

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-VIII: RELICS

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...

RELICS

AN ANCIENT WARSHIP APPEARS NEAR TO AUREK STATION AND CAL AND LARA UDRA ARE INITIALLY CALLED UPON TO HELP INVESTIGATE. BUT WHEN THE JEDI ARE SUDDENLY REMOVED FROM THE INVESTIGATION THEY MUST DECIDE IF THEY ARE GOING TO KEEP ON INVESTIGATING HOW THE SHIP CAME TO BE THERE...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
<http://www.hazugfiles.webspace.virginmedia.com/>

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1 .

Jedi knight Cal Udra was already in the pilot's seat of his vessel the *Bright Hope* when his younger sister and padawan learner rushed into the cockpit, sat down heavily in the co-pilot's seat and began to strap herself in.

"So what's going on?" she asked.

"Something's heading for the station." Cal replied, "It could be dropping out of hyperspace at any time and it's big. Administrator Varr'kay and Captain De Kuun want every available ship out there ready."

Lara frowned.

"How come we got advance notice?" she asked. Typically vessels travelling in hyperspace moved at such high velocities that they would not be detected until they returned to real space. To actually be able to deploy to meet an intruder was an anomaly indeed.

"It's not moving that fast." Cal said as the *Bright Hope* rose off the hangar deck, "Now get ready, I want you to operate the weapons if they're needed."

Lara nodded and looked at the console in front of her, specifically at the targeting systems for the ship's twin laser cannons and proton torpedo launcher. Meanwhile Cal steered the *Bright Hope* towards the hangar bay exit and accelerated the ship out into space.

Through the transparent cockpit canopy Cal and Lara could see the other vessels that had been launched to protect Aurek Station. Six gunships commanded by Captain De Kuun himself had already taken up position between the station and the predicted exit point of the approaching vessel while a squadron of Aurek wing fighters was accelerating closer to the exit point. Behind the Jedi ship Aurek Station itself was preparing for battle, recessed weapon systems had been deployed and the station's shields had been concentrated towards the exit point for maximum protection.

A sudden flash of light marked the exit from hyperspace of the mystery ship, further out from Aurek Station than had been expected. The exit point had been calculated on the basis that the ship would continue until the mass of Aurek Station forced it out of hyperspace about three kilometres away. However, the ship had instead made a controlled exit at just over ten kilometres distant. But even at this distance the ship appeared huge to the Jedi.

"What the hell is that?" Lara exclaimed, but before Cal could answer they were interrupted by the *Bright Hope's* communications system.

"*Bright Hope*, this is Captain De Kuun." The statement was unneeded. Captain De Kuun was a Duros and his accent made his voice easy to recognise even over a communications channel.

"Reading you loud and clear captain." Cal said, "How may we assist you?" The question was carefully worded. Captain De Kuun felt that the Jedi Order should be subordinate to the military hierarchy and Cal was making it clear that any actions he took would be as a favour to the captain and nothing more.

"The target vessel has not identified itself." Captain De Kuun said, "I want you to take your ship in closer for a visual assessment."

"Confirmed captain." Cal said and as the channel went silent he looked at his sister and added, "Well it looks like we're going to get a closer look. Maybe we'll be the first to figure out what it is."

With its twenty-one powerful ion engines, the *Bright Hope* had acceleration and manoeuvring capabilities that rivalled or even exceeded many starfighters, so as Cal boosted the power to the sublight drives the ship rapidly closed with and then overtook the fighter squadron that was now moving to circle around the massive target vessel.

"Mind how you go there." A familiar female voice said over the communications system.

"You got our backs Erin?" Cal asked, somewhat informally for a response over military channels.

"Sure thing." Lieutenant Erin Shill replied, "My boys have a great view from here. If our visitor decides to blow you up we'll be ready to avenge you."

"Thanks." Cal said, "I think."

The massive starship was much closer now and Cal and Lara could make out details on its massive structure.

"How big is that thing?" Lara asked as she gazed at the ship.

"Sensors have it at about a thousand metres long." Cal replied, "The Republic's new command ships are three times that size."

"Is that carbon scoring?" Lara said and she pointed to a darkened patch on the hull of the ship.

Cal slowed the *Bright Hope* down for a better look and it became obvious that the hull of the massive ship was breached at the centre of the darkened area.

"Looks like she's seen action." Cal said.

"Look." Lara said, "There's more damage over there." And she now pointed to a portion of the ship's structure that was an open framework. There several of the beams were broken and twisted inwards as if something had struck them at a tremendous velocity and punched through into the interior of the ship.

"Definitely battle damage." Cal said, "But the question is who-" then he stopped abruptly.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked.

"Open your mind Lara. Relax and tell me how many crewmen that ship has."

"A ship that size would need thousands. How am I supposed to count them all- Oh." Lara replied as she realised what her brother was getting at.

Every sentient species known to the Republic had a presence in the force that a Jedi could detect. If, like Lara suggested the ship had a crew numbering in the thousands then their presence would shine out like a floodlight in the night to her and Cal. But to their Jedi senses the ship was empty.

If there was anyone aboard at all, they were dead.

"I'm taking us in closer." Cal said.

"Closer?"

"Yeah. There, that looks good." And Cal indicated an opening in the side of the ship. Unlike the other holes in the hull they had seen this one was regularly shaped, suggesting that it was supposed to be there.

"A docking bay?" Lara asked.

"I hope so." Cal replied, "Even if its not it'll do as one for now."

Carefully, aware that any sudden change in the larger ship's trajectory could send the *Bright Hope* crashing into the hull Cal guided the *Bright Hope* through the opening.

"*Bright Hope* we no longer read you on our sensors." Captain De Kuun transmitted, "Confirm your position."

"Its all right captain." Lara responded, "The ship looks dead, we've located what seems to be a docking bay and are preparing to board her now."

"I didn't give permission for that!" Captain De Kuun snapped, "I can have Sergeant Keltan's marines there in-"

Cal shook his head.

"Sorry captain," Lara said, interrupted the duros officer, "you're breaking up. Must be interference from the structure."

A dull 'thunk' sounded through the *Bright Hope* as Cal brought it to rest on what he assumed to be the deck of the vast space they were now in.

"A bit rough don't you think?" Lara said.

"Its not my fault." Cal replied, "There's no gravity here. I just hope I've not landed us on the ceiling."

"No atmosphere either." Lara said, noting the readouts in front of her.

"We better suit up then." Cal said, "Unless you just want to sit here and wait for the marines."

Preventing decompression by gripping the wearer's body tightly, the vacc suits worn by Cal and Lara could be quickly donned without the need for a lengthy pre-breathing procedure of pure oxygen to prevent nitrogen bubbles forming in their blood streams. So it was only a matter of minutes before the two Jedi were climbing out of the *Bright Hope*. To make it easy for them to see one another, Cal and Lara both wore brightly coloured suits. Cal's was a gleaming white, while his sister had opted for pink.

"So which way?" Lara said as soon as they were both outside their own ship, their magnetic boots keeping them from drifting off what they still assumed to be the deck of the larger vessel.

Cal looked around. The chamber was large enough to hold several ships the size of the *Bright Hope*, although there were no other ships present at that time. There was, however a great deal of debris heaped against one wall that included a large pile of wreckage that could at one time have been a small shuttle or fighter. There were three doors out of the chamber, all of which were positioned to suggest that his initial assumption about which surface was the deck had been correct, plus a larger door set into the deck itself.

"That one." Cal said, pointing to the nearest doorway set into the wall.

"Why?" Lara asked.

"Because it's the only one that's open." He answered.

Lara shrugged.

"Works for me." She said and she followed her brother towards the door.

The further from the *Bright Hope* and its landing lights the Jedi got, the darker the interior of the mysterious ship became and when he reached the open doorway Cal drew his lightsaber and activated it to act as a

lantern. The typical 'snap-hiss' absent was in the vacuum surrounding him. Behind him, Lara also drew her own lightsaber and activated it.

"Somebody's tidy." Lara commented, continuing to follow behind Cal as he picked a route through the deserted ship.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well look." Lara said, "There's no junk scattered at random like you'd expect. It's all been stacked up."

Cal stopped and looked around. Just as Lara had said, the debris in the corridor they were currently walking along was all lying against one wall.

"Hang on a moment." Cal said and he walked back the way they had come for a short distance until he reached a junction that he had passed by on the way, "Come look at this Lara." He said and he pointed down the side passage. Lara approached and looked down the corridor for herself.

"What?" she asked, "It looks the same as this corridor to me."

"No it isn't." Cal said, "Look at where the junk's been piled up."

Lara looked down.

"It's at the far end." She said, "Whereas in this one its along the side."

"Exactly." Cal said, "But if you study both corridors together you see that the debris has been moved in the same direction."

"A dodgy cleaning droid?" Lara suggested, "I once saw one try and-"

"No." Cal interrupted, "Think my young apprentice. What's in that direction?"

Lara paused.

"How should I know what's back-"

"Not that." Cal interrupted.

"Huh?" Lara replied.

"You just said it."

"Said what? I don't know what's back-"

"There again."

Lara stared at him.

"Stop being cryptic or I'm telling mom and dad on you." She said sternly.

"The front of the ship." Cal said.

"So?" Lara asked, "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Think Lara." Cal said, "What happens as you exit hyperspace?"

"Well there's a big flash of light for starters."

"No. What happens to the vessel itself?"

"Nothing it just slows down."

"Exactly. It slows down very, very quickly. It goes from travelling at billions of kilometres per hour to perhaps just a few tens of thousands in a relatively short space of time."

Lara looked back at the debris piled against the wall of the corridor they were stood in.

"So the inertial compensators aren't working properly then." She said, "The ship dropped out of hyperspace and everything not fixed down got thrown forwards."

"Precisely." Cal said, "This could be a problem."

"How come?"

"Well supposing the ship accelerates again with us inside. What happens to us?"

"Smooosh?" Lara suggested.

"Precisely." Cal said, "Smooosh. We need to get out of here before that can happen."

Lara nodded and the two jedi turned around and began to retreat back the way they had come as fast as they could manage.

The *Bright Hope* was exactly where they had left it and as soon as they boarded their ship Cal and Lara headed directly for the cockpit without bothering to change out of their vacc suits and back into their robes. Neither of them wanted to take the chance that they could be suddenly crushed under the force of uncontrolled acceleration.

Sitting in the pilot's seat, Cal brought the *Bright Hope's* drives on line and applied a reverse thrust to push the ship back out of the docking bay. Once outside he continued to put as much room as possible between them and the larger ship just in case it suddenly sprang to life.

"*Bright Hope*," Captain De Kuun transmitted, "marine transport is en route. Stand by for their arrival."

"Negative captain." Lara replied, "Do not approach the intruder."

"Why not?" Captain De Kuun demanded.

"We'll explain later." Cal said, "In the mean time just have your fighters surround the ship and keep watch over it. I'll speak to you back on the station."

2.

"It's one of ours." Administrator Varr'kay said to the assembled Republic personnel. The diminutive bothan stood beside a large hologram the ship floating outside Aurek Station next to a schematic of a similar vessel, "A heavy cruiser."

"Indeed" Captain De Kuun stated, "But ships of this class haven't been in active service for centuries now. I don't even think there are any in reserve fleets."

"Do we have an ID yet?" a woman sat beside captain De Kuun asked. This was Agent Jule Raser, the most senior member of the sector rangers in the Narthis sector.

"No." Captain De Kuun replied, "There are no markings remaining that give us a positive identification on the ship."

"And we saw nothing inside either." Cal said, "Though we were only there for a short time and didn't get near any of the vital areas."

"We need to get back aboard that ship." Varr'kay said.

"And soon." Captain De Kuun added, "Though we have not put anyone aboard until we can be reasonably assured that they will not be killed should the ship suddenly accelerate there are others more willing to try. Lieutenant Shill's squadron is having trouble keeping independent salvage operators away. While the ship is deserted it is vulnerable."

"We can't be certain it's deserted can we?" Jule asked.

"Well to borrow a word from my sister," Cal replied, "any crew left aboard would have been smooshed by now." And he smiled at Lara.

"Sergeant Keltan." Captain De Kuun said causing the marine sergeant to sit up in his seat suddenly, having been ignored in the conversation thus far, "How are your plans to make the vessel safe for boarding coming along?"

"Droids." The sergeant replied.

"What?" Varr'kay asked.

"I'm gathering EVA capable droids to carry charges to the ship's drive units and fuel lines." Sergeant Keltan explained, "We'll immobilise the vessel and then we can board her safely."

"Sounds good to me." Cal said, "How' it coming?"

"Not well." The sergeant said, "We've requisitioned all of the ones on the station, but that's only a dozen. We need at least three times that many to be certain of doing the job right. We've got them coming in from Crassis Major and the exploration post on Vayal, but they won't be here until tomorrow morning.

"What other support can we expect?" Varr'kay asked, looking around the room.

"The patrol frigate *Perseverance* is being diverted here just in case we need further support." Captain De Kuun said, "But the vessel is unlikely to be here even by tomorrow morning."

"So we're pretty much on our own if we get any more surprise guests." Jule said.

"Indeed." Captain De Kuun said, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair.

At that point the station intercom chimed and a second hologram formed next to the one of the ancient starship, this one of the station staff.

"Administrator," the crewman began, his image facing in Varr'kay's direction, "a vessel has just exited hyperspace and is on approach."

Fear.

The room's occupants looked at one another nervously and to the Jedi their reaction was easy to sense.

"A second warship?" Varr'kay replied.

"No sir." The crewman replied, "It is a transport ship from the Jedi enclave on Moldas, they are requesting permission to dock."

The occupants of the room relaxed, except for Cal and Lara who looked at one another nervously.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Lara whispered to her brother.

"I don't know." He replied softly, "I didn't ask them."

"Well I didn't either." Lara said.

"I requested their presence." Captain De Kuun said, "Though Master Karas made no promises about sending anyone."

Varr'kay turned to the hologram, "Give them permission to dock." He said, "Tell them they will be met in the hangar bay." And with that the image of the crewman faded away.

"I think that we should handle this." Cal said and he got to his feet, "Come on Lara."

"Indeed, I think that would be an excellent idea." Varr'kay said, "In fact, I suggest we adjourn for now and meet again tomorrow. Shall we say eight?"

"Nervous?" Lara asked Cal as they stood in the hangar bay awaiting the arrival of the Jedi starship.

"What ever gave you that idea?" Cal replied.

"That fact that you've adjusted your robes four times since we got here two minutes ago."

"Well until we know for certain we can't be sure that Master Karas himself isn't going to walk off that ship and you know what he thinks of us."

Lara's eyes widened.

"Stang." she said, adjusting her robe and hair.

There was a roaring as the transport passed through the magnetic shield covering the hangar and the vessel moved at high speed towards the empty landing slot where Cal and Lara waited. Decelerating suddenly, the ship spun around in mid air above them before settling down on the deck. There was a delay as the ship's engines powered down and then a ramp lowered from beneath it.

"If it is Master Karas," Cal said to Lara, "then I suggest you let me do the talking. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Lara replied.

They watched the transport ship and held their breaths in anticipation, relaxing only when they saw two figures descending the ramp, neither of them Jedi Master Karas.

"Seth." Cal said, smiling, "Good to see you again."

Seth Ashran was an expert in spacecraft of all types. The Udras had met him recently when investigating the recovery of a crashed starfighter that had belonged to the last Jedi stationed in the Narthis Sector. The second figure was a stranger. Another male human he was younger than Seth, in fact he looked about Lara's age.

"Likewise." Seth replied as he and the other newcomer halted in front of the Udras.

"So you've got a padawan then?" Lara said, looking at the other Jedi.

"Actually," Seth said sternly, "Dac Yale is a Jedi knight." And he stared at Lara as her shoulders slumped.

"Remember what I said about letting me do all the talking in front of Master Karas?" Cal said to her, "Well perhaps it should apply to all other members of the Order."

"I think that's an excellent idea." Seth said.

"In all fairness I only passed the tests three months ago." Dac said with a smile, "Now I'm hungry. How about we get something to eat."

"Sure." Cal said, "We know plenty of places."

Seth snorted.

"When Dac suggests eating he means he'll make the food."

Dac rummaged through the cupboards of the tiny kitchen in the Udras' apartment as a pot bubbled on the stove.

"You two make food here?" he asked after blowing dust from the utensil he wanted, "How do you manage without any proper utensils or ingredients?"

"Actually we get take out a lot." Cal said.

"I'd never guess." Seth commented, kicking a box filled with empty food containers.

"Well you're in for a treat now." Dac said, "Combined with the specially chosen range of spices in my kit I'm ready to prepare you a meal you'll never forget."

Cal and Lara looked at Seth.

"He's serious." Seth replied before turning towards Dac, "Enough stalling!" he called out, "Feed me!" and he banged the handles of a knife and fork on the table.

"So he really can cook?" Cal asked.

"Oh yes, Dac's quite the culinary expert." Seth answered.

"The ladies love it." Dac commented as he mixed and heated ingredients.

"Really?" Lara said with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Not quite." Seth said, "When he was made up to knight we went out to celebrate and he offered to make a woman dinner if she'd be dessert."

"I got a free drink out of it." Dac said.

"Only because you kept your mouth open while she threw it in your face." Seth said then as Dac began to spoon out servings of the meal he looked back at Cal and Lara, "So tell me more about this ship then.

What's it like inside?"

"A mess." Lara replied.

"We didn't actually get to see that much before we left." Cal added.

"So why leave?" Seth asked, "I mean a centuries old starship just dropped in your laps and you're not still exploring it?"

"Oh come on now Seth." Dac said as he handed out the plates of food, "Not everyone's as obsessed with starships as you. Some of us prefer other things."

"Like food?" Cal said, sniffing cautiously at a spoonful of his meal, "What is this anyway?"

"A little something I came up with in the ruins of an ancient city." Dac replied and he looked around, "It wasn't quite as run down as this place though."

Cal and Lara glanced at one another nervously before spooning a small amount of the food into their mouths at the same time. Then their eyes widened and they began to frantically transfer food from their plates to their mouths.

"Hello?" Seth said between more calmly taken mouthfuls, "How about you fill me in?"

"The inertial compensators were faulty." Cal said, wiping his chin with his hand then licking it clean.

"So we got out before the ship could start up again and smooch us." Lara added and Seth flinched as small drops of food flew towards him.

"The equipment needed to take the drives off line is being brought in," Cal explained, "It should be here in the morning hopefully. We need more EVA capable droids than the station has available."

"You're kidding me." Seth said and he set down his spoon before pointing at Cal and Lara, "Look, I can get that ship made safe right now with one droid. A three-DO if one's available, but pretty much any service model should do."

"But they're eating right now." Dac pointed out.

"Yeah, like kowikian monkey lizards." Seth replied, "Look, after dinner we'll get it sorted okay?"

"Okay." Cal replied and Lara just nodded as she scraped the last of her meal from her plate.

Then there was the sound of a loud belch and Seth's expression turned to one of disapproval.

"Oh very ladylike." He said.

"The thing to remember," Seth said as he piloted the *Bright Hope*, "is that a good rule of thumb is not to get closer to any ship that may suddenly jump to hyperspace than its length. That way you avoid risking being caught in the energy flash." And he halted the ship.

"So what now?" Cal asked.

Seth pointed through the canopy towards a large transparent structure located at the top of the antiquated heavy cruiser looming ahead of them.

"See that?" he said, "That's the command centre. Those ships were intended to be the focal point of a fleet so they had pretty impressive command and control facilities, even by today's standards."

"Let me guess." Cal said, "That's where we're sending the droid."

"Exactly." Seth said, "We shoot a line across from here and send the droid over with a cutting torch. Then it goes in and simply shuts off the engines."

"Sounds easy." Cal said.

"It is." Seth said, "You should have already done it." Cal was about to reply when Seth added, "Let me guess, either the navy or that paranoid bothan took charge."

"The bothan." Cal said, "He thinks we're here to spy on him."

Seth reached for the intercom.

"Are you two ready?" he asked.

"Ready and set." Dac replied, "We're depressurising now."

He and Lara were suited up and standing in the *Bright Hope*'s airlock along with a 3DO series protocol and service droid. The slender humanoid shaped machine had been fitted with a safety harness and clutched a portable cutting torch in one hand.

"You know what you have to do kay-three?" Lara asked the droid.

"Certainly mistress." The droid replied, "I am to cross to the other ship and make entry to its command centre. There I will receive further orders via wireless transceiver." Then the droid paused before it added, "I do have one question mistress."

"What?" Lara asked.

"Why are you not going? In my experience humans are more flexible when it comes to situations involving as many variables as this."

"Err-" Lara began.

"What was that word you used?" Dac asked her.

"You mean 'smooch'?"

"Yeah, smooch." Dac said and he looked at the droid, "Because we don't want to get smooched."

"I'm not certain I understand." The droid said.

"That's probably for the best." Dac said and then the airlock's outer door slid upwards, exposing the emptiness outside, "Ladies first." Dac said, indicating the open doorway to Lara.

Without replying, Lara climbed out of the airlock and climbed up onto the *Bright Hope's* upper hull, reaching back down she took the line thrower that Dac passed her, slung it over her shoulder then helped K-3DO up onto the hull after her.

"Grab hold of something." she said to the droid, aware that it lacked any means of remaining attached to the hull on its own, "Hey, not there!" she yelled as the droid took hold of her and she moved its hand to a pipe that stuck out from the hull.

Behind her, Dac was now climbing out of the airlock. He used just one hand to climb with, the other holding onto a large reel of syntherope. When he was standing beside Lara on the hull he took the end of the line in his hand.

"Here." He said to Lara and she unslung the launcher from her shoulder and held it in front of her. Dac attached the end of the syntherope to the magnetic grapple loaded in the launcher and stepped back, "You're set." He said.

"Thanks." Lara replied and she brought the launcher up to her shoulder like a rifle, aiming it towards the larger ship. With a gentle squeeze, she launched the grapple and immediately the syntherope began to unravel behind it from the reel Dac held as it sped towards the other ship.

"I think you're a little off." Dac said, noting that the grapple was going wide.

"I got it." Lara said and she reached out through the force and gave it a slight push to the side, bringing it back on target.

The launcher was not designed to fire the grapple at a high velocity and it took almost a minute for it to cross the distance between the two vessels. But when it struck the other ship it stuck fast just as it was intended to do. Seeing the trailing line start to go slack as the reel continued to spew out syntherope, Dac grabbed hold of it and stopped the reel turning.

"Okay then kay-three." Dac said, turning towards the droid, "Let's get you hooked up." And he grabbed hold of a clasp on the droid's harness before he hooked it around the syntherope and the droid let go of its grip on the *Bright Hope's* hull.

"All set?" Lara asked.

"All set." Dac replied, "Take it away."

Lara smiled and waved her hand. Immediately the droid flew off the hull and slid along the syntherope tether joining the *Bright Hope* to the other ship.

The two Jedi waited while the droid reached the end of the line and came a sudden halt, both relieved that they could still see it moving instead of being smashed to pieces by the impact. Then there was a flash of light as the droid lit its cutting torch and began to cut into the hull.

"Okay that's it." Dac said, "Let's get back inside."

By the time Dac and Lara returned to the cockpit of the *Bright Hope* the droid had cut a hole large enough for it to pass through in the hull of the ship and was climbing through into its command centre.

"Take a good look around." Seth said to the droid as he watched the remote feed from its visual sensors,

"We need to find the helm controls."

"There aren't any bodies." Lara noted.

"After centuries in space any bodies would have been reduced to desiccated husks." Cal said, "Then when the ship suddenly changed velocity they would have crumbled to dust."

"That's so sad." Lara said, "I mean their families may have never known where they went."

"If we could just focus on the present." Seth said, and then he leant forwards, "Wait!" he snapped, "Kay-three, can you make it to the set of seats in the top left quadrant of your vision?"

"I think so master." The droid replied, "Though it may take a few moments."

"Do it."

The feed from the droid wobbled as it pushed itself off the wall and towards the seats Seth had indicated.

The droid's hand appeared in the picture suddenly as it grasped the back of one of the seats and brought it self to a halt. The console in front of the seats was now visible in the feed and much to the relief of the Jedi it appeared to be functional. The droid climbed into the seat and the console filled the feed image.

"Now what do you require master?" it asked.

Seth studied the image for a moment.

"Bottom right of the panel," he said, "there's a touch panel and a rotary switch."

"I see them master."

"Turn the switch a quarter turn clockwise."

The droid did as it was told and the blank touch screen was suddenly lit up by a list of engine options.

"Good," Seth said, "now take the engines off line."

"Yes master." The droid said, tapping the 'OFFLINE' option on the display.

"See," Seth said, leaning back in his seat, "easy when you know how."

With the ancient ship now safely immobilised, Seth did not bother taking the *Bright Hope* into the docking bay Cal had used on his first trip to the ship. Instead he simply piloted the vessel as close to the breach in the command centre made by K-3DO and used the *Bright Hope's* landing gear to latch onto the larger ship. Then he looked at Cal.

"Well I suppose we better suit up as well." He said.

3.

Standing together just inside the breach in the hull, the four jedi looked around the command centre.

"This place is huge." Lara said.

Seth looked at Cal.

"Well I see you've taught your padawan to state the obvious. Always a good start." He said.

"Oh she's very difficult." Cal replied, "You know she once took a second job in a strip club? Made over three hundred credits in one night. Still has the outfit." and Lara scowled.

"Stop smiling." She said sternly to Dac. She turned around and began to make her way across the deck, "And stop checking out my ass!" she shouted.

Cal looked at Dac.

"I'd do what she says." He said, "Men have had their noses broken for less."

"Enough." Seth said and he too began to move, heading for the flight control station where K-3DO still sat motionless.

"Hey Seth!" Cal suddenly called out, "What's that?" and he pointed to a compact silver box attached to a column in the centre of the room, "It doesn't look like it belongs here."

Seth and Dac looked for themselves and saw that Cal was right. Though the vacuum in which the ship had existed for centuries had prevented corrosion of any of the instruments the small box was a different colour entirely, suggesting that it had been added later.

"Is that a portable drive?" Lara asked as she walked closer.

"Looks like one," Seth replied, "and I'd say that it's plugged into the main navigational computer."

"That's a nav computer?" Cal said and he looked at the massive column.

"Hey, this ship had to co-ordinate the jumps for an entire fleet." Seth said, "Plus their journey could have been in several stages. Without access to the beacon system, that would take a lot of computing power."

"But why hook up a drive to it?" Dac asked, "And was whoever did it transferring data into or out of it?"

"If we find them we'll ask." Cal replied.

"I don't think we can." Lara said, looking at an area on the wall at the back of the command centre. Unlike the other surfaces, this portion of the wall was discoloured. It was stained with blood, "I think whoever hooked up that drive was here when the ship suddenly accelerated when it jumped to hyperspace. Then smooosh."

Turning his attention back to the flight control console, Seth studied the drives status readouts.

"Well this explains why the station got so much warning." He said, "The primary hyperdrive is shot. Quite literally I think. This ship came here using its reserve under minimum power."

"Didn't think it was in mint condition." Dac commented.

It was then that the dim illumination provided by the displays and what starlight there was this deep in space was overwhelmed by bright spotlights shining through the transparisteel canopy of the command centre and the jedi looked up to see a compact spacecraft hovering outside with bright spotlights shining towards them. Then the jedi's communication channel crackled into life.

"Jedi Udra this is Sergeant Keltan, I have orders to secure this vessel. What is your status?"

"Oh great." Lara said, "I think we just lost our ship."

"Who gave you permission to enter the vessel?" Administrator Varr'kay demanded as the four jedi stood before him in his office.

"Err, you did." Cal said, "When you called the enclave on Moldas and asked for the Jedi Order's help."

Anger.

The bothan's fur ruffled.

"Well your help is no longer required." He snapped.

"You can't just cut us out now." Dac said.

"Yes I can." Varr'kay replied.

"Actually no you can't." Seth said, his arms folded and a stern look on his face.

"What?" Varr'kay asked, scowling.

"The ship was abandoned." Seth explained, "And the first people aboard were Cal and Lara, followed by myself and Dac along with them."

"Yeah." Lara interrupted, "We've got dibs."

Cal's shoulders slumped.

"I don't know what's worse." He whispered to her, "That you're my padawan or my sister."

"We have identified the vessel." Varr'kay said, holding out a datapad. Cal stepped forwards and took it. "The *Triumph Over Adversity*." He said, reading what was written on the display. "Indeed." Varr'kay said, "As you can see there it was part of a battlegroup lost a thousand years ago at the end of the Great Hyperspace War. It is a Republic vessel and by the authority of the Galactic Republic I am forbidding you from returning to the ship. A ruling on its salvage value will be made at a later date. Though I intend to report that the vessel was under formal exclusion when you boarded it without permission. Twice."

"You need to calm down." Dac said to Seth on the Jedi's return to Cal and Lara's apartment following their departure from Administrator Varr'kay's office.

"He's right." Cal agreed, "Your anger is clear to us all."

"Well I'm sorry." Seth replied in a manner that suggested he was anything but, "But there's a ship from a thousand years ago out there and we're not allowed near it." And he waved towards the transparent wall of the living room even though the *Triumph Over Adversity* was not visible through it.

"I'm sure the Republic will let you back on board eventually." Dac said as he sat down, "Once they've finished going over it themselves that is."

"That'll take months." Seth said.

Cal wanted to say something reassuring, but before he could think of anything he sensed something odd.

"Lara?" he said, "What are you hiding?" and all three Jedi knights in the room looked towards her.

Seth frowned.

"He's right. You're hiding something."

Without saying a word, Lara stepped forwards and reached inside her robes. When her hand reappeared it was not empty. In it she clutched the portable drive that had been plugged into the *Triumph Over Adversity*'s computer.

"Here." She said, "I took this when the marines came aboard. Don't worry, I made sure they didn't notice me."

Wide-eyed Seth snatched the device away from her.

"Lara," Cal said, "you shouldn't have—"

"Shush." Seth interrupted, holding up a hand as he clutched the drive in the other. Then he stood up.

"Where are you going?" Lara asked.

"I need the *Bright Hope*." He replied, "More precisely, I need her navigation system."

"What about your own ship?" Cal asked.

"Yours is better." Seth told him as he headed for the door.

"I suppose I better go with him." Dac said.

"Me too." Lara added.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal said as he followed.

"It wasn't plugged in like that." Lara said as she watched Seth hook up the portable drive to the *Bright Hope*'s computer.

"Huh?" Seth replied, pausing and looking up at her.

"Well those two lines you've just plugged in weren't connected to anything." Lara explained.

"Okay miss smarty pants, you do it." Seth said.

"Fitting." Cal said, "After all she's the one that stole it."

"Now now." Seth told him, "Don't discourage your padawan."

Now on her hands and knees beneath the console, Lara began to connect the drive to the ship's computer while the trio of knights watched her.

"That's a ROM port isn't it?" Dac said as he saw where Lara was connecting wires.

"Yes," Cal replied, "it is."

"Well that answers one question then." Seth said, "We know that data was being transferred into the *Triumph*'s computer not downloaded from it."

"There." Lara said suddenly, "How's that?"

Cal looked at the *Bright Hope*'s flight control console.

"We've got it." He said, "Well done." He stared at the data for a moment before he added, "Looks like jump data."

Seth leant over Cal's shoulder and looked at the same display.

"It is." He said, "It a basic navigational file with known hyperspace hazards. Just what you'd need to make a jump."

"The same sort of data that beacons like Aurek station give out?" Dac asked as he helped Lara back to her feet.

"The very same." Seth said, "In fact that's probably how the ship ended up here."

"How so?" Lara asked.

"Easy." Cal replied, "Somebody was copying this data into the ship's computer so that a map could be made and somehow the engines got triggered."

"And they were smooshed." Lara interrupted.

"Indeed." Cal said, "And the ship just carried out the instructions that had been loaded into its memory."

"But why here?" Lara asked.

"My guess is that it's a co-incidence." Seth said.

"A rather big one." Dac responded, "The odds of a ship happening to jump to randomly and coming out here—"

"It wasn't random." Seth said suddenly, not giving the younger jedi chance to finish his statement, "As the primary jump beacon of the sector, the co-ordinates for Aurek station are the most commonly used around here. My guess is that they were the first ones to be loaded into the *Triumph's* computer. If the engines hadn't triggered immediately then who knows where she could have ended up?"

"It still leaves us with the biggest question of all though." Cal said, "Where the hell did she come from?"

Seth sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"Let's find out." He said and he brought up the Bright Hope's sensor logs.

With a few quick taps on a keyboard he had isolated the data recorded from when the *Triumph Over Adversity* left hyperspace to where it had come to a halt a few kilometres later. He grabbed this data and copied it to a map of the surrounding systems, including systems not in the Republic and extending several parsecs beyond the Narthis Sector itself. The computer then took the limited course data recorded for the *Triumph Over Adversity* and projected this backwards, forming an expanding cone of possible points of origin.

"There we go." Seth said, "Unless the ship came more than seventy parsecs or from interstellar space, which I don't think it did, then it came from one of these systems."

The display now highlighted a significant number of star systems. The uncertainty of the mysterious ship's course became greater and greater as the distance from Aurek Station increased.

"Well we can eliminate the ones in the Republic for starters." Cal said, "Even though that's only four."

"But the drive is Republic technology isn't it?" Lara asked.

"Yes, but no where else in the Republic has reported seeing the ship." Seth replied.

"What about other places with sensors capable of detecting objects in hyperspace?" Dac asked, "How many of them are in this area?"

"Not many." Cal told him, "I think that Crassis Major is the only place with them."

"So not the other navigational beacons?" Dac suggested.

"No." Cal answered, "Besh and Cresh Stations are little more than automated platforms with a few emergency facilities. You fly an entire fleet right past them in hyperspace and they wouldn't pick them up."

"Then we need Aurek Station's sensor logs." Cal said.

"I don't think that Administrator Varr'kay is going to give them up easily." Dac said.

"That's why we're not going to ask him." Cal said and the others just stared at him, "What?" he asked, "You lot started all this."

The light level in the command and control centre of Aurek Station was lower than most other areas. This made it easier for operators to read the displays set out in front of them. It also meant that few people noticed that Cal and Seth were present.

"May I help you?" one of the crewmen asked when he found himself standing in front of them.

"You want us to look at the sensor logs." Cal said, glaring at the man.

"I'm sorry?" he asked with a puzzled expression.

"The sensor logs are confusing" Cal said, "You need them double checking against an independent source."

The puzzled expression disappeared to be replaced with one of someone irritated by overwork.

"We called for you ages ago." He said, "Now come with me, I'll show you where to set up."

"You don't want to tell the administrator about this." Seth said calmly, "He will not be pleased with you."

"If I tell him I let you get away with delaying us this long he'll make my day even worse." The man said as he led the jedi to a secluded area of the room, "Here you go." He said as he activated the control panel, "You've got guest access only. Let me know if you need to make any changes and shut off the console when you're done. I'm too busy to do it myself."

The data that the Jedi were looking for was easy to find, all neatly organised by time and beginning from when Aurek Station's sensor first detected the massive bulk of the *Triumph Over Adversity* as it approached the station. Seth repeated what he had done with the Bright Hope's sensor logs, transferring the records to a star chart and projecting back along the course to establish a likely point of origin.

"Three systems in this sector." Seth said, "Well that's better than two dozen."

"Assuming it came from in this sector." Cal said.

"Well, we'll need Dac and your padawan to come up with that for us won't we?" Seth said.

"Sergeant Keltan, may we have a word?" Lara said as the marine squad unloaded from the shuttle."

"Certainly commander." The sergeant replied, using the informal title given to Jedi padawans when serving in military units.

"It's about the ship." Dac said and the sergeant's face fell.

"We've been given strict instructions not to let you anywhere near it." He said, "You've managed to put the wind up both Captain De Kuun and Administrator Varr'kay."

Oh come on now sergeant," Dac said, "a bureaucrat and an officer? I thought enlisted men were tougher than that."

"I'm not letting you aboard," Sergeant Keltan said, "and don't go trying any mind tricks on me either."

"The thought never entered our heads." Lara said, "We don't even need to go to the ship anyway."

"Really?" the sergeant asked curiously, "Then what are you after?"

"Information." Dac said, "We need the computer's event log."

"The event log?" the sergeant asked loudly and both Jedi looked around to see if they were being observed.

"We need to know how long the ship was in hyperspace for." Lara said.

Sergeant Keltan paused. Unlike some of his superiors in the sector he was more sympathetic to the Jedi Order.

"Specialist!" he called out and another marine rushed over to him.

"Sergeant?" the marine said, snapping to attention.

"I need the data you downloaded copying to a secondary drive." Sergeant Keltan said, "Then give that drive to these people."

"Sir?" the marine said again.

"Is there something wrong with your hearing specialist?" the sergeant asked rhetorically, "We've been told that the data is restricted to Republic personnel only and the Jedi Order serves the Republic."

"Yes sir!" the marine snapped before rushing off to carry out the order.

Across the bay Lieutenant Erin Shill watched the conversation from her fighter's cockpit. When the ground crew servicing the vessel stepped away she reached into her flight suit and pulled out a point-to-point communicator.

"It's me." She said into the device, "I think the Jedi are up to something."

4.

Limping along on its backup hyperdrive, the *Triumph Over Adversity*'s speed through hyperspace had fluctuated wildly. But the ship's computer had recorded each change in the power flow to the hyperdrive and each change triggered an entry in the event log, the database that recorded every unexpected occurrence in the ship's operation. The Jedi went back through the list of these until they came across the entry relating to the power spike that signified the vessel's initial entry into hyperspace twenty hours before its arrival at Aurek Station.

Now back in the cockpit of the *Bright Hope*, the Jedi studied its course.

"Phillos." Cal said, "I don't think I've come across it before."

"There's nothing there." Lara said, "I've studied everything that the order gave us about the sector and Phillos is listed as dead. There aren't any habitable worlds and only limited resources."

"Just the sort of place where a ship could go undiscovered for a thousand years then." Dac said, smiling.

"Ships." Seth corrected him, "Remember that the *Triumph* was part of a larger battle group. There could be more ships out there."

"Can anyone plot that jump?" Lara asked, "If we ask Aurek Station for the details then it'll give away what we're up to."

"I'll do it." Seth said, "Though I suggest we carry out a jump to somewhere else first. Anywhere that won't arouse suspicion."

"Everyone take a seat." Cal said as he did up his safety harness. The other Jedi immediately sat in the other seats available in the cockpit and did the same while Cal brought the *Bright Hope*'s engines online.

"What do you plan to do about clearance?" Dac asked.

"Shouldn't be a problem." Cal replied, "I doubt Varr'kay will try and keep us here. Though I wouldn't be surprised if De Kuun sent someone after us."

"I've seen what the navy has here and they've nothing suitable that can keep up." Seth said, "Let them try."

The *Bright Hope* accelerated rapidly out of Aurek Station's hangar bay. Cal deliberately piloted the ship away from the hulk of the *Triumph Over Adversity*, instead flying in the direction more suited to the jump they were about to make to throw off any questions that the local authorities may have. Then, in a brilliant flash of light the *Bright Hope* entered hyperspace.

Away from the position where the *Bright Hope* jumped away another vessel, one that had been observing the *Triumph Over Adversity* and surrounding vessels also powered up its engines and jumped to hyperspace. This ship heading in the direction of Phillos.

With no way of telling from how deep into the system the *Triumph Over Adversity* had started its journey to Aurek Station, Seth calculated a jump that brought the *Bright Hope* out of hyperspace on the edge to the system, from where the Jedi began to scan for the tell-tale signs of starship activity.

As it happened this did not take long.

"How many?" Lara asked.

Cal shrugged.

"They're all over the place." He said, "Whatever happened here was huge and from this distance we're only picking up the big ships like the *Triumph*."

"So far we've isolated about sixty of them throughout the system. Ranging from the orbits of the second through eighth planets." Seth said.

"So where do we start?" Lara asked.

"How about with these guys?" Dac said and he indicated the sensor display that showed a group of vessels closing on their location rapidly.

"Think they're friendly?" Lara asked.

"I doubt it." Cal replied and he looked at Seth, "You want to take over the helm?"

"No." Seth answered, "I'm probably a better pilot than you, but I know I'm a better gunner and we're going to need that."

There were four ships closing on the *Bright Hope* in a rough vertical boxlike formation. Their closing speed was not excessive, certainly less than the Jedi's vessel was capable of but their aggressive manoeuvring still gave cause for concern.

"Unidentified vessels off my bow, this is the Jedi vessel *Bright Hope*." Cal signalled to the approaching ships, "Please state your intentions."

In return only static was heard.

"Okay, weapons are ready." Seth said, "But I think we need to wait for them to fire first, just in case."

"What about our shields?" Dac asked.

"On them." Seth replied, adjusted the *Bright Hope's* deflector shield emitters so that they focused towards the front of the ship.

"I don't recognise the type." Dac said when the four ships came close enough for the *Bright Hope's* optical sensors to be able to provide them with a picture. The ships were much smaller than the *Bright Hope*; even placed end-to-end they would not have equalled that ship's length with four wings arranged in a bent 'X' configuration, "But they look like fighters."

"They are." Seth said, looking at the image for himself, "Koros interceptors - more relics from the Great Hyperspace War. They were probably carried aboard those ships out there."

"So are they dangerous?" Lara asked, "I mean if they're a thousand years old?"

"They're well armed. Or at least they were when new. Whether those weapons are still operational is another thing."

"Well I'm not taking the chance." Cal said, "Seth stabilise the shields." And before Seth could react Cal put the *Bright Hope* into a sudden dive, taking the ship away from the approaching fighters.

As he manoeuvred the ship the interceptors opened fire.

"Ion cannons!" Dac snapped, recognising the distinctive appearance of the highly charged energy bolts.

"They're trying to disable us." Seth said, "Cal, keep us out of the way of those blasts."

"You don't need to tell me that." Cal replied hastily, adjusting the *Bright Hope's* course wildly and at random to throw off their attackers.

Meanwhile Seth turned his attention to the *Bright Hope's* weapons. Two laser cannons mounted on the ship's wings gave him an all round field of fire, so Cal's manoeuvring still let him keep the interceptors in his sights. A stream of bright red energy blasts streaked across space from the *Bright Hope*, aimed into the midst of the interceptor formation.

"You missed" Dac snapped as he looked through the cockpit canopy to gauge the effectiveness of the strike.

Remaining silent, Seth just smiled when Cal turned the *Bright Hope* again and the continuous stream of fire Seth was directing swung around and blasted one of the interceptors apart.

"Doesn't look like they're in great shape." He said, "I barely grazed that one."

There was a second volley of ion cannon blasts from the remaining interceptors, but the energy blasts faded as they dispersed before reaching the *Bright Hope*.

"We're pulling ahead of them!" Lara exclaimed.

"Not surprising." Seth replied as he lined up for another shot, "For all their firepower those ships are much slower than us." Then he threw a glance at Cal, "Try and keep them between a hundred and fifty and two hundred kilometres behind us. We'll be out of their weapon range but still able to hit them."

"Gotcha." Cal said and he directed his attention to the sensor display so he could accurately monitor the range to the interceptors.

At this longer range, it was harder for Seth to target the interceptors, but as he had suggested it left the *Bright Hope* beyond the range of the interceptors' own weapons. The interceptors then reacted by ceasing fire and channelling all their available power to their sublight engines. The tiny craft accelerated suddenly in a way that took Cal by surprise and the gap between them and the *Bright Hope* narrowed. To maintain this speed the interceptors had no choice but to keep to a straight course and Seth took full advantage of this. He directed the lasers he controlled to a point just ahead of one of the interceptors and then allowed the hapless pilot to fly his own vessel into the stream, cutting it in half lengthways.

The last two interceptors cut their acceleration as soon as they came within weapons range of the *Bright Hope* and before Cal could increase the distance once more they opened fire with their ion cannons once more and this time some of the charged particle blasts struck the aft section of the *Bright Hope*. The ship's deflector shields offered no protection against ion cannons and the sound of alarms filled the *Bright Hope's* cockpit as systems were overloaded and shut down. The displays flickered off and on as the onboard computers tried desperately to determine the state of the ship.

"You two go do something useful!" Seth yelled at Dac and Lara, "Get back there and find out how bad we're hit."

"Bad enough!" Cal snapped, struggling to keep the ship under control as the two Jedi behind him released their harnesses, "I think one of the engines is jammed on full throttle."

"On it!" Lara yelled as she ran from the cockpit.

Familiar with the layout of the ship, Lara kept ahead of Dac as she ran through its corridors towards the stern and she was well ahead of him by the time they reached the engineering compartment.

"What happened here?" she exclaimed, staring through the hatchway at the smoke filled room.

"I'd say something caught fire." Dac offered.

Ignoring him, Lara went to the intercom panel.

"Cal this place is a mess." She said.

"Can you reach any of the engines?" Cal asked.

"I think so." She said.

"Well check numbers eight through fourteen. I think one's stuck on. Disconnect it manually if you have to, but shut it down."

"Right, eight through fourteen." And Lara ran from the intercom panel through another hatchway, "Hey Dac!" she shouted, "Come give me a hand with this would you?"

Following through into the side room, Dac found Lara undoing the latches of an inspection cover set into the rear bulkhead and he ran to help her.

"I've got it." He said, grabbing hold of the cover while Lara released it.

Then as Dac set down the cover beside him Lara bent over and looked into the machinery of the Bright Hope's engines. There she saw a cluster of three identical engine modules, one of which was glowing brightly.

"Its number ten." She said, "If we don't get it shut down it'll blow." And she reached towards a lever mounted on the drive unit, "Ow! That's hot!" she exclaimed, withdrawing her hand and waving it to cool it off. Then she held out her hand again and concentrated. Letting the force flow through her she instead pulled on the lever telekinetically and promptly deactivated the drive.

"Well done." Dac said as he pulled Lara back to her feet.

Then the ship shook suddenly and both jedi fell to the deck.

"We've been shot again." Lara said.

"That wasn't a laser blast." Dac replied, "Something hit us. We better get back to the cockpit."

Alarms still sounded in the cockpit when Dac and Lara returned.

"What's happening?" Lara asked, then she flinched suddenly as something made of metal and plastic shot over the canopy.

"We're in a debris field." Cal replied.

"Debris? From what?" Dac asked.

"The remains of a ship are just up ahead." Seth explained, "Not one of the largest, but still pretty big."

There was a flash as a laser blast narrowly missed the Bright Hope.

"Haven't we lost them yet?" Dac said.

"Strangely we thought that it would be a good idea not to go so fast we crashed into the first lump of garbage we came across." Seth replied.

"But at least I can steer properly now." Cal added, suddenly rolling the ship to avoid another piece of debris.

More laser blasts narrowly avoided the ship but like Seth's attempts to shoot at them the interceptors' weapons fire was disrupted by their pilots' efforts to avoid the debris.

"If you could hold still a few moments this would be much easier." Seth told him.

"If he holds still we'll be shot to pieces." Lara said.

"Shut up the pair of you." Cal said, "I've got an idea." And he activated the Bright Hope's torpedo system, "Angle our particle shields forwards." He said as the targeting display lowered in front of him, "All of them."

"Oh no." Lara said as the shape of the main piece of the wrecked ship ahead grew in size, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

It took only a few seconds for the torpedo system to lock onto the hulk and Cal fired two in rapid succession.

"Hang on!" he yelled as the projectiles shot towards the wrecked starship.

There was a brilliant flash as the first torpedo struck the hulk centrally, followed moments later by another.

The dual impacts and detonations tore the aging hulk apart and flung debris out in all directions. There was a rattling as pieces struck the *Bright Hope*, the force of the impact blunted by the ship's particle shields. But as the fragments continued to fly through space they encountered the pursuing Koros interceptors.

Unshielded and only lightly armoured, the two ancient starfighters were shredded along with their unfortunately pilots.

As the Bright Hope passed through the expanding cloud of wreckage, Cal cut back on the power to the engines, reducing it to nothing.

"Now we just drift and run silent." He said, "Hopefully anyone watching thinks we've been destroyed along with those fighters."

Lacko Dabb's expression was difficult for many of his subordinates to read, as an aqualish his face was not as expressive as many other species. But had he been human he would have been frowning in frustration – Frustration that he had just lost a squadron of four fighters and also that the Jedi starship had vanished from sight.

"Do you want me to send more fighters to investigate?" his co-pilot asked.

Lacko paused. He had a score to settle with the Jedi and was keen to confirm their deaths. But on the other hand his growing pirate force had been able to fix only a handful of the ancient starfighters so far.

"No," he replied, "We have better things to worry about. I want to speak to the Givin."

The skeletal looking Givin species was unusual in that it had evolved to be able to tolerate hard vacuum for long periods and a group of them had been assisting Lacko's band of outlaws to pick over the wreckage that littered the system.

"What is taking so long?" Lacko demanded when the image of one of the Givins appeared on the monitor in front of him, "I need one of those cruisers. The Jedi traced the one you lost to this system, the rest of the Republic forces may not be far behind."

The image of the Givin glared back at Lacko.

"You tried to hurry us once before." He replied, "That was the cause of us losing the one ship we were close to bringing on line. Now we must start again with another. I recommend you leave us alone to worry about the cruiser; you just busy yourself with the smaller ships. Do not worry about us, we have made certain that this ship will not be able to jump to hyperspace." And then the display went black.

"Looked like a ship to shore transmission to me." Lara said.

"Agreed." Cal replied, "I can't tell where the ship is because of all the reflections off the wrecks, but it looks like the surface part was located on a moon orbiting the sixth planet.

"There are a large number of wrecks just beyond that planet's orbit." Lara said, "But the planet's not really that close to them."

"Well it's still a good place to start. We better let the others know."

In the engineering compartment Dac and Seth were working on fixing engine number ten and pieces of the damaged drive unit were laid out on the deck.

"Are you sure all this is wise?" Dac asked.

"Well if you'd rather we not bother fixing the engines—"

"I mean about them." Dac interrupted, "You know what Master Karas thinks about them."

Seth set down the engine component he had just repaired.

"Look Dac," he said, jabbing at the younger Jedi with his finger, "Master Karas hasn't given one shred of proof for what he thinks about the Udras. I know for a fact he's taken his concerns as high as the council itself and they told him to get lost. So for as long as we're here we'll just keep acting normal."

"Yeah I suppose so." Dac said.

"Keep an eye on them though. No sense taking any chances. Especially given those ships out there."

"What about them?" Dac asked.

Seth inhaled deeply and then exhaled.

"That ship Cal blew up to cover us," he began, "was a Sith frigate."

Then the intercom chimed.

"Seth, Dac, are you done yet?" Cal asked, "Because we're moving out."

Dac and Seth made their way back to the cockpit and sat behind Cal and Lara.

"I thought we were moving." Dac commented when he saw that the space outside was still full of the debris ejected by the exploding hulk.

"We picked up a signal between a ship somewhere else in the system and someone on one of the moons of the sixth planet." Cal explained, "I was just waiting for the moon to go into eclipse before I fired up the drives."

"Which it's not going to do for at least an hour." Lara said.

"Use the repulsors to turn the ship." Seth said.

"Repulsorlifts? In space?" Dac commented. A ship's repulsorlift engines were designed for use within a planetary atmosphere and relied on a world's gravitational field to operate.

"We're close to the bulk of the wreck of that ship." Seth said, "If we use its mass to generate a repulsorlift field we should just about be able to rotate towards the planet. Then we can fire the ion drives and the ship's hull will hide most of the energy flare. If anyone happens to be looking this way they won't see any motion against the star field and may think it's just something exploding. Then we coast the rest of the way to the moon."

“Got it.” Cal said, bringing the *Bright Hope*’s repulsorlift engines online. There was a groaning sound as they strained to create a stable antigravity field with so little mass nearby. But steadily the ship turned in the direction of the moon that was the source of one half of the intercepted communications. At that moment Cal shut off the repulsorlifts and instead briefly engaged the *Bright Hope*’s ion drives at maximum power. The reaction accelerated the ship towards the moon and the force pressed the ship’s occupants into the padding of their seats, even with the acceleration compensators built into it. As quickly as he had activated the engines Cal shut them off again, leaving no thermal flare to be detected.

5.

"What did he want Khaloh?"

Khaloh snorted.

"That aqualish idiot thinks that just by stamping his feet and yelling he can speed up the process of repairing the ship." He replied.

"That is what I came to see you about." The other givin said.

"There is progress Zal'Gren?"

"Some. But we require more parts not currently available to us. I want permission to take our shuttle and look for more amongst the other wrecked capital ships."

"Of course." Khaloh said, "Go now and get what you require. Then we get paid and be rid of that fool Lacko Dabb."

Zal'Gren turned and walked away, heading for the airlock. Though givin could survive in a vacuum for far longer periods than most species, they still needed to return to an oxygenated atmosphere periodically. Therefore, they were still careful not to allow the structure they occupied to suffer uncontrolled decompression. Fortunately for them, the cluster of interconnected buildings they now occupied had been here when they arrived and had required only minor work to make habitable.

Taking one last breath Zal'Gren cycled the airlock and prepared to leave the building, but when the outer door slid open he found his way blocked by four figures in vacc suits.

"Going somewhere?" Lara asked, though her voice was carried no further than the three other jedi hooked into their communications net.

Surprised and unarmed, Zal'Gren could do nothing but stare as Seth pushed him backwards and the four jedi squeezed into the tiny room. He held the givin tightly by his collar and held his deactivated lightsaber up to his throat while the others saw to sealing the outer door and re-pressurising the air lock, ready to ignite the weapon should the givin prove troublesome.

When the inner door hissed open both Cal and Dac stepped into the adjoining storage room and ignited their lightsabers simultaneously, the distinctive 'snap-hiss' sounds merging into one.

"Clear." Dac said and both he and Lara began to unfasten their helmets.

"No wait." Seth warned them as he shoved Zal'Gren through the doorway.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked.

"Take a look around." Seth told her, "Do you see any suits in here?"

"No. Why?" Lara replied.

"This guy's a givin." Cal said, lifting his visor, "Supposing all his associates are too. They wouldn't need space suits. If we leave our suits behind they can just pump out the air from whatever section we're in. Just open your visors if you want, but keep your helmets on." The he looked at Zal'Gren, "So tell us," he began, "how many of you are there in here?"

Fear.

The givin just stared back at him, his skeletal face displayed no emotion but he was clearly concerned about his fate. Cal was about to press the question further when a slight tremor in the force alerted the jedi to the approach of more of the outpost's occupants.

"Help me!" Zal'Gren yelled as two more givin appeared at the opposite doorway and he tried to break away from Seth.

There was another 'snap-hiss' as Lara ignited her lightsaber while the two newcomers reached for their sidearms, but before they could open fire both Cal and Dac had stepped forwards and struck with their lightsabers. The powerful energy blades sliced not only through the givin themselves, but also tore chunks from the aging walls either side of the doorway. Meanwhile Seth brought the pommel of his own lightsaber, the only one to still be deactivated, down at the base of Zal'Gren's skull and he collapsed.

"So much for keeping it quiet." He said, "Now let's go."

"We should split up." Cal suggested, "We can cover more ground that way. Try and find a control centre or something."

"Good idea." Seth said as he joined the others in igniting his lightsaber, "Dac, you're with me." And then he took off running down the corridor.

Khaloh was studying a hologram of the warship his men were currently working to bring back to operational status by cannibalising other wrecked ships. The image was colour coded to indicate which systems were damaged but repairable and which needed replacing entirely. Had he been able to smile he would have.

The ship was ready to fly, only a few critical components for its targeting arrays were still needed and he expected Zal'Gren to be back with most of them soon. That still left most of the weapons themselves to be replaced of course, but they were of lesser importance. Any weapons would do and Lacko Dabb's own men could add them later if the aqualish pirate so desired.

Then an unusual sound caught his attention. It was distant but just about audible. A scream, followed swiftly after by another.

"What was that?" he said out loud to the other two of his men in the room, "It sounded like screaming."

One of the other givin looked up from the workbench he was hunched over and looked around at a bank of displays. He reached out and began to adjust one, changing the picture repeatedly as he switched the input from one internal security camera to another. The set up was crude, but it was all the original builders of this place had left for Khaloh and his men. The givin halted when the image showed a pair of figures running down a corridor. One wore a brilliant white vacc suit while other wore a pink one. Each one held a glowing blue lightsaber.

"Sir!" the givin snapped, "We have intruders. They're jedi!"

"Warn the others!" Khaloh shouted and then he dashed to a different console, newer than most of the others. This was the communications system that he had brought with him.

"Lacko!" he yelled as soon as it was activated, not waiting to confirm that a connection had been made, "Lacko where are you?"

"Where do you think?" a gruff reply came, "We're pulling fighters from the wrecked carrier inside the orbit of the forth planet. Now what do you want?"

"The jedi are here! We need help!"

"How many?" Lacko asked.

"I don't know. At least two."

"Two?" Lacko repeated, "You have more than fifty men there. Deal with them yourself." And then the channel went dead.

Lacko was only partially correct in his estimation of the number of men Khaloh had under his control.

Though he did have the number suggested in total, more than half were outside the outpost working on the warship. Right now he had less than twenty to call upon and it seemed as though that number was getting steadily smaller. In the distance Khaloh could hear shouting and weapons fire as his men engaged the jedi. It was louder than the first screams he had heard which meant only one thing. They were getting closer to him.

"Kriif you Lacko Dabb." He said to himself then he looked at the one givin remaining in the room, "Gather what you can." He told him, "We're getting out of here and we're taking Lacko's warship with us."

The other givin nodded and began to gather up his tools. Meanwhile Khaloh himself reached under a nearby bench and pulled out a large metal case that was simply labelled 'DANGER – EXPLOSIVES'.

Lara rolled as a beam came crashing down beside her when a spatial distortion fired by one of the givins' weapons tore it away from the wall it had stood against for hundreds of years. Cal acted to protect his sister, using the force to knock the givin off his feet before he could fire a second shot. Then he charged forwards and swung his lightsaber as he ran, decapitating the givin as he tried to get back to his feet. Then his vacc suit's built in communicator came to life.

"Cal where are you?" Seth's voice asked.

Cal looked around for some sort of identifying marks on the walls, but found none.

"I've no idea." Cal replied, "But we've just dealt with another givin."

"Well we're pinned down near the centre of the complex." Seth replied, "There's four or five of them with pulse-wave rifles. We could do with an assist here."

"We're on our way." Cal replied then he looked at Lara, "Get up." He said, "We've work to do."

The two jedi ran through the corridors of the complex, heading in what they hoped was the right direction to get them to the centre of the complex. As they continued they began to hear the sound of sustained energy weapon fire.

"I think we've found them." Lara said, "Unless there's another battle going on we don't know about."

"Quickly." Cal said and he ran towards the gunfire.

Rounding a corner Cal and Lara found both Seth and Dac taking cover behind stacks of large metal drums about ten metres apart. The stacks were getting steadily smaller as a group of givin on an overhead walkway fired down with energy weapons and blasted them apart. If this carried on much longer both jedi would be exposed. As it was neither could risk making a break for it because the givin could shoot at them from more than one direction at once.

One of the givin spotted Cal and Lara and he shouted a warning to his comrades. Immediately a volley of fire came their way, forcing them back around the corner.

"Did you see that walkway?" Cal asked Lara.

"Hard to miss." she replied, "Big, metal and full of angry givin."

"That's the one." Cal said, "I'm going to take it out. Cover me."

Lara nodded.

"Now!" Cal shouted he spun back around the corner.

Lara stepped out beside him, wielding her lightsaber in front of her. Two of the givin fired at them, but Lara easily blocked the blasts with the blade of her lightsaber, bursting the spatial distortions that did nothing more than make her weapon quiver slightly in her grasp. At the same time Cal locked his lightsaber on and hurled it towards the walkway. He reached out through the force to guide the weapon as it twirled towards one of the walkway's supporting girders and Lara sensed his satisfaction as it sliced through the structure. There was the sound of tearing metal as the walkway collapsed under its own weight and the givin fell screaming to the floor below. Dac and Seth seized their opportunity and leapt out from behind cover and rushed the givin. Two tried to reach for the weapons they had dropped whilst falling only to have their arms sliced through before they could get hold of them, while the others were run through as they tried to fight on unarmed.

"Nice work." Seth called out as Cal and Lara entered the room properly, Cal reaching out his hand and telekinetically calling his lightsaber back to him, "Now let's go see what's up there that this lot were so keen to protect."

That was when the explosion happened.

6.

As air rushed through the hole blasted in the outer wall Khaloh, already prepared to enter the vacuum outside, ran towards the breach and jumped through it himself. As soon as he was outside he ceased to be affected by the artificial gravity of the outpost and instead gently floated back to the surface of the moon under the influence of its own much lower gravity. He kicked up a small cloud of dust as he landed and immediately began to run across the desolate lunar surface. Behind him the other givin landed, more heavily than Khaloh due to the weight of the equipment he carried, but safely and able to run after Khaloh nevertheless.

The Jedi slammed their visors shut as the air rushed past them and clung onto whatever they could find to stop themselves from being dragged off their feet. The wind was furious but short lived, even as the air already in the outpost was being blown out into the vacuum outside the life support system tried to pump more in but could not keep up with the rate at which the pressure was dropping.

"Come on." Cal said as the wind dropped, "We've got to find out what that was."

Clambering up what was left of the walkway, the Jedi made their way into the room that the givin had been protecting where they found the reason for the sudden decompression.

"Someone was in a hurry to leave." Dac said, advancing on the neat hole blasted in the wall. The remains of a shaped charge assembly now dangled through the hole, having been dragged through by the rush of escaping air. All four of the Jedi stood beside the hole and stared out onto the surface of the moon where they spotted a pair of figures running into the distance, neither of whom wore spacesuits.

"I'm guessing more givin." Lara said, then she added, "So are we off after them then?"

Cal smiled and backed up. Then he ran headlong towards the hole and leapt through, the low lunar gravity enabling him to fly a great distance before gently settling back down to the ground. He felt the ground tremble slightly as Seth was the next to land, followed rapidly by Dac and finally Lara. Then, without speaking the Jedi began to run after the fleeing givin.

Khaloh and his subordinate ran for all they were worth. A quick glimpse over their shoulders had alerted them to the four Jedi in brightly coloured vac suits pursuing them. Had they been wearing bulkier space suits then Khaloh would not have been so worried, but he knew that the lighter weight suits worn by the Jedi would allow them to operate in the vacuum as easily as the givin who were unencumbered by protective suits of any kind. The only advantage that the two givin had was their massive head start.

Jedi training was tough and kept the body in top physical condition, so the four Jedi began to close the distance between themselves and their quarry as soon as they set off. But they still had no idea where the givin were heading or how far away their destination was. One thing was for certain though; it could not be too far away. Though they could withstand the vacuum of space for some time, far longer than humans, they still had to return to a breathable atmosphere eventually and at their rate they would be using up the air they had stored in their bodies by running non stop, that time would be fast approaching.

"They're heading for that bridge." Cal said suddenly.

Ahead of both the Jedi and the givin the ground beneath them came to a sudden stop and the end of a narrow bridge could be seen built into the side of this sudden drop. Where it went, however was not clear.

The bridge was angled downwards and vanished from view after a short distance.

The Jedi headed for the bridge themselves, still narrowing the gap with the givin but knowing that they would be unable to catch them before they reached it. The givin rushed straight onto the bridge and then disappeared from view as they continued down it while the Jedi did their best to catch up. Less than a minute later they too reached the bridge only to discover that it was not a real bridge after all. It was a boarding ramp.

The ancient ship sat in the canyon below the Jedi was huge, bigger even than the *Triumph Over Adversity* and as they watched the two givin disappeared through a hatch where the ramp ended. As soon as they were inside the hatch slammed shut behind them.

"Back!" Seth yelled as Dac began to run down the ramp towards the starship.

They could all feel it. The ground beneath their feet was shaking and the rumbling of the starship's engines was so powerful that without any air to travel through, it reached them through the ground itself. The bridge suddenly gave way as the starship rose up from the ground and Dac leapt through the air, landing beside the other three Jedi still standing on the canyon edge.

"The *Bright Hope*!" Cal shouted, "We've got to get back to the ship and stop that thing."
"What hope have we got against something that big?" Lara asked as Cal began to run.
"Depends." Seth answered her, "Just because it can fly doesn't mean it's got functioning weapons or a hyperdrive. But we've got to be quick."

"Khaloh, what are you playing at?" Lacko demanded. The launch of the warship had shown up like a flare on his own vessel's sensors, but he had not authorised it, "Khaloh! Answer me!"
The communications screen flickered into life to reveal the face of Khaloh.
"Goodbye Mister Dabb." He said, "I'm afraid the Jedi have made our position here untenable so we're taking the ship to sell elsewhere. I'm sure there are plenty of others who would be willing to purchase such a vessel. I can't say it's been a pleasure working for you." Then the screen went black.
"Signal the others." Lacko said angrily, "Tell them to attack. If I can't have that ship, no-one can."

Though the massive warship was capable of space flight, the Jedi crew did not want to put too much stress on her to begin with so they were increasing the power to her ion drives only slowly until they were clear of the subsystem of moons around the nearby gas giant. Then, as soon as they were clear of the planet's gravity well they would be able to escape into hyperspace.
But as they slowly made their way between the gas giant's moons another vessel shot up from the surface of the same moon they had launched from. The *Bright Hope*, accelerating at a much greater rate soon caught up with the massive vessel and as she flew by bolts of energy spat from her two laser cannons along the entire length of the ship.
"You got her!" Lara exclaimed when she saw hull plates ripped away as explosions tore along the warship.
"Not even close." Seth replied, studying the effect of his attacks, "She's just too damn big."
"Switch to torpedoes." Cal suggested.

"Shields up!" Khaloh yelled across the bridge when he saw that the *Bright Hope* was moving into attack position to make a second run.
"But sir," one of his crew replied, "our shields aren't operational yet!"
"What about weapons?" Khaloh asked, "Don't we have anything to shoot back with?"
"Two point defence turrets," The crewman answered, "but their energy cells are depleted."
Khaloh was about to order that full power be turned over to the engines. The power necessary to recharge the few weapons he had available would be better used in getting the ship out of here. But then a brilliant flash interrupted him and the ship shook as a proton torpedo slammed into it.
"Charge the guns!" he barked, "Shoot that ship down!"

Cal turned the *Bright Hope* sharply; bringing the ship in low across the warship's hull while Seth continued to strafe it with laser fire.
"When we get to the end bring us around for another run." Seth said, "I'll see if I can line up a torpedo shot on their engines."
"Got it." Cal said, but before he could say anything more there was a flash of weapons fire that did not come from the *Bright Hope*, "Stang!" he exclaimed as he pulled the *Bright Hope*'s nose up, narrowly avoiding being hit by the energy blasts.
"They've got guns?" Lara exclaimed, "I thought you said they didn't."
"I said they might not have." Seth reminded her.
"So how many weapons does a ship like that have?"
"Potentially?" Seth asked and then he added, "Hundreds."
"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal said, "A really bad feeling."

Lacko could see the two ships duelling one another through his canopy. The *Bright Hope* was much faster and more manoeuvrable, but the larger warship had sufficient mass and armour protection that the Jedi's ship could barely scratch it. The weapons of Lacko's ships were not much more powerful than those on the *Bright Hope*, but Lacko had more of them.
"Fire at will." He ordered, "Target all firepower on that battleship."
Emerging from behind one of the moons, Lacko's ships swarmed towards the ancient warship and opened fire as soon as it came within range. The attacks lit up the ship along its entire length as energy weapons and torpedoes found their marks. Through it all the *Bright Hope* twisted and twirled as Cal sought to avoid being hit.

"It's the Navy!" Lara cried out excitedly, "They've found us!"

"Err, I don't think so." Seth replied and he showed her the image of one of the approaching fighter craft on his targeting sensors, "Not unless the Navy in this sector uses second hand sith fighters."

"Then who are they? Dac asked.

"I don't know." Seth answered, "A rival group of scavengers perhaps?"

"Wait." Cal said suddenly, "Lara check the transponders of those closing ships against our records. One of them looks familiar."

"On it." Lara replied and she began to check the Bright Hope's computer logs. After a minute or so of work she came back with, "Found it. Crescent-class ship. Cal its one of those pirates we dealt with. The ones who were faking jump co-ordinates."

"I thought as much." Cal replied, "Some of them must have gotten away and be looking to replace their fleet by scavenging ships from here."

"So why are they firing on that ship then?" Lara asked.

"I can't be certain," Cal replied, "but my guess would be a falling out between criminals. Maybe the givin decided they wanted to keep the ship for themselves."

"How does this affect us?" Dac then asked.

Cal looked at the massive warship again. It was burning along its entire length now and it seemed that whatever weapons it had possessed were no longer functional. The he looked at Seth.

"Well?" he asked.

"She's done for." Seth replied, "There are far too many for her to be able to escape."

"Too many for us too." Cal replied, "They've got us outnumbered and outgunned."

"Then we leave." Seth said solemnly, "No point getting killed for nothing. We can come back with reinforcements later."

Cal nodded.

"Plot the jump." He said.

Ships of Farris Industries buzzed around the wrecked ships. The man born as Del Farris, but known since his marriage as Del Karn stood in an observation chamber aboard one of them watching their progress and he smiled.

"Going well?" a woman asked as she entered the room behind him.

"Ahh, Faye." Del replied, his smile widening as he took his wife's hand, "It's going very well."

"I hear Lorna Fayl was furious you undercut her." Faye said.

"Lorna's always furious about something." Del said, "She should spend more time sorting out the present than looking for revenge over the past."

When the Republic Navy had arrived to secure the Phillos system there had been no sign of the pirates and the massive ship that the Jedi had reported engaging was nothing more than a cloud of scrap metal slowly falling into the atmosphere of the sixth planet.

That had just left the business of recovering the other vessels and Del Karn had been quick to put in a bid through one of his companies. The use of Farris Industries instead of one more readily identifiable as belonging to the Karn family, one of the Founding Families whose ancestors had originally surveyed the sector was deliberate. They did not want the public to be too aware of what they were doing here.

The wrecks of the Republic ships would be cut up and sold for scrap by the Republic, but even with the percentage that Del was charging for their recovery he expected to make a hefty financial loss on this operation. But the Karn family was not worried about the salvage of a few hundred Republic ships; they were more concerned about the vessels that would never find their way to Republic licensed scrap yards. They were more interested in the ships that were primarily clustered in the space between the orbits of the seventh and eighth worlds.

The sith ships.