

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-IX: SENSITIVITY

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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...

SENSITIVITY

ARE GAL AND LARA UDRA FACING THE MOST POWERFUL FORCE USER THE GALAXY HAS EVER KNOWN? A BLOOD SAMPLE INDICATES THE PRESENCE OF SOMEONE STRONGER IN THE FORCE THAN IS THOUGHT TO BE POSSIBLE AND THE TWO INEXPERIENCED JEDI MUST TRUST IN HELP FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE...

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1 .

On Xyros there was not one single true landmass, only the islands made of the indigenous weed that grew in some of the shallower waters and formed enormous structures that reached up beyond the surface. Into these structures the few thousand beings to call this world their home carved out habitats and work places, while others brought in prefabricated building modules from other worlds and attached them to the weed. The complex that officers Dreyan and Madine now approached was of the latter type. It had been imported recently by some wealthy off worlder who wanted to conduct research here. This was not unusual. The biosphere of Xyros contained many unique species of interest to the galaxy's wider scientific community. But it seemed that something at this laboratory had gone horribly wrong.

"Are you the one who called us?" Dreyan asked of the man standing on the landing platform as he and Madine got out of their speeder.

"I – I am." The man stuttered.

"And you are?" Madine asked. Both officers kept a careful eye on the man and were ready to react should he become violent, their hands never straying far from their sidearms.

"My name is Shart. I bring the professor his groceries. I was making my regular delivery when I – well if you go inside you'll see for yourself."

"Wait here." Dreyan told Shart and the two officers approached the entrance to the laboratory. The door was open most of the way, with the visible part hanging at an angle. Inside the illumination panels were flickering.

"I don't like the look of this." Dreyan muttered as he stepped through the door.

The room inside was a mess, with furniture scattered and broken all around the officers. In the wall opposite the entrance was another doorway. Like the main entrance this doorway was clear, but instead of merely looking as though the door had been dragged open this one looked like it had been subjected to a massive force from the inside. The frame was ripped and torn, while the door itself had been hurled across the room and was lying mangled beside the main entrance.

On seeing this both officers drew their weapons and headed through into the next room. This was the laboratory itself and like the outer chamber the contents were scattered and smashed. But this apparent act of vandalism was irrelevant compared to what lay on the floor beside the workbench located in the middle of the room.

"Well I think its safe to say that he's dead." Madine said, holstering his sidearm.

"I hope that wasn't evidence." Cal Udra, jedi knight said as he stepped into the laboratory behind his younger sister and padawan Lara. She had just stood on something that had made a very audible 'crunch'.

"I hope so too." Lara said, looking at the sole of her boot.

"Err, somebody asked for our help." Cal said out loud, causing the assortment of beings clad in all-covering suits that were going over the room to all look towards the two jedi newcomers.

"Ah yes." one of the figures replied and when the mask was removed it revealed the face of a female sullustan, "I'm Nym Noss. I'm the chief investigator for the Karn Aurek police department."

"Karn Aurek?" Lara said, "Isn't that-"

"It's a moon orbiting this system's largest gas giant." Nym interrupted, "Xyros doesn't have much of a population so they bring us in to handle stuff like this rather than maintain a larger police force themselves."

"And you brought us in." Cal said, "Why?"

"Over here." Nym said and she led the Udras to a bank of instruments mounted on one of the walls. As they walked around the central work bench Cal and Lara both spotted the tape outline on the floor that indicted where a body had lain, "I recognised this." She said and she tapped one of the machines, "Its for testing midi-chlorian levels isn't it?"

"Looks like it." Cal said, "Though I'm not family with that exact model."

"What's it doing here?" Lara asked.

"The biosphere of Xyros is unusually rich in midi-chlorians." Nym explained, "Quite a few scientists come here to try and figure out why. So far none of them have."

"So you figured we might be able to shed some light on all this." Cal said.

"Actually," Nym replied slowly, "I just asked Agent Raser for technical support. It was her idea to involve you two."

Cal's face fell.

"But now that you're here perhaps you can help out." Nym said and she looked at Lara, "Providing you can avoid squashing any more evidence that is."

Now it was Lara's turn to have her expression change suddenly.

Nym held out a tiny sliver of plastic to Cal.

"What's this?" he asked while he held it up and looked at more closely. The object was rectangular with clean edges and transparent. In the centre he could clearly see a dark spot.

Blood.

"It was loaded into the analysis machine. The machine is damaged and I thought maybe whoever did all this was trying to destroy it."

"Well," Cal said, tucking the sliver into his pocket, "we can certainly run an MC test for you and we can pass it on to Agent Raser for a more thorough analysis by the sector rangers."

Nym smiled.

"That'd be a great help." She said.

Cal nodded before turning to leave, Lara following behind him. Nym turned around also to return to her examination of the scene, but she paused when she heard a 'crunch' from behind her.

"Oh stang." Lara exclaimed.

The Delaya-class transport the *Bright Hope* had been assigned to Cal and Lara by the Jedi order and it carried a well-equipped medical bay that was capable of running a midi-chlorian test on the sample provided by Investigator Noss. It was while Cal waited for the results of this test that he heard Lara enter the room behind him.

"I thought you may like some caf." She said, setting a mug down near him.

"Thanks." He replied and he took a sip of the drink.

"So what's taking so long?" Lara asked as she sipped at her own drink and looked at the display, "I'd have thought you'd have finished this ages ago."

"The machine's on the blink." Cal said, "This is the third time I'm running the test. Each time it goes all the way through and just reports a 'result overflow error'."

"What's that?" Lara asked, frowning her brow.

"Something to do with the size of the number that the machine can count to." Cal said then the machine buzzed, "Oh kriff it!" Cal exclaimed as he looked at the message on the display that simply read 'RESULT OVERFLOW ERROR', "That's it!" he snapped, yanking the sample from the machine's analysis port, "I'm just sending the data to the enclave on Moldas. Let them sort it out."

Jedi Master Ben Karas stepped aside as his opponent tried to skewer him with her lightsaber.

"Faster!" he shouted at her, "I've seen gamoreans that could do better." And he swung his own blade around towards her, smiling as she successfully brought up her lightsaber to block the attack before he needed to shut off his weapon to avoid decapitating her.

"I'm not interrupting am I?" a voice called out from across the training room.

"Of course not Kraus." Master Karas replied and he shut off his lightsaber, "That will be all for now Keana." He added, looking at his padawan, "Go and meditate on what you have learned here today."

"I've learned you're damn quick." The young woman muttered as she walked to the side of the room and took a drink of water.

"So what can I do for you Kraus?" Master Karas asked.

"We received a call from Cal Udra in the Narthis Sector master." Kraus said, approaching the more senior Jedi.

Master Karas frowned. He did not like or trust the Udras and the recent discovery that the Sith had once run rampant in the Narthis Sector had done nothing to calm his fears that the Udra family would fall to the dark side.

"What do they want now?"

"They sent a datafile from a blood sample for analysis master. They requested a midi-chlorian test."

"And?"

"And I have the results here master." Kraus said, handing over a datapad.

"The result is false." Master Karas announced.

"It is not master. I have rechecked them. The midi-chlorian count of the sample is almost thirty-five thousand."

"Why did Cal request this information?" Master Karas asked, immediately suspecting the motives of the young Jedi knight.

"There was a murder. The sample was found at the scene."

"A murder?"

"Yes master, apparently most brutal."

"How many jedi are here right now?"

"Including ourselves?"

"Yes and padawans."

"Only seven master."

"Then gather the others, I'm going to acquire further help."

"Is that wise master?" Kraus asked, sensing what Master Karas was planning.

"If we are dealing with a Sith of such power then he will help us."

"That is what I am afraid of master."

The man who walked alongside Master Karas had no force sensitivity whatsoever but Master Sergeant Jerad Gall had served the Jedi Order for more than two decades now. He was the highest-ranking member of the Freedom Warriors, the non-force sensitive soldiers who supported the jedi in battle on Moldas. As part of his duties he was responsible for guarding this building and its sole occupant.

"Has he caused any trouble?" Master Karas asked.

"None general." Jerad replied, "Though he has disabled the lighting panels again."

"Never mind." Master Karas said, "Let me in."

Jerad nodded to one of the two guards standing either side of the door in front of them and one of them entered the code necessary to trigger the opening sequence.

Inside the room was lit only by the flickering flame from a fire that had been lit in the centre of the floor. Behind a cloaked figure sat staring at the flames.

"You came alone." The man said, "Normally you bring your padawan when you're trying to reform me."

"I'm not here to talk about your history today Hargood." Master Karas replied.

"Then why -" Hargood began, looking up at Master Karas, "Ahh," he suddenly said, "you need my help."

"We may be facing a Sith."

Anger.

Hatred.

Vengeance.

The reaction was exactly what Master Karas expected.

"He's powerful." Master Karas went on, "More powerful than we ever believed was possible." Then he held out his hand and showed Hargood what he held. Hargood smiled and reached out his own hand. Then, as Master Karas relaxed his grip Hargood used the force to call his lightsaber towards him.

2.

Fear.

"Come on now Lara." Cal said to his sister as they waited in the hangar bay of Aurek Station, "I'm sure that there's nothing to be worried about."

"Master Karas is coming here." Lara replied, "He doesn't like us. Me especially, I know it. We're in trouble and he's coming to tell us how he's going to make our lives much harder. He's going to send us to straighten the sand on Tatooine or something."

"I doubt that." Cal said and then he saw a ship entering the hangar bay that had jedi markings on the side, "Ahh, here he is now."

Then a second ship with identical markings entered the bay behind the first.

"He's brought someone else." Lara said.

"Looks that way." Cal replied before another jedi vessel, this time a starfighter arrived. Then there was another shuttle and another after that.

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

"Now who's scared?" Lara said to him.

Master Karas was the first to disembark from any of the shuttles, followed closely by his padawan Keana.

"Master Karas!" Cal called out as he and Lara walked towards their superior, "Welcome to Aurek Station."

"You may dispense with the pleasantries." Master Karas replied, "I am here to get your investigation back on track."

"Investigation?" Cal asked, "I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean."

"This." Master Karas replied sternly and he handed Cal a datapad containing the results of the midi-chlorian test he had requested.

"Oh." Cal said, "That." And he passed the datapad to Lara.

"Holy crap!" she exclaimed.

Master Karas frowned at her, then turned back to Cal.

"Given the nature of the threat," he said, "I brought all the jedi available."

"Freedom warriors too I see." Cal commented as he spotted a group of the soldiers beginning to unload their equipment from one of the transports.

"Indeed. Now where can we go to discuss the situation? I will require a full update on the investigation."

"Err, well -" Cal responded.

"Is there a problem Jedi Udra?"

"We've not been investigating anything." Lara answered before her brother could speak, "We just went to Xyros at the request of the sector rangers. An agent of local law enforcement asked us to do the midi-chlorian test. We only asked you because we thought our gear was acting up."

"In fact it just couldn't handle the results." Cal added, glaring at Lara.

"Then take me to Xyros." Master Karas ordered, "I will speak with this officer of the law myself."

This time Nym Noss wore the standard uniform of Karn Aurek's police force while either side of her were a pair of officers in Xyros police uniforms.

"Nym Noss, allow me to introduce Jedi Master Ben Karas." Cal said.

Most of the jedi reinforcements had remained on Aurek Station, only Master Karas and Keana had accompanied Cal and Lara here.

"A pleasure to meet you." Nym said, shaking the hand of Master Karas.

"Likewise." He replied and Cal and Lara were mildly surprised to see him smiling, something he had never while talking to either of them, "I just wish it was under more favourable circumstances."

"I have to admit," Nym said, "I didn't expect the Jedi Order to send a master all the way out here just to deal with one murder."

"I felt this case warranted my personal involvement. Now may we see the scene of the crime?"

"Of course, do come with me." And Nym walked into the laboratory ahead of the jedi.

Master Karas paused at the door.

"I won't be disturbing anything stepping in here will I?" he asked.

"No, we've cleaned everything up now. But thanks for asking."

Lara frowned.

"The victim was found here." Nym said, indicating the outline on the floor, "He was Doctor Larten Storn, an arkanian geneticist."

"What was he working on?" Master Karas asked, crouching down beside the outline.
"We don't know." Nym answered, "He spoke to no-one about his work here and all of his equipment was brought from out of the system."
"What about his assistant?" Cal said.
"Assistant?" Lara repeated, "how do you now he had one?"
"Because the work stool at that bench over there is set at a different height from the one here." Keana commented, "His assistant was taller than him."
"Very good young padawan." Master Karas said, smiling.
"He came from off world as well," Nym said, "and like the good doctor he didn't mix much with the locals. We do know he was human though. Or at least a near human species that could pass for one."
"But where is he now?" Cal asked.
"We don't know. So far he's our prime suspect. Though a break in is still a possibility given the state of the place."
"I would like access to everything you've gathered so far." Master Karas said, "From this point onwards the Jedi Order will be taking an active role in the investigation."

Han Shill, owner and chief executive of Shill Security stared across his desk.
"You're an idiot." He said, sneering at the woman sat there.
"I didn't come here to be insulted Han." She replied, scowling at him, "I need you to-"
"To clear up the mess you've made Lorna." Han interrupted, "What exactly did you think you were doing running your little science project without telling the rest of us about it?"
"I'm hardly the only one to operate individually. My family would still be -"
"Ahh," Han said, interrupting Lorna for a second time, "there it is. The poor, hard done by orphan girl routine. Cram it Lorna, I'm just as sick of it as everyone else."
Lorna stood up.
"Well if you're not going to help I'll find someone who will." She said.
"I never said that. Now sit back down." Han replied.
Lorna sat down and Han leaned across his desk towards her.
"Look Lorna, this mess is bigger than you realise. The Jedi are involved."
"The Jedi? But there's only two of them."
"Plus the ones that turned up this morning from Moldas." Han told her, "Whatever your pet scientist did it put the wind up Master Karas enough that he brought every Jedi at his disposal with him, plus a company of Freedom Warriors."
Lorna's face fell.
"Are you certain?" she asked.
"Need I remind you that one of my sisters is a Freedom Warrior?"
"Of course not. But that gives us the advantage does it not? She can sabotage their efforts."
"To cover for you? Not likely Lorna."
"But if my family is linked to-"
"I don't care about the Fayl family. If you'd been more co-operative with the others then maybe you wouldn't be in the situation you're in now. As far as I'm concerned you're expendable. All of you. That's what I'll be telling the other families when I let them know what you've been up to and somehow I can't see them disagreeing."
Lorna stared back, open mouthed.
"But, but-" she stammered.
At that moment they were interrupted the office door opening and another woman entered.
"Good afternoon." She said, sitting down beside Lorna.
"Ahh, Belle. Thank you for joining us." Han said.
"Anything for my twin brother." She replied, "Now what's going on."
"Lorna here has had a slight mishap with one of her investments." Han said.
"Losing more money Lorna?" Belle said, looking at the other woman, "Are you going to tell us that it's all the Druds' fault?"
"Lorna is willing to accept responsibility for her actions." Han said, "In fact I've made her quite aware of what that may involve. But in the mean time I would like you to try and tidy things up before they get out of hand too much. Don't worry about the cost, Lorna's paying."
Lorna Fayl just scowled at the pair of them.

Lara yawned. Since the other Jedi had arrived on Xyros all of the padawans had been assigned to study the mass of datafiles that Investigator Nym Noss had provided to Master Karas. The other two padawans were also human. One of them was Keana Vreyes, padawan to Master Karas himself and was apparently nearing the point at which she would be elevated to the rank of Jedi knight. On the other hand Pedrus Ketam was a younger padawan who was apprenticed to the Shistavanen knight Vrish Khal.

"I am the only one here who's bored out of their skull?" Lara commented.

"This is important." Keana said without looking up from the display in front of her.

"If it's so important then why are we the only ones working on it?" Lara replied, staring at the other young woman, "I mean what is this stuff anyway?"

"I've got a lot of invoices." Pedrus said quietly.

"See." Keana said, "That tells us who the victim was dealing with. Maybe it will give us a clue about what he was doing in that lab that got him killed."

"Well I'm out of here." Lara said and she got up and began to walk to the exit taking a datapad with her.

"But what about Master Karas' instructions?" Pedrus asked, "He ordered us to study these."

"Where do you think you're going?" Keana demanded.

"To take a proper look at the crime scene for myself. Are you coming?"

"But what about the datafiles?" Pedrus asked.

Lara held up a datapad.

"I'll have them with me. Perhaps we'll learn more if we know what to look for."

A single police speeder was parked outside the laboratory building when the padawans arrived.

"That's weird." Lara said as she looked around.

"What is?" Pedrus asked.

"Yes," Keana added, "do give us the benefit of your experience that lets you override the orders of Master Karas."

"You didn't have to come." Lara said.

"Someone has to be a witness at your hearing. Master Karas will have you sent back to the temple for retraining with the younglings for this."

"Are you going to answer the question?" Pedrus asked.

"Of course." Lara said, "How many speeders do you see?"

"Two." Pedrus answered.

"And how many people?" Lara then asked.

"Three." Keana replied, "Is this really the best you can do? Getting us to count to three for you?"

Lara held up her hand.

"The three of us all came in the one speeder." She said, "So how did the police speeder get here?"

"The police guard brought it." Keana said, placing her hands on her hips, "Master Karas is right. You really are stupid."

"What guard?" Pedrus said.

"Exactly." Lara said with a smile. Then looking at Keana she said, "Not so stupid now hey?" and she drew her lightsaber as she moved towards the laboratory entrance. Behind her Pedrus did the same while Keana just watched them.

"There's someone in there." Lara whispered, "I can sense them."

"The guard perhaps?" Pedrus suggested.

"Perhaps." Lara answered, then she went inside.

The building's interior was even darker than the last time she had been here. All of the lighting panels were shut off and there were no windows. There was however a flashing coming from inside the laboratory itself.

"Stay quiet and keep close." Lara whispered as she crept forwards, her fingers flexing around her still deactivated lightsaber. As she reached the door into the laboratory itself she peered cautiously inside.

There in the darkness she could just about make out the silhouette of a humanoid moving about with a compact torch for illumination. She crouched down and signalled for Pedrus to do the same before creeping into the laboratory and moving around the various workbenches, hoping to get close to the intruder before they knew that the Jedi were there.

"Aren't you two finished yet?" Keana's voice suddenly called out from the doorway, "And why not just turn on the light?" and the room was suddenly lit up as she turned on the lights.

The figure spun around and hurled its torch at Keana who squealed as she ducked back around the doorframe.

"Get him!" Lara yelled and she and Pedrus both suddenly jumped out from behind the bench they had made it to.

Without looking at the two padawans, the figure that was totally covered in black rushed for the doorway. Keana appeared again with her lightsaber in her hand, but it was not activated and before she could bring it up the figure lashed out and punched her hard on her nose. There was a 'crunch' and blood splattered around the doorway as Keana collapsed.

With a 'snap-hiss' Lara's lightsaber came to life. She reached out through the force, concentrating not on the mysterious figure but instead on the door out of the building that she could just about see from her present location. There was a groaning sound and the buckled door began to close before jamming.

The figure halted and turned to face Lara and Pedrus as they rushed forward to help Keana.

"Lara?" it said suddenly, with a woman's voice and Belle Shill reached up and pulled the mask from her face, "What are you doing here?"

Lara ground to a halt and shut off her lightsaber just as Pedrus accidentally ran into her when he failed to stop in time. Belle stepped forwards to help but as she did so Keana raised the grip of her lightsaber above her head and brought the pommel down on the base of her skull.

"Be honest." Keana said with blood pouring from her face, "How does my nose look?"

"Err, fine." Lara said, but Keana sensed she thought otherwise.

Smooshed.

3.

Belle groaned as she came round, but the sound was muffled. She could feel something in her mouth and she tried to reach up to remove it only to find out that she could not move her arms. Her eyes snapped open wide and she found herself sat on one of the laboratory chairs, secured to it by bright yellow tape marked 'CRIME SCENE – DO NOT BREAK SEAL' and with what she took to be her own mask gagging her. She tugged at the tape and tried to spit out the mask.

"So who is she?" Keana asked, dabbing at her nose with a tissue.

"Belle Shill." Lara replied, "Covert operations specialist for Shill Security. She's a lackey for the Founding Families."

Belle grunted something and glared at Lara.

"I think she wants to say something." Pedrus said.

"Well she can talk to Master Karas." Keana said, "He'll be here any minute now."

Sure enough Master Karas then appeared in the doorway.

"What exactly is going on here?" he demanded as he entered, Cal and Vrish Khal accompanying him.

"Well hello again Belle." Cal said with a smile, "Nothing to say for yourself?" and now she glared at him instead.

"Enough!" Master Karas snapped and using the force he pulled the mask from Belle's mouth.

"Thanks." She said, spitting on the floor to try and get the taste out of her mouth.

"What are you doing here Belle?" Cal asked.

"The bloke who ran this place was sending threats to the Fayl family. Demanding money for his research."

She said, "I came to try and find out if he was a genuine threat or if he was just some madman."

"A madman can be a threat too." Keana said.

"So can an idiot who bashes people over the head with a lightsaber." Belle replied, "I want to make a complaint about –"

"Oh shut up Belle!" Lara shouted, "You struck first."

"That's because I didn't realise that you were jedi. I thought you were the scientist or his assistant coming back."

"So what was going on here"? Cal asked, "If the man wanted money he must have said what it was for."

"Some nonsense about transplanting mid-chlorians to make someone force sensitive." Belle replied.

"Transplanting?" Master Karas repeated.

"Master is that possible?" Pedrus asked, looking towards his own instructor.

"No." the shistavanen replied solemnly, "It takes more than the presence of the midi-chlorians to make one force sensitive. A being must be able to properly interact with them."

"Larten Storn was a geneticist." Cal pointed out, "Perhaps he found a way to modify the midi-chlorians. Or maybe the host."

At that moment Master Karas' communicator sounded and he turned his back on the others.

"Now how about untying me?" Belle asked, "I've done nothing wrong."

"You were disturbing a crime scene." Cal pointed out.

"So were they." Belle replied, nodding at the padawans.

"They're part of the investigation into what happened here." Cal said, "You're not."

"There will be time for this later." Master Karas said suddenly, putting his communicator away, "Someone has just used Larten Storn's credit stick on Karn Aurek." Then he looked at Cal, "Take your padawan and go there now. We will continue the search for his assistant here or until you require us there. Understood?"

"Yes master." Cal replied.

"Good, then go."

Cal and Lara left the room with the other jedi behind them.

"Hey!" Belle called out, "What about me?"

As he left the building Master Karas paused to speak with one of the Freedom Warriors standing guard.

"Corporal Shill," he said to the woman, "I believe that your sister is inside. Can I trust you to escort her back to Crassis Major?"

"Yes general." The woman replied, snapping to attention, then as Master Karas left she headed inside.

"Hey there Belle." The Freedom Warrior said when she saw her sister tape to the chair, "Need a hand?"

"Oh shut up Corlay." Belle replied, "Just cut me loose so I can get after them."

"Sorry, but I've been ordered to get you back to Crassis Major. Karas was quite insistent about that." Corlay said before using her knife to slice through the tape restraining her older sister.

"Did they believe what I told them?" Belle asked.
"If they didn't do you think either of us would be here right now?"

The hooded figure was fumbling with something beneath its cloak.

"Looks like a good one lads." Gord Flayin said to his gang of petty thugs, "He doesn't even look to be wearing a mask."

Unlike the pleasant atmosphere of Xyros, Karn Aurek's was thick with pollutants that made it unpleasant though not toxic. All of the gang members had masks or scarves to cover their respiratory systems as well as to hide their faces from local security monitoring devices.

As the gang watched the hooded figure produced an injector and loaded it with a cylinder of bright green liquid. Placing the injector against its arm, the figure emptied the contents of the cylinder into itself.

"A junkie." Gord said, "Come on lads, this will be easy. We'll take his stash too." and he drew a gun from beneath his jacket.

The figure was bracing itself against a large commercial waste container as the gang approached from behind.

"Okay man," Gord called out, "hand over what you've got and no-one gets hurt."

"I choose the second option." The figure said in a deep male voice.

"There is no second option. You give us what we want, that's it."

"That is not what you said." The hooded figure replied, turning towards the gang, "You said I was to hand over my property and no one would be hurt."

"So?"

"So that leaves the option for me to refuse and for people to get hurt."

"Not people. Person. In particular, you."

"I think not." The figure said and it reached out.

Gord raise his gun, but stopped suddenly before it was pointed at the stranger's chest like he wanted. For some reason he could not breathe, his throat was tight and he was unable to take in any air. Suspecting a fault in his breath mask, Gord pulled it away from his face only to find that it made no difference.

Choking and clutching at his throat, Gord slumped his knees and then collapsed in a lifeless heap.

"You killed him!" another gang member called out, "You'll pay for that!"

"No! You will pay. Everyone will pay!" the figure yelled as pale blue lightning shot from his fingers and consumed the screaming gang member.

Nym Noss was waiting at the starport when the Bright Hope came in to land and the sullustan waved as the Udras disembarked and approached her.

"Is Master Karas not with you?" the investigator asked and Lara frowned.

"No." Cal replied, "He's remaining on Xyros to search for the missing lab assistant. Now I believe you reported a lead."

"Yes." Nym replied, "Doctor Storn's credit stick was used last night here at the starport to secure accommodation."

"Then you have a location for our suspect?" Cal said.

"Unfortunately not. We only know about the credit stick because he caused a disturbance that the manager responded to by summoning us. By the time we got there he'd gone, taking most of his belongings with him."

"Most?" Lara said, "But not all?"

Nym smiled.

"No. Several items that the hotel manager said were not there earlier were left behind by the suspect."

"I want to see them." Cal said.

"I thought you would. Come on, I'll take you there now."

The state of the hotel room bore a similarity to the laboratory where Larten Storn was killed. It looked as though it had not been of high quality to begin with, but Cal doubted that the furniture would have been upturned and smashed as it was now.

"Do we have a name?" Cal said as he surveyed the mess.

"A name and description. Wedge Parr, and he fits the description of Storn's assistant. We found some of his belongings in the bathroom." Nym said, pointing towards a doorway in the far corner.

Cal and Lara went into the bathroom where they found several cylinders laid out on the counter. Most of them contained a bright green fluid, but one of them was empty.

"They're auto-injector cartridges." Nym said from the doorway, "They're widely available but only to licensed professionals."

"Like a genetic engineer." Lara said, "So what's in them?"

"Looks cloudy." Cal said, holding up one of the full containers to the light.

"It's no drug I've seen before." Nym said, "Though I suppose Storn could have been developing something new."

"Oh he was developing something new alright." Cal said, "But I doubt that he had it in mind as a narcotic. Where they refrigerated?"

"No. They were on the floor. We recorded the locations and moved them to prevent them being trodden on." When making this last comment, Nym looked at Lara.

"Lara, take hold of this a moment." Cal said, passing the cylinder to her.

"Okay." She said and she took the cylinder in her hand, "Right now what – Ooh."

"You feel it too?" he asked.

"Feel what?" Nym asked, looking from Cal to Lara and back again.

"It's alive." Lara said.

Back on the *Bright Hope* Cal smeared a diluted sample of the green liquid onto a slide that he inserted into the medical scanner.

"Here goes." He said to Lara and activated the device.

"What if we get the same error as with the blood sample?" Lara asked.

"Then we try again with a more diluted sample." Cal said, "Though an overflow error in itself would pretty much prove what we suspect."

"That someone's trying to make themselves force sensitive?"

"Precisely."

There was a chime from the scanner and Cal and Lara both looked at the display.

"Seventeen thousand?" Lara exclaimed.

"And that's with a twenty five percent solution." Cal said picking up the cylinder, "Lara, what we have here – for want of a better term – is the force in liquid form. We should call Master Karas."

"Can I do it?" Lara asked, "I never get to give him good news."

"Fine." Cal said, "Call it a reward for catching Belle snooping around."

"Did you believe what she said about Storn making threats?" Lara asked.

"I didn't sense any obvious deception from her."

"Neither did I, but that's not what I asked."

"Not a word of it." Cal said as he got up to leave, "Now you go tell Master Karas what we've found while I go talk to Investigator Noss. I want to see if we can find this Parr guy on local security footage."

Wedge Parr let out a growl as the crashing sound produced by a chemical drum being dropped echoed around the room. All around him were open containers of various sorts that members of local gangs were using to mix an assortment of chemicals in. A day earlier these beings would have been at one another's throats in seconds when placed in such close proximity, but now they had him as their master and they knew the price of disobedience or desertion. Of course a leader could not hold onto power by punishment alone so Wedge had made clear the potential rewards as well. Already his rag tag army had committed more than a dozen major crimes thanks to his new found abilities, plus many other lesser offences when the opportunity arose. Breaking and entering were much easier when safe combinations and security alarm codes could be read from the victim's mind.

Though some of the money raised from these robberies had gone to his underlings, Wedge had used the bulk of it to equip this abandoned factory as a manufacturing plant to make more of the serum he needed so badly. He had only eight cylinders left and each time he used one the effects seemed to wear off quicker.

"Be careful!" he yelled at the clumsy gang members now scrambling to clean up the spilled chemical, "Or I'll see to it that you're sealed inside one of those when we're done with them." Then he turned to nearest of the containers. The chemical mix inside was a brilliant yellow and it bubbled slightly as the various parts reacted together to give off various gases. Smiling, Wedge took one of his precious cylinders from his pocket and unsealed it. Tipping it over the container in front of him, Wedge let a few drops fall into the chemical mix before he righted the cylinder again. Then he moved on to the next container and repeated the procedure, tipping a small amount of the serum into it so that the midi-chlorians inside could multiply and fill the entire thing.

In a matter of hours Wedge would have more power than anyone else in history.

"Master Karas? Is that you? I can barely see you." Lara said. The holographic image flickered and faded then became clearer for a moment before fading once more.

"Weather conditions here have taken a turn for the worse." Master Karas said, his voice obviously raised to try and overcome the interference, "It seems that the presence of so many of us here has triggered a reaction. We're in no danger, but all flights are grounded until things clear up."

"We think we've confirmed the presence of Storn's assistant." Lara said, raising her own voice, "Plus we've found some of what Storn was making in that lab. It looks like he was injecting his assistant with midichlorians. What do you want us to do?"

"I didn't catch that." Master Karas' hologram replied, "Look, I'm going to have to go. I'm hoping that by spreading ourselves out we may be able to reduce the disturbance that's affecting the weather here. In the mean time if you need help then there's a ship waiting in orbit with back up aboard. They'll respond to a signal on zerek channel. Karas out." And with that the image disappeared.

"We're on our own." Lara said to herself, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Leaving the communications suite, Lara took a breath mask before heading out of the ship and slipped it over her face as she walked towards the local security office. Technically the office was only responsible for starport security, but it was equipped with computers that were networked to every other law enforcement computer on the moon. Because of this Cal was using one of them to review security footage from the area beyond the starport itself.

"What did Master Karas have to say?" Cal asked without looking up. He was used to the presence his sister had in the force and could recognise her without having to lay eyes on her.

"He's not coming."

"What?"

"All flights are grounded. It seems that the presence of so many jedi in one place where the force is so powerful has triggered planet-wide storms or something."

"So we're on our own then?"

"Not quite. Master Karas said something about there being a ship in orbit around Xyros that would respond to a signal on zerek channel. He didn't say anything more about it though."

"It's probably a unit of Freedom Warriors." Cal said, "They could come in useful."

"So what have you found?" Lara said, changing the subject and pulling a chair next to her brother.

"This is our guy." Cal said, passing her a datapad showing an image of Wedge Parr's face, "It's from the immigration records. Unfortunately he seems to know enough to keep his face out of sight around public security cameras so I've not figured out where he went."

"I don't suppose he's used Storn's credit stick again has he?"

"No." Cal replied, shaking his head, "If he's paying for anything then he's either using a credit stick not associated to himself or Storn or he's using good old fashioned cash."

"Or he's just stealing whatever he wants." Lara commented.

Cal smiled.

"Of course." He said.

"What?"

"He got thrown out of the hotel for causing a disturbance right?"

"Sure. But what does that have to do with it?"

"So doesn't it follow that wherever he goes trouble's going to follow him around?"

"Well murder is a dark side sort of thing." Lara said.

"So we just need to take a look at what crimes have been committed recently and see if there are any sudden new hotspots." Cal explained and he tapped at the computer keyboard. A map of the area appeared on the display followed by coloured dots to indicate reports made to the local police in the past few days.

"There, look at that." Cal said, pointing at an area that had a great many dots in it, "Until today that area was no more dangerous than any other in the city, but in the past few hours alone there have been over forty crimes reported in that neighbourhood."

"So how come the local cops haven't noticed?" Lara asked.

"Because they've suddenly been swamped in the past few hours." Cal said, "Look, crime's up everywhere, but that area's been hit hardest."

"If you say so." Lara said, yawning.

"I know how you feel." Cal said, "All this travelling back and forth has worn me out too. Perhaps we should turn in for the night. We can pick this up tomorrow when we're fresh. I'd like more data on the crime figures anyway. It's still possible that there's a more mundane explanation than a dark side driven crime wave."

Then he activated the communicator set into the desk and used it to put a call through to Nym.

"What can I do for you Jedi Udra?" she asked.

"I need a breakdown of crimes reported in the past few hours and an analysis of whether there are any unusual patterns."

"Of course." Nym replied, "Shall I send the results to your hotel?"

"Hotel?" Cal asked, "What hotel?"

"I got the message about ten minutes ago. Your suite at the Emperor is ready for you."

"The Emperor?" Lara said, "Isn't that place like two thousand credits a night? And that's for a room, not a suite. We can't afford that."

"The hotel said it was already paid for." Nym said.

"It must be Master Karas." Cal said, "The storm must have screwed up his communications so bad he's booked us into the wrong hotel."

"So we're going to stay there?" Lara asked.

"You heard Investigator Noss, it's already paid for. Two thousand credits is a lot of money to waste."

4.

Cal and Lara grinned at one another as the turbolift took them up to the penthouse suite of the Emperor hotel. Across the galaxy, the Emperor hotel chain provided high quality accommodation for equally high prices.

"Even the lift music is good." Cal said.

"With what they charge they've probably got a live orchestra on the turbolift roof." Lara replied as the doors slid open to reveal their suite, "Wow." She exclaimed as she walked across the room, staring at its furnishings, "This place is great."

"No mini bar." Cal said, "I suppose we'll just have to make do with this full sized one." And he walked over to where a fully stocked bar was fitted up against the wall. Then he stopped suddenly.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked, leaping onto a large couch and spreading out her limbs over it.

"Shush." Cal said quietly, "We're not alone."

Lara stood up and reached for her lightsaber as Cal also drew his weapon and advanced towards one of the large doors that he presumed led to a bedroom. Gently he pushed the door open and the sound of running water could be heard coming from a room adjoining the bedroom. Cal waved Lara closer and crept towards the open doorway opposite. He halted beside the open door and pressed himself up against the wall and waited for Lara.

"On three." He whispered, "One... two..."

"Three!" Lara snapped and she rushed through the door ahead of Cal.

As Cal burst into the bathroom behind her, he ground to a sudden halt. Lara reached out and placed a finger beneath his chin and used it to push his mouth closed.

"Oh hi there." Belle Shill said as she stepped out of the shower, "Are there any towels behind you?"

Recovering his composure, Cal returned his lightsaber to his belt.

"Belle what are you doing here?" he demanded, "Didn't Master Karas have you sent back to Crassis Major?"

"Sure he did." Belle replied, "My sister took me all the way back there. You can check. Then I got on another ship and came back here. By the time I arrived the weather was too bad to land on Xyros so I thought you might appreciate me coming here to help you out. I even arranged this suite. I'm afraid there's only two rooms though, so two of us will have to share."

"Not particularly." Lara said.

"Fine." Belle replied and she held out her arms with her wrists pressed together right in front of Cal's face, "Clamp me in binders and punish me for my transgression."

Cal sighed.

"I need a drink." He said, "Belle, we can discuss this tomorrow morning." And he turned to leave the bathroom.

"Yeah," Lara added as Cal left, "after you've put something on." And using the force she hurled a towel at Belle from a rack behind her.

Cal awoke with a start when Belle hit him with a pillow and he rolled off the couch he had spent the night on.

"Sleep well?" she asked as she stood over him.

"Remarkably well." He replied as he sat up and stretched, "This thing is comfier than my bed on Aurek Station." Then he remembered about how Belle had not adequately explained her presence in the system,

"So why are you here Belle?" he asked, "Really."

"I told you, Storn was making threats –"

"Well he's dead now isn't he? You must know that by now. In fact I reckon you knew it before Lara caught you in his lab. So he's no longer a threat to your precious Founding Families is he?"

"Okay you caught me." Belle said, shrugging, "He did extort money from the Fayls. He did by threatening to leak information that was personally embarrassing to Lorna Fayl. Something about her ex partner, her daughter Nissel's father. Understandably, Lorna would like to know that the information has been secured. For her daughter's sake of course."

"Oh of course." Cal said.

"Well the problem is that the main drive from Storn's computer was removed – not by the police, I checked – so I need to find it."

"You think Wedge Parr's got it don't you?"

"Of course. Can you think of anyone better? With that he can continue to extort money from the Fayl Family. They may not be as rich as the others, but they're still loaded. Do you want him to have access to that sort of cash?"

Before Cal could answer, Lara emerged from her bedroom. Like Belle she wore a robe marked with the emblem of the Emperor Hotel chain.

"Can we keep these?" she asked, grasping the collar of her robe.

"Well I'm not the one paying," Belle said, "so I'm going to say yes."

Lara smiled.

"Great." She said, "Now what about breakfast?"

"On it's way up." Belle said, "I wasn't sure what you two would want so I ordered the full selection."

Cal looked at the datapad he had left on the table overnight. Connected to his point-to-point communicator it was able to receive data wirelessly and it seemed that this was exactly what had happened while he slept.

"Looks like Investigator Noss's people sent us that information." He said, picking up the datapad and opening the new file, "Yep," he added, "this is the crime data I asked for."

Lara sat down beside him while Belle just stared over his shoulder.

"So what do we have?" Lara asked.

"Lots of robberies." Cal replied, "The increase is mainly cash or unlocked credit devices being stolen rather than jewellery or consumer goods and such."

"So things that don't need selling on." Belle said.

"It worries me how you know this stuff." Lara responded, looking up at Belle for a moment then looking back at the datapad.

"Its useful in my line of work." Belle replied.

"Do a bit of burglary on the side do you?" Lara asked sarcastically.

"No." Belle said, "Though I seem to recall you being arrested for that."

Lara scowled at her.

"Anyway." Cal said loudly, "There are a few odd things too. Hardware and tools. In fact I'd say the sort of stuff you'd need for rigging up a clandestine lab."

"Now who knows too much about this?" Belle said looking at Lara, then she looked at Cal, "So is there a pattern?" she asked, "Or any hints about where will be hit next?"

"Well everything here looks like it would be used for mixing up chemicals." Cal said, "I've seen it before in narcotics cases. But we know that the solution will need storing and administering carefully using proper medical grade equipment. So far nothing like that has been taken."

"So where could they get it?" Lara asked.

"Well there aren't that many medical supply companies around." Cal said, "And those that there are tend to have pretty good security."

"You're not going about this properly." Belle said, "The places that supply medical equipment have tight security, but the places that actually use it tend to be harder to protect. Clinics and hospitals have to be open to the public."

Cal called up a map of the area he was studying and highlighted medical facilities.

"Three of them." He said, "That's convenient, we can each take one. As soon as Parr hits one of them whoever's covering it can signal the others and we can take him down."

"Yeah, right." Lara said, "Have you forgotten this guy's MC count?"

"Well the injector cartridges at the hotel suggest he's having to inject himself to keep that level. Hopefully we'll catch him when he's low on power."

"Hopefully?" Belle said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Cal did his best to blend in at the clinic, pulling his hood up to conceal his features. The clinic was not at the forefront of medical treatment, instead getting by on charitable donations from people living in more upmarket areas. From what Cal could tell it spent most its time dealing with complications arising from the locals being exposed to the moon's atmosphere for too long without protection and the sound of coughing filled the air. There were only a few guards, stationed mainly around the pharmacy to protect it from being looted. But Cal knew that Wedge would not be interested in the medicines kept there. He would target the treatment areas themselves.

He concentrated and let the force flow through him, attempting to pick out the thoughts of anyone who may be planning to steal from the clinic.

Greed.

Guilt.

Unfortunately there seemed to be rather a lot of beings planning to do just that, though at least some seemed to be reluctant about stealing from such a place. Even as he watched he spotted a man picking the pocket of one of the patients while he was not looking.

"You can return that." Cal said as the thief passed by, sending the words into his mind.

"What?" the thief asked.

"You want to return the wallet that man dropped." Cal said.

The thief stopped and turned around, walking back to his victim.

"Hey, I think you dropped this." He said, holding out the wallet.

Cal smiled and looked around once more, watching for anyone that looked out of place. Like him.

Wedge Parr showed his underlings an image on his datapad of what he wanted.

"Standard auto injectors." He said, "And cartridges too."

"What about the drugs?" one of those with him asked.

"Leave them." Wedge said.

"But we could-"

Before the man could continue he suddenly clutched at his throat, choking.

"You could do nothing." Wedge said, his hand reaching towards the man, "We are not interested in the drugs. Just the injectors." And then the man gasped as Wedge released him, "Now let's go."

The group got out of the battered speeder van they had travelled to the clinic in and headed for the main doors as a group. Once inside they split up and began to spread out, all of them watching for the equipment they needed.

Cal saw the man pause as he walked past the trolley and study the equipment that was on it. Most of the clinic's patients right now were human, but this man was a vultan with intertwined growths of cartilage in place of his hair. The vultan species was known for its technological curiosity so it was possible that this was entirely innocent. But then Cal noticed the man also looking about to see who was looking in his direction. Then in one swift motion he took an injector and slipped it into his coat and walked off.

Cal went after him.

Wedge suddenly came to a stop and steadied himself on the wall.

"Are you okay master?" the man with him asked.

"I need more." Wedge wheezed and he fumbled in his pockets until he pulled out an injector already loaded with a cartridge of green fluid. Placing it against his arm, he emptied the contents into himself.

The tremor was massive and obviously came from close by. Cal staggered when it hit him and almost fell.

Anger.

Hatred.

The energy was cold and dark, an embodiment of the dark side itself.

"Are you alright?" a nearby nurse asked him.

"Fine." He replied as he reached for his PTP link. Activating the device, he set it to send to both Belle and Lara simultaneously, "He's here. I can feel him." He said.

"We have to go." Wedge said as the initial rush of power settled down.

"Why? We don't have the stuff we came for yet." The man with him replied.

"Forget it." Wedge said, "There's a jedi here and he's getting closer."

"Wedge Parr!" Cal's voice suddenly called out down the corridor, "Stay where you are, you're under arrest for murder."

Wedge's eyes widened and he whirled around to face Cal, reaching out his arm. Cal reacted by diving aside just in time as bright blue lightning shot from Wedge's finger towards him, instead striking the wall behind him and blowing out the light mounted there. He reached for his lightsaber and with a 'snap-hiss' it came to life.

All around people started screaming in terror.

"Stay there!" Cal repeated as he sprang back to his feet and ran towards Wedge.

The man beside him drew a gun and fired at Cal, the bullet going wide. With the flick of a wrist Cal wrenched the gun from the man's hand and sent it flying across the room. Now unarmed the man turned and ran.

Wedge unleashed another blast of force lightning and Cal tried to parry it with his lightsaber, but the blast was too strong and he was thrown back. Looking up from the floor he saw Wedge running off after his

associate. There was no way Cal could catch up with him unless he could be slowed down, so Cal focused on every object between Wedge and the exit ahead of him.

The first object to hit Wedge was a datapad left on a table, than the table itself slid away from the wall towards him but Wedge dodged this. Next an IV stand fell; tripping Wedge briefly and making him stumble. But instead of just lying where he fell, Wedge rolled over and looked back at Cal. Cal froze as he gaze into Wedge's eyes and saw that his sanity was gone. The shock of suddenly having is mind opened to the force to the extent that it had had driven him mad and now this insane mind was focusing on Cal. That was when everything went black.

5.

When Cal woke up he was in one of the clinic's beds with assorted cables stuck to his chest and forehead. "Back with us?" Lara asked, holding out his lightsaber for him.

"Wedge?" Cal said.

"Gone." Belle answered him, "By the time we got here all of his men had left, though it looks like they were scared off before taking too much. Just a few bits and pieces."

Cal swung his legs over the side of the bed and began to pull the cables off him.

"He's mad." He said, standing up, "The stress of what he's been through has driven him mad. I don't think he'll surrender."

"So does that mean what I think?" Lara asked nervously.

"He'll have to be killed." Belle said, "Before he kills too many others."

"We may still be able to incapacitate him." Cal said, "Then if we can keep him that way long enough the effects of that stuff he's injecting will hopefully wear off."

"But we need to find him first." Belle pointed out, "This should help." And she held up a mem-stik, "It's the security footage for the time he and his men was here. I'm hoping it's caught whatever vehicle they used."

"Then we can match that up with traffic footage." Lara said.

"Good." Cal said, "Now let's get back to the hotel, "The couch there is more comfortable than this bed."

Belle and Lara helped Cal up.

"I'm fine." He said as he took a few steps, then he wobbled and grabbed hold of Lara, "Well maybe not quite fine." He corrected himself.

Walking to the exit took the group down the same corridor that Wedge had made his escape down and Cal glanced down at the spot on the floor where he had been tripped by the IV stand. He looked back up and then suddenly looked down again.

"What is it?" Lara asked, sensing his sudden excitement.

"Look!" Cal exclaimed and he pointed to the floor beneath a wobbly looking seat where a computer hard drive lay abandoned.

"It doesn't stop Wedge of course." Cal said as they all stared at the hard drive now resting on the table in their hotel suite, "But it should put a dent in his plan."

"My job's finished." Belle said, "This was all I needed. But I think I'll stick around to help you two out. You may need me."

"Thanks." Cal said, "Right now I think we should take the clinic's security footage to Investigator Noss and see if she can track Wedge and his men."

"I'll wait here." Belle said, "We should avoid moving that drive around just case it gets lost. But the information contained on it is too dangerous to leave unguarded."

"Okay." Cal said, "Lara, you're with me."

"How come she gets to stay in the posh hotel suite?" Lara complained.

"Because my client's paying for it." Belle replied.

"Oh." Lara said, "Right."

Nym Noss took the mem-stik and loaded it into her computer.

"There's not much from inside the clinic." She said, "It looks like he was able to cloud the camera somehow."

"The Sith showed that they could do that during the war." Cal said, "I guess he's just picking up random abilities."

"What about outside?" Lara asked, "Is there any footage of them in the parking lot?"

"Yes, there is." Nym said, "But it's clouded again."

"So the footage is no good." Cal said.

"Not entirely." Nym told him, "Its just details we can't pick out, but we have general movements and the time stamp is intact. I can use that to check against traffic surveillance and follow their vehicle. Can you wait?"

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"Belle's expecting us back." Lara pointed out.

"Well she can wait a bit longer." Cal said, "That lady can look after herself just fine."

Wedge screamed with rage, hurling whatever loose objects he found from the back of the speeder van.

"Lost!" he bellowed.

"Master, please." One of the gangers recruited to his cause said nervously, "We can—"

"We can what?" Wedge yelled, leaping from the van and gripped the unfortunate man by his neck, "Well? Answer me!"

The man tried to speak, clawing at his throat to try and get free of Wedge's grip.

"Fool!" Wedge exclaimed as there was a snapping sound and the man's head hung limply. Then he turned to the other horrified gang members looking on, "Return to the medical facility." He ordered, "It must be there. Find it."

Lara looked at the liquid carefully then sniffed it.

"Well?" Cal asked.

"I'm not sure." Lara replied, "I think so."

Simultaneously Cal and Lara raised their cups to their lips and drank. Almost immediately after they lowered them again and looked for somewhere to spit out what they were holding in their mouths, unwilling to swallow.

"Do you actually drink this caf?" Cal said to Nym as she emerged from her office into the corridor.

"Actually, the stuff from that machine we generally only give to suspects." The sullustan investigator replied, "And lawyers."

"Torture's illegal." Lara said, "We should report you for that. About the suspects only of course. Who cares about the lawyers?"

"So what have you come up with?" Cal asked.

"Quite a lot actually." Nym said as the Udras walked into her office, "Using the parking lot footage I was able to match Parr's departure from the clinic grounds with the local traffic cameras. We never get a good look at his face, but he couldn't conceal the entire vehicle. I've tracked it back to district fourteen, dead centre of the section of the city hit by the crime increase in the past day or so."

"We've got him now then." Lara said, "If the police can set up a cordon around the area we can go in and find him."

"A cordon wouldn't do much good." Cal said, "If he decide to run he'd just smash right through. Better just to go in low profile."

At that moment Nym's desktop communicator chimed.

"Investigator Noss." A voice said, "I think you should come and see this, the jedi too."

"What is it?" Nym asked.

"We've just had two prisoners brought in. They were detained by security at the clinic your suspect was last seen fleeing."

"I'll be right there." Nym replied as she and the Udras all got to their feet and headed to the door.

Nym led them through the corridors of the police station to main booking area where two near humans were sat on a bench, their arms bound behind their backs.

"They were caught trying to sneak into the clinic's security office itself." The desk sergeant said, "Then they attacked the two staff that discovered them."

"Recognise either of them?" Nym asked Cal.

"No." he said, shaking his head. Then he looked one of the two men in the eyes, "Tell me what you were after." He said.

"Kriff you." The man replied,

"You want to tell me what you were doing." Cal said, "It's in your best interests."

"Tell him." The other said, "Its in our best interests."

"We were sent for a computer drive." The first said, "Our master wants it back."

"Wedge Parr?" Cal asked.

"I don't know his name. He is our master, that's all."

Cal pulled out his datapad and showed the men a picture of Wedge.

"That's him." The second one said.

"Good." Cal said, putting the datapad away again, "Now these nice men will show you to a cell and my charming apprentice will get you some caf."

"So where is this drive?" Nym asked as the two prisoners were led away, "The one that's not been submitted to me as evidence."

"Safe." Lara said, "Belle's looking after it."

"Who's Belle?" Nym asked.

Cal's eyes suddenly widened.

"Belle." He said and he quickly took out his PTP link and activated, "Belle." He said, "Belle, can you read me?"

There was only silence in return.

With their lightsabers in their hands and active, Cal and Lara burst into the penthouse suite of the Emperor hotel where they had left Belle and the computer drive. The room looked neat and tidy enough, just as it had been when the Jedi had left earlier and the large screen holo player was active, its image floating in the middle of the room showing a serial drama show.

"Belle!" Cal called out, "Are you here?"

"I don't like this." Lara said, "She should be here."

"Shush." Cal said, holding up his hand and he shut off his lightsaber. Lara did the same while Cal used the force to pull the holo player's control unit to his hand and shut off the sound. The muffled cries from Belle's bedroom then became easier to hear.

They found Belle with her limbs tied to the corners of her bed and a length of tape over her mouth.

"Ouch! Untie me!" she snapped as Cal ripped the tape from her mouth.

"What happened?" Cal asked.

"Just untie me quick!" Belle snapped, tugging at the strips of cloth holding her down.

Cal and Lara released the knots and Belle jumped up from the bed and ran into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

"Sorry about that." She said when she re-emerged, "But after five hours tied to that bed I was getting desperate. What the hell happened to you two anyway? I thought you said you'd only be half an hour."

"We were waiting while Investigator Noss was checking out Parr's vehicle." Cal replied.

"Cal said you'd be fine." Lara added, staring at her brother.

"Well the drive's gone." Belle said, "Some guys with guns turned up and took it."

"Parr must have sent them after us." Cal said, "He sent men to the clinic as well, but they were caught."

"They looked like the sort." Belle said, "So now we've nothing to go on."

"Actually we have." Cal told her, "Nym think she's found where Parr's operating from."

"So what are waiting for?" Belle asked, "I want payback."

Though the speeder they were in was a stock model it still stuck out in this area. All of the other vehicles they saw looked like they were kept running only by cannibalising other vehicles for parts. If that other vehicle happened to be of the same type then that was just a bonus.

"Sense anything yet?" Belle asked her two Jedi passengers.

"Nothing." Cal said, "though I think I only picked up on Parr at the clinic when he gave himself another shot of his serum."

"So its not permanent then?" Belle said.

"No." Cal said, "Or at least so far I don't think it is. What long term use of the serum combined with whatever Storn did to Parr to begin with will do is anyone's guess."

"Of course," Lara said, "there are other ways of finding him."

"Such as what?" Belle asked.

"Well does that van look familiar?" Lara said and she pointed to a battered speeder van parked beneath the overhang of a large run down factory building.

Belle pulled the speeder over and its three occupants got out.

"We're being watched." Cal said, "from the second floor."

"I see them." Lara said.

"So how do you want to do this?" Belle asked.

"Casually." Cal said, "We just calmly walk past and see how they react." And he pulled up the hood of his cape, Lara copying him.

They strolled down the street, past one empty building after another until they reached the gates of the factory.

"Are they still watching?" Belle asked.

"I'm not sure." Cal said, "Though I can sense quiet a few of them up there."

"Do we look for another way in?" Lara said.

"No." Cal replied, "Let's just do this." And they marched through the gates.

The burst of gunfire struck the ground beside Cal, a trio of magnetically accelerated projectiles and Cal rolled sideways until he was behind the rusting remains of an unidentifiable speeder. Belle and Lara also dived for cover as more gunfire erupted.

"I think they know we're here." Lara said.

Belle fired two shots from one of her compact handguns, though neither did anything to lessen the volume of fire directed at them.

"Now what?" she asked.

"We need help." Cal replied, reaching for his PTP link, "Investigator Noss," he said, "Follow this signal, we're under fire at what we think is Parr's base. We need urgent assistance."

"Copy that Jedi Udra." Nym's voice responded, "Tactical team is on the way."

Cal was about to return his PTP link to the pouch on his belt when he remembered something else, "Zerek channel." He muttered to himself.

6.

In orbit around Kam Aurek the jedi shuttle waited.

"There's the signal." Master Sergeant said to the pilot, "Take us in. I'll go tell him he's needed."

If anything the weight of fire was increasing as more gang members took up positions to fire on the Udras and Belle. So far the obstacles they had chosen as cover were holding up, but it was only a matter of time before the mix of bullets and energy beams cut them up. Whenever the police tactical team got here, it would not be too soon.

The roaring of an aircraft engine made the trio look upwards to where a shuttle flew towards the factory grounds and hovered above them. A hatch in its belly opened and a figure dropped from the craft, its black cloak billowing in the wind.

Cal and Lara both felt a shiver down their spines as the man landed on his feet and looked around.

"I'm Hargood Nollar." The man said ominously, apparently indifferent to gunfire that was somehow failing to hit him, "What is the situation?"

"The situation," Cal said, "is that we're getting shot at. We're waiting for backup."

"Backup?" Hargood said, "I'm here." And he ignited his lightsaber.

Hargood strode towards the factory doors, swinging his lightsaber to deflect the shots aimed at him. Seeing one of the gunmen in an upper window, Hargood grabbed the man through the force and pulled him through the window before releasing him in mid air. The man screamed as he plummeted to the ground.

"Who the hell is that?" Belle said loudly as she watched Hargood send the beam from an energy weapon back at the being that had fired it.

"Our way in it looks like." Cal replied and he jumped up and rushed after Hargood.

Lara also emerged from her hiding place and ran after her brother and Hargood, dodging the gunfire rather than deflecting it. Seeing that she was being left behind Belle also ran after them, firing at the windows above.

A pair of figures appeared in the factory doorway as Hargood drew closer and aimed their weapons directly at him. Expecting him to either deflect or avoid their attacks, Cal and Lara were both horrified when Hargood instead reached out towards the two beings and clenched his fist. The pair immediately dropped their weapons and clamped their hands over their ears. Screaming and with blood pouring from their eyes, ears, nose and mouth they collapsed on the ground in pools of their own blood.

Cal and Lara came to a sudden halt, pressing themselves up against the wall of the factory as Hargood stood just beside the door. They gazed at the bodies of the men in the doorway while Belle reloaded her weapons.

"What the hell are you doing?" Cal demanded, "This is not the jedi way!"

"No." Hargood replied, "But it is mine." And he went inside.

"What do we do?" Lara asked Cal.

Cal shrugged.

"I guess we follow him." Belle said and she dived through the door after Hargood.

"We may as well." Cal said, "We've come this far."

There was another body just inside the door, this one cut in two by a lightsaber and from around a corner screams could be heard.

"I think he went that way." Lara said.

Wedge put his hands against his forehead, trying to stop the pounding. He could sense the presence of his enemies; the assassins come to kill him. Two of them burned like fire, one was but a tiny spark and could be ignored but the fourth...

The fourth was rage incarnate and right now he was cutting his way through the minions that Wedge had assembled. He cared nothing for them of course; they were all expendable and easily replaced. But at this rate the assassins would reach him at any moment.

Wedge reached into his pocket and removed the cylinders of serum he still had. There were three of them. Then, although the influence of the previous cylinder he had injected himself with had not yet worn off, Wedge injected himself with them all as fast as he could.

There was a scream like nothing that Cal or Lara had heard before. It echoed down the halls of the factory and into their minds through the force causing them to stop and recoil.

"Keep up!" Hargood snapped from ahead of them, "Our quarry is here." And he ripped a door from its hinges and stepped into the room beyond.

Inside the room Wedge Parr was curled up in a ball on the floor.

"Wedge Parr!" Cal shouted as he and Lara took up positions beside Hargood, "Surrender now!"

At first Wedge did not respond, but then he began to cackle softly. The evil laughter became louder as he got to his feet, facing away from the Jedi. Then he turned around to look at them with blazing yellow eyes. Belle stepped out from behind the Jedi with a pistol raised and pointed at Wedge. There were soft 'pops' as she fired the suppressed projectile weapon, walking towards Wedge as she fired. In response Wedge just raised his hands and the bullets came to a halt centimetres away from him. As Belle paused to reload he laughed and lowered his hand, the bullets suddenly dropping to the floor. Then he roared and extended his arm again to hurl Belle back against the wall.

Hargood charged, his lightsaber held high and Wedge turned to face this more serious threat. Lightning shot from Wedge's fingers but Hargood parried it with his lightsaber and kept on coming.

"Move!" Cal shouted at Lara and they both rushed towards Wedge, one either side of Hargood.

Seeing the three Jedi coming at him Wedge jumped backwards, doubling the distance they had to cross to reach him. All three Jedi carried lightsabers while Wedge was unarmed. However, he knew how to even the odds. He extended both arms out beside him and ripped two lengths of long disused pipe from the walls, each about the length of a lightsaber. Then he let go with the lightning again, only this time he just channelled it along the pipes.

Hargood leapt into the air and as he descended he brought his lightsaber down, intending to cleave Wedge in two as he had done with the guard on the front door. But as he descended Wedge brought up one of the lengths of pipe and used it to block the attack. Normally a lightsaber blade would have cut through a hollow metal pipe as if it was not even there, but surrounded by the crackling energy of the dark side the improvised weapon withstood Hargood's assault.

Swinging the second pipe, Wedge forced Hargood back just as Cal and Lara arrived to help him. Wedge roared and began to swing both lengths of pipe wildly, blocking each attempt by the three Jedi to land a blow on him. Impossible as it may have seemed he not only held his ground, but began to push the Jedi back.

Lara saw one of the pipes as it was swung towards her. Wedge expected her to either retreat further, perhaps making an effort to parry the attack despite it being too powerful. But rather than step away from him she reacted by dropping to the floor, spreading her legs wide apart in a sudden move that sent ripples of her pain through the force. From this angle she was then able to bring her lightsaber up beneath his arm, severing it about half way between the wrist and elbow. Then she rolled aside as the still energised pipe dropped towards her.

Pain.

Wedge screamed, his agony coming out in shockwave that threw all of the Jedi away from him. Dropping the other pipe to the floor, he clutched at the stump of his arm.

"You bitch!" he shouted at Lara as she got back to her feet and he reached out with his remaining hand to send out a blast of force energy that sent Lara sliding across the floor.

"Get off her!" Cal yelled as he got back up and charged at Wedge. The madman now pointed at Cal and with another scream he created more force lightning. Cal blocked the attack with his lightsaber but Wedge kept on channelling power into it and Cal was brought to a halt, struggling to keep hold of his weapon as lightning flowed around it.

A piece of machinery that had been left behind when the factory had closed suddenly flew through the air and struck Wedge, causing his attack to cease. Exhaling heavily, Cal dropped to the floor.

Wedge turned around to see Hargood glaring at him, his lightsaber beside him. With a flick of his wrist Hargood sent another heavy object hurtling through the air at Wedge who with a flick of his own wrist deflected it before it could hit him. Then he reached out and called one of the dropped lengths of pipe back to his grip and wrapped it in lightning. Hargood smiled, then charged.

Dazed, Cal looked up to see Hargood and Wedge duelling, their movements almost too fast for him to see. For the moment Wedge was stronger. But his abilities were unstable and Cal knew that Hargood was just acting to draw out the fight as long as he could until he was the stronger. But Wedge knew this was what Hargood was doing as well, so he was not holding anything back. Each step backwards that Hargood was forced to take pushed him closer to a wall that would block any further retreat and he would be forced to stand and fight.

Cal tried to get up, but his physical strength failed him. Looking back towards the battle he spotted a large tub of liquid just beyond the two combatants and he felt the concentrated presence of mid-chlorians within. He reached out towards it, his hand trembling and then he called the tub towards him.

Just as Wedge swung his improvised weapon at Hargood again, Hargood noticed the container sliding towards him. This time instead of parrying the attack and retreating again he shut off his lightsaber and dived aside. As Wedge's swing continued the pipe passed harmlessly over Hargood as he continued to roll across the floor, but as Wedge then swung the pipe back again he instead brought its tip down into the vat of liquid as it closed on him.

The reaction was immediate and violent. The force lightning that had enveloped the pipe now flowed into the vat and the millions of midi-chlorians it contained. The vat burst open as force energy exploded from within it and Wedge was consumed in flames. Screaming in agony, he dropped to his knees as the flames went out as quickly as they had spread over him.

Hargood got back to his feet and ignited his lightsaber as he advanced on the kneeling Wedge Parr. Wedge looked up at Hargood and gasped for breath.

"You cannot defeat me." He croaked, "I am—"

Wedge's sentence went unfinished as Hargood thrust his lightsaber through his chest.

"You got lucky." Han said to Lorna as they sat in his office, "Your little science project was an unmitigated disaster but no-one knows it was anything to do with you."

"What about the records?" Lorna asked.

"What these?" Han asked, holding up the computer drive, "Belle passed these to me before the Jedi got a look at what's on them." Then he snatched the drive away before Lorna could take it, "The others have asked me to hold on to this." He said, "For some reason it seems they don't trust you right now."

Lorna scowled.

"Anyway," Han said, "I've business to attend to, so you can show yourself out."

As Lorna got up to leave the office door slid open and Belle walked in.

"Nice to see you again Lorna." She said as the other woman stormed past her. Then, after the door had slid shut once more she looked at her twin.

"It's not my fault." He said, "I had no idea they'd be delayed."

"Five hours." Belle said, "Was it worth it?"

"In what sense? The research is garbage. You know that."

"But five hours."

"You said it would be less than one."

"Never mind that. Did you have to tie me up so tight?"