

# STAR WARS

## TALES OF THE JEDI



### III-X: CLUE

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...

**CLUE**

LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE UDRAS' BEHAVIOUR, A NEWLY HEALED TARRIS BLAKE RETURNS TO CRASSIS MAJOR TO INVESTIGATE THE ATTACK THAT INJURED HIM...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.  
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# 1.

Tarris Blake found that he could not focus his vision properly when he opened his eyes and he blinked several times. It was then he realised that he was floating in a vat of liquid, a mask over his nose and mouth allowing him to breathe.

"Doctor he's awake." He heard a voice say, distorted by the fluid it was not possible to tell whether it was male or female or identify a species.

Realising that he was suspended in a tank of bacta, the fluid used in medical facilities throughout the known galaxy Tarris turned his head as much as his air line would allow and he saw a group of figures converging on the tank. One of these was a droid with a humanoid body and it began to inspect the instruments monitoring both the tank and Tarris himself.

"The patient's vital signs are approaching normal." The droid said as a human and a bith dressed in the white typical of medical staff stood just behind it.

"Is he strong enough to tolerate being removed from the tank?" the bith medic asked.

"Indications are good." The droid replied and the two medics looked at one another.

"Do it." The human ordered and Tarris heard the sudden sound of the bacta being rapidly drained from the tank.

Tarris himself was lifted up out of the top of the tank and laid down on a bed while his breathing mask was removed.

"Jedi Blake? Can you hear me?" the bith doctor asked, shining a light in his eyes one at a time.

"Yes." Tarris rasped, "I hear you."

"Do you remember what happened?" the human then asked him.

"I- I-," Tarris began as he tried to recall events before waking up in the bacta tank. The last thing he remembered was confronting two of the fugitives he had come to the Narthis Sector to hunt. Cal and Lara Udra were a brother and sister team assigned here by the Jedi Order until the younger of the two, Lara, had been accused of murdering another jedi. Rather than let his sister stand trial for the killing Cal had broken her out of custody and the pair had gone on the run. This combined with the revelation that another mysterious individual responsible for numerous crimes in the sector was in fact Kyle Jenner; the previous jedi knight assigned here had drawn the attention of the jedi shadows. These were special agents of the jedi order sworn to root out and destroy all traces of the Dark Side of the Force, whether these be ancient Sith artefacts or individuals committed to evil. Cal and Lara's parents, also members of the Jedi Order, had come to the Narthis sector to try and help their children and by tracking them Tarris had been led right to Cal and Lara. Tarris had requested a unit of local troops to support him against them but before they could arrive another party had intervened, "There was a starfighter." He said. Then a sudden thought struck him, "This is Aurek Station." He said as he realised that he had been brought to the Republic's primary navigation beacon in the sector from Crassis Major where the encounter with Cal and Lara had taken place, "How did I get here?"

"I believe that three other jedi brought you." The human doctor replied as a nurse passed Tarris a robe.

"Describe them." Tarris ordered.

"They were all human. Two of them were middle aged, a man and a woman." The doctor replied and Tarris guessed that this was a reference to Cal and Lara's parents, "The third was slightly younger. He's outside now."

Tarris frowned as he realised that the third jedi was one of the knights assigned to the nearby enclave on Moldas. His name was Seth Ashran and he was an experienced pilot. He had accompanied the Udras here and presumably remained behind to monitor Tarris' condition while they fled back to Coruscant, possibly taking Cal and Lara with them.

"Send him in." Tarris said and the bith doctor turned and left the room. Then moments later a man in jedi robes entered without the bith, "Jedi Ashran." Tarris said, glaring at Seth, "I ordered you to assist me and you refused. Explain yourself."

"Something's going on in this sector." Seth replied, "Something bigger than just a couple of young jedi. Somebody tried to take us out with a davaab-class starfighter."

"That is a mandalorian craft." Tarris pointed out, "The mandalorians have a history of collaborating with the enemies of the Republic and the Jedi order. Including the Sith. Cal and Lara Udra could easily have made a deal with some of them to kill us."

"Yeah, I know that." Seth said, "But it was Cal and Lara that made sure we both made it out alive. They even took out a local shield generator so we could escape Crassis Major."

Immediately upon leaving the medical section and telling Seth that he could go in the bith doctor made his way towards the main hangar bay, specifically to the area where the Republic Navy's ships were located. There amongst the pilots checking their craft he saw a human woman with blonde hair and he stared at her until she noticed him. He saw her say something to the other pilots and then walk in his direction.

"What's up doc?" she asked.

"Lieutenant Shill, you asked me to keep you informed of the jedi's condition." The doctor replied.

"I know I did. Is there news? Or did you just come here to remind me of what you're doing?" the woman said.

"He is awake. The other one is with him now."

"So he's out of the gunk?"

"Indeed. I have no doubt that he is almost fully healed. Now about my debt to-

"Your debt is forgiven doctor." The woman said, "Now get out of here and tell no one that we spoke. Understood?"

The bith doctor nodded and then scurried away. As he left the woman shook her head slowly.

"Oh Belle you nerf herder." She said to herself, "Is it really too much to ask for you take out a few jedi?"

Tarris felt somewhat stiff as he walked back to his ship, accompanied by Seth. This was a side effect of having spent so much time the bacta tank healing rather than from any lingering effect of his injuries.

"So tell me how Cal and Lara Udra expected the ambush." He said without looking at Seth.

"They claimed that the fighter was being flown by Belle Shill." Seth replied, "She's a special agent for the private military company-"

"Yes I know." Tarris interrupted, "I met her in the Phillos system. She thinks herself more powerful than she really is."

"Well according to Cal and Lara she's the one that really killed Kraus and framed Lara."

"Jedi Ashran." Tarris said, coming to a rapid halt and turning on the spot to face the younger jedi, "Do I need to remind you that it was you who identified Padawan Lara Udra as the killer of Jedi Trevan? From the security recordings."

"Yes I know." Seth replied.

"And if the Udras case is so strong then why did they not simply present their case to Master Karas?"

"Ah." Seth said and he glanced downwards for a moment. Then looking up again he went on, "Master Karas has been somewhat harsh when it comes to the Udras."

"Because of his prophecy?"

"I think so. The fact that the council told him to forget about it didn't help. I don't think Cal believed that he or his sister would get a fair hearing. Now that the local government wants to try them both they think the same about that. They've got a theory that the Founding Families are up to something involving the Sith." Tarris frowned briefly at the mention of the Sith.

"And what do you think Jedi Ashran?" he asked.

"I've come across a few instances of members of the Founding Families seemingly attempting to obtain Sith artefacts and it was information I came across that took us to the Phillos system in the first place. I know that there's a black market for Sith artefacts and the fact that we try and control them just makes them more sought after in some quarters, but the way these people go after them is more than just an interest in antiques. They're after something specific."

Tarris paused as he considered this. Then he turned around again and continued towards the hangar.

"Where are you going?" Seth called out after him.

"To my ship Jedi Ashran. And from there back to Crassis Major and the sight of the ambush. An attempt was made on my life and I intend to investigate it. No matter where it leads me." Tarris replied and then he looked over his shoulder at Seth, "You will accompany me." He added.

*Surprise.*

Seth had not expected this. Previously the jedi shadow had rejected all attempts by other jedi to join him, but now he was actively encouraging it.

"Sure. Why not?" he said.

Belle Shill rushed through the doorway of her apartment, hurrying to get to the communicator before it went to the answering machine.

"Belle." She said without waiting for whoever was calling to say anything or even checking the caller's identity on the unit's display screen.

"Hello little sister." The voice of her older by eight minutes twin brother Han said.

"Hi Han." She replied, "So who needs killing this time?"

"What do you mean 'this time'?" Han answered, "You screwed up your last attempt."

"Hey look Han I'm sorry about losing the fighter, but-"

"But nothing Belle." Han interrupted, "I've just heard from Erin and she says that Tarris Blake has just been taken from the bacta tank you put him in. That means out of the five jedi I asked you to deal with not one of them is out of action. What's worse is that according to Erin he just left Aurek Station a few minutes ago with that other one. Seth Ashran I think his name is. And guess what? They're coming back here."

"Stang." Belle exclaimed.

"Look, just get out to where your ship went down and make sure that there's absolutely nothing left that can lead them back to us." Han told her and then he added, "Don't fail me again." And the line went dead.

Belle turned and looked at the wall-mounted chronometer. Aurek Station had been built fairly close to the Crassis system and the route between them was well charted. Combined with the high hyperspace speed that she knew Tarris' vessel was capable of that meant that the trip would take approximately an hour, not long for her to arrange a cover up. In fact it left her with no time at all in which to plan it so instead she ran back out of her apartment intending to come up with a plan on the way.

## 2.

Seth was further surprised that Tarris requested that he pilot the shadow's starship, a starstorm-class courier named the *Star of Light* to Crassis Major while he sat in the vessel's sparsely decorated rear section and meditated.

"We're entering the atmosphere now." Seth called out but Tarris did not respond and Seth snorted, unsure of whether he should repeat himself or not. Opting not to he instead flew the ship towards the area of Crassis Major where he had last landed, that time in a starfighter that had been destroyed on the ground along with two others. Seth still considered himself fortunate that he had not been killed along with it. The three wrecked fighters were located at the bottom of a ravine and not far away, spread over a much larger area were the remains of the davaab-class fighter that had attacked the Jedi. Looking out of the *Star of Light's* viewport Seth saw that there was also another craft located nearby, a small atmospheric transport and for a moment he was concerned, remembering that the local defence forces were under the command of Josh Drud, the head of one of the Founding Families and there was no telling why they were down there. But as the ship descended further he saw that the transport instead bore police markings and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Something was bothering you Jedi Ashran?" Tarris asked from behind him.

"I just thought for a moment that we could be walking into another trap." Seth replied.

"I have considered that possibility myself." Tarris said, "When we land I will exit the ship first and you will follow. I am more likely to be able to sense an impending attack."

"Modest as well." Seth muttered.

"Something you wish to add Jedi Ashran?"

"No. Oh, but you can just call me Seth you know."

"I am aware of that Jedi Ashran."

Seth set the ship down about a hundred metres from the outer edge of the wreckage and as the access ramp was lowered beneath it a group of three uniformed individuals approached. Two of these were human and both wore local police uniforms while the third was a much shorter Sullustan in a sector ranger's uniform. The sector rangers were the interstellar law enforcement agency of the Republic and it came as no surprise that they were on hand to investigate an aerial battle in the atmosphere of the sector's capital world.

"This area is restricted." The Sullustan announced as Tarris strode down the access ramp with Seth following behind. But when he saw that the new arrivals were both Jedi knights his jaw dropped momentarily, "I'm sorry. I was not informed that you would be arriving." He added.

"Of course you weren't." Tarris said and he walked right past the three law enforcement officers.

"My name is Agent Rivv Tarr." The Sullustan began but then Tarris cut him off.

"Your name does not matter." He said, "Tell me what you have discovered here. Can you tell me who flew this ship?"

"Ah, no. That is not at present." Agent Tarr answered, "I'm waiting on an expert coming in to survey the remains. Then we'll-"

"That will not be necessary." Tarris said, interrupting yet again, "Jedi Ashran here is an expert in most types of starship. He should be able to answer my questions."

So that's why you brought me along. Seth thought to himself. You needed me to tell you who was piloting this thing. And he smiled.

"That looks like the cockpit." He said, pointing towards the centre of the wreckage, "The flight recorder should be close to that so I'll start there." And he began to pick his way through the wreckage; careful not to stand on anything that could turn out to be a vital clue.

Meanwhile Tarris looked at the Sullustan.

"I take it you have adequate security arrangements in place." He said.

"Indeed I do." Agent Tarr replied, "The Crassis Major police have provided me with enough officers to establish a perimeter at five hundred metres."

Belle moved quietly between the rocks towards the crash site. When she had ejected from the starfighter she had landed quite some distance away from where her ship had crashed so this terrain was not familiar to her. After her landing she had been careful to conceal her parachute and given that it did not seem to have been discovered yet she concentrated on reaching the wreckage that the authorities had discovered instead. Spotting movement in the distance Belle stopped behind a rocky outcrop, took out a set of

magnifiers and looked around. At intervals all around the crash site she saw the familiar uniforms of the planetary police, obviously placed there to keep people away. But whoever had put them there clearly intended only for them to warn off anyone who happened to come along, despite the location being in a remote and uninhabited area. This was given away by the fact that each of the officers was patrolling individually. If their leader had expected any real trouble then they would have had them patrolling in pairs and likely armed them more heavily than just their standard sidearms.

She then smiled as she turned the magnifiers towards the wreck itself. These patrolling police officers actually made it easier for Belle to get close to the wreckage. All she had to do was kill one of them and take their uniform. Unless anyone looked closely at her she would then appear to be amongst the investigation team. However, her smile vanished when she spotted the starstorm-class vessel landed near the crash site and she realised that the Jedi had beaten her here. This did not change her plan though, the presence of the Jedi just meant that things had become more urgent.

Turning her attention back to the patrolling police guards Belle noted the size and build of each of them. A poorly fitting uniform could easily give her away to the others so she needed to select her victim carefully. She spotted a blue-skinned wroonian amongst the guards. The near human police officer was actually male, but his height and build looked close enough to Belle's own to be convincing and she put away her magnifiers, now simply watching him with her eyes alone. As she watched him get close Belle drew a compact slugthrower pistol and screwed a silencer to the muzzle. The weapon ought to allow her to despatch the wroonian from a distance, but there was a flaw to this. Although all of the uniformed police wore armoured vests that would likely prove quite capable of stopping a low velocity bullet, Belle needed the uniform intact and so would be aiming for her target's head rather than centre mass as was usual. But this was quite a tricky prospect even for an accomplished marksman like Belle. Even the slightest error could result in a miss or even worse, just clip the target and allow him to cry out. Therefore in her other hand Belle drew a narrow bladed knife and then she crept closer to where the wroonian seemed to be walking towards, using the rocks to keep her out of sight.

Sure enough the wroonian walked straight past Belle, seemingly oblivious to her presence. Belle aimed her pistol at the back of his head as he carried on walking but held her fire. With practiced grace she moved forwards after him, avoiding making any unnecessary noise until the wroonian was within arms reach and only then did she strike. Belle lunged forwards and wrapped her knife hand around in front of the wroonian with the blade held vertically. She forced the knife up, driving it into the wroonian under his jaw and into his brain and she twisted it. There was a brief grunt of surprise that became a gurgle as the wroonian's own blood flowed down his throat and he slumped backwards into Belle's waiting grasp.

Moving quickly she dragged the body into the rocks and laid it down on the ground. Then she plucked the dead officer's point-to-point communicator from his chest and clipped it to her own, inserting the earpiece into her own ear so that she could listen in on the police communications and then dashed back to where she had killed the wroonian. There she kicked at the ground where some of his cobalt blue blood had fallen on it until none could be seen. Then she also did her best to disguise the furrows left where she had dragged the body. This did not need to be perfect, but it did need to conceal the trail left where her victim's heels had dug into the dirt. With this done Belle first stripped the wroonian of his uniform and then took off her own clothes and swapped them for the police uniform and armour. She tucked her long blonde hair under the cap that came with the uniform and adjusted its peak so that would partially obscure her face and then after tucking her own weapons into the pockets of her disguise and concealing her clothes nearby Belle started walking towards the wreckage.

The theory of starship flight recorders was that they were supposed to be able to survive any accident. However, the Davaab-class vessel had not crashed as a result of an accidental systems' failure or pilot error. It had been shot down and the energy of the laser cannons used to shoot it down had succeeded in frying the recorder.

"Well we're not getting anything useful out of this." Seth said as he examined the charred and melted recording device and then he shook it and there was a rattle as loose parts inside moved about, "Varn Udra did a right number on this."

"Is there nothing else we could use to identify the occupant of this vessel?" Tarris asked.

"Well we could try taking back the consoles." Seth suggested as he looked at the ruined cockpit, "If the pilot ever got into this ship without wearing gloves then there's a chance that there are still fingerprints that we could lift, even given the damage."

Tarris looked around, his eyes gazing at the horizon in all directions.

"This area is remote." He said, "Do you think that any ground tracking stations will have monitored the fighter's flight path?"

Seth looked around himself.

"Its possible I suppose. Though I get the feeling that Cal and Lara picked this place to meet because of the lack of sensor coverage. All Belle would have needed to do is fly into space out of range of the planetary sensor net and then loop back around into the blind spot."

"Be careful Jedi Ashran." Tarris warned him, "Do not jump to conclusions. We do not know that Belle Shill was the pilot of this vessel."

*Fear.*

There was a brief flash of emotion from close by and both the jedi looked around for its source. But all they could see were beings in the uniforms of law enforcement agents.

Belle felt a shiver run down her spine as she heard her name mentioned by both jedi. But she was able to get her feelings under control before they could use them to locate her. However the matter was now clearly even more urgent. The jedi already correctly suspected her of being the pilot of the fighter and she needed to make certain that they never got the chance to prove it.

Even if that meant killing everyone here.

"Agent Tarr I require the control consoles of this vessel removing." Tarris told the sector ranger without bothering to look around at the man, "Have them loaded onto my ship and remember that they are evidence."

Agent Tarr looked down at the consoles, all of which were hopelessly smashed.

"Is there a problem agent Tarr?" Tarris then asked.

"No of course not." The sullustan replied.

"Good." Tarris said and then he turned to Seth, "If we are done here I want to know more about the vessel Cal and Lara Udra used."

"It was a delaya-class courier." Seth told him.

"The *Bright Hope*? The vessel assigned to them by the Jedi Order?" Tarris asked.

"No." Seth replied, "It was another ship of the same class. I think that they're using it so they can move about the more heavily settled systems without being recognised as soon as they come in sensor range."

"I did not see this vessel when I approached." Tarris said.

"No, you wouldn't have. It was hidden in a cave over- over," Seth said and he looked around, "Ah, over there." He added, pointing.

"Show me." Tarris ordered.



### 3.

Belle had halted her approach to the wreck of her fighter when her reaction to her name being used had almost given her away and now she watched as the two Jedi walked away. Then she turned her attention back to the law enforcement officers that were now gathering around what remained of her fighter. One of them began to roll out several large plastic evidence bags while the others appeared to be looking at ways to remove the control consoles. Having spent many hours in the fighter Belle knew that it was likely that there would be some forensic evidence to link it to her and she also knew that she needed to destroy it. She looked around at the other pieces of wreckage scattered around and smiled as she saw part of the rear section where the hyperdrive was located. Significantly she saw that inside this the hypermatter flask remained intact. Taking another look at the nearby police and the sector ranger Belle began to move towards the hyperdrive and the flask it contained. Making it to the wrecked rear section Belle checked to see that she was still not being observed before crouching down and reaching inside the wreck. The hypermatter flask was about the same weight as a rifle so after disconnecting it from the hyperdrive Belle was able to hold it in one hand. The flask was also heavily armoured to contain the highly reactive substance within and Belle knew that neither of her pistols would be able to pierce it. However, she also had the Wroonian police officer's weapon, a full sized pulse wave blaster that possessed a third more hitting power than her own compact version.

The problem for Belle was how to get the flask to where it could do the most damage and yet not get killed at the same time. There was an immense amount of energy held within the flask and although the unconventional way in which Belle was planning to release it would mean that only a small fraction of its potential would be realised, there would still be a significant blast radius that she did not want to get caught in. Too heavy for her to throw, the only other option was for Belle to carry it closer.

Standing up she walked towards the police officers now carefully extracting one of the consoles from her fighter. As she got closer the sector ranger looked around and Belle rapidly averted her gaze just enough that her face was hidden from him.

"What are you doing here?" Agent Tarr asked, unaware that he was addressing an impostor.

"I found this while patrolling." Belle replied, holding up the hypermatter flask, "Someone must have removed it. Given how much damage it could-"

"Yes, yes." Agent Tarr said, "Put it down over there and get back to your patrol. Whoever took the flask may still be close by."

Belle smiled, her reaction unseen by the Sullustan or any of the genuine police officers and she headed to where the evidence bags were set out waiting. Carefully she set down the flask and backed away, making her way towards a nearby rock formation that offered both a line of sight to the flask and also protection from the explosion she was planning to unleash. As soon as she reached the rocks she drew the pulse wave blaster from her waist and turned around.

At that moment Agent Tarr also turned around and looked straight at Belle, finally realising that she was not one of the police officers provided by the planetary authorities. Gasping he reached for his own weapon, but he was too late and Belle fired before he could draw it.

Tarris stood at the mouth of the cave shining a torch inside. Though in starship terms a delaya-class courier was a fairly small craft it was still seventy metres long and when its wings were folded for landing it was still more than forty tall so the cave was even larger.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Seth asked when Tarris began to walk into the cave.

"Evidence." The shadow replied and Seth frowned.

"Yeah right. I get that." He said, "But evidence of what?"

"Cal and Lara Udra have spent several months as fugitives." Tarris explained, "In that time it is likely that they have established a hideout. Particularly as they seem to be swapping between two different ships. That requires a secure location to conceal the other vessel while not in use."

"So you think that they may have used this place?" Seth asked.

"I thought it a possibility before. But not now."

"Why not?"

"Simple size Jedi Ashran." Tarris told him and he waved a hand around in front of him, "Two vessels of the delaya-class would not fit in here." Then he aimed his flash light to a spot on the floor where a piece of silver foil lay, "Though it would seem that while they waited for you and their parents to arrive they failed to pick up their litter."

Seth smirked.

"Perhaps we can get one of those cops out there to write them a ticket." He said.

And that was when they felt the explosion.

There was a dull rumbling and the ground beneath their feet shook. At the same time parts of the cave ceiling shook as well and parts of it came loose, falling towards the ground.

"Outside!" Tarris yelled and he extended an arm upwards, creating a telekinetic blast that pushed the rubble that looked likely to strike the Jedi clear of them instead.

As they burst out into the daylight both Jedi ignited their lightsabers, Tarris only triggering one of the two blades his was fitted with and they looked back towards the crash site. There they saw a plume of smoke rising into the sky.

"I don't see anything in the air." Seth said as he looked upwards, searching for any signs of an aircraft or starship that could have launched a missile or bomb, "Could it have been some sort of accident?"

"No." Tarris said, "I sense the hand of the Dark Side here. Agent Tarr and the others at the crash site have been murdered and now we must locate the culprit. Come with me Jedi Ashran and be cautious. The killer will be close by."

Belle's ears were still ringing as she peered back over the rock. The air was thick with dust and smoke, confirming that she had successfully ruptured the hypermatter flask, but it also meant that she could not tell exactly how much damage had been done. She coughed and realised that if she was going to stay here in the cloud she would need a breath mask and although she had brought one with her it was still in her speeder. As a stop gap she took a handkerchief from her pocket and placed it over her nose and mouth and began to head in what she hoped was the direction of her speeder.

### *Fear.*

Both Seth and Tarris sensed the approach of another being as they neared the cloud and they turned to see one of the police officers assigned to perimeter security coming towards them.

"What's happening?" the man asked nervously, "My comms are out. Are we under attack?"

"It seems that way." Tarris answered.

"Not from the air though." Seth added, "There's someone on the ground." And he took out his PTP link and checked it, only to find that it was not functioning, "Whatever they did must have let out a magnetic pulse that's knocked out our communications." He said.

"What should we do?" the officer asked.

"My ship appears intact." Tarris told him, looking at his vessel that sat just on the edge of the cloud, "And its systems will be shielded against stellar radiation. Gather up whatever of your team are left and meet us there."

"Yes sir." The police officer replied and he headed back in the other direction.

"Jedi Ashran," Tarris then said, "I think that the best course of action for now is for us to wait for the surviving police in my ship. We'll see if the ship's sensors can tell us anything about what happened here and then when the police join us we'll know what we have to work with."

"Sounds good to me." Seth replied, "Lead the way."

With the access ramp of the *Star of Light* left open by the Jedi, the dust and smoke had been able to penetrate into the vessel and the first system that Tarris brought on line was the air filtration to make it easier to breathe inside.

"I should check the sensors." Seth said and he dashed to the pilot's seat and sat down, "How good are they on this thing?"

"They are the standard suite of active and passive receptors." Tarris replied.

"Well hopefully that'll do." Seth said as he adjusted the position of the sensor display screen so that both he and Tarris could see it. At first the screen just showed static and Seth grunted, "Nothing on active." He said, "If there is anything up there then all this particulate matter in the air is shielding them from detection."

"And the passive sensors?" Tarris asked and Seth switched the display to a passive readout.

"Ah, that's better." He said, "I've got a thermal hotspot right where I think the wreck was. In fact I think it's about where the cockpit was."

"So Agent Tarr and the officers we left dismantling it are dead then?" Tarris said and Seth nodded, sighing.

"It looks that way. I don't see how anyone could survive that."

"But what was that exactly? A weapon that large would be too big to carry very far." Tarris pointed out.

"I know." Seth agreed, "But as far as I can tell there's no signs of another vehicle on the ground either. Of course it could have been vaporised by the blast, but I'd still expect some evidence of it."

"Perhaps it was a trap." Tarris said, "The explosive could have been concealed beneath the wreck and Agent Tarr's men disturbed it."

"No." Seth replied, shaking his head, "There were no signs of anything out of the ordinary when I checked that cockpit. Whatever was used to do that got put there after we left. Ah-ha."

"What have you discovered Jedi Ashran?" Tarris asked as Seth stared at the display and a slight smile appeared on his face.

"Hypermatter traces." He replied, "Its tachyonic matter so most of it's dispersed but there's enough still bouncing around out there for the sensors to be able to pick it up."

"Then the explosion was caused by the starfighter's hypermatter flask being ruptured." Tarris said.

"Exactly." Seth said, "And in a pretty uncontrolled fashion I'd say. Somebody probably just shot the damn thing and ducked for cover. Unless they got blown up with it as well."

When Belle emerged from the cloud she found that she had been walking in the wrong direction after all. But before continuing to her speeder she paused and coughed and spat onto the ground, trying to get rid of the taste and feel of the dust she had inhaled. Then she heard footsteps and her hand went back to the blaster on her hip.

"No wait! We're on your side." A voice called out and Belle saw a group of police officers approaching, all of who had varying amounts of dust on their uniforms. For a brief moment she wondered how any of them had survived being so close to the exploding hypermatter flask but then she remembered that the wroonian she killed had not been the only police officer patrolling the area around the crash site. Obviously the layer of dust covering her was preventing them from realising that Belle was not really one of them, which gave her the advantage. However, there were six police officers in the group and although two of them were helping a third heavily injured comrade along Belle doubted she could take out them all before at least one was able to draw a weapon and use it. Therefore she opted to leave hers where it was. For now at least she would pretend to be what they thought she was.

"Are you hurt?" another of the police officers asked as they came closer and Belle coughed again.

"What the kriff was that?" she spluttered, "I was just heading back to the wreck when I got blown off my feet. I think I blacked out for a moment and when I came to I could hardly breath. I just had to get out of there."

"Well the jedi want us to gather at their ship." The officer replied.

"The jedi survived?" Belle asked, "Both of them?"

"Yeah, I ran into them and they told me to find everyone that's left. I think you're the last so we should get back to their ship now. They think whoever did this is still close by."

"Sure. I'm coming." Belle replied, wanting nothing more than to keep on heading away. She had hoped that the jedi would still have been close enough to be caught by the blast, but if they were both still alive then that spelt trouble for Belle. Not only did she have to make sure all evidence linking her to the crashed fighter had been destroyed, but also now she had to make sure that she was not exposed as having caused the explosion. For now however, she had no choice but to go along with the surviving police officers and hope that an opportunity arose for her to escape.

"They're here." Seth said as he sensed the approach of the survivors of the explosion and he rushed to the top of the access ramp and looked outside.

Moving around the edge of the cloud he saw the police officers approaching, their once dark blue uniforms now coated with dust from the explosion. Seth counted only seven figures; one of whom needed the support of two comrades to walk and his heart sank. There had been more than four times that many police officers deployed here when he and Tarris had first arrived, along with Agent Tarr and presumably the rest were now lying dead somewhere inside the cloud.

"It is better than none Jedi Ashran." Tarris said as he sensed Seth's reaction, "Focus your thoughts on the living rather than those who have become one with the Force." And then he walked down the ramp and waved the approaching group towards the ship, "Hurry!" he called out, "We'll take off and survey the area from the air."

"Are you sure about that?" Seth asked, "I'd like to check the ship for damage before we try taking off."

"Jedi Ashran to do that would require us to wait for the cloud to disperse fully and we cannot afford to wait for that to happen. Now I have faith that you will be able to safely pilot this vessel. Or do I need to do it myself?"

Seth frowned.

"I'll give it a try." He said.

"No!" Tarris snapped and Seth jumped, "There is no try. Only do or do not."

"Yeah well in this case 'do not' could involve ploughing into the ground at a few hundred kilometres per hour. Anything in the Jedi Code about that?" Seth replied but Tarris just glared at him.

The police officers reached the access ramp and staggered up it. Those carrying their injured comrade set him down on a couch.

"Where's your medical kit?" one asked and Tarris reached out his hand. A metal case promptly leapt across the interior of the ship and he caught it before handing it to the police officer without a word.

"Is this it?" Seth asked the officer he and Tarris had encountered earlier and the man nodded.

"We checked all around the edge of the cloud." He said, "If there's anyone else left then they're still inside that and we don't dare go in after them."

"A thermal sweep from the air may reveal more." Tarris said and he looked at Seth, "Perhaps you should get us airborne." He added.

"Sure, why not?" Seth replied and then he muttered, "What could possibly go wrong?"

## 4.

Though the outside of the ship was caked in dust Seth had not noticed any major external damage to it when he had approached it after the explosion. Additionally since the repulsorlift engines used for atmospheric flight needed no oxygen the cloud of dust still persisting outside would not affect them in any way. But there was still a chance that a larger piece of debris had been thrown into an opening and inflicted damage internally.

Typically Seth liked to push starships to their limits. But on occasions such as this when he was in effect testing the flight capability of the vessel he was piloting he took things more slowly. Gently he built up the power to the repulsorlifts and allowed the *Star of Light* to rise slowly into the air before he paused, letting the vessel hover while he checked the readouts for any signs of trouble.

But the ship seemed stable enough and so Seth moved it forwards, banking to follow around the edge of the cloud while beside him Tarris studied the sensor display.

"Anything interesting down there?" Seth asked.

"Nothing." Tarris replied, "I think that the police transport was destroyed also. There are a few hotspots but nothing that could be a life form and there does not appear to be any fire."

"Most likely the cloud has choked off any that started." Seth said and then the two jedi became aware of one of the police officers standing behind them. It was a human woman who was covered from head to foot in a thick layer of dust. Unlike the other police officers who seemed to have made some effort to wipe away the dust that covered their faces she had made no such attempt, though whether it was because the dust did not bother her or because the shock of her experience had made her oblivious to its presence could not be determined.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" Belle asked, adjusting her voice slightly, making it sound as if her throat was sore from inhaling dust. This was something not far from the truth but her intention was to disguise her voice to Tarris, who she had spoken to before and knew who she was.

"Nothing inside the cloud." Seth answered and then he glanced at Tarris, "What about the surrounding area?" he asked.

"There are no signs of – wait." Tarris responded.

"What's wrong?" Belle asked.

"I have a contact." Tarris said, "Metallic. Stationary about eight hundred metres from us."

"A droid?" Belle asked.

"No. Too large. A vehicle of some sort." Tarris said.

"Give me a bearing." Seth said.

"One forty." Tarris told him and Seth steered the ship towards the speeder. Behind them Belle did her best to control her frustration. That speeder was her only way away from here and even though it was not formally registered to her or Shill Security she had little doubt that a close inspection of the vehicle would reveal something to connect it to her or the company. But if there was no way to prevent the vehicle from being searched then she could at least be one of the ones to search it.

"I'll go stand by the access ramp." She said.

"Take care." Seth cautioned her, "Whoever's responsible for all this could still be about."

"Oh don't worry." Belle replied, "I know what I'm doing."

Seth landed the *Star of Light* close to Belle's speeder, positioning the ship so that the speeder was visible through the main viewport.

"We're down!" he called out as he looked back at the police officers gathered by the access ramp, five of them in all with the other two considered too badly injured to assist.

Belle activated the access ramp controls and as soon as it touched the ground the police officers all rushed down with their weapons already drawn. Belle on the other hand left her pulse wave blaster in its holster and simply ran towards the speeder. From her pocket she slipped the access tag but kept it out of view. Then as the jedi emerged from the ship and the other officers approached her she acted as if she was trying the doors of the speeder and subtly she presented the tag to the driver's door lock.

"It's open." She called out and she reached for the handle.

"Wait!" Seth yelled at her and Belle looked towards him, "It could be a trap." He then added but Belle opened the door anyway, "You stupid nerf herder!" Seth then shouted, "What would you have you done if there was a bomb wired to that door?"

"It's fine." Belle replied, "There was no sign of any tampering."

"Yeah well from now on you do exactly what you're told when you're told to do it. Do you understand officer?" Seth shouted, scowling at Belle.

Meanwhile Tarris looked at the other police officers.

"Spread out and search the area for a radius of two hundred metres." He told them.

"That's not much of search area." Seth pointed out.

"Without communications we must limit ourselves to distances over which orders can be issued Jedi Ashran." Tarris responded, "I will assist in the search while you remain here to go over this vehicle." And he indicated the speeder before looking at Belle, "She will remain with you." He added with a snarl and Seth then looked at her as well.

"Just don't open anything else without checking with me first. Got it?" he said sternly and Belle nodded.

Crouching down Belle made it appear that she was inspecting the floor of the speeder around the driver's seat when in fact she was running her hand over the storage shelf set into the door behind her. It was here that she had left three grenades. These were plastic cased explosives that produced very little shrapnel but would create a loud bang and a bright flash that would disorientate most beings in close proximity.

However, when more lethal effects were required a metal fragmentation cup could be fitted around them and Belle slid three of these from the shelf as well, fitting each one around one of the grenades in turn without having to watch what she was doing before slipping the explosives into her stolen uniform.

Belle then took stock of where everyone else was located. Seth was the only other person in the immediate vicinity while the police officers and Tarris were now spreading out and looking for signs that they were not alone. It quickly dawned on Belle that this would be her best chance for escape but she needed to deal with Seth first. The Jedi was currently examining the storage compartment to the rear of the speeder; a location that Belle knew held nothing of relevance. With her Jedi opponent distracted Belle decided to act and she got to her feet, slowly sliding the pulse wave blaster from its holster.

Tarris froze as he felt a tremor run through the Force and his hand instinctively went to his lightsaber as he looked around. The terrain was as barren and devoid of life as it always had been and it was only when his gaze fell upon the speeder that he saw Belle in her disguise slowly making her way towards Seth with a weapon in her hand. In her stolen uniform and under a layer of dust Tarris may not have been able to recognise Belle herself but he realised immediately what she was planning on doing.

"Lookout!" he bellowed and there was a double 'snap-hiss' as he drew and activated both blades of his lightsaber.

Seth looked up just in time to see Belle take aim and he lashed out with his foot, kicking Belle's leg out from under her and she gave out a yelp as she fell backwards and accidentally discharged her blaster skywards.

The combination of Tarris' warning and Belle's shot attracted the attention of the police officers and all of them turned back towards the speeder and drew their weapons. Lying on the ground Belle saw this and she fired again, this time a shot properly aimed at the police officer right in front of her and she saw him fall as her shot slammed into his chest. She then swung the weapon around towards Seth once again. While she had been distracted the Jedi had got to his feet and drawn his lightsaber and as Belle took aim he ignited the blade and swung it in a downward arc. Belle pulled the pistol back just in time to avoid getting her hand taken off at the wrist but the blade still sliced through the blaster with ease, cutting it in half and rendering it useless. Hurling the part of the pistol she still held to distract Seth, Belle grabbed hold of the speeder and pulled herself back up and stepped closer to him. With one hand she grabbed of the hilt of Seth's lightsaber and pushed it aside as she lashed out with the other and struck him under his jaw. The blow stunned Seth and he let go of his lightsaber, reaching up to clutch at his throat as he staggered back and Belle used the opportunity to strike again, tripping him over and then bringing her heel down hard in his groin.

A pulse wave blast passed close by, reminding Belle of her other opponents and she reached into her jacket and pulled out one of the grenades. Pulling out the pin she hurled it towards a pair of police officers rushing towards her, one of who had just fired the shot at her. Then she dived towards the open driver's side door of the speeder.

Tarris saw Belle hurl the grenade and he slid to a stop and reached out a hand towards it. Concentrating he released a sudden burst of telekinetic energy through the Force that expanded the further from him it got. By the time it reached the grenade it was just a fraction of the strength it had been when he released it but it was still enough to give the grenade enough of a push that it was suddenly deflected away from the two police officers and when it landed it bounced once and then exploded too far from anyone to do any damage. Tarris then turned his attention back to the speeder just as he heard its door slam shut and the

repulsorlift engine starting up. The vehicle lifted itself up off the ground and with a sudden roar it accelerated away. Shutting off his lightsaber Tarris rushed over to where Seth was picking himself up. "You should learn more focus Jedi Ashran." He said, "With it almost any amount of pain can be ignored." Seth frowned.

"Really?" he gasped, "You want to try for yourself? Because I'm perfectly willing to kick you in the-" "We have no time for your crude suggestions Jedi Ashran." Tarris interrupted, "We must get after that woman. I do not need to be Force sensitive to deduce that she is the one responsible for the explosion."

## 5.

Belle increased the altitude of the landspeeder so that it cleared most of the rocky outcrops that formed natural obstacles to her escape. However even if the terrain had been perfectly flat Belle knew that she would not be able to outrun the Jedi's starship. What was worse was that starstorm-class couriers came fitted with a turret mounted laser cannon. Therefore unless she could find somewhere to conceal herself and the speeder then this was likely to be one of the shortest escapes of all time as she was strafed from above.

The problem in searching for a suitable hiding place was that she was not familiar with the terrain and had no way of knowing which way to head to find a cave or overhang large enough to hide her both from sight and also the *Star of Light's* sensors. The speeder's auto navigation system was useless here as well. The area was so remote that no one had ever bothered producing maps for it. However, an idea then came to Belle and she brought the speeder to a halt while maintaining its altitude.

Aware that she had only a limited amount of time available to her Belle began to unreel syntherope from the dispenser on her belt and she tied one end of this around the speeder's accelerator pedal, taking care not to actually trigger it. Then she hurled the reel out of the door and watched it drop to the ground, leaving a trail of syntherope behind it. Climbing out onto the roof of the landspeeder she then shut the door again to trap the syntherope before standing up and taking a deep breath as she looked down.

"This better work." She said to herself and then she jumped from the roof of the speeder. The drop was about five metres and Belle rolled as she landed, letting out a gasp and wincing as she felt her leg bang into something. Without stopping to check on this she took hold of the dangling syntherope and pulled on it. Though the grip of the door was enough to hold the line in place the additional pressure from Belle pulled more of it out from under the door and in turn this pulled down the accelerator. Almost immediately the landspeeder's engines grew louder and Belle let of the syntherope just in time to avoid having it ripped from her grip as the vehicle's engine overcame its inertia and it accelerated away. The amount of acceleration was limited by how far Belle had been able to pull down the pedal but it was enough to keep the landspeeder's speed building and Belle watched for a few seconds as it got further away, maintaining a straight course thanks to its internal stabilisation systems. Then she turned around and picked out the direction that seemed most likely to offer her somewhere to hide while she figured out how long it would take her to walk back to civilisation. Limping away she did not notice the spots of blood she was leaving behind her.

Tarris leapt into the pilot's seat of his ship before Seth and looked around at the other Jedi.

"Is everyone aboard?" he asked.

"They are." Seth replied, nodding as he took the co-pilot's station and began to activate the *Star of Light's* turret.

"Hopefully that will not be necessary Jedi Ashran." Tarris commented.

"When people start shooting and hurling grenades about I generally find that they're done negotiating." Seth replied.

"We will see Jedi Ashran." Tarris said and as he pulled back on the control column the *Star of Light* rose into the air and flew off after the fleeing landspeeder.

While Tarris concentrated on looking out of the cockpit viewport Seth directed his attentions to the sensors, monitoring both the active and passive feeds.

"Got her." He said as he picked up the speeder both on radar and from its engine heat, "About twenty degrees to port."

"I see it." Tarris added, adjusting the ship's heading and the tiny shape of the speeder appeared through the viewport.

"That's weird." Seth then commented, "She doesn't seem to be in much of a hurry to get away from us."

"Why do you say that Jedi Ashran?" Tarris asked, glancing at him briefly.

"Well because that speeder's not even doing a hundred kilometres per hour when that model should be capable of more than two hundred. Unless it's damaged of course. But there didn't seem to be any signs earlier."

Tarris ignored this, focusing his mind on the speeder they were steadily gaining on. Through the Force he examined the vehicle. As an inanimate machine it created very little disturbance within the Force, but a driver should have stood out cleanly. So either the driver was able to shield herself against detection through the Force or she was no longer in the vehicle.



"Jedi Ashran!" he suddenly exclaimed, "Prepare the laser cannon."

"What?" Seth responded, "I thought you said—"

"Our opponent is not inside that vehicle Jedi Ashran. Nobody is." Tarris interrupted, "As a dangerous runaway vehicle it is our duty to bring it to a halt."

"It's empty?" Seth replied and a smile appeared on his face as he turned his attention to the targeting system. The ship's turret swung around to face the speeder and Seth moved the crosshairs over it. The laser cannon was designed for engaging much larger targets than the speeder, but with it simply moving straight and level it was an easier target. There was a flash of red and the sound of laser fire as Seth fired once. The powerful blast ripped through the structure of the speeder and a ball of flame momentarily consumed it before pieces fell to the ground, spreading out over a large area.

"Got it!" Seth exclaimed.

"Jedi Ashran, do not get over exuberant." Tarris cautioned him, "We still have to determine where our opponent abandoned her vehicle and where she went."

"Well her speeder's overall course from where we found it hasn't been straight." Seth said, "But it was flying straight when he caught up with it so I'd say that it's a fair bet that if we just follow a straight line back the other way we'll come across the place where she abandoned it. Tracking back from its acceleration should give us a distance as well."

"My thoughts exactly Jedi Ashran." Tarris replied.

Belle had heard the sound of her speeder being shot down as she continued to walk through the wilderness and she smiled briefly at the thought of how the Jedi themselves had just destroyed any hope of connecting it to her or Shill Security. A rhythmic pounding sound in the distance then caught Belle's attention and she made her way towards it. Reaching the top of a hill she looked over the edge and saw what looked to be a mining camp below her. Droid operated machinery was digging raw ore out of the mine and then loading it onto automated transports and when Belle examined the scene closer through a compact set of wide scan binocs she found that she could not make out a single sign of life. It was unlikely that the camp was fully automated of course, but if there was a significant population of organic workers there then at least some of them ought to be visible. Putting the binocs away she then made her way down the hill towards the mine.

A simple wire fence surrounded the facility, but this seemed to be in a poor state of repair and Belle found a spot where she could simply lift it up off the ground and crawl underneath. Again she felt a jolt of pain from her leg and this time she looked down to see a cut that had reopened when she scraped it against the ground coming under the fence and looking at the ground she also saw a smear of blood there. The wound was not severe, but the blood stain that ran down her leg had clearly been there some time.

"Oh stang." She said to herself as she realised that she had likely left a trail from where she had jumped from the speeder. This meant that the Jedi could still possibly follow her here despite her doing her best to conceal her path. Reaching into her jacket Belle took out her own compact pulse wave blaster and then headed for a building that had a large antenna sticking out of the top.

As she approached the building Belle saw a battered looking ground car parked outside and she smiled momentarily before walking up to the door and trying the control. The door was not locked and as soon as Belle pressed the open button it hissed open to reveal a cluttered control room staffed by just two operators.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded, not noticing the police uniform that Belle wore under the dust that still covered most of it.

"Police." She replied sternly, "And I'm afraid that there's a problem. I need to use your communications array."

"Of course. That's no problem."

"Yes I'm afraid it is." Belle said as she stepped inside and closed the door behind her, "You see I can't have anyone finding out who I called." And then she pulled the blaster out from behind her back and shot both of the operators dead in an instant.

Tucking the blaster back into her jacket Belle quickly surveyed the controls in the room to determine which were for communications. One of the dead operators was currently slumped over this console so Belle pulled him off, pushing his body to the floor without a second thought while she took his place. Then she adjusted the communications controls so that it would transmit on a very special frequency. One available to just a handful of people in the sector.

"Mister Shill we're getting a signal from your sister." A voice called out as Han made his way past the communications desk at Shill Security headquarters.

"Which one?" Han replied, "I have three."

"It's from Miss Belle Shill sir. She's transmitting on the emergency channel."

Han frowned for a moment.

"Transfer it to my office." He said, "I'll take it there." And he made his way to his office, sealing the door behind her. The communications panel was already flashing at him and after double-checking that the counter surveillance system was functioning he activated it.

"Belle what's wrong?" he asked as soon as her face appeared on the screen in front of him.

"I took care of the fighter." She replied, "But I've lost my speeder and I'm expecting a pair of Jedi to show up at any moment. There's a ground car where I am that I could take but I doubt it will let me get away quick enough."

"So you want a pick up?" Han asked.

"Sure do bro. Something that can handle itself against a starstorm-class courier if it comes down to it."

"Don't worry Belle." Han replied with a smile, "I've got just the ship in mind. I've got your location so just try and stay put, help is on its way." The screen then went black as Belle terminated the link and Han reactivated the communicator, "Tech department? Is our special vessel ready for launch yet?"

Tarris had set the Star of Light down in the centre of the area the Jedi had calculated to be where Belle had abandoned her speeder and along with the remaining police officers they began to search the ground around it.

"Over here!" one of the police officers yelled suddenly and he waved a hand in the air. The others ran over to see what he had found and he pointed to the ground, "Look." He added. There in front of them was the relatively deep impression left when Belle had landed, "Here as well." The police officer then said and he indicated a patch of dried blood on a nearby rock.

"She's injured." Seth commented.

"Not so badly that she could not walk though." Tarris replied.

"At least this gives us something to follow." Seth said.

"Indeed it does Jedi Ashran. Now I suggest everyone gets behind me and keeps watch for an ambush. I would not it past our opponent to leave a deliberate trail for us to follow."

Though the spots of blood were only intermittent the trail was still enough for Tarris to follow and it led him directly to the mining camp where he and Seth looked down at it from almost exactly the same point as Belle had.

"There ought to be someone down there we can ask if they've seen her." Seth said and Tarris exhaled.

"I do not think so Jedi Ashran." He said, "I sense the Dark Side hanging over this place like a cloud. I think that for the workers of this facility our arrival has come too late."

## 6.

Not being fond of the idea of waiting with a pair of corpses for her twin brother to send someone to pick her up Belle dragged the bodies of the dead mine operators from the building and left them slumped in a nearby storage shed instead. As she was making her way back to the control building after moving the second body she spotted movement from near the perimeter fence and she ducked down behind a stack of cargo containers labelled with the vague description of 'Machine Parts' and watched.

There was a brief flash of light as a lightsaber was ignited and then the familiar humming sound of such a weapon being swung. This was then followed by a rattle as the fence gave way and the jedi with their police allies came through the gap. As Belle watched the group then split into three, with two police officers remaining by the hole in the fence while each jedi was accompanied by a single officer as they headed in different directions, Tarris seemingly approaching the control building while Seth headed for the vehicle storage hangars.

Belle knew that she could still opt to flee in the ground car, but that would mean abandoning the location where her evacuation ship was coming to and her personal communications had been taken out by the same pulse that had taken out her enemy's. Therefore her only option was to try and avoid the jedi and police until the ship got here.

No. She then thought to herself. She only needed to avoid the jedi, not the police and her attention was drawn to the two officers left guarding the gate.

Taking note of the directions the jedi had gone in Belle began to move cautiously, circling around them as she made her way back towards the hole cut in the fence and its nervous guardians. As she got closer to them her hand slid inside her jacket again and took out the silenced slug thrower. Given that only a headshot would suffice against the partially armoured officers she held her fire for now and continued to creep closer, ever vigilant for the return of the jedi.

The closest she could get to the two officers without walking out into the open was about twenty metres. From this distance she knew that a grenade would take out both police officers, but also that using such a weapon would bring the jedi rushing back. But if she threw something it did not necessarily have to be a grenade. Belle bent down and scooped up a fist-sized rock and then took a quick look around the corner of the building she was hiding behind. Past the two police officers she could see a cluster of storage drums that had gaps between them that looked large enough for a person Belle's size to try and conceal themselves in and she smiled. Then while the police officers backs were both turned she hurled the rock at the drums.

There was a sudden 'Clang!' and both officers spun around to face the area of the drums, aiming their blasters at them.

"Come on out!" one yelled, "We are armed and we'll open fire if you don't surrender."

But as the two officers searched for a target Belle darted out from behind the building with her pistol held level and aimed at their backs.

The moment she considered herself in range Belle fired twice in rapid succession, putting both shots into the back of one officer's head and he simply collapsed.

"Oh kriff!" the second exclaimed and before Belle could shoot him as well he dived to one side and returned fire. The sudden shot was poorly aimed and the spatial distortion flew past Belle and into the wall beside her, but the impact produced a sound that echoed loudly and Belle realised that the jedi would soon return.

Outside the control building Tarris saw the drag marks in the ground where Belle had removed the bodies. "Be cautious." He said to the police officer accompanying him, "I sense no one inside but there may be other dangers. I sense the Dark Side within." And then he waved his hand and using the Force he opened the door.

When the door slid open and no booby trap as triggered he then advanced inside and found exactly what he had expected. There was blood across one of the consoles where one of the dead men had slumped forwards while an upturned chair was all that gave away where the other had been when he was murdered. The police officer stepped past Tarris and began to make his way around the room, searching between consoles.

"No." Tarris said, "We are too late. She has been and gone from here. Our efforts are better used elsewhere." Then just as he turned to leave there was the sound of a shot from a pulse wave blaster striking something solid, "The officers at the fence!" Tarris snapped and he rushed back outside.

Belle fired again, emptying her pistol into the police officer. Then stuffing the weapon back in her jacket she ran to the two bodies just in front of her and scooped up their blasters instead. Whirling around she saw both Tarris and Seth rushing headlong towards her with their lightsabers active and the two remaining police officers following them as quickly as they could.

Pointing both her blasters towards Seth Belle opened fire. The Jedi knight did his best to block the attacks with his lightsaber, but he could not react fast enough to stop them all and instead he was forced to leap out of the way while Belle turned her attention to Tarris instead. The Jedi shadow activated the second blade of his lightsaber and with inhuman speed parried her each shot in turn, the spatial distortion bursting as they struck the fields surrounding the thin energy blades. Belle began to back away as Tarris continued to advance and Seth positioned himself behind the shadow, but it was obvious that it was only a matter of time before they would both reach her.

But then the air was filled with the sound of powerful repulsorlift engines and a delaya-class courier ship swooped down from the sky, making a low level pass over the battle below. As the ship flew overhead Seth looked up and he caught sight of the registration details stencilled on the underside of the ship's hull. Along with the registration number was the name of the ship.

It read *Bright Hope*.

"I don't believe it!" he exclaimed as the ship banked sharply and came around for a second pass.

But this time the vessel slowed and the ventral cargo hatch slid open, a line lowering down from the opening. The ship came to a complete halt right above Belle and dropping the blasters she grabbed hold of the line and hooked it around her body under her arms. The line was suddenly reeled back up and as Belle was lifted off the ground the ship's engines roared and it flew away.

"Did you see that?" Seth said to Tarris as the shadow just stared at the departing vessel and scowled, "That was the *Bright Hope*, Cal and Lara's ship. That assassin must have been working with them. I didn't think they'd risk bringing the *Bright Hope* here though."

"They are too self-assured with their own power Jedi Ashran." Tarris replied, "A failing common with the followers of the Dark Side. But perhaps now you see that Cal and Lara Udra need to be dealt with."

"The *Bright Hope*? Really?" Belle asked Han as he stood smiling at her in the hold of the vessel that had just rescued her.

"I thought you'd appreciate it." He replied, "I had our people take a look at every image I could get hold of showing every detail of Cal and Lara's ship and told them to create an exact replica. I thought it may come in useful to be able to frame them for a few more things we get asked to do."

Belle smiled and then kissed her brother on the cheek.

"I love it." She said.

Alone in his ship and back on Aurek Station once more Tarris loaded the computer program he had set up to watch for anything that could indicate where Cal and Lara Udra were located. The program sifted through law enforcement and other official reports as well as broadcast media channels and searched not only for direct mentions of the two fugitive Jedi, but also for any mention of events that would seem to indicate their involvement.

But before he could start reading the information this program output he remembered Seth's comment about how the Udras were using a second delaya-class vessel to move about the sector covertly. To purchase a new ship would require financial resources that they lacked and as far as Tarris knew no such vessels had been reported stolen in the sector recently. However, he did recall mention of a delaya-class ship in one of the mission reports from Cal Udra that he had read and he called it up on screen. Sure enough the report detailed how Cal and Lara had seized a delaya-class ship operated by raiders whose actions threatened to trigger a military conflict with the alien Kinnin species. As far as Tarris could tell there was no record of this ship having been recovered by the Republic after the mission was complete, making it likely that this was the Udras' mysterious second vessel. The raiders had been travelling to the Kinnin star system via the long abandoned space station known as Dorn Station and it was here that the captured ship had been abandoned.

Tarris smiled as he then read up on Dorn Station. Although abandoned it was structurally sound and still had functional life support. Located on the fringe of explored space it was rarely visited by anyone and even then only small sections of the station were accessible. All in all it was a good place to hide if you had your own transport.

"I have you now." Tarris said to himself and then he activated his ship's communications, "Flight control this is Jedi Blake." He said, "I need jump co-ordinates for Dorn Station."