to pay someone else to do it for you."

"Starships are something of a hobby for us both." Corva told her, "Now if you'll come over here I'll show you our sensor logs."

Corva directed Lara to one of the bridge stations and she sat down. As soon as she did the panel in front of her reacted to her presence by adjusting its height to match her needs and all of the displays activated.

"Here," Corva said leaning over her, "I'll just call up the data you want." And after tapping on a touch panel a couple of times the sensor data recorded in the Tepillos system became available.

That was quick. Lara thought to herself. Almost as if it had been prepared before we arrived.

"That's fine thanks." She said, not mentioning her suspicions.

The data was well organised and Lara soon found what she wanted. Two contacts that took off from Tepillos on the day in question and headed directly away from the planet. Both ships accelerated continuously and there were spikes in energy output consistent with weapons fire. There was little information beyond that before the craft went out of range of the ship's sensors, but they had been holding a steady course, which gave Lara a vector to follow.

"I need to make a copy of this." She said as she produced her datapad.

"Here." Deesa said, "I've already download it to this mem-stik. You can take it."

"Thanks." Lara replied, spinning round in her seat and taking the mem-stik. She couldn't help but notice that the device had only been offered to her when she had looked like she was about to connect her datapad to the ship's computer.

"If that's all Miss Udra," Corva said, "we'd rather like to be on our way."

5.

"Well?" Cal asked when they were back aboard the *Bright Hope* and watching the Torins' vessel move off through the cockpit canopy.

"Well what?"

"Well what did you get young one?" Cal said, frowning and Lara held up the mem-stick.

"They recorded Kyle and the droid leaving Tepillos." She said, "There's a vector to follow."

"Did they jump to hyperspace?"

"Who?"

"Kyle. Or the droid."

"Oh, I don't know. They went out of range without anything like that showing up."

Cal inserted the mem-stick into a port on the control panel.

"Well what is here looks good." Cal said, "Strap in and I'll pull the data for a jump back to Tepillos."

"Oh goody, we're going back to Tepillos." Lara said sarcastically.

"I know what you mean." Cal said in agreement, "If there's a bright centre of the universe, then Tepillos is the furthest planet from it."

The *Bright Hope* dropped out of hyperspace well beyond the gravity well of Tepillos. The natural orbital path of the planet had shifted it millions of kilometres from its position when Kyle Jenner had left it weeks earlier.

"Not bad brother dear." Lara said as she studied the navigational instruments, "I think you landed us less than twenty thousand kilometres from where we needed to be."

"Getting here was the easy part." Cal said, "Figuring out where Kyle and the droid got to is going to be a bit harder."

"You're plan's still just to fly through space in a straight line and hope we stumble across them?" Lara asked, pointing her hand through the canopy.

"It is. So keep an eye on those sensors. Let me know the second you see anything."

Cal then adjusted the heading of the *Bright Hope* and engaged the ship's ion drives. Delaya-class vessels like the *Bright Hope* mounted engines amongst the most powerful in the galaxy, so as Cal accelerated the ship away from the orbital path of Tepillos Lara concentrated intently on the sensor display in front of her, anxious not to miss anything as they flew past it.

Lara soon saw that following the course that the two Starsaber-class fighters had taken while being monitored by the Torins' space yacht was taking the *Bright Hope* towards a gas giant located further out in the system.

"Hey Cal!" she said, prodding her brother who was sat meditating in the pilot's seat while she kept watch on the sensors, "Are you going to do anything about that?"

"What? I'm awake." Cal replied suddenly.

"Yeah, you always snore when you're meditating. Now what about that planet out there?"

"We'll miss it." Cal said, "Look, its more than three million kilometres away from us."

"Yes, but where was it eighteen days ago?"

Cal suddenly sat upright and grasped the control column.

"You're right." He said, "If they kept their heading then Kyle and the droid would have flown right into that gas giant's subsystem. How many moons?"

Lara checked the navigational files and compared them to the sensor readouts.

"Eighteen listed moons." She said, "I'd say that seven of them are on our side of the plane right now. Plus the rings of course."

"That's a lot of places to hide from pursuit." Cal said, "I'm taking us in closer."

Lara checked her harness as Cal piloted the *Bright Hope* towards the gas giant looming ahead of them. She alternated her view between looking at the sensor display and through the cockpit canopy into space. At this distance the interference given out by the gas giant and the numerous smaller bodies orbiting it prevented the sensors from providing a full picture of what was in the area. Experienced pilots often used such places to evade pursuit or turn the tables on an attacker. Of course such tactics were not without risks. The interacting gravity wells of the gas giant and its moons made an escape into hyperspace impossible, while a slight error in piloting could send a ship ploughing into the barren surface of a moon or the depths of the gas giant itself. In the Tepillos system the two Jedi were far from help.

"Whoa!" Lara exclaimed suddenly and she grabbed the control console as Cal carried out a sudden manoeuvre to steer them between two of the gas giant's rings and Cal grinned.

"Calm down young one." He said and he rolled the *Bright Hope* so that the rings appeared above them, "With any luck by using the rings as cover we'll be able to see anyone else around here before they see us." "That's great." Lara said, now clutching the arm rests of her seat, "Just try and avoid hitting any of those lumps of ice out there okay?" "Don't worry little sister. I like my drinks neat. No ice." And Cal adjusted the ship's course again suddenly to avoid a tumbling lump of ice.

The flight systems gave out a sudden alarm and Lara looked down at the sensor readout. "Metallic contact." She said, "Range six thousand kilometres, bearing zero four." "Got it." Cal replied and he steered towards the object, "Any identification?" Lara checked the sensors again. "Nothing. It looks inert. Wait. No, there's more than one object. Multiple metallic contacts in close proximity. They're too small to be ships." "Debris." Cal said and he reduced the *Bright Hope's* speed, "We may have just found the wreckage of one of the starsabers." "Yeah, but whose? Kyle's or the droid's?" "Only one way to find out."

Cal allowed the ship to coast towards the debris, firing manoeuvring thrusters to keep a safe distance from the rings until the compact field of debris came into view through the canopy. "That's not a starsaber." He said, "Looks more like a probe of some kind." Lara looked for herself. Sure enough the debris floating in front of the *Bright Hope* appeared to be from some long forgotten satellite, most likely placed here to monitor the space around the gas giant by the government of Tepillos prior to its near total collapse. "So we're back to square one." Lara said. "Maybe, maybe not." Cal said, "If that thing had been in that state for the last fifty years then it would have tumbled into the gas giant's atmosphere decades ago. No. That satellite's not been like that for long." Then he pointed to one piece of the debris, "See there, that's a laser burn. I think that it got hit by a stray shot." "A stray shot from a starsaber you mean?" "Exactly. Now keep an eye out. We still don't know who came out ahead in the battle."

Another alarm sounded, more urgent than the previous one. "We've been spotted!" Lara exclaimed, "Someone just bounced an active sensor pulse off our hull." "Double check it." Cal said, "There's a lot of clutter out there. Make sure it wasn't one of our own just bouncing off the rings." "Not ours. Wrong frequency. But it did come from the rings." "Then we weren't the only ones using them to hide near." Cal said and he activated the communications system, "This is the *Bright Hope* out of Coruscant." he signalled on a wide band, "Jedi Jenner is that you?" "Contact!" Lara said excitedly, "And there's a transponder. Starsaber-class starfighter." "But no response to our signals." Cal said, "Shields up!" Lara activated the *Bright Hope's* defences just in time as a volley of energy blasts impacted against them. "They're firing at us!" she yelled. "Yes, I did notice." Cal replied as he threw the *Bright Hope* into a dive, banking to throw their attacker off target, "Now what can you tell me about that fighter?" "Err, right." Lara said and she looked back at the sensor display, "Well it's following us." She said. "Yes, that I got from the laser fire overtaking us. But who's flying that thing?" "Well it can't be Kyle can it?" "It could if he's mistaken us for the people who sent the assassin droid and his comms are out. I can't sense anything through the force, but we're probably just too far away and I don't want to let that fighter get any closer than necessary." "Oh yeah." Lara said and she studied what the sensors were saying once more. Specifically she looked at the thermal profile. The vast majority of the heat from any space vessel came from its engines, followed by the electronic systems as they operated. But a vessel occupied by warm-blooded beings like humans would also give off other heat traces. Traces different to a droid, "There's no life readings." Lara said after what seemed like an age, "Cal, that's the droid flying that fighter. But that means Kyle's-" "It means nothing yet." Cal interrupted, "Now charge up our own guns, I'm not letting any tin plated killer get the better of me."

"It's got the better of two jedi so far." Lara muttered as she activated the *Bright Hope's* weapons. "Well let's just see if the third time's the charm." Cal replied before a shrill warning sounded.

"It's got a missile lock!" Lara exclaimed and Cal glanced at the sensor display just long enough to see that another contact had broken from the fighter chasing them around the gas giant and was racing towards them.

"What's the status on our guns?" he asked.

"Their ready now." Lara replied

"Well you may want to try using them then."

Lara hunched over the console and ran her hands over the weapons controls. The *Bright Hope* mounted two laser cannons in turrets that could be remotely operated from the cockpit and it was these that Lara took control of. Angling both to the stern of their ship she pressed her finger down on the firing control and held it pressed.

"Easy!" Cal exclaimed, "Fire too long and you'll blow the coils. Shorter bursts. Where did you learn to shoot?"

"I haven't." Lara said.

"What?"

"I haven't learned to shoot yet. Aren't you supposed to be teaching me this stuff?"

"Oh great. Well just do what I said, short bursts and remember to lead your shots. The computer will do a lot of the work for you, but you can out think a computer any day of the week. Trust in the force."

Lara took a deep breath and concentrated. Thanks to a last second roll from Cal the missile had just overshot and was now banking around for another run at them. Gently she moved her hands over the control console again, but this time she let the force flow through her and tell her not where the missile was, but where it would be.

She jabbed at the firing control and pulses of red light streaked from the *Bright Hope's* turrets. There was a sudden flaring of light through the canopy as the missile exploded far from the ship and the warning alarm finally ceased.

"I got it!" Lara exclaimed, "Cal, I got it!"

"Nice work kid. Don't get cocky. That fighter could still have another of those missiles."

Sure enough the warning alarm sounded again as the droid piloted starfighter launched its second concussion missile.

"Wrong time to do that." Cal said and he turned the *Bright Hope* directly towards the nearest of the gas giant's rings.

"Cal what are you doing?" Lara demanded, "You're not actually going to fly right into that ring are you?"

"Yes I am." Cal replied, "Just angle our shields forwards and shoot the ice."

Lara did as she was told, concentrating the *Bright Hope's* shields to the front of the ship and firing at the lumps of ice that made up the ring. The high-energy blasts were easily powerful enough to annihilate the lumps of ice, boiling them away to nothing when they hit them. But it was the lumps near to these vaporised ones that Cal was counting on. The thermal energy output by the passing blasts was enough to cause fractures and tiny jets of steam as parts of the ice became super heated. This set them moving and as more began to move they began to collide and break up.

Behind the *Bright Hope*, the missile's tracking system followed the ship. It was aware of the ring system, but compared to the *Bright Hope* itself the ice formations were of no significance. Right up to the moment that a shard of ice slammed into the missile.

"That was his last." Cal said and making full use of the *Bright Hope's* manoeuvrability he swung the ship around and charged directly towards their opponent.

The two ships flew headlong at one another, firing. The starsaber rolled as the droid piloting it sought to evade Lara's shooting, but in doing so its own attacks were pulled off target and the few blasts that struck the *Bright Hope* were absorbed by its shields.

"Whoa, that was close." Lara said as the starsaber flew over the *Bright Hope's* cockpit canopy, missing the vessel by a handful of metres.

"You know what would be useful?" Cal said and before Lara could reply he added, "If you could shoot straight."

"I'd like to see you do better." Lara said.

"Good idea." Cal said, "Take the controls."

"What?"

"Take control of the ship. Just try not to crash us into the planet okay?"

Lara took hold of the control column mounted in front of her seat as Cal let go of his. He reached upwards and grabbed hold of a compact display unit mounted on the end of a mechanical arm. He flicked a switch and there was a soft hum as he lowered the display right in front of his face.

"What are you doing?" Lara asked.

"We have proton torpedoes remember? That droid shot missiles at us; I thought I'd return the favour. Just try and keep that fighter in front of us."

"Here goes." Lara said and she pushed the *Bright Hope* into a tight turn after the fighter. Meanwhile Cal tagged the fighter's sensor image as the target for his torpedoes and immediately the computer began to calculate the optimum firing solution.

"Stay on target." Cal said.

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

"There is no try Lara. Stay on target."

Lara concentrated, ignoring the readouts on the console in front of her she watched the path that the fighter was taking ahead of them as it tried to shake off their pursuit and let the force guide the movements of her hands on the control column.

"Got him!" Cal exclaimed as the targeting computer buzzed to indicate a lock. There was a slight shudder and a flash as a torpedo shot from the launching tube mounted beneath the *Bright Hope's* hull. The droid piloting the starsaber detected the launch immediately and threw its fighter into a sharp turn, attempting to manoeuvre outside of its sensor lock. But as the droid banked and rolled Cal launched a second torpedo that flew towards the starfighter on a slightly different trajectory.

The droid was left with no choice. Caught between the two rapidly closing torpedoes it ceased all efforts at evasion and instead opted for speed, attempting to get into the densely packed rings that Cal and Lara had earlier used to defeat one of its own missiles. But in adopting a straight course, the droid made its flight path easily predictable and switching back to the *Bright Hope's* laser cannons Cal fired them both along that path.

The blast ripped one of the wings away from the starsaber and one of its engines flared as it caught fire.

The fighter began to tumble, still heading towards the rings. That was when the first torpedo hit.

There was a brilliant flash of light as the warhead detonated, followed by another as the second torpedo also slammed into the fighter and detonated. As the explosion subsided Cal and Lara watched as the smouldering remains of the ship fell towards the atmosphere of the gas giant below and vanished into the clouds.

"What now?" Lara asked.

"Head for Aurek Station." Cal said, "We need to refuel and I've got a call to make."

6.

"So it was an assassin droid?" the holographic image of Master Karas said.

"I believe so master." Cal replied, "Though we were unable to recover any wreckage."

"And what of Kyle Jenner?" Master Karas asked.

"We don't know for certain." Lara answered, then she remembered to add, "Master."

"It seems likely that he was killed by the droid." Cal continued, "Though it's not impossible that he evaded pursuit and escaped into hyperspace master."

The image of Master Karas bowed its head.

"Kyle Jenner is officially listed as missing." He said eventually, "We will not give up hope that you will find him alive."

"Us?" Lara asked.

"Indeed young one." Master Karas said, "Given the loss of Kyle Jenner and Lom Des the Jedi Council is extending your deployment. You are now the Jedi guardians for the Narthis Sector."

Then, before either Cal or Lara could protest Master Karas stepped off his holopad and his image faded to nothing.

"We're staying?" Lara said.

"Looks that way." Cal replied.

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

"Me too sis. Me too."

On the world of Moldas Jedi Master Ben Karas walked towards his quarters.

"Master?" a young woman called out to him as she emerged through a doorway in front of him.

"Ah Keana." He replied, "How may I help you my young padawan?"

"Are you going to bed master?"

"I am. I have finished communicating with the new Jedi in the Narthis sector and I have much to do tomorrow."

"But there's something troubling you isn't there? I know you haven't been sleeping well the past few nights. Everyone here's noticed it."

"I appreciate your concern young one. But I will be quite alright. Now I suggest you run along and get some rest yourself. I will be requiring your assistance early in the morning."

"Of course master." Keana said and she stepped out of his way.

Ben Karas continued on his way back to his quarters and once there sat down on the edge of his bed. For a brief moment he recalled the message that had been disrupting his sleep. It was a terrible warning that he could not ignore, but seemed powerless to do anything about.

The Udra family will serve the Sith.