

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



III-II: SETTLEMENT

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...

SETTLEMENT

A GATHERING OF MEMBERS OF THE FOUNDING FAMILIES ATTRACTS THE ATTENTION OF CAL UDRA AND HE AND HIS SISTER LARA HEAD FOR THE RECENTLY SETTLED WORLD OF GRASSIS MINOR TO FIND OUT WHY THEY ARE THERE. BUT THE REAL THREAT COMES FROM ELSEWHERE...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.html>

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1 .

Tilting her head back and using her fingers to hold each open in turn Faye Karn dropped a single drop of fluid into each of them. Then she blinked several times and stared into the bathroom mirror, smiling as she watched her eyes turn from their natural brown to the pale blue she preferred.

"Faye are you ready?" she heard her husband Del call out from the bedroom and she turned to see him standing in the doorway, like her wearing his finest robes.

"I am now." She replied, "How do I look?"

"As beautiful as the day we were married." Del answered.

"What about the girls?"

"Sial and Keera are both waiting." Del said before adding, "Yes I'm as shocked as you are."

"And what about-" Faye began before remembering and she sighed, "Sorry. Force of habit."

"Don't worry." Del told her, "I do it every now and again myself. But let's face it, we're much better off with Gayal safely out of the way. Now come on, everyone will be expecting us to be at the ceremony."

Jedi Knight Cal Udra checked each of the computer drives in turn. The fire in Dorn Station's main computer room had fortunately been extinguished before it could spread to the racks of data storage drives, but with the processing core badly damaged he was left with no option but to extract each drive in turn and plug it into one of the few adaptors left behind by the Republic's engineers when they had made their ill fated attempt to take control of the station two hundred years earlier. Finding all three of the drives he had selected this time to be intact he plugged them in and then turned to the desktop terminal in front of him. "Anything interesting Cal?" he heard a voice say and he looked up to see his younger sister Lara approaching with a half eaten ration bar in her hand. As well as his sibling she was also theoretically his padawan learner, though since both of them were now considered renegades by the Jedi Order and the Republic she was now paying even less attention to his instructions than she had been before they had fled to this remote space station.

"I've only just plugged them in." Cal replied.

"Well I've found something that may interest you." Lara said and she held out a datapad, "I found this article." Cal looked at the datapad display and saw that it was accompanied by images of several members of the Karn family, one of the so-called Founding Families whose ancestors had been the survey team to first chart the Narthis sector for the Republic three centuries earlier. From the moment they had arrived in the Narthis Sector events had unfolded to convince the Jedi that these families had an unhealthy interest in the Sith occupation of the sector a thousand years earlier. But more than that, until recently Cal had been romantically involved with the eldest daughter of the Karn family, Gayal. However, she had conveniently vanished at the same time as Lara was framed for the murder of another Jedi and Cal believed that if he could locate Gayal then he could clear his sister's name.

"Crassis Minor?" Cal commented as he read the first few sentences and he frowned.

"Yeah, apparently its some ground breaking ceremony for a new settlement. They're stumping up the credits for most of it so they're being invited to attend."

"No." Cal said suddenly, "I think there's more to it than that." And he began to search through data that he had taken off other computer drives, flicking through page after page of text written in the incomprehensible to him language of the ancient Sith who had come to the sector a millennium ago, "Ah here it is." He said, spinning the computer monitor around so that Lara had a better view. There she saw a map, also labelled in the Sith language but obviously showing an image of a planet.

"That's Crassis Minor." Lara said.

"Yes it is." Cal replied, "Though I've no idea what the Sith called it when they were there. Now look here."

And he tapped the screen where an icon was located along the coast of one of the continents, "And now look at your article."

Lara looked at her datapad and further down the article she saw a map showing the location of the groundbreaking ceremony.

"Cal its right by whatever's on that Sith map." She said.

"Precisely." Cal said, "Now am I the only one thinking that the Karn's think that something could be there and are going to collect it in person?"

"You're about to suggest we go there and stop them aren't you?" Lara asked and Cal grinned, "I suppose the fact that this means flying into the capital system of the Narthis sector while wanted by the authorities isn't

going to dissuade you is it?" she then added and Cal shook his head, "Oh I've got a bad feeling about this Cal. A very bad feeling indeed."

"Senator Torin." Faye said as she descended the ramp of the Karn Industries shuttle, "How delightful to see you here."

All around members of the media pointed assorted recording devices towards the Karns as they emerged from their ship, though some instead focused on the group waiting at the foot of the ramp on the starport tarmac. Foremost amongst these was Senator Airia Torin, the Narthis Sector's representative in the Republic Senate and standing just behind her was her cousin Corva Torin along with his wife Deesa. The Torins were another of the Founding Families and it was rare to see Corva, the head of the family away from his starship. As well as the Torins there were two more individuals waiting for the Karns, Trent and Calleen Narthis, descendants of the captain of the original survey vessel after whom the entire sector had been named. "Well it's so wonderful to be here." Airia replied with a smile, "How could I turn down the invitation to witness the foundation of a new settlement?"

"Especially one soon to be filled with potential voters." Calleen muttered to her husband and then she smiled for the cameras. If Airia heard this she gave no indication of it and she continued speaking.

"We were just discussing the opportunities that the new construction will offer for us all." She said, "Perhaps you'd care to join us and give your input."

"Of course my dear senator." Faye replied, "I'm sure Del will be able to give us the benefit of his business expertise."

The members of the three Founding Families then turned and began to walk towards several waiting landspeeders, their every step being recorded by the reporters present.

"Excuse me Mister Torin!" one called out from near the front of the crowd, "But could I speak to you about Ban Hollis?"

Corva scowled and Airia and Deesa threw nervous glances at one another. However, before the man could speak again a pair of plain clothed security men muscled their way to him and pulled him away while more moved to surround the members of the Founding Families and bundled them to the speeders as quickly as they could.

"Problem brother?" a man asked Corva as the Torins got into their speeder and the door was closed behind. This was Vorn, the younger brother of Corva. As was so often the case he had a drink in his hand.

"Why couldn't you just find a cantina with that parasite Dal?" Airia asked angrily as the speeder began to move off.

"I'll take that as a yes." Vorn said, taking a sip of his drink.

"Some reporter asking about Ban." Deesa said.

"Ah, I see." Vorn said, "Nothing like someone accusing you of being descended from a murderer to spoil such a wonderfully stage managed event."

"It doesn't matter." Corva said.

"It might if that reporter has actually managed to figure out what happened to the survey team's first officer." Vorn said.

"Well that's a problem for the Runns on Delvad isn't it?" Airia replied, "If he knew then he'd be hassling them."

"Maybe he's not in much of a hurry to drown." Vorn said.

"Let's just get to the hotel okay?" Airia said.

The hotel in question was not quite up to the standards that members of the Founding Families were used to, but it was the finest available by the more limited standards of Crassis Minor. The three speeders pulled up outside the hotel as a group and staff members rushed to open the doors for the occupants. A man in a hotel uniform approached the vehicle containing the Karns and greeted Del as he emerged.

"Mister Karn," he said, "My name is Greg Lurten and I am the manager of this hotel. If there's anything that we can do for you during your stay then please don't hesitate to ask."

Del nodded politely, but otherwise did not reply. Instead the Karns along with the members of the other two Founding Families present proceeded inside the hotel, where they were met by a dark skinned woman who was a member of another Founding Family, the Drud family.

"I heard about the starport." She said as she approached the others.

"Yes Kayza." Corva said abruptly, "Your little photo opportunity didn't turn out quite how you assured us it would. Care to explain how you intend to spin Han's men dragging some reporter off?"

"Don't worry." Kayza replied, "I've already made some calls and none of the news networks will be carrying it. You can consider this a dead issue."

Standing just inside the hotel's main door Vorn grinned when he heard this and took out his point-to-point communication link. His particular model of PTP was an upmarket model, not commonly available here on Crassis Minor. As well as standard voice and image messaging it also allowed for direct data transfers to public distribution nodes. Logging on anonymously to a node Vorn promptly uploaded the footage he had recorded of the reporter being taken away.

"Up to something?" a voice said from behind him and Vorn turned to see his friend Dal Corun standing just outside the hotel.

"Oh just the usual." He replied, "Making sure everyone sees how badly my brother does things."

"Well you'll be glad to know that I've found the perfect cantina just twenty minutes drive away." Dal told him, "Not far from the site of the new settlement. If it works out tonight we can sneak in there while your brother and his friends do all that breaking ground poodoo."

"Great." Vorn said as he put the PTP link away and then he looked towards the Karns, "I know just who to invite along with us."

2.

The ship shuddered as it entered the atmosphere of Crassis Minor and Lara glared at Cal.

"I thought you could fly this thing." She said. The Udras were not in the *Bright Hope*, the delaya-class starship that the Jedi Order had assigned to them but instead had travelled here in a second delaya-class ship that they had seized from individuals attempting to loot Sith artefacts from the Kinnis system. The ship had been left docked at Dorn Station and the Republic's authorities had never got around to recovering it. Now it provided the two Jedi with an alternate means of transport that allowed them to enter the sector's capital system without the transponder of their own ship giving them away.

"This ship hasn't been maintained as well as the *Bright Hope* has." Cal replied, "Now hang on. I'm switching to repulsorlifts and for all I know this is the first time they've been used for actual flight since the ship was launched."

The roar of ion engines gave way to the higher pitched scream of repulsorlifts that had not been properly serviced for several years and the ship shook again. Less violently this time, but the shaking went on continuously

"So where are you planning to land?" Lara asked, "Assuming you're not just planning to fly this thing around until it falls apart. In ten minutes say."

"We'll descend to low altitude and then head for the site of the new settlement. I'll set down in walking distance and then we'll see if we can pick out anything out of the ordinary." Cal replied.

"You mean anything the Sith may have left behind?"

"Exactly."

Cal landed the ship at the edge of a grassy plain that was sandwiched between an area of woodland and a deep gorge that was spanned by a narrow bridge. Had he been flying the *Bright Hope* he would have set down right next to the trees for cover, but he was unwilling to risk the less reliable manoeuvring of this vessel near any obstacles. It was dark when the Jedi landed and as they descended the access ramp each of them held a flashlight, these allowing them to conceal their identities as Jedi better than using lightsabers to light their way.

"So where are we?" Lara asked.

"About two thousand metres from the new settlement site." Cal said, "It's just over that hill there beyond that bridge. But more importantly we're also not far from the road to the planetary capital. We can keep an eye on who's coming and going from there."

"So construction site first?" Lara then asked and Cal nodded. The two Jedi then began to trek towards the construction site.

Even though it was dark it was still easy for Cal and Lara to pick out the construction site. The entire area had already been cleared of undergrowth and this left a massive hole in the terrain. So as the Jedi came closer they were able to pick up on the lack of wildlife in this area as local animals stuck to places that would provide food and cover. But as they got even closer the pair sensed something more sinister, something even darker than the night sky and every bit as cold. They glanced at one another as they instantly realised what they could sense. They could sense what the Sith had left buried here a thousand years ago.

"I think it's coming from over here." Lara said, pointing and wandering away from Cal.

"Wait Lara. Stay close." Cal called out after her.

"What? Are you afraid that I'll get attacked by another Sith spectre?" she replied, but before Cal could answer another flashlight beam was aimed in at her and she froze.

"No." Cal said, "I was worried that there might be security guards around."

"Who are you?" the guard called out as he strode towards the two Jedi.

"Who us?" Cal asked.

"No. The other two trespassers." The guard responded.

"Oh we were just out for a walk." Cal answered.

"Oh right. Like I'm going to believe that. You're from one of those deadbeat hippy groups aren't you? Trying to get construction stopped."

"Hippies?" Lara said, "Deadbeats?"

"No now Lara. The man is clearly observant." Cal said, "He's rumbled us."

"What? Oh right. Yes we're hippies. We don't bathe at all."

"Then I'm going to have to escort you away," the guard said.

"Of course you are." Cal said and he waved a hand toward the man, "In fact you already have. We're beyond the perimeter of the construction site."

"Yes we are." The guard said, "Now keep going you two and don't let me catch either of you here again."
"Of course. Come on Lara." Cal said and the pair began to walk on, passing by the guard who failed to recognise that they were continuing to head towards the empty construction site.
The look and smell of the site from close up gave the impression that a chemical defoliant had been used to clear the undergrowth and Cal had no doubt that lingering traces of this chemical would be keeping local animals at bay as well.
"If we split up we should be able to zero in on the strongest source of the Dark Side." Lara suggested.
"I was just thinking that as well." Cal replied, "From here I'd say that it was in that direction." And he pointed, "So you wait right here and I'll try from over there." And then he walked a short distance away, "Now it seems to be in that direction." He called out, "Walk towards it and we'll see where we meet up."
Carefully the Jedi paced in straight lines, heading in the direction of the strongest source of Dark Side energy close by. After a short time this brought them together and they both crouched down where their paths met and shone their flashlights over the ground.
"Here!" Cal exclaimed and setting down his flashlight he produced a fold away shovel from under his robes and he began to dig.
Lara shone her flashlight into the hole as Cal continued to work, watchful for any signs of there being something out of the ordinary at the bottom of it. All of a sudden there was a sharp 'crack' just as Cal pushed the shovel into the ground again and both Jedi smiled at one another.
"Let's see what we've got shall we?" he said and he reached down to begin brushing away the dirt where he was trying to dig. Almost right away he exposed something that glittered in the light of the flashlight beam and he plucked it out of the ground.
"That's pretty." Lara commented as she saw what Cal had dug up. It was clearly some sort of talisman and was mounted on a gold chain that was now encrusted with dirt. Cal began to rub this off with his fingers.
"Strange for something so small to be so strong in the Dark Side." He said, "Somehow I doubt this was just a piece of jewellery."
"Then what is it?" Lara asked and Cal shrugged, "And how did it get here?"
"Beats me." He said, "The Jedi Order doesn't exactly hand out details of Sith artefacts. Too many Jedi have fallen prey to the temptation of using them in the past. As for how it ended up here, well my guess would be that there was a battle and either the owner was killed or it got lost here. We know the Sith fought one another."
"There's writing on it." Lara said as she caught sight of the back of the talisman.
"Well spotted." Cal replied and he turned it over, "Maybe we can find out if anyone around here has ever seen any writing like this before."
Lara looked around.
"There's no one around to ask." She said.
"No, not here. But since we're not far from the main road to the capital we're probably not too far from a cantina."

"If you and the two young ladies wouldn't mind waiting here I'll go get you some drinks." Dal said and he patted his pockets, "Ah, err Vorn-" he added.
"Here." Vorn replied as he tossed his friend a credit stick. Dal smiled as he caught it and then headed for the bar.
"This place sucks." Keera said as she looked around.
"Yes well at least they're not checking IDs on the door." Vorn replied, "You two would never have got in otherwise."
"Well I'm just going to use the bathroom." Sial said as she got up, "Keera are you coming?"
"No." Keera replied, "I'm dying for a drink."

Cal and Lara had been walking for some time when the lights of the cantina came into view.
"Oh at last." Lara exclaimed, "My feet are killing me. I think I've got something in my boot."
"Well you go find out." Cal replied, "I'll get us a couple of drinks and something to eat. Then after we've had a break we can see if we can find someone who can tell us if anything like this talisman has cropped up before."
Entering the cantina the two Jedi split up, Cal heading for the bar while Lara instead head for the bathrooms. Once inside she headed for the row of washbasins beneath the long mirror than ran along one entire wall and steadied herself on it as she removed her boot and tipped it up, shaking it and watching the bits of dirt dropping out. At that moment she heard one of the refresher units cycling and she glanced up as the occupant emerged.

"Oh stang." Lara said as she found herself looking straight at Sial Karn.

Sial's jaw dropped and then her hand suddenly reached into her bag, emerging with a compact slug thrower in it.

Cal's head whirled around he heard the distinctive sound of a gun being fired.

"Oh no. Lara." He muttered and he rushed from the bar towards the bathroom. Ahead of him a pair of bulky cantina staff forced their way through the panicked crowd of customers and disappeared into the bathroom marked 'Females'. As Cal ran in behind them he saw both staff members standing back and dodging as Lara wrestled with Sial. Lara had her hand securely wrapped around Sial's wrist and was forcing her to point the gun she held away from them both. Now the two cantina bouncers were trying to keep out of the line of fire. Cal darted around them and went to help his sister, delivering a sharp blow to Sial's hand that sent the gun clattering to the floor. Then he took hold of Sial himself and pulled her upright.

"Back off!" one of the bouncers suddenly yelled at Cal as they both waded into the fray and Cal was pushed back against the nearby wall of a refresher unit. The bouncers grabbed hold of both Lara and Sial and pulled them apart.

"Hey let go of me!" Lara yelled, "She attacked me. I'm a-" she was about to say 'jedi' when she realised that doing so may alert the bouncers to her identity and she suddenly stopped speaking.

"You worthless little monkey lizards!" Sial hissed as she and Lara were dragged out of the bathroom and towards the front door, "I could buy this entire stinking little cantina!"

"Well then it's a pity its not for sale." One of the bouncers replied, shoving Sial through the door. Immediately afterwards Lara was also ejected from the cantina, landing right on top of Sial.

"Nerf herder!" Sial yelled and she struck Lara in the face.

"Oh that does it." Lara snapped back, "Eat dirt." And she picked up a handful of dirt and pushed it into Sial's face, aiming for her mouth.

In the meantime, satisfied that they had dealt with the threat to good order inside the cantina the two bouncers headed back inside, walking past Dal, Vorn and Keera as they went to see what was going on with Sial.

"Hey!" Dal said excitedly, "Girl fight!" then he glanced at Vorn, "Got your link?" he asked.

"Of course." Vorn said as he produced his PTP link and aimed its built in recorder at Lara and Sial. It was then that Keera noticed who it was that Sial was fighting with.

"You!" she exclaimed, snarling and she dived onto of Lara.

"Even better!" Dal exclaimed.

"I think I just found my new screen saver." Vorn added, "If only it was raining."

It was then that Cal emerged from the cantina, clutching Lara's boot in his hand. Seeing his sister trying to fight off both Keera and Sial he rushed forwards and dragged Keera off her.

"Get off her!" He yelled, shaking Keera.

"Oh come on man." Dal said, "Don't you have any sense of fun?" and Cal whirled around and glared at him. Shoving Keera to the ground he reached into his robes and pulled out his pulse wave blaster.

"Back off laser brain." He said. Then he glanced down at Lara, "Get up and put your boot back on." He added.

"Lucky your brother was here to rescue you." Sial hissed as she watched Lara get back up. Then she spat out what dirt remained in her mouth.

All of a sudden flashing blue lights appeared in the distance.

"Uh-oh." Cal said, "Lara, cops."

"The bouncers must have called them." Vorn commented.

"Let's get out of here." Lara said as she finished putting on her boot and both she and Cal promptly ran off into the night.

"Perhaps we should be making a move as well." Dal suggested and he looked at Sial, "She did fire off a gun after all."

Vorn nodded as he put his PTP link back in his pocket.

"I'll start the speeder." He said.

As Vorn headed for their landspeeder and Keera helped Sial to her feet Dal noticed something lying on the ground near where the young women had been fighting, a gold coloured talisman on a chain.

"Hmmm." He said to himself as he bent down to pick it up, "Could be worth something."

Cal and Lara headed across country, running directly back towards their starship. All of a sudden Cal ground to a halt.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked as she too stopped running and looked at him.

"The talisman." He replied, patting the various pockets in his robes, "I've dropped it."

"Oh stang." Lara said, "Cal that's a Sith talisman. Who knows what it could do to anyone stupid enough to pick it up."

"Yeah, like me." Cal commented. Then he went on, "Well we can't go back to the cantina. If those cops have figured out who we are then this place could be crawling with police, sector rangers, even military personnel hunting us."

"So what do we do now?"

"We keep going back to the ship." Cal answered, "We'll see if we can intercept any law enforcement or military comm. chatter. If it looks like they're on to us we'll head back to Dorn Station before they can get a blockade in place. Otherwise we'll just have to figure out a way of getting that talisman back. With any luck I dropped it while we were running and no one's found it."

Lara shook her head and sighed.

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

When Keera and Sial returned to the Karn's hotel suite they found their parents talking with the other members of the Founding Families present.

"Where the hell have you been?" Del snapped as got up and stared at them.

"I think I can guess." Corva Torin added, "They were out with my brother."

"And what exactly happened to get you coming back here in that state?" Faye demanded.

"It wasn't our fault." Keera replied.

"No." Sial added, "It was that jedi Lara Udra. Oh and I've lost my gun. I'll need a new one."

"Did you just say Lara Udra?" Trent Narthis commented as the other members of the Founding Families looked at one another nervously.

"Yeah. Her and her brother attacked me." Sial replied, "Which is how come I lost my gun. If the cops come asking that wasn't my fault either. No matter what those kriffing bouncers say."

"What are those jedi doing here?" Calleen Narthis asked, "Are they here for us? If they've attacked your daughters then-"

"I doubt they're here for any of us." Kayza said, "But it may be wise to obtain reinforcements. Just in case."

"Han's people can be here-" Trent began before Kayza cut him off.

"No. The Udras are fugitives. I think now is a good time for us to show how we're all good citizens of the Republic." And she leant forwards to activate the communications panel sat on the table just in front of her.

"Hotel switchboard." A voice said.

"It's Kayza Drud. Get me an off-planet line. I need to be put through to the Crassis Major Defence Forces immediately. I want to speak with General Josh Drud."

On the nearby world of Crassis Major, the capital of the Narthis Sector General Josh Drud, head of the Crassis Major Defence Forces and also head of the famous Drud family wandered into the command and control centre to find a young officer rushing up to him.

"Priority message from off world for you general." The officer said excitedly.

"Off world?" Josh asked.

"Yes sir. Apparently its your sister."

The general sighed and walked over to his station.

"Put her through." He said as he sat down. Then when the channel became active he added, "Look Kayza, you can't just go calling me up to-"

"Oh shut up Josh." Kayza's voice snapped, "The Udras are here on Crassis Minor."

Josh's eyes widened. Then his expression turned to a frown.

"We're on our way." He said before cutting the link to his sister.

3.

Cal came to a halt once more and crouched down, waving at Lara for her to do the same.

"What now?" she whispered.

"Look." Cal said, pointing ahead to where a light shone out of the darkness.

"What is it?" Lara asked.

"I think it's a house." Cal replied.

"All the way out here?"

"Could be a farm. Most of the people on Crassis Minor are involved in farming." Cal pointed out, "We didn't use a straight path before. We must have gone around it."

"Do you think they'll raise the alarm?" Lara asked.

"Not if we're careful." Cal said, "Just keep the noise to a minimum and we'll see if we can sneak past."

The two Jedi set off once more, skirting around the building set out here in the middle of nowhere. There was no sign of a vehicle parked outside that would allow the occupant to get into town easily, but there were a handful of smaller buildings on the far side that could have housed a small speeder. As the Jedi were passing the main house they passed by a small cluster of trees that seemed to offer them cover, but as they crept around these there was a sudden sharp 'Crack!' and Cal whirled around to stare at Lara.

"Oops." She said, looking down at her feet and the broken branch she had just trodden on.

From inside the house there was the sudden barking of a canine and another light appeared as the front door opened.

"Oh stang." Cal muttered, "Stay still. Movement's easier to spot in the dark."

There was more barking and a dog rushed out of the house, heading towards the two Jedi while in the doorway an elderly human male stood wielding a pulse wave carbine and a bulky flashlight.

"I know you're out there!" he called out, "My dog's got senses far better than you."

"I doubt that." Lara whispered and Cal glared at her to be quiet.

The man began to walk out of the house and Cal noticed that he possessed a severe limp. Meanwhile the dog continued to rush towards the Udras. Had he been dealing with just a human opponent, or any sentient for that matter, Cal would have simply used the Force to convince them that he and his sister were not there. But animals were a different matter and Cal was unable to pick out any thought pattern he could manipulate. The dog ran right up to the two Jedi, still barking and as it closed with them it leapt up at Lara.

The force of the impact knocked Lara from her feet and she squealed as she fell backwards, the dog landing on top of her. But instead of mauling Lara the dog began to lick her face as she lay helpless beneath it.

"Arrrgh! Cal, help me! There's dog spit in my hair." She exclaimed.

At that moment a light fell over the Udras and Cal looked around to see the old man now pointing both his flashlight and carbine towards them.

"You're Jedi." He said.

"Ah." Cal said, standing up straight and holding out his hands to show they were empty. Then he tried to focus on the man's mind, "You don't need to keep us here." He said, "We can be on our way."

The man snorted.

"You're not very good Jedi though are you?" then he frowned and he stared first Cal and then Lara directly in their faces, "You're those two the Republic is hunting aren't you?" he said.

Cal grinned, still hoping that he could find a peaceful way out of this. Killing an old man and his pet just protecting their home was not what he had in mind.

"You better come in then." The old man said suddenly, lifting his carbine over his shoulder. The he looked at the dog, "Ghost get off her." He said and the dog rushed to his side. Turning around the man began to limp back towards his house, "Well are you coming or not?" he called out, glancing back over his shoulder at the two confused Jedi. Cal reached down to help Lara back to her feet and then they followed the old man into his house.

Inside the house they Udras found themselves in a living area that joined directly onto a kitchen.

"You hungry?" the old man asked as he hung his carbine on a wall mounting above a storage unit.

"Kind of." Lara replied, "We didn't get time to eat at the cantina."

"Well sit down while I see what I've got." The man said.

"We don't want to be any trouble." Cal said as he and Lara sat down on a sofa. Ghost the dog promptly wandered right up to them and rested his head in Lara's lap, his eyes looking up into hers.

"Your dog is very friendly isn't he?" she called out to the old man.

"Oh him? It's probably that soap you use. I could practically smell it from the front door myself. Don't worry, he won't bite unless I tell him to."

"That's a relief." Cal said as he reached out to stroke the dog, "As a kid I always wanted a dog."

Lara frowned, staring at Cal. She had heard him make known his desire for a pet dog many times before and each time he had followed the statement up with how he ended up with a younger sister instead.

"Just stroke the dog." Cal added when he saw the look on her face. Then he turned to their host and said, "I'm Cal and this is my sister Lara. What can we call you?"

"Dag's the name. Dag Thayer." And then after a pause he reappeared and added, "So the Republic thinks you've gone dark." as he returned with a plate on which he had laid out food and a jug of water in the other hand.

Cal and Lara looked at one another again.

"Is that why you invited us in?" Cal asked.

"No." Dag said, "I invited you in because you obviously haven't gone dark and I thought you could do with somewhere rest for a while."

"How do you know?" Lara asked, confused.

"Because I'm still here. If you'd gone dark you'd have sliced me up and left the bits of me out there in the dark without a second thought. Isn't that so?"

"You seem to know a lot about Force users." Cal said.

"Of course I do." Dag said as he returned from the kitchen again with two mugs. As he set them down Cal took a mug, poured himself a drink and picked up some of the food, "I spent forty years in the Freedom Warriors." And he picked up an image in a frame from on top of the heater and passed it to Cal. Lara leant over to look at it as well. The image showed a group of beings, mainly human and all dressed either in the robes of the Jedi Order or the combat fatigues of the Freedom Warriors. Amongst the uniformed men was one figure that was obviously a younger Dag. Lara frowned briefly.

"Is that Master Karas?" she asked, pointing to one of the figures.

"Master?" Dag responded, "Yes, I suppose he probably would be by now. Back then he was just Jedi Knight Ben Karas. Pater Hald was the master in charge of us, Ben Karas' old instructor as well as I recall."

"So what happened to him then?" Cal asked and Dag sighed.

"He was killed in the Sith War. Ben Karas was never quite the same after. Some say they heard him talking to himself as if Master Hald were still there. No one mentioned it to his face of course."

"So the guy who's got it in for us is a total loon." Lara said.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Dag replied, "Master Hald was strong. If anyone could keep his individuality after death it would be him. But force ghosts don't tend to walk down the high street for everyone to see."

Cal took a deep breath and leant towards Dag.

"The authorities may know we're out here." He said, "They'll be after us."

"Oh I wouldn't worry about that." Dag said and he got up and walked over to the storage unit he kept his blaster over and opened up one of the compartments. From inside he took an old and bulky communicator and tossed it to Cal, "The weapon wasn't the only thing I kept when I retired out here. This will pick up pretty much any military transmission within a couple of hundred kilometres. Local, Republic or Jedi. So long as you're here you may as well use that to monitor what's going on."

Cal and Lara looked at one another and Lara smiled.

"Looks like we'll be waiting here a while then." Cal said.

The sun was just appearing over the horizon when the shuttles dropped out of the sky. Bulky, heavily armed and armoured the shuttles all bore the markings of the Crassis Major Defence Force and sure enough as soon as the first one touched down its hatch opened and Josh Drud appeared in full uniform and armour.

"Josh!" Kayza called out from the edge of the landing area and she, Del and Trent approached the shuttle.

"Kayza." Josh replied with a smile and he embraced his sister.

"So what did you bring with you?" Trent asked Josh as he looked around at the other shuttles now unloading troops and their equipment.

"Two companies." Josh replied.

"Two companies?" Del repeated, "Is that enough?"

"Not by themselves." Josh answered, "But Han's on his way with a company of his own people."

"I thought we were keeping Shill Security out of this?" Trent said.

"We were." Josh replied, "But-"

"But a reason was needed to legally justify the deployment of troops to Crassis Minor." A voice interrupted him from within the shuttle and another dark skinned human appeared. Heddren Drud was Josh's younger brother who, given Josh's commitment to the Crassis Major Defence Force was left to manage most of the

family business. In this case one of the most expensive law firms in the sector. Then behind Heddren followed his wife Millel, son Hiran and daughter Jaynie.

"Is there anyone you didn't invite?" Kayza asked and Josh just smiled.

"We just fancied attending your little ground breaking party." Millel replied.

"Yes, why didn't we get an invite from you sister?" Heddren added.

"So how does having Han's mercenaries here help us?" Del asked before Kayza could reply and looking at Heddren.

"Its just a training exercise." Josh answered in place of his brother, "Officially my troops are here to practice responding to an attack on Crassis Minor. Han's people are to play the aggressor role. They'll simulate a drop into open country and dig in to await our counter attack."

"Let me guess." Trent said, "When in fact they'll be searching for the two jedi."

"Exactly." Millel said, "Then as good citizens of the Republic they'll call Josh's men in to take custody of the fugitives."

"Though I'm certain that they'll resist." Josh added, "Making the use of deadly force necessary."

When Lara awoke from her night on the couch she found Cal had laid all his equipment out on the table and was checking each item in turn before returning it to his belt.

"Expecting trouble Cal?" she said as she sat up.

"I'm going to go and see Keera and Sial." He replied without looking at her.

"What? Are you insane?"

"No. I'm deadly serious. Lara, I need to figure out what happened to Gayal and if anyone knows it will be her family. Remember Lara, Gayal may be able to clear you."

"Which is something I'm all for." Lara said, "But do you even have a clue where they are?"

"I know exactly where they are." Cal told her, "They'll be in a hotel."

"But which one brother dear?"

"Easy. The most expensive."

"So how come you didn't wake me to come with you?" Lara asked.

It was then that Dag appeared and he handed Cal an access key for a repulsorlift vehicle.

"Here you go Cal." He said, "The bike's in the barn. I haven't used it in a while, but it should get you to the city and back."

"Thanks." Cal replied as he took the key and then he looked at Lara, "No room on the bike." He said, "You just stay put. I'll have my PTP link with me so you should be able to contact me with Dag's communicator if you need to, it'll have enough range. In the mean time use it to keep an eye out for trouble. Don't wait for me if the authorities turn up. Get back to the ship and get off planet."

"What you mean just leave you here?" Lara asked.

"I'll be fine." Cal replied, "I'll lay low until I can figure out another way off planet."

Cal then left the house and Lara watched as he walked to the building that held Dag's old speeder bike.

"Something wrong young lady?" Dag asked her.

"I just get this weird feeling like he's walking into danger." Lara answered while still looking at her brother, "A very bad feeling."

"Are sure you want to go to that boring ceremony?" Jaynie asked her brother as he checked his clothing in the mirror and he smiled.

"Given the alternative? Yes." He said.

"Alternative? You mean hanging out by the pool with me?"

"I mean hanging about by the pool with them." Hiran replied quietly and he looked around towards where Keera and Sial were in the next room.

"There's not need to whisper." Keera called out when she spotted him looking at her, "We know you're talking about us."

"What's he saying?" Sial asked, peering around the doorframe.

"That he'd rather go watch our parents dig in the dirt than stay here with us." Jaynie replied.

"His loss." Sial said and she promptly slipped off her robe to reveal the swimsuit beneath it and strode out onto the hotel suite's massive private balcony that included its own swimming pool. A moment later there was a loud splash.

"Remember," Hiran said, looking directly at Jaynie, "you're the responsible one here. So if they get drunk and drown don't save them on my account."

Jaynie grinned and playfully slapped his face.

"Well have fun in the dirt." She said and then she followed Sial onto the balcony.

Hiran instead headed for the door out of the suite and just as he stepped out into the corridor he encountered his Aunt Kayza.

"Oh thank goodness you're ready." She said and she looked past him into the suite, "What about the others?"

There was another loud splash.

"They aren't coming." Hiran said and Kayza scowled.

"Oh that's just great. The press will be all over this ceremony and having everyone there would really have helped. The Narthis and Torin kids will all be there."

"So I guess that mean's I'm babysitting them in front of the cameras then." Hiran replied.

"Sorry but yes. There's no one else."

"Its probably safer than trusting those two Karns. A six year old is more mature than them."

Kayza smiled.

"Thanks for seeing that way. Now let's get a move on." And she began to pull him towards the turbolift at the end of the corridor.

4.

A search run on a public data terminal told Cal which hotel had the highest prices and also gave him directions on how to get there. He left the speeder bike parked in a nearby parking lot and then raised the hood of his robes to conceal his features before walking the rest of the way to the hotel. Standing on the street outside he watched as four luxury landspeeders pulled up immediately outside the main entrance and members of the Founding Families exited the building, each family heading for a different speeder. The sheer number of them present surprised Cal. He had expected the Karn family as well as Senator Torin but the others were unexpected, particularly considering that both the Narthis and Torin families had turned up with young children in tow. However, much to Cal's relief neither Keera nor Sial emerged from the hotel before the speeders drove off. That meant they were likely to still be inside. The hotel was large by the standards of Crassis Minor and searching every room would take time that Cal did not have. Fortunately he knew exactly where they would be. They would be on the penthouse level.

Cal looked up the side of the building, using the Force to help focus his senses on the contours of the walls and he determined that it was a surface that he would be able to climb given enough time. However, doing so would undoubtedly attract attention that he could not afford so an entry at ground level would be required. For a brief moment he considered simply walking in through the main doors. But a quick glance at them told him that that would be a bad idea. Though he would have little difficulty in getting past the doormen with just a wave of his hand and the suggestion that he was a wealthy guest once inside it would be harder to disguise the fact that his clothing did not match that of any of the other guests.

Cal decided that if he could not impersonate a guest then the obvious answer was to impersonate a member of staff and with this in mind he began to walk around the back of the hotel.

At the rear of the building Cal found a doorway large enough to take a speeder truck and inside a parking garage where the hotel could take deliveries and service its own small fleet of vehicles. The sound of machinery from nearby told Cal that he was near the laundry and he smiled. Then with a wave of his hand Cal turned a valve on the compressor set up to repressurise the tyres of ground vehicles. The sudden noisy release of gas was enough of a distraction to the handful of hotel staff in the parking garage to allow Cal to enter unnoticed. Quickly he walked around the edge of the room, pausing only briefly to scoop up a holdall of tools before heading for the interior door that seemed to lead to the laundry.

Once through this door he lowered the hood of his robe and slung the holdall over his shoulder before simply walking towards the sound of machinery as if he was supposed to be there, the few staff he encountered simply assuming he was one of them who had just arrived for work.

Sure enough the sounds Cal had heard had been from the hotel laundry, with washers and driers running throughout the large. Most of the clothing in the room clearly belonged to guests and Cal had no wish to steal from them. As well as the morality of stealing from an innocent person Cal could not discount the possibility that he may happen to run into the owner while wearing their one of a kind outfit. However, as well as guests' clothing the hotel laundry also cleaned and pressed the staff's uniforms and there were several racks of them lined up to one side of the room. Cal slipped around behind these and out of sight of the laundry workers he rummaged through the male uniforms until he found one in his size.

A short time after Cal emerged from the refresher wearing the hotel uniform and with his own robes stuffed inside the holdall he still carried. Dressed like this he hoped that he would be taken as a porter carrying a guest's bag up to their room and he then began to look for a turbolift that would be able to take him up to the top floor. Along the way he passed by a cleaner and holding out his hand he made the woman's pass key leap from her belt into it.

Stepping out of the turbolift Cal looked around and opened his mind to the Force. As far as he could tell most of the floor was deserted, with just a small cluster of individuals close by. Assuming that these would be the Karn sisters he calmly walked in their direction. Halting by the door closest to the life forms he felt through the Force Cal took another look around and took out his stolen passkey. One quick swipe of the key over the lock caused the door to slide open with a hiss and Cal stepped inside and set down the holdall. From here he could hear the sounds of conversation and he sensed the presence of three individuals on the balcony outside. For a brief moment he considered the possibility that the third person present could be Gayal, returned from wherever she had vanished to. But it did not take long for him to realise that it was not her. Gayal was mildly Force sensitive and as such had a distinctive presence that Cal had learned to recognise and whoever this was they had no such sensitivity. Closing the door behind him Cal began to quietly make his way towards the door leading to the balcony.

"Did you hear something?" Jaynie said, lifting her head off her lounger.

"No. Why, what was it?" Sial asked from hers.

"I could have sworn I just heard the door open." Jaynie replied.

"Keera go check." Sial said.

"Why me?" Keera asked.

"Because I say so." Sial said and Keera frowned.

"What did your last slave die of?" she asked as she got up.

"I shot them of not answering the door." Sial replied.

Still frowning, Keera walked back to the balcony door but just as she reached it she found Cal standing right in front of her and she let out a gasp.

"Stang!" Sial exclaimed as she too looked round and saw the jedi standing there in a hotel uniform.

"Good morning ladies." Cal said with a smile as he walked out onto the balcony." If you don't mind I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Danger.

The tremor in the Force caught was unexpected and Cal was surprised to see Jaynie suddenly leap up from her lounger and charge towards him. Raising an arm Cal blocked the first punch she threw, but the kick delivered almost immediately after caught him off guard and he winced as it struck his leg. The rapidity and accuracy of Jaynie's blows suggested to Cal that she had some significant training martial arts and Cal concentrated on parrying her attacks while he tried to determine whether there was a pattern to her attacks that he could exploit.

"Get him Jaynie!" Sial called out.

"Yeah! Kick his jedi ass!" Keera added gleefully.

"How does it feel to get beaten up by a girl in a bikini Cal?" Jaynie asked as he was forced to dodge a kick aimed for his groin.

Cal grinned as he blocked another punch.

"Normally I have to pay fifty credits a time for it." He said, "Though this isn't even worth five."

Anger.

Jaynie struck out, aiming to punch Cal in the face, but Cal saw his chance and he took it. Taking hold of her wrist in both hands he pulled her closer to him and unexpectedly head butted her before letting go of her again. Disorientated, Jaynie staggered back and at that moment Cal slipped his lightsaber from his pocket. There was a 'snap-hiss' as the weapon ignited and he held it out in front of him, pointed straight ahead so that the tip hovered just a few centimetres from Jaynie's face.

"I parry your next attack with this." He said, "You can lose a hand or a foot. Your choice. Alternately you can all just give up."

Jaynie stared at the deadly weapon, well aware of the damage Cal could do with it and then she sighed and raised her hands. Cal glanced at Keera and Sial and they also raised their hands in surrender.

"That's good." He said, "Now I need the bag by the front door and three chairs."

Two datapads was all Cal's search of the hotel suite turned up and as he flicked through the pages of unsecured data they held he saw that there was nothing related to Gayal's disappearance on them at all.

Anger.

Hatred.

Cal looked back over his shoulder at the three young women sat in a row. Cable ties taken from the tool kit bound their arms and legs to the chairs while he had used tape to make certain they did not call out for help while he search the suite.

"You know ladies." He said as he pulled up another chair and sat down in front of them, "I'm starting to think you don't like being tied up. Well do you or don't you?"

Keera and Sial shook their heads while Jaynie just glared at him and Cal smiled.

"I tell you what then, anyone who wants me to untie them just raise your hand and say 'Pretty please.'" Then after a brief pause while all three of Cal's captives produce unintelligible grunts he added, "No? Then in that case I suppose I better keep you tied up while you tell me what you know. Where is Gayal?"

The trio of women glared back at Cal silently and Cal sensed no strong reactions to the question.

"Okay so who shall I pick to get an answer from?" he said and then he looked at Sial, "You I think." He added and he walked up to her chair, reached down and peeled the corner of the tape away from her skin, "Fast or slow?" he asked and then he ripped it from her face.

"Ow!" Sial exclaimed.

"Make a sound other than to answer my questions and the tape goes back on." Cal warned her, "Plus whatever foul tasting rags I can find to stuff your mouth. Understand?"

Sial nodded.

"I don't know where Gayal is." She added.

Cal paused, searching the Force for any sign of deception. Finding nothing he reached out and ripped the tape from Keera's mouth as well. Unlike Sial she remained quiet but Cal still sensed her pain.

"I don't know where she is either." She said, snarling at Cal, "Now untie me. I can't tell you anything."

Deception.

Cal frowned.

"Oh that was a mistake." He said and he headed to the holdall, "Now what I've done to you is pretty much the same as what you did to Lara when you tried to set her up on a burglary charge." He added as he rummaged through the holdall.

"We didn't tie her up and gag her." Sial replied.

"No, but you did make sure she couldn't leave." Cal said, "Now how did you do that again? Oh yes. By taking all her clothes." And he pulled a pair of scissors from the holdall and held them up, opening and closing the blades to produce an audible 'Snip-snip.' Then he grinned, "Now cutting off those swimsuits wouldn't be terribly jedi-like, but I'm pretty sure that a quick haircut wouldn't get me in much more trouble than I'm already in. Then I'll find a nice alleyway somewhere to leave you in. alternatively you can tell me what you know and I'll just leave you here for someone to find."

"Ask her." Keera said suddenly, looking at Jaynie.

"Her?" Cal asked, "What would she know?"

"It was her father took Gayal away." Keera went on, "I overheard mom and dad talking to him a couple of weeks after she vanished. He said she was safe."

"Then she's alive." Cal said, smiling and he approached Jaynie. With one swift movement he ripped the tape off her and glared at her, "Okay talk."

"I don't know anything. You think dad tells me anything about his business? Try asking Hiran. Though I doubt you'll be threatening to cut of his hair, his head is already shaved."

Cal sensed nothing from Jaynie, indicating she was telling the truth. However, she was not done yet.

"So not only have you failed to find your girlfriend Cal but you and your sister will dead by the end of the day. My uncle's brought more than three hundred men here to deal with you. Let's see you and your precious little sister handle all of them."

Once again Cal sensed no lies. Hurriedly he cut some fresh lengths of tape and stuck them over the mouths of his prisoners before rushing back to the holdall and scooped it up before heading for the door. But as soon as he opened it he found himself face to face with Vorn Torin and Dal Corun.

All three stood there for a moment, staring at one another open mouthed.

Jaynie tried to scream, the tape muffling her cry but not silencing it completely and both Dal and Vorn looked towards her. The moment their attention was distracted Cal struck, jabbing Vorn in the throat hard enough to make him stagger back, clutching at his throat as he struggled to breathe but without causing permanent damage. As the jedi then turned towards his other opponent Dal reached into his jacket and spotted the compact accelerator pistol just as Dal was drawing it from the concealed holster.

"Oh no you don't." Cal snapped and he lashed out again, this time delivering a blow to Dal's wrist that caused him to drop the weapon. But that was not the only thing that Cal's punch struck and at the same time as the pistol clattered to the floor the Sith talisman was knocked from Dal's pocket and dropped to the floor beside it. Cal reached down to scoop up the talisman faster than Dal and so when the other man extended his hand out the jedi already had hold of it.

"Give that back!" Dal snapped as he wrapped his hand around Cal's and gripped it firmly. This had the effect of pressing Cal's hand tight against the talisman and for a brief moment he felt something shift underneath his hand. His first thought was that something had come loose from the ancient artefact but then he felt a sudden tremor run through the Force.

Awaken.

The single word that called out startled Cal. Somehow his handling of the talisman had just triggered a message encoded in it by the Sith who had created it so many centuries ago and Cal had a bad feeling about where it may be destined for.

Lifting his knee up sharply Cal kned Dal in the stomach and the man let out a sudden gasp as the air was painfully forced from his lungs and he dropped to his knees, letting go of the talisman. Elbowing him in the face, Cal knocked Dal out of his way and ran from the hotel suite leaving both men on the floor behind him and all three young women still tied to their chairs.

5.

Worried, Lara cycled through communication channels using Dag's old communicator. No long before she was certain she had picked up something, a brief pulse transmission perhaps but now the government and military channels were silent once more. Ghost was sat beside her and Lara stroked the dog's fur as she continued her search of the airwaves but all of a sudden the dog looked around and let out a bark. Ghost then rushed to the window and stared out of it, barking some more.

"Dag what's wrong with him?" Lara called out.

"Damned if I know." The old man replied as he limped into the room, "Though it could be that he's-" and then there was a massive explosion from outside.

Han Shill, CEO of Shill Security smiled as he watched the barn burning through his magnifiers. He had no idea what had been inside the building but now it was nothing but burning wreckage. If there had been a vehicle inside then the jedi would not be using it to escape.

"General do you read me?" Han transmitted.

"Loud and clear Mister Shill." Josh Drud's voice replied over the link.

"We've got them cornered, you my start your advance."

"Copy that, we're on our way. I've three platoons in the air right now and the rest won't be far behind. Can you hold out long?"

Han smiled.

"Easily." He said, "In fact there may not be anything left by the time you get here." Then he shut off the link and turned towards a group of masked soldiers standing close by and he nodded. The troops briefly snapped to attention and then began to run towards the house, their weapons raised and ready to fire.

"And so it is with great pleasure that I ask Faye Karn, one of the sponsors of this development to symbolically break the ground." Airia said, smiling to the assembled crowd of reporters, construction workers and those who had turned up just to get a look at the members of the Founding Families gathered here. There was polite applause as Faye stepped forwards and was handed a polished shovel by one of the construction workers, an image that was recorded by everyone with suitable equipment.

"Where? Just here?" Faye asked the worker as she pointed to the patch of ground at their feet.

"Yes that's fine." The worker replied after a moment's pause, clearly surprised that she had spoken to him and then there was more applause as Faye inserted the shovel into the ground, holding it still and resting her foot on the blade as the reporters once again recorded everything.

Then the ground began to shake.

"What the hell is that?" Corva said, looking to Trent, "Artillery?"

"No." Trent replied, "Artillery doesn't sound like that."

"How would you know? You've never been in the military." Heddren commented.

"No but being that its my ancestor that the sector is named after I've been at plenty of parades and been given more than a few salutes." Trent said back.

The shaking continued and more and more of the crowd began to look around for the source.

"I think maybe we should leave until the site supervisor can determine what's happening." Deesa Torin suggested.

"Yes, excellent idea." Calleen Narthis added and Airia nodded in agreement.

"Gentlebeings it seems that we need to-" Kayza began, hiding her anger at having her carefully staged media event disrupted by a rather minor seismic disturbance. But before she could finish an area of ground about a hundred metres away suddenly exploded upwards and a creature right out a nightmare burst into the daylight after a thousand years of hibernation.

Ghost continued barking as Dag plucked his carbine from the wall.

"Get down." He said to Lara as he then headed for the window beside his dog and looked outside. Then he ducked and pulled Ghost down with him, "Incoming. Six men, armed and armoured. Looks like projectile weapons, high calibre slug throwers or RAPs maybe."

Lara pressed herself up against the wall beside the window and risked a look outside for herself as she drew her lightsaber. One of the soldiers charging towards the house looked directly at her, his face concealed by the tight fitting mask that covered most of his head and the bulky visor strapped over his eyes. In an instant he aimed his pistol at her and fired a single shot. After the sharp 'Crack' of the discharge there was a flash of

light from just in front of the weapon's muzzle as a tiny rocket motor ignited and the rocket-assisted projectile streaked towards her. Lara rolled back out of sight a fraction of a second before the round smashed through the window and arced around, guided by the tracking system built into the soldier's visor only to bury itself in the wall opposite before it exploded.

"Well that answers that question." Lara said, "They're carrying RAP pistols." And then there was a 'snap-hiss' as she ignited her lightsaber.

"I never liked those things." Dag said, "Too complicated."

Lara sensed the approach of the soldiers outside and she darted towards the front door. There was a sudden crash as the soldier at the front of the charge kicked the door off its hinges and then a tiny cylinder came flying through. Lara recognised the grenade for what it was immediately and she waved a hand towards it, using the Force to send it back through the door before it detonated. The sound confirmed that it was just a simple flash-bang type stun grenade, but had it detonated inside then it would likely have stunned Lara long enough for the soldiers to get inside.

Panic.

The soldiers attempting to storm the house had not expected their own grenade to be used against them but their disorientation did not last long and the first of the soldiers leapt in through the ruined doorway. Lara swung her lightsaber upwards in a vertical arc and the blade sliced the arms from the soldiers before a second horizontal swipe took off his head and Lara dived out of the way.

There was a flurry of gunfire from outside as the other soldiers aimed their weapons at the spot on the wall that they determined Lara had been standing behind the first impacts blew chunks out of the wall until a hole was created that allowed subsequent shots to pass through.

With their attention focused on Lara, Dag saw an opportunity and he bobbed up and fired his pulse wave carbine through what remained of the window. The glass exploded outwards as the first of the spatial distortions shattered the window and then the next blast lifted one of the soldiers off his feet and sent him flying backwards, his rib cage shattered and the organs within scrambled by the impact.

"Fall back!" Dag yelled at Lara, "Get in the kitchen."

"Why the kitchen?"

"Because its further away from them than here." Dag replied and then he looked at Ghost, "Come on boy." He said and he began to crawl towards the kitchen door as further rocket propelled projectiles exploded above him.

"Target right." Han heard the squad leader say over the communications net and he shifted his magnifiers to zoom in on the front window of the farmhouse. The interior of the building was darker than the outside and Han could barely make out anything. However, he did spot movement even as two of the four surviving soldiers took up a position immediately outside the window and fired into the farmhouse.

A sudden flash of blue from inside the farmhouse gave away Lara's location and Han saw one of the soldiers at the window twist around for no apparent reason at the moment he fired his weapon, the round striking his comrade from point-blank range and blasting through his protective vest. Then, before the soldier could recover from being assailed by the Force Han watched as Lara thrust the tip of her lightsaber through his chest and he winced. Han was just considering ordering the rest of his men to open fire on the house despite there still being two more of his men down there when he heard a dull roar from the distance.

"What the kriff was that?" another of his men asked.

"I don't know." Han replied, "But I think it came from the construction site."

The gigantic reptilian creature roared as the security detail that protected the members of the Founding Families opened fire. Like the troops attacking the farmhouse where Dag was sheltering Lara these individuals were highly trained employees of Shill Security. But unlike those troops equipped for front line combat these carried only lightweight and concealable weapons that did not appear to even penetrate the thick purple hide of the beast.

People screamed as they fled and the members of the Narthis and Torin families hurriedly gathered their young children close to them.

Most of the crowd simply ran for where their vehicles were parked in an area close by. Unfortunately as they all tried to flee at the same time few were willing to let anyone else get away ahead of them and almost right away the collisions began. Speeders and ground cars struck both other vehicles and those beings still on foot and the panic became more intense.

"Josh where are you?" Kayza yelled into her PTP link, "We need immediate evacuation."

"Why? What's going on down there?" Josh asked in reply.

"There was something under the ground." Kayza said, "We must have woken it up. Its-" and then there was a

sudden loud screeching joined by screams of agony as the beast exhaled and produced a jet of flame from its mouth that engulfed several of the security personnel who had unwisely moved closer in the hope that it would give them a better chance of injuring it along with one foolhardy reporter seeking a better image. Moving forwards with surprising speed for a creature of such size the creature then lashed out with several of the tentacles that ran along its sides and another guard was thrown off his feet.

"Kayza," Josh said, and she looked back at her PTP link, "I've ordered the advance units to divert to your location. That's a dozen squads and transports, it should be enough to get you all out of there."

"What about you?" Kayza asked.

"I want the Jedi." Josh replied, "I want them before Han can get them."

6.

Hunched over the speeder bike Cal raced back towards the farmhouse, hoping that he would be in time to escape with Lara before the Founding Families sprung their trap. However, the sounds of gunfire in the distance suggested that he was too late. Then the gunfire came to an abrupt halt just as Cal crossed the last rise before the farmhouse. Much to his concern he saw the outbuilding where the speeder bike had been stored had been reduced to rubble while the main farmhouse was clearly damaged, with windows shot out and the front door smashed open. Even without his Jedi senses Cal could make out a group of men on a hillside beyond the farmhouse withdrawing and again this worried Cal. But as he drew closer to the farmhouse Cal felt a familiar presence in the Force. Lara was alive.

Cal brought the speeder bike to a halt outside the farmhouse and leapt from it, drawing and igniting his lightsaber before his feet hit the ground.

"Lara!" he called out as he rushed into the house.

"Call!" Lara shouted and she burst out of the kitchen, her lightsaber still in her hand, "What's going on?"

"The founding Families know we're here." He said, "The Druds have brought a force from Crassis Major and they've hired some mercenaries from Shill Security as well."

"Well that explains these guys." Dag added as he emerged from the kitchen as well, Ghost by his side, "RAPs aren't military issue anywhere near here and those bodies aren't in defence force uniforms."

"Some of Han Shill's hired killers then." Lara said.

"Looks that way." Cal said and he shut off his lightsaber and walked over to the window where just outside one of the soldiers lay dead, impaled by Lara's lightsaber. Climbing through he plucked the visor from his face, "This may come in useful." He said, holding up the device.

"Cal there's something else going on isn't there? Lara asked, "I can sense it. It feels – well evil."

"I know. That may be my fault." Cal said and he produced the talisman.

"You found it? Where was it?" Lara asked.

"One of those guys with Keera and Sial at the cantina had it. He must have picked it up when I dropped it. I think it's some sort of transmitter. When I gripped it tightly I felt something, a word. Awake."

"That doesn't sound good." Dag said.

"No it doesn't." Cal agreed, "So Lara and I are going to head over to the construction site where we found this and see what's going on."

"Lead the way." Dag told him.

The trio of platoon transports made a low pass over the construction site and the monstrous creature terrorising the civilians below looked up at them and roared briefly before exhaling a second blast of flame into the sky. Surprised by this unexpected means of attack the three pilots broke their formation and scattered, all coming away unscathed.

One of the transports set down, hatches popping open to disgorge the force of men it carried. But the pilot had not witnessed the ability of the creature to move quickly. If he had then he would have picked a spot much further away from it to land. Roaring, the beast charged, seeing the transport as the largest and thus most significant threat to it. Bravely the soldiers carried by the vehicle held their ground, expecting their military issue weapons to be adequate in brining down their target. But although the volley of pulse wave blasts battered the oncoming creature they did nothing to slow it down and it was soon right on top of them. Men screamed as they attempted to get out of the way only to be trampled underfoot moments before there was an almighty 'Crash!' The platoon transport was flipped over by the force of the impact as the creature ran right into the side of it before turning back to face the surviving soldiers. Having seen just how ineffectual their weapons were even at close range these men turned and fled.

"So much for our evacuation." Corva said, looking at Kayza as they hid behind one of the construction vehicles.

"Having trouble?" a voice suddenly asked from behind the closely packed group and they looked around to see Han Shill approaching at the head of a group of well-armed troops.

"Han." Heddren called out, "Got anything to take out that?" and he pointed to the rampaging creature.

Han stared for a moment before he spoke.

"Depends. What the hell is it?"

"Beats me." Heddren replied.

"Well let's see what it thinks to an anti-armour missile shall we?" Han said and he looked at one of his men, a soldier that carried a tube shaped weapon on his back in addition to his rifle.

The man nodded and rushed to the front of the construction vehicle, setting down his rifle and taking the tube from his back before lining it up on the creature.

"Clear behind!" he yelled before firing the missile. The weapon streaked towards its target, guided by the firer by means of a tiny dot projected onto the creature's body. Exploding on impact, the missile produced a cloud of smoke and flame that briefly obscured the creature, if not its roar of pain. However, when the smoke cleared the creature was now looking around towards the construction vehicle and it roared again before charging.

"Han you fool! It's coming right for us!" Trent yelled before he and his wife grabbed hold of their children and ran.

"Cal what the kriff is that thing?" Lara asked as they watched the rampaging creature, "Its bigger than a rancor."

"I don't believe it." Cal said, "An actual Sith leviathan."

"A what"? Lara asked.

"Don't they teach you anything in the jedi temple nowadays young lady?" Dag asked and Lara looked at Cal and smiled.

"Ask him. He's my teacher." She said.

"Leviathans are the product of Sith sorcery." Cal explained, "The usual mix of genetic engineering and manipulation of the Dark Side."

"And they're nearly impossible to kill without calling in a major air, artillery or orbital strike." Dag added.

"The talisman must have been the activation key." Cal then said.

"So what do we do?" Lara asked.

"We may be fugitives but we're still jedi." Cal replied, "So we go and help those people down there."

Lara turned her attention to the beings trying their best to escape the leviathan's rampage and she noticed amongst them not only several major members of the Founding Families but also men wearing the same clothing as the soldiers who had attacked her and Dag at the farmhouse.

"There are some bad people down there Cal." She said, "Do they deserve our help?"

"Maybe not." Cal replied, "But there are innocents there as well and they do." And with that he leapt out of hiding and ran towards the leviathan, igniting his lightsaber.

"Over there sir! A jedi!" one of Han's men snapped and as Han looked around he not only saw Cal rushing towards the leviathan but he also saw his man taking aim.

"No you idiot! Han yelled, shoving the soldier to spoil his aim, "Let him kill that thing first. Then kill him."

"Cal wait!" Lara shouted before breaking cover and running after Cal, her lightsaber active as well. Behind her Dag limped along, holding his rifle up and pointing it at the leviathan though holding his fire for now.

Ghost meanwhile initially ran alongside his master before overtaking first him and then Lara as well.

"Ghost come back!" Dag shouted, but the dog ran on.

"Cal watch out for-" Lara shouted, hoping to warn her brother about Ghost just in case he was able to do anything about the animal, but she stopped shouting and came to a rapid halt when she saw Cal suddenly drop to his knees and shut off his lightsaber.

Dropping his weapon, Cal placed his hands against the sides of his head and winced.

"Cal no!" Lara screamed as she saw the leviathan charging headlong towards him.

Meanwhile all that Cal could concentrate on was the screaming in his head. Whether these were the screams of long dead victims of the Sith construct or maybe those sacrificed to create it he did not know. But whatever their source they were overpowering. Suddenly he became aware of Ghost beside him, jumping up and down and barking at the leviathan in defiance.

"Good dog." Cal said as he struggled to throw off the disorientation and he looked for his lightsaber. He saw it just a few metres away, beyond his physical reach and he tried to summon it to his grasp through the Force. However, the continued disruption caused by the leviathan prevented this and Cal instead was forced to dash forwards and retrieve it in person. Looking up Cal then saw the leviathan towering over him.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." He said to himself. But then the leviathan just stopped.

From inside his robes Cal felt an unusual tingling and he reached in and took out the talisman and he saw that several of the jewels set into its design were now glowing with an eerie light.

"What's going on?" Del Karn asked as the members of the Founding Families watched the leviathan standing motionless in front of Cal.

"Looks like he's holding something." Han said as he studied the scene through his magnifiers.
"Well what are you waiting for?" Calleen Narthis snapped, "Shoot him!"
Han frowned and looked at her.
"If we shoot him now then whatever he's doing to keep that thing under control will cease." He pointed out.
"Well what about them?" Calleen asked and she pointed to where Lara and Dag were approaching Cal.
Han nodded.
"Shoot the old guy." He ordered.

The farmhouse itself was just a burning ruin now as Josh surveyed it.
"Well? Report corporal." He said to the soldier who approached him from the ruin.
"Doesn't look like there was anyone inside when we hit it general." The corporal replied, "The only bodies look like they're from Shill Security."
Josh frowned.
"Look sir! Tracks!" another soldier yelled out and Josh looked towards him.
"The tracks lead off in this direction sir." The soldier continued.
"Towards the construction site." Josh said to himself. Then in a raised voice he called out, "Everyone back on the transports! We're moving out!"

Lara heard the burst of gunfire and dropped into a crouch as the projectiles flew past her. Then she heard the sound of something heavy hitting the ground and she looked around to see Dag lying face down.
"No!" she yelled and she scrabbled towards him, rolling him over onto his back.
Two shots had struck Dag, one striking his neck and the other entering his torso just below his ribs and he stared up at Lara, coughing up blood.
"Cal come quick!" she shouted as she pressed her hands over Dag's wounds.
"Its no good young lady." He gasped, more blood coming from his mouth, "Just make sure you get out of here."
Seeing Lara trying to treat Dag Cal got up and backed way from the leviathan, holding up the talisman in plain sight. The Sith creature advanced slowly, maintaining a steady distance between it and the talisman and this had the effect of putting it between the jedi and the forces of the Founding Families. Lara winced as it approached, the screams in the Force flooding her senses.
"Lara concentrate!" Cal said, "You can ignore this." And he grasped her hand.
Lara looked around at her brother as she pressed down on Dag's wounds again.
"I don't know what to do." She said, "I can't save him."
"You'll never save everyone." Dag croaked, "Now go do your duty and save those other people." Then he tilted his head towards Cal and pointed a quivering hand towards Ghost, "You said you always wanted a dog." He began and then both Cal and Lara felt the last of his life disappear.
"We need to go." Cal said.
"What about that thing?" Lara asked, looking around at the still stationary leviathan.
"It looks like this talisman is more than just an activation trigger." Cal replied, studying the talisman in his hand, "I'd say it was some sort of control device as well."
"So you can give it orders?"
"No. And I don't think that trying to figure out how this thing works is a good idea. Messing about with Sith artefacts is a good way to end up becoming one of them."
"Then what do we do Cal?"
Cal paused and then a smile appeared on his face.
"I've got an idea." He said, "Just follow me." And he got up.
"Where are we going?" Lara asked.
"Back to the ship." Cal replied, "Trust me, I know what I'm doing."
"I'm not so sure." Lara said.

"Squad one form up and get ready to move around that thing." Han ordered his men, "I want you ready to take out the jedi as soon as they've dealt with it."
"Oh yeah? Well it doesn't look like they're dealing with it at all." Hiran said as he peered around the stack of pipes he was using for cover, "It looks more like they're taking it with them."
"What do you mean son?" Millel asked as she too looked over the pipes.
"Well its just that it looks kind of like they're leaving and the beast seems to be going with them." Hiran answered, "Maybe that dog is herding it."

"Then I'll take my men and-" Han began.

"No." Trent interrupted him.

"What? Who are you to give me orders?" Han demanded.

"I'm Trent Narthis of the Narthis family. We founded this sector and I'm telling you to stay put." Trent replied sternly, "Remember your place Mister Shill, you exist only to protect and make sure there is balance between the Families. And I'm ordering you and your men to stay put. You're needed here."

"Trent what on Coruscant are you thinking?" Del asked. "the jedi-"

"The jedi can wait." Trent interrupted, "Right now our priority has to be getting out of here in one piece. All of us."

"He's right." Kayza added, calling out from behind a nearby shipping container, "Besides, think of the publicity in staying here to protect all those innocent civilians from the jedi and their pet monster."

"You know I think that sounds like a good idea." Millel said.

"I have the jedi in sight now general." The pilot of one of the two remaining platoon carriers reported, "They seem to be leading the beast away from the construction site. I've spotted a delaya-class vessel on the ground nearby, it could be theirs."

"I'm there now." Josh responded, "We're going to need you back here to help with the evacuation of the civilians. Break off and return."

"But sir I can-"

"Do it pilot." Josh ordered, "If the jedi are controlling that thing then there's no telling what it will do if we break that control. We don't have time to bring in heavier firepower to deal with it. Let them go."

The pilot sighed, certain that with just a single run he could have taken out both Cal and Lara. But his orders were to withdraw and so that was exactly what he did.

Lara looked up to see the shapes of the two aircraft getting further away.

"Looks like they're leaving." She said.

"Good." Cal said, keeping a careful eye on the leviathan that was still following him as if it were a loyal dog like Ghost.

"So what do we do with this thing now that there's no one around?" Lara asked.

"Just get it to keep following us." Cal said, "Over that." And he looked around at the bridge that lay between the jedi and their ship, "Think that's strong enough to hold the weight of this thing?"

"Don't be stupid. It'll fall apart as soon as - Oh." Lara replied and she smiled.

"Take Ghost and get across to the far side. I'll follow you."

Lara nodded and patted Ghost.

"Come on boy." she said and as she set off across the bridge the dog bounded after her. Reaching the other side Lara turned and called out, "Okay we're across!" she shouted.

"Good." Cal replied as he stood still at the other end of the bridge, staring up at the leviathan as it looked back down at him and the talisman. He took three deep breaths in a row, "Okay Cal, you can do this." He said to himself and then he set off running across the bridge.

Behind him the leviathan charged forwards as well and Cal felt the bridge shake as its feet pounded against it. There was a sudden 'Snap!' as one of the supporting cables broke and Cal ducked to avoid the loose end as it whipped through the air above his head.

"Faster Cal!" Lara yelled, but at that moment the bridge gave way.

The bridge broke into two parts, each one swinging down to the sides of the gorge. On the half nearest Lara Cal reached out and grabbed hold of the safety rail that still ran along the edge of the bridge and he wrapped his arms around it. Behind him the leviathan let out a shriek as it plummeted downwards into the gorge, its legs and tentacles flailing helplessly.

With a 'Crash' the remains of the bridge slammed into the side of the gorge and hung there, its remaining support cables groaning under the strain.

"Cal! Cal are you okay?" Lara yelled as she peered over the edge of the gorge and looked down.

"Fine I think." Cal replied and he looked down to where the leviathan lay dead at the bottom of the gorge below, "Better than that anyway." He added. Then he looked up, "Go warm up the ship." He called out, "We'll be leaving just as soon as I can climb up there."