

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



III-XII: CELEBRATION

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...

CELEBRATION

DESPITE THEIR PUBLIC IMAGE OF UNITY THERE IS GREAT RIVALRY BETWEEN THE FOUNDING FAMILIES AND SO WHEN ERILL CRASSIS UNCOVERS WHAT HE THINKS COULD GIVE THE CRASSIS FAMILY AN ADVANTAGE OVER THE OTHERS HE DECIDES TO ACT. BUT THE PROBLEM IS THAT MEANS LOCATING GAYAL KARN, WHO HAS NOT BEEN SEEN FOR MONTHS...

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1 .

Hundreds of billions of datapads were manufactured every year at millions of factories spread across known space. The compact computing devices were a feature of everyday life for sentient creatures from all walks of life, using them for work, recreation and household tasks too numerous for anyone to be able to list them all. As was common with so much technology rival manufacturers designed and built different models aimed at different markets, adding features for those who required them and removing them for those who wanted something cheaper.

Erill Crassis had owned dozens of datapads in his seventy years of life and every single one of them had been a top of the range model. A descendant of Bail and Leia Crassis who three hundred years earlier had been a part of the survey team that explored the sector for the Republic his family had become wealthy enough that nothing less than the best would ever do for them. The latest estimates put his family's worth at somewhere over four and a half trillion credits. Amongst the Founding Families, the term used to describe the descendants of the survey team this was not especially high but it was still far more than the vast majority of Republic citizens could aspire to.

It would therefore seem odd to some that he was currently sat in his study carefully studying a datapad of much more basic manufacture, a model designed for durability and economy rather than the widest range of functions possible. Despite its relative simple construction however, he found himself unable to access it. He tried to stand but found that his strength failed him, a consequence of his long illness.

"Victor!" he called out.

"Here master." A humanoid droid responded as it shuffled into the study, "How may I assist you."

"Just get me out of this chair." Erill said and the droid walked over to him and extended a hand.

"Do you require your doctor sir?" it asked.

"No I do not." Erill said angrily, "I just want to go and speak to my son that's all."

"Of course sir. I believe that Master Luke is currently in the garden."

"I know, I heard him." Erill said, supporting himself on the droid as they walked towards the study door. The droid then proceeded to help Erill through the large mansion that was the Crassis family home in the direction of the garden to the rear. As they neared it there was the sound of a gunshot and when they stepped outside they saw Luke Crassis standing by a low wall dividing a paved section from the lawn reloading an archaic muzzle-loading firearm while servants stood nearby with the extra ammunition and his wife swam in the nearby swimming pool.

"Sorry Erill." His daughter in law said as she climbed out of the pool and as a servant handed her a robe she looked at Luke, "See Luke, I told you that you were disturbing people."

"Oh no, not at all Salla." Erill replied. Then he looked around and added, "Where are the children?"

"Playing in the trees over there." Luke answered, looking towards a cluster of trees at the side of the lawn,

"So what do you want father?"

"I'm having trouble accessing this." Erill answered and he held out the datapad to his son. Luke took the device and looked at it, frowning.

"What's wrong?" Salla asked when she saw the reaction on her husband's face.

"Father, where did you get this from?" Luke asked and he held up the datapad.

Erill looked around, focusing on the servants.

"Leave us. All of you." He said and the servants clustered around his son and daughter in law backed off, heading towards the house. However, the security staff remained in place, "You as well." Erill added, looking at them. But the guards hesitated.

"Go!" Salla snapped, "We'll be quite safe in our own back yard."

Glancing at one another briefly the guards then withdrew, heading for an outbuilding.

"Well?" Luke then asked, looking at his father, "What's the big secret?"

"I found that datapad in my study two nights ago." Erill answered, "When we had our uninvited guests."

Luke and Salla stare at him.

"This belongs to Cal Udra? The jedi knight?" Luke said.

"I believe so. Either that or his sister. But in either case that datapad could offer us a great advantage." Erill said.

"Shouldn't we give it to Han?" Salla asked, "Shill Security should have plenty of people who can slice it."

"Oh I'm not so certain that it needs a slicer." Erill told her, "And in any case I'd like to keep it quiet until we know what information it contains."

Luke smiled.

"You think that it could give us an advantage over the other families don't you? Not just the Jedi." He said and Erill smiled back at him.

"Which is why I didn't tell Han's people or the police that I'd found it." He said, "So can you access it?" Luke frowned.

"You're normally better at this sort of thing than me father." He said as he inspected the datapad and manipulated its controls.

"But you have a particular knack for these sorts of devices Luke." Erill said.

"That's true." Salla agreed.

"Yes it is." Luke said and the datapad came to life, "See how you go with that." He said, handing it back to Erill.

"Excellent, thank you." Erill said as he took the device back, "I'll let you know as soon as there's anything worth telling you about." Then he looked at the droid that was still standing patiently beside him, "Back to my study Victor, there's work to be done."

Helped back to his study by Victor, Erill plugged the datapad into his desktop computer. The two devices were fully compatible and the larger display of his own machine made it easier for him to navigate the various menus as well as to view the contents. A title applied to the datapad drive made it immediately clear that the device belonged to Cal rather than Lara, but from what Erill could tell there was no obviously classified material from the Jedi Order stored on the datapad. Though Erill knew that it was possible that there were concealed files not visible to him right away. This was not a great disappointment to him however; Erill was more interested in what Cal and Lara Udra were up to on their own here in the Narthis Sector. A poorly executed plan by some of the Founding Families and their agents was supposed to have seen Lara convicted of murdering a fellow Jedi while the conviction would hopefully have distracted Cal from following up on what the Founding Families were doing. However, Cal had unexpectedly reacted by staging a daring rescue of his younger sister and now the pair of them were roaming free as fugitives and free of the limitations placed on them by the Jedi Order had continued to target the Founding Families, even going so far as to break into this very office.

A lot of the information Erill found at first seemed to be general information regarding the worlds of the Narthis Sector, including not only the three active hyperspace navigation beacons but also the obscure Dorn Station. From the time stamp this data appeared to have been added some time after the two Jedi arrived in the sector but for now it held no interest to Erill. A section of the datapad's drive labelled 'PERSONAL' attracted his attention and Erill opened up this area. Here he found a large number of small text files that looked to be correspondence between Cal and his parents, along with a number of images of both him and his sister. But also contained in this part of the drive was a subsection entitled 'GAYAL' and Erill smiled briefly as he saw this. Gayal Karn was the eldest daughter of another of the Founding Families and had a history of getting into trouble with the law. Fortunately her parents' great wealth had been able to keep her from ever seeing a courtroom. More recently however Gayal had been seen in the company of Cal Udra and when it had been confirmed that the pair had been romantically involved the Karn family had stepped in to end the relationship and prevent Gayal from threatening their schemes by sending her away. Mainly out of curiosity Erill opened this section for a closer look. Mainly it held images of both Cal and Gayal together or Gayal alone, including some that looked to have been taken by Gayal herself and then given to Cal as a gift from a girlfriend. Erill had heard tales that the Karn family had previously spent a significant amount of money to recover other images such as these in the past few years. Erill smiled again at the thought of a Jedi knight involved with such a young woman and he copied the relevant images to his own computer. It was then that he noticed another file tucked away in this section. Unlike most of the others it was not an image file. Instead it was a very small data file with the title 'MC Analysis' and Erill frowned.

The 'MC' could only stand for midi-chlorian, the name given to the microscopic lifeforms that swarmed in the blood of all living creatures. They seemed to have some connection with Force sensitivity, since Force sensitive individuals invariably had higher counts but transplanting them to induce such ability invariably ended in disaster. Another of the Founding Families had attempted just such an experiment and although the test subject had become Force sensitive his abilities had proven short-lived and driven him completely insane, attracting the attention of the Jedi Order. Erill opened the file and gasped as he saw the contents. Here he saw why Cal had taken such an interest in Gayal to begin with, the midi-chlorian count of her blood clearly indicated that she was Force sensitive. The Founding Families had been searching for a Force sensitive individual that they could control ever since their ancestors had explored the sector and now here Erill had the proof that they had had one in their midst for more than twenty years without realising it. Or rather the Karn family had.

For a moment Erill considered the possibility that Del and Faye Karn had know about their daughter's ability and kept it quiet. Whatever family was the first to come up with a Force user in their number would have a significant advantage over the others when it came to their ultimate goal.

"No, you didn't know did you?" Erill said to himself, his smile returning wider than before, "You'd have made your move long before now if you did."

"I'm sorry master Crassis, I'm afraid I did not understand that statement." Victor said.

"What? Oh never mind Victor I wasn't talking to you. Just thinking things through." Erill replied and he turned his attention back to the computer.

Then a thought occurred to Erill. If the Karns did not know about their daughter's sensitivity to the Force then perhaps he could turn it to his own advantage instead. Gayal's historically stormy relationship with her parents could be used to tempt her away from them and into siding with the Crassis family instead. But there his idea hit a major hurdle; he had absolutely no idea where Gayal Karn was. In fact nobody did. Then Erill remembered Lorna Fayl who until recently she had been the head of the Fayl family. This had always been the least influential of the Founding Families thanks to the incompetence of Corvis Fayl, the survey mission's medical officer who had lost and been cheated out of much of his rightful share. Lorna Fayl had undertaken several desperate schemes to try and increase this influence, for example the attempt to transplant midi-chlorians. More recently however she had attempted to lure both Cal and Lara into her service and the other Founding Families had reacted strongly to this by removing her from her position and installing her only daughter Nissel as head of the family instead. Significantly it had been the Karn Family that had offered a way of disposing of Lorna herself without killing her, something that was feared would turn Nissel against the other Founding Families. It seemed logical to assume that whatever had been done to put Lorna Fayl where she could cause no further problems was also where Gayal Karn had been sent and also that Nissel would know something of her mother's fate, therefore she would in effect know what had happened to Gayal Karn as well.

"Victor have a speeder prepared." He said, "I want to pay a visit to young Miss Fayl."

"Are you sure that is wise master? Your health has not been-" the droid replied.

"Get me the damn speeder." Erill interrupted, "Or shall I walk to the garage myself and do it?"

"Of course sir." Victor answered and the droid walked out of the study.

In the meantime Erill disconnected the datapad from his computer and locked it away in a desk drawer before shutting down the computer itself.

"Father what's going on?" Luke's voice sounded from the study doorway and Erill looked up to see his son and daughter in law standing there.

"I'm just going out for a while." Erill answered.

"Yes we heard from Victor." Salla said, "To see Nissel Fayl. But what on Coruscant for?"

"Why to offer that nice young lady any help she may require in wrapping up her poor mother's affairs as she steps into her new role as the head of her family of course." Erill answered.

"Poodoo." Luke said, "Father you're ill."

"I've been ill for a long time now my son." Erill said, "I think that a short trip will do me no harm at all."

"I'd rather not take the chance." Luke said.

"Perhaps we could go in your place." Salla offered, "Tell us what you need and we can speak to Nissel for you."

"What I need," Erill said, "is for you two to let me get on with this. Besides if word gets out about your concern for my health all those rumours that you're planning to bump me off and take over here will have to end and we wouldn't want to stop such wonderful gossip would we?"

Luke frowned; the stories that he was planning to kill his father were baseless and annoyed him greatly. More than one servant had lost their job for making such suggestions.

"Master Crassis the speeder is ready." Victor announced as the droid reappeared.

"Excellent." Erill said as he managed to get to his feet unaided.

"At least let us come with you father." Luke said.

"No my son." He replied, "I want to present a friendly face to young Nissel, if rather haggard perhaps.

Turning up at her home unannounced and en masse could intimidate the young lady and that's the last thing I need. Thank you, but I will go alone. Victor, help me to the speeder please and bring my oxygen just in case."

"Of course Master Crassis." The droid replied and picking up the portable oxygen cylinder and mask standing beside the desk the droid helped its master to the front of the house where a luxurious landspeeder waited for him with its engine idling. Behind it was a second vehicle significantly less ornate than this and inside sat four stern-faced men of various species. Although Erill could not see them he knew

that all four occupants carried significant weaponry and knew exactly how to use it. As soon as Erill appeared in the front doorway the driver got out of the speeder and opened the rear door for him. "Where to Mister Crassis?" the driver asked. "To the Fayl estate." He replied, "No need to hurry, we aren't expected."

2.

Although the Fayl family was the poorest of the Founding Families and their estate was significantly smaller than that of the Crassis family the Fayl mansion and grounds still possessed the signs of great wealth such as a large pool and private landing pad for airspeeders and shuttles or small starships. The guard at the main gate waved the speeders through as soon as he saw who was being carried in the lead vehicle and signalled the house to let them know who was on their way.

A trio of servants was on hand to welcome Erill as his speeder pulled up at the front door while a pair of armed guards also stood close by, eyeing up the security tail car even though both groups of guards were supplied by the same private military company, Shill Security, that handled almost all of the Founding Families security and covert needs.

"I'm so terribly sorry Mister Crassis." One of the servants announced as Victor helped Erill out of the speeder, handing him his oxygen mask for a couple of deep breaths, "We weren't expecting you but I've informed Miss Fayl that you're here."

"Oh that's quite alright my good man." Erill replied, "Now if we could head inside I'd like to get out of this sun."

"Of course sir. This way please." The servant said and he led Erill into the house.

Nissel Fayl checked her appearance in a mirror and then stood facing the door as Erill was brought into the lounge.

"Good afternoon Mister Crassis." She said in a friendly way, "Please sit down, I've ordered refreshments."

"Oh do please call me Erill." Erill replied as he sat down, "You're the head of your family now and that makes us equals. Unless you'd rather I address you as Miss Fayl?"

Nissel smiled and also took a seat.

"No. Nissel will be fine. So what brings you here so unexpectedly?"

"Well I suppose I ought to apologise for dropping by unannounced." Erill said.

"Oh that's alright." Nissel said, "I'm getting used to people doing that."

"Oh really?" Erill asked, "The other families are-"

"Oh no." Nissel interrupted, then realised what she had just done, "I'm sorry I didn't mean to be rude. What I mean is that I've had quite a number of my own relatives turning up to suggest that they are better placed to run the family for the time being."

"Ah." Erill said, "The rancors are circling. Yes, I remember when your mother took over the family. She was even younger than you at the time, just a teenager and as well as having to cope with the fact that her parents had been murdered by pirates she also had assorted cousins and uncles trying to muscle their way into her rightful place. All of them claiming that it was for your mother's benefit of course."

"Really?" Nissel replied, "That is a coincidence, they said exactly the same to me." And both she and Erill smiled.

"So how are you finding being thrust into such a position of responsibility Nissel?" Erill then asked.

"It was scary at first but I'm starting to figure out who I need to go to for help. Mister Drud and Mister Karn have been a great help." Nissel said and then she paused and took a deep breath, "I mean Heddren and Del. They said I should use their given names as well."

"So you're not sticking with your mother's old representatives then?" Erill said as he recognised the names of the lawyer Heddren Drud and industrialist Del Karn.

"No." Nissel answered, "I figured that maybe mom would have done better if she hadn't kept up that stupid feud with the Druds and taken up Del's advice when he gave it. Her old lawyers and financial advisors are furious of course; they've even threatened to sue me for about a billion credits under various get out clauses. But Heddren's already threatening counter suits and Del's stated that he'll be an expert witness to their unsuitability so I think that'll be fine."

"I doubt Heddren's working for free though." Erill pointed out.

"No, but its about a thousand times less than what the others are trying to take."

At that point a servant entered with a tray of food and drink and set it down on the table in front of Erill and Nissel before leaving them alone again.

"Would you like a drink?" Nissel asked.

"Just water please." Erill said and Nissel poured a glass from the jug before pouring a mug of caf for herself.

"Thank you." Erill said as he reached for some of the food, "Now there is something that's been bothering me."

"Oh really? What's that?" Nissel asked.

"Well I was concerned about your mother." He said.

"Yeah, her breakdown came as a real shock." Nissel said, "I mean I always knew how edgy she was. I suppose that's from her parents being killed and then dad running off with hundreds of millions of credits of her money. Did you know she still had a bounty out for the pirates and dad?"

"I had heard things to that effect." Erill answered, "Will you retain them?" and Nissel shrugged.

"The one for the pirates I think I will. They killed my grandparents after all, even if it was before I was born. But I think I'll let the one on dad go. Providing he never tries to come back he can keep the money. I've got more than I'll ever use."

"I wise decision I think." Erill said, "Now back to your mother. How is she?"

"Actually I'm not certain." Nissel said, "I've been so caught up in other things I haven't had the chance to ask for a report. The doctor's said that she'll never be fully cured and that she'll probably be hospitalised for at least several years. Apparently there are complications involving the medication that they'd normally use to treat people like her. Some allergy or something."

Here goes. Erill thought to himself.

"And have you seen her since she was hospitalised?" he asked.

"Oh no." Nissel told him, "I know it sounds really bad, but I probably won't. The doctor's report said that she needs to be kept isolated from as much of what drove her over the edge as possible and that includes seeing family members for a while at least. Even if I did decide to go and see her I'm not sure where the hospital is where she's a patient."

Erill frowned briefly.

"You don't know where she is?"

"No. The Karns and Druds found somewhere nice and quiet for her where people wanting a look at the head of a Founding Family who'd gone insane wouldn't pester her. Then Heddren took her there himself."

"I see." Erill said, "So Heddren handled all the details for you did he?"

"Oh yes. He's been a great help, especially considering how nasty my mom was to all the Druds."

This presented Erill with a major obstacle. Heddren Drud took his legal work seriously, a dedication that had served the Founding Families well since the establishment of Drud Legal. But it also meant that he was unlikely to divulge where either Lorna or Gayal had been taken during casual conversation and if Erill came right out and asked then he would become immediately suspicious, possibly even ordering them moved to a new location beyond Erill's reach.

"Well then since it seems you have everything under control I will let you get on." Erill said and he set down his glass and looked at Victor, "Help me to the speeder Victor." He told the droid.

Nissel saw Erill out to the waiting speeder, waving as the vehicle pulled away.

"Back home sir?" the driver asked as they headed down the driveway.

"Yes I think so." Erill said, but then he had a thought. Heddren Drud lived in the Drud mansion of course, along with his wife; two children and his older brother Josh who was the real head of the Drud family. All of them knew to keep their family's activities secret and were smart enough to know that there were certain things not to be spoken of at all. But there was another individual who lived with them.

Kerden Larrenod was the father of Millel Drud, Heddren's wife and had been invited to join his daughter in the Drud family mansion. A former member of the Crassis Major Defence Forces and then a mechanic he now spent his days tinkering with the Drud family's collection of vehicles. Erill had met the man on numerous occasions and the two got along well. Well enough that no one would become suspicious if Erill happened to drop by for a chat.

"Actually I'd like you to take me to the Drud estate." Erill said, "I've a promise to keep to an old friend."

"Yes sir Mister Crassis."

There was a speeder parked outside the garage when Erill's vehicle drove up the driveway of the Drud estate and towards the house. The engine covering of this vehicle was open and a figure could be seen leaning beneath it while a young dark skinned woman was visible in the driver's seat, a bored expression on her face.

"Pull up here." Erill said to the driver and he lowered his window and shouted towards the woman sat inside the speeder.

"Jaynie! Is your family so poor that they can't afford a real maintenance droid and need an old man to keep their speeders running?"

Startled, the woman looked at Erill and then got out of the speeder.

"Grandpa, Mister Crassis is here."

"What? Luke?" Kerden said as he emerged from under the engine cover and straightened up, pressing a hand into his back as he did so. Then when he too looked around and saw Erill he smiled, "You look like poodoo." He said and Erill smiled back and opened the speeder door. Kerden then looked at his grand daughter, "Jaynie go tell the others we have company." And she walked into the house as Erill got out of the speeder.

"Actually I thought I'd pay a visit to you Kerden." Erill said.

"How come?" Kerden responded as the pair began to head towards the house. Outside the closest doorway were several chairs and a table and they sat down here.

"Oh I was just passing and I thought I'd drop in and say hello. It's been a while since I saw you last. So how are you keeping?"

Kerden snorted.

"Oh you know, still trying to figure out how I ended up here." Kerden answered and he waved at the mansion beside them, "It's been twenty four years now and I still sometimes wake up and wonder what happened to my old place."

"What did happen to it? Do you still own it?"

"I think so. To be honest I think Jaynie and her brother stay there occasionally when they've stayed out late and don't want to be in trouble when they get home."

"I thought that was more the sort of thing the Karn girls did." Erill said and Kerden nodded.

"Yes I've heard all about their antics. Jaynie seemed to find some them funny so I warned her that if she acted like that I'd raise hell if her father tried to get her off on some technicality like he keeps doing for the Karns."

This was good. Erill thought, Kerden was talking about his son in law and Erill needed to keep him on this subject.

"I just paid a visit to young Nissel Fayl." Erill said, "She said your son in law was helping her out a great deal."

"Yeah that figures." Kerden said, "That young lady needs all the help she can get from what I hear. I tell you Erill if there's one thing about this family that stands out to me its their sense of charity. You know my daughter only ever takes cases for free? Drud Legal charges tens of thousands of credits per hour for all its other lawyers, but she operates for nothing. I asked her and Heddren why they did it and they just told me that even the poor deserve their help."

"Nissel told me that Heddren took her mother to the hospital himself." Erill said.

"That he did. Took him two weeks to sort out before he finally made it back here. He never does say what took so long of course."

"Of course not." Erill said, "But at least your daughter's not left on her own here whenever he needs to go off on one of these trips."

"No there is that." Kerden agreed, "But I still think it would be nice if he took her with him sometimes, she's a lawyer as well after all and its not like he never takes anyone else with him."

"So does he spend much time away?" Erill asked, "I'm afraid I don't get out as much as I used to so I don't get the chance to keep up with all my friends like I once could."

"Oh no, most of the time he sends one of the other lawyers that works for his company, but he seems to keep all of the work for you lot to himself."

"Us lot?"

"The Founding Families. Heddren won't trust anyone other than himself to look after them all. Fortunately most of their business takes place in the sector so none of the week long flights to pack for."

Erill decided that he needed to push Kerden harder.

"Actually I think I remember being told about six months ago that he'd gone away." He said.

"Yes I remember it." Kerden replied, "Or rather I remember the woman who came to the house to go with him."

Erill was puzzled, it was unlikely that Heddren would have brought Gayal here and she would have been unlikely to have gone anywhere willingly.

"What about her?" he asked.

"Oh there was just something that didn't add up about her. I think I've seen her before but I can't quite place her, my memory's not quite what it was you know. But I got a vibe off her that I've not had since my time in the military. Back then when you were around some people you just knew that they were trouble, dangerous even. The last thing you wanted to do was cross them and this little blonde gave off just that vibe."

A blonde. Belle Shill.

Erill almost laughed out loud, wondering how he could have missed that. The twin sister of Han Shill, Belle acted as Shill Security's covert operations chief. She was a trained killer and it was her that had really killed the Jedi knight that Lara Udra had been framed for murdering. The Shills had not discussed the operation to frame her fully, particularly since it had not turned out as planned but it made sense that if Gayal had been with Cal Udra at the time then it would have been Belle Shill that would have taken her to wherever she had gone.

It was then that three other figures appeared from inside the mansion. One of them was Jaynie while the other two were her older brother Hiran and their aunt Kayza, Heddren's younger sister.

"Hello Erill." Kayza said as she leant over and kissed him on the cheek before sitting down, "You weren't looking for Heddren were you?"

"No my dear." Erill answered, "Actually it was a social visit. I had a few minutes to spare and thought I call in on Kerden here."

"We've been discussing why Jaynie would want to take a speeder out that's older than either of us." Kerden added and he smiled at his grand daughter.

"I'm sorry to cut this short Kayza my dear," Erill said, "but if I don't get back home then my son will likely have your eldest brother call out the defence force to search for me."

"And I've got a speeder to fix." Kerden added and he looked at Jaynie, "Come on young lady, I'm doing this as a favour to you so you can at least pass me my tools when I want them."

The four members of the Drud family gathered together to see Erill off, waving as his speeder headed down the driveway.

"So what did you really talk about?" Kayza asked Kerden as the speeder passed through the gate.

"Oh he was just telling me how my son in law is being so helpful to young Nissel Fayl." Kerden answered and then he nodded to Jaynie, "Come on, that speeder won't fix itself." He said and they both headed for the partially dismantled vehicle.

"So do you believe any of that?" Kayza asked her nephew.

"Not a word." Hiran replied.

"Then Erill must need to know something about what your father's doing." Kayza said, "But he's not working on anything that would affect the Crassis family as far as I know. Has he said anything to you that would give you any idea what it could be?"

"Not a thing. But maybe it's not to do with what dad's doing now. Maybe it's to do with what he's already done. Maybe he brought up the subject of Nissel because he needs to find out something about her mom."

"Lorna? But why would he want her? She almost brought the entire Jedi Order down around our necks."

"I don't know Aunt Kayza, but I've got a bad feeling about this."

3.

"Father, thank the heavens you're back." Luke exclaimed as Victor helped Erill back into the house.

"Yes we were starting to worry." Salla added, "You turned off your speeder's communications and we didn't want to go through your security detail."

"Help me to my study." Erill replied, "Both of you."

Along with Victor, Luke and Salla helped the old man into his study and to his desk where he sat down. As he unlocked a drawer he looked at Victor.

"Leave us and close the door behind you." He ordered.

"Of course sir." The droid answered and it left the room, the door closing behind it.

Certain that they were now alone Erill removed Cal's datapad from his desk drawer and put it down beside his computer.

"This does belong to Cal Udra." He announced.

"Don't tell me you've been trying to hunt down a jedi knight in your condition." Salla said.

"No of course not." Erill replied, "I'll leave that to Han's people and that jedi shadow who's shown up."

"Then what's so important that you risk your health in going out father?" Luke asked.

"Gayal Karn." Erill replied.

"You're kidding me." Luke replied, frowning.

"Seriously Erill, what were you doing?" Salla added.

"I was trying to find out where the Karns have sent their eldest daughter." Erill told her, "I need to find to find out where Gayal has gone to."

"But why? What on Coruscant does she have to do with anything?" Luke asked.

"She's nothing but trouble." Salla added in agreement.

"She's Force sensitive." Erill said simply and both Luke and Salla gasped. Erill held up the datapad, "Cal performed a midi-chlorian test on her and the results are on here. Gayal Karn is what our families have been searching for for twelve generations now."

"But Gayal Karn?" Salla said, "Three hundred years of searching and the end result is that we need some young delinquent to finish our task?"

"Actually it makes sense." Luke said and as his wife and father turned towards him he explained further, "Look, the Karns are like the rest of us. We keep our true business secret from the galaxy at large and even from our own children until we feel that they can be trusted with the knowledge. Has anyone stopped to consider how a Force sensitive individual would react to being raised in such an environment? Of course she rebelled, she's no more playing by the rules than any of us are."

"That's a very interesting theory." Erill said, "It may even help us tempt her to ally with us."

"Ally with us?" Salla responded, "Do you really think that's possible?"

"Perhaps." Erill answered, "But first we need to know where she is."

"That could be difficult." Luke said, "There hasn't been a word from her since she vanished."

"Heddren Drud knows." Erill said, "Wherever she is he took her there, along with Belle Shill. And I think that it's the same place he took Lorna Fayl."

"What makes you say that?" Luke asked.

"The situations are almost identical. A member of one of our families risking exposing everything we have worked towards who cannot simply be killed. It was Faye Karn who recommended that we deal with Lorna by imprisoning her and it was Heddren Drud that she said knew how to get it done. Now in Gayal's case Heddren was accompanied by Belle and when Lorna was taken Han went along to provide security. Each time Heddren was away for a similar amount of time, about two weeks."

"You can get a long way and back in two weeks." Salla pointed out.

"Well outside the sector." Luke agreed.

"Indeed." Erill said, "Plus by going outside the sector it minimises the chance of someone recognising who they are."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just set up some hidden base on a deserted planet though?" Salla asked.

"In the long run perhaps." Luke said, "But unless Heddren happened to have a secret base up and running before hand then he'd have to get one pretty quickly when the Karns wanted Gayal out of the way."

"The question of course still remains where Heddren and the Shills would have taken them." Erill said.

"An asylum." Luke said suddenly and when the others looked at him he went on, "Think about it, it's a secure facility and if Gayal or Lorna should happen to escape then anyone they go to for help will think they're crazy."

"So Lorna actually has been institutionalised." Salla said.

"She may even be able to visit her mother at some point." Luke added, "If the staff applied the right medication then she'd act crazy enough while Nissel was there."

"So we're looking for a psychiatric hospital that offers secure accommodation." Erill said, "In an adjacent sector where Heddren could pay someone off."

"It'll be coreward." Luke said, "Any further out on the rim and there just aren't the same number of places available to hide someone away."

Salla leaned forwards and began to count off points on her fingers.

"So we need to figure out where Gayal is. We need to go there and persuade whoever has her to turn her over to us. Then we need to get her back here before they can warn the Karns, Druds or Shills and then we need to keep her safe."

"I don't see how we can keep her safe." Luke said, "Our security is handled by the Shills as well and if the Karns want her back then they can just come and take her from us, all perfectly legally as well if she's been listed as being mentally incapable."

"But has she?" Salla asked, "Lorna was said to have had a breakdown, but Gayal just vanished. In the eyes of the law she may still be regarded as perfectly sane."

"But it still doesn't explain how we're going to get hold of her and protect her." Luke reminded his wife.

"Actually I think that I have an answer to at least one of those problems." Erill said and then he looked at Luke, "We'll need to locate Mister Mott. You handle that while I discuss ways of making sure that in the eyes of the law Gayal is free to choose to stay here if she wishes."

Kaylor Mott was a very dangerous man. The leader of a band of mandalorian warriors he had fought both the Republic's regular forces and also jedi. He obtained his position by killing his predecessor and there were few individuals who would dare challenge him in single combat. However, it was said that once paid to do a job he could be relied upon to finish it no matter what. His band had become mercenaries following the most recent Sith War when they found themselves stranded in the Narthis Sector and since then had built up a network of agents to inform them when someone wished to make use of their services and arrange meetings. Fortunately on this occasion Kaylor happened to be on the same planet when he received word that he was wanted.

"Who is it?" he asked the barman of the cantina, one of his agents in this area.

"Corner booth." The barman replied, "Real fancy looking guy."

Kaylor looked around and he smiled when he spotted Luke.

"Someone you know?" the barman asked.

"Oh yes." Kaylor told him, "I think that this job is going to pay very well." And then he strode across the cantina and sat down opposite Luke, "No bodyguards Mister Crassis?" he asked.

"I doubt they'd do much good against you." Luke replied and he looked around, "Besides, how many of the innocent looking patrons in this place are in fact your men? Could I be anywhere safer?"

"Well its nice to be appreciated. Now tell me what brings you to this wretched hive of scum and villainy."

"My family has need of a strike force, small and well trained and equipped."

"What about that fancy outfit you normally use?" Kaylor asked.

"This operation is to be kept secret. The other families must not know about it, at least not yet."

"Okay so it's hush-hush. What's the op and what's the pay?"

"It's a rescue mission. We need you to liberate a hostage and return them to us safely. Your pay will be at least two hundred thousand credits."

"At least?"

"The target is believed to be outside the sector. A bonus will be paid depending how far outside and also more if collateral damage can be limited."

"So no using concussion missiles then?"

"Not if there are civilians around no."

"Fair enough. Now what's this about the target might be outside the sector. Don't you know where they are?"

"Not yet. My father is working on that."

"And who is it?"

"That will only be revealed when you have agreed to all our terms."

"Terms? Look Mister Crassis, my only term is money up front. Now is that okay with you or have you wasted my time here?"

“Oh that’s quite acceptable to us Mister Mott. But there is something else that you need to consider. If you’re agreeable then this job stands to be far more profitable for you than a measly two hundred thousand credits.”

Kaylor grinned.

“Tell me more.” He said.

4.

When Luke returned home he found his wife and father both still in his father's study sat at Erill's desk. Erill himself was using his desktop computer terminal while Salla was making use of a portable computer placed opposite.

"Any luck?" Luke asked as he closed the door behind him.

"I managed to isolate the vessels Heddren used to take Gayal and Lorna out of the sector." Salla replied, "Knowing how fast they can go that gives us a clue about how far away we need to focus our attention on."

"And what about you?" Erill asked, "Did you locate Mister Mott?"

"Of course." Luke answered, sitting down.

"And what did he have to say?" Erill then asked and Luke smiled.

"It would seem that we have our strike team." He said.

"And the other details?" Salla added.

"He said it's not the sort of thing his men normally do, but given the money we're offering he couldn't afford to say no."

"Excellent." Erill said, "But it still leaves us without a target."

"Let me see." Luke replied and he sat down beside his wife, turning her computer so that he could see the display.

"This is as far coreward as they could have got." She explained, pointing to a line marked on a star chart.

"Unfortunately it still leaves us rather a large amount of territory to cover." Erill added.

"Seven systems." Salla then said, "With a dozen settled worlds in them, any one of which could be the location of the hospital we're looking for."

"The count would have been eight systems." Erill said, "But we didn't think that Heddren would be stupid enough to take Gayal and Lorna to Moldas where the jedi enclave is."

"Perhaps we're thinking about this wrong." Luke suggested.

"How so?" Erill asked him.

"Well since we know which ships were used to take Heddren to and from the hospital then perhaps we should just try getting the information from them.

"Somehow I doubt that their owners would simply tell us where they took him." Erill replied.

"Even if they did aren't you running the risk of them telling Heddren what we're up to?" Salla asked and Luke smiled.

"Actually I wasn't thinking that we'd just ask nicely." He said, "I was thinking that Mister Mott would be only too willing to seize one of those ships for us and take the location of the hospital from its own navigation logs."

Salla looked at Erill, smiling.

"It even gives us a ship to use that can't be linked to us." She said, "One we know has the range to get the mandalorians to the target and back."

Erill looked at his computer screen.

"The *Golden Rancor* is currently running supplies between here and Crassis Minor." He said.

"That's the ship that brought Han and Heddren back after they took Lorna away." Salla explained, "It's a quartermaster-class ship, so no weapons and only average speed."

"In other words an easy target." Luke said, "Of course I'll have to go along to make sure Mott's people recover the data they need."

"That could be dangerous." Salla said.

"I'm not suggesting that I take part in the boarding action." Luke replied, "Only that I go aboard afterwards."

The orbital positions of the two settled planets of the Crassis system, Crassis Major and the newly colonised Crassis Minor placed them close to their maximum distance apart from one another. This meant that providing the attack was timed correctly it would be possible to intercept the *Golden Rancor* far from any help.

The assault ship was designed to carry fifty troops into battle, but because of the room taken up by the mandalorians' basilisk war mounts it currently carried only twenty. But given that the *Golden Rancor* was expected to have only three crewmen aboard it this was not considered a problem.

Basilisks were a hybrid of droid and vehicle capable of operating in atmosphere and space. Heavily armed and armoured they turned individual riders into formidable foes equal to several times their own number. For this mission the basilisks would be used to transport the mandalorian warriors between their assault ship

and the target vessel and as Luke watched from the side of the hold Kaylor Mott and his men prepared them for battle. There were members of several species amongst the mandalorians, their society did not discriminate and by the time they were encased in their fully enclosed suits of armour it often became difficult to them apart in any case.

"You should head for the cockpit." Kaylor told Luke, "Unless you want to be sucked out into space when that door opens." And he pointed to the large door set into the deck.

"Of course." Luke replied and he headed for the cockpit. There he found three more mandalorians. None of these wore helmets and it was easy to see that all three were human.

"The target's up ahead now." The pilot said when he became aware of Luke's presence in the doorway behind them. Luke looked out of the forward viewport, but at this range the *Golden Rancor* was not visible to the naked eye. Meanwhile the pilot leant forwards and activated the intercom, "Bay opens in sixty seconds." He said.

Back in the hold Kaylor looked around at his men.

"You heard him!" he yelled, "Mount up!" and he lowered the armoured visor of his helmet and climbed onto his basilisk. Seconds later a klaxon sounded and there was a hissing as the air was pumped out. When all the air was gone there was a rumbling that was felt through the basilisks on which the mandalorians were all sat and the large door in the deck slid open, "Charge!" Kaylor broadcast to his men and they all rushed forwards into space.

"Is that a krath assault ship?" the helmsman of the *Golden Rancor* said when he saw the mandalorian vessel closing and the second crewman in the cockpit took a look for himself.

"Looks like it." The other man said, "I guess someone must have been buying from a surplus yard." Then there were a series of flashes of light from near the krath assault ship and his jaw dropped, "Mandos!" he snapped as he saw the basilisk war droids spread out in front of his own ship, "It's a trap!"

Taking hold of the ship's controls the helmsman did his best to steer the ship away from the mandalorian warriors spreading out in front of them, but the *Golden Rancor* lacked the manoeuvrability needed to evade them all and several of the droid mounts clamped onto the hull as the ship passed between them, including the one ridden by Kaylor himself.

"Listen!" the helmsman snapped, "They're looking for a way in." and sure enough there was the sound of pounding metal as the basilisks moved across the hull followed by an alarm, "They've forced the airlock. They're in."

"I'm sealing us in." the other crewman said and a thick door dropped shut behind them, "Call for help." The helmsman then activated the ship's communications but as soon as he did so there was a sudden screeching sound from the receiver.

"They're jamming us." He said, "We can't call for help."

"We're doomed."

The third crewman of the *Golden Rancor* was in the engineering section when the decompression alarm sounded and he rushed forwards to investigate. Bursting out of the engineering section the startled crewman ground to a sudden halt as he found himself staring at four armoured figures aiming weapons at him.

"Where are the others?" Kaylor Mott demanded, pressing the muzzle of his rifle under the man's jaw and there was a sudden sour smell as he lost control of his bodily functions, "Where?" Kaylor yelled, pushing the rifle harder against him.

"The cockpit! Please don't hurt me!" the crewman shouted out.

"Show us." Kaylor said and he lowered his rifle and shoved the man along the corridor.

The terrified crewman led the boarding party to the cockpit where an armoured door blocked their way and Kaylor pounded on it with his fist.

"Open up! We've got your friend!" he shouted and he glanced up to where a security camera was pointed at them before shoving his captive in front of it.

"Just take the cargo." The helmsman's voice announced over the intercom, "Its just a load of grain, not worth dying for. You can have it."

Inside his helmet Kaylor scowled.

"We don't care about your cargo, we want your ship. Now open up and maybe you'll live through this."

Kaylor called out but there was no response and he looked around at his men, "Get that kriffing door open." He ordered and he stepped back, dragging the crewman with him.

Though the cockpit door was armoured it was not a true blast door and after a quick inspection one of the mandalorians began to roll out a block of explosive into a long thin strip that he then pressed up against the door to form a circle. A detonator was pressed into this and then he looked at Kaylor.

"Ten seconds." He said.

"Do it." Kaylor replied and as the demolitions expert activated the timer the boarding party withdrew to a safe distance.

Sure enough exactly ten seconds after the detonator was armed the explosives were triggered and there was a massive 'Boom!' that echoed down the corridor. Safe inside their armour and away from the explosion the mandalorians were unaffected by any of this, but the deafening sound of the blast overcame all three crewmen and they collapsed, their hands clamped over their ears.

"Go!" Kaylor yelled and his men rushed the cockpit, leaping through the hole punched through the hatchway and the lump of metal blown clear of it.

The two crewmen in the cockpit were still cowering on the floor, stunned by the blast and the mandalorians grabbed hold of them and dragged them back out into the corridor.

"What shall we do with them?" one of the mandalorians asked Kaylor.

"Secure them." He replied and then he activated his communicator to contact the assault ship, "Its ours." He signalled, "No casualties."

"Good." Luke replied, "I'm on my way."

"He's on his way." Kaylor said to his men.

"I feel safer already." One replied.

5.

A mandalorian escorted Luke from the airlock where the assault ship docked to the cockpit. Here he found Kaylor sat waiting, his helmet now resting on a console while a pair of his men kept watch over the bound and hooded crewmen in the corridor outside.

"All yours." Kaylor said, "And with minimal damage."

"Excellent." Luke replied as he sat down at another console. "Now just wait while I access the logs." And he placed a portable computer in his lap and hooked it up to the console. As a simple commercial vessel there were few barriers against examination of the ship's logs. In particular the navigation system was specifically designed to be accessed remotely by hyperspace navigation beacons and Luke opened up this data and began to scroll through it.

"Find what you're looking for?" Kaylor asked.

"I'll know in a minute." Luke replied, "I just need to check out where this ship was a couple of months ago. A-ha! Got it." And he turned the computer so Kaylor could see the screen, "Here, this is where we're going."

"We? I don't think so."

Luke glared at him.

"I'd like to remind you that I'm paying for-"

"Actually its your father that's paying and carrying passengers was never part of our agreement."

"Well I'm modifying it."

"No you're not." Kaylor said, "Look, my men can handle this ship just fine and from what you've told me you can't afford to vanish for two weeks in case you tip off your enemies. Now go back home and let us do the job your father is paying is to do."

Frowning, Luke unplugged his computer from the *Golden Rancor's* and began to pack it away.

"What about them?" Kaylor asked, looking back at the three captives and Luke paused.

"They're no use to us." He replied, "Get rid of them."

Looking to one of his men Kaylor nodded and there were three blaster shots.

Han Shill looked up as his office door opened and his twin sister Belle entered with Kayza Drud.

"Hello ladies." He said with a smile.

"Never mind that Han." Belle replied, "That old fart Erill's up to something." And Han frowned as his visitors sat down.

"Okay, so I've got a bad feeling about what you're going to tell me." He said.

"He was at the house earlier." Kayza said, "He came to speak with Kerden."

"So? He doesn't know a damn thing." Han pointed out.

"No, but he knows that Heddren's been meeting with Nissel." Kayza said, "And it just so happens that Erill went to see her before coming to our place."

"He's after Lorna." Belle then said.

Han leant back in his chair.

"But why?" he asked.

"I don't know." Belle replied, "I guess he's uncovered one of her laser brained schemes we didn't know about and isn't in the mood to share with the rest of us like he should. Luke's been having some meetings without any guards."

Han looked at Kayza.

"Talk to your brother. Tell him to hurry up with his search of Lorna's files. We need to know everything she did." He said, "Meanwhile I'll tell our favourite psychiatrist to let us know if anyone starts asking awkward questions."

After transferring his strike force to the *Golden Rancor*, Kaylor and his men spent the weeklong journey through hyperspace checking their equipment and reviewing everything the Crassis family had been able to discover about the facility where they now believed Gayal to be held. This was sketchy at best; just the information placed in the public domain to advertise it since making any specific enquiries risked alerting the Drud family to the planned attack.

As befitted a facility intended to keep individuals from wealthy families with serious mental illnesses away from public view it had been constructed in a remote location far from the nearest settlement. Such a location meant that the best way to approach the facility was from the air and a landing pad had been

constructed specifically to permit this. An added bonus of arriving like this was that it allowed patients to arrive without attracting too much attention.

Of course, landing the Golden Rancor on the pad to start with would attract attention from the hospital staff and so Kaylor instead had the ship circle overhead while his troops descended atop their basilisk war droid mounts.

"We'll set down four hundred metres from the perimeter fence." He broadcast to his men and without replying verbally they followed his lead and landed their mounts in a wooded area beyond the fence.

The heavy quadruped droids strode through the woods unhindered by the undergrowth, their massive feet crushing it beneath them.

"Commander I'm detecting EM emissions ahead." The mandalorian at the head of the group signalled, bringing his basilisk to a halt and Kaylor checked his own droid's sensors.

"I see them." He replied, "Looks like a communications tower. Krevis can you take it out from your position?"

"With ease." The lead mandalorian said.

"Then wait where you are while I take the others around to the rear of the facility. Wait for my command before taking out the antenna. Juxx, Fammer and Glostal will remain with you. After you've taken their communications I want you to secure the landing pad. If we need to bring the ship in then I don't want any nasty surprises waiting for it."

"Yes commander. It will be my honour." Krevis said as three more mandalorians moved to take up positions just behind him.

"Okay, everyone else with me." Kaylor ordered and he had his basilisk move onwards.

Drawing near to the perimeter fence told Kaylor that the owners of the hospital did not consider an armed assault likely. There were no armoured gun emplacements or even any ground level sensors to give early warning of an attack. Significantly the fence itself was not even electrified or tipped with spikes to deter anyone from climbing over. Obviously the safety of a patient attempting to escape was considered more important than the possibility that someone like Kaylor would ever do what he was about to do. On the other hand the powerful transmission tower would allow the staff to summon help from the local authorities immediately and Kaylor could not allow that to happen.

"Krevis we're in position." Kaylor transmitted, "Now."

In the wood behind him Kaylor heard the sound of Krevis firing the laser cannons mounted on his basilisk and a moment later there was an explosion as the transmission antennae at the top of the tower were struck. This was followed by the roar of repulsorlifts as the four mandalorians left behind rose up above the trees and opened fire in unison, reducing what was left of the tower to molten scrap.

"Charge!" Kaylor shouted. It was not necessary to raise his voice, his communicator would pick up normal speech easily and broadcast it to his men, but shouting the order seemed appropriate. Straight away the mandalorians and their basilisks charged towards the fence, not even bothering to fire their weapons at it or use their repulsorlifts to boost them over the top. Instead they simply charged right into the flimsy barrier and it gave way in an instant.

With their communications destroyed and the perimeter fence brushed aside as if it was not even there it did not take long for the hospital staff to realise that they were under attack and a klaxon began to sound.

"Guards ahead commander." One of Kaylor's men warned him and Kaylor spotted the two guards who had just appeared from a small door to the hospital clutching pistols in their hands. Both guards took aim and fired and there was a brief flash as a projectile struck one of the mandalorians. However, the armoured warrior remained unhurt and Kaylor realised that the pistols carried by the guards were designed to fire low velocity electrically charged rounds to stun troublesome inmates rather than kill. Such ammunition stood no chance of penetrating the armour of the mandalorians unless it happened to find a weak spot. However slim this was a genuine possibility and combined with the fact that they had offered a challenge to him meant that Kaylor could give only one order.

"Return fire." He commanded and the air between the guards and the mandalorian strike force was suddenly filled with laser blasts. Too late the guard tried to retreat into the hospital but both were cut down before they could take even a single step back. Kaylor then aimed his basilisk's laser cannons at the doorway itself and he opened fire again, firing a sustained burst that blasted away the surrounding wall to create a hole large enough to permit his men to enter while still mounted on their basilisks.

Inside the corridor ran off in both directions and Kaylor saw several junctions where more corridors split off.

"You, you and you!" Kaylor snapped at three of his men as he drew his pulse wave rifle from the holster mounted at the side of his basilisk and dismounted, "With me. The rest of your split into fours and spread out. You know what our target looks like so signal if you find her. And remember our employer requested a minimum of casualties but that doesn't mean you should take risks. That means shoot to kill if you need to. Now move!"

Leaving the basilisks to protect themselves the mandalorians broke up into groups of four and began to spread out through the hospital. Ahead of them panicked staff fled as soon as they saw the armoured figures appear, some of them abandoning confused looking patients who were just shoved aside by the mandalorians as soon as they had confirmed that they were not Gayal Karn.

There were guards as well of course but many of these just turned and ran as well, realising without firing a shot how ineffectual their weapons would be against the mandalorians. However, in a different part of the hospital several guards gathered around a locked door while one of the medical staff opened it.

"Hurry up doctor." The guard leader said as the sounds of panic and weapon fire being used to intimidate staff and inmates became louder.

"Here you go." The doctor replied as the door open and the guards rushed inside the room beyond. There they found racks of weapons more powerful than the stun pistols they all carried at their waists. There were several grenade launchers but the guards ignored these, they had only incapacitating ammunition for them that was as useless against the mandalorians as their pistols were. The weapons they wanted were the bulky energy rifles mounted along one wall. These were obsolete plasma rifles, bulky and short ranged the powerful weapons had almost completely vanished from military armouries but here they remained useful owing their peculiar method of operation. The high energy hydrogen plasma blasts they fired was accelerated towards its target using a magnetic field and this meant that if the weapon was fired without a hydrogen source attached to turn into plasma then all that was released was a high powered magnetic pulse that was strong enough to disable most humanoids without killing them.

The rifles were passed around and loaded with energy cells. But before the guards headed off to deal with the attacking mandalorians the doctor walked over to what looked like a standard wall panel and felt around the edge for a hidden switch. There was a soft 'click' as he found it and the panel slid aside to reveal several rows of compact hydrogen cylinders.

"Try not to let any of the other staff see you using these." The doctor said as he handed out the ammunition that turned the plasma rifles from weapons useful for stunning a violent patient into one capable on incinerating a human sized opponent, even one wearing fully enclosing armour, "They may be heading for the high security wing, so concentrate your defence there."

"What about you doc?" one of the guards asked as he loaded a hydrogen cylinder into his weapon.

"I'll be in the high security wing." He said, "If the mandalorians get inside then I'm going to make certain they don't get away with the woman they came for." And from under his long white coat he drew a compact pulse wave pistol.

"Commander this way!" one of the warriors accompanying Kaylor yelled out when he caught sight of a sign pointing to the maximum security section of the hospital and without waiting for an order from Kaylor he rushed off down the corridor. However the moment he stepped out into a junction there was a sudden blast of heat and a flash of light that consumed him momentarily before his charred remains collapsed to the floor.

"They've got blasters!" Kaylor called out to his remaining men and they ran down the corridor after their fallen comrade, halting just before the junction, "Lay down your weapons!" Kaylor shouted around the corner and he leant around it just long enough to count the four guards crouching down behind a barrier improvised from benches and tables before one of them fired and Kaylor pulled his head back behind cover. Reaching to his waist Kaylor drew his sidearm, a projectile weapon similar to the guards' stun pistols. However, where they magnetically accelerated charged stun rounds at low velocity this one accelerated its solid ammunition to a much higher level that gave it far better penetrating power. Reaching around the corner he fired without looking, emptying the magazine towards the barrier and there were screams as the high velocity rounds punched through and into the guards using it for cover.

"Now!" Kaylor snapped and the three mandalorians burst out from behind the corner and charged down the corridor, firing their weapons on fully automatic. The compact spatial distortions the pulse wave rifles fired ripped apart the barrier and the wounded guards found themselves now facing down the barrels of the mandalorian weapons," How many more of you are there?" Kaylor asked a guard that had his hands clamped over a wound to his stomach that had blood pouring from it. But the man just stared at him without replying so without a second thought Kaylor shot him and turned to his men, "Finish them off and let's keep moving. Be alert for more."

Kaylor and his men halted when they came to the entrance to the maximum security section and he took a brief glimpse around the corner to confirm that the hospital guards had erected another barrier here and that like the previous group encountered they were equipped with plasma rifles. Unlike the last barrier however this one appeared more solid, being made from heavier metal shipping containers. Heavy footfalls from

further down the corridor made Kaylor turn and he saw more his men rushing to join him from the opposite direction.

“Stay back.” He hissed, using his communicator to alert his men without also giving away his presence to the guards and the approaching mandalorians stopped running, creeping up to the junction and waiting for Kaylor’s orders, “They have plasma weapons.” He said, “This calls for extreme measures.” And he took a grenade from his belt, “Be ready. As soon as this detonates we charge.”

“Understood commander.” One of the mandalorians opposite responded and Kaylor pulled the pin from the grenade.

Not wanting to risk the grenade going straight into the part of the hospital where Gayal was most likely being held Kaylor opted to roll the explosive along the floor instead of hurling it as he would normally do and because of this the guards saw it coming towards them.

“Grenade! Take cover!” one yelled and they all ducked back behind their barrier.

The grenade detonated close to the barrier and the corridor was filled with flying shrapnel and flames.

However, both the guards behind their barrier and the mandalorians around the corners had been expecting the blast and so none of them were injured. Using the blast as their signal, the mandalorians suddenly emerged from around the corner before the guards had chance to get back into position and just as on his last charge Kaylor and his men rushed towards them firing as rapidly as they could. This time however their shots were aimed over the barrier rather than into it, meaning that any of the guards who attempted to get back into position were cut down mercilessly.

Vaulting over the barrier Kaylor landed beside a guard who was still covering there and he swung his rifle butt against his head, sending him sprawling across the floor with a pool of blood forming beneath him.

“Come on!” Kaylor shouted at his men, “This is it.” And he ran into the maximum security section where he found the doctor was waiting for him.

6.

The maximum security section was a single corridor lined on both sides with cells. Each of these had a transparent front face with a door set into it while the floors and remaining walls of each cell were thickly padded. At the moment most of these cells were empty. But in one located right at the end of the corridor stood one of the hospital doctors pressing his blaster to the head of the patient he was using as a human shield. Bound in a straight jacket and gagged the patient was struggling against her captor, but could not get free.

"You can't have her." The doctor said flatly as the mandalorians stood outside the cell and looked in at him. Kaylor looked at the patient being used as a hostage. She was a human female, just like the individual that Kaylor had been sent here to release but he could tell that it was not Gayal Karn. Slowly Kaylor entered the cell and walked up to the doctor and his hostage, keeping his rifle held low at all times.

"Who they hell is she?" he said out loud, staring at Lorna Fayl. He knew full well who she was, but his question was intended to confuse the doctor more than anything else.

The doctor's jaw dropped as he tried to think of what to do next. Remembering his pistol he swung the weapon towards Kaylor, but the veteran warrior simply reached out and grabbed the doctor by his wrist before the blaster could be aimed at him. With a single sharp tug he then pulled the doctor out from behind Lorna and hurled him against the transparent barrier that made up the front wall of the cell. Another pair of mandalorians stepped into the cell and grabbed hold of the doctor, disarming him. As Kaylor watched this happen he spotted a figure slumped in the corner of the cell opposite. Like Lorna this individual was bound and gagged, but unlike Lorna who was then still struggling to try and free herself she simply stared at the mandalorians without moving.

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder Kaylor stepped forwards and plucked the doctor's pass card from the front of his coat.

"Stick him in one of the vacant cells." He ordered his men and then he went to the opposite cell and presented the card to the lock. There was a 'bleep' and the door opened, allowing Kaylor access. He strode into the cell and crouched down in front of its occupant, studying her face.

"Hello Miss Karn." He said as he drew his knife, "I know someone that wants to see you." And then he sliced open her straight jacket.

The moment she was untied and her gag removed Gayal screamed and lashed out at Kaylor. The blows could not hurt him, but Kaylor grabbed hold of her and pinned her against the wall anyway.

"My employer wants you alive and unharmed." He said sternly, "And I'm being well paid for it. So that means if I have to tie you up and gag you again then I will. Understood?" and Gayal nodded, "Good. Now let's go, we've got a ship waiting."

Kaylor led Gayal from the cell and his men formed a protective barrier around them just in case there were any more guards close by. As they withdrew they left behind them the doctor locked in one of his own cells and Lorna Fayl still trying to get free, her pleas for help unintelligible because of her gag.

As the assault ship touched down at the Crassis estate agents of Shill security rushed towards it with their weapons at the ready.

"This is private property." One called out as the assault ship's access ramp lowered. Then as Kaylor strode down the ramp with his helmet held under his arm the agents took aim. Kaylor however did not even flinch as a pair of his warriors followed him down the ramp fully armoured and mounted on their basilisks. On the other hand the Shill security agents looked at one another nervously when suddenly confronted by such powerful opposition.

"We are expected." Kaylor said, staring straight at the agent who had addressed him.

"I doubt that." The agent replied.

"Then why don't you ask for yourself?" Kaylor said and he peered over the agent's shoulder to where Luke Crassis was approaching from the mansion.

"Good afternoon Mister Mott." Luke said out loud, "Thank you for coming at such short notice."

"Mister Crassis, if I may-" the security agent began but Luke interrupted.

"No you may not." He said, "You and your men are dismissed."

"I'm sorry sir. I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. You and all the other Shill Security personnel are to depart the premises immediately. From this point on Mister Mott and his men will be providing our security needs under the auspices of the

Crassis family's new in-house security operation. Now go and tell Han Shill that his services are no longer required."

The security agents stood speechless and Kaylor's hand moved to his sidearm. At the same time there were footfalls from inside the assault ship and more mandalorians rushed out of the ship.

"Would you like my men to clear the grounds sir?" Kaylor asked, looking at Luke who in turn looked at the agent he had been speaking to.

"Is that going to be necessary?" he asked.

"Err. No sir." The agent answered, "We'll be on our way."

As the agents withdrew Luke turned back to Kaylor.

"Well? Do you have her?" he asked and Kaylor grinned.

"Hey, its me."

Erill looked up from his desk while Salla stood up from her chair and both smiled as Luke and Kaylor entered his study.

"Ah, so you've returned at last." Erill said.

"And he's not alone either." Luke said and he looked around as another pair of mandalorians entered the room escorting Gayal between them, now wearing a set of ill-fitting combat fatigues like those worn by the warriors.

"Leave us." Erill said, looking at Kaylor and the mandalorian nodded.

"Of course sir. I'll oversee the deployment of my men." And then all three mandalorians left the room and Luke closed the door behind them before sitting down beside his wife.

"Gayal," Erill said to the nervous looking young woman, "do please sit down." And he indicated a chair in the middle of the room.

"What do you want with me?" she asked, remaining where she was.

"I would like you to sit down." Erill replied.

"There's no need to be afraid my dear." Salla said, "You're among friends here."

"Yes why else would we have sent those mandalorians to rescue you?" Luke said as Gayal finally sat down.

"I thought I was going to be in there forever." Gayal said.

"And if your own family had any say in the matter you would have been." Erill said, "We on the other hand value you far more highly than that."

"But why?" Gayal asked.

"Gayal, we know that you are Force sensitive." Salla told her and Gayal's jaw dropped.

"Bu – but how?"

Erill held up Cal's datapad.

"It would seem that jedi knights are not quite as careful with their belongings as they ought to be." He said and as he set the datapad down on his desk once more he went on, "Gayal all of the Founding Families have been hunting for someone who is Force sensitive ever since our ancestors first explored this sector and you are the first we have found who was not already a part of the Jedi Order."

"I don't understand." Gayal said.

"Of course you don't." Luke said, "Look Gayal this sector of space is littered with artefacts left behind by the Sith."

"Including numerous tomes of knowledge that we want." Salla added.

"So you think that I'll be able to access these?" Gayal asked, looking around at the other three.

"The ancient Sith were careful to restrict much of their knowledge to those they considered worthy." Luke said.

"And we believe that you are such a being." Erill added, "So because of that we went to the expense of bringing you here. Gayal, join with us and we can rule this sector of space."

"And what if I say no?" Gayal asked.

"Then you can walk out that door right now." Luke said.

"That's right." Salla added, "Gayal you are not our prisoner. The mandalorians will not prevent you from leaving. You can return to your family."

Gayal's face fell.

"Ah yes." Erill said, "Now you understand. You need our protection as much as we desire your co-operation. Now young lady, do we have a deal?"

"They'll come after me though won't they?" Gayal pointed out, "When they find out that I'm here my parents, the Drud family and the Shills will want me out of the way. How will you stop them?"

"The mandalorians are quite capable of protecting us against any attempt at a physical assault." Luke said.

"And we have an idea on how to prevent your parents attempting to use any legal tricks to force your return to them." Salla added, "Though I must admit, it may sound a little extreme at first."

Holographic images of the heads of all the Founding Families other than Erill Crassis lined Han Shill's office. "Luke Crassis ordered my people off the family property." He said, "He had a team of mandalorians on hand to enforce his order as well."

"What about the hospital?" Faye Karn asked.

"We've heard nothing from them." Han replied, "I warned them that the Crassis family may attempt to contact Lorna but the possibility of an armed assault by mandalorians was totally unexpected."

"Is my mother dead?" Nissel asked, her image looking around at the others.

"That is a distinct possibility." The hologram of the nautolan Ket Runn replied.

"Alternatively she could have been returned to the Narthis Sector." Corva Torin said.

"I've had my people watching their estate," Han explained, "and they've had two visitors since ordering my men out."

"Who?" Trent Narthis asked.

"The first was a lawyer." Han said and he looked at Nissel, "In fact it was your mother's old lawyer."

"And the second?" Faye asked.

"A judge. Judge Marl Firoon."

"He's up for re-election in three months." Trent commented, "And from what I've heard he's had trouble raising funds for his campaign."

"Well as of two hours ago he just received a hundred thousand credit boost." Han said, "Apparently from one hundred concerned citizens each giving a thousand credits each, but I don't think that is entirely accurate."

It was then that the meeting was interrupted by a chiming sound and Han looked down at his communications panel and frowned.

"It seems that the Crassis family is calling." He said.

"Put them on." Josh Drud said, "Let's see what they have to say for themselves." And as Han tapped the panel there was a momentary flickering before an image of Erill Crassis joined the other holograms.

"Ah its so nice to see all my friends gathered together." Erill said, "Though I must confess that it concerns me that I was excluded from this meeting."

"Fine words from someone excluding all of us from what you have been up to Erill." Josh said sternly.

"My dear general you wound me." Erill replied, "Especially since I call with such great news. I tell you what though, why don't you all come over here right now? Those of you on the planet of course, the rest can attend virtually."

"Why should we?" Trent asked.

"Because you're all dying to know what I have to tell you." Erill replied and then his image flickered again and vanished.

The luxury speeders arrived en masse at the Crassis estate and the mandalorians guarding the gate waved them through. These contained the heads of most of the other Founding Families along with their spouses and a handful of other close family members. Only the Runns and Torins were not represented, neither family being in the Crassis system but despite not being the head of one of the families Han Shill was also with them, accompanying Nissel Fayl. They were met at the front door to the mansion by several servants and a pair of mandalorians and as soon as Han stepped out of the speeder one of these troops stepped up to him.

"Your weapon." He said, holding out his hand.

"Sure why not." Han replied and he removed the weapon he carried under his jacket and handed it over.

"If you'd all like to follow me I will take you to Mister Crassis." The most senior of the household staff announced and he headed inside followed by the guests. The servant led them into the main lounge where in addition to the Crassis family there were also the holograms of the heads of the Runn and Torin families.

"Thank you for joining us." Luke announced as he personally handed each guest a narrow glass of expensive wine.

"Just tell us why we're here." Trent said.

"And how about throwing in why you're bribing judges." Faye added.

"Bribing judges?" Salla said and she laughed, "Why whatever makes you say such a thing?"

"Because I had my men keep an eye on this place after you threw them out." Han said, "They saw the judge and they saw the lawyer."

"Mom's lawyer." Nissel said, "What have you done with her?"

Erill looked at her.

"Why I would hope that she is still being taken good care of where you and your new legal representatives arranged for her to be sent for the treatment she so clearly needs." He said.

"Then why bring her lawyer here?" Nissel then asked.

"Because you told me yourself that your family's old lawyer was not happy about losing your business." Erill replied, "So I sensed the opportunity to negotiate a good deal for his firm to act on our behalf from now on instead of Drud Legal." And he glanced at the Drud family.

"What about the judge Erill?" Trent asked.

"Oh we needed him to perform the ceremony." Salla said, "Unfortunately my father in law's health was not good enough to allow him to leave the estate for it."

"Ceremony?" Ket Runn exclaimed, "You make no sense."

"Oh it will all become clear." Erill said and he activated the intercom beside him, "Could you please come in here to say hello to our guests my dear?" he said and then the lounge door opened to reveal Gayal, now wearing an elaborate dress and flanked by a pair of mandalorians. Silently she walked across the room to stand behind Erill and placed a hand on his shoulder as the Druds and Karns exchanged concerned glances, "You all know Gayal of course." Erill announced, placing his hand on hers, "We have invited you all here to celebrate the fact that as of four hours ago she became my wife."