

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-VII: PROLOGUE

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...

PROLOGUE

BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE REPUBLIC, A RESEARCH TEAM IS INVESTIGATING THE RUINS ON THE PRIMITIVE WORLD OF ATCH. WHEN THE TEAM IS THREATENED BY SOME OF THE NATIVES JEDI KNIGHT CAL UDRA AND HIS PADAWAN LARA ARE SENT TO PROTECT THEM. BUT WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE VIOLENT NATIVE CULT AND THE ANCIENT SPACE TRAVELLERS WHO BUILT THE RUINED CITIES OF ATCH...?

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1 .

Doctor Dayle Larnson, doctor of xenoarchaeology and xenoanthropolgy picked his way carefully across the floor of the ruined temple. The ancient civilisation that had built this place had left it littered with traps to prevent the unwary from seizing its treasures. As he moved, Dayle could see what he was looking for directly ahead of him. Standing on a plinth was a tiny golden statue of the god to whom this place had once been dedicated.

He stopped at the plinth and, carefully studied the statue, doubting that the builders of this place would have just left it out in the open. Then he spotted it, a gap around the stone base directly beneath the statue and the rest of the plinth indicating the presence of a pressure plate. He looked around and smiled when he saw the dirt that had collected around the bottom of the plinth. Reaching into a pocket he produced a small bag that he then filled with dirt scooped up from the floor. Holding his breath, he held the bag beside the statue and gently nudged the artefact to one side, letting the bag of dirt replace the statue itself.

He exhaled as he stood up straight, inspecting his prize. Then he heard something, a soft grinding sound and he looked back at the plinth to see the bag of dirt causing the pressure plate to sink into the body of the plinth.

"Oh, I've got a bad feeling about this." He said to himself and he turned towards the doorway out of the temple just in time to see a massive stone barrier starting to drop down, to where it would inevitably seal him in.

He ran, ignoring the triggers to the traps that he had so carefully avoided and he was forced to duck as tiny darts shot from the carved walls towards him only to miss by a narrow margin. Ahead of him the door was getting lower all the time and Dayle calculated that unless he took drastic measures he would not get there in time. Diving, Dayle landed just beside the door and rolled beneath the falling stone just in time.

Groaning, he picked himself up and took several deep breaths. Then he heard a low rumble that caused him to turn around and look down a dark passageway that ran uphill. Rolling down that slope was a massive boulder heading straight for him...

"Oh bantha poodo! That never happened!" the young woman said, putting her mug down on the table in front of her.

"I swear it did." Dayle said.

"Really?" the woman replied, "So how come I've never heard of this temple before?"

"Ah, well-" Dayle began, then he spotted another of his student researchers rushing into the mess tent, "Marshan!" he called out, "Come over here and tell this young lady about my-"

"Doctor Larnson!" Marshan called out in response, "You've got to come quickly, something terrible has happened."

Dayle recognised the native as one of the local tribe that provided labour for the research team when needed. He did not know the being's name but he recognised its appearance. Of course the last time he had seen the native he had been alive and well rather than corpse scattered with salt.

The indigenous inhabitants of Atch known as the arten were an amphibian species that made their settlements near the many rivers that criss-crossed its surface. Their skin was cool and damp to the touch because of the highly porous nature of their skin. Covering one in salt was a warning that someone wanted the victim to suffer.

"Do we know who did this?" Dayle asked, looking around at the mixed group of humans and arten. One of the older natives looked at his fellow arten and spoke in their own language, Dayle guessing that he was translating the question. The natives spoke amongst themselves for a few moments before the older one looked back at Dayle.

"They say it was the Blood Tribe." He said.

"The Blood Tribe?" Dayle repeated, "But they're just a myth aren't they? They died out."

The native steadied himself on his staff and the row of spines running down the back of his head twitched.

"The Blood Tribe follow the old ways." The native said, "The ways brought to us by those you seek knowledge of. When they moved on we rejected their teachings and returned to our own traditions. But the Blood Tribe had gained the favour of the others and had much power while they were here. Power they were reluctant to give up. Our ancestors did their best to rid of the Blood Tribe, but a few always remained to carry on their own ways. They have not been seen in many years, but we recognise their methods."

"But what do they want?" Marshan asked, "Why would they make their presence known now?"

"Because of us." Dayle said, looking back at the body of the unfortunate native worker, "They don't want anyone associating with us do they?"

"They do not." The older native replied, "They do not agree with your ways any more than they agree with ours."

The natives began to talk amongst themselves again. One of them and then the rest walked away as one of them spoke to the elder.

"They are afraid, they do not believe you can protect them." He said, "They are leaving."

"So what do we do now?" Marshan said to Dayle, "We need them to—"

"I know." Dayle replied, interrupting as he stood up and reached into his jacket. A moment later he produced a key on a chain that he handed to Marshan, "You know where it is?" he asked.

"You're kidding." Marshan said, staring at the key.

"We brought them for a reason." Dayle replied.

"Yes, but we're not soldiers."

"No reason to be defenceless." Dayle told him, "Now you go break out the weapons and distribute them."

"Why me? Shouldn't you—"

"I'm heading for the transmitter. Like you said, we're not soldiers so I'm sending for help."

"So what does Captain Miserable want us for now?" padawan Lara Udra asked, looking at her older brother and jedi instructor as they stood in the turbolift taking them to the administration levels.

"Captain De Kuun," Cal Udra began, "has not seen fit to disclose that information yet. He just stated that it was Republic business."

"Huh." Lara snorted, "He just wants to boss us about."

"Probably." Cal replied, "But let me do the talking if he does. He may not be our superior, but he is the ranking naval officer in the sector."

The turbolift came to a halt and the doors opened to reveal a corridor bustling with activity. The two jedi wove their way between the uniformed station staff until they reached a briefing room with its door open. From inside they could hear voices.

"I understand your concern senator." Captain De Kuun said as Cal and Lara entered. The duros officer had in fact been alone in the briefing chamber, standing in the centre of the room. The other voice had come from the holographic projection he was looking at. It showed a woman dressed in what looked to be very expensive clothes. It flickered slightly, indicating that the image was being transmitted from a great distance.

"My concern, captain is that you are not doing your job!" The woman in the hologram snapped.

"But senator, Atch is outside of the Republic. I cannot order the deployment of troops or ships under these circumstances senator." The captain protested.

"Then how do you intend to protect the republic citizens there?"

It was then that Captain De Kuun noticed the approach of the Udras.

"Ah, there you are." He said. Lara could not read the expressions of the duros species very well but he seemed to be smiling, something she had never seen him do before.

"You asked to see us captain?" Cal asked as he neared Captain De Kuun.

"Who are these people captain?" the woman in the hologram asked, her image turning towards the Udras as they entered the pick up zone for the holographic scanners.

"Senator, allow me to introduce Cal Udra and his apprentice Lara Udra." Captain De Kuun answered her.

"They are jedi?" the woman asked, a frown appearing on her face.

"We are." Cal said, "And who might you be?"

The woman's frown deepened.

"I am Airia Torin. Senator Airia Torin." She said, "I represent the Narthis Sector in the Republic Senate and I did not request your presence here."

"He did." Lara said, nodding towards Captain De Kuun.

"Senator," the captain said, "the jedi order's mandate allows them to operate beyond our borders more freely."

"I know that captain!" Senator Torin snapped.

"What seems to be the problem senator?" Cal asked.

"No problem jedi Udra." She replied, "At least nothing the Republic's conventional forces can't handle."

"A research team has run into trouble." Captain De Kuun said, "They have come under attack by the natives and have requested protection."

"Protection that the captain is refusing to provide despite a direct senatorial order from me."

"Did the captain say that the team is located on one of the worlds in the sector that is not part of the Republic?" Cal asked, "Because if that's true then I'm afraid that his assessment of the situation is correct."

The Republic military cannot just deploy its troops anywhere it likes. On the other hand my apprentice and I can assess the situation and summon further help if needed. In fact we'd be glad to."

"We would?" Lara commented.

"Yes." Cal replied to her, "We would."

"Then it is settled." Captain De Kuun said, "The Jedi will travel to Atch and protect the researchers."

"Damn it!" Airia exclaimed as soon as the transmission was cut off, "Jenie! A drink!"

"Certainly mistress." The droid standing close by replied and it walked up to her with a tray on which was a bottle and a glass. Airia took them, poured herself a drink and gulped it down. Then she looked at the droid.

"Jenie, have my speeder made ready."

"Yes mistress." The droid replied, "Will you be going far?"

"No, but I may be some time. I need to tell Keleen that that idiot De Kuun has got the Jedi snooping around the dig."

2.

"There's no beacon." Lara said as the delaya-class transport vessel *Bright Hope* approached Atch.

"Of course not." Cal replied, "This is a primitive world. The natives can just about work iron."

"So how do we find the research team?" Lara asked.

"We use an old jedi trick." Cal told her.

"What old jedi trick?"

"Watch." Cal said and he activated the ship's communications, "Republic research team, this is the jedi vessel *Bright Hope*. Can you read me?"

There was a brief pause before a voice replied.

"Hello *Bright Hope*, this is expedition camp two. We sure are glad to hear from you."

"Hello camp two." Cal said, "We're in orbit now, can you send us landing instructions?"

"Sure can *Bright Hope*. We'll leave the channel open, just follow our signal. There's no other traffic so your flight path is clear. Just land when you see us." Then the voice stopped, replaced with a repeating electronic bleeping indicating an open channel.

"See," Cal said, glancing at his sister, "now we have a beacon." And he guided the *Bright Hope* into the planet's atmosphere.

The camp was smaller than either Cal or Lara had expected. Two tents were set up in a large grassy plain beside a row of three transport ships. In front of one of the tents stood a man who waved at the *Bright Hope* as it passed overhead.

Cal brought the ship in to land beside the other three vessels.

"Come on." He said to Lara, "Let's go meet the people we're here to protect."

It was only when Cal and Lara descended the *Bright Hope's* access ramp that they saw the man who had come to meet them was carrying a blaster holstered at his hip. Through an open tent flap Cal spotted a second man sat cradling a rifle.

"Doctor Larnson's idea." The man said as he noticed Lara looking at the weapon. Then he was interrupted by the sound of an engine.

Approaching across the plain was a small vehicle with multiple wheels, obviously designed for cross-country travel. Sat at the controls of this vehicle was Doctor Dayle Larnson.

"He's a teacher?" Lara said, staring, "He looks like he's half wookiee."

"I wouldn't say that to his face." The man standing in front of the jedi said, "He may just pull your arms out of your sockets."

Dayle halted the vehicle and leapt out.

"Hello there!" he called out as he walked up to them and stood next to the man that had met the jedi, towering over all three of them, "I was worried we'd been abandoned out here." He added as he offered his hand first to Cal then Lara, "Now come on, I'll take you to the main camp." And he beckoned them towards his vehicle.

"We were told you've come into conflict with the natives." Cal said as he and Lara followed Dayle.

"Actually its more like we've been caught up in a disagreement between different groups." Dayle explained, climbing into the vehicle.

"Tribal warfare?" Lara asked, "Perhaps we can find a settlement."

"No, it's not like that." Dayle replied, "A couple of weeks ago one of the locals working for us was killed. The others say the murder was carried out by some secret society that hasn't been heard of for centuries. Now most of the others are too scared to work for us. Without them to act as guides and labourers we're stuck. I don't have the people to continue my research without local help."

"What is your research doctor?" Cal asked.

"You weren't told then?" Dayle responded and Cal shook his head, "Well sometime ago this world was settled by an alien civilisation. I don't know who they were, but the aliens brought their own culture here and converted the locals. Then they vanished for no apparent reason and most of the locals went back to their own ways. I'm here to find out who they were and hopefully where they went."

"You say most locals went back to their own ways." Lara commented, "What about the rest?"

"They're the ones that killed the worker." Dayle answered.

"So what about the weapons?" Cal asked and he pointed at Dayle's hip where he too had a blaster holstered.

"Well I was worried that this secret society would come after us so I had the weapons we brought with us distributed. It seems to have done the trick; they've not come near us. I get the feeling they know what our weapons can do compared to theirs."

"You've demonstrated them?" Lara asked.

"Not formally." Dayle said, "But a few of us have been out hunting with the locals and given one or two of them the opportunity to fire them. They all seem to grasp the concepts easily enough. I'm guessing the mysterious aliens brought some of their own with them."

As Dayle drove around the edge of a forest a cluster of tents came into view ahead and Cal and Lara saw that it was set up beside the ruins of a city.

"This is the largest city we've found." Dayle said as he led Cal and Lara through the outskirts of the ruins, "As far as we can tell the aliens built them near useful resources and forced the natives to move to them as workers. As soon as the aliens left the locals moved back to the coasts and riverbanks they prefer." Cal ran his hand over the surface of a standing stone that was covered in carvings that were partially eroded away.

"I don't recognise the language." He said.

"It's the local alphabet, we've found nothing of the aliens' writing." Dayle said, "Some of the locals were helping translate, but without their help we've been reduced to just searching the area ourselves, which as I said is too much for my team."

"Hmmm." Cal said, nodding slowly.

"You've got a plan haven't you?" Lara said, "I know that look."

"Well I'm glad to hear it." Dayle said, "Care to let me in?"

"We can't force the locals to come back to work for you," Cal said, "and hunting down this secret society is going to need information that we can't get without help translating these carvings."

"But only the natives can read them." Dayle pointed out.

"Not necessarily." Cal said and he turned towards Lara, "I need to make a call." He added.

"Master Trevan." Lara said to the much older man walking down the ramp of the small starship that had landed next to the much larger *Bright Hope*. Much older than either Lara or Cal, he wore the traditional robes of a Jedi and a lightsaber hung at his waist.

"I am not a master young one." He replied, "You may call me Kraus." And he offered his hand in greeting, "Master Karas tells me you're having trouble with some ancient carvings."

"So you're the expert in alien languages?" Lara asked him in response.

"I am an expert in learning my dear." Kraus answered, "Languages are just a part of that. Now take me to these ruins. I hate to admit it, for I know it is not the Jedi way but I am impatient to see them for myself."

Lara offered her arm to the Jedi to steady him, but he waved it away and just walked alongside her as she walked towards the pair of local mounts that the research team had provided her with.

"I'm afraid there's only limited mechanical transport here." She said as she climbed onto the creature's back, "But the researchers say these are the next best thing. Even if they do smell like a Hutt's armpit."

"They will do." Kraus replied as he too climbed into a saddle. Then after taking a breath he added, "I think."

Lara bypassed the research expedition's base camp in favour of taking Kraus directly to the ruins; a decision that turned out to be the right one as far as Kraus was concerned.

"These are amazing!" he exclaimed before he had even dismounted from the creature on which he rode and as soon as his feet hit the ground he dashed towards the nearest structure that bore carvings, "Yes, yes. Incredible." He muttered, running his hands across them.

"Only the natives know what they all say." Lara said as she approached him, "Though I think Doctor Larnson has some notes."

"Larnson?" Kraus said, glancing at Lara, "Ah yes, the xenoarchaeologist." Then as he looked back at the carvings he added, "Go and fetch him immediately."

"I think he's at the—" Lara began.

"I don't care where he is now Padawan, I want him here."

"Fine, I'll go look for him then." Lara replied and she climbed back onto her mount and rode off in the direction of the base camp.

Meanwhile, Kraus remained engrossed in the carvings. He took a deep breath and concentrated. At some point in the distant past another being had stood where he was now to make these marks and Kraus hoped to establish a link to what that being had been thinking about as he carved them. Translations using the Force were much easier when hearing a language spoken in person, the presence of the speaker providing

a live mind go focus on but it was still possible to translate writings such as these with enough effort. Though he was focusing intently on the carvings, he still sensed the approach of two others. "Ah, Doctor Larnson I presume-" he began before realising that neither of the newcomers were human. Kraus spun as he straightened himself up and he found himself staring into the faces of two of the arten. Both aliens stared back without speaking. Though their flesh was the typical greenish brown of their species they had both smeared their faces with some sort of red dye. "Do you speak basic?" Kraus asked, hoping that they would be able to help him decipher the carvings.

Hatred.

Anger.

Though the arten had not spoken, Kraus felt their hostility as they reached upwards and drew the swords they carried on their backs. Kraus reacted in kind, drawing his lightsaber and igniting it. "I have no wish to harm you." He said as they drew their swords and he noticed that the same dye they had used on their faces had also been used to coat their blades. Kraus sidestepped as the first arten lunged forwards with its blade extended out in front of it. Kraus jabbed at the alien with his elbow as it passed him by, the blow was carefully timed to strike at his assailant's elbow and the sword dropped from its grasp. Pre-empting the second arten's attack, Kraus stepped forwards and swung his lightsaber above his head. The green energy blade passed effortlessly through the alien's sword blade and sliced the weapon in two.

Fear.

The two arten had clearly not counted on their opponent having such power, and the realisation that the jedi scholar outmatched them both was now sinking in. Both aliens shrieked in unison and adopted poses suited for unarmed combat.

"Be calm." Kraus said, wielding his lightsaber between himself and the aliens.

The arten both separated and began to circle him, forcing Kraus to focus on only one of them at a time. But when the alien behind him suddenly charged, Kraus sensed it's approach and channelling the force through him, he leapt into the air and somersaulted over it.

The alien ground to a halt and whirled around as Kraus landed right in front of it. Before Kraus could react the alien reached out and wrapped a webbed hand around his throat and gripped it tightly. Knowing he had to escape the alien's grasp immediately, Kraus brought up his lightsaber and just as easily as he had broken the sword blade he severed the arm holding onto him. The arten staggered backwards, screeching and holding onto the stump of its arm.

"Surrender!" Kraus yelled, still not knowing if either of his attackers could understand him.

The uninjured arten charged, ducking beneath Kraus' lightsaber and knocking his weapon arm aside. But before the arten could land a serious blow Kraus swung his free arm and delivered it a strong blow to its abdomen. Most humanoids would have been immediately stunned by such a strike, but the amphibious nature of the arten meant that they lacked the respiratory system that the blow was intended to disrupt so all he managed was to slow down the alien for a brief moment. This moment was long enough for Kraus to step backwards and reposition his lightsaber to where it could defend him properly. Then, when the arten moved to attack again he thrust the weapon under the alien's jaw and up through its head.

As the one alien dropped dead to the ground, Kraus turned to see what had become of the other. Though it was injured, the wound inflicted by his lightsaber would have instantly cauterised and it may not take long for the arten to decide it was in no danger of bleeding to death and go on the attack once more.

Sure enough the arten was picking up the undamaged sword that had been knocked to the ground at the beginning of the fight. Kraus stepped forwards, holding out his lightsaber and aiming for the dyed sword blade. But the alien tried to roll out of the way and lashed out at him. Kraus dodge the poorly aimed strike, sensing that the arten's injury was causing it some difficulty even if it was not life threatening.

Seeing no other choice Kraus swung his lightsaber again at chest height and the arten's large eyes widened slightly as it was cut in two. Kraus stood back and let the pieces of its body fall to the ground, shutting of his lightsaber as he stared down at them. Then he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Something was moving through the ruins towards him.

Kraus opened his mind to the force and sensed the presence of numerous beings all around him. They had encircled him completely and Kraus could sense the same dark feelings in them as the two attackers now lying dead at his feet.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." He said to himself as he raised his lightsaber once more and ignited it.

A tremor in the force alerted him to an attack and Kraus leapt aside just in time to feel an arrow as it whizzed narrowly past him. The arrow snapped as it struck a standing stone behind him and as Kraus crouched down to make himself a smaller target he looked down at the weapon. The shaft of the arrow had

been coloured with the same distinctive red that his arden opponents had used on their faces and sword blades. But what really caught his attention was the darker looking fluid dripping from the tip of the arrow. "Poison." He said to himself softly. Then he suddenly turned his head around and outstretched a hand, creating a shockwave through the force that caught four more arrows in midair and splintered them. It was then that Kraus heard the sound of an engine and through the force he sensed four more beings approaching his location, two of who had a presence in the force that burned brightly. Looking around, he was just in time to see Cal and Lara leap from the still moving all terrain vehicle, ignite their lightsabers in midair and hit the ground running straight towards him. At the same time Dayle brought his vehicle to a halt and both he and the assistant riding with him disembarked, drew their own weapons and took cover behind it.

The arden were clearly shocked by the sudden arrival of reinforcements for Kraus. A hail of arrows headed towards Cal and Lara that the two jedi dived and rolled to avoid. As he got back to his feet, Cal spotted a trio of red-painted arden preparing to let loose another volley. Reaching out towards them, he pushed through the force and sent all three flying backwards. Then he continued to run towards Kraus.

Lara got to the jedi scholar ahead of her brother.

"I brought Doctor Larnson for you," She said as she slid to a stop and stood back-to-back with Kraus, covering the area behind him, "and my brother came along too."

"I noticed." Kraus replied as Cal arrived and joined them, "Good day Jedi Udra." He added.

"Hello Jedi Trevan." Cal replied, "Good to meet you."

"Likewise." Kraus said as he swatted an arrow with his lightsaber, "Now to business. I count fourteen of them all around us."

"Fourteen. Right." Cal said, not having bothered to try and count the number of arden, "What do you suggest?"

"Falling back to the ATV." Cal said, "Hook up with Doctor Larnson and his assistant."

Right on cue there was the sound of energy weapons being fired as Dayle and his assistant fired on the arden. Though they failed to hit any of their attackers, it forced them to move further back from the vehicle.

"They seem scared of our weapons." Lara said, "Perhaps we should give them more of a demonstration."

And she swung her lightsaber towards a standing stone.

"Wait no!" Kraus yelled, but it was too late to stop Lara from slicing through the carved stone block. There was a grinding sound as the now severed portion of the block first slid sideways then toppled over the edge of the still intact base.

"Back!" Cal shouted and all three jedi jumped away as the block crashed to the ground and shattered, scattering debris all around it.

Back at the ATV Dayle continued to fire his blaster at the arden. Beside him, one of his assistants wielded one of the few rifles that the expedition had brought with them and like Dayle, he was using his weapon to try and keep the arden's heads down rather than actually aiming directly at them. After all the jedi were the real fighters here, they were just scientists.

Dayle's assistant suddenly cried out in a mixture of alarm and pain as an arrow slammed into his shoulder. Dropping the rifle he fell backwards.

Dayle holstered his weapon and turned to help the man. The arrow had gone straight through his assistant's shoulder, so Dayle grabbed it in both hands and snapped the shaft before he pulled the tip all the way through the wound. Then he reached into the ATV for a medical kit.

"Doctor Larnson!" Cal yelled when he noticed that the weapons fire had ceased, "Are you okay?"

"Greer's hit!" Dayle shouted back, "We need to get him proper medical attention!"

"It would seem that we now have an urgent need to withdraw." Kraus said.

"Agreed." Cal replied. Then he looked at Lara and added, "You first, we'll cover you."

Lara nodded then dashed towards the ATV. The arden spotted her almost immediately and began to fire at her. But Cal and Kraus knocked the arrows from the air before they could get anywhere near her. Reaching the ATV, Lara shut off her lightsaber and crouched down beside the injured Greer.

"Cover Cal." She said to Dayle, "I'll see to him."

Dayle picked up Greer's rifle and began to fire at the arden once more. As soon as he did both Cal and Kraus began to head towards the ATV themselves. Keeping side-by-side, each of them focused on deflected the attacks from one particular side, using the force to strike at the arrows in flight and also at the arden archers.

Lara lifted Greer into the ATV as Cal and Kraus drew nearer.

"Keep the arrow!" Kraus shouted at her, "It may be poisoned." And Lara looked around for the arrow.

"Here." Dayle said, kicking at the ground where the arrowhead had fallen.

As Lara picked up the arrowhead and joined Greer in the ATV, Cal and Kraus finally made it to the vehicle also. Then with the artem closing in around them Dayle leapt into the driver's seat, tossed the rifle into the rear and accelerated away.

The artem watched the ATV as it drove away but did not attempt to pursue the escaping party. Instead their leader waved in the direction of the two dead artem that had engaged Kraus earlier. Some of the other artem broke off from the main group and ran to where the corpses lay. They picked up the pieces of the bodies before all of the artem withdrew.

3.

"How is Mister Greer?" Kraus asked as Cal and Lara sat down at the same table in the mess tent with their meals.

"He'll be fine." Cal said.

"How did you know what to do?" Lara asked. Following their return to the base camp, Kraus had rapidly determined the nature of the toxin used on the arden arrow and the research team had been able to come up with a counter agent thanks to this.

"A nerve agent would have caused paralysis young one." Kraus explained, "So I reasoned that it was a toxin designed to interfere with the subject's respiration. Since the arden are amphibians that breathe through their skins this would be done by forcing the glands in their skin to produce large amounts of a thick mucus that would prevent the absorption of oxygen. In mammals like us this would manifest itself as a massive increase in mucus production in the nasal passages and throat, either choking or drowning the victim." Then he looked up from his meal, "I just realised I forgot to get any blue sauce with this." he added.

"Here." Lara said, tossing him a sachet of sauce, "I think I just lost my taste for anything gooey."

"So how far did you get with Doctor Larnson's notes?" Cal asked Kraus.

"Not very I'm afraid." He replied as he ripped open the packet of sauce and poured it over his food, "The good doctor has done his best in the short time he has been here, but his resources are limited."

"You've learnt something though?" Lara commented.

"Yes indeed I have. It would seem that Doctor Larnson took the commendable step of interviewing the natives before they withdrew their services regarding the layout of the ruined cities."

"So what did he learn?" Cal asked.

"The aliens who came here were tyrants and like all tyrants they had those they oppressed build them great palaces."

"I've not seen any great palaces around here." Lara said, chewing on a freeze-dried nutrient bar.

"They were of course torn down by the natives as soon as they rejected the aliens' culture. But there should be something of them left. If we could find these then it would give us a great insight into this so-called Blood Tribe. Then we may stand a better chance of locating their hideouts."

"So what's our next move?" Cal asked.

"I want to go back to the carvings I was studying when I was attacked." Kraus said, "We should leave as soon as it gets dark."

"Dark?" Lara exclaimed, "Why on Coruscant would you want to go poking around in the dark? The Blood Tribe could be hanging around."

"Indeed they could young one." Kraus said, "But in darkness we would have the advantage. The locals have a very primitive technology level that precludes the use of even the most basic light amplification technologies, while our jedi sense will more than compensate for any disadvantage caused by the darkness."

"But why go back to the same place?" Cal asked, "Why not try somewhere else?"

"Because that is where the Blood Tribe chose to attack me. They have had several weeks in which to attack Doctor Larnson's people, but chose not to. I think they attacked me because I was too close to something they want to remain hidden."

When darkness fell the three jedi made their way from the base camp back into the ruins, all three raising the hoods of their dull brown capes to better conceal themselves. Cal took the lead, with Kraus and Lara following close behind. All three held their lightsabers in their hands but refrained from activating them and giving away their positions. Through the force they reached out and searched for any signs of the Blood Tribe.

Upon reaching the carvings that Kraus had been studying earlier that day the group halted. Kraus himself crouched immediately beside the carvings and removed a portable computer from his bag on which he had copies of all of Dayle's notes. Meanwhile both Cal and Lara took up positions where they could observe the surrounding area.

"How long will this take?" Lara said softly, "It's creepy out here."

"Don't tell me you're scared." Cal said, "Fear is a path to the dark side."

"I know." Lara replied, "It's just that I could swear that some of these rocks are moving."

"Oh don't be so stu-" Cal began, looking around at his sister. Then he stopped suddenly in mid sentence, staring at the largest chunk of the stone block that Lara had cut down during the battle. Cal was letting the

force flow through him freely and using it to enhance all of his sentences and right now he could just about detect motion in the block, "I think you're right." He said and he got up and walked over the block of stone where Lara joined him.

"So it is moving." Lara said.

"Yes." Cal replied, "It's just barely noticeable but it's definitely sinking into the ground."

"So what's causing that?" Lara asked and she lashed out at the rock with her foot, stamping down on it. That was when the ground beneath the pair collapsed.

Kraus turned around rapidly as both Cal and Lara fell into the hole that had opened up so suddenly. He rushed to the hole and looked down into the darkness.

"Are you two okay?" he asked, more out of politeness since he could sense that both were alive and not seriously hurt.

"I think we've found something." Cal called back.

"Yeah, a hole." Lara added.

"No, more than that." Cal said and he looked up at Kraus and added, "Get down here and take a look at this."

As Kraus climbed down into the hole, Cal produced a compact flashlight from a pouch and directed its beam at the side of the hole nearest him. There, rather than plain compacted dirt was a stone wall covered in carvings clearly produced by the arten.

"Remarkable." Kraus said, opening up the portable computer again and comparing the newly discovered carvings to those that Dayle had already translated.

Meanwhile Lara also produced a flashlight and shone it around the hole.

"Hey," she said, "this place goes off in both directions."

Cal looked around and saw that Lara was right. They had fallen not into a subsurface chamber, but instead into a tunnel running beneath the ruins.

"What is this place?" Cal said as he shone his flashlight along the tunnel.

"The answer to multiple questions." Kraus answered as he looked away from the carvings that had been holding his attention.

"Such as?" Lara asked.

"To begin with, how the arten of the blood tribe that attacked us were able to approach so easily," Kraus replied, "and possibly why."

Cal and Lara looked at one another and Cal shrugged.

"Go on." Lara said to Kraus, "Let us in on the secret."

"The arten had to be able to approach without being observed," Kraus explained, "and a network of subsurface tunnels is perfect for that."

"Yes, but why did they attack?" Cal said, "Like you said earlier, they've had plenty of chances to attack Dayle's team but never did."

"That is because Doctor Larnson and his people never studied the exact carvings I was looking at. In fact they never came within a hundred metres of them."

"You mean there's something nearby that the Blood Tribe don't want us to know about around here?" Lara said, "But what?"

"The tunnels themselves." Cal said then he looked at Kraus and added, "I'm right aren't I?"

"I believe so." Kraus said, "Their discovery of their concealed method of travelling unobserved would present a grave threat to a secret society like the Blood Tribe. Now we should leave."

"Leave?" Lara suddenly blurted out, "But we just found this place."

"Yes and we are ill prepared to explore it." Kraus said, "We do not know how far these tunnels stretch or how many of the Blood Tribe may be in them. We should consult with the locals to see what information they can offer."

Excitement.

Dayle's enthusiasm when told of the discovery of the tunnel beneath the ruins was easy to detect. Even someone without any sensitivity to the force could have picked up on his reaction.

"This is amazing. I mean I suspected that there could be something beneath the city, but I had no idea where to look. How far do they stretch?" he asked, his eyes wide open.

"How would we know?" Lara replied, her arms folded, "We just climbed straight out of the hole again."

"We need more information." Kraus said, "I hoped to speak with some of the natives who worked for you before the Blood Tribe scared them off."

"I suppose I can drive you to the nearest village first thing tomorrow." Dayle said, "but I can't guarantee they'll talk to you. Most of them don't speak basic anyway."

"Do you have a translator droid?" Cal asked, "I mean you must have used something like that to communicate with the arten originally."

"It's damaged." Dayle said, "It happened about a week before we found the body. I thought it was an accident, though now I'm not so sure. We didn't have the parts to repair it."

"Then we must trust that we can find a local willing to help us." Kraus said.

"If not," Cal added, "then maybe we can try to be more, err, persuasive."

At first light Dayle drove the three jedi to the nearest of the arten settlements. Like all the places the species lived the village was located by water, in this case a wide slow moving river. The village was lightly fortified, with the three sides not on the riverbank surrounded by a shallow ditch with sharpened stakes driven in at an angle just inside the perimeter created by them.

"Are they expecting trouble?" Lara said when she saw the defences.

"No." Dayle replied, "Its quite normal for the arten to protect their settlements like that. They aren't overly warlike, but the tribes do come into conflict every now and again. Plus there's the stories about the Blood Tribe raiding defenceless homes."

"They may not be just stories." Kraus said.

"I'm just coming to realise that." Dayle said.

"Well it looks like we've got a welcoming committee." Cal said and he pointed to where a wooden bridge crossed the defensive ditch and led to a narrow gap in the stakes. There a group of arten was assembling, all of who were armoured and armed with spears or bows.

Dayle brought the ATV to a halt just before the bridge.

"We are here to speak with Elder Shem." He called out.

The arten held their ground, blocking the way into the village. One of them, a figure that wore armour more ornately decorated than the others stepped forwards and spoke. His words were in the arten's own language and thus unintelligible to any of the humans, but the way in which he waved his arm past them gave the suggestion that he was ordering them to leave.

"Perhaps we can help solve this." Kraus said, climbing out of the ATV.

"Lara, let's go with him." Cal said and they both got out after the older jedi and followed him as he walked across the bridge.

Kraus held his arms out open to try and show that he approached as a friend, but behind him both Cal and Lara kept their hands on their lightsabers just in case.

The arten leader shouted again and pointed past the jedi.

"We mean you no harm." Kraus called out. He knew that his words would have no meaning to the aliens, but he reached out through the force as well in an attempt to calm them.

Unfortunately his efforts failed and the arten leader stepped back, ordering his troops to take up a defensive position with their shields pressed together and spears poking between them. Behind this armoured wall the arten bowmen drew arrows. Simultaneously Cal and Lara drew and activated their lightsabers, the characteristic 'snap-hiss' of each weapon powering up merging into a single sound. They moved forwards, positioning themselves between Kraus and the arten warriors, poised to strike.

Fear.

The effect on the arten was immediate and several of them broke and ran, while those remaining looked at one another nervously.

"You know," Kraus said to the Udras, "explaining that we come in peace is not helped by you two getting ready to hack up the locals." And he reached out and lowered the arms of the two younger jedi before walking closer to the arten line. As he did so the Udras shut off their lightsabers. "Please forgive my two companions," He called out, "but they are young and inexperienced. I would like to talk to your elders."

The same arten that had so far tried to warn the jedi off now looked around to where two of the warriors that had fled were already returning with a much older arten between them.

"Shem!" Dayle called out when he saw the older arten approaching, "We need to talk." And he got out of the ATV as well and walked up to where the jedi stood.

"We have made our position clear Doctor Larnson." Shem called back, "We dare not go against the Blood Tribe."

"These people can help you Shem." Dayle replied, pointing to the jedi, "They are great warriors."

"They do not look so great to me." Shem said, "One is old and another is female."

"Did he just insult me for being a girl?" Lara said, looking at Cal.

"I think so." Cal replied, "Perhaps you give him a demonstration."

"I will go first Cal." Kraus said.

"Age before beauty I suppose." Lara said.

Kraus frowned briefly then reached out an arm. Immediately the arrows of the arten warriors all rose from their quivers into the air before dropping back to the ground. Stunned, some of the arten began to scabble about in an attempt to pick up their arrows.

"My turn." Lara said and she focused on the leader of the arten troops, ripping his spear from his grasp and dragging it through the air to where she caught it. Then she looked directly at Shem and smiled.

"See." She said, "I'm not just a pretty face."

"Really?" Shem replied, "You are considered attractive amongst your people? How strange."

Lara scowled.

Elder Shem cleared everyone out of his hut for the meeting with Dayle and the jedi, then he sat on one of several woven rugs laid out in a circle on the floor and indicated for his guests to do the same. Dayle sat down immediately, followed by the jedi.

"Shem," Dayle said, "we're here about—"

"The Blood Tribe." Shem interrupted and he shook his head.

"You fear them." Kraus said.

"We do." Shem replied, "Our ancestors united to try and destroy them but failed. For a long time they were just a bad memory, but now that they are active once more this village cannot stand against them alone."

"But you aren't alone any more." Dayle said.

"You said your people were not warriors." Shem said, looking straight at him. Then he shifted his gaze to look over the jedi, "Do you really believe that just these three can go against the Blood Tribe?"

"We already have." Cal said, "They attacked us last night. More than twenty of them."

"How many of you did they kill?" Shem asked.

"None." Lara answered before either of the other jedi could respond, "But we got a few of them."

Shem's spines rose.

"You defeated the Blood Tribe?" he asked, sounding as if he did not believe what he had been told.

"We did." Kraus replied.

"Then Lamson is right." Shem said, nodding slowly, "You are mighty warriors. But my people still will not fight the Blood Tribe when they are not bothering us."

"They'll come for you eventually." Cal said.

"They have had many years to do this." Shem pointed out, "But they only attacked us when we dealt with you."

"Fighting may not be necessary." Kraus said, "We seek information. What can you tell me of the Blood Tribe? What are their customs and where do they live?"

Shem's spines sank once more.

"The Blood Tribe were the favoured of the outsiders who came to this world long ago." He explained, "When our ancestors were enslaved theirs gained privilege by giving them the worship they demanded. Then the outsiders left, some say to make war with each other and the Blood Tribe tried to usurp their position on this world. But the other tribes rose up and it was thought that they were gone. Their places of power were smashed and no tribe paid them tribute any more."

"Places of power?" Kraus said, "What places are these?"

"In each city the outsiders had palaces for themselves and their loyal servants. To the rest of us these were places that one ever returned from. At least not alive. In the uprising they were burned to the ground with as many of the Blood Tribe inside as possible."

"What about tunnels?" Cal asked.

"It was said that the Blood Tribe could appear as if by magic anywhere in the cities they controlled." Shem said, "Many warriors were lost to surprise attacks. It was later discovered that there were networks of tunnels running beneath the cities built by the outsiders. All those that were found were destroyed."

"But you can't be certain that you got them all?" Dayle asked.

"No." Shem admitted.

"Do you know where these tunnels led?" Kraus asked.

"Where else?" Shem answered, "To the palaces of the outsiders."

4.

"Well this is it." Dayle said, "The approximate geographical centre of the city." And he held his arms outstretched, "Just the sort of place an evil overlord would build a palace."

The jedi looked around. All around them were the remains of what could have been a single massive structure once. Of course it was hard to tell, the ruins were so overgrown here that there could have been the remains of several smaller buildings present instead. The ancient artefacts had been thorough when they destroyed this place.

"So where do we start?" Lara asked.

"I don't know." Cal replied and he looked at Dayle, "Any ideas?" he asked.

"None." Dayle answered.

Kraus sighed and drew his lightsaber. There was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated the weapon and then he plunged it blade first down into the ground at his feet. He dragged the lightsaber along in a line before he shut it off and returned it to his belt, then he lay down on the ground and looked into the groove he had just cut.

"See anything?" Lara asked, standing over him.

"No." He replied as he got back to his feet, "We must try again."

The jedi spread out and using their lightsabers they cut grooves in the ground that they could look down into, hunting for any signs of tunnels running beneath their feet. On the other hand, Dayle simply began a search of the ruins themselves, using his own experience of hunting for hidden chambers and passageways. Unsurprisingly, it was his hard won experience that came out ahead of the more haphazard method being used by the jedi and he stopped suddenly when he felt a paving stone shift beneath his foot. "Over here!" he shouted and he waved the jedi towards him before crouching down and brushing dirt away from the edges of the stone.

"What have we got?" Kraus asked as he stood looking over Dayle's shoulder.

"It's loose." Dayle said, "I felt it move. I think that it's covering something."

"Everybody stand back." Cal said and he reached out an arm, closed his eyes and concentrated.

There was a slight grinding sound as the large stone slab shifted, just slightly but it was noticeable. Adopting a similar stance to her brother, Lara leant her support also and the slab rose into the air. Cal gave it a shove through the force to push it away from where it had lay before releasing it. Unable to hold it aloft on her own, Lara also let go as the slab dropped to the ground and broke. Then everyone stepped forwards and looked down into the darkness of the passageway now exposed below them.

"I take it one of you is going first?" Dayle asked, looking at each of the jedi in turn.

"Doctor, I suggest you remain here." Kraus said.

"So I can be easily picked off if the Blood Tribe send anyone up out of the tunnels?" Dayle replied, "I don't think so."

"Very well doctor." Kraus said, then he looked at Cal, "Jedi Udra, I recommend that you take the lead." He said, "I will follow with Doctor Lamson and your padawan can bring up the rear."

"You hear that?" Cal said to Lara, "Get to the back." And then he leapt into the hole.

The moment he hit the floor, Cal activated his lightsaber and used the blue glow from its energy blade to light up the area. As it happened he was not standing in a tunnel after all, but a chamber held up by evenly spaced columns. He looked all around and saw no signs of anyone else in the chamber. Aware that the columns provided plenty of places to for an enemy to hide he opened his mind to the force and looked for the distinctive signs of intelligent life.

A sudden flare in the force from behind him made Cal spin around, holding his lightsaber at the ready. But instead of one of the Blood Tribe he found himself looking at his sister.

"You were supposed to be the last one down." Cal said sternly.

"I got bored waiting." She replied, "So what's down here then?"

"I was just seeing if could sense any intelligent life."

"And can you?"

"Now that you're down here? No. Just me."

"Oh ha ha, very funny." Lara said as she activated her own lightsaber. Then she shouted up through the hole, "It's safe! You can come down!"

Almost immediately Kraus leapt into the hole and joined the Udras, but Dayle remained on the surface.

"What about me?" he yelled, "Not all of us can jump into the dark as neatly as you lot."

"Wait one moment." Kraus shouted back then he looked at the other two jedi, "Take a look around." He said, "There must be some way of getting up to the surface from down here." All three jedi then began to move off in separate directions, looking for a way to get Dayle down safely.

"Over here!" Cal shouted after he had gone only a handful of paces and he held his lightsaber up to one of the columns. There a lever was set into the stone work.

"What are you waiting for?" Lara asked as she walked over to her brother, "Pull it." And she reached out and took hold of the lever.

"No wait!" Kraus shouted at her, but it was too late and Lara pulled on the lever and there was a sudden grinding sound, "It may be booby trapped." He added more quietly.

"That makes you the booby." Cal whispered into Lara's ear and she frowned at him.

The grinding continued and as the jedi looked around their lightsabers revealed that the floor beneath the hole was rising upwards. Then part of it stopped about twenty centimetres off the floor as the rest continued to rise. An equal distance later the next portion halted and so on until the elevated floor sections had formed a stairway leading up to the surface. Holding a torch in one hand and his blaster in the other, Dayle descended.

"Incredible." He exclaimed as he looked around, "This chamber is far better preserved than any of the surface structures."

"Indeed it is." Kraus replied, "I must admit to envying you for what you may-"

"Hey." Cal interrupted, "In case you've both forgotten the reason this place is so well preserved may just have something to do with the Blood Tribe keeping it all neat and tidy."

"Of course." Kraus replied, "We must proceed."

"Yeah, but which way?" Lara asked, "There's more than one door you know."

"Well I suggest that way." Dayle said, aiming his torch beam at one of the doorways.

"Why?" Lara asked, "It looks the same as every other way out of here."

"The arten are amphibious." Dayle answered, "They like it cool and damp. That door leads in the direction of the river."

"Sounds good to me." Cal said and he began to walk towards the doorway indicated by Dayle.

The passageway was narrow, not wide enough for two people to walk along side-by-side. Using his lightsaber for illumination, Cal also made use of his jedi senses to hunt for any sign that they were not alone down here. It was only when he reached the end of the passageway that he felt something, a slight tremble in the force.

"What is it?" Kraus asked softly when Cal suddenly halted.

"I'm not sure." He replied and he stepped into the next chamber.

This place was smaller than the chamber that led back to the surface and required no columns for support. Long and narrow, the passageway came out midway along one of the longer walls, while the only other doorway was set opposite. But the feature that dominated the room proved that there were other ways out, for running the entire length of the chamber and cutting it in half down the middle was an underground river. The river flowed in through a hole in one wall and extended to the far wall where it must have exited via another hole that was located beneath the surface of the water.

"There's someone here." Cal whispered as the others followed him into the chamber, "I'm sure of it."

"Where?" Lara asked, she could sense the presence of intelligent beings herself but like her brother could not determine where they were.

Cal moved further into the room, right up to the edge of the water.

"Wait! Get back!" Dayle suddenly yelled and he pointed his blaster towards the water just as one of the Blood Tribe reached out and dragged Cal in by his ankle.

"Cal no!" Lara cried out and she shut off her lightsaber, switched on her torch, rushed to the water and dived in.

As soon as Cal's lightsaber had been submerged its circuitry had shorted out and safety mechanisms cut in to shut it off before permanent damage was done to it. This left both Cal and Lara fighting with their bare hands against the submerged Blood Tribe.

There were six of the arten hidden beneath the surface of the water, all of who were grappling with Cal as Lara let her torch beam pass over them. Briefly she returned to the surface and took a deep breath before diving back down again.

As she swam closer, Lara saw that the arten were all armed with knives strapped to their waists, but none of them had bothered to unsheathe their weapons. Instead they just seemed to be trying to hold Cal in place. For a moment this confused Lara, but then she remembered that the arten were amphibious, meaning that they could breathe underwater while Cal could not and it seemed that they knew it.

The light from the torch gave Lara's presence away to the Blood Tribe and two of them looked around at her and broke away from Cal, swimming towards her. Realising that she was at a disadvantage, Lara reached for the only weapon she had available. Like the arten, she had a knife at her waist and she slipped it from its sheath. The arten saw this and reacted in kind, producing their own weapons. But as Lara closed on them she waved her hand holding her torch and, using the force sent a shockwave through the water that knocked the knives from her opponents' grasps. Startled, the arten both halted and seeing her opportunity Lara struck.

She sliced across the chest of one of the arten, cutting him wide open. Then as a cloud of blood began to expand out from his dying comrade, the second arten found Lara's torch hurtling towards his face. Using the compact device as a weapon, Lara jabbed the torch into the arten's eye. Then as the arten pulled back she brought her knife up under his chin and thrust the blade into his neck.

Cal had seen his sister dive into the water and rapidly despatch two of the arten. The four arten still grappling with him were clearly attempting to drown him and with Lara now closing, Cal decided that he should stop struggling to conserve what air remained in his lungs.

Meanwhile the arten now faced a dilemma. If they continued to hold Cal firm then Lara would easily be able to kill them one at a time. On the other hand, if any moved to engage her then it was possible that Cal would escape.

So they fled.

The four arten kicked out and propelled themselves towards the surface of the water, hoping to escape. Cal followed, desperate for fresh air with Lara not far behind. As soon as Cal broke the surface he heard the sound of an energy weapon discharging and he pushed himself away just before the body of an arten that had been shot while climbing out of the water fell back into it. Dayle cut down a second arten just before it reached the doorway on the far side of the chamber, but the final two made it into the darkness of the passageway beyond and escaped.

"Thanks." Cal said, gasping for breath when Lara surfaced beside him, "That's one I owe you."

"Take my hand." Kraus said, crouching beside the water and offering his hand to Cal who was nearest.

"No thanks." He replied, "I need to get my lightsaber back, I dropped it in the struggle. Then I may as well climb out on the other side. After all we've got to get after those two before they warn their friends we're coming." Then Cal dived back beneath the water.

The highly carved walls of the chamber allowed Dayle and Kraus to climb over the river bisecting the chamber without immersing themselves in the water like Cal and Lara had done. On the other hand, the two younger Jedi simply swam to the far bank to climb out.

Lara was the first to reach the far side.

"Where are you going?" Kraus called out to her as she rushed towards the exit.

"Someone needs to get after those guys." She replied, without bothering to look back, "They might warn their friends otherwise."

"Just be careful padawan." Kraus warned, "Take no foolish chances."

Lara paused and looked at him.

"Hey," she said, "it's me." And then she disappeared through the doorway.

As they continued to make their way over the river Kraus paused and looked at Dayle.

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

It was then that Cal surfaced and climbed from the water.

"Hang on," He said, looking around and holding up his torch, "where's Lara?"

"She went after the arten." Dayle told her as he stepped down from the wall.

"Oh no." Cal said and he ran after her.

As Kraus stepped down from the wall he shook his head.

"That young man must learn to trust his padawan more." He said.

5.

Lara sensed living beings ahead of her and shut off her lightsaber to avoid giving her presence in the passageway away to them. She placed a hand on the wall and used it to steady herself as she continued to make her way forwards. Then she halted as she sensed a more powerful presence in the passageway behind her and she span around to face it.

"You shouldn't run off like that." Cal said.

"Shush!" Lara snapped, "And shut off that lightsaber. Do you want to let them know we're coming?"

Cal frowned; annoyed at being given orders by his own padawan but recognising that she was right.

"How many do you think?" Cal whispered as he tried to determine how many opponents they faced.

"I can't tell." Lara whispered back

"That means a fair number then." Cal replied, "Enough for their individual presences in the force to be merging into one."

"So what do we do?"

"I'm going for a closer look." Cal said.

"And what about me?"

"Stay behind me. This could get messy."

Lara stuck close behind Cal as he crept forwards. The tunnel lightened as they advanced, meaning that either light was entering from the surface or the Blood Tribe were making use of artificial lighting. So far there had been no artificial lights other than those that the Jedi and Dayle had brought with them. The Arden had good low light vision so had no need of such illumination if they were merely moving around. Cal knew that whatever lay ahead must be important if it needed lighting.

He reached the end of the passageway and halted before stepping out into the light. From where he was Cal could see into the massive chamber beyond while at the same time the relative darkness of the passageway hid him from view.

Ahead was a scene that sent a shudder down Cal's spine. The chamber was filled with members of the Blood Tribe; hundreds of them and it seemed that they were getting ready for war.

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

"What?" Lara asked, "Let me see." And she stepped forwards and gasped as she looked into the chamber that was many times larger than the one that held either the stairs to the surface or the short river section for herself.

Massive columns held up the ceiling of this place and around each column burning torches cast a flickering light around the chamber. Small groups of Arden were scattered all about the chamber and each of them seemed to be preparing weapons and armour. Then he spotted two other Arden, whose skin and clothing were soaking wet rushing hurriedly between these groups. These were the two that Cal and Lara had followed here. Cal looked ahead and saw where they were headed. At the far end of the chamber was a raised dais on which was mounted an ornate throne and in this throne sat an armoured Arden with the characteristic red painted face of the Blood Tribe. Upon reaching the dais, the two Arden halted and knelt before their king. From this distance neither Cal nor Lara could hear whether they were speaking and would not have understood anything being said in any case, but it was clear that the entire Blood Tribe was about to find out that they had been discovered.

"So what now?" Lara asked.

"I'll stay and keep an eye on things here." Cal said, "You go and get the others. They need to see this."

"No Cal." Lara said and Cal glared at her.

"Remember your place padawan."

"Look," Lara interrupted, "I can get around them towards that chieftain guy or whatever he is. You know we're going to have to fight our way through this lot to get to him and it would be better if I was already there."

Cal considered this for a moment. Though his skills with the force were much stronger than his sister's, he knew that Lara had mastered the art of hiding herself in plain sight much better than he could and in the time it would take him to return here with Dayle and Kraus she could have made her way right up to the leader of the Blood Tribe without being spotted.

Or she could have been found out and killed instead.

"Cal, I can do this." Lara said, sensing his concern for her safety.

"Yes, I know." Cal admitted reluctantly, "But be careful." And with that he rushed back down the passageway towards Dayle and Kraus.

Lara paused; suddenly aware of how alone she was against what was probably the entire Blood Tribe. She took several deep breaths and let the force flow through her freely. Then she stepped into the light.

Lara doubted that she could follow the path taken by the two arten sentries towards their leader, deceiving that many beings would take more power than she could control at present. So instead she moved cautiously around the edge of the chamber, letting the shadows cast by its supporting columns and the crude lighting help conceal her from view.

At one point a group of arten spearmen suddenly got to their feet as Lara approached and she thought they had detected her. In response she raised the lightsaber that she still gripped, but did not activate its blade until she knew for sure. As it happened she was still safe. The spearmen had stood up to be inspected by their unit commander and Lara continued on her way.

From the bottom of the dais, Lara could see the throne on which the Blood Tribe's leader sat more clearly. It clearly was not built by the arten; in fact it was not really a throne at all. Though she did not recognise the exact model and even with the modifications that had been made to it, she knew an ejector seat when she saw one. Lara immediately surmised that whatever alien race had come here in the distant past had left it behind and the Blood Tribe now treasured it. Over the years they had decorated the ejector seat, perhaps even beginning when its original owner had still occupied it after crashing here and now it was covered in detailed carvings and totems.

Creeping closer, Lara saw that the two arten sentries were now giving a report to their leader, pointing to a map of the tunnels to show where they had encountered the humans. In response the Blood Tribe's leader was giving orders to several other arten in highly decorated armour, most likely instructions to find and kill the intruders.

But what really concerned Lara was that this close to the leadership of the Blood Tribe all she could sense was centuries of lingering hatred.

She glanced down and noticed the safety harness of the ejector seat-turned-throne. The clasp had been kept free of corrosion over the centuries and it still bore a decorative carving of a symbol that Lara recognised instantly.

A tremor in the force alerted Lara to the arrival of Cal and the others and looking towards the doorway she had entered through, she just about spotted her brother in the passageway.

"So what now?" Dayle asked as he looked at the hundreds of arten warriors they faced.

"We need to get over there." Cal replied, pointing to the dais.

"Through that lot?" Dayle asked.

"Do not worry doctor." Kraus said as he looked towards the dais, "I think we have something in our favour. May I borrow your recording rod?"

"Yes of course." Dayle said and he took the device from his belt and handed it over, "But I don't see how that's going to help."

Kraus pointed the recording rod at the dais and took a picture. Then he handed it back to Dayle.

"Take a look doctor." Eh said.

Dayle looked down at the recording rod's tiny display and his eyes widened, then he looked up at the dais and then back to the image.

"But how?" he asked and he placed his finger on the image to zoom in where it clearly showed Lara standing right behind the chief of the Blood Tribe even though she was not there when he looked for himself.

"I think that the good doctor has just realised how talented your padawan is." Kraus said to Cal.

"Never tell her I agreed, will you?" Cal replied.

Kraus looked at Dayle.

"I think it best if you remain here." He said, "We will make our way over there and deal with this situation."

"Sure." Dayle said, "But what if they find me?"

"You've got a blaster haven't you?" Cal said, "Use it. We'll give them something more to worry about than you."

"Thanks." Dayle said, "I think."

Lara shook her head slowly. She could see Cal and Kraus as they made their way towards her, also sticking to the shadows at the edge of the chamber. Unlike Lara, the two older jedi were using distraction to mask their approach rather than just dulling the perception of those around them and blending into the background. This would work fine so long as no one was looking directly at them, but it only took one to raise the alarm...

Cal waved his hand and an arten unit commander suddenly spotted something about one of his men he didn't like and began berating his subordinate loudly, causing his other troops to focus their attention on him instead of the two jedi knights less than ten metres away. Cal turned to Kraus and beckoned him forwards, only to find the scholar studying the carvings on the wall beside him.

"Come on." Cal whispered, "We've got a job to do. You can go sight seeing later."

At first Kraus frowned, but then he relaxed, nodded and followed Cal. But just as the pair made it past the group of arten, its leader ceased yelling at his subordinate and looked around. Right at Cal.

When the warning went out, Dayle drew his blaster. An arten had let out a sudden screech and the spines on his head and back had stood on end as he drew his sword. His troops did likewise and Cal and Kraus suddenly found themselves surrounded.

Dayle raised his blaster and waited to be discovered.

6.

Throughout the chamber the warriors of the Blood Tribe drew weapons and looked towards the two jedi. Already Cal and Kraus had ignited their lightsabers and stepped away from the wall to do battle. Meanwhile on the dais Lara decided that it was time for her to act also and she ignited her own lightsaber.

The sudden 'snap-hiss', combined with Lara's ending of her concealment surprised the Blood Tribe and all those on the dais stepped back in surprise as she appeared as if from nowhere, weapon in hand. The Blood Tribes leader himself toppled from his throne and scabbled backwards across the floor until one of his underlings grabbed him and helped him back to his feet. Reaching out her free hand, Lara sent a shock wave through the force that sent the nearest arten flying backwards through the air. Then she charged at the arten king.

Torches dropped from their mounts as Kraus reached out through the force and as they landed on piles of clothing and other possessions they ignited, starting half a dozen small fires in seconds that served to further confuse and panic the Blood Tribe.

Meanwhile, like his sister Cal went on the attack and charged the arten swordsmen in front of him, slicing through their weapons with a wide swing of his lightsaber. Some of his startled opponents stepped away and those that did not were cut down on his return swing.

Three arten warriors, all heavily armoured stepped in between Lara and their king. But though the finely crafted metal plates they wore would have protected them from their own style of weaponry, against an opponent armed with a lightsaber the extra weight was nothing but a hindrance and Lara cut her way through them effortlessly.

Yelling at anyone near him the arten king fell back, putting as many other warriors between Lara and himself as possible.

"Hey Cal!" Lara shouted at the top of her voice, "How about a hand over here?"

"Bit busy at the moment." Cal shouted back as he despatched another arten with a thrust of his lightsaber, but he did begin to move in her direction as he fought on.

Kraus fought more defensively, knocking weapons from the grasp of their owners and angling his lightsaber so that the momentum of their strikes brought them into its blade without him having to do anything about it. "Allow me." He said as Cal began to move towards his sister and with one tremendous effort Kraus sent a wave of force energy out in front of them, directly towards Lara. The wave sent arten warriors and their weapons flying aside, creating a gap that the two jedi rushed down towards Lara as she finally came face to face with the arten king.

With no more underlings to sacrifice, the king of the Blood Tribe drew his own sword and held it in front of him. Immediately Lara shuddered. There was something about the sword that was, for want of a better word, unnatural. But after seeing the carving on the ejector seat Lara was not surprised to see it here.

The king struck first, swinging his sword downwards towards Lara who brought up her lightsaber to block the attack. But rather than breaking in two when its blade struck the energy of the lightsaber, the king's sword simply halted and Lara felt the pressure as the enraged arten pressed down with all his might.

"Hey!" Cal yelled from nearby, "Get your filthy stinking hands off my sister!" and he charged at the arten king.

Distracted, the king broke off his attack on Lara and readied himself for Cal's assault. This came almost immediately as Cal thrust out his lightsaber only for the king to block it with his own mysterious blade.

Surprised that his attack had been blocked in this way, Cal paused and the arten king used the opportunity to launch a counter attack that Cal sidestepped easily.

Lara saw her chance and leapt over the arten king, landing close enough to be able to attack him. But the arten reacted quickly and clamped a hand around her throat before she could strike; her lightsaber fell from her grasp and rolled across the floor.

His spines twitching, the arten king looked Lara in the eyes and hissed something unintelligible in his own language. Then Lara felt his grip tighten.

"I said get off her!" Cal bellowed and he brought his lightsaber down on the king's arm, slicing cleanly through it and breaking his grip on Lara, who staggered backwards gasping for breath.

As the arten king staggered backwards Cal swung his lightsaber again and put an end to his reign. Then he reached down to where the late king had dropped his sword, curious to discover how it was able to block lightsabers.

"Cal no!" Lara yelled and using the force she pushed it away before he could touch it.

"Here, take this." Kraus said as he joined the Udras and he handed Lara's lightsaber back to her.

She took the weapon and activated it. Then the three jedi stood back to back as the arten of the Blood Tribe closed in all around them.

"We'll never make it to the door we came in through." Lara said.

"Lots of other doors." Cal said, noting that the other exits from the chamber.

"Indeed," Kraus added, "but we have no idea where they lead."

"So what do you suggest then?" Cal asked.

"If a suitable exit is not available then we must make it ourselves." Kraus said, "I believe we want to go up."

"On three." Cal said, "One-

"Two-" Kraus said.

"Three!" Lara yelled and all three jedi suddenly leapt upwards and over the heads of the startled arten warriors.

"Dayle! Run!" Cal shouted as he landed beside one of the chamber's supporting columns and swung his lightsaber. In different parts of the chamber Kraus and Lara did the same, cutting through the stone columns that held up the ceiling. Then before the Blood Tribe could reach them they leapt into the air once more before touching down beside another column. Soon a grinding noise filled the air of the chamber as the immense weight of the ceiling began to push down on the broken columns.

It was a column in the centre of the chamber that failed first. Cal had cut through it at a steep angle and the stone simply shattered as it was no longer able to support the weight pressing down on it. The failure of this one column was just the start as more began to fail, crashing down on top of the arten warriors below. But this was not the end of it. Without the columns to support it, the ceiling began to fall in.

"There!" Kraus shouted and he pointed as a ray of sunlight broke in through a hole that had opened up.

The jedi all leapt upwards, using pieces of falling masonry as launch pads for further leaps that took them higher and higher, closer to the surface.

Emerging from the underground tunnel complex, Dayle saw the cloud of dust filling the air and walked towards it. Somewhere in that he knew was the collapsed chamber where the jedi had fought the Blood Tribe. He had fled as soon as Cal told him and so he had no idea of what fate had befallen them, but he was determined to find out.

As he neared the cloud a figure emerged from it, covered in dust. Two more followed soon after and Dayle smiled when he saw that they were the jedi. Putting on a more serious expression he looked them in the eyes.

"You know that was a priceless archaeological find you just destroyed." He said.

"You're welcome." Lara replied.

"Yeah, well it's going to set back my research not having that place to study. Who knows what it contained?" Dayle said.

"Actually doctor," Kraus said to him, "now that the Blood Tribe around here are buried under tonnes of rubble I think the locals will be more willing to help you once more."

"They better." Dayle replied.

"Am I disturbing you master?" Kraus said as he stood at the entrance to Jedi Master Ben Karas' quarters. The jedi master was mediating in the centre of the room.

"No," he replied, "do come in. Now what is it?"

"I have returned from Atch master." Kraus said, "With disturbing news."

Master Karas got up from the floor and looked at Kraus.

"What is it my old friend?" he asked.

"I know of your premonitions about the Udras." Kraus said, "That they will-

"Get on with it." Master Karas interrupted.

"While I was on Atch I had a brief opportunity to study carvings made by the aliens who visited the world many years ago. I know who they were."

"You're very quiet." Cal said, looking across the cockpit to his sister, "Is this to do with that sword?"

"Sort of." Lara replied, "Cal, I know you really wanted to study it but I don't think that it would have been a good idea."

“Why not?”

“I saw markings on the throne that I recognised. I’ve seen them in books and old data files. Did you notice how the Blood Tribe painted their faces red and did the same to their weapons?”

“Yes, so?”

“So I think that they were doing more than just keeping up the traditions of the mysterious aliens who visited them centuries ago. I think they were trying to impersonate them.”

Cal stared at Lara.

“Who were they?” he asked.

“I think they were the Sith.”