

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



III-VI: FAILURE

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...

FAILURE

WHAT LOOKS LIKE A MESSAGE FROM GAYAL KARN TURNS OUT TO BE FROM A SENIOR MEMBER OF ONE OF THE FOUNDING FAMILIES AND WHEN THE UDRAS ARRIVE FOR MEETING THEY ARE MADE A MOST UNEXPECTED OFFER. BUT THE FOUNDING FAMILIES ARE WILLING TO GO TO EXTREME LENGTHS TO KEEP THEIR SECRETS, EVEN IF THAT MEANS TURNING ON ONE OF THEIR OWN...

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.html>

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1 .

Lorna Fayl sat alone in her study going over the latest reports gathered by the sources available to the Founding Families. The house was quiet at this time of night, the security staff were concentrated around the perimeter, most of the servants had gone home and the only family she had was her daughter Nissel who had arranged to go out that evening.

However, Lorna still found herself disturbed by a knock at the door.

"Enter." She called out, frowning at the interruption.

"Mom it's just me." Nissel said as she appeared in the doorway, "I was just on my way out."

"Fine." Lorna replied. Then she looked up from the computer screen and looked directly at Nissel, "Don't forget now, I know that Hiran and Jaynie Drud are both on Crassis Major at the moment and I-

"Oh give it a break mom." Nissel interrupted, "I've heard all this before."

"Their family stole what was rightfully ours Nissel."

"Some ancestor maybe. What our own didn't throw away on gambling and drink. But don't I know you don't want me hanging around with them and if it'll keep you happy I won't. Now I'm going so I'll see you tomorrow." Nissel said and she turned around and closed the door behind her. As she walked towards the front door she took out her point-to-point communicator and activated, selected a pre-programmed target frequency from its memory.

"Hello?" a male voice said a moment later and Nissel smiled.

"Hi Hiran, I'm on my way now." She said.

"Your mom give you any trouble?" Hiran Drud asked.

"Only the usual. Nothing I can't handle. Tell Jaynie I'll be with you in half an hour." And Nissel shut off the device.

Back in her study Lorna continued to examine her files. Even these newer additions added little if anything to the grand scheme of things. Hints and rumours about ancient artefacts unearthed by accident or discovered in some dust covered ruin, but no concrete information on how to combine any of what the Founding Families knew into something that would allow them, or at least one of them to claim the ultimate prize and gain control of the power it promised.

The Founding Families, the Crassisises, the Druds, the Karns, the Narthises, the Runns, the Torins and of course the Fayls themselves were the descendants of the original survey team that had charted the Narthis Sector for the Republic three hundred years earlier. What they had found promised far more wealth and power than the Republic offered and so since then the Families had kept their discoveries hidden and spared no effort in searching for a way to exploit their discovery. In theory they were all equal partners in the effort but in practice they often acted alone, knowing that whoever was the first to unlock the secrets they sought would be the one to claim ultimate power. Wealth was the determining factor in the respect the Families had for one another and right now the Fayls, despite having billions of credits to their name still had the least amount of this. What Lorna needed was something to set her family apart from the others in another way.

The key was Force sensitivity.

The ancient Sith who had been chased to this region of space by a Republic battle group had established a fledgling empire that had burned itself out in civil war in only a few years but their legacy remained.

Unfortunately while it was possible for ordinary people to make use of some Sith devices the long dead sorcerers had always designed their most powerful creations to be used only by themselves so until one of the Founding Families could produce a member who was Force sensitive or find a way to mimic this they would be unable to claim the power they all sought. Lorna herself had attempted to circumvent this by attempting to induce Force sensitivity artificially in an individual by means of massive transfusions of midi-chlorians, the microscopic organisms they were key to manipulation of the Force. But the attempt had been a dismal and expensive failure. The test subject had been able to control the Force only for short periods and the shock to his system had driven him insane. In the end a large force of jedi had come to the sector to deal with him and Lorna had been heavily criticised by the other Families.

Tired of reading reports that said nothing more than she had already read in so many other documents, Lorna switched to reading about something else instead. The two jedi assigned to the Narthis Sector had recently gone rogue. One of them had been accused of murdering another jedi, falsely Lorna knew since she had seen the report detailing how an assassin linked to the Founding Families had really committed the crime. The other, the accused jedi padawan's instructor and as it happened older brother had broken his sister out of custody and the pair had fled. They had recently been seen in both the Phillos system where

the Karn family were conducting salvage operations and in the nearby Brena system where they had prevented the Founding Families from obtaining a Sith holocron. The current opinion amongst the Republic authorities and the Founding Families was that they were hiding out somewhere in the Levik Cluster, a dense grouping of stars that was home to several outlaw groups. Concerned at the problems these two could cause the Founding Families were also attempting to eliminate them as well. But it suddenly occurred to Lorna that they could be of use. If she could convince either of them, or better yet both of them to serve her then the Fayl family would be catapulted from a position of weakness to one of pre-eminence amongst the others. Of course convincing the Jedi to work for her could be difficult, but Lorna considered that since she only really needed one of them then their own family connection could be exploited by threatening one to get the other to co-operate.

Of course, this now meant that Lorna needed to come up with a way of luring the Jedi out of hiding to meet with her.

"Off on holiday then?" Han Shill asked as he personally oversaw the unit of troops loading their gear onto the Fayl family transport.

"I don't see how that's your business." Lorna replied without bothering to look at him.

"Oh then I must be mistaken." Han said, "Because I thought that these were my men you are taking with you."

"They're just a close protection squad Han. It's not like I'm about to try and start a war somewhere."

"Really?" Han said as he saw a case of grenades being loaded, "Because you're taking enough firepower to start one. Now I'm asking you nicely Lorna. What are you up to?"

Lorna smiled and looked at Han.

"Why Han, I'm just going fishing that's all."

"Big fish I take it?"

"As big as they come Han. As big as they come."

Han then watched as Lorna herself boarded the transport and waited while it launched. As it rose into the sky he produced his PTP link and activated it.

"Have my personal team put on standby." He ordered, "Lorna's up to something and I want to be there to make certain it doesn't screw everything up for us all."

Cal Udra, fugitive Jedi knight could hear the sound of lightsabers in action as he checked data files and he looked up to see his younger sister Lara sparring with a second figure, a diminutive green being who lived as a hermit for two centuries on the abandoned space station the Udras now called home. Cal and Lara had recently encountered a member of the Jedi shadows, the secretive group within the Jedi Order pledged to root out all traces of the Dark Side and its followers and destroy them. Unfortunately from the point of view of the order this now included Cal and Lara and after duelling with the shadow Lara had requested further instruction in the art of lightsaber combat.

Cal went back to his research. He spent most of his free time combing through media reports concerning any events that made any mention of any members of the Founding Families. Part of his motivation for this was intelligence gathering, he was well aware that the Founding Families were gathering information and artefacts related to the Sith but in addition he was desperately hunting for information on one member in particular. Gayal Karn. Gayal had been with Lara at the time she had been framed for murder and Cal believed that her testimony would be able to clear his sister, but there was a more personal reason as well. Cal and Gayal had been romantically involved and he was keen to be reunited with her.

A squeal from Lara made Cal turn his head again and he saw his sister now lying flat on her back with Tyshon standing triumphantly on her stomach.

"Enough for now that is." Tyshon said as he shut off his lightsaber, "Hungry I am after so many victories."

"There's food ready." Cal called out and he got up to go and fetch it.

As Lara got into a sitting position she waved to the dog that had been lay nearby, watching her mock duels with Tyshon. The animal was a fairly large dog with a long reminiscent of the wolves the species was descended from and this particular breed was popular with military and law enforcement groups. This particular example had been a pet that its previous owner gave to the Jedi just before his death however.

"Come here Ghost." She said and the dog wandered over and sat beside her.

"Stop hogging my dog." Cal said as he carried two plates of food towards his sister.

"He's mine as well." She replied, "And he loves me. Don't you boy?" and she stroked the dog's head.

Cal sighed and set down a plate of food in front of Ghost and patted his head.

"Good dog." He said. Then he set the other plate down on the floor in front of his sister and patted her on the head in the same way, "Good Lara." He said as she looked up and frowned at him.

Picking up the plate and carrying it to the nearby table Lara sat down and began to eat.
"So have you found out any interesting gossip?" she asked Cal as he brought his own meal to the table.
"Its all balls." Cal replied and both Lara and Tyshon stared at him, "You know, charity balls. Dancing and all that nonsense." He added and the other two jedi both nodded.
"I like dancing." Lara said, "I wish we could go."
"I don't think there are any lubricated poles involved and the dancers keep their clothes on." Cal said and Lara scowled at him.
"I am not a stripper Cal!" she snapped and she flicked some of her food at him.
Cal dodged and a sudden 'Ping' from the computer terminal alerted Cal to another data file being acquired by the search program he had set up.
"Another load of balls?" Lara asked as Cal checked it.
"No." he replied, frowning and then his frown turned into a smile, "I think it's a message from Gayal."
"You're kidding." Lara said, "But how would she know where to send it?"
"It's a message on a public bulletin board." Cal answered and he rotated the screen so that Lara could see it. Sure enough it showed a simple message taken from a data node used for leaving random messages.
+++I'm back.+++
+++Gayal.+++
"Is that it?" Lara asked.
"Not much to go on it is." Tyshon added, "Caution I advise."
"Oh I'll be careful." Cal replied, "But I think it deserves investigating."
"So where is she? Or rather where was the message posted?" Lara asked.
"The node looks like the Ralta one." Cal replied.
"Ralta? Planet of the poison pollen?" Lara said I reference to the toxic pollen in the planet's atmosphere.
"That's it." Cal said, "So we'll have to leave Ghost here." And he looked at Tyshon, "Is that okay with you?"
"Acceptable it will be." Tyshon said, "Like me best he does anyway." And both Cal and Lara frowned.

2.

The Udras had two fast deleya-class couriers available to them. One of them, the *Bright Hope* was the vessel issued to them by the Jedi Order when they had been assigned to the sector. Unfortunately that vessel could be easily traced to them and so by taking the second ship, one captured from individuals plundering a nearby star system the Udras were able to risk travelling through the central systems of the Narthis Sector without risking discovery and cutting several days off their travel time than if they had stuck to back routes around the sector's edge.

From space the planet Ralta looked inviting to humans, with lush green rain forests covering much of the landmass. But the poisonous pollen released by the plant life in these jungles made this appearance deceptive. However, the pollen was present only at low levels in the atmosphere and so by building settlements around giant columns that kept them well above this level it was possible to maintain a presence here to exploit the natural resources of the world.

"Any idea which tower she'll be in?" Lara asked as soon as the ship dropped out of hyperspace and Ralta appeared through the cockpit canopy ahead of it.

"I can't identify individual terminal addresses with my set up on Dorn Station." Cal replied, "And there isn't exactly a main starport to use as reference, all the towers have full landing facilities."

"So how do you intend to find her?" Lara asked.

"Well first I'll see if anyone can pinpoint the terminal used to place that message." Cal replied.

"And if that fails?"

"Then I'll just place a message of my own telling her where she can meet us."

Piloting the ship towards Ralta Cal turned and directed it towards the first beacon they came across. Like all of the cities on Ralta this one consisted of a massive metal framework tower that extended more than a kilometre into the air and in the upper third there were numerous disk shaped modules that were stuck around it, creating an appearance of a strange, gigantic metal tree. Here and there cables emerged from inside the modules that led off into the distance, these were cable car lines and they provided an alternative to aircraft for travel between cities. Air travel remained common though and the tops of most of the circular modules had been set up to act as landing strips for both atmospheric vehicles and small to medium sized starships like the deleya-class vessel the Jedi possessed.

Cal set the ship down on the uppermost module and he and Lara headed for its access ramp.

"Remember we've been here before." Cal said, "Not to this particular tower but the planet is sparsely populated. There's a chance people will remember us."

"Yeah, especially since we left a load of bodies behind us." Lara commented, "Not even including that guy who jumped off the balcony."

"Just try not to attract attention." Cal said and he pulled up the hood of his cloak as the access ramp began to open.

"At least your hair's not green any more." Lara muttered as she did the same, hiding her features under the hood.

The wind at this altitude was quiet strong and as Cal and Lara headed for the turbolifts leading into the module they were both forced to keep hold of their hoods to prevent them blowing off. Once inside however, they let go of their hoods but kept them up all the same. An information desk was located nearby, staffed by a pair of droids.

"Excuse me." Cal said and he slipped a datapad from his pocket and called up a copy of the message that had brought them to Ralta, "Can you tell me where this message came from exactly?"

"I'm sorry sir." The droid replied, "I do not carry that sort of information. I can refer your request to maintenance if you wish."

"No that's fine." Cal said, "I'll ask around myself."

"As you wish sir." The droid said and as Cal walked away it turned its attention to the next being in the queue without a second thought.

"So what now?" Lara asked.

"Now we find a room to stay in, send a reply and see who turns up." Cal said.

"It better be a cheap room." Lara commented, "Just not as cheap as our old place on Aurek Station okay."

"At least that was free of rats." Cal replied. "Only because they all found somewhere nicer to live."

+++Gayal.+++

+++Tower 143. Module mern. Level 6 lounge.+++

+++23:00 local.+++

+++Confirm.+++

A smile spread across Lorna's face as she read the message posted on the same board as the one she had planted and she checked the location of the tower referred to in the message before replying.

+++Can't do 23:00.+++

+++01:40 soonest.+++

+++Confirm.+++

+++Gayal.+++

And then she leant back and waited. As it happened she did not have to wait for long.

+++Gayal.+++

+++Confirmed. 01:40.+++

+++See you then.+++

In quarters considerably less well furnished than the ones Lorna had acquired for herself Cal leant back in his seat briefly and then quickly lent forwards again as he felt it wobble.

"We're on." He said to Lara, "One forty tomorrow morning."

"Good job we've not adjusted to the local time yet then." She replied, "That's the middle of the afternoon to us."

"Yes, now lets get moving." Cal said as he shut off the computer and checked his lightsaber as he stood up.

"Where are we going?" Lara asked.

"To the lounge on level six." Cal replied and a confused look appeared on Lara's face.

"Why? The meeting's not for hours yet." She asked.

"Because if it's a trap then I want to be the first one there to spring it." Cal told her.

With their hoods up to conceal their identities Cal and Lara went to the nearby public lounge. The towers of Ralta contained many places such as these. They were located at the edges of the modules and offered wide views over the jungle. Some, such as this one that were guaranteed to be far above the level of pollen infiltration featured open air balconies in addition to the sealed viewing areas. So that anyone making use of the lounge area would not have to travel far for necessities an assortment of businesses dealing in food and drink for many different species.

It was early evening by local time and the lounge contained several couples and small groups of beings indulging in their evening meal while enjoying the view.

"I don't recognise anyone here." Lara said softly as they made their way through the lounge.

"Its still early." Cal replied, "Now let's sit over here for a while." And he pointed to a table close to the balcony but still located inside the module itself.

"We' be less noticeable over there." Lara replied and she indicated the tables towards the back of the lounge, those furthest from the balcony.

"People come for the view Lara." Cal said, "If we sit right the way back there when there are better tables available we'll do nothing but call attention to ourselves."

They sat at the table and both looked around subtly to see if any of the others present had reacted. But it appeared that if anyone had noticed the jedi then they weren't displaying any interest.

"So now what?" Lara asked, "Do we just sit here and wait?"

"For now yes." Cal replied, "Enjoy the view and open your mind to everyone's feelings. We're looking for anyone coming here thinking of violence."

"And what if we sense that?" Lara asked.

"Then we leave." Cal replied, "I'd rather not risk getting into a fight in a public place. If necessary we go outside."

"Outside?" Lara asked, "But there's no way off the balcony but down."

"Didn't you bring your syntherope dispenser with you?" Cal asked in return and beneath her hood Lara shook her head.

"No I didn't."

"Then we'll just have to make do with only mine." Cal said, "We'll throw a line up to the top of the module and climb up to the landing strip."

"Then we just fly away right?" Lara said, "That's another reason why you sat us here isn't it? So we don't get cut off from our escape route?"

"Exactly. Plus the view's better and we may as well take it in while we can."

As the light continued to fade the number of beings in the lounge started to dwindle. There was a brief upsurge at around dusk as several small groups, couples mainly, came to enjoy the sunset itself. But as darkness fell properly the bars and cafes all closed and Cal and Lara found themselves alone in the lounge, the lights now lowered to conserve power.

Lara reached for her hood.

"Leave it." Cal said, "No point taking risks." And Lara's hand returned to her side.

"I wish I'd bought something to eat before that last store closed." She said and Cal slid a foil packed ration bar across the table.

"Be warned." He said, "I think its war surplus. From one of Xim the Despot's campaigns."

Lara bit into the bar and Cal felt her disgust.

"I think it was out of date then as well." She said, continuing to eat the bar nonetheless. Then she noticed Cal straighten up.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

"We're not alone." Cal said, staring past her.

Slowly Lara looked around and she saw a figure cloaked and hooded in the same way as she and Cal were standing in the doorway to the lounge. The height and build were what the jedi expected for Gayal Karn and as the figure began to move towards them it moved as a human would.

Cal took a deep breath and reached out through the Force.

"Its not her." He whispered, "Its not Gayal." And he slid his lightsaber from beneath his cloak but kept it hidden below the table still.

"How can you tell?" Lara asked.

"Use the Force Lara. What do we know about Gayal?"

"She's a sadistic nut job?"

Beneath his hood Cal frowned.

"Seriously." He said.

"Seriously she's a sadistic nut job. I still don't know what you see in her."

"She's Force sensitive." Cal said, "And whoever this is they aren't."

"I don't think they're alone either Cal." Lara said and Cal realised that she was right, standing just outside the lounge at several of the exits where they could not be seen were several more beings.

The hooded figure now stood beside the table, its head tilted down to look at the two jedi.

"Can we help you?" Cal asked.

"You must be Cal." A woman's voice replied and then the figure looked at Lara, "Which makes you Lara. I have an offer for you both." And the figure pulled out a chair and sat down.

"You seem to have us at a disadvantage." Cal said, "Who are you?"

"I am the one who sent the messages to you Cal. I apologise for giving you false hope of finding Gayal Karn, but I needed a way of meeting you face to face. Let me introduce myself though." And then she lowered her hood, "I am Lorna Fayl. We've met before, regarding an insurance issue I believe."

Cal and Lara both leapt up from their seats and stepped away from the table. Lorna noticed Cal's, lightsaber and held up her hands.

"Don't!" she snapped, "I am unarmed but my associates are not." And both Cal and Lara saw not only the figures now standing in the doorways but also the clusters of tiny glowing red dots on their own chests from the targeting devices mounted on the weapons now pointed at them. "Please I mean you no harm, either of you. Sit down again and I will explain why I went to the trouble of setting up this meeting. But I must warn you, I have not told my guards who you are. If they find out they will kill you."

"They'll try you mean." Lara commented.

"Perhaps." Lorna replied, "But it would only take one lucky shot to bring one of you down."

Cal tucked his lightsaber back into his sleeve and sat back down.

"Okay. Talk." He said.

"You are outcasts Cal. Your own government and your own order consider you fugitives and you are forced to live in some hovel somewhere far from civilisation. I can change that."

"How?" Lara asked.

"Easy." Lorna answered her, "Come and work for me."

"She may not be Gayal, but she is a sadistic nut job." Lara commented, glancing at Cal.

"Let's just hear her out." Cal said, "I've sat here bored out of my mind for hours. I could do with a laugh."

Cal and Lara sat down and stared at Lorna in silence as they waited for her to explain herself.

"I can provide you with accommodation as well as a generous allowance on any world in the sector." Lorna said, "Additionally I will maintain your ship for you."

"Serviced a lot of hyperdrives have you then?" Lara commented and for a moment there was a brief flare of emotion from Lorna.

"That's all very interesting Miss Fayl." Cal said, leaning forwards, "But it would be useful to know exactly what you expect us to do in exchange for all of this."

Lorna smiled.

"I'm sure you are aware that all of the Founding Families have been gathering information regarding the history of this sector before the Republic settled it." Lorna said, "Well I can tell you that this is the continuation of work begun during the survey itself. Our ancestors saw the potential for greatness out here far from the Core Worlds and we have spent three hundred years trying to achieve that."

"By creating a new Sith Empire?" Cal asked.

"No of course not. But we would make use of their discoveries." Lorna said.

"Those discoveries cost tens of millions of lives over thousands of years." Cal pointed out.

"And that is a tragedy Cal." Lorna agreed, "But those beings are dead and simply leaving the knowledge of the Sith to rot and be forgotten will not bring any of them back. If we can learn from it and—"

"You don't learn anything from studying the Sith." Lara interrupted, "You just get corrupted by what you study."

"Its like the uncertainty principle in reverse." Cal added, "Observing it changes you."

"Oh that's so melodramatic." Lorna said, "Look at me. Am I a monster?"

"Yes." Lara replied quickly.

"Then why sit there talking to me? Use your weapon and strike me down." Lorna said. Then when neither Cal nor Lara reacted she added, "Well what are you waiting for? Is the possibility of my guards killing you in revenge for my death holding you back perhaps? I thought that Jedi were supposed to be willing to sacrifice themselves. Oh but you're not exactly Jedi any more are you? Either of you."

"Miss Fayl." Cal said, "You still haven't given us a good reason why we should turn our backs on our tradition. Despite our current status with the Jedi Order we still operate according to its laws."

"How about because if you do a deal with me you will radically shift the balance of power between the Founding Families. You have a deeper understanding of the Force than any of us possibly could have and it will be you that determines what use the knowledge we recover will be put to. Join me and we can rule this sector."

"Rule?" Lara commented.

"Yes of course." Lorna answered her, "Regardless of how beneficially it may be used the Republic and Jedi Order will never allow us to make use of any Sith lore. The only way we can complete our goal is to secede from the Republic and establish an independent state. One founded in the name of science and reason, not the ancient superstition and mistrust that drives the Jedi Order."

Cal and Lara remained silent, looking at one another.

"Of course I can't expect you to make such an important decision right away." Lorna said, "Come with me and I'll show you some of what you can expect as agents of my family." And she got her feet, "Well? Are you coming or not?"

"What about Gayal?" Cal asked suddenly.

"I'm not sure I understand." Lorna replied.

"I mean what happened to her?" Cal said.

"I have no idea." Lorna told him, "The Karns sent her away. That's as much as I know. Of course I could always investigate if it were to my advantage."

"If it lured Cal into your service you mean?" Lara asked.

"Well I have no need of finding out where she is right now do I?" Lorna responded, "I tell you what, come with me and I'll start to ask some questions right now. Call it a sign of good faith. That and this as well." And she took out a tiny electronic credit stick and placed it on the table.

"A bribe. How quaint." Cal said.

"Take it. There are twenty thousand credits on it. I'll activate it at the same time as I ask my agents about your missing friend."

"Girlfriend." Lara corrected.

"Deal." Cal suddenly exclaimed and he reached out and snatched the credit stick from the table.

"Cal what are you doing?" Lara asked, "You can't be serious about—"

She will turn on you.

The brief warning from the Force hit Cal again but he ignored it.

"I'm agreeing to hear her out. Nothing more, not yet." Cal said, "Now are you coming too or do you want to wait in our room?"

"I'll come." Lara replied, "If only to keep you out of trouble."

“Good. Now if you’d like to follow me I have arranged quarters that I’m certain are better than those you have.”

As Lorna led the two Jedi away from the table her armed guards stepped back from the doorways and lowered their weapons. They allowed the three figures to pass unimpeded and then formed up behind them. Cal kept a wary eye on these men but he sensed no signs of any direct hostility towards him or Lara from them through the Force.

“Here we go.” Lorna said eventually as she stopped at the door of an apartment located in an area of the module that was decorated in a much finer manner than the one Cal and Lara had been able to afford. She opened the door and then stepped aside for Cal and Lara to enter, following them in but waiting just inside the door.

“Wow.” Lara said as she looked around.

The apartment consisted of a large communal area with a swimming pool located centrally while there were two levels of other rooms such as bedrooms, bathrooms and a separate kitchen. Additionally the outer wall, part of which could be opened to allow access to a private balcony was entirely transparent and offered a view of the jungle that did not include any artificial structures.

“If you’d like to wait here I’ll go and start making enquiries.” Lorna said and before she turned around and left the apartment she placed the access key on a table just inside the door. Outside in the corridor she looked at one of her guards, “Position yourselves back from the door and don’t do anything to interfere with my guests but make sure that you follow them if they try to leave.”

“Yes ma’am.” The guard replied, snapping to attention and then Lorna walked away.

One of the guards watched her leave and discretely reached for his PTP link. But rather than activate the device fully he just tapped the switch twice to produce two brief pulses on a specific frequency. Then in his earpiece he received a response.

“We’re in a cable car now. We dock at the east port in eight minutes. Be there.” Han Shill ordered him.

3.

"Cal is this what the Jedi Council means when it says the Dark Side is more seductive?" Lara called out from one of the bedrooms.

"I think there's more to it than that." He replied, "What are you doing in there anyway?"

"Getting changed. The closets in here are full of clothes in my size. I know the Founding Families are evil and all that. Plus that Lorna Fayl's got that funny thing going with her eyes where they're really pale while her hair is really dark, which is kind of creepy if you ask me but she's got great fashion sense."

"I should never have let you read those fashion magazines and why do you need to change anyway Lara? Your robes are just fine for- Oh." Cal said but he stopped when his sister appeared in a bathing suit.

"Can't go for a swim in my robes." She said, "So what do you think?"

Cal frowned.

"I think you were wearing more when you worked at the strip club." He replied.

Lara stuck her tongue out at him and then ran and dived into the pool.

Han stepped off the cable car that had brought him from the tower fifteen kilometres to the west and was followed by a group of muscular beings that although they wore civilian clothing instead of uniforms had a definite military look to them. The figure that appeared on the platform to meet him however was in uniform, it was the guard that had signalled him.

"Well?" Han asked.

"She met with two individuals Mister Shill." The guard said.

"Did you recognise either of them?" Han asked.

"No sir, I didn't see their faces. Both wore hooded cloaks that they kept up throughout the meeting and while we escorted them to the apartment Miss Fayl rented for them. But there was one thing sir."

"What?"

"Well I think that one of them was holding a lightsaber. I think they were the two fugitive jedi. Cal and Lara Udra."

Han scowled.

"We need to be certain." He said, "And I need to know what she's doing talking to them." And then he waved one of the troops he had brought with him closer. The soldier held out a small plastic case that Han took and opened, removing from it what looked like a tiny metal pin about two centimetres in length, "This is a bug." He said as he then handed it to the uniformed guard, "Its not completely undetectable, but I doubt Lorna will be checking for such devices herself. Just make sure that after you plant it that no one in your unit aside from you does either. Let me know when it's in place with a double pulse again."

"Yes sir." the guard replied and he turned on the spot before marching away.

"Your orders sir?" another of Han's disguised troops then asked.

"We'll find somewhere out of the way to use as a staging area." Han replied, "Then I want a full equipment check and everyone needs to gear up. We could be facing jedi and I don't want any chances taken."

"Yes sir." The soldier replied, smiling.

Lorna Fayl looked up only briefly from her terminal as one of her guards entered the room, blanking the screen.

"What do you want?" she asked, "I requested not to be disturbed."

"I'm sorry ma'am." The guard replied as he approached her, "But I need to know what your instructions are regarding access to your guests' quarters? Should we allow individuals to approach them or should they be kept isolated so long as they remain inside?"

Lorna frowned as she looked up.

"They don't know anyone here." She said, "So no one should be going anywhere near that apartment. Make sure that remains the case but do nothing to let my guests know you are there. Is that clear enough for you?"

"Yes ma'am." The guard replied.

"Go, now stop leaning over me and go away." Lorna said and as the guard turned to leave he brushed against her just long enough to be able to get the bug Han had given him into the weave of her clothing. As soon as the guard was gone and she was alone again Lorna reactivated the computer screen and the image of the man she was talking to re-appeared.

"What can you tell me about Gayal Karn?" she asked.

"Next to nothing I'm afraid." The man replied, "I've had people keeping tabs on the other Founding Families as best as they can but their security is rather tight."

"I know that." Lorna said, "I use the same security as them. But I'm paying you to find out where they go, not what they have for breakfast. Now what happened when Gayal Karn disappeared?"

"She did just that." The man replied, "Vanished completely, disappearing from the galaxy. I've found no record of her booking passage on any flight out of the sector, but she hasn't been seen in it for months either. And let me tell you until rather recently that young lady was very easy to find. All you had to do was follow the police sirens. Providing you got there before the Druds and Karns swept it all under the deck plates anyway."

"I'm well aware of that. Now do you know anything that I couldn't find out from my daughter without paying your law firm a thousand credits an hour?"

"Gayal wasn't the only one to disappear at that time. Heddren Drud vanished briefly as well." Lorna frowned.

"Why should I care about him? His entire family are nothing but thieves and scoundrels and—"

"Lawyers?" the man interrupted and Lorna's frown deepened.

"Go on." She said.

"Well he headed out of the sector in a privately chartered transport. No records of the destination and no direct link to his family. Then about a month later he reappeared. But he returned on a different ship. So if he left in the company of say an attractive young woman then the crew of the ship that brought him back here would have no idea about it would they? You want answers we need to go after the Druds."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure." Lorna said and she sighed, "Oh well what you've told me is a start. Hopefully it will be enough to get the ball rolling. I'm about to make a deal that will put me ahead of the others forever." And then she shut off the communications link.

"Cal what are you doing?" Lara asked as she lay by the pool and sucked a large drink she had mixed for herself from the apartment's private bar through a decorative straw.

"I'm sending a message to mom and dad." He replied from the computer terminal, "I'm telling them we're safe and well and hoping to see them again soon."

"Ooh. Tell them we have a dog now." Lara said and Cal frowned.

"I'm telling them I have a dog now." He muttered.

"Heard that." Lara called out.

It was then that there was a chiming sound from the door and Cal got up to answer it. Not knowing who may be outside he lifted the hood of his cloak to conceal his features before opening the door.

Only to be met by a figure doing exactly the same thing.

"Come on in Miss Fayl." Cal said and he stepped back to allow Lorna entry to the apartment.

"There's no need to be so formal Cal." Lorna said as she lowered her hood, "If we're going to be partners then you should call me Lorna."

"So you see us as partners then?" Cal asked, closing the door and then lowering his own hood.

"Of course I do Cal." Lorna replied as she sat down on a nearby sofa, "Without me you two are nothing but fugitives from the Republic."

"Thanks to the Founding Families' minions." Lara commented before she stuck the straw back in her mouth.

"And without you I am no better placed to exploit the ancient Sith knowledge than any of the other families."

Lorna said, ignoring Lara's remark.

"I'm still not sure that's such a bad thing." Cal replied.

"Then do it for Gayal." Lorna said, "I can help you find her Cal."

"You know where she is?" Cal asked.

"No. But my people have a lead. Trust me when I say that if we are in a position of power over the other Founding Families then you'll have no trouble in finding her."

"Tell me what you know Lorna." Can said sternly.

"All in good time Cal. Right now you need to decide if—"

"Tell me Lorna!" Cal yelled and his hand went for his lightsaber, drawing and activating the weapon with a 'snap-hiss'. Then he grabbed hold of Lorna by her hair, dragging her from the sofa as he pulled her head back and held the glowing blue blade close to her throat, "Tell me while you still have a head."

"Killing me won't help you find her Cal." Lorna gasped.

"At least it gets rid of you." Cal replied, "One family leader down and six more to go."

"Nissel would just take over from me." Lorna hissed, "And you'd have gained nothing."

"Apart from the twenty grand on the credit stick." Lara pointed out as she got up and used the Force to call her cloak and belt to her. Putting on her cloak she took her own lightsaber from her belt and then advanced on Lorna as well.

"Your guards aren't here Lorna." Cal said, "Even if you screamed for the ones waiting outside I could kill you and Lara and I would be out of the window before they even made it through the door."

"Heddren Drud left the sector at the same time she vanished." Lorna said, "He used private transport and different ships for the trip out of and back from here. That's all I have at the moment."

Sensing no signs of deception Cal snarled and shut off his lightsaber, shoving Lorna back down onto the sofa. With one of her hands rubbing her throat she looked up at Cal.

"Come to Delvad with me." She said, "I'll present you to the others as my allies and we can force them to let you join us."

"So we'd effectively become part of the Founding Families little club?" Lara asked.

"Its not the only time it's happened is it?" Cal added, "The Shills."

Lorna smiled.

"There's so much you don't know." She said, "The Shills are a special case."

Han suddenly sat upright as listening to the feed from the bug planted on Lorna he heard mention not only of Delvad but also his family name.

"Oh Lorna you fool." He said to himself.

4.

"I can see you still need time." Lorna said, standing up once more and she took a PTP link from the pocket of her cloak and handed it to Cal, "Call me when you've decided. But hurry. I can't remain here indefinitely without attracting the attention of the others. You've caused us all a great deal of trouble Cal and they are not as forgiving as I am." Then she walked to the door and left the apartment.

"Not as desperate more like." Lara commented when Lorna was gone. Then she looked at Cal and added, "So are we getting out of here now?"

"Not just yet." Cal replied, "She's getting desperate Lara. What she said about not being able to stay here long was right and after the trouble she's gone to so far I don't think she's given up on trying to convince us. We may learn something more yet."

"Like what?" Lara asked.

"Like what's on Delvad that's so important she wants us to go there with her."

"Fish." Lara commented, "Lots and lots of fish."

"Something significant Lara. Something so important that the Founding Families turned that planet into a playground for the rich, limiting how many people would go there and important enough that one of them would stay there permanently. Rarely appearing in public and never leaving the planet."

"The Runns." Lara said, "The nautolan family."

"Exactly." Cal replied, "Nautolans are an aquatic species so their setting up home on an ocean world like Delvad seems natural enough. But I think there's another reason for them to be there, something they need to protect and I think Lorna can tell us exactly what it is."

The computer screen was split into six equal parts and each one of these showed an image of a different individual. All of them were the heads of the Founding Families other than Lorna Fayl.

"We've got a problem with Lorna." Han said, a tiny camera mounted on top of the screen capturing his image for it to be sent to the others. In their own homes on other worlds of the Narthis Sector, or in the case of Corva Torin aboard his private space yacht these people saw a flat image of Han floating amongst the more advanced holographic images of their fellow heads of families.

"Since when haven't we?" Josh Drud asked.

"Agreed." Trent Narthis added, "She's almost brought the Jedi Order down on us with her little science project on Xyros."

"Let Han speak." Erill Crassis said and then he coughed heavily, gasping for breath before a mechanical hand reached into the image to present him with an oxygen mask that he clutched to his face and took several deep breaths.

"Cal and Lara Udra are here." Han said, "Lorna invited them."

"She's trying to take them out?" Faye Karn asked, "What's the problem with that?"

"She isn't trying to kill them at all." Han answered, "She's trying to recruit them."

"Just out of curiosity, is she having any success?" Corva Torin asked.

"Of course not. But she's managed to mention Delvad to them."

"They know?" Ket Runn suddenly exclaimed.

"I don't think so." Han said, "But she invited them to travel there to meet with you all."

"We cannot risk that." Ket replied.

"Of course not." Trent added, "But what should we do?"

"Kill her." Ket said, "Before she gives away anything more. Her youngling is of age. She can take over for her mother."

"Kill Lorna and you risk alienating Nissel." Faye Karn said, "She doesn't know the truth of what we're doing yet. We must tread lightly until she accepts her place amongst us."

"But what of Lorna?" Erill gasped and Faye smiled.

"Oh there are places people can be put where they won't cause any more trouble that don't require you to kill them." She said, "And our plans can be completed soon enough, places from where they can be welcomed back to us again."

"What are you talking about Faye?" Josh asked.

"Ask your brother." She replied, "Now are we going to vote on this?"

"Removing the head of a family should be unanimous." Trent commented.

"Indeed it should." Erill added, "Now what do we say? Act now or do nothing?"

"What about Hugo and Keleen?" Corva asked, "Should we not consult them as well?"

"They are both in the core." Han said, "Including them would take too long. This needs to be settled now and I say we act."

"Yes, act now." Faye said.

"Act now." Corva agreed.

"Act now." Josh then added, nodding his head slowly.

"We should kill her." Ket said, "But since that option does not carry with any of you I also say act now and let Faye deal with her as she sees fit. Providing there is no risk."

"None at all." Faye said.

"I am in agreement as well." Trent said, "We must act now or risk losing everything our families have spent three hundred years working towards."

All eyes then turned to Erill and the only sound was his laboured breathing.

"It is decided." He said, "Lorna Fayl will be removed as head of her family and her daughter Nissel brought here to be told everything."

Faye smiled.

"Han I'll need you to secure Lorna for travel." She said.

"Of course." He replied.

"You have enough men to deal with Lorna and the jedi?" Trent asked.

"I brought a unit of my best troops with me." Han said, "They should be able to handle the jedi while the unit Lorna herself kindly brought along as bodyguards can take care of her. Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

Lorna sat waiting for a call from either Cal or Lara, drumming her fingers on the desk in front of her. But the PTP link sat silently on the desk and Lorna came to a sudden realisation.

The Udras had no intention of joining her. They were going to string her along and then leave.

"Damn you!" she yelled, picking up the PTP link and hurling it across the room with such force that it shattered when it hit the wall. Then she activated the intercom to the unit of guards waiting outside for her, "Sergeant come in here." She said.

Moments later the door slid open and the leader of her bodyguards entered followed by several more of his men. The sergeant walked up to Lorna's desk with his hand on the plasma pistol holstered on his hip while the other formed a ring around her, all holding batons while their rifles remained slung on their backs.

"What is the meaning of this?" Lorna demanded as she looked around her, "What are you all doing?"

"They're just waiting for me Lorna." Han announced as he too stepped into the room, two more guards entering behind him.

"Han? What's happening? I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. Despite all that expensive education your parents paid for you never did possess even the most basic common sense Lorna. Why else would you put yourself in the same room as a pair of jedi and tell them all about Delvad?"

"I told them nothing." Lorna protested, "Han whatever you think you know-"

"I heard you Lorna." Han interrupted.

"But how?"

"I planted a bug on you. Or rather he did." And Han nodded towards the guard he had used to put the listening device in place. Lorna snarled, "I've spoken with the other heads of the families Lorna and we're all in agreement. You can't be allowed to continue."

"But I was about to kill the jedi!" Lorna snapped, "They don't suspect a thing. Give me a chance and-"

"Enough Lorna! It's too late for excuses. This is just another of your stupid schemes that's blown up in your face and we can't risk letting it happen again. My personal team will deal with the jedi while we deal with you."

All of a sudden Lorna reached into a pocket and when her hand emerged it held a compact blaster that she aimed directly at Han and fired. The spatial distortion struck him in the chest with a 'thud' and knocked him backwards. But the heavily armoured vest he wore prevented any damage more serious than briefly knocking the breath from him. Reacting to this one of the guards stepped forwards and swung his baton. The blow was not aimed for Lorna's head or neck, blows that while being highly likely to disable her were also potentially life threatening but instead the baton came down on the hand holding the blaster and she screamed in pain as bones snapped and the weapon dropped from her grasp. Two more guards leapt forwards and grabbed hold of her arms, pulling them apart before one of them delivered a kick to the back of her leg that brought Lorna to her knees.

"I am Lorna Fayl and I order you to release me!" she yelled, "Han you can't do this. You don't have the right."

Without speaking the sergeant drew his plasma pistol and pointed it at Lorna's head. Then he looked around at Han just as he was getting back to his feet, still wheezing from the pulse blast. Looking back at the sergeant Han nodded and the sergeant pulled the trigger. With the feed from the pistol's hydrogen fuel cell disconnected only the magnetic pulse generator used to propel the charged plasma bolt was triggered, creating a bright blue flash of light that enveloped Lorna. At such close range the magnetic pulse overwhelmed her nervous system and her body jerked briefly before she slumped forwards unconscious. "Good work." Han said as he walked forwards to inspect Lorna. Crouching down beside her he placed a hand to her throat to check for a pulse, "Sweet dreams Lorna." He said when he found one and he looked up at his men, "Get her ready for transport." he added.

A group of four of Han's hand picked unit made it's way down a corridor towards the door of the apartment located directly above the one Lorna had provided to Cal and Lara. All but one took up positions either side of the door while the last one stood right in front of it and knocked. Moments later the door was opened by a sullustan female who gasped when she saw the armoured soldier standing in the hallway.

"Sorry to trouble you ma'am." The soldier said and he held out an identity card for her to see, "I'm afraid there's a problem in the apartment below and we need to make use of your balcony for a few minutes." The he waved at the other troopers and they pushed their way into the apartment.

"What's going on?" a male sullustan demanded, standing up from his seat as the soldiers rushed directly to the balcony.

"I'm sorry about this sir." The soldier who had knocked said, pausing in the middle of the room, "We're from Shill Security Incorporated and we're hunting two dangerous fugitives. Don't worry you will be fully compensated for any damages but I must ask you to remain inside and remain quiet while we work."

The male sullustan looked around to look at the three soldiers on the balcony. One of them was fixing climbing gear to the safety rail while the other two had opened up bulky holdalls and were loaded the drum-fed slug throwers they had taken from them. The other guard then activated his PTP link.

"Fire team one in position." He said as he too made his way to the balcony.

On the floor below the remaining eight of Han's troops closed on the door to Cal and Lara's apartment. Unlike the unit on the floor above these troops were already prepared for battle before they even reached the door. They were masked and carried their weapons, slug throwing automatic rifles in a bullpup configuration ideal for use in the confines of the tower at the ready. Like the group on the floor above they took up positions either side of the door and paused. Once certain that Cal and Lara had not detected their approach the unit leader waved one of his men forwards and he rushed right up to the door, slung his rifle and began to unreel a length of shaped explosive cord that he then taped in place around the edge of the door so that it would remove the door without endangering the soldiers in the corridor. The trooper affixed a wireless detonator and then turned to the leader, nodding before he withdrew and unslung his weapon once more.

5.

Inside the apartment Cal was relaxing on a couch and flicking through channels on the entertainment system while Lara was rummaging through the closet full of clothing. Not that Cal blamed her; he too had discovered a closet full of expensive clothing in his size in another bedroom and had swapped his usual robes for an expensive suit.

"Cal, which is better?" Lara called out, emerging from the bedroom holding up two dresses, "The red or the blue?"

Cal turned his head.

"The blue." He said when he noticed how short the red dress was and Lara smiled.

"Definitely the red then." She said.

"Why ask me when you're going to do the opposite?" Cal asked.

"Because you have no taste dear brother." Lara replied, "So if you like it then it must be rubbish."

"If I've no taste then what about this?" Cal said and he got to his feet to reveal the suit, "Doesn't this make me look like one of those secret agents from the holos?" he asked with a smile.

"More like a waiter." Lara replied and Cal's face fell.

Lara then disappeared for a moment before reappearing with the red dress on.

"Zip me up." She said, "I can't quite get to it."

"How is that possible?" Cal asked as Lara walked over to him, "There's hardly anything to this?"

"Oh shut up and pull." Lara replied and Cal zipped up the dress.

"There. Is that-" he began.

Danger.

"Down!" Cal snapped and Lara squealed as he dragged her to the floor behind the couch with him just as a pair of black armoured figures dropped on lines from the floor above onto the balcony outside and opened fire with their machine guns.

The bullets ripped into the furniture and the air was filled with fragments of stuffing. However, the soldiers had chosen to use low penetration fragmenting rounds that would not pierce walls and so the couch provided protection to them both as the soldiers kept firing.

"Who the kriff are they?" Lara exclaimed.

"Maybe Lorna got tired of waiting and decided to take us out for the reward instead." Cal replied, "Give me your lightsaber." And he held out his hand.

"Do you see my lightsaber?" Lara asked.

"No, but I can see pretty much everything else you've got. Where is it?"

"On the bed in my room. What about yours?"

"Same. My blaster as well."

"Oh great." Lara said, "I don't see how this could get any worse." And then the front door was blasted inwards.

"Move!" Cal yelled and he dragged Lara back to her feet just as the soldiers storming through the ruined doorway opened fire. Extending a hand towards them Cal released an unfocused blast of Force energy that shoved the entire unit backwards and threw off their aim momentarily. Then he looked towards the balcony and repeated this just as two more rifle-armed soldiers were sliding down from the floor above. However, this time the blast affected more than just the soldiers it threw off balance. The floor where the transparisteel wall had been was now strewn with fragments of the transparent material and this was lifted up in a cloud that hurtled towards the four soldiers. Protected by slash resistant uniforms and armour plates over vital organs the tiny fragments presented no real risk of injury from laceration, but it was a different matter for the syntherope lines the two new arrivals were still being supported by and the sharp edges of the fragments sliced through them both.

One of the soldiers dropped out of sight completely, his panicked scream being broadcast over the comm. channel as he plummeted to his death. On the other hand the second soldier let go of his rifle and was able to grab hold of the balcony's safety rail just time to avoid sharing his comrades fate.

"Help me! Help me!" he yelled and one of the machine gun armed troops ceased fire as he turned to pull his comrade up onto the balcony.

Meanwhile Cal and Lara dived through the open door into the room Cal had claimed as his own and closed and locked it behind them.

"Oh like that's supposed to hold them?" Lara exclaimed as Cal rushed to the bed and picked up his equipment belt.

"They're not using jacketed armour piercing rounds." He said as he tossed his pulse wave blaster to Lara and drew his lightsaber himself, "Even the couch stopped their shots so they're not going to be simply shooting through the door or wall. If they want us they'll have to come in after us." Then he bundled his robes up in his cloak and used the belt to sling it over his shoulder.

"So we just wait in here for them to break down the door?" Lara asked.

"Not quite." Cal replied, "But not far off." And he rushed back to the door. Placing one hand flat against it he closed his eyes and concentrated.

In the main room outside the soldiers formed an arc centred on the door the Jedi had just disappeared through.

"Charge." The unit leader muttered and the demolitions expert darted towards the door, unreeling more of the shaped charge. But as he stood right in front of the door Cal sensed his presence from inside the bedroom and placing the emitter of his lightsaber directly against the door he activated it. There was a 'snap-hiss' as the blade cut through door as it extended and then a sudden shriek as the soldier right outside was skewered by it.

Cal then rolled aside as there was the roar of firearms on fully automatic. Just as he had predicted the rounds could not pierce the door or the wall, but a few of them did pass through the small circular hole left by Cal's lightsaber and impacted on the far wall.

"Get ready." Cal said to Lara and she nodded, taking cover behind the bed and aiming the blaster towards the door. Cal slashed the wall beside with his lightsaber twice, cutting diagonal slots in the shape of an upside down 'V'. All that was needed to create a large triangular hole in the wall was a final horizontal cut and seeing this the soldiers outside all turned their aim to this spot. But Cal instead shut off his lightsaber and slammed his free hand down on the door control and it suddenly slid open with a hiss. Before the soldiers could react Lara opened fire and one of their number was sent sprawling backwards. However it did not take long for the others to retaliate and a volley of bullets forced Lara to duck back behind the bed. For a moment there was silence. Lara crouched behind the bed, Cal pressed up against the wall and the soldiers outside waiting to see what the Jedi's next move would be. When nothing happened the squad leader waved one of his men forwards and watched by the others he crept towards the door. With both Cal and Lara remaining out of sight the soldier made it to the doorway and slowly poked the muzzle of his rifle through it. But Cal was ready and swiftly he reached out and grabbed the rifle by the barrel and gave a sharp tug on it, activating his lightsaber he brought the blade down on the soldier as he fell forwards. Even as the dead soldier's body was landing on the floor Cal turned the rifle around and one handed he held it around the doorframe and opened fire, emptying the magazine into the room beyond.

The armour worn by the soldiers as enough to stop the fragmenting rounds fire by their own weapons but lucky strikes could still find weak spots and so they reacted in the only way available to them and they dived for whatever cover they could find.

"To your room! Quick!" Cal snapped and he dropped the empty rifle and burst out of the bedroom. Finding one of the machine gun equipped soldiers lying on the floor nearby he swung his lightsaber down and cut the man in half before he could lift his weapon to fire it and then carried on running. Likewise as Lara ran from the bedroom she fired on the soldiers she saw and another of them was cut down before he could act to defend himself. She continued firing as she ran after Cal towards her room, but this was simply to keep the guards pinned down and none of her shots struck any of them. As soon as Lara reached her room Cal once again closed and locked the door behind them.

"Okay I make that five down and seven more to go." Cal said as Lara began gathering up her belongings and bundling them up as Cal had done and then pulled on her boots. Picking up her own equipment belt she tossed Cal's blaster back to him.

"Should still be about half charged." She said to him.

"Okay." Cal said, "We can't risk cutting a new way out of here because we'd endanger anyone who happens to be wherever we end up. So we're going to have to go back out there."

"Oh great." Lara replied, "Oh well, at least we're both properly armed now."

"But we can at least surprise them by attacking from an unexpected direction." Cal then added and he looked at the wall beside him. "The kitchen's on the other side of this right?" he said and Lara nodded, "Okay then let's cut through into there." Cal then said and he approached the wall and gently punched the tip of his lightsaber into the wall and began to cut a circular hole in it.

Unfortunately he had failed to consider what was in the kitchen on the other side of the wall and as he was cutting through the wall it turned out he was also cutting through a set of shelves stacked with bottles and cans that were attached to it. As Cal completed the hole he used the Force to grab hold of the loose section he had just cut free, but he was unable to do this without shaking the shelves and there was an almighty 'Crash!'

In the room outside the remaining soldiers had held back from the bedroom door, the memory of what had happened to those who had approached the other door still fresh in their minds. But when they heard the sound of bottles breaking and cans bouncing on the kitchen floor they rushed to investigate.

"Oh nice work Cal." Lara said as Cal let go of the loose piece of wall.

"It's not my fault!" Cal exclaimed in reply and a hail of bullets came flying through the hole beside him.

Another flick of Cal's wrist sent the removed section of wall flying back into its original place and the gunfire ceased immediately, "Okay, so we can't leave that way." He added.

"No doubt whoever's in charge out there is positioning his men to watch the walls on both sides now." Lara said.

"Most likely." Cal agreed, "So the best way for us to get out of here is through the door."

"What makes you say that?" Lara asked.

"Because it opens at the touch of a button and we can seal it just as quick if we have to. The problem is all those soldiers with automatic weapons out there."

"If even a few of them had blasters we could block them with our lightsabers." Lara commented, "Even if they just used semi-automatic firing modes. I can block one or two bullets, but a full burst?"

"I know." Cal replied, "You'd think they equipped themselves and are acting as if they specifically wanted to kill jedi."

Lara scowled briefly and pulled a face at her brother.

"The bar." Cal said, "We need to get to the bar."

"You want a drink?" Lara asked and it was Cal's turn to scowl.

"No I want to make a bomb." He said.

"Ah." Lara said, "I take it you'll need a fuse?"

"I will, but I'll handle that while you go get me a mirror from the bathroom."

"Sure." Lara replied and as she ran to the en suite bathroom Cal began to tear strips of cloth from the bed sheets. Lara soon returned holding a small mirror she had detached from the bathroom wall and she held it out towards Cal.

"Here." She said.

"Thanks." Cal replied as he set the mirror down on the floor so that it reflected an image of the door, "Now get out of the way of the door." And both he and Lara rushed to stand beside the door. Cal opened it and there was a brief flurry of gunfire that halted as soon as the soldiers outside realised that neither Cal nor Lara was in their line of fire.

"The mirror." One of the troops whispered and the others looked down at the mirror resting against the bed. From where they stood both Cal and Lara were visible and they watched for any signs of movement.

To Cal however the mirror reflected a view of the suite's main room and behind the row of armed soldiers he saw the private bar. Focusing on this reflected image he reached out through the Force and summoned one of the bottle towards him. The bottle flew through the air, passing between the soldiers then through the door and then suddenly veered sideways to where Cal caught it. Looking at the label Cal and Lara saw that it was a bottle of wine.

"Cal you can't use that." Lara whispered, "Its over four hundred years old."

"Then we'll take it with us." Cal replied and he passed the bottle to his sister who stuffed it into her bundle while Cal used the Force to summon a second bottle to him.

"Corellian whisky." He said and then he stuffed it into his bundled up belongings, "Third times the charm hopefully." And he pulled a third bottle from the bar, "Ah." He said with a smile and he closed the bedroom door, "Lum."

"Lum?" Lara exclaimed as Cal opened the bottle and began to stuff rags into it, "Cal we're supposed to be making an incendiary cocktail, not a thermobaric bomb."

Cal just smiled and tipped the bottle upside down to soak the rags in the liquid contained within it. Then he briefly activated his lightsaber so that he could set light to the fuse and then used the pommel of his lightsaber to open the door, hurling the improvised bomb through the doorway the moment it was open.

The bottle landed between two of the soldiers and broke open, spilling its contents. The moment the burning fuse made contact with the volatile liquid it ignited it all and produced a sudden 'Whoosh!' as a ball of fire expanded outwards and enveloped the two soldiers either side, including the last remaining machine gunner. Both men cried out in alarm as their uniforms burned, though the fire retardant lining of their clothing protected them from the flames. However, there was an obvious means available by which they could extinguish the flames and both of them immediately ran to and jumped into the swimming pool.

As a safety mechanism the pool included a powered shutter system that could be deployed to place a cover over the water and before either of the men who had just leaped in could surface Cal used the Force to activate this system, trapping them underwater. In the mirror Cal spotted one of the other soldiers locate the

shutter controls and run towards them, seeking to free the two men now hammering on the underside and he drew his blaster and pointed it out of the door just long enough to put two shots into the soldier's back before ducking back away from the bursts of projectile fire that his brief appearance prompted.

"Now there's only four left." Cal said as he used the Force to tip over the mirror, preventing the soldiers from observing the Jedi any longer "Two to one odds."

"Seems almost unfair on them." Lara said, grinning, "So what's the plan oh great one?"

"We come out shooting and make a run for the ship." Cal replied, returning his lightsaber to his belt.

"So even after we take the last four out you want to run?" Lara asked.

"We might not take them all out and they're only the last four we know about." Cal pointed out, "But we don't have any idea how many more there are around. There could be an entire airborne company on their way now in gunships. We need to get to the *Bright Hope* and get out of here. Now are you ready?" Cal asked and Lara nodded as she drew her blaster.

"Okay, let's go!" Cal snapped and he rolled through the doorway and unleashed the strongest blast of telekinetic energy he could.

6.

The blast took all four soldiers off their feet and as Lara emerged she opened fire on the first one she saw. Cal fired on a second as he got to his feet and both he and Lara ran for the destroyed front door. There was a rattle of gunfire as the remaining soldiers tried to open fire, but they were disorientated by the blast that had struck them and their attacks only impacted against the doorframe as the Jedi disappeared through the hole.

"Turbolifts!" Cal yelled and they ran towards the turbolift cluster down the corridor and dived into the first one available, "We need to hide our kit." Cal said as the turbolift began to move. If anyone sees our lightsabers they may realise who we are." And both he and Lara holstered their blasters, removed their equipment belts and stuffed them inside their robes. To an observer who did not know their appearance they now looked like two humans in fine clothing.

The turbolift door slid open on the rooftop landing pad and Lara shivered.

"This dress is not made for the cold." She said.

"I'd say the tailor didn't finish it." Cal replied as they exited the turbolift and began to walk calmly towards the *Bright Hope*.

As they walked across the landing zone there was the sound of repulsorlifts from overhead as another transport came into land and Cal looked up.

"Uh-oh." He said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"What?" Lara asked and then as she too looked up she added, "I've got a bad feeling about this as well."

The transport heading towards the pad was marked with Shill Security logos and obviously armed. But the gunship did not move to attack the Jedi, instead lowering its landing gear as it descended further and when Cal lowered his head to look at where it seemed to be headed for he saw a cluster of figures in Shill Security uniforms that he recognised as being Lorna Fayl's personal guard. But worryingly Han Shill himself led them.

"Quickly." Cal said, averting his gaze, "We can't let him see us."

"Who?" Lara asked and she looked towards Han and his men, "Oh stang." She said.

"Exactly. Han Shill himself." Cal said.

"No. Its Lorna." Lara replied and Cal looked up again to see more of Han's men dragging Lorna from another turbolift cluster, her hands bound and her mouth taped shut.

The gunship touched down and as its access ramp lowered Han happened to take a look around and gazed straight at Cal and Lara.

"Move!" Cal snapped as Han's jaw dropped and he reached for his sidearm.

Equipped for a close protection role the troops at Han's disposal were poorly suited for engaging targets as far away as the Udras were, while the weapons of the gunship were too powerful to be used here - a single blast could trigger a catastrophic chain reaction amongst the parked shuttles and airspeeders. Thus it was that when Cal and Lara reached the *Bright Hope* Han and his men were still rushing towards, hoping to close the gap between them enough to be able to engage them before they escaped.

Opening the *Bright Hope's* access ramp Cal and Lara rushed inside before sealing it shut behind them.

"Wait here." Cal ordered as he set down the bundle of clothing he carried.

"What for?" Lara asked.

"I need to get the ship started and Han's men may get here first. If they do its up to you to keep them from getting aboard." Cal replied.

"Got it." Lara said and she reached inside her own bundle and pulled out her equipment belt, fastening it around her waist and drawing her lightsaber, "We should have brought the grenade launcher." She said to herself, "I still haven't had a turn using it."

"Get that hatch open!" Han bellowed as he and his men reached the *Bright Hope* and one of them darted forwards and took out an electronic lock pick that he connected to the access ramp's controls.

"Five minutes." He said.

"You've got two." Han replied as the *Bright Hope's* engines came to life.

"Lara how are we doing?" Cal asked over the intercom.

"They're at the hatch right now." Lara replied, "You know if we'd brought the grenade launcher-" and then there was a 'Hiss' as the access ramp opened.

Han was about to lead the charge up the access ramp, taking aim at Lara as she stood at the top with her lightsaber held in both hands in front of her. But as he took his first step there was a sudden roar as the *Bright Hope* lifted off and he and his men were knocked off their feet.

"Sir I'm sorry." The trooper who had overridden the lock, "I couldn't have done it any faster. The lock was using a jedi-" and then he was cut off as Han punched him in the face.

"Apology accepted." Han said as he looked up to see the *Bright Hope* vanishing into the sky.

Inside the *Bright Hope* Lara resealed the access ramp and headed for the cockpit.

"Well we're away." She said, "And the trip wasn't a total bust."

"How do you figure that?" Cal asked.

"Well we got these nice new clothes, a bottle of fine wine, some whisky and of course lots of Lorna Fayl's money."

Cal smiled.

"The twenty grand will come in useful." He said, "I just wish I'd been able to send that message to mom and dad. I want them to know I've got a dog."

"He's our dog Cal."

"Oh he's so my dog. He was given to me."

"Selfishness isn't a jedi trait Cal."

"Neither is jealousy. Or lying for that matter. You know Ghost is mine. Admit it."

"Never."

"Of course it would be nice to know what Han plans on doing with Lorna." Cal then said.

"Oh who cares?" Lara asked.

"Mrs Drud." Nissel said when a servant led her into her mother's study only to find Hiran Drud's mother waiting for her.

"Please call me Millel." The woman replied.

"My mom wouldn't want you here." Nissel said, "She could be back at any-"

"She's not coming back my dear." Millel said, "I'm so sorry."

"No." Nissel said, shaking her head, "She's not-"

"Oh no she's not dead." Millel reassured her, "But you need to come with me. There are people you need to speak to."

"Where are we going?" Nissel asked.

"To Delvad dear. To the Runns' estate."

Millel refused to be drawn on why they were travelling to the ocean world of Delvad throughout the entire ten hours of the flight and even as they transferred from the shuttle to the submersible vehicle that would take them the remainder of the way to the nautolan Runns' seabed home all she would say was,

"Everything will be explained to you."

Nissel had never met the Runns in person before and only occasionally seen them in virtual form. They rarely left their estate and never left Delvad but right now it seemed that they were playing host to all of the heads of the Founding Families. Apart from her own mother Nissel saw that only Erill Crassis was missing, the old man far too ill to travel away from home and so he was instead represented by his son and daughter-in-law.

"Sit down Nissel." Trent Narthis told her and nervously she sat in the vacant seat close by.

"There's no need to be afraid." Deesa Torin said while her husband just smiled at Nissel.

"What's going on?" Nissel asked, "Where's my mom?"

"Gone." Ket Runn said simply.

"Really Ket." Salla Crassis said, "You'll scare the poor young girl." And Ket just snorted. Then Salla's husband Luke lent forwards, staring directly at Nissel.

"What do you know of Ban Hollis?" he asked and Nissel just looked around nervously.

"Don't worry, it's not a trick question." Faye Karn said, "Just answer honestly."

"Err; he was the first officer of the ship our ancestors used to scout out the sector. He died didn't he? The reports all say that it was an accident, but I've heard that he was murdered by-" and as she turned to look at the Torins Josh Drud interrupted.

"That's good enough." He said, "Now I think that its time we showed you what really happened to Ban Hollis and what our families have been doing in this sector for twelve generations."

"But what about my mom? What's happened to her?"

"You are the head of your family now Nissel. Accept that." Faye Karn said, "But don't worry about your poor mother. She'll be taken good care of and no harm will come to her."

Lorna tried to fight against the droids dragging her along the corridor but it was useless for her to resist. The straitjacket held her arms immobile while the gag muffled her screams. Ahead of her and the droids were a trio of figures, only two of whom she knew.

"You understand your instructions doctor?" Han Shill asked the stranger in a white coat as she reached a transparent section of wall with an opening in it. The stranger paused to unseal the opening and stepped back to allow the droids to drag Lorna into the padded chamber inside.

"Of course." He said, "The patient will be kept here under maximum security and there will be no contact with the outside world at all. Treatment has already been deemed to be ineffective so none will be attempted."

"Very good." Heddren Drud replied, "Your fees will be paid in the usual way."

"That is acceptable." The doctor said as the droids exited the cell.

Lorna managed to get to her feet and rushed at the doorway, but was prevented from reaching it by the tether holding her to the far wall and she instead slumped to the floor.

"Then I think we should be going." Han said to Heddren and he nodded in return. Before they walked away. Now alone in her cell Lorna tried to scream again, watching them until they were out of sight. Only then did she look around to take in her surroundings and she saw another cell opposite hers that was a mirror image of it and slumped in one corner, bound and gagged just like she was she saw Gayal Karn.