

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-XI: AUTOPSY

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...

AUTOPSY

HOW DID LOM DES DIE? WHEN MORE OF THE UDRA FAMILY ARRIVE IN THE NARTHIS SECTOR AN ATTEMPT IS MADE TO FIND MORE ANSWERS REGARDING THE FATE OF THE PREVIOUS JEDI ASSIGNED THERE. BUT THEIR SUDDEN ARRIVAL PROVOKES MASTER KARAS AND LEADS TO MORE QUESTIONS...

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

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1 .

The sound of the communicator beside his bed woke Cal Udra from his sleep.

"Hello?" he said, blinking at the screen.

"Hello there Cal my boy." His father Varn replied, "I've not woken you have I?"

"Dad?" Cal said, "Err, I was asleep yes." And he glanced at the clock revealing that it was very early in the morning.

"Sorry." Varn said, "I'm not used to the time difference between the Jedi Temple on Coruscant and Aurek Station."

"What do you want dad?" Cal asked, yawning. Then he noticed something about the connection, "Hang on." He said, "There's no delay and your transmission is crystal clear. Where are you?"

"In the docking bay." Varn said, "Your aunt Elle was kind enough to bring your mother and I."

Cal's eyes widened.

"Come on down." Cal said, "I'll let Lara know you're here." And he shut off the communicator and rolled out of bed, "Lara!" he yelled as he ran out of his room and began to knock on the door of his younger sister's bedroom, "Lara wake up!" and he opened the door and went inside.

"Cal? What the hell are you doing?" Lara asked, then she looked at the clock, "Do you know what time it is?"

"Mom and Dad are upstairs in the hangar. They're on their way down right now."

Lara closed her eyes and rolled over again.

"Its too early for jokes Cal."

"I'm not joking."

Lara sat up and glared at him.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously, now get up quick."

Lara got out of bed and the two jedi both rushed into their apartments lounge and looked at the assorted stacks of empty take out containers.

"What are we going to do?" Lara asked.

"First get dressed." Cal said, "Then we get rid of this junk."

"But we'll never get it to the disposal chute."

"We don't need to. We'll just dump it in the corridor and pretend it's nothing to do with us."

Neari Udra looked at the datapad on which she had loaded a deck plan of Aurek Station's residential levels. Her two children lived in an apartment on one of the levels that featured a large number of smaller dwellings instead of the more desirable residences on the upper towers.

"I think its down here somewhere." She said.

"All these corridors look the same to me." Varn said.

"I think they are." The third individual in the group said as she looked around.

"Well you've got the map, so after you my dear." Varn said to his wife.

"Do you sense that?" the other woman asked as she and Varn followed Neari.

Panic.

Varn smiled.

"I think it means we're on the right track Elle." He said.

"Here we are." Neari said and she tucked the datapad into her robes and went to knock on the door immediately beside her. But as he hand neared the door it suddenly opened to reveal Cal standing just inside with a large plastic bag in each hand.

"Mom." He exclaimed, "You're here."

"Move it Cal." Lara said from behind him, "They'll be here any-" then she spotted her parents and aunt standing in the corridor and she dropped the bag she was holding, "Hi mom, dad, aunt Elle." She said nervously and she smiled at them.

"We've come several thousand light years." Varn said to Cal, "Are you going to ask us in or not?"

"Of course." Cal said, stepping aside and as soon as the three newcomers had walked past him he hurled the two bags he was holding out into the corridor and shut the door, "Do sit down." He added, "Caf anyone? I know I could use a cup."

"Make mine a strong one." Lara said as she led the others into the lounge and their guests indicated that they would like drinks.

"So to what do we owe this visit?" Cal asked as he poured out cups of caf.

"It's your mother." Varn said, "She got the idea that you needed her."

"That Lara wanted me here." Neri added and she and Elle both looked at her daughter.

"Me? Why?" Lara asked.

"I just got an overwhelming feeling recently that you were in trouble and wanted my help." Neri explained then as Cal set down a tray of drinks she picked one up and sipped at it.

"Dorn Station." Cal said as he took another cup to a vacant seat and sat down. Then looking at Lara he added, "Remember in the stairwell? You were scared and you said you wished mom was there."

"Be careful." Varn said, "Fear is a path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, Anger leads to hate and hate -"

"Oh give it a break." Elle interrupted, "We know all of this. Honestly, you were just as bad when we were kids Varn. Don't lay it on them too." Then she looked from Cal to Lara and around the room before she asked, "So what's with this dump?"

"Oh Cal lost a speeder that we'll be paying off for about a year." Lara said, smiling as she sipped her drink.

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

"We're still paying for it."

"Mistakes happen Lara." Neri said.

"Yes, you should, know that Lara." Cal said, grinning at her.

"I sense your deployment here has had its problems." Varn said, "Tell me about them."

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"He's bossy." Lara said suddenly.

"She doesn't respect my authority." Cal responded.

"Cal beat up a guy in a bar."

"Lara got arrested for burglary."

"Cal was thrown out of a strip club."

"I was only trying to stop you working there. She made three hundred and two credits in a place that charges a hundred and fifty per private dance."

"So two people tipped you a credit each?" Elle commented as everyone looked at Lara.

Anger.

"I was carrying out an investigation!" Lara yelled.

"She still has the outfit." Cal said.

"Cal. Enough." Neri said and she turned towards Lara, "Now calm down. I'm sure you only did what was necessary."

"What about the events that brought you here?" Varn asked, changing the subject.

"You mean Kyle Jenner?" Cal said, "Well we still haven't found out exactly what happened to him."

"But we do have a wrecked fighter, an assassin droid, a gang of hired killers and the body of his padawan." Lara then added.

"Has anyone come forward with any information?" Elle asked.

Cal shook his head.

"No one." He said, "Most people didn't even seem to notice that Kyle or Lom were missing."

"How did his padawan die?" Neri asked.

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"The assassin droid we think." Lara said.

"Yes, but how did it kill him?" Neri asked, "What did the autopsy say?"

"Autopsy?" Cal said, "There hasn't been one."

"The lightsaber." Lara said and she looked at her parents, "The insurgents on Tepillos got hold of Lom's lightsaber from somewhere." She explained, "We were guessing that the droid gave it to them to prove that it had killed Lom."

"But there could have been someone else there when he died." Cal finished.

"What happened to Lom's body?" Varn asked.

"Actually," Cal said, "I think that it's still on Tepillos."

Jedi Master Ben Karas was woken by a knocking on his door.

"Master!" a woman's voice called from the hallway outside.

"I'm coming." Master Karas replied as he walked towards the door, "Now what is it Keana?" he asked.

"Master we have just received word from Aurek Station in the Narthis Sector. Administrator Varr'kay is requesting to know why we didn't inform him that a delegation of Jedi would be visiting his command."

"What delegation?" Master Karas replied.

"It would seem that three of the Udra family have arrived." Keana told him, "They visited Cal and Lara before they all left for Tepillos."

"Tepillos?"

"Yes master."

The Udra family will serve the Sith.

The premonition that haunted Master Karas suddenly returned to his thoughts.

"Gather as many Jedi as you can." He said to his padawan, "We're going to the Narthis Sector."

Master Karas closed the door and began to get dressed. As he did so a shimmering blue light appeared and formed into a humanoid form.

"Ben." The glowing being said simply.

"The Udras are here." Master Karas replied as he pulled on his cloak and called his lightsaber to him from where it lay.

"Be careful my old apprentice."

"I have seen their fall Pater. But no one on the council will listen."

"You must be mindful of the uncertainties in your vision Ben. If you try too hard to prevent what you see in your dreams then you may end up triggering it yourself."

"Are you saying I should do nothing?"

"I am asking you to be careful."

"Why hasn't the body been moved yet?" Neari asked as a pair of orderlies rolled Lom Des's corpse into the room on a trolley.

"It seems to have been a clerical oversight." The chief mortician told her as he consulted his datapad, "The case is still open and the investigating officers made no request for the body to be moved."

The investigating officers in this case were of course Cal and Lara and as their relations all looked in their direction the two younger Jedi avoided their gazes.

"It doesn't matter right now." Varn said.

"Of course not." Neari replied. Then she looked at the mortician, "Thank you." She said, "That will be all."

The mortician nodded and left the room. As soon as he had shut the door behind him Neari activated the recorder mounted above the spot where the trolley had been left and pulled the cover off the body.

"Victim is a male Sullustan aged about twenty standard years." She said, "There is considerable decomposition that I believe is a result of the body not being discovered until several weeks after death."

Then she began to examine the injuries Lom had sustained, "There are numerous abrasions, consistent with a violent struggle during which the victim was subjected repeated physical blows though I do not believe that any of these contributed to his death. What is clearly the fatal wound is located on the chest.

The tissue surrounding it is heavily charred, suggesting that it was inflicted by—"

At that moment the door to the examination chamber opened again and as the Udras looked around they saw a group of Jedi rushing in. Cal and Lara recognised them all instantly. Master Karas was at the head of the group with the Shistavanen knight Vrish Khal just behind him. Backing them up were their padawans Keana and Pedrus Ketam and a squad of Freedom Warriors.

"Do not move!" Master Karas called out.

"Explain yourself." Varn Udra responded just as loudly.

"I have nothing to explain." Master Karas said, snarling at Varn, "I am the senior Jedi in this region and your presence here was not cleared with me."

"Our presence in this sector," Varn replied, "is of a personal matter and none of your business."

"I know you are related to Cal and Lara, but—"

"But nothing!" Varn yelled, "You have no right to greet a fellow master with a weapon in your hand. Or is this how you greet all visitors?"

The other Jedi all glanced at Master Karas' hand and saw that he was indeed holding his lightsaber, though it remained inactive.

"Now you will explain yourself to me." Varn said, "Or shall we prepare to defend ourselves?" and using the force, Varn called his lightsaber from his belt to his grip.

Simultaneously the other Udras all placed their hands on their lightsabers, though none went as far as to draw them. Two masters threatening one another was more than enough.

"So what will it be then Master Karas?" Varn asked, "I have three knights and a padawan to your one knight and two padawans. How much faith do you have in your Freedom Warriors?"

Anger.

Master Karas had lost this argument and he knew it. For a brief moment the normally level headed jedi failed to control his emotions. Quickly calming down, he returned his lightsaber to his belt.

"I apologise for my haste Master Udra." He said to Varn, "But you should have informed me of your arrival. Protocol demands it."

"Of course we should." Varn replied, also putting his weapon away, "Unfortunately our trip here was somewhat of a spur of the moment thing and we had no opportunity to warn you."

Master Karas looked around.

"Keana remain here. The rest of you wait outside." He said forcefully.

When the room was cleared of those Master Karas deemed unnecessary he looked back towards the Udras.

"So what is going on here?" he asked.

"I was just carrying out an autopsy." Neari said, "We thought it may be useful to find out how the assassin droid defeated Kyle Jenner's padawan."

Master Karas nodded slowly and he folded his arms.

"Continue." He said.

Turning her attention back to the body on the trolley, Neari picked up her examination where she had left off.

"The wound is cauterised." She said. Then she picked up a scalpel from a nearby tray and gently inserted it into the wound, "There is a definite cavity, "she said, "with cauterised tissue running all the way along. I would say that elements of both lungs and the heart were pierced and burnt. The deep, penetrating nature of the wound suggests that an older plasma weapon is unlikely to have been used; however a modern blaster would inflict such injuries. As would a lightsaber thrust directly into the chest." Then she looked up, "Was Lom's lightsaber recovered?" she asked, looking from Cal to Lara and back again.

"Yes." Cal replied, "Not that long ago actually."

"The local insurgents had it." Lara added.

"And what sort of crystal did it use?" Neari asked.

"Kathracite." Lara told her, "It was just a padawan's blade."

"Well no kathracite focused blade did this." Neari said as she continued to probe the wound, "The depth to which tissue has been burnt is far too deep."

"So the killer used a blast rifle or pistol then?" Elle asked.

"A rifle I think." Neari said, "There's a lot of damage."

"Colonel Jeck said that the insurgents did have some blast rifles." Cal said.

"Plus the assassin droid could have taken one from the armoury." Lara suggested.

"No." Cal replied, "Remember what the Colonel said? They've not lost any guns from the armoury since he took over. The droid wasn't with Kyle for long."

"Pity we sent it tumbling into a gas giant." Lara said, "The colonel's people could have taken it apart and gotten to the truth."

"A gas giant?" Varn said.

"Yeah." Cal replied, "It was waiting in orbit in a fighter stolen from Kyle's hangar."

"That makes no sense." Master Karas said, suddenly breaking his silence, "An assassin droid is an expensive commodity. Too expensive to simply abandon."

"Perhaps its owners thought they may need it later." Elle said, "But didn't want to run the risk of it being captured."

"Makes sense." Varn said, "They could have gone back for the droid at any time, but anyone else finding it would result in either the droid killing them or all the evidence it contained being destroyed."

"Jedi Udra." Master Karas announced and Cal, Elle and Neari all looked at him, "Cal." He added to dispel the confusion, "Find out where that droid came from. That is now your top priority." Then he looked at Varn,

"Will you be remaining with your offspring?" he asked.

Varn looked to his wife who nodded.

"We will." He said.

"Keana." Master Karas said, turning his head towards his padawan.

"Yes master?"

"Remain here with Master Udra. Assist him as needed. I will have Jedi Khal leave his padawan also. The Udras may require assistance from those more familiar with the sector."

"Yes master. But master?"

"Yes?"

"Are you not staying with us too?"

"No." Master Karas said, "I have other duties to attend to."

Master Karas left the examination room and sent Pedrus back in. Then, just before the door dropped shut once more the remaining Jedi just had time to see him beckoning for Vrish and the Freedom Warriors to follow him back towards their ship.

"Is he always that cranky?" Elle asked and Cal and Lara both nodded, smiling.

"Master Karas is a great man." Keana said, "You would see that if you knew him."

"Yes." Varn said, "Great men often leave their apprentices behind to spy on people."

"Spy?" Pedrus said, "We are not spies. Master Karas asked us to help you."

"Know much about Tepillos Pedrus?" Lara asked him.

"No, I've never been here before. I've only been to the Narthis Sector twice before today."

"Some help you're going to be then." Cal said.

2.

"Master Crassis sir, you should not be up." The droid said, "Your illness."

"Oh blast my illness!" Erill Crassis yelled back at the droid before slumping down in his chair and he waved for his oxygen mask.

"Here you are sir." The droid said, "Breathe deeply."

"I know." Erill gasped and he took several deep breaths from the mask, "Now put her through Victor."

"Of course master." The droid replied and it activated the communications unit on the desk in front of its owner.

"Corlay." Erill said as the image of a young fair-haired woman appeared on the screen. She wore the uniform of a Freedom Warrior.

"Mister Crassis," she replied quietly, "I didn't expect you to"

"Whatever you have to say, get on with it." Erill interrupted.

"I must be brief." Corlay Shill replied, "I'm on a transport that's getting ready to return to Moldas. We could be cut off at any time."

"Then hurry young lady. Too many delays and I may not make it to the end of this conversation myself."

"Of course sir. More jedi have arrived in the Narthis Sector."

"More? How many? And why? What do they want here?"

"They are the relatives of Cal and Lara Udra sir. Master Karas was furious when he found out they were here."

"Then their visit is not official?"

"No, definitely not. Master Karas had us march right up to them on Tepillos and demanded to know why they were here. He and Master Udra almost came to blows. Master Udra as good as threatened to kill us all."

"So there is division within the jedi order? This could benefit us if it is handled correctly. You did well to bring it to my attention."

"Thank you sir, I"

Then the screen went blank.

"I'm sorry Master Crassis." Victor said, "But it appears that the transmission has been cut off."

"Well of course it has!" Erill snapped, "Now bring my son here. I need him to go to Tepillos."

The large building that had been home to Jedi Knight Kyle Jenner and his padawan Lom Des was empty now. After Republic forces had removed anything they thought could be evidence the building had been sealed and less than an hour later the seals had been broken and looters took almost everything that the authorities had not.

"This looks like it was quite a nice place." Elle said as the jedi stood in the central courtyard, "How did Kyle afford it?"

"Property prices on Tepillos crashed about the same time as the locals started killing one another." Cal said.

"So where do we start looking?" Neri asked, "There's not much left to go through."

"I've got this." Lara said and she produced a datapad. The device had been loaded with a virtual reconstruction of the building created from images and evidence logs taken at the time the property was initially searched for evidence. Now if the datapad was held up it used its built in navigational software to display an image of what would have been seen by an individual standing on that spot when the images were taken.

Varn took the device and held it up, turning on the spot and watching as the image changed.

"Where was Lom Des found?" he asked.

"Up here." Cal replied and he headed towards a flight of stairs. The stairs led up to a balcony that ran around the courtyard. From this balcony all of the rooms on the upper storey could be accessed.

Cal led the rest of the jedi up the stairs and to the room where he had discovered Lom's body. A white outline on the floor showed the position and as Varn moved the datapad around he saw exactly how the corpse had appeared at the time of its discovery and there were still visible traces of blood on the floor.

"What was over here?" Neri asked, walking across the room and repeatedly looking down at the outline.

"Why?" Cal asked.

"Because this is where the blaster shot would have headed after it exited Lom's body." Neri replied.

Varn turned the datapad.

"There's nothing on the recording." He said.

"Well there was something here." Neri said, "The blaster shot passed straight through Lom and yet there's not a mark on the wall that was behind him. Unless..." and she trailed off.

"Unless what?" Pedrus asked from near the doorway.

"Well the body went undiscovered for weeks after he died right?"

"Yes, about four weeks." Cal replied.

"Well who's to say that he died here? He could have been moved from where he really died."

"Perhaps we should search the building for a scorch mark then." Keana suggested.

"If we split up we could cover more ground." Pedrus added.

The sound of a heavy engine in the courtyard suddenly interrupted the conversation and the Udras headed back on the balcony. There they saw a large if battered repulsor truck driven by a man in a brightly coloured armoured vest roll through the gateway and come to a halt. Varn reached for his lightsaber.

"It's alright dad." Cal said, "I know this guy." Then he looked down at the driver of the truck and called out to him, "Hey Jondo! Up here!" and he waved.

"Cal!" Jondo shouted back as he climbed down from the cab of his vehicle, "I heard you were back." Then he noticed that there were seven jedi on the balcony rather than the two he was expecting, "Whoa." He said, "I take it that things are picking up in the investigation."

"More like a fresh set of eyes or three." Elle replied.

"Who is this then?" Neri asked Lara.

"Jondo Veltros." Lara replied, "He runs one of the aid agencies trying to help the locals."

"Do all aid workers carry guns around here?" Keana said, noticing the bulge in Jondo's pocket.

"Some of us yes." Jondo told her, "I'm afraid that the jacket doesn't always work to stop people trying to take supplies meant to help more than just them."

"So what brings you here Mister Veltros?" Varn asked.

"I heard that Cal and Lara were back on the planet." He replied, "So I thought I'd check in with them."

"Did you often check in with Kyle Jenner?" Neri asked, "You seem to know where he lived."

"Actually I did know him." Jondo said, "Though I never came inside here until after he vanished."

"Jondo was with us when we found Lom Des's body." Cal explained. Then he looked back at Jondo, "We've been back before," he said, "how come you never felt the need to check in then? What do you really want?"

"Okay." Jondo said, "Look, the thing is I hear things. People say all sorts of things when they don't realise that I'm listening."

"So what have you heard?" Cal asked.

"A lot of the people we help have ties to the insurgency. The less people have the easier they are to recruit, especially if they're told that someone else is to blame for their situation."

"Like the Republic?" Lara interrupted.

"Yes." Jondo replied, "So I get to hear the odd detail about their activities and right now they're complaining about you two a lot. I think they may target you for assassination." And he pointed to Cal and Lara.

"They believe they can take down two jedi?" Varn said, "Have they perhaps done it before?"

Jondo shrugged.

"Look," he said, "I just came here to warn you, that's all. Perhaps you'd be better off staying away from here for a while. Until things calm down."

"Calm down?" Lara replied in amazement, "When is this place ever calm?"

"Well thanks for the warning." Cal said, "But we're not frightened off that easily."

"Don't say I didn't try and warn you." Jondo said and he climbed back into his vehicle and drove back out of the gate. After travelling a short distance he pulled over and waited as a hooded figure climbed into the passenger seat.

"Well I did as you asked." He said, "I passed on the message"

"Excellent." The figure said, lowering its hood to reveal the bright red skin of a zeltron female.

"Now how about you give me what you promised me?" Jondo said.

"Sure." The zeltron replied and from beneath her cloak she produced a bundle of bank notes, "There you go. That should buy plenty of help for these poor people."

Jondo took the money while his passenger opened the door beside her to leave, but at the last moment she closed it again and quickly pulled up her hood.

"What's wrong?" Jondo asked.

"Look." The woman said and she pointed down the street to where a column of vehicles was approaching.

"Oh stang." Jondo said, "Lynn's going to go mad."

"Never mind your girlfriend, now my master has to deal with them too."

The Jedi were back in the courtyard, dividing up the building into sections that they could search individually when there were more sounds of engines. This time they had the distinctive sound of well-maintained repulsorlifts. Something not common on Tepillos.

"Who is it now?" Keana exclaimed, "I thought this was Jedi Jenner's private retreat."

Lara rushed to the gateway to take a look outside and saw the assorted speeders pulling up. All of them were black in colour with windows blotted out and were clearly armoured. Lara doubted that they contained locals.

"Shill Security." She said out loud, glancing back at the other Jedi when she saw the first figures disembark from the speeders wearing body armour all marked with the Shill logo, "With someone important." She added as a pair of the security guards walked up to a speeder that had remained sealed so far and opened the rear doors. From these a pair of well-dressed humans, a man and a woman exited the vehicle while the other guards watched for any signs of attack.

"Who are they?" Pedrus asked as the other Jedi dashed to the gate to observe the newcomers.

"I've no idea." Cal replied, "But I can take a rough guess."

"Who?" Neari asked.

"One of the Founding Families." Lara said.

"Hello there!" the well-dressed man called out as he and the woman with him approached the gateway.

"With me." Varn said quietly to the other Jedi and he advanced towards the newcomers.

"Ah, you must be Varn Udra, Jedi master." The man said, holding out his hand in greeting, "I'm Luke Crassis, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Cautiously Varn took Luke's hand.

"And the lady?" he asked.

"My wife, Salla."

"You have me at a disadvantage Luke Crassis." Varn said, "I don't have the faintest idea who you are."
Anger.

Luke Crassis was not used to being anonymous. Especially when he was riding around in an armoured convoy.

"They're from one of the Founding Families dad." Lara whispered to her father, "They're gazillionaires or something."

"I don't believe we've met either." Luke said, looking at Lara, "I'd remember I'm sure."

"What are you doing here Mister Crassis?" Cal asked, "Tepillos isn't the place for a family vacation."

"Not even for the Udras?" Salla asked with a smile.

"We're working." Pedrus replied, "That's why Keana and I are here."

"As are we." Luke said, "My family donates a great deal of money to the agencies working to help the people here and my wife and I are here to see how that money is being put to use. We'd hate for it to be being wasted, even if we are gazillionaires." And he glared at Lara.

"And when we found out that you were here," Salla went on, "we decided to find out what has brought so many members of your order to this world."

"Jedi business." Varn said, "None of yours. Now will there be anything else?"

"No." Luke said, "Though should you require any help do feel free to contact us. The resources of the Crassis family are of course at the disposal of the Jedi order."

"We may need a speeder." Lara said, "Cal hasn't lost ours yet, but there's still time."

"If that is what you need then I'll be happy to provide one." Luke said, "But even so I'm sure we'll run into one another again at some point." And he patted Cal on the shoulder.

"Uh, sure." Cal replied.

Luke smiled briefly before he and his wife returned to their speeder. There was a short delay as their security detail got back into their own vehicles and then the convoy moved off.

"Shall we get on with the search?" Lara asked out loud, "Or shall we just wait here until the next random group of people shows up?"

"Well that wasn't very productive darling." Salla said to Luke, pouring him a drink from the compact bar.

"I just wanted to get a look at them, that's all." Luke replied and he reached out to take the glass, sipping at it as his wife poured a second drink for herself, "We'll see if they're more talkative later on."

"So you'll be meeting with them again?"

"I've nothing planned, but I wouldn't be surprised if they came to us for help. From what our source said they won't be getting much support from the enclave on Moldas and the locals are as overstretched as ever." Then Luke gazed out of the window, "Besides," he added, "even if they don't come to us at least I managed to plant that tracking beacon on Cal."

3.

The search of the building revealed little new. Room after room had been stripped of anything of value. That was until Lara explored what had been a training room while Kyle and Lom had lived here.

"That definitely wasn't here before." She said.

"Definitely." Varn agreed, holding up the datapad to compare the image with what the Jedi now found themselves looking at.

"Of course the big shelf in the way would have obscured even a great gaping hole like that." Cal said.

Pedrus knelt down by the hole in the wall and looked at the floor beneath him.

"Scratches." He said, "Running from side to side."

"From when the shelves were removed?" Keana suggested.

"No." Pedrus replied as he ran his fingers over the scratches, "There's dirt ground into some of them. The floor has been trodden on a lot since the first were made."

"So someone had a secret escape tunnel then." Elle said.

"It could have been a previous owner." Pedrus said.

"And if neither Kyle nor Lom discovered it then it could have given someone else a secret way in." Cal added.

"We need more information," Varn said, "and we can't get it by sticking together."

"So how do you want to proceed?" Neari asked.

"It's Cal's case." Varn said and he looked at his son and waited.

Err, right." Cal said, surprised at his father's decision to defer to him, "We need to know if there are any records of the tunnel. Right?" and he glanced at Varn who nodded slowly, "So that means checking local records and also Kyle Jenner's."

"There wasn't much left of Kyle's records." Lara pointed out.

"Then perhaps someone with considerable expertise should take a look at what's left." Varn suggested and looking at Cal he added, "Your mother and I for example."

"Yes," Cal said, nodding, "and Pedrus and Aunt Elle can take the official records, see if there were any blueprints of them. Keana and Lara are with me."

"What are we going to do?" Keana asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Lara said to her, "We're going down the hole."

Though the tunnel looked to have been well built, decades of neglect had turned its unbroken surfaces into a cracked and crumbling structure.

The floor of the tunnel was of most interest to Cal as he led the two padawans along it. Holding up his lightsaber and using its pale blue blade for illumination he studied the tracks that had been left by previous users, track that appeared to go in both directions. Meanwhile behind him Lara was more interested in the roof of the tunnel.

"What are you looking for?" Keana asked her.

"Anything that could drop down my robes." Lara replied, "Especially things with lots of legs."

"Oh." Keana replied, not having considered the possibility of this herself and then she too began to study the roof. Suddenly she spoke again, in a hushed voice so as not to disturb Cal, "Can I ask you a question?" she said to Lara.

"Sure." Lara replied, stepping around the area beneath a suspicious hole where something had moved.

"You saw him fight didn't you?" Keana said.

"Who? Cal? Of course I've seen him fight."

"No, not your master." Keana said and Lara frowned at this, "Hargood Nollar."

Lara suddenly turned her attention to Keana.

"What's his deal?" she asked, "Because yes I saw him fight and I saw him use the force in ways I've been told never to. He used it to kill. He's on a one way path to the dark side if you ask me."

"It's too late to worry about that." Keana said, "He fell years ago."

Lara was shocked at this and her jaw dropped.

"How?"

"The Sith." Keana said, "Their troops killed his family and he slaughtered them all in revenge."

"So why the hell is he still wandering about with a lightsaber?" Lara asked, "Does your master want to see lots of people sliced up?"

"Master Karas thinks that he can be brought back to the light side." Keana said, "So do I."

“So you’re trusting him to do as he’s told and if a few people get killed along the way—“
“He’s not free Lara.” Keana said, “He’s kept under guard.”
“Well he looked pretty free to me when he was hacking up those gangers on Karn Aurek.”
“Master Karas deploys him sometimes, when he thinks that we may be dealing with a Sith. He knows that Nollar hatred of them gives him an incentive to behave. Despite everything he’s still one of the most powerful jedi in the region.”
“Well from what I saw he’s still got a long way to go.” Lara said. Then she felt something on the back of her neck, “Ahhhh!”

“How’s that?” Elle asked.
“No good.” Pedrus replied, “It’s still not working.”
“Blast.” Elle said and she continued to pick through the assortment of cables running from the computer terminal into the desk, “I can’t believe that the authorities haven’t replaced this old thing.”
“I can’t believe you agreed to pay a two hundred credit bribe to get us in here.” Pedrus replied.
“I think the two may be related.” Elle said, “The money intended to replace the computer probably wound up in someone’s personal account. Assuming there are any banks left operating on this planet.” Then there was a sudden flash of light.
“It’s working!” Pedrus exclaimed and Elle rounded the desk to look at the display.
“So what do we have?” she asked.
“The building has been there for over a hundred years.” Pedrus replied.
“Any mention of the tunnel?”
“No. But the neighbourhood was subject to a formal security assessment.”
“When?”
“About sixty years ago. It seems that the building was purchased by a minister in the planetary government at that time.”
“I could imagine a government minister wanting an emergency escape tunnel.” Elle said, “Plus I can see such a modification being left off public records.”
“But that still doesn’t tell us where it leads to.” Pedrus said.
“Well unless my brother and his wife come up with anything I suppose its up to Cal to find that out.”

“Get it off me! Get it off me!” Lara screamed as she attempted to remove whatever was making it way down the back of her robes.
“Hold still and I will.” Cal said.
“This is ridiculous.” Keana said as she watched Cal and Lara struggle to remove the offending creature, “It’s just a bug.”
“The ceiling’s probably full of them!” Lara snapped.
“No it isn’t.” Keana replied, “Look.” And using the hilt of her lightsaber she began to strike the ceiling, causing small lumps of ferrocrete to fall from it. Suddenly a larger area crumbled to dust and the insect nest it had been supporting dropped onto Keana and broke open.

“I’m glad our children aren’t here to hear you talking like that.” Salla said.
“What?” Luke replied, looking up from his computer.
“Oh nothing. Just wondering what’s got you so frustrated. Can’t find the naughty pictures?”
“I can’t find those damned jedi.” Luke said, “Han said the transmitter would be good for up to a hundred kilometres.”
“He also reeled off a list of things that could get in the way darling.” Salla replied as she walked over to her husband and placed her arms around him, looking over his shoulder at the computer display.
“Yes I know.” He said, “But their signal just vanished and I can’t see anyone having suddenly installed any equipment that would produce the EM field needed to jam the signal.”
“Well if its not being jammed then could it be being blocked?”
“That neighbourhood’s not what it used to be Salla. There may have been some shielded safe rooms before the planet fell apart, but they’ll have been looted and sold by now. No, the only way they could be shielded from us is if for some reason they’d gone...”
“Gone where?” Salla asked as Luke trailed off
“Underground.” Luke said and a smile spread across his face, “They’ve found something underground.” And he reached for the communicator sitting beside his computer, “We need something with ground penetrating radar. Good ground penetrating radar.”

Jondo did not head straight back to the old hotel that his agency used as its base of operations; instead he first completed the round of deliveries that he had set out on before being paid to deliver the warning to the Jedi. When he finally returned he found his partner Lynn waiting for him.

"Oh thank god you're back!" she exclaimed and she hugged him as soon as he got out of his vehicle.

"What's going on?" Jondo asked, "Why such a warm welcome."

"I was worried." Lynn told him, "We've just had a guy in for treatment for chemical burns."

"Let me guess," Jondo said, "to his hands and lower arms."

"Spot on." Lynn replied.

It was not uncommon for beings to seek emergency treatment from their agency for such burns rather than go to a government medical centre or approach the Republic for help. The burns of the type they were being asked to treat were caused by accidental contact with a blend of chemicals that many of the local insurgent movements use when making their own explosives. So the man had probably been a supporter if not a member of one of them.

"I think something big's about to go down." Lynn went on, "He seemed in a hurry to get back to work."

"Where is he now?" Jondo asked.

"He just left, so he can't be that far away."

"Wait here." Jondo told Lynn and kissed her cheek, "I need to speak to him."

Jondo ran from the courtyard of the hotel and looked in both directions. Spotting a man walking away from the hotel he headed after him, the bandages around the man's arms demonstrating that this was the right man when he got close enough to see them.

"Hey you!" Jondo called out, "Wait up a moment!"

The man looked around briefly, then picked up his pace.

"Hey!" Jondo called out again as he too sped up and he grabbed the man's shoulder as soon as he got close enough.

"Get off me!" the man shouted back, "I've done nothing."

Jondo grabbed hold of one of the man's arms and lifted it up, causing him to wince.

"Oh yeah? So you've not been mixing up explosives in your kitchen then? Or maybe your bathtub."

"So you're a cop." The man said, "Well you're out of luck, because I don't have the money to give you for you to keep on walking."

"The insurgents are paying you then?" Jondo asked.

"You're no cop." The man replied.

"No. But I've got an interest in what's going on. Why are you in such a hurry to go back to your little chemistry project?"

"I need money. They said they'd pay big if I could get it done quick enough, but it's too late now."

"Too late? So they're planning something soon. Are they about to hit the Jedi?"

The man just looked at him.

"If they find out we spoke—" he began, but stopped mid sentence when Jondo took out the bundle of notes given to him earlier. He counted three out and held them out to the man, "It'll cost you more than that." He said.

"How much?"

"A thousand."

"A thousand?"

"You've got the times that there."

Jondo counted out another seven notes.

"Yes they're after the Jedi." The man said, "But someone else too, someone else they don't expect to be around for long. I think someone else has paid them off to do the hit."

"Thanks." Jondo said and he turned on the spot and ran back to the hotel as fast as he could.

"Jondo what's happening?" Lynn asked, having been stood by the gate waiting.

"The insurgents are about to launch an attack." He replied, climbing up into the cab of his transport.

"I guessed that." Lynn said, "But we can't stop them."

"I think I can."

"Delusions of grandeur aren't very attractive Jondo."

"I think I know who they're going to hit and I have to warn them." Jondo said.

"Who?"

"The Jedi."

"Jedi? They can take care of themselves. Don't get us involved."

"And one of the Founding Families."

Lynn scowled.

“Jondo-“ she began.

”I know what you’re about to say.”

“The Founding Families Jondo. You know what they’re like, what they’ve done to this world. Let them die.”

Jondo was well aware of Lynn’s dislike for the sector’s most prominent citizens, but each time she voiced it he felt the urge to yell at her that most of the funding he secured came from them. But if she ever found out it would destroy what they had, so he kept the secret so he could keep her also.

“I can’t.” he said.

4.

Colonel Arion Jeck stared at Jondo across his desk.

"And exactly how did you come by this information?" he asked.

"That doesn't matter." Jondo said, "Now I know that there are several jedi plus someone from the founding families here right now. You have to do something or they could end up dead."

"The Army of the Republic is not in the habit of large scale redeployment on the basis of unconfirmed rumours." The colonel replied.

"Well you can at least make sure that the targets are warned."

Colonel Jeck nodded.

"Yes," he said, "that I can do." And he activated his desktop communicator, "I need to speak with Mister Crassis." He said.

"They're not here." The reply came, "They left half an hour ago."

"Left?" the colonel said, "To go where?"

"I don't know, but they took an airspeeder."

"Did they take an escort?"

"No. Not this time, just the one vehicle."

"Oh stang." Colonel Jeck exclaimed and he looked at Jondo, "They've left the damn Green Zone and they've gone alone."

The vehicle was large by airspeeder standards, with adequate room inside for almost a dozen passengers. But it was not the spacious interior that had attracted Luke and Salla to the vehicle; instead it was the sensor suite capable of penetrating several metres of solid rock. The vehicle was crewed by a salvage team who normally made their living looking for anything of value on Tepillos that looked abandoned but had not already been looted and taking it for themselves. The Republic frowned on such activities of course, but the Founding Families did not always concern themselves with such niceties. Indeed, it made the silence of these men more likely. If they revealed what they knew they also revealed how they made their money.

"We're over the target zone now." The pilot said, glancing back into the passenger compartment.

"Good." Luke replied, "Then begin your scans."

"And keep your eyes on the sky in front of us please." Salla added as the vehicle juddered slightly.

"Feeling a bit air sick?" her husband asked.

"Just a little."

"Here, some wine will cure it, or at least make you stop noticing." And Luke held out a glass to his wife. But she never managed to get hold of it.

"Good god!" the pilot exclaimed and he jerked the control column suddenly, causing the airspeeder to turn sharply. Before Luke could demand an explanation, there was an explosion and the sound of alarms filled the interior of the speeder.

"What was that?" Pedrus said, looking up from the computer.

"Nothing good." Elle responded and the two jedi rushed to a nearby window and looked outside. In the distance they could see the aircraft plummeting towards the ground, trailing fire across the sky as it fell.

"Do you think anyone could survive that?" Pedrus asked.

"I don't know." Elle said, then after a brief pause she added, "But I don't think its their survival we need to worry about right now." And she pointed to a different spot in the sky where several small shapes were arcing slowly towards the government building they were in, "Down!"

Three of the mortar rounds landed in the streets around the government records building, sending injured and panic-stricken civilians fleeing in all directions. One more failed to detonate, instead remaining lodged in the roof until it was shaken loose by the remainder of the barrage that peppered the building with explosions. Automated alarms were triggered the moment the first bomb exploded and the building's occupants began to rush for the exits, only for some of them to be caught in the blast of one of the stray rounds.

In the private computer room Elle and Pedrus lay on the floor, covering their heads with their hands and waiting for the barrage to stop. The building shook with each impact and the sound of explosions punctuated the screams of the injured and dying. Only after more than a minute had elapsed since the last explosion did Elle look up.

"Its stopped." She said and she began to get to her feet.

"Where are you going?" Pedrus asked.

"We're Jedi, it's our job to help the injured." Elle replied.

"I'm not much of a medic." Pedrus admitted.

"Good time for you to learn then."

There were injured beings in the hallway outside the computer room and Elle stopped to assess their situation. Meanwhile Pedrus just waited for her to tell him what he should do. The sudden sound of footfalls on a nearby flight of stairs caused Elle and Pedrus to turn around.

"They're coming up the stairs." Pedrus said, "They must be here to help." And he headed for where the stairs met the hallway.

"No Pedrus! Wait!" Elle shouted, but it was too late.

The Padawan froze to the spot when he saw the masked men rushing up the stairs towards him and gave the first of them enough time to swing the butt of his rifle around and knock him to the floor. Leaping to her feet, Elle drew her lightsaber and prepared to defend herself.

"Do it and he dies!" the masked man snapped, pointing his weapon at the prone Pedrus before Elle could activate her lightsaber.

Slowly, Elle held her arms out away from her body and another of the masked men rushed over to her and plucked the lightsaber from her hand. Then he struck her with the butt of his own rifle.

Jondo was right behind Colonel Jeck as they rushed into the Green Zone's military command centre.

"What's the situation?" the colonel demanded, studying the various tactical displays that were lit up with red dots.

"Multiple detonations." One of the command staff replied, "Sensors have pinpointed two launch locations and a firing solution has been plotted for counter battery strikes. Just awaiting your clearance sir."

"Those are populated areas colonel. Crowded with civilians." Jondo said.

"I know." Colonel Jeck said solemnly. Then he looked at his command staff, "Stand down counter strike." He said, "The insurgents probably aren't even there any more. Even if we managed to avoid hitting and civilians we'd just be wasting ammunition. Where's that gunship?"

"Still on the pad sir." Another of his staff answered, "Technical difficulties."

Just then the door opened and Neari and Varn rushed in.

"Colonel what's happening?" Varn asked.

"Multiple insurgent attacks." The colonel replied, pointing to the areas hit, "Looks like a missile brought down the speeder transporting two members of the Crassis family while a mortar barrage hit a government building here."

"Elle." Varn said when he saw which building had been targeted. Then he looked at Colonel Jeck in the eye, "Speeder bikes could get us there in minutes." He said.

Colonel Jeck nodded.

"Take what you need." He said, "I'll arrange for a squad of men to accompany you."

Varn looked at his wife.

"I'll go for Elle." He said.

"Yes," Neari replied, "I think I can do more good at the speeder crash. Assuming anyone survived of course."

"Did you hear something?" Cal said.

"What?" Lara replied, "Over the sound of Screamy Screamer here?" and she looked at Keana who was still brushing insects from her robes, "I don't think I'll ever hear properly again after that racket." Keana just scowled back at her.

Anger.

"Something above ground." Cal said, ignoring his sisters taunting of Keana and the other Padawan's reaction, "I think it was an explosion."

"Hardly unusual for this planet." Lara commented, "Let's keep going."

Cal nodded and continued along the tunnel. Then he halted suddenly.

"Feel that?" he said quietly.

"I think so." Lara replied, "Its-"

"Cold." Keana interrupted.

"The dark side is with us down here." Cal said and he crept forwards.

The tunnel suddenly opened out into what Cal at first took to be a natural cavern, but then he realised that the surfaces were made of carefully carved stone blocks. Various plinths were laid out in widely spaced

rows that all led to the far end of the chamber where a large stone statue stood. Humanoid in form, the face of the statue had two short distinctive growths that hung down either side of its mouth.

"What is this place?" Keana said as she stared past Cal.

"It's a temple." Cal said.

"A Sith temple." Lara added.

Luke Crassis released his safety harness and staggered across what was left of the airspeeder's cabin. Of his bodyguard who had been sat at the rear of the vehicle there was no sign and Luke guessed that the man had been sucked from the massive hole at some point during the airspeeder's uncontrolled decant. The pilot and co-pilot were clearly dead; shrapnel from the missile had killed them both instantly. Behind them the other two crew, those responsible for operating the sensor suite had been impaled by a long metal rod. One of them coughed, blood splattering the console in front of him. Luke grabbed the man and looked into his face, just in time to see his eyes widen as he took one last breath. Then he heard a soft moan from where he had been sat.

"Salla? Are you okay?" he asked, rushing back to his wife's side.

Salla looked back at him.

"I don't feel airsick any more." She said, "But that wine has quite a kick to it."

Luke smiled.

"We need to get out of here." He said.

"The others?"

"Dead. Now can you walk."

"I think so. Where are we?"

Luke looked out of the airspeeder, but all he could see was burning fragments of the vehicle and run down buildings further away.

"Nowhere good." He said, "Do you have your gun?"

Salla nodded and pulled a compact semi-automatic pistol from her pocket.

"Good." Luke said and he reached for his briefcase. Opening it he removed a larger pulse wave blaster,

"I've got my blaster too, now let's get moving."

As they staggered out of the downed airspeeder, Luke and Salla steadied one another. Though neither of them had been seriously injured in the crash they were both shaken.

"There's someone coming." Salla said, noticing movement between the nearby buildings and she waved in its direction.

"Then we go this way instead." Luke said, "We should try and avoid the locals if we can."

But as they moved in the opposite direction there were more signs of movement form ahead of them.

"They're all around us." Luke said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Don't move Mister Crassis!" a voice called out from behind them and Luke and Salla spun around to face whoever was there.

A group of three masked figures had emerged from where Salla had spotted them moving earlier and all of them carried rifles of some description. Immediately Salla brought up her pistol and there was a sharp 'crack' as she fired it. Still disorientated by the crash her shot went wide, but it had the effect of forcing the figures to dive for cover just in case her aim improved with her second shot.

There were more rapid and heavy footfalls from the direction Luke and Salla had been heading and as they turned that way once more another masked figure barged into them and sent them sprawling on the ground.

5.

The four speeder bikes came to a sudden halt at the edge of the clearing where the airspeeder had been forced down. Immediately Neari and the three Republic soldiers dismounted and advanced through the scattered debris towards the main part of the wreckage.

“Corporal!” the leader of the soldiers yelled, “Get in there and check for survivors.”

“Yes sir!” and while his comrades covered him the armoured soldier rushed to the wreck. Neari kept quiet. The wreck needed checking of course but she already knew that anyone inside was already dead, there was nothing in the force to indicate any survivors still aboard.

“It’s just the crew sir.” The soldier called back as he looked into the wreckage, “All dead.”

“What about passengers?” Neari called out to him, “Our information was that the vehicle left the Green Zone with three passengers aboard.”

“No sign of them.” The soldier replied, shaking his head.

Then Neari felt something, a slight tremor in the force coming from some distance away from the wrecked speeder. Carefully she approached the location of the disturbance. It was coming from a small clump of undergrowth where vegetation was just starting remove traces of a dilapidated building. As she drew closer Neari heard a soft moaning sound and she started to run.

“Sergeant!” she yelled, “There’s a survivor over here!” and she dropped to her knees beside the injured man.

“Save them.” He gasped.

“I’m sorry.” Neari said, “The crew are already dead. You’re the only survivor.”

“No.” the man replied, blood starting to dribble from his mouth, “Mister Crassis and his wife.”

“What happened to them? They’re not here.”

“Rebels. Scum. Attacked after the crash. I couldn’t help. I-“

The soldiers arrived bearing a stretcher that they began to unfold as rapidly as they could.

“There’s no hurry.” Neari said, “He’s gone too.”

In another part of the city another group of speeder bikes came to a rapid halt and their riders disembarked.

“You there!” Varn yelled at one of the rescue workers, “What’s the situation?”

“It’s a ruffing mess.” She replied, “More than thirty dead and over a hundred wounded. And those are just the ones we’ve found. A mortar round landed in the middle of some of the beings who got out of the building and we don’t have a clue how many bodies we’re trying to put back together.”

“Where any of them Jedi?” Varn asked.

“Jedi?” the rescue worker replied, a puzzled look on her face, “No. Should they have been?”

Varn just looked around.

“Elle,” he said quietly, “where are you?”

“Let me see them.”

The four captives were bound and hooded on the floor of the basement dwelling, their wrists tied to their ankles to keep them immobile. At the command from the man who was paying for this operation, one of the insurgents stepped forwards and one at a time pulled the hoods from the captives heads, revealing the faces of Elle, Luke, Pedrus and Salla staring back and unable to speak because of the rags tied in their mouths.

“Did they offer any resistance?” the insurgents’ employer asked, his hooded robe concealing his appearance. All the insurgents knew of the man was that he was human or near human and male. Though more importantly he was both wealthy and willing to spend his wealth with them.

“Some.” The insurgent replied.

“Show me their weapons.” The stranger commanded.

“We need those.” The insurgent replied.

“I said show me!” the stranger yelled, his voice not only registering with the insurgents’ ears, but in their very subconscious as well and another insurgent stepped forwards with a holdall, that he held out open for the stranger to see its contents. Inside the bag were a pair of lightsabers and two handguns as well as the other items taken from the captives. The stranger reached in and took one of the lightsabers. At the same time he subtly removed an ornate chronometer also.

“You may keep the rest.” He said.

“What about them?” one of the insurgents asked, indicating their captives.

"Do what you will with them." The stranger replied, "I believe that it is not uncommon on this world to ransom off prisoners. Just make sure that they are not released for at least a day. I need that time to deal with another problem."

"What problem?" the insurgent asked, but the stranger just turned and left with Elle's lightsaber.

Cal and Lara split up and walked around the outer edge of the Sith temple. They had deactivated their lightsabers and were instead using the more reliable light from compact flashlights to illuminate the details carved on the walls. On the other hand Keana remained near the tunnel entrance and watched what Cal and Lara were doing.

"When you tell Master Karas what we did you will be sure and mention you just stood back and did nothing won't you?" Lara called out to the other padawan.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Keana replied.

Deception.

Cal and Lara looked at one another and smiled.

"Yes my sister," Cal said, "she's carrying out the important task of making sure no more bug nests spring out and attack us without warning."

"What are you looking for anyway?" Keana asked, walking away from the door.

"Well all of the artefacts seem to have been removed from here." Cal explained, "But maybe these carvings will reveal something."

"Something like what?" Keana then asked.

"Something like whether there's another door." Lara replied, "Even I know that the Sith are fond of their secret passages."

"Were." Keana said.

"What?" Lara asked.

"The Sith 'were' fond of secret passages. Their species is extinct." Keana said.

"And yet here we are in one of their temples." Cal said to her, "Perhaps you shouldn't pay too much attention to those who say the Sith are no longer a threat."

"Oh I don't think that." Keana said, "Master Karas has warned me about the danger of their teachings, but the Sith themselves are long gone."

"Then it can't hurt to help us look for another door can it?" Lara suggested.

Keana sighed and began to search the walls as well.

Cal suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as he sensed a disturbance in the force.

"There's someone here." He said, stopped his search of the walls and looking around, casting the beam of his torch over as much of the temple as it would reach.

"Someone," Lara repeated, "or something." And she drew her lightsaber.

"It's just this place." Keana said, "It's naturally strong with the dark side. Nothing more."

"Concentrate." Lara said to her, "Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?" Keana said, then her face fell suddenly.

"Thing is," Lara said, "I know that little trick." And she advanced towards Keana.

"Me too!" Keana snapped and in a single motion she drew her lightsaber, activated it and spun around to face the hooded figure attempting to conceal itself in the force behind her.

There was a second 'snap-hiss' as the figure activated its own lightsaber, a green Jedi blade rather than the red Sith one that Cal had feared it would wield. As the two energy blades met the figure reached out with a free hand towards Cal and sent a blast wave of force energy towards him. The attack knocked him off his feet and his lightsaber rolled across the floor away from him.

Lara jumped and somersaulted through the air to land near Keana, seeking to support her fellow padawan against this mysterious assailant. But as she swung her lightsaber their opponent parried with his own and easily blocked her attack. Keana struck again, but the figure sidestepped and left her staggering past him as she struggled to keep her balance. The stranger lashed out at her not with his lightsaber but with his foot and Keana screamed and his heel smashed into her knee from the side and sent her tumbling to the floor in agony.

Now the stranger was free to concentrate on Lara and holding his lightsaber in just one hand he delivered strike after strike, forcing her on to the defensive as she gave up ground with each parried blow.

Seeing his sister being driven back, Cal called his lightsaber back to his grip and dashed to Lara's aide.

Sensing his approach, the stranger reached out a hand and through the force he took hold of Cal's throat.

The young Jedi knight stopped suddenly, choking as his airway tightened and was closed off.

Copying how the stranger had reacted when Keana had attacked him, Lara suddenly decided to doge out of the path of his next attack instead of parrying it with her own lightsaber and as he brought down his weapon

arm Lara took a swing at it. The blade of her lightsaber failed to sever the man's arm as she had hoped but it missed him only narrowly and instead cut the grip of his lightsaber in half. Immediately the energy blade of his weapon collapsed, leaving him defenceless.

"I have you now." Lara hissed and she swung again, this time at neck height.

The stranger reacted quickly, releasing his grip on Cal and rolling across the floor, well beneath the path of Lara's swing. Then he jumped back to his feet and ran towards a nearby column, taking shelter behind it.

"Cal, are you alright?" Lara asked as she advanced towards the column, holding her lightsaber out in front of her.

"Fine." Cal called out, his voice somewhat hoarse from being choked. Then he scooped up his lightsaber once more and reactivated it, "What about you?" he asked Keana.

"My knee!" she cried out.

"You may as well surrender." Lara shouted towards the column as she and Cal advanced on it from both sides at once, "There's no escape."

"We do this together." Cal said as they got closer to the column.

"Just give the word." Lara said.

"Okay." Cal said, "Now!" and both he and Lara rushed around the column.

Where they found no one.

"Where'd he go?" Lara said.

"There must be a secret door set into the wall back here." Cal said. Then he spotted a small flashing light at his feet and looking down he saw the explosive charge that the stranger had left behind.

"Lara." He said.

"Yes?"

"Grab Keana."

Dragging Keana between them the Jedi fled down the tunnel that had taken them to the temple and stopped only when there was a dull 'crump' and the tunnel shook as the charge exploded behind them.

"Can you walk from here?" Cal asked Keana.

"No." Keana said, "I think he took out my kneecap. Who the hell was that anyway? He had a lightsaber."

"More importantly he knew how to use it." Cal said, "He must be a Jedi."

"But there are no other Jedi in the sector. Apart from your family and Pedrus and he didn't feel like any of them." Keana said, "We'd know if there was anyone else."

Cal and Lara looked at one another, knowing that there was at least one other Jedi knight in the sector, though that could not possibly have been the man they had just faced.

"It wasn't his lightsaber." Lara said, "Cal I got a good look at it. It was Aunt Elle's."

"Oh no." Cal said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this." Then he looked down at Keana, "Come on." He said as he picked her up, "We have to get out of here."

"Oh thank goodness you're both okay." Neri said as her children entered the command centre and she embraced them one after the other.

"Mom," Lara began, "Aunt Elle—"

"I know." Neri interrupted, "Your father tried to find her, but she wasn't at the records office."

"We were attacked by a man wielding her lightsaber." Cal said, "Where's dad?"

"Over there." Neri replied and she pointed across the room to where Varn was standing with Colonel Jeck as they studied the various tactical displays.

Cal walked over to the two men.

"We found a Sith temple." He announced and both of the men suddenly turned and gazed at him in surprise.

Fear.

"The Sith? Here?" Colonel Jeck said.

"Perhaps." Cal replied, "We were attacked by a man wielding a lightsaber. Dad, it was Aunt Elle's, Lara saw it up close."

"Are you two okay?" Varn asked.

"We're fine, but what about Aunt Elle?"

"We've still no leads." Varn told him.

"The insurgents have taken four hostages." Colonel Jeck said, "Your aunt, the padawan with her and the two members of the Crassis family whose speeder was brought down outside the Green Zone. I barely have enough men for normal duties, if the Sith are involved—"

"Let's not jump to conclusions just yet colonel." Varn interrupted, "The Sith don't need to steal lightsabers."

"The man who attacked us definitely knew how to use the force." Cal said, "He made use of it to attack us, he wasn't just some nut with a stolen weapon."

"At least we have a link between the attack on you and the raid on the records office." Colonel Jeck said, "Where is this temple?"

"Was." Cal corrected, "The man who attacked us had obviously gone there to destroy it. He had a bomb that he detonated to bring the roof down. Actually that helped us out, we were able to get back to the surface through the hole instead of having to go all the way back to Kyle Jenner's old place."

"So where was it?" Colonel Jeck asked.

Cal studied a map of the city on one the larger displays.

"Here." He said, pointing at the spot on the map where he, Keana and Lara had found themselves when they returned to the surface.

"That's not a good place to be." The colonel said, "That whole area is riddled with insurgent sympathisers."

"That could have had something to do with the presence of the temple." Cal said, "It was hardly a nexus of dark side energy, but it would make the locals tend more towards negative feelings."

"Then it's likely that the area is where the captives are being held." Varn said, "It all fits. An area of opposition to the Republic and in close proximity to where our mystery force user was seen with my sister's lightsaber. Colonel, can you seal it off for a search?"

Colonel Jeck shook his head.

"I'm sorry." He said, "I just don't have the men available. I could pull them all back here for redeployment or ask for help from the local police and defence forces, but—"

"I know." Varn said, "Either course of action would tip off the insurgents that we were about to move against them."

"Well then," Cal said, "it looks like its up to us."

"Five of you?" Colonel Jeck said.

"Four." Cal replied, "Keana's in no shape to go anywhere."

6.

The local population eyed the four jedi with suspicion. It was rare for any representatives of law and order to venture here. Even rarer for them to do it without armoured vehicles and air support. But in their quest to find the missing captives the Udra family was moving openly, hoping that their presence would trigger a reaction from someone who would lead them to their quarry.

"Perhaps we should try splitting up into pairs." Neari suggested.

"But how would we know where one another was?" Lara asked, "There's no PTP network out here."

"She's right mom." Cal agreed, "Splitting up makes us easier targets too."

"On the other hand," Varn said, "if we're easier targets then maybe the insurgents will be tempted to get a little bit closer and give themselves away. Providing we stay close enough to one another we won't need a relay network for our communicators."

"Two blocks?" Cal suggested.

"Sounds good to me." Varn replied, "You and Lara go south one block, I'll go north with your mother."

The jedi walked in separate directions, casting their eyes about as they searched for any signs of suspicious activity. Unfortunately suspicious activity in their neighbourhood was the rule rather than the exceptions and nothing stood out even to the jedi's enhanced senses.

"Cal?" a familiar voice called out from the doorway of a cantina and both Cal and Lara looked around to see a female zeltron standing there, leaning on the door frame.

"Kassa." Cal said, "Go away."

"Oh now is that any way to speak to a friend?" Kassa replied.

"We're not friends." Lara said.

"Of course we aren't." Kassa replied, "But we could be."

"Not interested." Cal said and he and Lara continued to walk on past the cantina.

"To my darling Salla, happy birthday. Love always, Luke." Kassa said and Cal and Lara halted suddenly, turning to face her again. Smiling Kassa held up an ornate chronometer.

"Where did you get that?" Cal demanded, reaching out for the chronometer.

"Look with your eyes Cal. I paid for it, fair and square." Kassa said.

"Nothing you do is fair and square." Lara said.

"Well okay, I kind of guessed that it didn't belong to the twi'lek I bought it off. But he only wanted twenty credits for it. Too bad it's got someone else's name carved in the back. It's iridium too, it'll cost a fortune to get it removed."

"How much?" Cal asked.

"Oh, I suppose it'll depend on who I go to."

"No." Cal said, "How much for you to give us the chrono and tell us where you got it?"

"Shall we say an even thousand?" Kassa said.

Cal and Lara both frowned.

"Five hundred." Lara replied.

"Bye then." Kassa said, turning around.

"Seven!" Cal called out and Kassa stopped.

"Cash?" she asked.

"A clean credit chip." Cal said.

"Deal." Kassa said and she handed over the watch as Cal pulled out a credit stick and set it to transfer seven hundred credits to the one Kassa pulled from her own pocket.

"Okay, so where did you get it?" Lara asked.

"End of the street." Kassa said, "Junction twelve."

Kassa then watched as Cal and Lara headed in the direction she had given them. Behind her a hooded figure approached.

"You did well." He said, "Now the jedi will eliminate the insurgent group that can identify me."

The twi'lek was still sat on the steps leading up to the building's front entrance as the Udras watched from the roof of the building across the street.

"Are we sure they're in there?" Neari asked.

"Not one hundred percent." Cal said, "But Kassa's a professional infomerchant. If it got out she was dealing in false data she'd be finished."

"We need to talk to that twi'lek." Varn said, "Privately."

"Unfortunately I think he'll raised the alarm as soon as he claps eyes on us." Cal said, "Pity Lara doesn't have her stripper clothes with her." Then he suddenly added, "Ouch!" as he was struck on the back of his head.

"Be nice to you little sister dear." Neri said, returning her hand to her side.

"I didn't ask for a sister." Cal muttered, "I wanted a dog."

"What about the building next door?" Lara asked.

"What about it?" Varn asked. In reply.

"Well couldn't we sneak into that and jump across from the roof?"

"That's a big jump," Neri said, "and if any of us miss... well..."

"I know." Lara said, "Smooosh,"

Then they all spotted that Cal was smiling.

"Lara you're a genius." He said, "Though I'm not putting that in your progress report."

"What's your idea son?" Varn asked.

"Well if you were an terrorist group hiding out in an apartment building where would you be so that no-one saw you doing terrorist things by accident?"

"The basement." Varn said and he smiled.

"Exactly." Cal said, "And I'll bet all these buildings have basements that run right up close to one another. So if we go into the basement of the building next door we can just cut through."

"Cal's right." Neri said to Lara, "You are a genius."

"Glad I thought if it." Lara said.

"We just need to let the colonel know." Cal said, "We may need help getting out."

Varn placed his hand up against the basement wall.

"They're in there." He said, "I can sense Elle."

"Then she's still alive." Neri said in relief.

"Yes, but we'd better hurry just in case." Varn replied, "Cal, after you."

Cal stepped forwards and activated his lightsaber and Varn did the same. Then both jedi plunged the blades of their weapons into the ferrocrete of the wall and began to slice an opening. As soon as their blades were inserted there was a shriek from the far side of the wall.

"I think you got someone." Lara said as she ignited her lightsaber, ready to rush through the breach her brother and father were in the process of making.

"Lets just hope it wasn't a hostage." Neri said and she too activated her lightsaber.

Moments after they began to cut through the wall, the hole was complete and Varn ripped the ferrocrete block back towards the jedi to make sure that it did not fall on a hostage. Then the jedi burst through into the basement of the building beyond.

The body of an insurgent lay beside the hole, the side of his torso sliced away by a lightsaber blade, while in the centre of the room were the four hostages, still bound and gagged. Neri rushed towards them, kneeling next to Elle.

"Are you hurt?" she asked and Elle shook her head. As Varn rushed to join her, Neri began to cut through Elle's bonds.

Just then another insurgent burst in through the door, coming to investigate the screaming.

"It's a raid!" he yelled and he raised his weapon.

Cal used the force to knock the weapon aside a moment before the terrorist fired, a loud 'boom' filling the room as the ceiling was sprayed with shot. Jumping over the body of the insurgent by the hole. Lara rushed across the room and with a single stroke of her lightsaber cut down the newly arrived man.

"Let's move!" Varn yelled as the last captive was untied.

"Where to?" Luke asked as he reached to the floor and picked up the weapon that the insurgent guarding them had been armed with. As it happened it was his own pulse-wave blaster.

"The roof next door." Neri said, "Follow me." And she headed back through the hole.

Salla was next through the hole, with Elle and Pedrus following her. Meanwhile Luke held back with the other jedi of the rescue team, aiming his gun at the doorway just in time to be able to take a shot at the first insurgent to respond to the warning given by his late comrade.

Anger.

Hatred.

"Never mess with my family." Luke hissed as the insurgent was thrown backwards by the force of the focused spatial distortion that smashed his ribs.

"Come on!" Lara shouted at him, "We came to get you out of here, not so you could go on a killing spree."

Luke looked at her with a look of fury on his face. Then he nodded and ran for the hole.

"Hostages are clear." Lara called out.

"Fall back." Cal snapped as the sound of approaching footfalls came from outside the room.

The Jedi moved back through the hole they had cut into the basement of the adjoining building. Already Neari and the freed captives were making their way up the stairs to the upper levels of the building. There was a 'clank' from behind them and Cal looked around to see a small metallic cylinder rolling across the floor from the direction of the hole.

"Grenade!" he shouted and using the force he pushed the explosive back towards the hole and ran towards the stairs.

There was a 'thump' and a rush of heat as the grenade detonated, followed by screams as the terrorists who had thrown it were caught up in the blast themselves. Taking advantage of the brief respite from pursuit, the Jedi made their way up the stairs.

Up ahead Neari was leading the free captives through the building's lobby when the front door burst open.

"Look out!" Pedrus yelled and he pushed Neari aside just in time for her to avoid the burst of gunfire.

Luke pulled his wife back behind him before leaning out from around the stairs and fired twice, sending the gunman sprawling backwards down the steps. Then he fired again to dissuade the following insurgents from barging through the door also.

"Move!" he shouted to the others as he continued to shoot.

"You too." Cal said as he pulled Luke up the stairs with him.

As the group rushed upstairs they found themselves pushing past several shocked residents who were caught out in the open. Those who were still inside their apartments as the sound of shooting came from outside knew better than to open their doors and investigate.

At the top of the stairs Neari cut through the door leading to the roof and rushed outside, followed soon after by the others.

"So now what?" Luke said as he looked around the empty roof, "I'm out of ammo and you've led us to a dead end!"

"Just get behind us." Varn said as the armed Jedi lined up between the freed captives and the doorway, holding their lightsabers out in front of them just as insurgents began to pour through it.

"There's no where to run now." One of the insurgents called out as the Jedi backed away from the growing number of beings aiming weapons at them. Then the man stepped forwards and held out his hand and with a smile on his face he said, "Surrender your weapons."

Then his head jerked backwards suddenly as a high velocity projectile hit him between the eyes.

A roaring sound from above caused the insurgents to look skywards to where a Republic gunship was descending. A second gunship came into view from behind them, a sniper sitting in the open hatchway and aiming at the roof. One of the insurgents swung his rifle towards the sniper. The last mistake he would ever make.

Both gunships opened fire simultaneously, the beams from their laser turrets slicing through the dense group of insurgents.

"Over here!" the amplified voice of Colonel Jeck called out as a third gunship descended and hovered beside the building. The hatchway slid open to reveal the colonel beckoning the group towards him. At the same time a pair of Republic troopers held out their arms to assist them from the roof to the safety of the gunship's interior.

When everyone was aboard the colonel looked at the pilot.

"Go!" he yelled and the vehicle's engines roared as it flew away leaving the other two gunships and their occupants to clean up the mess on the roof.

Reaching into his pocket, Cal pulled out the chronometer Kassa had given him and he held it out to Salla.

"I think this is yours." He said. Then he reached into a different pocket and held his hand over Luke's. "And this belongs to you I think." He added as he dropped the fragments of a crushed tracking beacon into it.

There was a flash accompanied by a cloud of smoke.

"Somehow my boy," Erill Crassis said as Victor helped him towards his son, "I doubt that old thing would have done you any good on Tepillos."

Luke lowered the musket and turned to his father.

"Just a bit of recreational target practice father." He said.

"I see. So where is Salla after your narrow escape?"

"Out jogging. Surrounded by guards."

"Good. Now what did you discover?"

"The Jedi found a Sith temple on Tepillos." Luke told his father.

"Intact?"

Luke shook his head.

"Not any more. Father, there was someone else there. Someone who could face three jedi and survive."

"Ah." Erill said, wheezing and Victor handed him his oxygen mask, "This is unfortunate." He added as he took several deep breaths from the mask, "It seems we may have a rival to contend with."

"That's doesn't bother me father."

"But something does, yes?"

"Yes. The jedi. How are we supposed to move when there are so many of them here now?"

On the hangar deck of Aurek Station Cal and Lara were there to see the other jedi off.

"Keana will be fine." Neari said, "The enclave on Moldas has the medical facilities needed to heal her leg. We'll drop her off on our way back to Coruscant."

"I bet Master Karas will be overjoyed to see you again." Lara said sarcastically.

"I can handle him." Varn said as he hugged his daughter, "Its you two I'm more concerned about."

"Why?" Cal asked.

"We never did find any evidence of Lom Des being hit by a blast rifle in the building." Varn said, "So on the basis of that we can only conclude that he was killed-"

"By a lightsaber." Cal finished.