

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



III-VIII: ENTRAPMENT

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...

ENTRAPMENT

HOPING TO HELP CLEAR THEIR CHILDREN'S NAMES VARN AND NEARI UDRA COME TO THE NARTHIS SECTOR IN SEARCH OF THEM. BUT THEIR MOTIVES PUT THEM AT ODDS WITH TARRIS BLAKE, THE JEDI SHADOW HUNTING THEM...

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

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1.

From behind miraluka appeared to be human and the differences between the two otherwise closely related species only became obvious when viewed from the front. The eyes of a miraluka were milky white; the non-functioning remains of organs that had long since ceased to have any function to them. The homeworld of the species, a world known as Alpheridies received little visible light and gradually they had lost the ability to sense it. However, at the same time the dormant ability to sense the Force had improved to the point whereby they instead saw through the energy field that bound the very universe together. This ability meant that the species produced an abnormally high number of individuals suitable to be trained as Jedi and many of the order's greatest members came from that backwater world.

Jedi Master Nolaneb Salu was one of these great individuals and he easily sensed the approach of another Jedi master as he exited his quarters.

"Master Udra. You wish to speak with me?" he asked.

"You can tell?" Varn Udra replied and the human stared at his fellow Jedi master.

"It is obvious even to those without eyes to see it." Nolaneb said, "You have been waiting out here for several minutes now. Say your piece. My time is precious."

"You sent one of your men to the Narthis Sector." Varn said, "Why?"

"An interesting question Master Udra and I would have thought the answer obvious. Jedi Blake has gone to hunt down your offspring before they can cause any more deaths."

Varn scowled.

Anger.

"Be careful Master Udra." Nolaneb said as he sensed the other master's feelings, "Anger is a stepping stone to the Dark Side. Perhaps the first step Cal and Lara took."

"Just who do you think you are?" Varn snapped, "Sending one of your zealots after my children without the authorisation of the Council. You-"

"Ah." Nolaneb interrupted, "But there we have it. The Jedi shadows are not answerable to the Council. We manage our own affairs according to the letter of the Jedi Code. Perhaps if you lived your life by the same values we would not be having this conversation now."

"Most of my family wouldn't be alive if we lived every minute of it by your precious code." Varn said, "It's all very well saying attachment is bad, but banning Jedi from having families would cut us off from the very society we serve. It motivates us to build a better future for them all."

"According to reports from the Narthis Sector it may have motivated your son to fall so he could save your daughter. Now both are lost as was foretold."

"Foretold? By whom?"

"Why Master Karas of course. The Jedi master your children were supposed to answer to. He warned the Council that they would fall."

"Why haven't I heard anything this?" Varn asked.

"Perhaps you should ask them." Nolaneb replied.

"That sounds like a very good idea." Varn said before turning around and striding away.

Despite his blindness Nolaneb faced Varn as he departed and smiled.

"He warned us about more than just your children Master Udra." He said to himself, "The Udra family will serve the Sith they said and if that is so then I will deal with you myself."

"It is unusual for you to demand an audience with us on such short notice Master Udra." One of the assembled Jedi Council said. Varn had headed directly for the Council chamber where he knew that the leaders of the Jedi Order would be holding a meeting and exercised his right as a master to address them. "I want to know why the investigation into the death of Jedi Kraus Trevan has been handed over to the Jedi shadows." Varn announced, "Without my being informed."

"You are mistaken Master Udra. Master Karas investigated the murder and closed the investigation."

Another of the masters told him.

"The Jedi shadows are merely acting according to their mandate, to hunt down agents of the Dark Side." A third added.

"Cal and Lara have not fallen." Varn said sternly, "I'd know if they had."

"Perhaps your love for them blinds you." A master who was present only in holographic form suggested, "Master Karas-"

"Master Karas has been hostile to them ever since they arrived in his territory." Varn interrupted, "And what's this nonsense I've heard about some prophecy?"

"The Udra family will serve the Sith." The holographic council member replied, "A warning we did not agree with – at the time."

Varn frowned.

"The warning was vague." The master who had spoken first then said.

"Apparently clear enough for you all to convict Cal and Lara without a trial." Varn replied. Then he looked around at each council member in turn, "So will you summon Master Karas or the shadow Master Salu's sent to the Narthis Sector here to explain themselves?"

"No." the supreme grand master spoke from beneath the hood that concealed his face and he leant forwards in his chair, "Master Udra, if Cal and Lara are innocent then they have nothing to fear from surrendering themselves. Something they have had ample opportunity to do."

"Very well." Varn said, "If that is the decision of the council then I shall abide by it." And without waiting to be dismissed he turned and left the room.

"He is going to the Narthis Sector." One of the council said to her fellows.

"Of course he is." Another replied.

"Contact Master Karas on Moldas." The supreme grand master said, "Warn him to watch for Master Udra's arrival. Tell him to report his activities to us."

"None of them would listen." Varn announced as he entered the medical unit where his wife Neri worked.

"So what do you intend to do now?" she asked and Varn sighed.

"I have to go there for myself." Varn replied, "Maybe if I can speak to this shadow myself then I can convince him that Cal and Lara have done nothing wrong."

"You mean we have to go there." Neri corrected him, "You don't think I'm going to sit here on Coruscant while our children need us do you?"

Varn smiled.

"Of course not. I'm sorry." He said.

"So is your sister going to take us?" Neri asked.

"No." Varn answered, shaking his head, "She's off planet somewhere checking out some potential new recruits. I'll signal her to let her know what we're doing, but for now we'll have to book our own passage. Unless I can convince the council to lend us a ship."

The world of Moldas was not in the Narthis Sector where Cal and Lara Udra were stationed. Instead it was a sparsely populated planet slightly closer to the core worlds that served as the location of a Jedi base. This base housed several Jedi ranging from Padawans up to the master in charge of it, Ben Karas as well as a contingent of the non-Force sensitive troops known as Freedom Warriors and from here they stood ready to react to threats across the region.

The shuttle carrying Neri and Varn Udra touched down on the enclave's landing strip and as they disembarked a pair of Jedi stationed there approached them. One of these was several years older than Varn while the second although much younger seemed rather old to still possess the braid in his hair that marked him out as a Padawan.

"Master Udra." The older man called out, "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Whillam Antess and this is my apprentice Rich Cryne."

"A pleasure to meet you both." Varn replied, "This is my wife, Neri."

"Likewise, a pleasure." Whillam said, "Now if you will accompany me I will take you to Master Karas. He has been awaiting your arrival for some time now."

"You knew we were coming?" Neri asked, "But our ship only told you—"

"The temple informed us of your intentions." Whillam interrupted and Neri and Varn glanced at one another as they wondered what the council had told Master Karas.

"Please lead the way." Varn said.

The buildings of the enclave had been constructed to numerous different architectural styles depending on the tastes and opinions of the Jedi masters who had commissioned the work. Some were built in a highly decorative manner while others favoured functionality over form and it was one of these buildings that Whillam led the Udras to now.

"What is this place?" Varn asked as they neared the building, "It feels- it feels—"

"Dark?" Neri suggested.

"Yes. Dark." Varn agreed, "There's no nexus on Moldas is there?"

"No." Whillam answered, "You're not sensing the place, you're sensing a person. I believe you've already met him."

"Hargood Nollar." Varn said, "So this is where you keep him."

A pair of freedom warriors stood guard outside the entrance to the building and as the four jedi approached they stepped aside and opened the armoured blast door. There were more guards inside who remained silent as the jedi then walked towards a second blast door and it was only when this opened that they saw the building's one permanent resident.

Hargood Nollar was a human jedi knight. His family had been slaughtered by Sith troops during the last war and upon discovering this he had allowed his anger to overwhelm him. He had his revenge on the Sith troops and their Force using leaders but it had cost him dearly. Now he was under the sway of the Dark Side. However, he was still loyal to the republic and so rather than exile him Master Karas opted to keep him confined and would release him only when the need was greatest and only under the strictest supervision until he could be returned here. Hargood was not alone right now however. Master Karas and his padawan, a young human woman named Keana were here also and Varn guessed that it was part of the ongoing effort to return Hargood to the Light Side of the Force.

"Ah, Master Udra." Master Karas said as he got to his feet and turned to face the new arrivals, "This is an unexpected-

"Your man already told us the council tipped you off." Neri pointed out and she looked at Whillam and smiled.

Nollar grinned as well.

"So that explains the timing of this little meeting." He said and he stared at Master Karas, "Hoping to warn them of the risks of acting out of concern for one's family?"

"Perhaps we should continue this somewhere else." Master Karas said.

"Yes lets." Varn replied.

"You may leave and continue your apprentice's training." Master Karas told Whillam.

"Master." Keana said suddenly and Master Karas looked at her.

"With your permission I'd like to remain here." She said.

"If you must." Master Karas replied and as he led the other jedi away Keana waited with Hargood.

"Take a good look Keana." He said softly, "Master Udra is stronger than Ben ever will be. Its his attachment to his family that gives that strength to him."

"But what if something were to happen to them?" Keana asked.

"Then that strength will be unleashed to its full potential." Hargood answered.

2.

"So what exactly do you hope to achieve by coming here Master Udra?" Master Karas asked when he and the Udras were alone in his office.

"You know exactly why we're here Ben." Neri snapped and Master Karas frowned at the informal use of his first name rather than his title by someone with the rank of knight rather than master, "We're here because your blind prejudice against our children led you to convict Lara of murder without any evidence." "There was a security recording." Master Karas said.

"In which the face of the killer could not be seen." Varn pointed out, "And now as I understand it all of the original recordings related to Kraus' murder have been conveniently wiped."

"By your children." Master Karas replied.

"Oh that's poodoo!" Neri yelled, "How exactly would they know where to find every record on a secure system under constant supervision?"

Master Karas did not reply.

"Face it," Varn said, "we know you've been biased against Cal and Lara since the moment they arrived here."

"And we know all about that ridiculous prophecy of yours." Neri added, "So long as the Jedi Order stands, no one called Udra will ever serve the Sith."

"I would not be too sure about that." Master Karas replied, "My feelings are clear. The Jedi Council may-

"The council knows better than to trust in the ranting of a single individual." Varn interrupted, "If your warning is so clear then why didn't the council agree with you?"

"The shadows seem to agree." Master Karas said.

"Ah yes, the shadows. Fear, surprise and a fanatical dedication to the Jedi Code." Neri responded.

"The problem with fanatics though is that they sometimes miss the bigger picture." Varn added, "So how about you tell us everything you know about this shadow that's hunting our children and we can be on our way."

A hint of a smile appeared on the face of Master Karas.

"You intend to challenge the shadow?" he asked.

"We intend to confront him, yes." Varn replied.

"We'll make him see that someone else is responsible for the killing of Jedi Trevan." Neri then said, "And after that we can all be out of your way."

Varn sensed something, a brief ripple through the Force that emanated from Master Karas.

"You want him gone don't you?" he asked, "The Jedi shadow I mean. But why? He's not trying to take your authority away from you."

"Unless maybe he is." Neri said with a smile, "How many Jedi under your command have fallen Ben?"

"A good question." Varn added as he too smiled and the pair both stared at Master Karas.

"Up to five." He answered reluctantly.

"So that's three." Neri said, "Considering that you'd count Cal and Lara amongst them. But even so, three Jedi in just under a decade."

"When the shadow is done in the Narthis Sector he's coming back here isn't he?" Varn asked and when Master Karas failed to reply he added, "So that makes it in your interest to get rid of him as well doesn't it?" Master Karas leant forwards and activated the intercom on his desk.

"Send Jedi Ashran to my office please." He said and then he leant back in his chair again, "Master Udra, Jedi Udra. Jedi Ashran will accompany you to the Narthis Sector and act as a liaison between you and me. If you need to contact me do so through him. Now is there anything else you wanted to say?"

"No. I think that will be all, thank you." Varn replied, his smile widening.

As the Udras left his office a translucent blue figure surrounded by glowing light materialised just behind Master Karas.

"You're taking an awful risk Ben." The spirit said, "Your vision said that the Udra family would serve the Sith. What if those two join Cal and Lara?"

"Then I'll be proved right won't I, my old master?" Master Karas responded.

Jedi knight Seth Ashran was an expert pilot who preferred the speed and manoeuvrability of starfighters to other more comfortable vessels to travel in. Thus when he, Neri and Varn arrived at Aurek Station, the primary navigation beacon in the Narthis Sector they did so in three separate slender hulled starfighters. "Aurek Station dead ahead." Seth broadcast, "Follow me in."

"Copy that." Varn responded, "Neari how are you doing over there?"

Varn was also an experienced fighter pilot, but as a healer his wife had never flown such a craft before and she was relying on the automated systems to help her fly her fighter.

"Err, fine I think." She said, "But I'll be glad when we dock."

Seth flew his fighter into the main hangar of Aurek Station at high speed, pivoting in midair before touching down in the spot allotted to him by the station's flight controllers. Varn then followed him, adopting a more cautious approach than Seth had opted for. Finally Neari entered the hangar, letting the autopilot handle the landing in its entirety. As she descended the ladder a service droid pushed up against the hull of her fighter she wobbled slightly.

"You don't look fine to me." Varn said as he helped his wife off the ladder.

"I will be just as soon as the station's stabilisers are fixed and it stops wobbling." She replied.

"There's nothing wrong with them." Seth said as he walked towards Neari and Varn. Then he noticed a dark haired woman about the same age as the Udras in the uniform of a sector ranger walking across the hangar towards them, "Looks like we're getting an official welcome." He added.

"Ah, Agent Jule Raser." Varn said, "How nice of you to meet us here." And he held out his hand in greeting.

"I must say Master Udra, I was surprised to hear about your arrival. I wouldn't have thought that the Jedi Order would send you here to investigate your own offspring." Jule said as she shook Varn's hand.

"We're not exactly here under official orders." Neari answered.

"No, we're here to speak with the jedi shadow hunting them." Varn added, "Tarris Blake I believe his name is. Do you know where we can find him?"

Jule snorted.

"Yes I can tell you exactly where he is for all the good it will do you." She said, "He's right over there in his ship. Hardly ever leaves it except when he's off chasing around the sector after Cal and Lara."

The three newly arrived jedi looked around to where Jule was pointing and they saw a starstorm-class courier ship with its wings folded in the landing position. The ship's access ramp was in the open position but there was no sign of life.

"He's in there?" Neari asked and Jule nodded.

"He hasn't bothered taking quarters on the station or anywhere else in the sector for that matter. As far as I can tell he just sits in there waiting for word to come though that Cal or Lara have been spotted and then he goes racing off after them. Not that he let's me in on any of this mind you. I'm the senior sector ranger for the Narthis Sector and I'm being denied information about two wanted fugitives." Jule explained. Then when she saw the reaction on Neari and Varn's faces to their children being described a fugitives she added, "I know you think they're innocent, but I'm duty bound to find them."

"Of course you are." Varn replied, "But I think its about time Tarris Blake learned to share." And he strode towards Tarris' vessel. He paused briefly at the bottom of the access ramp to see if Tarris would react to his presence there, but when there was only silence from inside the ship he began to walk up it, "Jedi Blake!" he called out, "I am-"

"You are Master Udra." Tarris' voice suddenly called out from inside the ship, "And accompanying you are jedi knights Ashran and Neari Udra."

Varn looked around at the other two jedi following close behind him.

"I think that's as close to an invitation as we're going to get." Neari commented and Varn around again and walked the rest of the way up the ramp.

Inside the ship he found Tarris Blake sat with his back to him, staring at several monitor screens on which assorted data pages and media reports were shown. Resting on the console below the monitors was Tarris' lightsaber. This was a much bigger weapon than Varn's and he instantly recognised it as the variant that was effectively two lightsabers joined back to back so that the weapon would produce two blades from opposite ends. Looking around the compartment Varn saw that there were no other seats or decoration. Apart from the fact that Tarris was sat in front of him, Varn could have believed that this vessel was still sat on the factory lot.

"Jedi Blake." Varn said as Neari and Seth joined him inside the ship, "We have come for an explanation of what you are doing here."

"I am hunting two fugitives Master Udra." Tarris answered, still without looking around, "You know that. They are your offspring after all."

"They haven't done anything." Neari exclaimed and Tarris finally turned his chair around to face his uninvited guests.

"Oh really?" he said as he got to his feet, "In addition to the murder of Jedi Kraus Trevan-"

"Which Lara didn't do." Neari interrupted, but Tarris continued anyway.

"Jedi Knight Cal Udra assaulted several members of the freedom warriors and a jedi knight."

"Only to release Lara." Neri pointed out, "She was never going to get a fair hearing from Ben Karas."
"They have destroyed evidence relating to their crimes." Tarris said and both Neri and Varn frowned,
"They killed several members of a tactical team that attempted to apprehend them and now they have destroyed a civilian transport ship, as Jedi Ashran will be able to confirm."

Varn looked around at Seth.

"Its true," he said, "The wreckage of a freighter was found close to a beacon not far from Moldas. I was asked to take a look at it because of the cargo."

"What was so special about it?" Neri asked.

"Nothing as far as I could tell." Seth replied, "It looked like a shipment of hyperdrive components."

"Well they must have had a good reason." Varn said.

"The death and destruction was its own reason Master Udra." Tarris said sternly, "The Dark Side of the Force is strong in the Narthis Sector and your children have fallen under its sway. Obviously it was a mistake to send them here together given their relationship. The weakness of one likely triggered the fall of both."

"I came here hoping to reason with you." Varn said, "But I should have remembered that the Jedi shadows are not known for their flexibility."

"Well at least we tried." Neri said, placing a hand on her husband's arm.

"There is no try." Tarris said, "Only do or do not. Just as there are no grey areas when it comes to the Force. Only Light and Dark. Now if you wish to attempt to track down your children I will not stand in your way. But I will not allow you to stand in my way either. I will do whatever I must." And he glanced back at the lightsaber resting on the console.

"Let's go. We're done here." Varn said and he strode back down the ramp.

"Varn." Neri said as she rushed past him, "So are we just giving up and going back to Coruscant?"

"Of course not." He replied, "We're going to do just what Tarris suggested we do. We're going to find Cal and Lara ourselves." Then he looked at Seth, "Are you in?" he asked, "We'll be taking them back to Coruscant with us, not leaving them on Moldas to be shut away in some bunker until Ben Karas decides to let them loose on the galaxy."

"Okay I'm in." Seth replied, "But how exactly are you proposing to find them?" he then asked, "That Jedi shadow's been here for weeks and so far he's only encountered them once from what I here and they got away."

"Easy." Varn said with a smile, "Cal and Lara will want to find us and we're going to see to it that they do." Meanwhile back inside the courier ship Tarris returned to his seat. But rather than just continue searching through data files and media reports he activated his ship's communications system.

"Flight control." A voice announced.

"This is Jedi Blake." He stated, "There are three other Jedi vessels currently docked at this station. When they depart I want to be notified immediately. Furthermore I will require their destinations."

"I'm afraid I can't just hand out that information without authorisation Jedi Blake. You'll have to—"

"Look up who I am." Tarris interrupted, "Your station administrator has it on record. That is my authorisation."

3.

Normally Lara Udra found it difficult to meditate when Ghost was nearby. The dog frequently expected to be fussed over and could not understand how important it was for Lara to be left alone when she was trying to do so. Lara herself did not object to having the dog close by, but given that she was still attempting to behave as a Jedi Padawan should despite her fugitive status she realised that she still needed to meditate. On this occasion however Ghost had already been worn out by her older brother walking him and had simply lain down beside Lara as she sat cross-legged on the floor.

Lara let her mind drift as the Force flowed through her and she waited for it to show her visions of other times and places. From what Lara knew there were some Force users who did nothing more than this, functioning as oracles and fortune tellers and even the Jedi Order itself had been known to act on the basis of visions that came during mediation on occasion. The problem for Lara was that she still lacked the training to properly interpret details and normally she could sense only strong disturbances. But that all changed when dealing with individuals who she was particularly close to.

Love.

Lara gasped and opened her eyes.

"Cal!" she yelled suddenly and beside her Ghost's eyes also opened as she woke him up, "Cal where are you?"

Lara ran from the room that had been converted into a lounge area for the three Jedi who resided on Dorn Station at the fringes of explored space. With Ghost rushing along with her Lara first checked her brother's bedroom and then the other rooms that made up their living space. Then she headed for the hangar bay where a pair of delaya-class couriers were docked. One of these ships, the Bright Hope was the vessel that the Jedi Order had assigned to Cal and Lara when it sent them to the Narthis sector, while the second ship was one that had been owned by raiders the pair had encountered later. After the raiders' defeat the ship had simply been left at Dorn Station. Now Cal and Lara made use of it. It was beside this second vessel that Lara saw not only Cal but also a diminutive green figure that also wore Jedi robes. This was Tyshon, a Jedi knight that had been living on Dorn Station alone for more than two hundred years.

"Cal I saw them!" Lara cried out as she rushed across the hangar.

"Who?" Cal replied, looking around at his sister.

"Mom and dad. They're here Cal, in the Narthis sector right now. I'm certain of it."

Cal just stared at her for a moment.

"Are you sure?" he asked and Lara nodded frantically.

"I felt them Cal. I know they're close by."

Cal looked down at Tyshon.

"Hmm." The older Jedi said, leaning on his staff for support, "Difficult the difference between what is wanted and what is real can be to determine. Particularly for one so inexperienced."

Lara frowned.

"Oh please Cal, I know it was real. Mom and dad are here right now."

"They could have come to try and help us." Cal replied, "I sent them a message before I freed you."

"Then we need to go and find them." Lara exclaimed, "Dad's a master. He can set everything straight."

"Only with evidence can the case against you be disproved. Until then, fugitives you both remain." Tyshon warned, "Without evidence, disastrous this would be."

"If we can get a message to them we can try and set up a covert meeting." Cal suggested, "I think that Aurek Station would be the logical place for them to have arrived at, but it's also where we're most likely to be spotted."

"What about bringing them here?" Lara asked.

"No." Cal replied, shaking his head, "If anything went wrong then we'd have given away our location. For now we can't tell even mom and dad where we're hiding."

"So we can't go to them and they can't come to us." Lara said, "What's left?"

"A meeting in space your answer could be." Tyshon suggested.

"Of course." Cal said, smiling, "If Aunt Elle's brought them here then we can just dock with her ship with ours."

"So where do we set up this meeting?" Lara asked, "Tepillos has pretty poor system defences. They'd never notice us. Plus it's only a day and a half away."

"Maybe so, but you're forgetting that we still need to get word to mom and dad." Cal replied, "We really ought to use a public comm. booth to send the signal. I wouldn't put it past Tarris Blake, the Founding

Families or any number of others to be keeping a watch on mom and dad and a direct signal from our ship could get them in trouble. There are only a few capable of that on Tepillos. All of which are in the Green Zone."

"Which is crawling with Republic troops." Lara commented.

"Exactly." Cal replied, "Crassis Major on the other hand has crowds we can blend into and plenty of places we can send a signal from."

"Well defended Crassis Major is." Tyshon pointed out, "The *Bright Hope*, noticed will it be. Take the other ship you should."

"We really need to find a name for her." Cal commented.

"How about the False Hope?" Lara suggested and Cal smiled.

"I like that." He said, "The *False Hope* it is then. Now let's get moving, we've no idea how long mom and dad have been in the sector or how long they can stay."

"What about Ghost and Keleen?" Lara asked. Keleen Delvad had been captured by the two Jedi when they destroyed the freighter en route to the Narthis Sector and was now locked inside an otherwise unused compartment.

"What about them?" Cal asked in reply.

"Well what if mom and dad take us back to Coruscant to face the council? It could be months before we come back here, if ever."

"A good point she has." Tyshon agreed, "But look after them both I can."

"No we'll take Ghost with us." Cal said, "But we'll leave Keleen here with you Tyshon."

The newly named *False Hope* dropped out of hyperspace above Crassis Major, the capital world of the Narthis Sector and as Cal piloted the ship into the planet's atmosphere he sensed a brief moment of confusion from his sister.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Well I was just thinking about how most of the people we think set me up are here." She replied, "And we do have a well armed ship. A few strafing runs and-"

"And we'd be shot out of the sky about a minute after we first opened fire." Cal interrupted, "You know what defences the Founding Families can call upon. Their estates are undoubtedly shielded. We may take out one on the first pass but the local defence forces would be swarming all over us after that and we'd never get away once they raise the planetary shield. Plus I can think of at least two families that we'd miss. The Runns are on Delvad and the Torins could be anywhere."

"Oh well it was just a thought." Lara said, sighing.

"Approaching vessel identify yourself." A voice suddenly called out over the communication system.

"Err, this is the *False Hope*." Cal said and as he said the name of the ship he smiled and glanced at Lara, "Requesting landing instructions for the district four starport."

"Copy that *False Hope*. Follow beacon on channel one one three eight."

"Thank you control." Cal then replied, "Well it looks like we've permission to land." He then added and he steered the ship towards the closest starport.

The moment they landed Cal and Lara disembarked from the *False Hope* with Ghost and headed towards the main terminal building where they knew that long range communications would be available. However, as they approached the communications hub Cal suddenly stopped and grabbed Lara by the arm.

"Cal, what is it?" she asked as she too halted and Cal pointed at the building just beside the cluster of communications booths, or rather at the cluster of uniformed men stood outside it smoking.

"Those are defence force troopers." Cal said.

"So? So what?" Lara asked.

"So how likely do you think it is that General Drud has distributed notices of our appearance to all his personnel?" Cal responded.

"Undoubtedly." Lara said, "I've got a bad feeling about this. We need to find another way of signalling mom and dad. If we put our hoods up they may get suspicious anyway."

"We can't do it from the ship. So long as we're still on the wanted list we need make certain that no one can identify us and making calls from our own ship will make that all too easy to do."

"We need someone to relay a message to them then." Lara said, but Cal shook his head.

"No we have to speak to them ourselves while we arrange to meet."

"What about relaying the message from the comm. booth to the *False Hope* Cal?" Lara asked, "Someone could hold a PTP link to the system and we could talk that way."

"Crude." Cal replied, "But it could work. Providing of course that we can ask someone we can trust to make the actual call."

"Ah. I hadn't considered that." Lara said and then after a brief pause she added, "A droid." And she smiled. "A droid?" Cal asked.

"Yeah Cal. We can just buy a droid. Then it can carry the PTP link to the booth and make the call. Come on Cal, we've got all that money Lorna Fayal gave us, we may as well put it to use and a droid could come in very useful."

Cal sighed.

"Fine." He said, reaching into his pocket and taking out a credit stick that he handed to his sister, "Get a cheap one." He told her, "We just need it to be able to walk, carry a PTP link and be able to operate a comm. booth keypad."

"The keypad? What about a droid that can patch in through the data port?" Lara asked.

"No." Cal replied, "If the authorities trace the call back here then they'll be able to pull up the ID tags of the droid. Get one that can dial in manually."

"So what will you be doing while I'm trying to find us a droid?" Lara asked.

"I'll be back at the ship trying to listen in on local law enforcement communications to see if anyone suspects we're here." Cal replied.

On a modern world like Crassis Major droids other than fourth degree military types were fairly easy to come by, particularly in the area around the starport. This was down to the level of demand; droids were popular with starship crews for their ability to function without life support. Therefore it did not take Lara long to locate a business offering a wide range of types. Although the credit stick Cal had given to her had a great deal of money on it Lara was aware that whatever she spent could not be easily replaced. Therefore she turned her attention to the fifth degree droids, simple labour units with more basic capabilities than the far more expensive first through third degree droids designed for scientific, medical, diplomatic and technical duties.

Most of the fifth degree droids Lara found herself looking at were designed for cargo handling and many had specialised appendages for moving standard packing containers. However, there were also a few humanoid types on offer as well and it was one of these that Lara chose, a hulky two point three metre tall bulk loader. The droid's head was set well below the level of its shoulders and its face was dominated by a single large photoreceptor.

Unfortunately the droid was built for power rather than speed and as she walked back to the *False Hope* Lara frequently found herself having to stop for it to catch up with her.

"Cal!" she called out as she began to walk up the access ramp, "I'm back."

Cal appeared at the top of the ramp and was about to respond when he saw the droid behind her and his jaw dropped.

"Stang Lara. I said get a droid, not a battlefield walker."

"Isn't he great?" Lara said, "Ell bee series bulk load lifter. The salesman said that this model is ideal for customisation."

"I'm not surprised." Cal said, descending the ramp and circling the droid. The droid for its part looked back down and watched him, "You could fit an ion drive in this chassis."

"He doesn't say much though." Lara said, "In fact I've not heard him make a sound at all."

Cal looked at her.

"Is that the manual?" he asked, looking down at the datapad that had come with the droid and Lara nodded and handed the device to Cal.

"The guy in the store has already configured him to recognise me as his owner." She said, "And he said it's easy to repeat for you. This is his designation right here." And she pointed to a point on the droid's chest plating where the serial number T1-LB-5RTY had been stencilled, "I think we should call him Shorty. What do you think?"

"Its less of a mouthful." Cal said without looking up from the datapad.

"So Shorty, do you like your new name?" Lara asked, looking the droid in its face but the massive machine just stared back at her and she frowned, "See. Not a word."

Cal held up the datapad.

"That's because this model doesn't talk at all." He said and Lara frowned.

"But why would a droid that can't talk go to a public comm. booth?" she asked.

"It wouldn't." Cal replied.

"Does this mean I have to take him back?" Lara asked.

"No, he'll do." Cal said, "He can still take verbal instructions so we can relay instructions to him over the PTP link. Or at least I hope we can."

4.

Plodding across the starport the droid now known as Shorty headed towards the communications hub, walking right past the defence force post next to it without any of the troopers taking a second look. As far as they were concerned it was just another cargo handling droid and they did not notice the point-to-point communicator it held in one oversized hand. Without the ability to speak Shorty could not tell Cal and Lara when it had arrived at the hub so instead it just gently tapped the microphone of the PTP link once as a signal.

"Okay Shorty," Lara's voice responded, "head for one of the booths, plug in the credit stick and switch it to voice activation.

"And make sure it's a vacant booth." Cal's voice added just as the droid took a step towards the nearest booth despite it already being occupied.

Shorty then headed for the nearest empty booth and halted just outside as it tried to figure out a way to fit its massive frame inside. Giving up the droid crouched down and leant inside before carrying out its instructions, connecting the credit stick to the slot and as soon as the menu screen appeared the droid tapped it gently to switch to voice activation and held the PTP link close to the screen.

"Welcome to Crassis Communications." An automated voice said, "Please state call destination clearly."

"Aurek Station." Cal said, "Name search Udra."

"Connecting." The automated voice said, "Please wait for verification." Then there was a delay as the signal from the booth was relayed through the local subspace antenna and transmitted to Aurek Station which in turn sent a response to confirm that a connection had been made and to provide the results of the search, "Two Udras listed." The voice said, "Udra, Neri. Udra, Varn. Please select."

"Neri." Lara snapped.

"Calling." The automated voice replied before Cal could anything.

"Hello?" Neri's voice suddenly sounded and Lara's jaw dropped.

"Mom?" she said.

"Lara? Lara is that you?"

"Its both of us mom." Cal replied.

"Oh Cal thank the Force. Are you two okay?"

"We're fine mom." Cal said, "Look we need to meet you. We've got some ideas about who set Lara up but we'll need help from you and dad. Get Aunt Elle to-

"Your Aunt's not here Cal." Varn's voice then interrupted, "We took commercial transport to Moldas and then flew here in starfighters."

"Ben Karas has assigned Seth Ashran to help us find you." Neri added, "I think he wants rid of that jedi shadow as quickly as possible."

"Figures." Lara commented, "I bet that Seth's just waiting to try and arrest us both to take us back to Master Karas."

"Actually Master Kara has authorised us to take you back to Coruscant with us." Varn said.

"But you can't manage a deep space rendezvous?" Cal asked.

"Not unless you've got somewhere with internal hangar bays in mind son." Varn replied.

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"It'll have to be a surface meeting then." Cal said, "How soon can you get to the Crassis system?"

"Crassis?" Neri replied, "That's very close to Aurek Station isn't it?"

"Just one jump." Cal answered.

"And a short one at that." Lara added, "We can do it in under an hour."

"Then it shouldn't take us much longer than that." Varn said.

"Just get here as soon as you can." Cal said and then he winced as he realised that if the call was being monitored he had just given away their location. The mistake was mitigated only by the fact that it would take only minutes to trace the connection in any case, "As soon as you arrive establish a beacon with your Jedi order identity number in it. We'll rely instructions to you then."

"Okay son. We'll be with you soon."

"I love you both." Lara added.

"We love you too honey." Neri replied.

"Okay Shorty end the call." Cal then said and in the comm. booth Shorty shut off the transmission and retrieved the credit stick before standing up straight and starting to walk back towards the *False Hope*.

"So what now?" Lara asked, looking at Cal.

"Now we need to figure out where's a suitable place to meet up with mom and dad." He replied.
"So do we go for somewhere quiet? Or somewhere with a crowd to blend in to?"
"I think quiet's better. Somewhere that we can keep the ship out of sight but we can still be ready to escape if something goes wrong."
"What could possibly go wrong?" Lara asked, "Cal, mom and dad are here."
"I know." Cal said, "But why are they being allowed to try and take us back to Coruscant when there's already a Jedi shadow hunting us. Lara all of a sudden I've got a very bad feeling about this."

The pages of data that continued to scroll past on Tarris' screens were suddenly interrupted by the image of one of Aurek Station's flight control staff.

"Jedi Blake?" the woman asked.

"Yes, what is it?" Tarris replied.

"You asked to be informed if the other Jedi vessels left the station. Well all three just did."

Tarris sat up straight.

"Have they requested jump data?" he asked.

"They have. Shall I try to hold them?"

"No." Tarris replied, "Let them through. But I want to know where they are going and I want immediate clearance for take off. And I do mean immediate clearance."

"Spear flight is everyone okay?" Seth asked as the trio of starsaber-class starfighters dropped out of hyperspace in rapid succession.

"Spear two checking in." Varn replied.

"Spear three checking in." Neari added.

"Okay we're about three light minutes out from Crassis Major." Seth said, "And about two light hours from Crassis Minor with their current orbital positions. Master Udra do you want to start broadcasting that signal?"

"Of course. Broadcasting now." Varn responded and he began to transmit his identity code over and over again.

After a few minutes a short response came back on the same frequency, a series of numbers broken down into two sets. The series repeated itself three times and then ceased.

"Seth did you get that as well?" Varn asked.

"Copy that. Looks like planetary co-ordinates." Seth answered, "And judging by the time delay I'd say that it came from Crassis Major. I'm programming the co-ordinates into my nav computer. Follow me in."

As the three fighters began to move towards the nearby planet of Crassis Major Varn suddenly considered Seth's motives. The Jedi knight had been one of the first to accuse Lara of murder he knew and there was the possibility that he had been given instructions to deal with Cal and Lara that Varn and Neari knew nothing about. However, he had positioned his fighter at the front of the three-ship flight and Varn felt that he could take out Seth if he tried to fire on Cal and Lara from the air. Just in case he brought his fighter's targeting computer online.

Behind the starfighters another vessel dropped out of hyperspace, a starstorm-class courier. Inside Tarris studied his sensors and saw the three other craft just starting to enter the atmosphere of Crassis Major. Tarris paused to meditate on the situation; Cal and Lara would undoubtedly resist any attempt he made to arrest them. Normally Tarris would be confident of being able to subdue both of them before turning them over to the local authorities but the involvement of their parents and Seth made things more complicated. Tarris expected that Seth would either follow an order than he gave to him or would simply not get involved. But Varn and Neari Udra would undoubtedly intervene to protect their offspring, a clear-cut example of why the Jedi Code rejected such emotional attachment. At best this gave Tarris odds of two Jedi knights versus one padawan, two knights and a master. More likely Tarris would be facing the Udras alone and in the worst case Seth as well.

Activating his ship's communications system, Tarris signalled Crassis Major.

"Crassis Major Defence Forces." A voice responded.

"This is Jedi Tarris Blake. Put me through to General Drud immediately."

There was the sound of slitherhorn music in the Drud family home when the call from the defence force headquarters came through to General Joshua Drud, head of both the Crassis Major Defence Forces and the Drud family while he was sat at his desk catching up on family business that his younger brother Heddren had carried out while he had been carrying out his defence force duties.

"General Drud." He said simply, the communications unit having alerted him to the source of the call. Given that most incidents could be dealt with by his subordinates a call being placed to him at home was generally bad news.

"General there's a call coming in from a Jedi Tarris Blake." The officer at headquarters told him.

Ah, here it is. Josh thought to himself. Jedi were always bad news to deal with especially when his family, like the others descended from the original survey team needed to hide what they had spent two hundred years doing.

"Put him through." Josh said, glad that a Jedi's abilities to sense deception would not function over a communications line. Immediately the image of the defence force officer was replaced one of Tarris Blake sat in the cockpit of his ship, "General Drud here. How may I—"

"General I am on approach to your world now." Tarris said without giving Josh time to finish.

"Of course. Now how—" Josh began but again he was interrupted.

"You must put your forces on alert general. The fugitive Jedi Cal and Lara Udra are on your planet at this moment. I will require a force capable of taking on five Jedi assembling and placing under my direct authority."

"Five?" Josh exclaimed. Immediately he thought of Kyle Jenner, the Jedi knight assigned to the Narthis Sector before Cal and Lara Udra. He had fallen to the Dark Side and now operated in competition with the Founding Families. Though Josh was well aware that Lara was innocent of the crime she was accused of he was still concerned that she and Cal could forge an alliance with Kyle. Together they would present a powerful threat.

"Three other Jedi have arrived in the sector." Tarris explained and Josh breathed a sigh of relief, "I cannot be certain of their loyalties and I cannot fight them all alone general. Therefore I must requisition troops from you."

"Of course." Josh replied, "I'll put a full company of my best men at your disposal. They can be air mobile in twenty minutes."

"Excellent general." Tarris said, "Now there are three starsaber-class fighters entering your atmosphere now. I want them tracked and their flight paths sent to me. Then when my own ship is inside your atmosphere I will need you to raise your planet's shield."

"Raise the shield?" Josh replied, "But that will cut us off entirely."

"Exactly the point general. I do not want the fugitives escaping into space. Raise the shield."

"I'll need approval." Josh said, "We get hundreds of commercial flights in and out every hour. Plus the private craft. I can't just raise the shield without the permission of the Defence Ministry."

"Then I suggest you get to it general. I will be entering your atmosphere in eight minutes." Tarris said and then the channel went dead. Josh scowled at the thought of being ordered about by this Jedi but then his expression changed and a smile spread across his face. Then he activated his communicator again and waited while the connection was made.

"Hello Belle." He said when a blonde woman appeared on screen, "It seems we have an opportunity. Handled properly we can rid ourselves of six Jedi at once."

"Six?" Belle replied and she too smiled, "Oh Josh, do tell me more."

5.

Seth was not surprised to discover that the co-ordinates provided to them led to a deserted region of Crassis major. The terrain here consisted of deep canyons and caverns with little plant or animal life. This was the sort of terrain that Seth enjoyed flying over and normally he would descend to a level that put him below the top of the canyons. However, given that he did not know exactly how good a pilot Varn was and he knew for a fact that Neri's piloting experience was limited to small transports, he kept at a safer altitude instead. The sensors of his fighter showed nothing at all, but that was not surprising. There were many places around here that a relatively small starship could be hidden and it seemed reasonable that Cal and Lara would not leave their ship out in the open where it could be attacked.

Then as he approached the co-ordinates given Seth looked out of the canopy and saw that at the bottom of a canyon below someone had managed to mark a massive 'X' in the ground. Though how Cal or Lara could have managed that was a mystery to Seth. As far as he knew neither of them had the raw power or experience with the Force to lift anything big enough to create such a deep furrow in the ground.

"Spear flight this is Spear leader." Seth broadcast to the other two fighters, "Destination is immediately below us now. Decelerate and follow me in."

The three fighters set down on the ground around the large cross and as soon as Seth got out of his fighter he went for a closer look at the carving. Seeing the deep tracks around it he smiled as he realised how it had been created.

"A droid." He said out loud, "A droid did this."

"Cal and Lara don't own a droid." Neri commented as she jumped down from her cockpit.

"You mean they didn't." Varn corrected her, "Who knows about now?"

"It would take a loading droid to do this. They could have taken it from that freighter they destroyed." Seth pointed out but neither Neri nor Varn replied to this. Then Seth looked up and frowned, "Either of you hear that?" he asked.

"Hear what?" Varn asked.

"It sounded like barking." Seth replied.

"Local wildlife?" Neri suggested.

"Perhaps." Seth said as he stood up. Then suddenly he felt the presence in the Force of something living heading towards them and he added, "Over there!" and he pointed to a narrow gap in the rock face at the side of the canyon.

From out of this a dog of the breed favoured by many human military and law enforcement groups around the galaxy emerged and it bounded towards the jedi. Upon reaching them it ran from one to another, sniffing at them in turn.

"Hello, who are you?" Neri said and she knelt down beside the dog, "It's got a collar." She added and she took hold of the small metal disk hanging from it, "My name is Ghost." She read out loud and then she smiled, "And I belong to Cal and Lara Udra."

Varn looked around.

"Cal Udra!" he yelled, "Get down here this instant. Did you try and swap your little sister for a dog again?"

"No sir." Cal replied cheerfully as he stepped out of the same gap in the rocks as Ghost had just rushed out of, followed soon after by Lara.

"Mom! Dad!" Lara cried out and she rushed up to her mother and threw her arms around her.

"Oh its great to see you too honey." Neri replied, "But what's going on?"

"A good question." Varn added, staring at Cal, "I hope you have a good answer."

"Why me?" Cal replied and he looked at Lara, "She's the one that got framed for murder."

"Only because he said it was me." Lara added and she glared at Seth who did not reply.

"Just tell us what's going on around here." Varn said.

"The Founding Families are up to something dad." Cal replied.

"Something? That's an understatement." Lara added, "They're nuts. Dad they're rushing around the sector gathering up everything to do with the Sith they can get their hands on."

"Is that why none of the ships salvaged from the Phillos system so far have been the Sith ones?" Seth asked.

"Possibly." Cal answered.

"You knew about this?" Varn said, glaring at Seth.

"I only knew that no Sith starships had reached the breaking yards they were supposed to." He said, "Kraus was trying to figure out why when he was killed."

"We think it was Belle Shill." Cal said.

"Well it certainly wasn't me." Lara added, scowling at Seth.

"But what do they hope to achieve?" Neri added.

"Ah. Well we're not entirely sure about that." Cal said, "But we do know it has something to do with Delvad."

"The ocean planet?" Seth asked.

"That's the one." Cal replied, "The person is safely under lock and key."

"The person?" Neri said.

"We caught her trying to smuggle components for a hyperspace cannon into the sector." Cal said, "We took her into custody."

"Then blasted the cargo apart." Lara added with a grin.

"And exactly how many innocents were aboard that freighter when it blew?" Seth asked.

"No one innocent." Lara said, "There were a whole load of thugs working for Uggaro the Hutt though. Ghost here saved me from having my throat cut by one of them."

"I had hoped that Lorna Fayl would give us more information about what was going on." Cal continued, "But Han Shill dragged her off somewhere and sent a squad of his goons to kill us."

"We were told they were sent to arrest you." Varn said.

"They burst in firing machine guns at us dad." Lara replied, "The words 'You're under arrest' were not used once."

"This is all well and good," Seth said, "but the pair of you are still wanted fugitives."

"Yes." Varn agreed, "Come with us back to Coruscant and tell the council what you've told us. They'll get to the bottom of the matter."

It was then that there was the sound of repulsorlifts from overhead and looking up the Jedi saw a small transport ship descending towards them, its wings folding up as it came in to land.

"Oh no." Neri said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Tarris landed his ship a short distance from where the other five Jedi stood and as soon as the ship's access ramp touched the ground he strode down it.

"Cal and Lara Udra you are under arrest!" he called out, "You will surrender to me."

"Not likely." Cal replied, frowning and his hand moved towards the lightsaber at his belt.

"Cal no." Varn ordered, "I'll handle this." And he stepped in between Cal and Tarris, "Jedi Shadow Blake you are to stand down." He said, "Cal and Lara have already surrendered themselves to me and I will be taking them back to Coruscant."

"They should stand trial here for their crimes." Tarris responded, "Now get out of my way Master Udra. This does not concern you."

"Like hell it doesn't concern us!" Neri snapped and she stood beside her husband, "You want them? Well you go through us first." And she drew her lightsaber.

Tarris looked at Seth.

"Jedi Ashran," he said, "where do you stand?"

"Err." Seth replied, suddenly uncertain of what to do. Seeing two groups of Jedi seemingly about to do battle with one another was not something that happened often. Then he stepped towards Tarris with his hands held out in front of him, "Look what Cal and Lara have said here today makes some sense. Maybe if they were sent back to Coruscant rather than being handed over to the locals. I know Master Karas would rather not have to bother with them."

"However the local sector governments would." Tarris replied.

"Senator Torin." Cal said, "The Torins are one of the Founding Families. She must have put them up to this."

"You aren't taking them." Varn said and he too drew his lightsaber. For now though, both his and Neri's weapons remained inactive.

"It's treason then." Tarris said and he held his own lightsaber out in front of him, aligned horizontally and then one at a time he activated the two blades.

Instantly Cal and Lara drew their lightsabers as well and there were multiple sounds of 'snap-hiss' as all four of the Udras ignited their weapons.

"There are five of us and only one of you." Cal said to Tarris, "You do the math."

"I count only four of you." Tarris replied.

"I'm sorry." Seth said, looking towards the Udras and backing away, "I can't be part of this."

"Four is still more than one." Lara said and then there was more noise from overhead. At the same time there were flashes of light from above the clouds as Crassis major's planetary defence shield was activated.

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

"My reinforcements." Tarris said, "Did you really think I would be so foolish as to come here alone? I put in a call to General Drud as soon as I arrived in the system. An entire company of his best men are on the way and with the planetary shield up you can't escape from me again."

Seth frowned as he looked up and searched the sky.

"Those aren't transports." He said, "In fact there's only one craft up there. And I think it's a fighter."

In the cockpit of her davaab-class starfighter, a mandalorian designed and built ship Belle Shill activated her targeting computer as soon as she picked up the Jedi ships on her sensors. There were four craft visible to her in total, three starfighters clustered together and a courier vessel not too far from them. "All too easy." She said to herself as she locked onto the closest fighter and angling her fighter downwards she squeezed the trigger of its single pulse wave cannon.

"Run!" Cal yelled as the diving starfighter opened fire.

The stream of powerful spatial distortions ripped through the three starsabers as they sat vulnerable on the ground, twisting them into unrecognisable scrap moments before the fuel and munitions they carried detonated and all six Jedi along with Ghost were blown off their feet by the blast.

Dazed, Lara lay on her back and it was only when she felt Ghost licking her face that she regained her senses and sat up.

"Cal get your dog off my face." She said, pushing Ghost away. Then she remembered what had happened and quickly scooped up her lightsaber. All around her the other Jedi were also regaining their senses, all except Tarris. The Jedi shadow lay in a heap with blood pouring from a large gash in his head where a piece of flying debris from the exploding fighters had struck him. Neari scrambled to him and inspected the wound.

"It's bad." She said, "He needs treatment urgently."

"I think a place to hide is more urgent." Seth said as he looked up at the davaab-class fighter that was now swooping back around for another pass.

"Into the caves." Cal said, "We can hide out there."

Seth and Varn rushed to Neari's side and between them they picked up the injured Jedi shadow and carried him along with them.

"Who is that?" Neari said as they headed for the cave opening.

"It's a mandalorian fighter." Seth replied, "Davaab-class. So it could be anyone. Mandos aren't picky about who they sell to."

"Belle." Cal said, frowning, "The first time we encountered her she was piloting a davaab-class fighter. General Drud must have tipped her off about us and she saw the opportunity to get rid of us all at once."

"Well if she still wants us," Varn said, "she's going to have to land and come into this cave after us. Then we'll see just how good she is."

Belle snarled as she saw the Jedi run towards the rock face and vanish inside a cave that she could not reach. However, she had clearly seen that her first volley had injured Tarris Blake and she activated her communications.

"Josh are you there?" she signalled on a private encrypted channel.

"I'm here." Josh's voice replied softly, suggesting that he may not be alone, "Report your status."

"Tarris is down but the remaining Jedi have fled into the caves. I've taken out their fighters but I can't target the Jedi themselves from the air. Where are your men?"

"About five minutes out." Josh answered.

"Five minutes? Stang Josh I thought this was supposed to be rapid reaction." Belle said.

"I had to delay them long enough to give you a chance to deal with the Jedi." Josh replied, "Don't worry though, they'll do your job for you." And then he broke the link.

In his headquarters Josh looked around at the rows of consoles manned by military personnel monitoring feeds from all over the planet.

"We've just had an update on the Jedi fugitives." He called out, "Apparently Jedi Blake is down which means all of the remaining Jedi are to be considered hostile. Tell the attack force to go in shooting. Tell them to shoot to kill."

6.

Belle detected the approaching troop transports and withdrew to a safer distance. It would become significantly more difficult to retain deniability about Shill Security involvement if any of the defence force sensors recorded her presence.

Meanwhile the pilots of the transports followed the plume of smoke being given off by the burning remains of the three Jedi fighters and they set down in a diamond formation before ramps dropped and disgorged more than a hundred armed and armoured combat troops. The first of them crouched down, forming a perimeter around their transports while the others investigated Tarris' ship.

"Look sir! Droids!" one of the soldiers shouted as he pointed to one of the massive footprints left when Shorty had marked out the cross in the ground. The imprints left by the droid were much easier to see in the hard ground than the much lighter imprints of the Jedi.

"The tracks go off in this direction." The soldier then added and he pointed towards a trail that seemed to lead up the side of the canyon.

"First platoon follow those tracks!" the company commander yelled, "Second platoon stay with the transports and third and fourth spread out and make sure there aren't any nasty surprises lying in wait for us."

"Looks like they're splitting up." Lara said as she watched from the cave mouth, using the Force to mask her presence.

"How many are staying put though?" Seth asked.

"About a quarter of them." She replied, "But a lot of the rest don't seem to be going too far away. They could get back pretty quickly if – Uh-oh."

"What?" Varn asked.

"Some of them are heading this way." Lara replied as she ducked back inside the cave.

"Do you know if there's another way out?" Varn asked, looking at Cal and Lara and Cal nodded.

"The cavern opens out back there and there's a large entrance. It's where we left the ship." He said.

"A ship?" Neri said as they began to move further into the cave, "Can it get us to Aurek Station quickly?"

"I don't think us flying you to Aurek Station is a good idea." Cal replied, "As soon as the station figure's out that we're aboard they're likely to open fire."

"Even if they don't shoot us down Administrator Varr'kay is likely to have us arrested and turned over to the local authorities." Lara added.

Neri then looked at her husband.

"We really need to get Tarris to a medical facility." She said, "There's only so much I can do here."

"Tarris' ship is still intact." Seth pointed out, "That can get us back to Aurek Station pretty quickly. Providing we can get the planetary shield down."

"Think they'll just drop it if one of us asks?" Varn asked his children.

"I doubt it." Lara replied, "Those are defence force troops out there and I wouldn't be surprised if Belle was flying air support especially for them."

"That fighter pulled out when the transports arrived." Neri reminded her.

"I agree with Lara." Cal said, "Belle may be worried about leaving evidence of her involvement, but she'll not run away until she sees us all dead." Then he pointed ahead of him to where the *False Hope* had come into view, "Look, there's the ship."

"That's not your ship." Seth replied as he saw the *False Hope* and instantly realised that it was not the vessel issued to the Udras by the Jedi Order.

"What? Do you really think we've only got one?" Lara replied.

"We thought we might need a spare and we knew where one had been left." Cal said, keeping his statement vague enough that he was not actually telling a lie that Seth or his parents may pick up on but was still not letting them know that he and Lara were now living on Dorn Station, "Everyone on board." He added as the access ramp lowered automatically as the Jedi approached and Ghost bounded up it ahead of them.

"How did you do that?" Seth asked, "I didn't see you use a remote to- Ah." And he smiled as he saw Shorty standing at the top of the ramp beside the controls.

"Ghost's not our only new friend." Lara said, "Mom, dad, this is Shorty."

"Lara chose the name?" Varn said, looking at Cal and he smiled.

"We told him to open the hatch as soon as we got back." Cal said and glancing towards Lara he added, "He knows how to follow orders."

Lara just frowned while Shorty raised the ramp now that all of the Jedi were safely aboard.

"Help me get Tarris to the medical bay." Neari said to Lara, "Let them fly the ship." Then as Lara helped her mother carry Tarris away the three male Jedi all rushed to the cockpit. Cal got there first and was just about to sit in the pilot's seat when Seth put a hand on his shoulder.

"That's my seat." He said, "I'm the best pilot here." And Cal stepped aside to let Seth take the controls of the ship. Then just as he was about to sit in the co-pilot's seat it was Varn's turn to stop Cal sitting down.

"I'm pretty sure I'm a better gunner than you son." He said.

"Then what shall I do?" Cal asked.

"Just sit behind us and watch how it's done." Seth said and Cal frowned as he sat in one of the chairs behind the pilot and co-pilot stations and strapped himself in.

The group of soldiers that had followed Shorty's tracks around from the canyon to the large cave opening were the first to come across the *False Hope*, hearing its engines power up just as they neared the opening.

"This is first platoon to company command." The officer in charge of the soldiers signalled, "Activity in the cave ahead. Sounds like a repulsorlift. Requesting immediate air support."

"Copy that first platoon." The company's commanding officer responded, "Transports taking off now."

But then the sound of the *False Hope's* repulsorlift engines grew louder and the vessel shot out of the cave and rapidly climbed skywards.

From her fighter, still circling far overhead Belle also witnessed the *False Hope's* launch.

"Stang!" she exclaimed, banking around to line up the nose of the starfighter on the delaya-class ship. Belle knew that the bigger courier possessed starfighter level performance and boasted superior weapons and defences to her own ship. Her best chance lay in being the first one to fire. Fortunately from her point of view she knew herself to be a better pilot than Cal and she believed that this would give her the advantage.

"Incoming!" Varn snapped, "Davaab-class starfighter."

"I see her." Seth replied.

"Well shouldn't we turn?" Cal asked, peering over his father's shoulder at the console.

"She'll be expecting that." Seth replied, "Master Udra, if you wouldn't mind could you put a quick volley across her nose?"

"Certainly." Varn replied with a smile and a moment later bright red blasts erupted from the *False Hope's* twin laser turrets.

The suddenness of the attack startled Belle. She had expected the *False Hope* to turn towards her and present her with a target that was coming at her head on, perfectly positioned for her to shoot down. But now not only was the *False Hope* still flying at an angle that made targeting her harder but the ship was firing on her as well and as she rolled her starfighter out of the path of the laser blasts she found herself rapidly losing altitude.

"Got her!" Seth snapped as Belle's fighter zoomed past, heading towards the ground below and he fired the *False Hope's* manoeuvring thrusters to pivot the ship around sharply and Belle's fighter suddenly appeared in the canopy ahead of them.

"I see her." Varn exclaimed and he opened fire again. This time the stream of fire was aimed directly at Belle's starfighter and one of its wings was blown clear.

"Dad you got her! She's going down!" Cal yelled as he saw Belle's fighter tumbling towards the ground. But then there was a brief flash as the starfighter's cockpit canopy blew off, followed a moment later by the ejection seat being propelled upwards as the fighter continued to plummet downwards.

"She's no threat now." Varn said as he watched a parachute open.

"Are you kidding?" Cal exclaimed, "That's Belle Shill. She's always dangerous."

"Not to us right now she isn't." Seth pointed out, "And if we can't fly back to Aurek Station in this ship then we need to get back to Tarris' ship." And he turned the *False Hope* back towards the canyon where Tarris' vessel was located.

The troop transports that had launched scattered as the *False Hope* came zooming towards them.

Although they were armed none of them were designed for air-to-air combat and their crews knew it.

Instead they pulled back to a safe distance while they signalled for help from the closest airbase while the troops on the ground sought what cover they could.

Seth brought the ship down directly over Tarris' vessel and hovered there.

"Take over." He said to Cal and Cal leapt forwards to take over piloting the ship.

"Where are you two going?" he asked as both Seth and Varn moved towards the exit of the cockpit.

"We'll drop down to Tarris' ship with your mother and him." Varn explained, "We'll head up for the shield while you and Lara take this ship to the closest shield generator station. If you can take it out we should be able to slip through and get Tarris back to Aurek Station."

"What about us?" Cal asked, "Lara and me I mean."

"There's definitely something odd going on around here." Seth said, "I'll try and convince Master Karas to investigate further."

"Until then I'm afraid you and Lara will have to remain here." Varn added, "If you come back with us now you'll be detained as soon as we get to Aurek Station and we'll never get you back to the Jedi Council. I'll see what I can do about convincing them to get involved directly." Then he smiled, "May the Force be with you son." He added and he and Seth rushed from the cockpit.

Seth was the first to leap out of the *False Hope's* ventral cargo hatch. As he dropped he ignited his lightsaber and angled his descent to land on the top of Tarris' vessel. Crouching down he looked around, searching for any sign of the defence force troops.

"Clear." he signalled and a moment later Varn followed him down, also igniting his lightsaber. Then the two Jedi leapt down to the ground beside the ship and Varn rushed up inside to make sure that it was empty.

"Okay Neari, bring him down." He said into his PTP link, "Seth get the ship ready for launch."

In the cargo hold of the *False Hope* Neari looked at Shorty.

"Okay lower us down." She said.

Tarris was strapped into a stretcher that had been hooked up to the main cargo winch while Neari herself was wearing a harness that was in turn connected to the stretcher.

Shorty nodded and activated the winch, lowering Neari and Tarris down to the ground where Varn was waiting to meet them. Swiftly he disconnected them both from the winch line and raised his PTP link.

"We're clear. Go!" he ordered and the *False Hope* lifted up into the sky as Varn and Neari carried Tarris into his ship.

"Stand by with the lasers." Cal said as Lara rushed into the cockpit and sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"What for?" she asked.

"Dad wants us to knock out the planetary shield locally."

"But won't the generator's be armoured? Wouldn't a torpedo-"

"A torpedo would destroy everything within a kilometre or two." Cal interrupted, "The lasers will be enough, even if we have to make a couple of passes. Trust me."

Lara took hold of the control column in front of her, checking that it was tied into the ship's lasers.

"Ready." She said and then an alarm sounded.

"Just in time as well." Cal said, "We'll be coming up on the shield generator soon and I've got two contacts closing from behind."

"Those transports?" Lara asked, but Cal shook his head.

"Too fast." He said, "My guess is stinger fighters from the defence force. I'm switching the shields to aft."

"But what if the generator is defended?" Lara asked.

"Then you'll just have to take those out before they can fire at us." Cal replied.

There was a flash from outside the ship as the pursuing fighters began firing.

"Cal they're firing at us." Lara exclaimed.

"Thanks." Cal replied, "I never noticed." Then on the horizon ahead he saw a massive dish like structure pointing skywards and he smiled, "There's the shield." He said, pointing through the canopy.

Lara frowned as she concentrated on aiming at the shield generator. The display in front of her showed the outline of the building and the moment the targeting crosshairs were placed centrally over it she squeezed the triggers. The bright red blasts of energy found their target, striking the shield generator. But all they achieved was to scorch the outside.

"It didn't work!" Lara snapped.

"Keep trying." Cal ordered and Lara fired again. Still the blasts did nothing however and there was another flash as the two stinger starfighters struck again.

"Cal we need to get out of here." Lara said.

"Not while that shield's still up." He said, "We need to find a way to-" and he trailed off.

"To what Cal?"

Cal grinned.

"I've got an idea." He said, "it'll take out the generator and get us out of here quickly I hope. I'm equalising the shields."

Cal then cut back on the repulsorlift engine power and the *False Hope* slowed.

"Cal what are you doing?" Lara asked in amazement, "Those fighters-"

"Forget the fighters." Cal said as he brought the *False Hope* to a dead stop directly above the shield generator and then he angled the ship pointing straight up.

"Make sure you're strapped in." he said to Lara.

"Oh no, you're not going to-" Lara said, scrabbling to secure her harness, "Cal I've got a bad feeling about this." And then Cal fired the *False Hope's* ion drives at full thrust.

Twenty-one ion engines firing together represented an enormous release of energy, all directed straight down and the air caught fire all around the shield generator. For a brief moment the generator's armoured housing withstood the incredible temperatures but then it simply shattered and the generator exploded as the *False Hope* shot skywards like a missile atop a column of flame.

The haze of the planetary defence shield flickered and Seth accelerated Tarris' ship upwards, rushing to get through the gap before the controllers on the ground could refocus other generators to compensate for the loss of one.

"Will we make it?" Neari called out from behind him as she felt the ship moving.

"Easily." Seth replied.

"What about Cal and Lara?" Varn then asked and he stood looking out of the canopy at the front of the ship. In the distance a tiny dark speck moved rapidly upwards, leaving a bright trail of fire behind it.

"Oh I think they'll be fine as well." Seth said.