

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-VI: NEXUS

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...

NEXUS

A DEAL TO GET GAL AND LARA UDRA OUT OF JAIL SEES THEM AGREEING TO TRAVEL BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE REPUBLIC. BUT WHAT IS SO IMPORTANT ON A POISONOUS WORLD THAT KNOWS ONLY CONFLICT THAT THE FOUNDING FAMILIES NEED THE HELP OF JEDI...?

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1 .

"So let me get this straight Lara." Cal Udra said as he looked at his younger sister and padawan learner as they sat next to one another in the detention cell, "Gayal and her sisters bought you over nine thousand credits worth of clothes and then left you naked in the apartment of a mon calamari couple. Did I miss anything?"

"No." Lara replied with a sigh, "That just about sums it up." And she adjusted the cloak that he had leant her. Being in prison, the belt had been confiscated and to keep the garment closed she had to hold the two sides together.

"But you still have the clothes they bought you? While the clothes they stole from you were just a set of robes that you have half a dozen of?"

"That's right."

"Well it seems like you came out ahead to me." Cal said.

"Well I don't." Lara replied, "I'm telling you now, when I get out of here I'm going to get my own back. Even if I don't get out in less than five to ten years."

"Revenge is not the jedi way." Cal said.

Lara sighed again.

"I know." She said.

"Good." Cal said, "Now we've got that out of the way what are you planning and how can I help?"

Lara looked at him and smiled, but before she could speak the cell door opened.

"Move it you two!" a sector ranger snapped, "Your lawyer's here."

"Lawyer?" Cal asked, "But we don't-"

"Listen to the nice man Cal." Lara said as she got up, "Let's go see our lawyer."

The sector ranger led the two jedi to a room a short distance away where a dark skinned woman waited for them.

"You can leave us now." She said to the sector ranger as the Udras sat down.

"I'll be right outside." He said as he left and the door closed behind him.

"So who the hell are you?" Cal asked when they were alone.

"My name's Millel Drud." The woman replied, "Of Drud Legal." And she held out a tiny slip of plastic that had her name and contact details on it.

"Didn't anyone tell you?" Cal said, "We can't afford your firm."

"Shush." Lara said, "Let the nice lady get us out of prison first."

"If you could then I wouldn't be here." Millel said.

Cal and Lara just stared at her.

"My husband takes the paying clients," she explained, "I do the charity cases. Like you two."

"That's very kind of you." Lara said.

"Not really." Millel replied, "My sister in law says its excellent PR and we get to right off six thousands credits per hour against tax."

Cal leant forwards.

"As much as I like hearing all about your family firm's tax dodging," he said, "it doesn't answer why you're here."

"We need your help," she said, "and for that we need to get you out of here."

"So how do you plan on that?" Cal asked.

Millel picked up her datapad and looked at the display.

"As I see it jedi Udra, you are charged with a single count of assault while your younger sister is facing a charge of burglary."

"Correct." Cal replied, "Now how are you going to get us let off?"

"Not let off, acquitted." Millel said and then she went on, "Jedi Udra the only independent witness to your alleged offence is a Mister Ren Distler. Is that correct?"

"It is." Cal replied.

"Well under legal advice, Mister Distler has declined to provide the authorities with a statement. Making your case one of your word against that of a man involved in arms smuggling and the murder of a sector ranger."

Cal smiled.

"Ren's your firms client isn't he?" he said, "It was your husband that first put us in touch with one another."

"That's not important." Millel said, "What is important is that the authorities will have no reason to hold you."

"What about me?" Lara asked, "Those mon cals didn't look to happy when they found me in their hot tub." "I have a statement from Gayal Karn about that." Millel told her, "She admits to being the one that gained access to the apartment and inviting you there without informing you of its ownership. She goes on to say that she became uncomfortable and left when you made certain advances towards her." "Oh that's bantha poodo!" Lara snapped and she turned towards Cal, "Cal, that didn't happen." "It's the only thing that will get you out of here." Millel said, "Miss Karn's parents are willing to compensate the Adlats."

"But that's not what happened." Lara protested, "Cal you can't let them say that about me!" Cal held up his hand for Lara to be quiet.

"Will there be any official record of any of this?" he asked.

"None whatsoever." Millel told him, "Your cases will have been dismissed."

"Then do it." Cal said.

"But Cal-" Lara began.

"But nothing." Cal said, "We need to get out of here and this is the only way."

"Excellent." Millel said, "Now all we need to discuss is what we need you to do in return for us."

"What we can do for you?" Cal commented.

"Yes," Millel replied, "like I said we have need of you elsewhere."

"And if we say no?" Lara asked.

"Then there is no need for Drud Legal to have any involvement with your cases."

"What is it?" Cal asked, "The job I mean. What exactly do you need us for?"

Millel smiled.

"An associate will be arriving in the sector within the next two days." She explained, "She will require an escort."

"I thought you used Shill Security for all that sort of stuff." Cal said.

"Normally we would." Millel agreed, "But on this occasion it is felt that you two would be a better choice. Given the sensitivity of the destination."

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

"Where are we going?" Cal asked.

"Centau." Millel told him.

"Centau?" Cal replied, "But that's not even in the Republic."

"Exactly." Millel said, "So a force of mercenaries would not be prudent. However, the pair of you along with a single agent from Shill Security can offer our associate a more discrete level of protection without risking antagonising the locals. So, do we have a deal?"

In the hangar deck of Aurek Station a ground crew manoeuvred their vessel, the *Bright Hope* out of its berth as Cal and Lara watched.

"Hopefully you'll be able to keep hold of this." Cal said as he handed Lara's lightsaber to her.

"I'm just grateful that Gayal gave my stuff back." She replied as she took the weapon and hooked it to her belt.

"It's not like she had much choice." Cal pointed out, "Unlawful possession of a lightsaber is a pretty serious offence. Probably more serious than anything else she's done."

"You must be Cal." A voice called out from behind the jedi and they both turned around to see a woman standing alone on the hangar deck, a bag over one shoulder and a rigid case in her hand, "I'm Keleen Delvad. I'm told you are to be my escort to Centau." And she held out her hand.

"Delvad?" Cal said as first he, then Lara shook her hand, "As in-"

"As in Koman Delvad." Keleen replied, "He was part of the original survey mission but rather than stay here he went back to Coruscant with his discoveries."

"So what brings you back here then?" Cal asked, "Especially considering how Centau isn't part of the Republic."

"The original mission did a brief scan of Centau and a few samples were collected." Keleen explained, "But the world wasn't considered suitable for settlement."

"So how come there are people there now?" Lara asked.

"From what I know it wasn't intentional." Keleen said, "A colony ship misjumped and the occupants were forced to abandon ship there. By the time the Republic found out what had happened the survivors had already created several rival settlements."

"Rival?" Cal commented, "So there's no central authority then?"

"No. There are numerous competing states where different ideologies are put into practice. The larger settlements are pretty well controlled, but some of the smaller outposts can switch loyalties daily."

"I'm guessing we're heading for one of those." Lara said.

"We are." Keleen replied, "My ancestor made notes regarding some interesting life forms but never got the chance to follow them up. Now the settlers have rediscovered them and I want to take a look for myself."

2.

The world of Centau loomed ahead of the *Bright Hope*, clearly visible through the cockpit canopy.

"I'm not reading any satellite system." Lara said as she studied the sensor display, "Aside from the two natural ones. No comm. traffic between them though."

"There won't be." Keleen said, "The locals can barely manufacture aircraft. They've got a handful of modern repulsorlifts that traders have brought here, but don't count on finding many spare parts if anything goes wrong."

"Sounds primitive." Cal said.

"It is." Keleen said, "I take you know about the atmosphere?"

"Type three isn't it?" Cal asked.

"Yes. There's enough oxygen to be able to breathe, but the problem lies in the other gases that are present. There's a lot of carbon monoxide and dioxide, plus ammonia. We'll need full-face breath masks when we go outside. Even a brief exposure can result in a burning sensation to the eyes and choking."

"Like that perfume you brought back from Alderaan." Cal said to Lara, smiling.

"Hey!" Lara snapped, punching her brother's arm, "That stuff smells nice."

"Compared to the back end of a bantha maybe." Cal said.

"Well mom and Aunt Elle both asked to borrow it." Lara said, pulling a face.

"Mom was sterilising wounds and Aunt Elle was degreasing a hyperdrive motivator." Cal said.

"Are we quite finished?" Keleen asked.

"The settlements are properly sealed though?" Lara asked, turning towards Keleen and changing the subject.

"Yes, but I wouldn't stray too far from a mask if I were you." Keleen warned, "There are supposed to be alarms that warn of leaks, but they're not always working in the frontier areas where we'll be."

A warning suddenly sounded from the *Bright Hope's* flight systems.

"Incoming!" Cal snapped.

"From the planet?" Keleen asked in amazement, "But they don't-"

"Behind us." Cal said, "Closing rapidly."

"Oh no." Lara said as she studied the sensor contact.

"What?" Cal asked.

"It's a mando." Lara told him, "A daavab-class fighter."

"Oh no." Cal said, "Get the shields up and power up the weapons. There's just one-"

"Wait!" Keleen interrupted and she reached forwards between Cal and Lara and activated the ship's communications, "Belle?" she asked.

"Well hello there." A woman's voice replied, "I guess you're Keleen Delvad then."

"I am." Keleen replied, "I was expecting you to already be on the surface."

"Sorry, I was delayed. I'll meet you down there."

Then the channel went dead and the starfighter raced past the *Bright Hope* and towards Centau.

"Well she seemed nice." Lara said.

"Yeah," Cal commented, "I just love people who fly fighters built by the galaxy's most infamous mercenary killers."

Thick clouds obscured the *Bright Hope's* path through the upper atmosphere and there were no electronic navigational aids. However, Belle appeared to know where she was heading and Cal was able to follow her fighter's thermal trail until a settlement appeared on the horizon. Built at the base of a mountain range, the city consisted of a cluster of windowless structures ranging from squat bunker like buildings to a handful of tall towers tipped with various antennae.

"So where do we land?" Cal asked.

"That looks like a landing strip." Lara replied and she pointed to a stretch of paved ground. As she and Cal watched, Belle piloted her fighter over this and then set down on one of several circular patches of metal. Almost immediately the circle began to descend beneath the ground, then a door slid shut across the opening to seal it.

"Handy." Cal said, "They look too small for us though."

"You could always try asking." Keleen suggested.

"I know that." Cal replied, opening a communications channel, "Hello traffic control, this is the Republic vessel *Bright Hope* requesting landing instructions."

There was a brief pause and Cal was about to repeat his transmission when the reply came.

"Bright Hope, this is Marsil City control. Hold your current heading and use primary runway, a hangar will be waiting."

Cal brought the Bright Hope in low over the runway and as he did so a light appeared from a large building near the opposite end.

"That must be our hangar." He said and he flew the ship inside and set it down.

"So where is everyone?" Lara asked as she looked out of the cockpit.

Outside was what appeared to be a somewhat primitively equipped hangar that was devoid of any signs of life. Then there was a dull 'thud' and the hangar door slammed shut behind the *Bright Hope*.

"They're waiting for breathable air to be pumped in." Keleen said.

Sure enough as soon as the hangar's life support system had exchanged the hostile atmosphere of Centau for a breathable one hatchways sprang open and a ground crew entered and approached the *Bright Hope*.

Most of these had the look of technicians who began an immediate inspection of the ship's hull, but there was another figure in more formal clothing that stood beside the ship and waited.

"Look's like a welcoming committee." Cal said as he got up from his seat.

"Not much of a committee." Lara said, "Only one person."

"Probably all they've got to spare." Cal replied.

The man standing at the bottom of the Bright Hope's access ramp watched as the Udras and their passenger disembarked.

"What is your purpose for visiting Marsil?" he said, looking down at the bulky datapad he held.

"Scientific research." Keleen replied.

"What sort of research?" the man asked.

"Biological." Keleen answered simply. Cal glanced at her for a moment, sensing a slight tremor that suggested there was something more to her presence than she was telling the man.

The man with the datapad seemed happy with Keleen's answers however and he looked up.

"I just need to know your names and how long you are staying." He said.

"Keleen Delvad," Keleen told him, "and we're not actually staying here. We'll be taking a rover out to the settlement at Felatine Ridge."

The man looked surprised.

"Felatine?" he asked, "Are you sure?"

"Is there a problem with the place?" Lara asked.

The man tucked his datapad under his arm.

"Young lady," he began, "the settlement at Felatine is in a disputed region between the nations of Marsil and Pultray. To make matters worse the locals can be somewhat disagreeable at times."

"You mean they won't pick a side?" Cal asked.

The man frowned.

"They have no law." He said, "Felatine is not a safe place to be."

"Then its fortunate that I have three bodyguards." Keleen replied.

"Three?" the man asked.

"Yes, I – ah here's the third one right now." Keleen said and she pointed towards the nearest hatchway where Cal and Lara looked to see a slender woman entering the hangar, "Belle! Over here!" Keleen called out and she waved at the woman.

Smiling, Belle approached the group.

"Hi there." She said as she halted right in front of the two jedi, "You must be Cal and Lara."

"We are." Cal replied, "I'm afraid no one's filled us in on who you are though."

"Really?" Belle said with a look of surprise on her face. Then she sighed, "Well I suppose that Millel must have wanted it to be a surprise. I'm Belle Shill."

"Shill?" Cal said.

"How many of you are there?" Lara added.

"Four." Belle replied, "Han's my twin. He's older by eight minutes I'd like to add. He founded Shill Security and so he's got quite a high public profile. That means I handle all of the stuff we want keeping low profile. Like trips outside of republic space, a force of mercenaries here could cause a diplomatic incident."

"So what about the other arrangements?" Keleen asked.

"All sorted." Belle replied, "We've got a rover and enough life support canisters for a week."

"A week?" Lara said, "Can we really stay outside for a week?"

"Felatine Ridge is a day away by rover." Belle said, "So we need two days for a round trip. The rest are just for contingency. We can't be sure that the locals will provide us with what we'll need when we go hunting for Keleen's little critters. Now shall we get moving? Shill Security charges by the hour you know."

The rover that had been procured for the trip was a four wheeled cross country vehicle that the Udras were relieved to discover had a fully enclosed cabin just large enough for the four members of the group, meaning that they had no need to wear their breath masks as Belle drove the vehicle at high speed over the rough terrain that lay between Marsil City and Felatine Ridge.

"Don't these people have any roads?" Cal commented as the rover lurched when Belle drove over yet another rock instead of going around it.

"Some." Belle replied, "But they're between the major settlements only. Here in the border regions there's little point in going to the effort of laying them. There's always the risk that a rival state could use them to move troops to attack a major target or even if they don't they could just rip them back up again to stop them being used to move troops for use against them."

"Sounds a delightful place." Lara said, "Why haven't they asked for Republic peacekeepers?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Cal said to his sister, "They don't know whose side we'd come down on. I get the feeling none of the factions here are exactly innocent."

"You'd be right." Belle replied, "Resources are scarce on Centau and what any particular government can't control itself it doesn't want its neighbours to get hold of either." Then she smiled, "Look," she added, "we're there."

Centau's sun had already set but just about visible in the beams of the rover's headlights were the unmistakable outlines of several artificial structures.

"Is that it?" Lara commented as she stared at the buildings.

"Afraid so." Belle replied, "What did you expect? An Emperor Hotel on every corner?"

"So long as they're sealed they're fine." Cal said.

"Could have stayed on Aurek Station." Lara said, "At least then we'd be sleeping in a familiar gundark lair."

"Look at it this way," Keleen said, "by the time we're through gathering specimens from outside, it won't seem anywhere near as unappealing."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Was all Lara could say in response.

As Belle drove closer the structures of the settlement came into view clearer. A wall about three metres tall surrounded them that had towers positioned at regular intervals, giving the appearance of a fortress town. A massive gatehouse could be seen and Belle drove the rover directly towards it and sounded the vehicle's horn as she drew near. After a few moments a small doorway opened in the main gate and a man stepped out. He wore a breathmask that covered only his nose and mouth, so to keep the planet's ammonia rich atmosphere away from his eyes he had added a set of goggles to cover them. Cal glanced up and spotted a pair of men dressed in a similar fashion take up a position on top of the wall beside an emplaced weapon. "They're not taking any chances." He said, "Didn't you call ahead to let them know we were coming?"

"How?" Keleen asked, "There aren't any com lines to here, the terrain blocks wireless signals and, in case you forgot, there aren't any satellites."

The man outside approached the rover cautiously, brandishing his rifle.

"What is your business here?" he called out, his voice muffled by his mask and the rover's structure. Keleen leant towards him as far as she could inside the rover.

"We're here to look for specimen's of wildlife." She called out

"Are you armed?" the man asked.

"Yes." Belle replied, "Light arms only. I have two handguns and these two people are jedi." She added, indicating Cal and Lara.

Fear.

Both Cal and Lara sensed it from the man as soon as Belle mentioned the word 'jedi.' It was not an uncommon reaction, however. Jedi normally only went where there was trouble, so the news that two had just arrived could be taken as a warning of bad things about to happen.

The man held up his hand and waved to the gunners on the wall. Then he stood back as the gate rumbled open. Finally he waved the rover through.

"Well that was easy enough." Lara said as Belle drove through the narrow streets of the settlement, "Now we just need somewhere to crash."

"Please don't use that word while driving." Cal said.

"What about there?" Keleen said, pointing to a squat building with a glowing sign above its entrance that simply read 'ROOMS'.

"Worth a try." Belle said and she pulled the rover up by the door.

The airlock cycled and the group stepped into the lobby of the hotel.

"Looks like that place on Tepillos." Lara said as she looked around.

"You mean the place that those charity people were using?" Cal asked.

"Yeah, the place you lost our speeder."

"I did not lose it, it was stolen."

As Cal and Lara continued to bicker Belle headed towards what passed for a reception desk.

"How many rooms do you have available?" she asked the woman sat behind the desk with her feet up on it.

The woman looked up.

"All of them." she said, "How many do you want?"

Belle looked round at Keleen and the bickering Udras.

"Do you have one big enough for all four of us?" she then asked the receptionist.

The woman exhaled as she took her feet off the desk and looked at a clipboard.

"We have a twin room." She said, "I can give you bunks instead of the two beds currently in there."

"That'll do." Belle said, "How much."

"Twenty per night."

Belle smiled and produced a purse from which she counted out some coins made of precious metals rather than Republic credits.

"Each." The woman said and Belle frowned before counting out more coins.

After taking the key to their room, Belle returned to the rest of the group.

"Okay," she said, "I've got us a room."

"A room?" Lara asked, "You mean we're all sharing?"

"Don't worry." Belle replied, "There's enough bed space for all of us. You can share with Keleen and I'll share with your brother." Then she looked at the surprised looking Cal, "But I'll be on top, okay?"

"Is that fear I can sense brother dear?" Lara asked as Belle walked away.

As the rest of the group followed, the receptionist picked up the handset of a desk mounted communicator and activated it.

"You're never going to guess what just happened." She said.

3.

Cal's relief that their room featured two sets of bunk beds turned to frustration when the hotel worker simply provided them with the parts needed to construct the upper bunks on top of the room's existing pair of beds and left them for the group to assemble themselves.

"What I don't get," Cal said as he turned the instructions around in an effort to determine which way up they were supposed to be, "is how come I'm supposed to do all of this with just this one little tool." And he held up a tiny bent metal bar with a hexagonal cross section.

"You know there are civilisation that used nothing but tools like that." Keelen told him.

"Are any of them left?" Cal asked.

"No, not any more."

"So Keelen," Lara said as she sat on a bed and watch her brother try to put together the upper bunks, "what's your plan?"

Keelen was standing on the far side of the room, laying out her possessions on a table.

"There's a cave system about a kilometre outside of town." Keelen said, "The reports are that the specimens I'm looking for are there."

"We'll take the rover out first thing in the morning." Belle said, "In the meantime I suggest we get something to eat and a good night's sleep. Assuming Cal can get the beds assembled anyway."

As the group approached the airlock the next morning they found their way blocked by a man entering the building.

"Leaving already?" he asked as he removed his mask. Unlike those worn by the guards on the gate the previous evening this man possessed a more practical full-face model. Sensing hostility from the man, Cal and Lara both moved their hands towards the lightsabers at the waists. Likewise, Belle rested a hand near to the concealed blaster beneath her jacket.

"Who might you be sir?" Cal asked.

"My name's Rodral." The man replied, "I own, well, I own just about everything in this town and I was wondering why you're here."

"We're just here to do some research in the hills." Keelen replied, "We're looking for samples of some of the local wildlife."

"Well if you know what's good for you, you'll just get in your rover and leave." Rodral said, sneering at her, "Those hills aren't safe for outsiders. Some of that wildlife you're looking for is dangerous."

"So are we." Lara said.

Rodral turned towards her, still sneering.

"There's a rather nasty little worm out there little girl." He said, "Likes to crawl into the gaps between rocks and lay its eggs. Of course they can't always tell what's a rock and what's not, so they sometimes find a nice tight little spot they can crawl into on a person and lay their eggs in there instead. Its bad enough if they crawl into an ear, but if you don't look where you're sitting they can end up elsewhere."

A mechanical clunk suddenly attracted everyone's attention.

"Now Rodral, you wouldn't be trying to scare off my customers would you?" the man aiming a primitive shotgun said, "You may own the mine and most of the rest of the town, but this place is mine and you're not welcome here."

Rodral raised his hands in front of him.

"I was just trying to help these good people out with some advice." He said and he lifted his mask back to his face, but before he put it on he paused and added, "I'll offer you some as well. Remember who runs this town." And then he put on the mask and stepped back into the airlock.

The hotel owner lowered his shotgun.

"You four may want to watch your backs." He said before turning round and disappearing into a back room.

Outside the hotel Cal was not surprised to see Rodral stood on the opposite side of the street, watching them as they loaded up the rover with their equipment.

"Cal does something about this place strike you as odd?" Lara asked as the last of the equipment was stowed.

"You mean the emotional state of the locals?" Cal asked in reply.

Now that it was daytime there were far more people moving about the street. Normally this would not be significant to a jedi, they would generate a host of differing emotions that would be meaningless to

someone sensitive to the force. But when all those emotions were similar the jedi could not help but pick up on them.

Fear.

Greed.

Anger.

Hatred.

Everyone that passed by seemed to have some grievance or another that was occupying their mind.

"What could be causing it?" Lara asked, "Surely not us?"

"I doubt we're helping." Cal replied, "They don't seem to welcoming of outsiders. Probably a side effect of the territorial dispute. There are two opposing armies within twenty kilometres of this place. I'd be worried about getting caught in the crossfire if I lived here too."

"Are we moving?" Belle suddenly interrupted.

"Sorry. Yes." Cal replied and he and Lara climbed into the rover.

They all waited as the vehicle's life support system drew the outside air through several filters to remove the toxic gases present and replaced them with more benign ones before bleeping and all clear. Then everyone removed their masks and Belle drove off.

Exiting the settlement was easier than their entry the night before. Evidently the guards did not care about who left the town, only who entered. Though as the rover drove through the gate both Cal and Lara picked up on the tension of the guards. Looking up at the wall-mounted weapon, Cal noticed the gunner flexing his fingers as if he were desperate to put his weapon to use.

"Problem?" Belle asked as she noticed Cal staring behind the rover.

"Maybe." He replied, "Just get ready to dodge okay?"

The rough track that led from the town into the nearby mountainous terrain was lined with debris. It was not continuous, but piles of scrap from what must have at one time been vehicles of some description were common.

"Drive carefully." Keleen said, tapping Belle on the shoulder, "We don't want to go off the road like them."

"I don't think they crashed. At least not all of them." Lara said, "Look at that one." And she pointed to the wreck of a large transport where the front of the vehicle had clearly been blown off by some sort of heavy energy weapon.

"A border skirmish?" Keleen suggested.

"I hope so." Belle said.

"Why?" Keleen asked.

"Because if it was then whoever did that is unlikely to target us." Cal said, then he felt a sudden disturbance.

Hate.

"Belle! Stop!" he yelled and Belle brought the rover to an abrupt halt, just in time to prevent it from driving into the blast radius of the explosive device buried beneath the track that detonated right in front of them, "Masks on!" Cal shouted and as soon as everyone inside the rover had their face covered he opened his door and dived from the vehicle.

There was a snap-hiss as he ignited his lightsaber, followed by another as Lara copied his action. Then the sound of screaming filled the air. Turning around the two jedi saw a crowd of beings from an assortment of species come rushing over the top of a nearby rise. They wore breathmasks of various designs, some of which looked to have been repeatedly patched and goggles as necessary to protect their faces. In their hands they clutched a variety of weapons, mainly clubs and blades but here and there were a handful of firearms and more advanced ranged weapons.

Cal banged on the side of the rover.

"Drive! We'll deal with this!" he snapped and Belle put her foot down on the accelerator.

The crowd howled as the rover began to speed away along the track and its members ran to follow the escaping vehicle. Meanwhile, keeping their lightsabers held out in front of them Cal and Lara positioned themselves between the rover and the mob.

"Stop!" Lara called out and she held out her free hand to signal to the charging beings.

"I don't think they care." Cal said.

"So what do we do?"

"What else? We protect the innocent." And he leapt towards the crowd.

Cal landed right in front of the group and before they had chance to react he swung his lightsaber at head height and decapitated four of them.

Anger.

The mob howled again as they witnessed some of their number cut down and they turned their attention from the rover and towards Cal instead. But before any of them could reach the jedi knight, Lara rushed to his side and thrust her own lightsaber through an ancient looking chest plate worn by one of the mob's larger members.

Standing side-by-side, Cal and Lara struck at any of the mob that approached. None of their attackers demonstrated any sense of self-preservation, instead charging headlong towards them. In addition those armed with ranged weaponry did not fire on them, but rather wielded them like clubs.

"There's too many of them!" Lara exclaimed as yet more assailants rushed towards her.

"Back to back!" Cal shouted in reply as he realised that they were being encircled by the mob and both he and Lara spun so that they face away from one another and thus stopped the mob from getting behind them both.

But still the enraged mob charged the jedi, rushing headlong to their deaths. Throughout all of this both Cal and Lara could sense only one thing from them.

Anger.

There was no apparent reason for their attack on the rover, but the mob had tried to destroy it anyway just as there seemed to be no motive for their continued assault on the jedi. Any reasonable foe would have withdrawn before now, but the mob just kept coming.

Cal suddenly spotted one of the mob drop to the ground, blood pouring from a wound to his head. Then another and another one after that and Cal risked a glance away from the battle. In the brief time before he turned his attention back to the mob he and Lara were facing he spotted Belle crouched at the top of a nearby hill, aiming her slug pistol at it. The weapon was longer than Cal remembered it from when she had unpacked it the night before and he realised that the reason he could not hear the gunshots was that it was equipped with a silencer.

"Head for the hill in front of me." He said to Lara, "Belle's here."

"Belle?" Lara said, "But what about Keleen and the rover?"

"We'll have to ask Belle. In the meantime let's get out of here."

Cal began to push forwards through the crowd, Lara backing up behind him as Belle gave more covering fire from the hilltop. Then she ceased fire and Cal guessed that her weapon was empty of ammunition. This was unsurprising. Firearms and especially slug pistols were known for having limited capacity when compared to more modern energy weapons. But when Belle reached to her belt she did not produce a replacement magazine. Instead she took a palm-sized cylinder and after holstering her pistol she pulled at one end before hurling it through the air.

"Grenade!" Cal yelled. He saw the path of the thrown explosive and realise that it would land almost right on top of him and Lara. Reacting the only way he knew how, he reached out a hand and gave the grenade a slight push through the force to divert it. Rather than landing on him the grenade instead landing amongst the mob.

There was a flash and a dull 'thump' as it detonated and a plume of dirt was thrown into the air. Screams of pain came from the mob and those closest to the detonation staggered and fell, clutching at their heads. It was then that Cal realised that the explosive had been a stun grenade; Belle was trying to incapacitate rather than kill.

Cal looked back at Belle to see her holding a second grenade. As soon as she saw him looking at her she threw it towards him and using the force again Cal steered this second explosive to where the mob was densest.

Just like the first, the blast from the second grenade caused a large number of the mob to collapse as the explosion disorientated them and the effect on the mob was telling.

Fear.

Like some primitive fight or flight reaction the mob's attitude changed suddenly from one of confrontation to one of survival and they turned away from the jedi and began to flee. Lara began to pursue them before Cal took hold of her as he shut off his lightsaber.

"Wait." He said calmly, "We're safe now."

"But shouldn't we get after them? Before they return in greater numbers?"

"That's exactly why we shouldn't go charging after them." Cal explained, "We could be walking into more than we can handle. Now come on, let's get back to the rover before everyone stunned by those grenades recovers and decides they want a rematch."

"Are you two okay?" Belle asked as the Udras approached her.

"Just about." Cal replied, "What was the idea with those grenades?"

"They were the only way I could think of to clear the mob." Belle replied. Then, when she saw Cal frowning at her she added, "Well it worked didn't it?"

Keleen was waiting by the rover in the gully where Belle had parked it when the others returned to it.

"What happened?" she asked, "I thought I heard explosions."

"You did." Lara commented.

"So who were they?" Keleen then asked, looking back and forth between Cal and Lara.

"We didn't get around to asking." Cal replied.

"Probably just outlaws." Belle said as she got back into the rover, "There are plenty of such groups that fall between the cracks. Remember we're beyond the reach of what passes for law and order even on this world."

Lara drew in breath, about to mention the bizarre sensations she had picked up on through the force when Cal tapped her shoulder. Glancing at her brother she saw him shake his head slightly. Then he too got back into the rover.

"We should have brought our blasters too." Lara said as she climbed in.

4.

It was not much further along the track that Keleen directed Belle to leave it and drive across country. Though given the poor state of the track this made little difference to the ride. Shortly thereafter, while travelling between two large rock formations they came to a dead end where the rocks joined together. "Looks like we've gone wrong somewhere." Lara said as she looked out of the rover at the near vertical rocks surrounding them on three sides.

"No this is it." Keleen replied, "We walk from here. The nests we're looking for are about five hundred metres ahead."

"There's a cliff less than one hundred metres ahead." Cal pointed out.

"Look there." Belle said, pointing to the base of the rocks, "That's where we're heading."

Cal and Lara looked and saw what at first appeared to be a large surface crack in the rocks, but on closer inspection they realised that it went deep inside.

"Time for the masks again people." Belle said, "Like Keleen said, we walk from here."

Cal was at the head of the group as they walked from the rover towards the cave entrance and like the others he had an assortment of bags over his shoulders containing the equipment that Keleen had brought with her. Despite there having been no signs that any of the survivors from the mob that had attacked them earlier had followed them, Cal kept his attention focused on the cliffs around them just in case anyone decided to use them as vantage points for an ambush. But it was not anything from above that caused him to suddenly falter.

The bags dropped away and Cal braced himself, drawing his lightsaber and igniting it on instinct as the sudden wave of darkness hit him.

"Cal!" Lara cried out, sensing her brother's surprise and dropping her bags also, she ran up to him and drew her lightsaber also. She ground to a sudden halt as she too felt the disturbance from in front of them, "What the hell is that?" she exclaimed as she held her weapon at the ready.

"Nothing good." Cal replied.

"Cal, Lara, what's wrong?" Belle asked, creeping up behind them with her hand hovering over her blaster.

Behind her Keleen checked the bags that the Udras had dropped in case they had broken anything.

"There's something ahead of us." Cal said, "Inside the cave."

"What?" Belle asked.

"Something bad." Lara replied, "Something evil. We shouldn't be here."

"She's right." Cal said, "The dark side is strong here."

"Podoo." Belle snapped and she strode past the two Jedi and into the cave mouth, "See?" she said as she turned through a full circle, holding her arms out wide, "I'm inside and I'm not dead."

Still holding his lightsaber out in front of him, Cal advanced cautiously.

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

"So do I my padawan." Cal said, putting as much authority into his voice as he could manage, "but we must not let our fears control us. That way lies the dark side."

Lara pointed at the cave.

"No, that way lies the dark side." She said.

"There is no darkness so total it cannot be banished by a single candle flame." Cal said as he continued to advance.

"Hey!" Keleen called out, "How about one of you two gives me a hand with this stuff you dropped?"

"Lara, grab my bags." Cal said without looking back and then he too stepped into the cave, making his way along a narrow passageway until it opened out.

Inside the blue glow of Cal's lightsaber illuminated a vast cavern. Water dripped from the high ceiling and formed a large pool around which fungal growths spread up the walls. Here and there he spotted movement and he sensed the presence of living creatures. However, if any of them had noticed him they made no attempt to attack him. But still he sensed the oppressive presence of the dark side.

"It's safe." He called out before adding, "I think."

The light changed as Belle walked into the cavern behind him, holding up a lantern. Now that the light from his lightsaber was no longer needed Cal shut off the weapon and returned it to his belt.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Lara asked as she arrived just in time to see him clipping his lightsaber at his waist, she still kept hers in her hand even though it was deactivated for the moment.

"The dark side is all around us." Cal said, "We must be careful about using violence here."

"So what's with all this 'the dark side is around us' stuff?" Belle asked, "I don't see any force users aside from you two."

"I don't think that it's coming from a particular person." Cal answered, still gazing around the cavern rather than looking at Belle, "I think that this area is just saturated with dark side energy. It's running through everything here. We should get Keleen's samples and get out of here as quickly as we can."

Standing in front of his rover, Rodral stared at the vehicle left outside the cave entrance. He had followed the newcomers from a safe distance in a three-vehicle convoy. He knew better than to risk the journey along the trail with just one rover and had not been surprised when the raiders had attacked them. What had surprised him was when the attack was driven off without any of the newcomers being staked out and left to choke to death as their breathmasks were ripped from their faces or their filters became clogged.

"They've gone inside sir." One of his men told him and Rodral nodded slowly.

"They must have found a new seam of ore." He said, "I don't believe they're after exotic life forms for a second."

"What shall we do sir?" the man asked.

"I had hoped the savages would take care of them for us." Rodral said, "But since they haven't we'll just have to prevent them from taking word of their find back to Marsil City. If there's more ore down there, then it's mine." Then he looked around to where another man sat perched on top of one of the rovers. In front of him was a heavy weapon mounted to the vehicle's roof. Rodral snapped his fingers and when the man looked at him he pointed to the rover parked outside the cave entrance.

The man nodded and swung the weapon around.

"Stand clear!" he called out and moments later a blast of super-heated plasma shot from the weapon and consumed the rover.

"What was that?" Keleen asked, looking up from the specimen case she had just placed samples in when she heard the dull rumble coming from outside.

"Trouble." Belle said.

"I can't sense anything." Lara said.

"Neither can I." Cal told her, "This place is blocking everything else." Then he began to walk towards the exit, "I'm going to see what's going on. You lot wait here." And he walked into the passageway leading back to the outside. Then he stopped suddenly when he heard the sound of footsteps from ahead. Worryingly he did not sense the approach of whoever was coming through the force. This was bad and Cal knew it. The cavern was saturated with the energy of the dark side and the only way for these newcomers to be hidden from him was if they too were in thrall to the dark side. Right now all he could sense was his sister and the much fainter presences of Belle and Keleen, both barely detectable to him.

Cal drew his lightsaber and held it in front of him but did not ignite it, knowing that doing so would give away his position. Moments later he saw torch beams in the passage ahead of him, but still he sensed nothing. Then the owners of the torches appeared, carrying not only their portable lights but also an assortment of handguns. With the snap-hiss characteristic of the weapon, Cal ignited his lightsaber.

"Hold it right there!" he called out.

"It's a jedi!" the lead figure of the group Cal was confronting shouted and he raised his weapon and fired.

The primitive projectile weapon boomed in the confines of the passageway, causing the man's cohorts to jump in surprise. Cal kept his lightsaber in front of him, placing its blade in the path of the bullet. The projectile passed through the field containing the lightsaber blade and into the energy stream itself, immediately heating it beyond its melting point. Cal flinched as tiny flecks of molten metal sprayed towards him, but they were sufficiently small and had cooled enough that they caused him no harm.

Cal knew that to use the force now was risky. The slightest mistake here could send him on an unstoppable path to the dark side. But he also knew that he needed to distract his opponents if he was going to make it back to the cavern. Reaching an arm out in front of him, Cal focused his mind not on the men advancing on him but instead the masks they wore to protect them from Centau's poisonous atmosphere and pulled them towards him through the force.

The effect was immediate if varied. Most of the masks were held in place quite securely and all Cal achieved was to drag them across their wearer's faces, but some of them were more loosely attached and these were pulled free. The men stopped, some of them grabbing for the masks no longer properly sealed against their faces while others scrambled frantically to recover their lost protection as they choked.

Seeing his chance, Cal ran back to the cavern.

"What's going on?" Lara asked as soon as he appeared, she already had her lightsaber in her hand and it was active, "I thought I heard a gunshot."

"You did." Cal replied, "We've got to get out of here right now."

Lara stepped towards him.

"That way's blocked." Cal said, "I don't know how many there are, but they're not friendly."

Belle drew a weapon of her own, but rather than the slug pistol she had used earlier she produced the pulse wave blaster she kept under her shoulder.

"This is the second time today we've come under attack." Keleen said, "What do they want?"

"Its this place isn't it?" Lara said, looking at Cal.

"What?" Belle asked.

"I think so." Cal replied to Lara, "The dark side is strong around here and I think that the locals have been affected by it. That's why we sensed so much hatred in town."

Then the sound of voices attracted the attention of everyone in the cave.

"Here they come." Lara said, raising her lightsaber.

"Be careful padawan." Cal cautioned her, "Remember that the dark side is strong here. If we act too rashly we may fall prey to its influence."

"Well if you're not going to fight we can't stay here." Keleen said.

"Is there another way out?" Lara asked, gazing rapidly around the cavern. However, its size coupled with the limitations of the light sources available prevented her from seeing anything.

"I think I saw a passageway over here." Keleen replied and she picked up the sample case and began to head towards the back of the cavern, skirting around the edge of the pool as she did.

Rodral's men burst into the cavern and spread out. There were fewer now than had confronted Cal in the passageway, the rest having taken too long to retrieve their masks and suffocated in the toxic air. After witnessing this, the rest had no wish to give Cal a chance to repeat this action.

"Where are they?" one of them men asked out loud.

"They must be in here somewhere." Rodral called out from the back of the group, "Spread out and find them. Remember two of them are jedi, don't take any chances with them just kill them."

Complying with their employer's orders the men began to spread out, their torch beams playing across the cavern walls. Every so often one of the men would spot a movement and open fire. But on closer inspection all of these turned out to be some the strange animals that made their homes here in the darkness.

The passageway that Keleen had found at the back of the cavern was much wider than the narrow opening leading to the surface and the group could all walk down it side by side. Cal and Lara had extinguished their lightsabers again, Cal not wanting to take any chances with the influence that the dark side seemed to hold here.

"I hate to say anything negative," Lara said softly, "but this passage we're in seems to be taking us deeper underground."

"Maybe you'd prefer it back in the cavern with whoever's after us." Belle suggested.

"Look." Keleen said, "There's a side passage just up ahead, it looks like it leads upwards."

"Stay back." Cal said and he approached the passage.

"What is it?" Keleen asked.

"The dark side." Lara said solemnly, "Its stronger that way."

"Well we've not got much choice have we?" Belle said suddenly and she barged past the two jedi and shone her torch down the passage, "See," she said, "Nothing. Now let's go before those guys figure out where we went."

Rodral looked at the opening at the back of the cavern that was illuminated by the many torch beams of his men.

"This is the only other way out." One of his men told him, "They must have gone this way."

Rodral shone his own torch down at the ground and smiled.

"Yes," he said as he saw the tracks leading down the passageway, "they did."

5.

"How are you feeling?" Cal whispered to Lara as they followed Belle and Keelen.

"Cold." Lara replied softly, "But it's not the temperature, it's something else."

"The dark side." Cal said, "I can feel it too. Take care."

"Our two friends there don't seem too bothered by it." Lara commented, "I guess there are some advantages to not being force sensitive."

Cal frowned. The force flowed through all living things even those without the ability to control it. With the dark side saturating everything in the area even Belle and Keelen should have noticed something, even if it was only subconscious. Then he spotted something else.

"Steps." He said.

"What?" Lara asked.

"Look down." Cal said as everyone looked in his direction, "See here the ground suddenly rises by about ten centimetres." Then he looked around, "Look back there about five metres, it's the same and it's the same in front of us. Every five metres or so there's a ten centimetre step."

"But if there are steps here-" Belle began.

"Then we're not the first ones to come this way." Lara interrupted.

"But who else could have been here?" Keelen asked, "Koman's notes never made any mention of settlement at the time of his survey."

"There have been people here for decades, most of whom don't get on with one another." Belle pointed out,

"It was probably just some of them." And she began to continue along the passageway.

"Hold on a minute!" Cal called out to her, "I'll go first. Lara, you bring up the rear." Belle paused while Cal walked around her and took the lead, "Keep that light directed ahead of me." He added, still unwilling to activate his lightsaber unless absolutely necessary.

The shallow steps in the passageway continued without giving any indication of who had constructed them or why. All this changed when the passageway abruptly ended in a solid metal door.

"Well I guess this settles it," Belle said, "someone beat us here."

"By a long time too." Lara said, "Look at that door. No way has that been here less than a hundred years."

Cal reached for the large handle mounted on the door and attempted to open it.

"It's stuck." He said.

"So we're trapped." Keelen said.

"No we're not." Cal said, bringing up his lightsaber, "I've got a key." And he ignited the weapon before plunging it into the door, "Lara come on up here." He added as he began to move the blade upwards, slicing a gash in it, "I think that the source of all this dark side energy could be on the other side. I need you to be ready just in case."

"In case of what?" Belle asked.

"In case something tries to eat his face." Lara said as she ignited her lightsaber and stood ready.

Cal cut a rough square in the metal door before withdrawing his lightsaber. Normally he would have used the force to give the large chunk of loose metal a shove and dislodge it, but given the saturation of the area by the dark side he felt it better to avoid relying on the force and instead gave the door a good kick. The effect was exactly what he had wanted and the metal he had cut around dropped backwards with a loud 'clang' that echoed down the passageway and caused Keelen to drop her lantern and sample case as she clamped her hands over her ears in surprise.

The sound echoed along the passage and Rodral stopped suddenly.

"What was that?" one of his men said.

"Them." Rodral replied, "Whatever it is they're looking for down here I think they've just found it."

"So what do we do now sir?"

"What else?" Rodral said, looking over his shoulder at the questioner, "Whatever they want, I want too and we're going to take it from them one way or another."

Simultaneously Cal and Lara stepped up to the gaping hole and held their lightsabers out in front of them, their flickering blue light providing illumination of what lay beyond.

"Looks clear." Lara said softly.

"Looks can be deceiving though my young padawan." Cal said and he stepped through the hole.

Lara followed him and the two jedi carefully moved deeper into the room as Belle and Keleen watched from the door.

"What is this place?" Lara said as she saw banks of computers and other machines she could not identify lined up along the walls.

"Looks like some sort of lab." Cal replied. Then he stopped and turned towards the door, "Hey Keleen, get in here and take a look at this stuff." He said.

When Keleen entered with her lantern the entire room was properly illuminated and the group got a good look at the equipment that filled it.

"I think you're right." She said, "This is a laboratory. But this isn't Republic technology."

Belle frowned when she said this.

"Then who—" Lara began to ask.

"There are several species native to the region." Belle interrupted before she could finish the question, "The kinnin have had hyperspace technology for centuries, plus there's evidence that the species that used to inhabit Vedra had it. Either of them could be responsible."

"But what were they doing here?" Lara asked.

"Same as us." Keleen replied, "This looks like equipment for studying lifeforms. Look, there are containment cages on that wall over there."

"Wouldn't working in this atmosphere be inconvenient?" Lara asked.

"Only if the species wasn't used to it." Belle said, "Perhaps there used to be a civilisation here after all. The original survey didn't stay too long."

"Or maybe they had better life support than just filter masks." Keleen said, "Look here on the wall. There's what look like gas taps. These could be used to pipe oxygen to the researchers."

"This is all very interesting," Cal said, "but we need to get out of here. In case you've forgotten there are a lot of armed beings following us and the dark side is everywhere here. Whoever built this place either built it in the wrong place or whatever they did here was so terrible that it left a mark in the force that still hasn't healed."

"Wait one minute." Keleen said as she dashed to one of the ancient computers. Then, using her lantern as a crude club she bashed the casing of the machine until it broke open, "This looks like it." She said, looking inside. Then she looked at Belle, "Could you get this out of here for me?" she asked.

"What is it?" Belle asked as she drew her knife and used it to pry loose the object that Keleen was pointing at.

"I think that it's the hard drive." She said.

Excitement.

Belle's hand slipped for a moment and she looked around suddenly at the jedi. The sudden burst of emotion from Belle was the first thing that Cal had felt since entering the cave system. This surprised him somewhat. He could understand Keleen being interested in the drive, but he had not pictured Belle as an inquisitive academic type.

"Oops." Belle said before she completed the task of freeing the hard drive and she stuffed it into her pocket, "Okay, now let's go."

There was only one other door in the lab, narrower than the one Cal had cut through and standing ajar in the far corner. Cal was the first to reach it and he placed his hands in the gap between the door and frame and tried to slide it open.

"It's stuck." He said.

"Let me help." Lara said and she joined her brother in pulling at the door.

There was a sudden sharp 'crack' as something caught in the mechanism gave way and the door slid open rapidly.

"Thanks." Cal said then he turned to Belle and Keleen, "Now come on."

The doorway led into a short corridor, narrower than the passageway that had led them to this installation and obviously of artificial construction. Unlike the laboratory, there were several exits from this room. All along one wall were closed doors identical to the one they had just come through, while another door stood open at the far end.

"That looks like our best bet for now." Cal said.

"Yeah," Belle agreed, "it saves having to pry any more doors open."

The room at the end of the corridor was far larger than either the corridor or the laboratory but it seemed to be empty. Even when Belle and Keleen entered with their lanterns all that was revealed was a vast level floor, the only other feature being a raised walkway that ran around the wall midway.

"Perhaps there's a way out up there." Lara said and she ran to one of the ladders that hung from the walkway at regular intervals.

"Lara be careful!" Cal called out as Lara grabbed hold of the ladder. But before he could stop her she lifted a foot onto the bottom rung and began to climb.

There was a grinding sound and Lara called out in alarm as the ladder broke free. Tumbling backwards to the floor, she rolled sideways as the ladder came crashing down after her, parts of it breaking off and shattering as it landed.

"I'm okay." Lara said as she sat up, "Nothing wounded but my pride."

"Well you did end up falling." Cal said as he helped her back to her feet, "I guess the ladder had corroded since this place was abandoned and you were just too heavy for it." He added with a smile.

Lara scowled and hit his arm.

"I'm not fat!" she snapped.

"Watch that anger youngling." Cal said shaking his finger at her.

"When you two are ready," Belle said, "could we get back to getting out of here. Wherever here is."

"I think it's a hangar." Cal said and he looked up at the ceiling, "Look there are roots poking through the gap between the doors. A few more years and they'll probably force them apart and the ground above will cave in."

"So we just have to hope those guys chasing us don't get here before then." Lara said sarcastically.

"Seriously," Keleen said, "what do we do now?"

Cal and Belle looked at one another.

"The high ground is always an advantage." Belle said.

"I agree." Cal replied.

"Well if I'm too heavy for the ladders you definitely are Cal." Lara said.

"We won't use the ladders." Cal replied then he looked back at Belle, "Is that a gyro grappler you've got there?" he asked.

Belle smiled and unclipped a short cylinder from her belt.

"Sure is." She said as she affixed the end of a length of syntherope to the cylinder, "I see you have one too."

"Indeed I do." Cal said and he began to prepare a similar device himself.

Standing side-by-side Belle and Cal held out the cylinders in front of them, their arms angled upwards.

Then one 'whoosh' followed after another as they both activated the gyro grapplers and they shot from their hands, trailing syntherope behind them as they flew upwards towards the walkway. As they flew hooks extended out from the sides of the cylinders and when they struck the walls and dropped these caught on the walkway. Belle and Cal then rushed to where the syntherope lines dangled and tested their strength by tugging on them.

"Seem solid enough." Cal said and using the line for support he began to scale the wall towards the walkway. Belle watched until he was about halfway up before hooking her lantern to her belt and doing the same.

Lara followed up Cal's line, but Keleen just stared up at the walkway where Belle and Cal now stood.

"What about my stuff?" she asked, "I can't carry any of it up with me."

"Just tie it to the end of the lines." Cal said, "We'll pull it up after you."

"And hurry." Belle added, "Those guys are probably getting closer."

6.

Staring at the ancient laboratory and its equipment, Rodral snarled. This was treasure trove on Centau where advanced technology of any kind was hard to come by and he had never even suspected that it existed. Now someone else had broken in first and clearly removed something that he considered to be rightfully his.

"Forget what I said earlier." He said angrily, "Take them alive if you can, I want to make them suffer while I find out what else they're hiding from me."

His men advanced, moving through the laboratory and into the corridor beyond. From there they headed straight for the open doorway at the end. When the first of them stepped into the hangar he fell backwards suddenly.

"What the—" the man immediately behind him began before he too collapsed. Looking down at the bodies in the doorway, their companions saw the dark stains around the bullet wounds in their chests.

"It's a trap!" one man yelled, "An ambush!" and he turned around to run.

"Get back in there!" Rodral snapped, grabbing hold of the man and shoving him back towards the hangar, "We've got them outnumbered, move fast and you'll be fine."

A group of Rodral's more foolish men rushed into the hangar, taking his assurance at face value.

Immediately two fell, one dead while the other clutched at a wound to his leg and screamed.

"Straight ahead!" one of the men yelled, "They're right opposite the door!" and he ran across the hangar, firing his own weapon and firing magnetically accelerated projectiles to where Belle lay on the walkway shooting down at him with her silenced weapon.

As soon as she shifted her aim away from the doorway the rest of Rodral's men saw their chance and burst into the hangar, spreading themselves out as they crossed the open space between them and Belle. As they got closer Keleen appeared, kneeling behind Belle and aiming the mercenary woman's compact pulse wave weapon and firing wildly into the mass of oncoming beings.

Rodral himself grinned as he stepped through the hatchway, the weapon he held still at his side and pointing at the floor. He could see his men dropping from the gunfire opposite and there was a tearing sound followed by screams as two of them attempted to scale a ladder that could no longer bear their weight. Confident that the weapons firing was being directed solely at his men he walked forwards calmly, out from underneath the walkway where it ran over the door.

What he failed to notice was the pair of synthrope lines that dropped from the walkway behind him.

"Ready?" Cal whispered and Lara nodded at him, "Good. Now remember avoid using the force if you can, the dark side is too strong here."

"I know." Lara replied softly and she shuddered slightly. Then the pair of them each grasped one of the lines and slid down to the floor below.

They landed almost silently behind Rodral and his men and drew their lightsabers as soon as they had let go of the ropes. The snap-hiss sound finally alerted Rodral to their presence and he whirled around, raising his weapon.

"Drop it!" Cal shouted, careful to restrain his anger at the way Rodral was trying to kill them and he extended his lightsaber out in front of him so that its blade pointed directly at Rodral's face.

Kill him! Kill him now!

The sudden sensation shocked Cal. He had never been anywhere this saturated with the dark side before and when it called out to him so clearly it was totally unexpected. For just a few seconds he froze.

The delay was all Rodral needed to sidestep away from Cal's blade and aim his gun at the Jedi knight's head. As Cal turned his head he found himself now staring down the barrel of a gun.

"Can you sense this?" Rodral hissed.

But in his haste to avoid Cal's lightsaber Rodral had forgotten that the Jedi was not alone and Lara suddenly lunged towards him, sweeping her own lightsaber in a wide arc. The shining energy blade cleaved through Rodral's arm at the wrist and he let out an agonising scream as both his hand and pistol dropped to the floor. The sound of their leader in pain caused several of Rodral's men to halt and turn around to where they saw Rodral kneeling on the floor, clutching at the stump of his wrist while Cal and Lara stood over him.

"Tell them to stand down." Cal said, still shaken by the call of the dark side.

Rage.

Hatred.

"Kill them!" Rodral yelled, "Kill them now!" and he dived towards Cal, letting go of his ruined limb.

Rodral's sanity was gone, Cal could tell that as he fell backwards under the sudden assault. The years of living in proximity to the nexus of dark side energy had taken their toll on all of the local inhabitants and now that Rodral had come to its very heart his anger, bitterness and greed had gotten the better of him. The dark side had finally consumed him as it had the raiders who had attacked the group on the trail.

His lightsaber fell from his grasp, deactivating as soon as it left his grip and it rolled across the floor.

"Watch out for the rest!" Cal shouted as he wrestled with Rodral and Lara turned back to face Rodral's men who were now rushing headlong towards her.

Belle and Keleen both got their feet as the mob below turned away from them and they began to run around the walkway towards the ropes still dangling down to the floor. As they ran they continued to fire on the beings charging towards the Jedi, picking them off one at a time.

Lara held her lightsaber up between her and the charging mob. As she came under fire she twisted the weapon to deflect and block their attacks. Meanwhile Cal continued to fight Rodral himself. Though the man was injured, the dark side flowed through him and gave him strength. Cal knew that the dark side would in fact be consuming Rodral and would inevitably lead to his death the knowledge did him no good right now. Cal reached out and grasped Rodral by the throat, pushing him away. At the same time he grabbed for Rodral's uninjured arm, taking it by the wrist. Rodral snarled, spittle spraying against the inside of his breathmask and he lashed out with his other arm. But with Cal holding him at arms length, the cauterised stump just flailed about in front of him. This could not go on forever Cal knew. At some point Rodral would either slip free of his grasp or his body would fail. Cal could not afford to simply wait and see what happened, he had to take action.

Cal released his grip on Rodral's throat and let him get closer. But he kept his hand near to Rodral's head and in one swift move he ripped the man's breathmask from his face. Rodral screamed and collapsed, clutching at his face as he gasped for breath and the ammonia in the air burnt his eyes. Meanwhile Cal hurled the breathmask across the hangar.

Cal looked around for his lightsaber and spotted it lying a short distance away. He raised his hand instinctively, ready to call the weapon to his grasp through the force before he remembered where he was and instead ran to where the lightsaber lay and scooped it up by hand. Then he looked to see how his sister and the other two women were doing.

Lara was standing her ground as the mob advanced on her, now much reduced in size. At the same time Belle slid down the same ropes the Jedi had used and then reached up to take the equipment that Keleen lowered using the other before following Belle down.

"Move!" Cal shouted to Lara as Belle and Keleen ran through the door back into the corridor and the two Jedi ran after them.

Rodral's men ran after them, though as they ran around their leader as he lay choking Rodral reached out and grabbed one of them by the leg.

"Give me your mask!" he gasped and began to claw at his face with his remaining hand in an effort to take the man's breathmask for himself.

As Cal and Lara exited the hangar they found Belle bracing herself against the narrow section of door that stuck out from the frame.

"Help me with this!" she yelled at the Jedi and while Lara stood just inside the corridor and used her lightsaber to block the gunfire from their opponents Cal grabbed hold of the door also. Then in unison he and Belle pulled at the door. At first nothing happened, but then there was a groaning sound and the door lurched as it closed slightly. Belle and Cal continued to pull at the door and in stages it slid closed more.

"That's enough!" Belle shouted, "Take cover behind it!"

"What?" Lara replied. Then Cal spotted Belle removing her last grenade from her belt and fitting a metal cup around it.

"Fire in the hole!" Cal shouted as he dived behind the door and pulled Lara with him.

The moment they were all pressed up against the wall, Belle let the grenade's safety lever fly and tossed it through the gap between door and frame.

There was a brief cry of alarm from the hangar then a dull 'boom' as the grenade detonated. The metal cup wrapped around the explosive turned it from a disorientating stun grenade into a lethal fragmentation device. There were a few screams from some of Rodral's men who had been on the outskirts of the blast, but then there was only silence.

"Keleen," Han Shill said, smiling as he saw her enter the room, "Belle was just filling me in on what happened."

Smiling, Keleen gave Han a light kiss on his cheek.

"It was a complete success." She said.

"Yes, that's excellent news." Han replied, "They'll be glad to hear it." And he pointed towards a nearby door. "They're waiting?" Keleen asked.

Han nodded.

"All of them."

Keleen took a deep breath and walked up to the door. It opened automatically as she approached and followed by the Shills she passed through the doorway.

The room beyond was lit only dimly with most of the light coming from the three dimensional projections lined up along each side. Keleen recognised the people represented here in holographic form immediately and had met all of them at one time or another, though this was the closest she had come to having them all in the same place at once. These were the Founding Families.

"Good day Keleen." Erill Crassis gasped, his ill health obvious even through the transmission, "Why don't you tell us what you found?"

"Our information was correct on all counts." She replied.

"Then the life forms on Centau have been genetically altered at some point?" Faye Karn asked.

"They have." Keleen replied, "Quite successfully as well I might add. They are stable and viable."

"And what of the other matter?" the nautolan Ket Ruun asked, his hologram leaning forwards as he leant closer to his communicator while his wife remained still beside him.

"There is a dark side nexus there as well." Keleen answered.

For a moment there was silence as her audience took in the significance of her reply.

"Then we were correct not to deploy a conventional force." General Josh Drud commented, looking around him at the other holograms, "As good as Han's people are they would have turned on one another."

"It was my idea general." A woman whose hologram was opposite his said and she glared at him, "You would have blundered in there with an army if I hadn't –"

"It is not important Lorna." Trent Narthis interrupted, not wanting the meeting to descend into yet another argument between the Druds and the Fayls. Then his hologram looked at Keleen, "How did the Jedi react?" he asked.

"Exactly as we expected." She replied, "They were initially overcome and their effectiveness was impaired throughout our time in the vicinity of the nexus."

"Did they suspect you?" Corva Torin asked, "Either of you?"

"No." Belle said before Keleen could answer, "They don't suspect a thing."