

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-III: RANSOM

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...

RANSOM

WHEN THE DAUGHTER OF ONE OF THE NARTHIS SECTOR'S RICHEST FAMILIES IS KIDNAPPED HER PARENTS WANT THE BEST INVESTIGATORS AVAILABLE. JEDI GAL AND LARA UDRA MUST RACE TO RECOVER HER SAFELY...

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

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1 .

"So are you pleased with how this event is going tonight?" the reporter asked Kayza Drud.

"Oh yes." Kayza replied, focusing her attention on the reporter rather than the camera pointed at her "We've got lots of people from the more privileged parts of our society here tonight to show their support for this wonderful cause. Later we'll be—"

"That's fine." The reporter said, cutting Kayza off in mid stream, "I think I'll just head over there and talk to some of the guests now."

"Of course." Kayza replied, forcing a smile as the reporter and her camera droid walked away from her.

"Not getting the respect you deserve?" a man suddenly asked from behind her.

"Vorn." She said with a sigh and she spun around to face Vorn Torin, "I suppose you and your friend are here to support the poor people of Tepillos too?"

Both of the men standing in front of her smiled.

"But of course." Vorn answered, "Isn't that right Dal?"

"This is a cause so close to our hearts." Dal agreed, "Why an old university friend of Vorn's lives and works amongst those poor people."

"Bantha crap." Kayza snapped, "What are you doing here really?"

"No seriously we're here for the charity bash." Vorn said, "My dear older brother is too busy doing whatever it is he does as head of the family so I thought I should represent us."

"Really? Because I can't think of anyone worse to represent one of our families." Kayza said, staring at Vorn.

"How about them?" Dal asked, pointing across the crowded room, "Aren't those the Karn sisters heading for your nephew and his young lady friend?"

"Oh no." Kayza exclaimed and she began to push her way through the crowd.

"Hey Nissel? Does your mom know who you're out with?" the eldest of the three sisters said as they approached the table where Nissel Fayl and Hiran Drud sat. When he saw who was approaching, Hiran's shoulders slumped.

"Evening Gayal." He said to the one who had just spoken. Then following on in order of their age he greeted the other two, "Sial. Keera."

"I thought your family wasn't supposed to mix with his." Sial then said to Nissel.

"Well my mom's not here is she?" Nissel replied, "What about you anyway Gayal? I thought your parents had cut you off. Or did I hear wrong about you being arrested again? What was it this time?"

"Nothing anyone chose to press charges about." Gayal said.

"How did you get in?" Hiran asked, "I know my aunt didn't invite you."

"Oh we have friends." Keera answered, "One of them gave us tickets."

"Good evening ladies." Kayza Drud said, interrupting as soon as she reached the table around which the younger group was clustered, "I just need to check your invites."

Smiling, Keera held out three pieces of plastifilm that were embossed with an intricate pattern and gave the details of the evening's event.

"See." She said, "We're allowed in. We were given these by someone that knows us."

"Who?" Kayza asked.

The three Karn sisters looked around.

"Him." Gayal replied and she pointed back the way that Kayza had approached from. When Kayza turned to look she saw Vorn and Dal both laughing. Vorn smiled and raised his glass at her.

"Just remember," Kayza said angrily as she handed the invites back to Keera, "Gayal's the only one of you three who's old enough to drink. You other two are on soft drinks right?"

"Of course." Sial said, smiling in a way that suggested they would not be paying any attention to the instruction. Meanwhile Gayal produced a cigarra and was about to light when Kayza stopped her.

"And there's no smoking in here. You'll have to go outside." She said. Then she turned around and began to push her way back towards Vorn and his friend.

With Kayza gone Gayal lifted her lighter back to the end of the cigarra.

"Hey Gayal." Hiran said, "How about you do as your told just once?"

"Fine." Gayal snapped. Then she looked at her sisters, "Save me a seat okay? I'll be back in ten minutes."

The evening air was cool outside the club where the charity event was being held and Gayal shivered slightly. She spotted a ground vehicle parked at the entrance to an alleyway nearby and as she looked at it a figure standing beside it waved to her. Gayal extinguished the cigarra and walked towards the waving man.

"Hello there." She said.

"Get in!" the man snapped, grabbing Gayal's arm and at the same time the side door of the vehicle slid open to reveal two more men inside.

"Hey! What's going on over there?" a uniformed guard standing just outside the club entrance called out.

"Get in! Now!" the man holding Gayal's arm repeated. Then, as he shoved her into the back of the vehicle one of the other men inside produced a weapon. There was a whining sound as the weapon powered up, then a sharp 'crack' as a magnetically accelerated projectile broke the sound barrier and the guard collapsed.

The man who had grabbed Gayal leapt into the vehicle and slammed the door shut behind him.

"Move!" he yelled at the driver, just as the other guards from the club entrance were rushing towards them with weapons drawn.

"What's going on?" Gayal demanded as the vehicle sped off, its armed occupant leaning out of a window to fire on the guards.

"Jewellery now!" one of the van's occupants snapped as he handed Gayal a small bag.

"I asked what's going on?" Gayal repeated as she began to remove her jewellery and place it in the bag,

"This isn't supposed to be happening."

"Shut her up." The driver said and before Gayal could speak again she heard the noise of tape being ripped from a reel and it was placed firmly over her mouth.

"You're doing fine." Cal Udra, jedi knight said to his younger sister and padawan learner as she piloted their ship, the delaya-class *Bright Hope* through the atmosphere of Crassis Major.

"I know." Lara Udra replied from beside him. Normally Cal insisted on flying the ship and she was pleased that he had allowed her to do it for once, "Now where's that damn beacon?"

The Udras were not heading towards any of the planet's major starports, nor for any of the smaller provincial ones either for that matter. On this occasion they had been directed to approach a private landing platform built on the estate of one of the Founding Families, the descendants of the beings who had originally surveyed the sector for the Republic and become fabulously wealthy because of it. If current estimates were to be believed then the Karns were the wealthiest of them all.

"Down there." Cal said, "Beside the antenna tower."

"Oh I see it and I see the welcoming committee as well."

There as a small group of figures standing beside the landing pad located within the extensive lawn and as Lara brought the *Bright Hope* in lower they stood back to avoid the blast from the ship's repulsorlift engines. Lara shut off the engines and as she released her harness she looked at Cal and spoke.

"Well let's go meet our hosts shall we?"

"Jedi Udra?" one of the men three waiting at the bottom of the ramp said as Cal and Lara descended side-by-side.

"I'm Jedi Knight Cal Udra." Cal said with as much authority as he could muster, "This is my padawan learner, Lara Udra."

The man who had spoken bowed slightly.

"Please do follow me sir. I will escort you to Mister and Mistress Karn."

The man then turned and began to walk towards the massive house clearly visible from the landing pad and the two jedi set off behind him. As soon as they had passed the remaining two men who both wore identical uniforms and carried blasters on their hips also followed them towards the house.

"Now this is a nice home." Lara whispered to Cal, "Much better than ours."

"Beware of envy my young apprentice." Cal replied, "Besides I saw it first, I've got dibs."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Well can I stay over?"

"No."

"I'm telling mom and dad."

"They can't stay either. This place will be mine. All mine." And Cal rubbed his hands together in a mock villainous manner.

As the group neared the house, the man leading them suddenly turned away from the large doorway visible at the front and began to walk down a pathway beside the building.

"Aren't we going inside?" Lara asked and she pointed towards the large doors.

"We are." The man replied, "But that front door is for the Karn family and their friends only. Employees use the rear entrance."

"You hear that?" Cal said, "We're the hired help."

"Yes but help with what?" Lara replied.

The rear entrance was not much smaller than the front door, but it was less ornamental. The Udras were led through the section of the house dedicated to the day-to-day business of the serving staff and to the areas that the Karn family themselves occupied. Upon reaching a large double door the man guiding them halted and knocked.

"Enter." A man's voice sounded from the other side and the Udras were then led into the room.

Waiting inside there were a man and woman sat behind a large ornate wooden desk and two more men on a nearby couch. One of them wore a badge marking him out as a member of one of the planetary law enforcement bodies.

"Do please take a seat." The man behind the desk said to the two Jedi and he indicated another, vacant couch. Then he looked at the man who had brought them here, "Send some more refreshments up," He said, "we're running low."

"Of course Mister Karn." The man replied, bowing slightly before leaving the room.

"So you're Mister Karn then." Cal said as he and Lara sat down, "The head of the Karn family."

"Actually," the woman sat beside Mister Karn replied, "I am. I'm Fay Karn, head of the Karn family since the death of my father. Del took my family name when he married me, but I still have the final say."

"Of course." Cal said, bowing his head, "I apologise for any offence."

"None taken." Faye replied, "It's a common mistake."

"Jedi Udra," Del Karn said, "allow me to introduce Agent Lyal Kayne of the Crassis Major Planetary Investigation Division and Han Shill, the head of the company that provides my family's security."

"Shill?" Lara said, "As in Lieutenant Erin Shill?"

"She's my sister." Han replied, "Well one of them. Now if we could get down to business?" "Yes let's." Cal said, "Since the Jedi Order doesn't generally work for private individuals we were somewhat surprised to receive a formal senatorial order to come here."

"Yes well Senator Torin is—" Del began.

"Oh I know the Torins are another of the Founding Families." Cal interrupted, "But the Jedi Order is not supposed to be at the beck and call of individual senators. Now why are we here?"

"Because our daughter's been kidnapped!" Faye suddenly yelled and she held her head in her hands. Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"Gayal Karn is the Karn's eldest daughter." Han said, "She was abducted from outside a charity event she was attending. During the abduction one of my men was shot and killed."

"Has anyone heard from the kidnappers?" Lara asked.

"We have." Del said and he looked at Han, "Show them."

Han reached down beside the couch and produced a battered holdall.

"This was delivered to one of my company's offices this morning." He said, "Along with a ransom demand."

"How much?" Cal asked.

"Thirty million credits." Del answered, "Plus a fast starship with the range to get them out of the sector."

"It's nothing to us." Faye said, "We're worth trillions."

"Of course under Crassis Major's laws actually paying a ransom is an offence." Agent Kayne said.

Han placed the holdall on the desk and opened it up. From inside he removed a bundle of clothing and then a handful of jewellery.

"These belong to our daughter." Del said.

"They returned the jewellery?" Lara said, "It looks expensive."

"It is." Faye said, "It's all custom made of course."

"But if they took it out of the sector surely they could still sell it?" Lara asked.

"It's tagged." Cal said and he looked at Del, "I'm right aren't I?"

"Yes." Del replied, "The earrings contain beacons that use the crystals set into them as a transmission amplifier."

"The effective range is about two thousand metres." Han explained, "They work off the planetary communications network."

"So whoever took your daughter had inside knowledge." Cal said.

"That's what we're assuming." Agent Kayne said.

"And I take it that you want us to investigate." Cal said.

"We do." Del replied.

"What about your own people?" Lara asked.

"My employees have no legal authority to carry out an investigation." Han replied.

"And neither us can read minds." Agent Kayne added.

"I have always believed in hiring the best available talent and it has always paid off." Del said, "That's why my wife trusts my advice. Now name your price."

"Your wealth is irrelevant." Cal said, "We'll help recover your daughter but we won't be charging for it."

Normally an abduction case on Crassis Major would involve the Planetary Investigation Division setting up an operations centre at a local civic building, requisitioning what resources were available. But given the wealth of the Karns and the involvement of Han Shill's private military company the operations centre had instead been set up at the nearest of Han's offices. As soon as Cal and Lara entered the room Cal was drawn towards a large holographic display in the centre.

"So this is her?" Cal said, staring at an image of Gayal floating in front of him, "Attractive."

"Aw, I think my brother has a crush." Lara said as she stood beside him. Then she added, "Who are all these people?" and pointed at another set of images located towards the edge of the display.

"Some of the other members of the Founding Families that were present." Han told her, "They all spoke with Gayal before she left the club." Then he pointed at two image in particular, "These two are her younger sisters." He said.

"So she went with her sisters, but she left alone." Cal commented, "Do we know why?"

"Apparently she wanted to smoke. Kayza Drud told her to leave."

"Drud? Oh great." Cal said.

"You've met the Druds?" Han asked.

"Yeah once or twice." Cal replied.

"The same one twice actually." Lara added, "Heddren. The sleemo lawyer."

"Ah." Han said, "Heddren can be somewhat intimidating at times. He's the younger brother, but Josh Drud is too busy being a general to have the time to run the family himself so Heddren does it. That's Kayza his younger sister and that's Hiran his son. Both spoke with Gayal at the club."

"To tell her to get out?" Cal said.

"Kind of convenient that they ordered her outside to where she was kidnapped." Lara said.

"I agree." Cal said and he looked at Agent Kayne, "Have you questioned them?"

The agent let out a snort.

"You don't just go and accuse members of the Founding Families of being parties to a crime." He replied.

"I do. I'll need a speeder." Cal said and he looked at Lara, "Are you coming?"

2.

The Drud estate was not quite as impressive as the Karns', but it was still massive. Cal drove the speeder provided by Han up the driveway towards the main building.

"Here looks good." He said as they approached a row of expensive looking vehicles parked just outside a row of garages.

"That's a lot of speeders Cal." Lara said, "Just think how much it would cost if you lost them all."

Cal ignored the comment and brought their speeder to a halt. At that moment an elderly looking human emerged from one of the garages. He had the same dark skinned appearance as the Druds, but instead of finely tailored clothing he wore simple overalls covered in grease.

"Ah, you must be the jedi." The man said as Cal and Lara got out of the speeder and he held out a hand in greeting.

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"Nice to know that our movements are being so closely monitored isn't it?" Lara said.

"Mister Shill called ahead and told us to expect you." The man explained as he shook hands with Cal, "I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm Kerden."

"Kerden Drud?" Cal asked.

"No. Kerden Larrenod."

"Then you work for the Druds?"

"No boy, I'm Millel's father. When she married Heddren they insisted I move in here and I've got to tell you its one of the best decisions I ever made. I've no work to do so I get to spend all day playing with these."

And he waved at the collection of speeders, "Have you ever seen so many classics in one place?"

"No." Cal replied. He knew little of classic or collectable speeders, but he could sense Kerden's emotional attachment to them.

"By the time Cal collected this many half of them would have been stolen." Lara commented and Cal glared at her.

"Come on inside." Kerden said, "My grandson's waiting for you."

Kerden took the Udras as far as the inside door of the garage, escorting them past even more speeders.

"I'd better leave you here." He said, "I don't want to mess up the carpet with boot prints." Then he leant through the doorway and gave out a yell, "Hey Hiran!" he shouted, "The jedi are here boy!" then he looked back at the Udras, "Go on through, he'll be down in a moment." And with that Kerden headed back towards the speeders.

Neither Cal nor Lara knew exactly where they were supposed to go, so they just walked in a roughly straight line through the house. They came to a halt when they encountered a large staircase leading up to a massive landing.

"Kerden indicated Hiran was upstairs." Cal said.

"Then perhaps we should go up." Lara suggested.

"Good idea." Cal replied, "But no sliding down the banister."

"Aw Cal."

"Don't 'Aw Cal' me."

At that moment Hiran Drud appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Hi there." He said as he walked down towards them, "You must be the jedi." He looked from Cal to Lara and stared at her as he approached, "Now what can I do for you?" he asked.

"Is there somewhere we can talk?" Cal asked, "We have some questions about the events of last night. Assuming you can stop thinking about what my sister looks like naked of course."

"What?" Hiran exclaimed as Lara's eyes widened, "Err, of course. Sorry. This way."

Hiran led the two jedi into a lounge and sat down.

"So what do you want to know?" he asked.

"What can you tell us about what happened last night?" Lara asked, "We're looking into Gayal Karn's abduction."

"I make it a point to avoid all involvement with them." Hiran answered.

"The Karns?" Cal asked.

"Their daughters." Hiran said, "Especially Gayal."

"So you're not friends?" Lara asked.

"No." then Hiran realised that the jedi were investigating whether he was involved, "Hey, I didn't have anything to do with what happened." He said defensively.

“But you did ask her to leave.” Cal said.

“She wanted to smoke and the club has a rule about no smoking. My aunt went to a lot of trouble to set up last night without Gayal causing another scene.”

“Another scene?” Lara commented.

“Don’t you know about Gayal’s history?”

“No.” Cal said, “What’s to know?”

“Oh not much. But she’s twenty-three, a year older than me and she’s been arrested more than ten times since I got back from university last year. It’s not really anything new either; she’s been acting up ever since I’ve known her and my sister says she got worse while I was away. But thanks to her family’s money and my father’s law firm she’s never even appeared in court. After last week her parents told her she wasn’t getting anything more from them until she started behaving.”

“So did it work?” Lara asked.

“No.” Hiran snorted, “Her sisters are just as bad, so they started paying for her. Plus there’s Vorn Torin of course. He gave the tickets for last night to the Karns, my aunt didn’t want them there at all.”

Cal considered the young man’s responses. He sensed no deception, though Hiran did not seem to want them in his home any longer than necessary. Though every so often there were flashes of thought about Lara.

“Thank you Mister Drud.” Cal said, getting to his feet, “We’ll be in touch if we need anything more. Please don’t leave the planet.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Hiran replied, also standing up and shaking Cal’s hand. Then he offered his hand Lara who accepted it.

“By the way, “she said quietly as they shook hands, “I’m hotter than you think.”

Cal just shook his head in despair.

Leaving Hiran in the lounge Cal and Lara heading back through the enormous house towards their loaned speeder.

“At least this one wasn’t stolen.” Lara said as they both got into the vehicle and Kerden waved them off. Then as Cal glared at her she added, “So where are we off to now?”

“Well Hiran gave us two leads.” Cal said.

“Both of whom are probably being warned to expect us right now.” Lara interrupted.

“Most likely.” Cal agreed, “But we’ve got to follow them up.”

“Agreed, after all how else can you save your new girlfriend? Ah, its so sweet, my brother the jedi in shining armour.”

“You know one of my teachers had a saying for people in your place.”

“What?”

“Shut the kriff up or I’ll hit you.”

“Oh charming.”

“Anyway, I think we should check out the sisters.”

“Why not Torin? He gave them the tickets.”

“Yes, but he couldn’t have been sure that they’d turn up or even get in if they did. No, we’ll check her sisters first. They were the ones who knew Gayal’s plans and who knows who they spoke to.” Then Cal activated the speeder’s built in communicator.

“Shill security.” A voice announced.

“Han Shill.” Cal said.

“I’m sorry, Mister Shill is-“

“Tell him its Cal Udra.”

“Of course, I’m sorry.” And then the line went silent while Han was put through.

“Go ahead Jedi Udra.” Han said.

“We’ve spoken with the Drud boy. He says all three of the Karn girls were at the club last night.”

“That’s correct, my men escorted the others away after Gayal was taken.”

“Where to? I want to speak with them and I didn’t notice them at the estate earlier.”

“There’s an apartment building down town.” Han said, “They tend to stay there a lot.”

“Away from parental supervision.” Lara muttered.

“I didn’t quite get that.” Han said.

“Never mind.” Cal replied, “Can you send me directions?”

“Of course, I’ll transfer them to your speeder. Anything else?”

“Yes one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Stop telling people what we’re doing.” Cal snapped and he shut of the communicator.

"I hope these are directions to the right place." Lara said as a route plan appeared on the speeder's main display, "After that Han may just be telling us to go somewhere else."

As it happened the instructions were genuine and they led the two jedi to a luxury apartment block located overlooking a lake.

"Thirtieth floor." Lara said, staring up at the building.

"The penthouse. What else?" Cal replied.

"The turbolift better be working."

"It will be. I get the feeling that if it didn't the tenants would have the caretaker shot."

As they stood in the ascending turbolift, Lara looked at Cal.

"Are you straightening your hair?" she asked when she noticed him stroking the side of his head, "We're not here for you to pick up a date."

"Shut up, we're there." Cal said and the turbolift doors opened to the thirtieth floor.

The hallway outside the doors was short and led directly to a large doorway that was unmarked.

"The entire floor." Lara commented, "These people just don't do anything by halves do they?"

"Too much effort to take the little plastic band off the pack of banknotes." Cal replied, "Easier just to spend the whole thing." And he knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" a voice came from a speaker set beside the door.

"Jedi. Open up." Cal announced.

The door slid upwards to reveal a young woman considerably shorter than either Cal or Lara.

"I'm Keera." She said, "I suppose you'd better come in."

"So your sister's been kidnapped and you just open the door to anyone?" Lara said as she and Cal entered the apartment.

"You're jedi." Keera replied.

"How do you know that?" Cal asked.

"After Nissel told me you were coming I asked daddy about you."

"Who's Nissel?" Lara asked.

"Nissel Fayl. You've never heard of her? Of the Fayls. You don't know much about how things work around here do you."

"We're learning fast." Cal said, "But how did she know we were coming here."

"Well Hiran told her you'd just been to see him, even though her mother hates his family and then she told me."

"We could have gone to the Torins." Lara commented.

"Why?" Keera asked, "We're more popular. Everyone wants to meet us."

"Look," Cal said, "is your other sister around. Sial isn't it?"

"Here." A voice called out from an adjacent room and another young woman of similar size to Keera appeared, "Come on through, the droid's made some caf."

As the jedi sat down Lara leant to Cal and whispered in his ear.

"This place is worth way more than our apartment."

"This couch is worth more than our apartment." Cal whispered back.

"So what do you want from us?" Sial asked.

"We're interested in who had knowledge of your presence at the event last night." Cal said.

"Oh the charity thing for the poor people of wherever." Sial replied, "I don't know. We didn't tell our parents. Gayal's not supposed to have the money to be going out at all."

"But you pay for her." Lara said.

"Sometimes." Sial replied.

"She doesn't need us." Keera added, "She can just get some guy to pay."

"What guy?" Cal asked.

"Any guy. Whoever she's leading on this time." Sial said. "She even tried it on with Erill Crassis once. I mean the guy's seventy and sick. She probably would have killed him if his son hadn't walked in and gone berserk."

"She leads men on? How?" Lara asked.

"You know, she promises things to get them to do what she wants. Like spend their money on her. Then she disappears before giving up what they want." Keera said, "Haven't you ever done that?" she then asked Lara.

"No I haven't." she replied.

"No, you don't look the sort that could pull it off." Sial said, "Not dressed like that."

"What's wrong with how I'm dressed?" Lara protested.

"Oh you look fine." Keera said, "For a jedi I suppose."

Lara was about to speak again when Cal interrupted.

"We're not here for fashion advice." He said, "Now was there anyone Gayal had been leading on that may have held a grudge?"

"All of them." Sial said, "That's what happens."

"Dad would know." Keera said, "I think he has us followed. Those Shill security guys always seem to show up pretty soon after trouble starts."

"That happen often?" Lara asked.

"Hey, its not our fault." Keera protested, "People are just jealous of us, that's all. I mean why wouldn't they be?"

Cal got to his feet.

"I'll go and speak with your father." He said to the two Karn sisters. Then as Lara began to get up he turned to her, "No. You stay here with them." He said before looking at the Karns, "I want you two to stay put."

The Karns both scowled.

"Oh come on." Sial said, "We're supposed to be—"

"Whatever your plans are ask yourself did Gayal know about them?" Cal said before she could finish and Sial nodded reluctantly, "So if the kidnappers have a general grudge against your family then you'd be making yourselves targets. Now I know that you've got pretty good security here, but I want Lara to stay with you just in case." Then he looked back to his sister, "Think you can handle that?" he asked her.

"Sure." She replied, "We'll have loads of fun."

"Just keep them safe." Cal said and then he walked directly to the front door and left the apartment.

After watching him leave Lara turned back towards the Karns and found them both glaring at her.

Anger.

Hatred.

She could feel their enmity directed towards her.

"So what do you do for fun around here?" Lara asked.

"We go out and party." Sial replied coldly, folding her arms in front of her.

"We have a drink and a laugh." Keera added, mimicking her older sister's stance.

"Drink?" Lara commented, "Neither of you is twenty-one. I thought that was the legal age in this sector."

"That's why we party with older guys." Sial said.

"How about we order some take away?" Lara suggested, "We could have our own little party right here."

"Oh my god, what a freak." Keera said, "A freak with no fashion sense."

Suddenly Sial smiled.

"I know what we can do." She said.

"What?" Keera asked, tilting her head.

"We can give her a makeover."

"A makeover?" Lara repeated.

"Yeah." Sial answered, "Gayal's got the perfect dress for you. You're a similar size to her." Then she looked at Keera, "You know, the black one with the zip panels."

Keera smiled.

"You mean the one she bought to show up mom and dad at their anniversary party last year?"

"That's the one. She never did wear it, but Lara could. Then we wouldn't need to worry about being stuck with a dork."

Lara frowned at the blatant insult, but there was something more to it and as she watched the two sisters whispering to one another she sensed something.

Deception.

The problem was she did not know what the two sisters were planning. But so long as she kept them occupied then they would not be causing trouble.

"Okay then." Lara said, "Lead the way."

With both Karn sisters now smiling, Lara followed them into one of the apartment's bedrooms. Sial went directly to a door that Lara assumed led to an adjoining room, but when it opened it revealed only a walk in closet containing more clothes than Lara had ever seen gathered together before.

"Here's the one." Sial announced, removing a long black dress from a rack, "Look it's perfect. Just a simple black dress with these panels at the front and back to tighten it around your waist and make you look thinner."

"Like a corset." Keera added.

Deception.

Amusement.

Lara still could not figure out what the sisters were planning, but she was certain she could handle it. "Now get out of those awful robes." Keera then said and while she and Sial waited, Lara removed the clothing she had to in order to try on the dress.

"What are you looking at?" Lara said as she stood in front of the two sisters in her underwear.

"What is that?" Keera asked.

"What is what?" Lara replied.

"That thing you're wearing." Sial said, "Where did you buy that?"

"Oh." Lara said, glancing down at her underwear. It was a simple pale brown single piece garment provided to her by the jedi order, "I didn't buy it. The temple gave it to me."

"Well its hideous." Sial said, "You're lucky we're here. Later on we'll show you something more fashionable."

"Even wearing nothing would be more fashionable than wearing that." Keera added.

"It's staying on." Lara said sternly.

"It doesn't matter right now." Sial replied, "Here's the dress." And she held out the dress for Lara to try. The young jedi took the dress and wrapped it around her. She reached to where the zipper was located between her shoulder blades and began to pull it closed, halting when it had reached a point about half way down her thighs.

"I think this is too small." She said, "I can't the zipper any lower."

"Well Gayal is a bit smaller than you." Keera commented and Lara frowned.

"I'll help you out." Sial said, wandering behind Lara, "Put your feet right together."

Lara did as she was told and bending down to reach the zipper, Sial pulled the rest of the way down the dress. Lara squealed slightly.

"This really is tight." She said, "I can hardly breathe and I don't think I can walk at all."

"You're just supposed to shuffle." Keera said, "Its fashion you know. Practicality doesn't come into it."

"Oh, okay." Lara said, still sensing that the sisters were up to something.

"Now let us help you with the panels." Sial said, "Put your arms by your sides."

"Like this?" Lara asked and she let her arms hang beside her.

"Yeah, that's right." Sial said and she and Keera looked at one another and smiled.

The two sisters immediately grabbed a pair of the panel halves each. But rather than fastening them in front and behind Lara they wrapped them over her arms and sealed the zippers, pinning her arms in place.

"Hey!" Lara exclaimed as she found she was unable to move her arms or legs, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Going out." Sial said as she and Keera walked towards the bedroom door.

"Come back here right now!" Lara shouted.

"Sure okay." Keera replied and she turned around.

"That's better." Lara said, breathing a sigh of relief, "Now get me out of this."

But instead of coming back into the bedroom Keera just smiled and shut the door.

"See you later!" Sial shouted through the door, "Don't go anywhere."

Lara could feel her anger rising. Anger both at the Karn sisters for tricking her and herself for falling for it. She had known they were up to something but instead of doing something about it she had allowed them to continue. She closed her eyes and breathed as deeply as she could in her current situation. Opening her eyes again she looked at the mirror mounted on the wall and focused on the zippers holding the side panels shut. She could not reach them with her hands, but she could still reach them with the force. The zips slid open and Lara pulled her arms free. Reaching out through the force again she undid the zipper running down her back at the same time as she called her cloak back to her from the bed. Then she rushed from the apartment as she put the cloak on.

Out in the hallway she saw that the turbolift had already gone and was on its way down to the lobby.

"Oh great." Lara said to herself, "Stairs again." And she ran to the emergency stairs.

Unlike the staircases Lara was used to that consisted of sections of steps in straight lines running back and forth, the emergency staircase in this high class building was designed to be just as aesthetically pleasing as everything else about it. The stairs consisted of a single spiral running the entire height of the building, which meant that they had a single uninterrupted banister.

"Oh this just has to be done." Lara said and rushing to the banister she threw one leg over, gripped it in both hands and let herself slide down.

All thirty floors.

"See," Sial said to her sister, "I told you that jedi nerf herder would be easy to deal with. She had some nerve thinking she could boss us around."

"Yeah, I admit it. You were right. But shouldn't we have gagged her or something? What if someone finds her before we get back?"

"Oh what are the odds of that?" Sial replied, "And just think when we do get back we can take her to a private midnight bonfire."

"Why would we do that?"

"How else can we make her watch while we burn all her clothes before throwing her in the lake completely naked?"

It was then that the turbolift came to a halt and the doors slid open and the faces of both Keera and Sial fell. "I am so dizzy right now I think I may just be sick on you." Lara announced, propping herself up on the edge of the doorway.

3.

Returning to the Karn estate, Cal marched up to the front door instead of going around the back. The man who responded to the bell was the same individual who had met Lara and him when their ship, which was still located on the Karn's private landing pad had touched down.

"This entrance is for the Karn family and-" the man began before Faye Karn appeared behind him.

"Oh Jedi Udra." She said, "Do come in. We weren't expecting you." and the man then stepped aside, glaring at Cal as he entered the building by the front door. Cal meanwhile just smiled. Clearly he had been able to keep ahead of the informal information network that had been alerting people to his movements since beginning this investigation.

The benefit of leaving Lara with those two spoiled brats. He thought to himself.

"Is your husband available?" Cal asked.

"He's rather busy. Can I help?" Faye replied.

"Perhaps. It has been suggested that you have your daughters followed by Mister Shill's employees."

"Yes we do, but Del handles that sort of thing. Perhaps you should come with me." And she began to walk up the main stairs.

Cal followed Faye as she led him through the upper floor of the house. Up here the walls were lined with artwork depicting the Karn's successes, beginning with the charting of the Narthis Sector, through its settlement and to their present activities.

"Impressive isn't it?" Faye said, noticing Cal looking at the images, "My family took a barren region of space and helped turn it into a thriving economy. Who knows what the future will provide us with?"

Greed.

Malice.

Cal frowned for a moment. He had met a fair number of wealthy people and most of them were looking for ways to make themselves even richer. But whereas they mainly wanted to do so honestly and in a manner that would also benefit others as a consequence, Faye's words and thoughts suggested that what she sought was something not for sale.

Cal's train of thought was interrupted as Faye halted and knocked on an ornate door.

"Del darling it's me. Jedi Udra is her to speak with you." She called out.

"One moment." Del's voice responded. Then after a moment's pause he added, "Come in." and Faye opened the door.

Fear.

Whatever Del had been doing before the door opened he did not want Cal knowing about it and it occurred to him that Faye had knocked on the door as a warning for him to stop.

"A pleasure to see you again." Del said and Cal felt the lie immediately, "Have you made progress?" and he pointed to some chairs set in front of the desk at which he was sat. Cal waited for Faye to sit in one before he chose one in which to sit.

"Jedi Udra was asking about your instructions to Han's men regarding our daughters." Faye said.

"Ah yes." Del responded and he looked directly at Cal, "Jedi Udra, you must understand that my daughters can be somewhat spirited at times. Gayal especially."

"So I am led to believe." Cal replied.

"Well I thought it would be wise to have some of our security people keep an eye on them. I thought it would put a stop to their mischief."

"You thought it would?" Cal asked.

"If anything it has made them worse." Faye said.

"They seem to have a knack of loosing their tails." Del said, "Gayal especially once again."

"Do Mister Shill's men keep notes of their movements? Who they meet with?"

"We know where they go, but not with whom." Del replied, "The men are under orders to remain discrete.

They can't exactly stop everyone my daughters meet with and ask for ID."

"But if I showed them an image they may recognise a face?"

"Possibly." Del said.

"That's good enough." Cal said, "I'll need to speak with everyone you've had tailing Gayal as soon as possible."

It took half an hour for the almost twenty men who had followed Gayal Karn at one time or another to assemble in a briefing room at the Shill Security building and for once Cal was happy for word of his

activities to be sent ahead. Standing in front of them, Cal used his datapad to search through footage from a security camera mounted outside the club where Gayal had been abducted.

"Take a look at this." He announced and he copied the video clip to a projector. The image flickered into life in the air beside him and the other men in the room watched the footage that showed Gayal Karn as she walked from the club doorway to the corner where a man stood waiting. Cal paused the image there, "This is one of our targets." He said and he zoomed in on the man's face, "Does anyone recognise him?"

The zoomed image was of poor quality, but as everyone watched the projector analysed the information and cleaned it up, producing a clear picture of the man's face. To Cal's dismay not one of the men he had gathered here indicated that they knew who the man was.

"What about him?" one of the men suddenly said.

"Who?" Cal said, looking round at the image.

"The guy in the van."

Towards the edge of the image was the profile of a man partially in shadow. Cal tracked the image across to centre it on him and waited as the projector enhanced the brightness.

"Him I know." Someone called out, "Well, I don't know him. But I've seen Gayal with him."

"Same here." Another voice added.

"Me too."

"Okay then." Cal said, "So we can guess that this is the man who knew what security precautions are taken with Gayal. But do we know where we can find him?"

"Strip joint." One of the men who had identified the man in the picture said, "That's where Miss Karn met him the night I saw them together. They went inside and never came out again that I saw."

"Me too." Another of the men who had recognised the kidnapper said, "Except I did see them come out. He had a big smile on his face."

"Okay." Cal said, "So it sounds like he likes that place, it's not just somewhere for them to evade you lot. Something that seems easy to do."

There was an uncomfortable silence as the security agents had their failing pointed out.

"Now how about someone gives me the address of this club our man frequents?"

Lara sat on the floor of the living room now fully dressed again watching an entertainment broadcast on the massive wall mounted video screen. Her legs were spread apart and between them was a large tub of ice cream she had found in the freezer and she was eating the contents with a spoon. She winced suddenly and placed a hand against her forehead.

"Ooh! Brain freeze!" she exclaimed, and then she dipped the spoon back into the tub. As she did her PTP link chimed, "Hello?" she said as she lifted the communications device to her head.

"Lara it's Cal. How are things going over there?"

"Fine."

"What's that noise?"

"What noise?"

"That banging."

"Oh, that's just the vid screen."

"Well stop rotting your brain and meet me downstairs. But before you leave I'm sending you a file."

Lara pulled her datapad from her robes and saw that it was receiving a data burst via her PTP link.

"I see it, an image." She commented.

"It's one of the kidnappers." Cal said, "Ask the other two girls if they know him."

"Okay. See you soon."

Lara shut off her PTP link and returned it to her robes. Then she picked up the tub of ice cream and carried it along with her datapad towards the bedroom where the two Karn sisters had led her earlier. As she drew closer the banging sound that Cal had overheard became louder. Entering the room she saw the pile of clothing on the bed that had previously been inside the closet that she now headed for. With her hands full, she reached out through the force to open the door.

"You can't keep us in here!" Sial snapped.

"Shut up." Lara replied, standing in the doorway so that neither of the two sisters could get past her, "Now do either of you recognise this guy?" and she held out her datapad. Sial just stared at Lara, but Keera looked at the image.

"Lorcken." She said, "I don't know his last name. He's one of Gayal's boyfriends."

"Does he have a last name?" Lara asked.

"Probably." Keera replied, indicating that she did not know it.

“What about you?” Lara said, looking at Sial but she just continued to stare at Lara, “Well I’m going now.” Lara went on, “So don’t go away.” Oh you may want this.” And she handed the ice cream to Keera. “You expect us to eat ice cream?” she said. “Actually I thought you may have need of the bucket it’s in later.” Lara replied and ignoring the looks of horror on the Karn sisters’ faces she shut the closet door.

“So where are we going?” Lara asked when Cal arrived to collect her.

“The guy we’re after-“

“Lorken.”

“What?”

“He’s called Lorken. The other two didn’t know his last name.”

“Well this Lorken met Gayal at a club on more than one occasion. I’m betting he’s regular there.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t her that’s a regular? She could have invited him along.”

“I doubt it.” Cal replied, “Though from what we know I wouldn’t put it past her entirely.”

“Why? Where exactly are we going?” Lara asked as she began to look closely at the buildings they were driving past. She pulled a face and then added, “I don’t like the look of this neighbourhood. The only clubs I’ve seen so far have all been – Wait, you don’t mean?”

“Yes I do.” Cal answered and he brought the speeder to a halt opposite to a large building whose bright lights contrasted with the lack of street lighting. On poster either side of the guarded entrance the club advertised the presence of females of several species, with large black blocks concealed portions of the images deemed unsuitable for those who had not paid to see them.

“Stay here.” Cal said, opening the door to the speeder.

“Why do you get to follow him and I don’t? Aren’t I supposed to be following your lead and learning stuff?” Lara replied, frustrated.

“Look Lara,” Cal said, leaning back into the speeder, “you may be my padawan, but you’re also my little sister and I’ll turn to the dark side before I take you into a place like this. Now stay here. Oh and look after this, I need to remain anonymous.” And he tossed his lightsaber to her, “You’ve got the picture of the guy we’re after. If he comes out without me then stop him and let me know.”

Lara watched as Cal approached the front door of the club and with a wave of his hand to convince the doorman that he had paid the cover charge he went inside.

“Wait in the speeder Lara.” She said to herself, “I need to go in by myself and watch the naked women dance. Can’t do that with you looking over my shoulder.”

Then she noticed two females, a human and a twi’lek walking down an alleyway beside the club. They halted by a side door and knocked on it. The door slid open and they disappeared inside before it closed again. Lara smiled.

“I’ve got a good feeling about this.” She said to herself. She removed her lightsaber from her belt and hid it along with Cal’s beneath her seat. Then she got out of the speeder and headed down the alleyway.

4.

The interior of the club was in darkness for the most part. Only selected areas were illuminated and in most of these females from species that were considered physically attractive to human males danced in revealing costumes. The males who watched did so in anonymity from darkened seating areas. Standing in one place, it was impossible to actually see Lorken in here so he began to wander around, making it look as if he was selecting a dancer to watch. Then he caught sight of Lorken sitting beside a small platform that had a yellow skinned borneck woman dancing around a pole. As Cal watched the man threw a handful of banknotes onto the platform and grinned.

"Would you like to share a drink with me?" a female voice suddenly asked from behind Cal.

"No thank you." He replied, "I'd rather just-" and he stopped suddenly as he turned around and found himself staring straight into Lara's face. Cal looked his younger sister up and down and his eyes widened in shock. Since he had left her in the speeder she had replaced her traditional, functional jedi robes with a tight fitting reflective leotard that just about covered her torso while a fine mesh material covered her legs. In her hands she held a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"What the kriff do you think you're doing here?" Cal hissed, anxious not to draw attention to himself or his sister.

"Learning how to be a jedi." Lara replied.

"Dressed like that?"

"A jedi must be prepared to operate under cover."

"That outfit does not count as undercover. It barely covers anything. Now go take it off."

"One hundred credits." Lara said.

"What?" Cal asked.

"There's a chart in the dressing room that says I have to charge one hundred and fifty credits for a private striptease. But we're family so I figure I should give you a discount. It's weird though, maybe I should charge more for it."

"That's not what I mean!" Cal snapped and he grabbed her arm.

"Ow!" Lara exclaimed.

"Thisss guy bothering you?" a deep voice asked, the end of the word 'this' extending into a hiss. Cal looked over his shoulder to see a massive reptilian barabel bouncer standing behind him, glaring down at him.

"He's after a freebie." Lara said, "Won't leave me alone."

"Okay pal. It'sss time to leave." The bouncer said and the barabel pulled Cal's hand away from Lara and began to pull him towards the door.

"Hey, get off me!" Cal said.

"Get out of here loser!" Lara called out as her brother was dragged from the club. Then she looked around and smiled as she saw Lorken still staring at the borneck dancer. Wobbling slightly on the high heels she was not used to, Lara walked towards him.

"Hey baby!" a man said to her, "How about a private party?" and he held out several banknotes.

"I'm not your type." Lara replied, waving the hand that clutched the wine glasses.

"On second thoughts, you're not my type. I prefer blondes." The man said, now oblivious to her long blonde hair. The man barged past Lara and then she continued on her way.

"Compliments of the house." She said as soon as she found herself standing next to Lorken and she set down the bottle of wine. The man looked her up and down and grinned. In contrast Lara forced a smile as her nostrils were filled with a stale aroma.

"You or the drink?" Lorken replied, still grinning and Lara had to fight the urge to recoil away as he exhaled a plume of smoke from the cigarra he was smoking straight at her.

"Just the drink." Lara said, forcing a friendly smile, "I'm very expensive."

"But worth it I bet." Lorken said and he reached out a hand and placed it on Lara's waist. Again she fought the urge to do something about it, "So why the special treatment?" he asked, "I've been here before but never been given any freebies."

"We look after our regulars." Lara lied, "Besides you're one of the few that brings his own girl in."

"Yeah, well she isn't around tonight." Lorken replied.

Greed.

Deception.

Lara placed her hand around the wine bottle and with the help of the force made the cork pop out.

"How about you tell me why over a drink?" she said and she slid into the seat beside his.

Anger.

Cal was not in a good mood when Lara returned to the speeder. She still wore the outfit she had acquired from the club's dressing room but now had her cloak over it while she clutched a bundle of her own clothing. The first thing she did when she got back in the vehicle was to place a jar on the dashboard that was filled with banknotes.

"What's that?" Cal asked.

"Three hundred and two credits." Lara replied.

"They both tipped you a credit each did they?" Cal said and Lara punched his arm.

"No!" she exclaimed, "But some guys will keep giving you money to get you stay near their table. Lorken for example seemed to be after someone to replace his usual date."

"What did you learn?" Cal asked.

"Not a great deal." Lara replied, "But then I wasn't expecting him to tell a woman he'd just met about how he abducted his last girlfriend. That puts women off you know brother dear. But I did get this." And she pulled a PTP link from her cloak.

"Lorken's?" Cal asked.

"Yep. I lifted it from his pocket. I shut it off just in case anyone tried calling while I was in there. But I figured we could use it to track his recent movements."

"Good work." Cal said, "But that doesn't excuse what you did here tonight. I gave you a direct order and-

"I'm your little sister Cal." Lara interrupted, "I'm not a little girl. Now can we get back to the ship so I can change? This outfit is riding up in places it's got no business being without at least buying me dinner and flowers first."

"Why didn't you just change in the club?" Cal asked as he started up the speeder.

"I thought keeping it on would annoy you more. Is it?"

"Yes."

"Then my work here is done."

Aboard the *Bright Hope*, the starship assigned to the Udras, Cal carefully removed the back plate of the PTP link his sister had stolen from Lorken. Then, taking a narrow probe he linked its main processor to the ship's computer.

"Found anything?" Lara said, wandering into the room.

Al looked up and saw that she was now wearing her usual robes.

"At least you're properly dressed." He said.

"Though not the height of fashion apparently."

"Really? What is?"

"Being immobile or wedgied it would seem."

"Glad I don't care about fashion." Cal said.

"So what have you learnt?" Lara asked as she leant on the workbench next to Cal.

"Nothing yet." Cal replied, "I was just pulling an ident from the chip. Ah, here we are." And he placed his finger on a monitor showing the information gained from the PTP link's innards. It was a string of letters and numbers that identified that particular device to the communications network that operated on Crassis Major, "Now we call Agent Kayne." And Cal walked out of the room and turned towards the *Bright Hope's* cockpit.

"You want what?" a bleary eyed Agent Kayne asked. The man had been asleep at home when the jedi finally got hold him and even though they could not sense his emotions through the communications link, both Cal and Lara sensed that he was not happy about being disturbed in the middle of the night.

"Access to the planetary communications net." Cal repeated.

"I take it that everything you're about to tell me is fully admissible in court?" Agent Kayne said.

Cal looked at Lara.

"Sure it is." Cal replied, though he knew that taking Lorken's PTP link had been anything but procedurally correct.

"Fine." Agent Kayne said, "I'll get you a log in authorised. It should only take a couple of minutes." And then he broke the link and the screen went black.

"Easy enough." Lara said.

"He probably just wanted to get back to bed." Cal responded, "We could have asked for the keys to the Crassis Major central bank vault and he'd have sent them over by courier droid."

Moments later, the *Bright Hope's* communications panel chimed to indicate an incoming data transmission.

"Is that it?" Lara asked as Cal leant forwards to see what was being sent.

"Looks like it." Cal replied, "It's got a government header. Wait, yes there's a link to the planetary communications database."

"So let's see where he's been." Lara said excitedly.

"I was just getting to that." Cal replied and he copied Lorken's PTP link identification number into the database. There was a short delay before the screen changed to a scrolling list of numbers.

"What are they?" Lara asked.

"Repeater towers." Cal said, "This is the list of which tower the PTP link was nearest to at each stated time. This shows us when he moved from one tower zone to another."

"Not very easy to read is it?" Lara said.

"Not like this, no." Cal agreed, "But we can overlay the data on a city map like this." And the image changed to a map of the city, over which coloured circles appeared to represent the approximate location of the PTP link.

"What happened there?" Lara asked, frowning when for a time the map had no such indication on it.

"He must have switched his link off." Cal said, "Look' it's back on in the same area."

"He's spent a lot of time there." Lara said and she pointed to a map square.

"More importantly he went there right after the abduction took place." Cal said, "I think we've just found a good place to start looking for Gayal."

The area that Lorken had gone to immediately after Gayal was abducted and had left for only brief periods since was a coastal district that included several harbour facilities. Unfortunately this meant that the area was also littered with storage buildings that ranged from clusters of rental units barely big enough to hold a speeder to massive warehouse complexes that could hold the contents of a large starship's hold.

"So where do we start then?" Lara asked, "Even with the communications data we still don't know exactly which building Mister Stinky spent so much time in."

"Mister Stinky?" Cal said.

"Yeah, he stank." Then Lara smiled, "He stank like fish." She said.

"Now I don't get the feeling that Gayal Karn is the sort to associate with someone who smells like that on a regular basis." Cal said.

"Her sisters would likely have said something." Lara agreed.

"So where would you have to go to get the smell of fish all over you?" Cal asked, looking at Lara expectantly.

"The ocean." She said, "But that's still miles of buildings to search."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Think Lara; the PTP link vanished for several hours. I thought he'd switched it off but maybe he just went out of range of the tower."

"But wouldn't the next tower have picked him up?"

"Not if he went somewhere that there weren't any." Cal pointed out.

"But where?" Lara said before realising what Cal was getting at, "The sea." She said with a grin, "Gayal is being held prisoner on a boat."

The harbour control building was an unimposing permacrete structure located beside a large pier where several aquatic craft were docked, all of them painted in the same bright pattern to mark them out as official vehicles. In addition a pair of airspeeders were parked on pads located just in front of the building. Cal brought the landspeeder to a halt beside the aircraft and both he and Lara got out and headed directly for the main door.

Upon entering they found a member of the amphibious chagrian species with his feet up on a desk and his head tilted forwards asleep.

"Shall I do it?" Lara said to Cal.

"No." he replied, "Allow me." And he reached over and tugged on one of the chagrian's large horns, pulling him off his chair.

"What the hell are you playing at?" the official bellowed as he picked himself up. His rage easy to sense.

"What?" Lara replied.

"What do you think? Pulling me off my chair!"

"How did we do that?" Cal asked, "it looked to me like we just surprised you and you fell off. Isn't that right?" and he looked at Lara.

"Yeah." She said, "Its not like we were able to just wander right up to you while you were asleep on the job." And she smiled.

Anger.

The jedi's words had done nothing to calm down the chagrian, but he knew as well as they did that there was nothing he could do about what they had done without getting himself in trouble also. "What do you want?" he demanded, looking up at the wall-mounted chronometer, "All the boat rental places are closed until six.

"We need to see your docking records for the last thirty six hours." Lara said.

"Kriff off." The chagrian replied.

"How rude." Lara said, looking at Cal.

"Perhaps we should try being more persuasive." He said to her and in unison they brushed their robes aside to reveal the lightsabers at their belts. Then both jedi looked at the chagrian and smiled as his face fell.

"Of course." He said and he immediately began to tap at the keyboard of his computer, "There you go," he said as he turned the monitor to face the jedi, "the name of every ship to come and go for the last twenty five hours."

Cal and Lara leaned closer.

"Have you got those times?" Lara said.

"Right here." Cal replied and he produced his datapad on which he had a copy of the information on Lorken's PTP link.

"This looks good." Lara said, pointing to one of the entries on the harbour database.

"It does." Cal agreed, "Left port just under an hour after the kidnapping, twenty minutes before the link disappeared off the grid. Then docks again about half an hour after it next appears. I think we've found our boat." Then he looked up at the chagrian, "Where is it now?" he asked.

"How should I know? If you see there, it says that it's out of the harbour. Where people chose to sail is up to them. I only care that they pay their docking fees and don't move any contraband through here."

"Your diligence is astounding." Cal said, "So you've no idea if a vessel gets into trouble?"

"They've got radios. They can signal for help and we'll send a speeder. Now is there anything else? I've a lot of work to do."

"Yeah," Lara said, "you looked really busy when we came in."

Cal stepped back and with Lara close behind walked out into the night air.

"This place stinks." He said when they were outside.

"So using our extra keen jedi sense of smell to sniff out Lorken's out of the question then." Lara said sarcastically, "So what is your next big idea big brother?"

"We send a distress signal." He replied.

"Huh?"

"Well, we get the local authorities to send out a pulse on the distress frequency and then—"

"We get a connection trace." Lara interrupted, "That's brilliant."

"Of course it is." Cal said and he pulled out his own PTP link.

5.

"Attention all vessels! This is an unscheduled test of the planetary distress network. There is no real emergency, do not answer this call."

Lorcken barely looked up from his seat when the call came over the trawler's radio, he was still annoyed about losing his PTP link at the strip club. Although he did have to admit that it would give him an excuse to go back and see if it had been handed in. Perhaps that new blonde stripper would be there...

"Stop daydreaming!" another voice snapped and a bulky figure kicked Lorcken's chair.

"Hey Griven, stop being such a pain."

"Look," Griven replied, "we've thirty million riding on this, so that last thing I want is for you to mess it up by crashing us into a reef."

Lorcken pointed up at a display.

"Sonar says we're in deep water and the auto nav's on. We've as much chance of ramming a starship in orbit as hitting a reef."

"Well you should pay attention anyway. I'm here to relive you. I suggest you go check in on your girlfriend."

"Ex girlfriend." Lorcken said, "She dumped me after we grabbed her remember?"

"Yeah, whatever. Go make sure she's okay."

Lorcken got out of his chair and let Griven take his place before he headed below. As he descended the staircase connecting the bridge to the lower decks Lorcken saw the other gang members clustered around a small table playing cards and he nodded at them before continuing further down.

The lower decks were filled with the sounds of the boats engines but since they were just idling it did not bother Lorcken at all and he calmly wandered towards the prow, where the catch tanks were located.

As a fishing vessel, the boat had several storage tanks in which fish would be stored. Though each of these was intended to be loaded and unloaded via the large access hatches located outside on the upper deck, each one also featured an inspection hatch that would allow access by a crewmember and it was to one of these hatches that Lorcken now walked. There was a sign beside the hatch, as there were beside all of the others that heavier than air gases could build up in the tanks but Lorcken did not fear these. There were no dead fish to produce such gas in this tank. Indeed, the catch it held was far more valuable. To the tune of thirty million credits Lorcken and his associates hoped.

"Hey sweetie. How are you doing?" he said as he opened the inspection hatch and shone a torch at the figure within.

"Just kriff off!" Gayal Karn yelled as she huddled in the corner, a reflective survival blanket wrapped around her.

"Hey baby, this was your idea." Lorcken said, "Easy money you told me."

"Yeah, well that was before you decided to kidnap me for real and kill that guard."

"My friends and I just thought that we'd get a better cut if there was one less share to pay." Lorcken said, "Especially when you wanted fifty per cent."

"Well you needn't think I'll be telling the cops I never saw anyone's faces!" Gayal yelled, "I'm telling them who you all are!"

"Go ahead." Lorcken replied, "We'll be a hundred parsecs away before you're found. Assuming your folks pay of course. If they don't it'll just be your body washed up on a beach. No telling anyone who we are then." And with that Lorcken stepped back through the hatch and slammed it shut. Then he headed back up to the card game he had seen and sat between two of his friends.

"How's your girlfriend?" one of them asked.

"Oh she's just fine. Deal me in."

Though the speeder was designed primarily for use on roads, its repulsorlift engines could handle rough terrain almost as well. But travelling across the ocean was taxing the vehicle to its limits. It was frequently struck by waves higher than its flight ceiling and its construction was not designed to keep out such massive amounts of water.

"That was a close one." Cal exclaimed as another wave broke over the speeder, knowing that should the engine stall the vehicle would probably sink.

"There's a ship up ahead." Lara said to him, pointing through the windscreen at a shape in front of the speeder. Unlike the ocean that reflected the light of Crassis major's moon this was dark and formless.

"No running lights." Cal commented. The other vessels that the Jedi had approached had all been lit to avoid collisions. This vessel however, seemed to be doing its best to avoid being spotted. But more than that there was something coming from the boat that only a Jedi's senses could detect.

Fear.

Rage.

Hatred.

"I think this is the one." Cal added.

He moved the speeder closer, approaching from the vessel's stern so that its own engine noise helped to mask them. Fortunately the vessel was at anchor so Cal did not need to worry about the waves caused by its passage through the water. He halted a few metres from the hull of the boat and opened the speeder's door.

"Careful." Lara cautioned him.

"Hey. Its me." Cal said with a grin and he reached into the back seat and took hold of metal cylinder about ten centimetres in length that had a length of synthrope trailing from one end. Leaning out of the open door he held the cylinder loosely and pointed it upwards before depressing a stud located half way down one side.

There was a soft 'whoosh' as the micro thrusters in the cylinder triggered and it shot up out of Cal's hands, the synthrope trailing behind it. As it flew, three hooks sprung out of the cylinder and locked in place before the thrusters cut out and the fully deployed grappling hook dropped down over the boat's safety railings and snagged. Cal tugged on the rope to make sure that it was secure then tied the other end to the chassis of the speeder.

"Don't want to lose another one hey?" Lara commented as Cal was climbing out of the door.

"Keep quiet and follow me up." Cal whispered and he began to scale the side of the boat.

At the top of the rope he leapt up over the railing and had his lightsaber in his hand before he even landed on the deck. But he kept the weapon deactivated, not wanting the bright light he knew it would project to give him away. Moments later Lara landed gracefully beside him, like Cal she clutched her lightsaber but had not activated it.

Cal lifted one finger to his lips, and then pointed towards the prow of the ship. Lara nodded and Cal began to creep forwards, remaining close to the control tower of the boat the rose up from the deck. When he reached the front of the tower and found only the empty deck ahead he halted and raised his hand to signal Lara to do the same.

"I think she's in one of those." He whispered and he pointed towards the sealed hatches of the catch tanks on the deck in front of them.

"Yes but which one?" Lara whispered back, "And how do we get near them without whoever's on the bridge spotting us?"

Cal looked upwards. Lara was right; even though the bridge was in darkness he could sense the presence of someone up there. Though Cal thought that given her particular abilities with the force, Lara would be able to sneak across the gloomy deck undetected he was less sure that he could and in any case as soon as they opened a hatch they would be spotted.

"We head up." Cal whispered, "We'll take the bridge from both sides. Quietly."

Lara nodded in agreement and retreated back along the side of the tower until she reached a set of handholds running up the tower to a walkway. She scaled these and found herself just outside an open hatchway to the bridge. Cloaking herself in the force she crouched down just outside and waited for her brother.

Meanwhile Cal crept around the tower until he found a matching set of handholds on the opposite side that also led him up to a walkway and a way onto the bridge. Peering inside he could make out the shape of the man on watch; a large human male sat looking out over the deck of the boat. Looking towards the back of the bridge he saw another open hatchway leading to a stairwell. As the boat pitched Cal reached out through the force and gave the hatch a shove, causing it to swing shut.

As soon as the hatch closed the man on watch turned around, his hand reaching for the weapon at his waist. Cal smiled, the weapon had been located on the far side of the man and now he knew what he was dealing with. As the man relaxed once more Cal stepped into the bridge and activated his lightsaber.

"Keep quiet!" he snapped, "In the name of the Galactic Republic you're under arrest."

The man jumped from his chair and reached for his gun. But before he could get hold of it the weapon flew from his belt to Lara's grasp as she too appeared behind the man.

"Jedi bitch!" the man yelled and he moved toward Lara.

Cal watched as his sister activated her own lightsaber and brought it up ready to defend herself. He also saw a flash of silver as light from his own weapon reflected off the knife blade their opponent was slipping

from his pocket. Rather than wait for Lara to deal with him, Cal stepped forwards and thrust his lightsaber between the man's shoulder blades.

"Thanks." Lara said as the dead man collapsed, "Do you think anyone heard?"

"If they had I think we'd know by now." Cal replied and he shut off his lightsaber, "Now wait here while go forwards and check the storage tanks."

Leaving Lara in the bridge, Cal headed back outside and down to the main deck. Then he headed forwards. At each hatchway to a storage tank he reached, Cal paused and placed a hand on it before moving on. He halted when he sensed a living presence beneath one.

Looking around, Cal saw the control to open the hatch and with a wave of his hand he activated it from a distance. Then, as the hatch was still sliding open he somersaulted through the air and into the storage tank below.

Cal held his lightsaber above his head as he landed and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated it to illuminate the storage tank. In the corner Gayal Karn gasped in surprise.

"My name's Cal Udra." Cal said, reaching out his free hand, "I'm here to rescue you."

Gayal stared back up at Cal.

"They took my clothes." She said softly.

Cal remembered the bundle of clothing shown to him at the start of the investigation.

"Here," he said, slipping an arm from his cloak, "take this." And he removed his cloak and handed it to her. As Gayal reached up to take the offered garment her hand brushed against Cal's. Cal gasped and dropped the cloak.

"What's wrong?" Gayal asked as she dragged the cloak beneath the blanket covering her and began to put it on.

"Nothing." Cal lied then he walked towards the inspection hatch in the wall.

"It won't open from the inside." Gayal said as she walked up behind him, tying his cloak closed around her waist, "That's why they stuck me in here."

"Yes, but you didn't have a key did you?" Cal replied.

"Key? There's no lock to have a key. What are you talking about?"

"Watch and learn." Cal said and he swung his lightsaber at the hatch, slicing it in two, "It's an old jedi trick."

He added as he kicked the ruined hatch open. He stepped out into the corridor, still holding his lightsaber at the ready then turned back towards Gayal, "Be careful." He said as she stepped through the hatchway behind him, "The edges of the hatch may be—"

Gayal gasped and clutched her hand as the heated metal burnt her.

"-hot." Cal finished.

"I'm bleeding." Gayal said, holding out her hand and Cal saw that a small amount of blood has indeed been drawn as a spur of metal had cut the side of her hand.

"Don't worry about it." Cal said, "We'll soon have you out of here." And Gayal just wiped the blood off on his cloak, "At least we will when I figure out which way gets us back to the deck."

"This way." Gayal said and she began to walk in towards the stern of the ship.

"Hey!" Cal called out, "I'm doing the rescuing here! You follow me!"

At the bottom of the staircase Cal grabbed hold of Gayal.

"Stay behind me." He whispered, "I can feel some them above us." Gayal nodded and stepped aside while Cal began to creep up the staircase.

He soon heard the sound of men talking and he peered above a deck plate into the room where the gang was sat still playing cards. Then he went back down the stairs until he was sure he and Gayal were far enough from the gang to not be overheard.

"There's too many of them." He whispered, "I can't sneak you past them and I can't guarantee your safety if I attack them."

"So what do you intend to do now then?" Gayal asked, frowning.

"I'm going to get help." Cal replied and he pulled out his PTP link, "Lara." He whispered into the device.

Though the boat was beyond the range of the repeater towers that gave PTP links a planet-wide range Cal knew that Lara was close enough for him to make a direct connection, "Lara are you there?"

"No, I'm back on shore." Lara's voice replied.

"I've got Gayal." Cal said, ignoring her comment, "We're at the bottom of the stairwell but the kidnapers are between us and you."

"Understood, I'm on my way." And then Cal shut off the link and put it away again.

"Same as before." He said to Gayal, "Stay behind me." And he began to head back up the stairs.

6.

Lara undid the hatchway to the stairwell and looked down. She could sense the presence of the gang below her and further down the much stronger presence in the force of her brother. Keeping her lightsaber unlit she crept down the stairs until the kidnappers came into view and she jumped from the staircase to the deck.

"Hello boys." She said at the same time as Cal appeared from the deck below with Gayal right behind him wearing his cloak.

"What the hell is this?" one of the kidnappers exclaimed as they all leapt to their feet and reached for whatever weapons they had to hand.

"It's the stripper!" Lorken said in surprise as he looked into Lara's face, "From the club!"

"You brought a stripper for backup?" Gayal said, staring at Cal.

"I am not a stripper!" Lara shouted.

"She does jedi-o-grams." Cal said to Gayal, "She's really serious about it." Then both he and Lara activated their lightsabers.

"Learn to count jedi." Lorken said, aiming his weapon at Gayal, "There's eight of us and only two of you. Reckon you can get her out past us all?"

"I'll give it a shot." Cal replied and he held out his hand towards Lorken, channelling as much of the force through it as he could.

The blow sent Lorken flying backwards into three of his comrades and his weapons went off as they all collapsed in a heap, punching a hole in the ceiling above him. Another gang member opened fire at Cal with a blaster, but Lara held out her lightsaber and blocked the attack.

"Move!" Cal yelled at Gayal and the young woman began to rush up the stairs while the jedi blocked her kidnappers from following her, "You next." Cal told Lara, "I'll hold them off."

"Showing off more like." Lara muttered as she backed towards the stairs herself, "You've just got to impress her haven't you?"

"Not now!" Cal snapped.

Lara deactivated her lightsaber as she followed Gayal up the stairs. Fortunately as it happened when Gayal suddenly halted at the top of the stairs and looked down at the body on the floor of the bridge.

"Don't worry about him." Lara said, "He's not going to bother us. Now come on with me." And she led Gayal outside.

Lara just leapt from the walkway to the deck below then waited for Gayal to make her way down using the handholds after her.

"This way!" Lara yelled, "We've got a speeder." And she ran towards the grappling hook that was still caught on the safety rail. Then as she looked over she added, "Oh no."

"What's happening?" Cal's voice called out as he jumped down from the bridge, "Why are you two still here?"

"Why do you think?" Lara replied, "You've lost another speeder!"

Cal rushed to the grappling hook and looked over the side of the boat to where he had left the speeder tied to the other end of the syntherope. Now all that was there was the syntherope dangling into the water.

"It's not my fault!" he exclaimed, "Quick! Look around, it must be somewhere."

"Unless it sank." Lara said.

"What's that?" Gayal cried out, pointing out across the sea to where a shape could be seen bobbing about just above the waves.

"The speeder!" Lara said excitedly.

Just then a shot rang out and one of the kidnappers appeared on the walkway beside the bridge.

"We'll have to swim for it." Cal said.

"We'll never make it." Gayal replied, "They'll shoot us or run us down or—"

"Just swim!" Lara snapped and he pushed Gayal over the rail.

"I'll call them in." Cal said and then Lara leapt into the water as well.

Grabbing his PTP link, Cal activated it.

"Sky Rider, Sky Rider. Target my location. Fire for effect."

"Understood Jedi Udra. Sky Rider heading in."

Cal left the PTP link active and stuffed it into a nearby vent before diving over the rail himself. He surfaced just behind Gayal and Lara and began to swim after them towards the drifting speeder.

"Turn after them!" Lorken shouted at the man who had just taken control of the boat, "Run them down!"

"They're coming!" Gayal screamed as she threw a glance over her shoulder and saw the boat where she had been held captive begin to turn towards them.

"Keep going!" Cal yelled back.

Then there was a roaring sound from overhead.

"Sky Rider Two this is Sky Rider One, I have target in sight. Follow me in."

The first airspeeder flew in low enough for Cal, Lara and Gayal to be able to make out the markings of Shill Security painted beneath its wings. As it passed above them there were bright flashes from the wingtips as its pilot opened fire on the boat and its control tower exploded in a ball of flame.

"Deep breaths!" Cal called out and all three swimmers plunged beneath the water just as the second airspeeder came in and followed up the first one's attack by blasting the remains of the burning vessel apart.

The trio surfaced to find pieces of burning wreckage drifting all around them and the two airspeeders circling overhead.

"See," Cal said to Gayal, "No problem."

"This water is freezing." Lara commented as they began to swim back towards the landspeeder, "At least I've got a change of clothes in the speeder."

"You mean your stripper outfit?" Cal said.

"I'm not a stripper!" Lara protested.

"Of course you're not." Cal said, "I'd never let my little sister do that."

"If you've quite finished," Gayal said, "I'd really like to get home. If you could just drop me at my apartment—"

"Oh no!" Lara said suddenly.

"What?" Cal asked.

"Oh nothing." Lara said, "But if you're going into the apartment you may want to check all the closets."

After the Bright Hope had entered hyperspace and Cal was certain that Lara was in her cabin he made his way to the area part of the ship equipped as a medical facility. He spread his cloak out on a bed and looked at it closely. Though the seawater had washed most of it away he smiled as he found a trace of Gayal's blood still on it. Taking a scalpel he scraped as much as he could onto a glass slide and placed a cover over it. Then he inserted the slide into a medical scanner and activated the machine. Scrolling down the list of functions on the screen he found what he wanted.

Midi-Chlorian Test.