

# STAR WARS

## TALES OF THE JEDI



### II-II: SUPERWEAPON

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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...

**SUPERWEAPON**

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

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# 1 .

It was just over three weeks since Jedi Knight Cal Udra had been summoned to appear in person to Master Karas at the enclave on Moldas to report on how it had been discovered that his predecessor on the Narthis Sector had not in fact been killed and how it instead appeared likely that he, possibly along with his padawan also had been seduced by the dark side of the Force. Three weeks of giving answers to questions that had already been provided in his written report had taken its toll on his patience and Cal was actually keen to return to Aurek Station and the run down apartment that he and his younger sister and padawan learner Lara called home.

After disembarking from the *Bright Hope*, the ship assigned to the Udras by the Jedi Order, he headed for the apartment. Being hungry, but in no mood to actually prepare a meal he stopped along the way at a herglic takeaway. This establishment served food in portions suitable for the massively built members of that species and the single meal that Cal purchased contained enough food for both himself and Lara.

When Cal reached the apartment he let himself in and headed straight for the kitchen area. From the bathroom he could hear the sound of running water and he guessed that his sister was in the shower.

"Lara I'm back." He called out, "I've brought dinner. It's herglic from that place on level nine." And he began to divide up the food onto some plates.

The sound of running water stopped and after a few moments there was the sound of bare feet on the floor.

"I got the usual," Cal said, "and the owner threw in some of those crackers we like as thank you for-" but then he stopped mid sentence as he turned around and saw that it was not his sister now sat on the sofa with a towel around her. The plate of crackers began to slip from his grasp and it was only his abilities with the Force that allowed him to catch both the plate and its contents before it hit the floor.

"Gayal, what the hell are you doing here?" he demanded. Gayal Karn was the eldest daughter of one of the wealthiest families in the Narthis Sector, if not the entire region. Three centuries ago one of her ancestors had been amongst the crew of the survey vessel that charted the sector and the descendants of that crew had been reaping the rewards ever since. Known locally as the Founding Families, they were rich and famous and from what Cal had experienced also highly untrustworthy.

"Well I was going to go on a cruise to Teras with my sisters." Gayal explained, "But my parents decided to stop me going and gave my ticket to Nissel Fayl instead."

"So you got arrested for something again and they got mad at you?" Cal asked, knowing full well that Gayal was frequently getting into trouble with the law, though her family connections had allowed her to avoid facing any formal charges so far. Gayal nodded.

"I came as far as here with them figuring I'd be able to get aboard anyway. After all, who'd notice one more passenger amongst over three hundred?"

"I'm guessing the company that operates the ship." Cal replied.

"My parents own the company." Gayal said, "Apparently my mother called ahead and warned the crew to keep an eye out for me. I never even made it onto the shuttle, let alone the liner."

"Why not just go back to Crassis Major?"

"Because you can't get on a flight without an ID card."

"So how did you get to Aurek Station then?"

"Well I had my card then. But being the considerate big sister I am, I lent it to Sial."

Sial was one of Gayal's two younger siblings. Significantly Gayal was the only one of the three over twenty-one, the legal age for purchasing intoxicating liquor in the Narthis Sector.

"Let me guess," Cal said, "so they could buy booze." And Gayal just smiled.

"But why here?" Cal asked.

"Well here I was, stuck on the station with no way home until my sisters get back with my ID and thought to myself who is my favourite person here? The one who's saved me from my psycho ex-boyfriend and his kidnapper friends? The one who's duty bound to help a damsel in distress?"

Cal sighed. Then something else occurred to him.

"Where's Lara?" he asked, looking around, "She'd never let you in. Not after you left her naked in a hot tub and got her arrested for burglary."

"Oh she went on the cruise."

"Poodoo."

"No seriously. Airia Torin was going and needed a bodyguard. You weren't about so they asked your sister instead." Airia Torin was the senator for the Narthis Sector, another member of one of the Founding Families, "I let myself in." Gayal added.

Cal frowned.

"You don't have a key." He said.

"I didn't need one. That lock is a simple four-barrier set up. I've been picking locks like that since I was twelve."

"I'm going to check on that you know." Cal said, "If you've hurt her—"

"I haven't laid a finger on her." Gayal protested.

Cal concentrated, staring at her and he sensed no deception. On past experience that was no guarantee of anything he knew however, several members of the Founding Families and those around them were strong minded enough to hid their precise motives from him and following their first encounter Cal had reason to suspect that Gayal herself may even have some sensitivity to the Force. Of course this last point made her someone of interest to him and so Cal resisted the urge to throw her out of the apartment.

"In that case then," Cal said as he brought his purchased food to the table and set it down, "dig in. You can stay tonight, but you're going home tomorrow."

"I told you I don't have my ID."

"No, but I have a ship of my own. I'll take you myself."

Though Aurek Station was the primary navigational beacon in the Narthis Sector two other beacons, Besh and Cresh Stations completed the Republic's navigational network in the sector. Unlike the much larger Aurek Station the operations of these two facilities were automated and although they maintained favourable environments just in case they were called upon to serve as emergency shelters for travellers in need they had no crew. Therefore it was purely by chance that a vessel was in the vicinity of Besh Station awaiting a response to its request for navigational data when something else exited hyperspace.

The object returned to real space with the flash of light characteristic of a hyperspace exit, but unlike a vessel that would continue to decelerate to mere fraction of the speed of light this object remained at a near relativistic velocity. The object's trajectory took it straight towards the immobile Besh Station and it smashed into the unmanned beacon with tremendous force. This impact sent a shockwave spreading from the point of impact even as the object continued on its course, deflected only slightly by the sudden introduction of drag against it and the hull on the side struck crumpled and burst open at several locations. Inside the station the projectile continued on its way, now decelerating as both the structure of the station and its atmosphere now impeded its travel. This set in motion further shockwaves from displaced air as the energy lost during this deceleration was transferred into the station itself and formed a cloud of shrapnel made up of fragments of the station. All this lasted for a fraction of a second before the fast moving object burst out of the far side of Besh Station leaving behind a trail of devastation that saw the facility break apart under the stress of its passage.

Even after this the projectile continued on its way, heading off into empty space in a straight line leaving behind the wreckage of Besh Station and a single stranded starship.

Cal angled the *Bright Hope* into a controlled decent over the world of Crassis Major. On this occasion he was not aiming for one of the government or commercial starports, but instead towards a private beacon that he had visited before. The sprawling estate of the Karn family included its own landing facilities for both aircraft and small starships such as the *Bright Hope*.

"You didn't have to bring me back here Cal." Gayal said from the seat beside him.

"Oh I think I did." Cal replied without taking his eyes off the sky ahead of the ship, "If I'd just dropped you at a commercial port you'd just have run off somewhere else. I'm sure your parents will be relieved to have you back."

Gayal snorted.

"Unlikely. They're not home; they're vacationing on Delvad. I was supposed to stay home alone as a punishment."

"Well then I'm just respecting their wishes." Cal said, then he pointed out of the cockpit canopy, "Look, there's your home now."

The sudden appearance of the *Bright Hope* in the sky over the Karn estate triggered a swift response from the staff who had been left behind when their employers had departed and by the time the ship touched down there was already a reception committee waiting beside the landing pad consisting of one of the senior serving staff and a group of armed guards.

"Mister and Missus Karn are not at home Jedi Udra." The servant announced as Cal strode down the *Bright Hope's* access ramp, "I will have to ask you to leave."

Cal looked around.

"Gayal don't make me cone up there for you." He called out and Gayal appeared on the ramp behind him.

"It my understanding that you were supposed to be keeping an eye on her." Cal said, turning back towards the servant.

"Ah, err, of course sir." The servant replied, his tone changing.

"Somebody better get my bags." Gayal said to the servant calmly as she walked up to Cal and linked arms with him, "They're in the hold."

"All twelve of them." Cal added with a frown.

"Certainly miss." the servant said and he reached for a datapad and tapped the screen several times before looking back at Gayal, "The droids will be along shortly. Now will your guest be staying?"

Cal was about to turn down the invitation when the point-to-point communications link he carried began to chirp.

"Funny," he commented, "who knows I'm here?"

PTP links could communicate directly with one another over short ranges, but at greater distances they relied on local booster networks that could relay signals over planetary distances. As soon as he had left the ship Cal's PTP link would have located he local network and logged onto it, but only someone aware of his presence on the planet would be able to route a call to him and the only people with that information were standing in front of him. Or so he thought.

"Cal Udra." He said, activating the device.

"Ah Jedi Udra." a voice replied. Cal had heard the voice before and sent the face of its owner, but he had never met the man in person up to now, "It's General Drud." General Joshua Drud was another member of one of the Founding Families. Technically he was the head of his family, but since he had decided to remain as head of the Crassis Major Defence Forces his family duties had instead fallen to his younger brother Heddren, "The Karn's staff alerted me to your presence on Crassis Major." He went on, explaining how Cal's presence had become more widely known. Cal guessed that one of the staff had alerted the general the moment they recognised his ship. News travelled faster than the class seven hyperdrive aboard the *Bright Hope* amongst the Founding Families.

"How may I help you general?" Cal asked.

"We need your help Jedi Udra. The entire sector's just been put on alert. Can you meet me at the defence force headquarters?"

Cal was puzzled, a sector wide alert was serious indeed and it was only fitting for the local and Republic forces two seek the assistance of the Jedi Order.

"What's happened?"

"Haven't you heard?" General Drud replied, "Besh Station has been completely destroyed."

Cal's face fell.

"I'll be there as soon as I can." He said, "Cal out." And he shut off the link. Then he noticed that Gayal was smiling at him, "What?" he asked.

"Now its my turn to give you a ride." She replied.

The Karn family owned numerous speeders, all of them luxury models. Some were built to provide the occupants with a smooth, comfortable ride and included all manner of recreational gadgets. Others were like the one Gayal selected to drive Cal to the defence force building and were built purely for speed and handling.

*Fear.*

Though Cal would not admit it to anyone the way in which Gayal handled the speeder terrified him and he frequently found himself flinching uncontrollably as she performed sudden high speed manoeuvres that briefly left their vehicle rushing directly towards another only for her to turn aside at the last moment.

The upside of this was of course that the ride was mercifully brief, it was hard to make the journey of less than ten kilometres to the defence force headquarters last more than a few minutes when travelling at up to three hundred kilometres per hour. When the speeder was thankfully brought to a halt Cal wasted no time in exiting the vehicle and barely resisted the urge to kneel down and kiss the ground in thanks for what he saw as his repeated narrow encounters with death.

"Jedi Udra are you ill?" General Drud called out as he approached from the building's main entrance flanked by a pair of guards and a junior officer clutching a datapad.

"No." Cal replied, "I'll be fine. Now can you update me on what's happening?"

It was then that Gayal got out of the speeder and General Drud frowned.

"This meeting is restricted." He said sternly, gazing right at her.

"Oh I'm with Cal." Gayal replied and she looked at the jedi knight, "Unless you'd rather I left and found something else to do." She added.

“Oh no.” Cal replied, “I’ve only just got you back here. I’m not having you disappear only to turn up at my place again.” And he turned back towards the general, “It’s true, she’s with me. She’s providing me with assistance while my padawan is away.” He said reluctantly.

“Very well then. Come with me.” General Drud said and he turned around and strode back towards the building entrance.

## 2.

"These images were recorded by chance." General Drud explained as Cal watched a hologram of the destruction of Besh Station by the mysterious projectile from hyperspace. There were several other holograms in the room also. These were real time broadcasts from across the sector. Cal instantly recognised the senior Republic military and administrative leaders and guessed that the others represented local military and law enforcement groups. "A transport ship was waiting for jump data to here and ended up getting stuck."

"Why not just signal for help?" Gayal asked.

*Annoyance.*

Cal sensed that the general did not like having her in his command centre and he found it difficult to disagree.

"The ship was equipped for short range broadcasts only." The image of Captain De Kuun, the duros officer who was in charge of the local Republic forces replied, "The same was true of the next two ships to happen along and they were all left stranded until a vessel equipped with a longer range communications suite turned up and relayed the situation to Crassis Major."

"So what's happening out there right now?" Cal asked.

"The *Perseverance* is on station filling in for the beacon." Captain De Kuun said, "Isn't that right Captain Veers?" and the hologram turned towards another of the floating images, this one of a human in a Republic Navy uniform. Though he had been addressed as captain the man's uniform bore the insignia of a lieutenant commander.

"It is." The image responded, "My ship is merely relaying requests for data to Aurek Station mind you, our nav computer isn't up to the task of replacing a beacon all by itself."

"Have there been any further attacks?" another of the holograms asked. This one was of one of the local commanders who Cal did not know.

"None." Captain De Kuun replied.

"I should head out to the site of the attack now." Cal announced, "I can liaise with the *Perseverance* while you all prepare for more attacks."

"I agree." Another of the holograms stated. This was another alien, a member of the short statured bothan species. Ishtel Varr'kay was the chief administrator of Aurek Station and if someone was intent on destroying the local navigational beacons then his command would inevitably come under attack. Bothans frequently assumed that others were plotting against them and the current situation played right into administrator Varr'kay's fears, "We must find the culprits before more of our facilities come under attack. We don't even know how the attack was carried out."

"Indeed." General Drud stated, "I am mobilising my forces now, but without a target to strike at we are impotent. If Jedi Udra and his assistant can determine the source of the attack then hopefully we can prevent another, or if he can determine how the perpetrators carried this out then perhaps we can come up with a defence in time to prevent anyone from being killed."

"Err, did you just say 'my assistant'?" Cal asked.

"Why yes Jedi Udra. You did say that Miss Karn was working with you." The general replied with a smile and as Cal looked around at her he saw that she too was grinning at him.

"Yes you did." She added.

"Fine." Cal replied, "But do as your told or you'll find yourself walking home."

"Cal, what's it like?" Gayal asked suddenly. They had been in hyperspace for several hours and had barely spoken during that time, though Cal had been aware that Gayal had been repeatedly glancing towards him.

"What? Flying in hyperspace?"

"No silly, I mean being a jedi. Do you like being able to read people's minds or make yourself float up to second floor windows instead of just using a door?"

Cal let out a brief laugh.

"I can't actually do either of those things." He replied, "Levitation is extremely difficult, I doubt more than a handful of masters can achieve it. If any."

"What about mind reading?"

"We don't really read minds. We just sense emotions and sometimes we can foresee what actions people are about to take. Though that's also related to the precognitive abilities some of us manifest."

"You can see the future?" Gayal said and then she suddenly reached out and took hold of Cal's robes, leant towards him at the same time as pulling him towards her and kissed him, holding her lips against his for several seconds while his eyes widened, "Did you see that coming?" she asked when she let him go.

"Err no." Cal replied, "Why did you do it?"

"Just wondering what it would be like."

Cal smiled.

"Like you were wondering about what being a jedi was like?"

"Kind of."

"Gayal have you ever noticed any odd feelings or sensations? Known what was about to happen before it did maybe?"

A puzzled look appeared on her face.

"I wasn't looking to be recruited." She said, "I was just curious. I can't move things with my mind or see the future."

"Maybe not." Cal said, but before he could continue there was an alarm from the console, "This is it," He said, "we're there."

"Wow." Gayal said when the *Bright Hope* dropped out of hyperspace at the location where Besh Station had once been, "This place is a mess."

"No argument here." Cal said as he looked at the field of wreckage. Here and there were the lights of the propulsion packs worn by the navy crewmen of the nearby frigate *Perseverance* as they combed the debris for clues.

"*Bright Hope* this is *Perseverance*. Captain Austin Veers here."

"Cal Udra aboard the *Bright Hope* here." Cal responded to the transmission, "Go ahead captain."

"Captain?" Gayal asked quietly, "I thought he was a commander or something."

"Ship's commanding officers are referred to as 'captain' anyway." Cal answered.

"As I'm sure you can see Jedi Udra, my men have been going over what's left of the beacon but there just isn't much of it."

"What about the projectile itself?" Cal asked.

"Long gone by the time we got here. It's travelling at near relativistic speeds so it'll be billions of kilometres away by now. The *Perseverance* is needed here right now."

Cal looked at the sensor display on the console in front of him, checking for any sign of the missing projectile.

"I can't see it on sensors." He said, "Can you give me a trajectory? That wasn't included in the holo." Austin's image turned aside briefly.

"We've got it for you right now." He said, "We're sending it over."

"Got it." Cal said as he saw the data packet arriving in the *Bright Hope*'s communications system and he loaded into the navigation system, "We're going to head after it. We'll be back as soon as possible."

"Copy that *Bright Hope*." And then the channel went dead.

"Okay then Gayal," Cal said, "hang on because this could get a bit bumpy."

The *Bright Hope* shook violently as Cal jumped the ship to hyperspace and almost immediately returned it to realspace. In that brief moment the ship had travelled a vast distance, but the projectile was still out of sensor range so once again he activated the hyperdrive and the ship was buffeted once more by the sudden changes in velocity.

"Is this your revenge for the speeder ride?" Gayal asked as she fastened her seat harness.

Cal just smiled as he carried out a third micro jump. This time the projectile was visible as a streak on the sensor display.

"Is that it?" Gayal asked.

"That's it." Cal replied, "The distortion in the return is because of—"

"It the Doppler effect." Gayal interrupted, "Its moving so quickly that we're receiving multiple returns from slightly different location at the same time." And she smiled.

"You're not jus a pretty face are you?"

"Oh no. The rest of me is good as well."

"Well make sure your harness is secure because to catch that thing I'm going to have to put everything we've got into the engines and particle shields. I'll take us alongside and we'll bring it inside."

Cal braced himself and the *Bright Hope*'s engines roared as he pushed them as hard as he dared. Both he and Gayal felt the force of the acceleration in spite of the ship's compensating gravitational field. This pressure was sustained for almost five minutes as Cal brought the ship up to a significant fraction of the speed of light and the projectile came into visual range.

"How big is that?" Gayal asked.



"Big." Cal replied, "About twenty metres or more."

"Will that fit in the hold?" Gayal then asked and Cal shook his head.

"We'll have to use the landing gear." He said, "We can use the docking claw to grab hold of it and decelerate. Once we've slowed it down enough we can go outside and take a look for ourselves."

"How long will that take?"

"About an hour." Cal said, "If I try using the same amount of power as I did to speed up we'll likely rip the landing gear off and lose it."

Cal extended the *Bright Hope's* landing gear and brought the ship in close to the projectile, aligning it with the docking claw that would enable the ship to latch onto another object. As soon as the claw tightened around the projectile Cal fired the engines again, slowing the *Bright Hope*.

"Now we just sit and wait." Cal said.

Cal was the first one out of the airlock, with Gayal close behind.

"I don't like this colour." Gayal commented, referring to the bright pink colour of her vacuum suit, "You're sister has no taste, you know that don't you?"

Cal ignored the comment as he walked along the hull of the *Bright Hope*, heading for the landing claw and he got his first close up look at the projectile. It was pitted and scored along its entire length, though at one time it had clearly been a sleek and pointed object. The most striking thing about the projectile was its lack of any surface features.

"There's no engine." He said.

"So?" Gayal responded, "It's just a big bullet isn't it?"

"Yes but it came out of hyperspace." Cal explained, "Which means it must have some sort of mechanism for transitioning to and from there. In other words, an engine."

"Maybe its inside." Gayal suggested.

Cal ran a gloved hand across the surface of the projectile. The pitting from the impact with Besh Station made it difficult to detect any imperfections, but Cal located a point where the projectile's casing had bent upwards.

"Stand back." Cal said to Gayal as he took the lightsaber from his belt and ignited it. He lowered the weapon over the projectile slowly and used the edge of the glowing blue blade to cut through the casing without damaging whatever lay beneath. As soon as the cut he made was complete Cal brushed the loose section away and peered inside. Then he looked back up at Gayal.

"So how would you explain this then?" he asked her and he pointed into the projectile's interior.

Gayal looked inside for herself and amongst the electronics contained there she saw a component with a clear logo marked on it and a label that read 'KARN HYPERSPACE'.

### 3.

There was just about enough room in the hold of the *Perseverance* to both contain the projectile and allow the frigate's crew room to study it properly.

"Captain I need to know as much about where those components came from." Cal said.

Austin nodded.

"My engineer says he'll have them removed in about ten minutes," He replied, "now that the armoury has confirmed that its not booby trapped. Though I think we both know where some of them originated." And he looked over his shoulder at Gayal.

"Why would my family want to blow up a nav beacon lieutenant commander?" Gayal said, glaring back at him and using his actual rank as an insult.

"Why would anyone?" Cal commented, "Hyperspace beacons are essential to space travel, only a few ships have nav computers that can plot jumps without them."

At that moment one of the ship's engineers approached holding the component marked with the Karn family logo.

"We've removed this like you asked sir." He said to Cal, handing over the device, "It turns out there isn't much else in there."

Cal frowned.

"So what is this then?" he asked.

"It's a gravity well cut out." The engineer replied, "If a vessel in hyperspace comes close to an object in realspace then this creates an energy pulse that forces the ship back to realspace to avoid a gravity well collision."

"Is that all?" Cal asked.

"Yes sir."

Cal then looked at Austin.

"Captain is it possible to launch something like that from within hyperspace and aim it at something like a beacon?"

"No." Austin replied, shaking his head, "Not with our current understanding of physics anyway."

"Well this is Republic technology." Cal replied, "So if it doesn't have a hyperdrive of its own then how did it get into hyperspace?"

"I don't know," Austin told him, "and that scares the hell out of me."

"Me too." Cal said and then he held up the cut out device, "Can I take this?" he asked.

"Sure, but where?"

"Back to Aurek Station. Maybe someone there can figure this out."

When Cal and Gayal arrived back at Aurek Station a human female met them.

"Jule, good to see you." Cal said to the woman.

"Cal." She replied with a smile and then she looked at Gayal and her smile vanished, "Gayal."

"So you've met." Cal said.

"Oh we meet most times she's on the station." Jule said, "Normally when she's being processed by one of my men before we escort her to a ship off here." Agent Jule Raser was the Narthis Sector's most senior Sector Ranger, the Republic's interstellar police force.

"Why am I not surprised?" Cal replied, throwing a quick look in Gayal's direction.

Jule looked at the engine component that Cal now had wrapped in a plastic sheet.

"So that's it is it?" she asked.

"Yeah, the only clue we have so far." He replied.

"Well you better come with me. Important people want to see you." And Jule looked at Gayal, "Both of you." She added sternly.

Jule led them to a conference room where both Administrator Varr'key and Captain De Kuun waited, additionally there was the translucent image of a middle aged human sat in a chair beside the two beings actually in the room.

"Oh no." Gayal muttered when she saw the image that was staring right at her, "Dad."

"Mister Karn has agreed to join us for this meeting." The station's bothan administrator said, indicating the hologram, "Now will you please show us what you have found Jedi Udra?"

"Of course." Cal said, unwrapping the component, "This device was the only system within the projectile." he explained, holding up the component, "It is a cut out device that-

"Yes I think everyone here knows what it is Jedi Udra." Del Karn said, "One of my family's companies made it and both the administrator and captain have decades of experience in space travel."

"Well I don't know what it is." Jule said, correcting Del.

"It's a safety device," Captain De Kuun told her, "and essential to hyperspace travel. If a vessel in hyperspace were to pass directly through an object in realspace then the collision of their mass shadows would destroy the ship. That device forces a ship back into realspace before such a collision can happen."

"So why fit one to that projectile?" Jule asked.

"Because the object in realspace will not suffer anywhere near as much damage." Administrator Varr'key answered, "I would guess that it was designed to drop the projectile into realspace when it encountered the beacon's gravity well and allow the two to collide in the most devastating manner."

"I agree." Captain De Kuun added, "This also means that the perpetrators' choice of targets is not as wide as we at first feared."

"How come?" Gayal asked and her father frowned at her.

"Because if the projectile drops out of hyperspace when it encounters the edge of a gravity well it means that it cannot be used to strike at a planet." The captain explained, "Such a gravity well extends far into space, much further than that created by a navigational beacon. Even moving at near light speed planetary defences would have twenty to thirty seconds to react. More than enough time to raise a shield to block the attack. Additionally it is too inaccurate to use against a ship in space. The weapon is clearly firing over interstellar distances and so can strike only at targets in easily predictable locations."

"Like Aurek Station." Administrator Varr'key said sternly.

"But it still doesn't explain how the projectile was fired." Cal said, "The captain of the *Perseverance* told me that it isn't possible to launch a weapon from within hyperspace."

"It isn't Jedi Udra." Captain De Kuun said, "But I think that I may have an answer for you." Everyone turned to look at the duros, "Millennia ago, before the creation of the Republic even when both my people and the Corellians were first starting to explore other systems we could not create ships capable of entering hyperspace, but we did have the technology to return a ship to realspace from hyperspace. The problem of entering hyperspace was at that time overcome by using what were referred to as hyperspace cannons, massive linear accelerators that would open up a hyperspace window and hurl a ship through it. Without another cannon at the destination it was a one-way trip, but it was the only method available until more rakata technology could be reverse engineered."

"No such devices were built in this sector." Administrator Varr'key said.

"Not by the Republic, no." Captain De Kuun replied, "But we all know that the Republic is not the only civilisation to have travelled these parts. We know little about the kinnin who live on the fringe of the sector and little more about any of those civilisations that we know to have been here in the past. Might I remind you all that a thousand years ago an entire Republic battle group was destroyed in this sector? A loss that was only solved within the last year? Clearly someone in the sector has access to a hyperspace cannon that is in working order."

"I need to know where this cut out went." Cal announced, holding up the component, "Mister Karn can you help with that?"

"Of course." Del answered, "That was why I was brought in on this meeting. Karn Hyperspace is based in the Jovan system. I will call ahead and let them know to expect you."

"I'm going as well." Gayal said.

"No you're not young lady." Del snapped, "You're supposed to be at home and that is where you're going."

"Well the Crassis system is on my way." Cal said, "I can drop her off." The hologram of Del Karn looked back at Cal, his expression suggesting that he was not keen on the idea. At the same time Gayal also glared at him, "Do you think anyone else can get her back home as easily?" he then added.

"No." Del replied, "Thank you Jedi Udra, your kind offer is appreciated."

In a luxuriously decorated room that overlooked the oceans of Delvad Del Karn shut off the holographic system and the images of the people on Aurek Station faded.

"I don't like it." He said as the sound of footsteps heralded the approach of his wife, the true head of the family, "Putting the two of them together. I don't trust him."

"Of course not." Faye Karn responded as she bent down and kissed the top of her husband's head, "But what damage can she do? It's only an hour or so from Aurek Station to Crassis in the Jedi's ship and she doesn't know enough to hurt us."

"I know. But like I said, it's him I don't trust. Faye darling, I've got a very bad feeling about this."

*Anger.*

Cal could sense Gayal's displeasure at being taken home, but as soon as the *Bright Hope* entered hyperspace he released his harness and looked at her.

"Come with me." He said to her.

"Where? Isn't it bad enough you're dragging me back to Crassis Major?"

"Actually I've jump data all the way to Jovan and I don't plan on deviating for anything. There's too much at stake for detours just to return badly behaved little girls home until I'm done."

Gayal looked back at him.

"Then why-" she began before Cal interrupted.

"Because I find you a very interesting person Gayal Karn and I think that by having you here I can get some answers. Now come with me."

Puzzled, Gayal followed Cal as far as the *Bright Hope's* medical suite where he began to activate the systems.

"A medical?" she asked, "Do you want me to take all my clothes off while you examine me?"

Cal smiled.

"It's just a blood test." he said, sitting down by a computer, "Now come over here and hold out your hand."

Gayal did as Cal said and sat down next to him with her hand outstretched. Cal jabbed her briefly with a needle and transferred the few drops of blood that he drew to a slide that he then inserted into the computer.

"I ran a test on a dried sample from my cloak when we first met." He explained, "But it was inconclusive so I'd like to try it with a fresh sample." Then he turned to the computer and selected the test he wanted to run.

"A midi-chlorian test?" Gayal asked, "But I'm no jedi."

"No. That much is obvious." Cal replied, "But I think you may have some sensitivity to the Force."

The computer silently carried out the examination of the blood sample provided and in just a few seconds a number was displayed on the screen. Cal smiled and turned to Gayal.

"Is that good?" she asked.

"Just under seven thousand?" Cal said, "It's not bad. It's almost three times the human average and suggests you are Force sensitive."

"I don't want to be a jedi Cal." Gayal said, folding her arms, "Most of you are far too stuffy and those robes? Brown is not my colour."

"I wasn't planning on recruiting you anyway." Cal replied, "I already have a padawan. Even if she is an impatient, self-opinionated and disorderly nerf herder."

"You're sister?"

"That's her. She doesn't like you by the way."

"Do you like me?"

"If I say yes are you going to kiss me again?" Cal asked and they both just looked at one another and smiled. Gayal then looked back at the display.

"So why run the test if you don't me to become a jedi?"

"Because I'm hoping you'll let me teach you few meditation techniques. They may help you control your behaviour before you get into too much trouble. So what do you say?"

The star at the centre of the Jovan system was relatively young and bright. At this stage in the system's development most of the mass orbiting the star was in the form of dense asteroid fields, with the gas giant Jovan itself orbiting towards the outer edge. Sealed settlements were scattered throughout the system either in space or built on the surfaces of some of the larger asteroids as well as numerous shipyards orbiting Jovan. The production facility of Karn Hyperspace was one of those located on the surface of an asteroid, several in fact and the facility linked a cluster of asteroids together in close proximity with docking facilities located on the connecting girders and travel tubes.

"Karn Hyperspace, this is the jedi vessel *Bright Hope*." Cal signalled, "We require docking instructions."

"Confirmed *Bright Hope*." An electronic sounding voice responded and Cal guessed that he was talking to a droid, "Please dock at the port now deploying, you are expected."

Cal looked through the cockpit canopy and saw that a tube was extending from one of the connecting structures and that it was tipped with what looked to be a standard docking port.

"You're expected." Gayal commented, "I wonder if I am?"

Once docked Cal and Gayal made their way to the *Bright Hope's* airlock and waited for the Karn Hyperspace facility's hatch to open. When it finally did they found themselves facing a trio of mouse-eared sullustans.

"Good day sir jedi." The sullustan at the front of the group, "I was expecting you to be alone."

Cal glanced at Gayal and smiled before looking back at the sullustan.

"This is Miss Gayal Karn." He said, introducing Gayal.

*Fear.*

"Karn?" the sullustan replied as his two companions glanced at one another.

Cal noted the reaction of the sullustans, for some reason they were more concerned about the presence of one of their employers' family rather than a Jedi knight.

"I need to ask you about this." Cal said, holding out the engine component.

"Ah yes, a type fourteen mass sensitive cut out." The lead sullustan said and he glanced at one of his comrades and muttered something in his own language before looking back at Cal, "If you'll come this way then I'm sure that we can find the information you seek."

The sullustan led Cal and Gayal through the confines of the facility, the other two disappearing down a different corridor without any explanation of where they were going.

*Deception.*

Cal sensed that the sullustans were up to something, but was unable to determine what. For now at least he determined to go along with whatever it was. The sullustan halted outside a room that contained a table and several chairs.

"Please wait here sir Jedi and Miss Karn." He said, "I will send a droid with refreshments while I look up the serial number of this device in our records."

*Deception.*

"So how long do you think we'll be waiting here?" Gayal asked after the door slid shut and they were left alone.

"I don't know." Cal replied slowly.

"You think they're up to something don't you? I can tell from the tone of your voice. It's not a Jedi feeling or anything."

"They're afraid." Cal told her, "More of you than me for some reason." Suddenly Cal felt a tremor in the Force and he leapt to his feet, instinctively drawing his lightsaber and igniting the weapon.

"What's wrong?" Gayal asked, surprised and concerned.

"I'm not sure." Cal replied, "But I just got a very bad feeling, like we're in danger. I think it's a trap."

## 4.

The sullustan rushed into the command centre and tossed the engine component aside.

"Where are we up to?" he asked the other two.

"The jedi are sealed in?" one of them asked.

"Of course and I vented the rest of the section. If that jedi tries to cut his way out they'll asphyxiate."

"Well we've deleted the inventory records." The other sullustan said.

"And the reactor is set to overload." The third one added, "We've got ten minutes before it blows."

"Ten minutes? That's not enough time to load the ship."

"If we left it longer the jedi may find a way of escaping. We've no weapons here and even if we had any we couldn't fight a jedi. Now let's get out of here before this place is destroyed."

"Cal this door is cold." Gayal said. She had walked to the door with the intention of opening it only to find that it had been sealed. She had then placed her hand against the metal door itself and withdrawn it as she felt the coldness against her skin.

Cal shut off his lightsaber and walked over to the door as well, placing his hand flat against the metal.

"There's no air outside this room." He said, "The crew have opened the rest of the section to space."

"But if they wanted to kill us then why not decompress this room?"

"Because they probably used a fire fighting system to do it. Individual rooms are probably all sealed and still have air. But by decompressing the corridors and sealing off ventilation shafts a fire can't spread."

"So how do we get out of here?"

"Easy," Cal said, "we take the *Bright Hope*." And he returned his lightsaber to his belt before taking out both his PTP link and datapad and connecting the two devices together. He tapped at the datapad display a few times until an image of the *Bright Hope* appeared and he tapped the part of the image relating to the cockpit. Immediately the screen split to show not only the entire ship, but also a miniature version of the flight console, "This would be a whole lot easier if my parents had let me play more video games as a kid." He added.

Outside the facility the *Bright Hope's* engines suddenly flared into life. The vessel was still clamped onto the boarding tube, but when the engines fired the comparatively lightweight structure twisted and broke under the strain. The *Bright Hope* itself then darted forwards, accelerating rapidly until Cal sent the command that slowed the vessel. Cautiously, he then manoeuvred it around the facility until he could see it through the viewport of the room he and Gayal were trapped in. He then rotated the ship so that the bottom of its hull was facing them and aligned the ventral cargo hatch with the view port. There was a brief flash of light as a low power shield activated across the area of the hatch before it slid open to reveal the inside of the ship's hold.

"I need your gun." Cal said to Gayal.

"What?"

"Your gun, the slugthrower you've got hidden down the back of your belt."

Gayal reached behind her back and pulled out a compact semi-automatic pistol that she handed to Cal. He stepped towards her and wrapped an arm around her before walking her towards the viewport.

"Now I need you to close your eyes tight and exhale." He said.

"Oh no, you're not serious." Gayal said.

"Hey," Cal said to her, "it's me."

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

"Just exhale. Now!" and at the same time as Cal pointed the pistol at the viewport he leant forwards and kissed Gayal.

The first bullet put an irregular dent in the viewport, while the second one cracked it. The third bullet punched through, leaving a small hole and there was the whistle of escaping air. Finally the fourth bullet caused the entire viewport to shatter and as all of the remaining air was vented into space Cal and Gayal found themselves dragged out along with it.

Unable to see with his eyes tightly closed, Cal had been forced to gamble that the trajectory along which he and Gayal were thrown was the right one. Fortunately the few rough calculations he had been able to make before he opened fire were good enough that they were blown directly through the waiting cargo hatchway of the *Bright Hope*. Cal and Gayal both felt the tingle on their exposed flesh as they passed through the shield that was set at a level just strong enough to contain the ship's atmosphere but not so strong that they would bounce off it. Cal had shut off the *Bright Hope's* artificial gravity, the last thing he wanted was for them

both to simply fall back through the hatchway and out into space but the atmosphere in the hold, slowed them as they headed straight for the ceiling.

They both gasped as Cal let go of Gayal and they separated, floating apart in the weightless environment and coughing and gasping as they filled their lungs with air once more. Cal kicked against the ceiling and propelled himself towards a small control panel set into a wall. When it came within reach he pressed a few buttons and simultaneously the cargo hatch slid shut and the gravity came back on, dropping both Cal and Gayal to the floor.

"Ow!" Gayal yelled as she hit the floor, "Did you have to do that?"

Cal sat up, still gasping for breath.

"Well I wasn't so keen on us just floating about in here." He replied and he crawled towards Gayal, "Other than the landing are you alright?"

Gayal nodded.

"What was with kissing me though? Was it just to give me something to focus on?"

"Not exactly." Cal replied.

"Then what?"

"I just thought that if I was about to die I may as well do it."

"So how was I?"

"Better than my sister."

Gayal stared at him.

"Look we've got to get moving." Cal said, getting to his feet, "I'm guessing that those sullustans weren't planning on hanging around long enough to dispose of our bodies and I think they may have made plans to cover up our deaths."

They ran the length of the *Bright Hope* to the cockpit where they found the flight systems already fully active thanks to Cal's remote piloting of the ship. Taking the pilot seat Cal checked the sensors.

"Uh-oh." He said, "These readings suggest this place's reactor is set to blow."

"Then get us out of here." Gayal told him.

"Way ahead of you." Cal replied and before Gayal could strap herself in she felt the push as the *Bright Hope* accelerated away from the doomed facility. As the ship increased speed Cal adjusted its course.

"Shouldn't we just go in a straight line?" Gayal asked, "If we don't want to get blown up I mean?"

"Take a look at the sensors." Cal said to her, "I think that blip on the edge of our range is the sullustans getting away. If we can at least keep them in our sights then we can catch them and find out what they're hiding."

"The kill them right? Like they tried to kill us."

"Not if there's an alternative." Cal replied.

The *Bright Hope's* engines were incredibly powerful and under normal circumstances the ship would have had no problems in catching up to the sullustans' relatively slow moving shuttle. But knowing that the asteroid facility could explode at any moment was forcing Cal to maintain a significant flow of power to the vessel's rear deflector screens. Combined with the shuttle's head start this meant that the *Bright Hope* was gaining on them only slowly and when a sudden flash of light marked the shuttle's entry into hyperspace it was clear that the sullustans had escaped.

"Now what?" Gayal asked.

Before Cal could answer there was a second flash, this one much brighter than the shuttle's entry into hyperspace that signified the destruction of the asteroid facility.

"Well I don't think there's anything else for us in this system." Cal said, cutting back on both shield power and acceleration now that there was no reason for either.

"So we're just letting them get away?"

"Of course not. Look." And Cal reached for the sensor panel and replied the last few seconds before the sullustans had made their escape into hyperspace, "See?" He said, "We have their exit vector plotted. I'm hoping that since they were expecting us to be vaporised in that explosion back there, they just plotted a jump directly to whoever they're working with."

"You mean the people with the hyperspace cannon?"

"Exactly." Cal answered, nodding, "On its own the vector isn't much to go on, but if we combine that with the record of the projectile's path then we can reasonably assume that the cannon is located where the two paths intersect."

Gayal smiled.

"That sounds too easy." She said.

"Perhaps." Cal responded, "But it'll need more computing power than we've got here. We need to get back to Aurek Station."

“You fools!”

The three sullustans cowered in front of their master, a vultan whose head was covered in the ridges of cartilage typical of his species.

“But sir, we tried to-“

“Oh you tried did you? Well at the end of the day you either do or do not and you did not. You did not deflect the Jedi’s investigation from yourselves, you did not dispose of the Jedi and worst of all you did not make any effort to disguise your route here.”

“But-“ the lead sullustan began to protest.

“Shut up!” the vultan yelled, “Now do you have the devices we need for our projectiles with you?”

“Oh yes sir, we brought a dozen of them with us.”

A brief hint of a smile appeared on the vultan’s face.

“That will just have to do.” He said, “Now get yourselves out of my sight, the test firing revealed that the cannon needs repairs if we want to fire it again without damaging it beyond repair. Go and join the maintenance teams while I see to the projectiles. With any luck we will be able to demolish Aurek Station before the Republic can locate us. After that our revolutionary brothers across the region will pay handsomely for us to target the Republic in their sectors.”



## 5.

"Vedra?" Cal said, "Where's that?"

"It's outside the Republic." Gayal whispered to him, "I've heard my parents talking about it a few times."

The pair were sat Administrator Varr'key's office on Aurek Station. The bothan's crew had analysed the sensor data from the *Bright Hope* and compared it to the trajectory of the projectile that had destroyed Besh Station. Factoring in the likely gravitational influences that would have affected the projectile during its unpowered flight through hyperspace they had built up a picture of its course until that intersected with the course taken by the fleeing sullustans. That had led them to conclude that the shuttle's destination and projectile's source was a system located on the edge of the Narthis sector, far from any of the navigation beacons or primary jump routes.

"It's a dead system." Administrator Varr'key said, "There was a civilisation there once but its long gone now. There are a handful of researchers on the planet but nothing more."

"Have you been able to contact the researchers?" Cal asked and the administrator shook his head.

"No," he said, "but that is not unusual. The team has only basic communications equipment and it has failed before. We normally rely on their supply ship to ferry messages back and forth and that is not due back here for another two weeks yet."

"So what support can I expect if I head to Vedra right now?" Cal asked.

"Limited. Captain De Kuun is keeping his squadrons here to defend this station. He hopes that our gravity well will large enough to force an incoming projectile out of hyperspace far enough away that he will able to shoot it down."

"What's wrong with the defence grid?" Cal asked.

"Nothing, but a squadron of gunships and a rotating fighter patrol makes us a much harder target."

"What about that frigate?" Gayal asked and Administrator Varr'key looked in her direction.

"I have a team of engineers putting together a replacement for Besh Station now," the bothan told her, "but for now the *Perseverance* is needed to provide jump data. If the main route through the sector cannot be travelled then we will lose shipping to other sectors."

"Well then," Cal said, looking at Gayal, "I guess it's just us."

"We'll be passing through Tepillos and Xyros." Cal said just after the *Bright Hope* entered hyperspace, "It's the best charted route available so it should be the fastest."

"How long?" Gayal asked.

"Twenty one hours give or take." Cal replied, "I suggest we use that time to get some rest. Unless you want to try learning-"

"Are you going to suggest we sit and meditate for almost an entire day? Because I'd rather just sit and do nothing. Come to think of it, meditating is just sitting around doing nothing. You must have something interesting to do on this ship. What do you and your geeky sister do in hyperspace? Or should I not ask? Does it have anything to do with why you think I'm a better kisser than her?"

"No it kriffing well does not!" Cal snapped.

"Well in that case I'm going to go and get some rest." Gayal said as she got up and left the cockpit, then from the corridor she called out, "I'll be in the first cabin."

"That's my room." Cal shouted after her, leaning around his seat to look down the corridor.

"I know." She replied, "Let me know if you think of anything we can do to pass the time."

Cal frowned.

"Surely she can't mean-" he said to himself softly. Then he stopped and opened his mind to the Force, reaching out to try and sense Gayal's emotions. When he did his eyes widened and he rushed after her as fast as he could.

Cal awoke to the sound of an alarm.

"What is it?" Gayal mumbled from beside him and he felt her shifting slightly in the confines of the bunk.

"We're there." Cal said as he sat and looked around for his clothes. He extended an arm towards and instantly his clothing leapt from the floor and flew to his grasp.

"Already? How long have we been asleep?"

"About six hours. Now come on, we have to get up."

Cal was more hurried in dressing than Gayal and by the time she reached the cockpit he was already seated and studying the ship's instruments.

"There's no beacon." He said.

“Beacon?”

“Yes, the research team should have set up a beacon to guide in their supply ship. But I can't find it.”

“The northern continent.” Gayal said as she sat down.

“What?”

“They're on the northern continent. I told you, I overheard my parents talking about this place. I think they're sponsoring the expedition or something. All of the Founding Families do a lot of that sort of thing. Its some whole 'making us look good to the community' nonsense. I'd rather just have fun.”

Cal guided the *Bright Hope* towards Vedra. The planet was a dull grey ball with only limited oceans that looked to be barely habitable and as soon as the ship entered the atmosphere Cal noticed that there was a high level of radioactive particles and other contaminants present.

“We'll need breath masks if we're going to be outside for long.” He said, “Now can you give me any more hints about where to look for this research team?”

Gayal shrugged.

“I hated school.” She said, “Why would I pay attention to my folks talking about history? All I know is they were poking about in some ruins.”

“Well there are plenty of them about.” Cal replied, “I'll just look for the biggest lot I can find.”

In the cratered landscape Cal found it difficult to pick out areas that had once been home to the long vanished inhabitants of Vedra, but he knew the scars left behind by orbital bombardment when he saw them and from what he knew of the sector he guessed that the now extinct vedrans had had the misfortune to run afoul of the sith during their presence in the Narthis Sector a thousand years ago.

However, the ruins that the research team had been investigating were so vast that even a millennium of decay could not hide their presence. The research base consisted of a set of prefabricated domes linked by tube-like corridors, their off white colour standing out clearly against the grey landscape.

“Vedra research team this is *Bright Hope*.” Cal signalled, hoping that at such short range there would be at least one functional piece of communications equipment that could receive his signal, “Vedra research team can you read me?”

The only response was static across the entire spectrum that the *Bright Hope's* communications were designed to receive and Cal threw a glance at Gayal.

“There's no one alive down there is there?” she said.

“I can't sense anyone.” Cal replied, “But from up here I could easily miss someone, especially if they're badly hurt. Get ready to land, I'm going in to take a look for myself.”

“You mean we're going in.”

“No. Me, alone. I've already risked you enough. Stay with the ship and keep an eye out for anyone turning up. Signal me if you see anything.”

Cal landed the *Bright Hope* on a large landing pad constructed from metal sheets, apparently designed to give the research team's supply ship a stable place to land. It was just as Cal was descending the *Bright Hope's* ramp that it occurred to him that the supply ship itself should have been here. He had been told that it ran regular trips between Vedra and Aurek station and it had not been at Aurek Station when he left. He added that to the list of mysteries he had to solve.

He approached the entrance to the nearest dome with his hand on his lightsaber, but without either drawing or igniting the weapon. When he reached the hatchway he found it closed but not sealed and he simply opened the hatch. There was a slight breeze from inside the dome as he opened the hatch and Cal immediately realised that the domes were pressurised at a slightly higher pressure than the outside world. This meant that if there were any punctures the contaminated air outside would not leak in. Somewhere in the complex there was undoubtedly a filtration system that drew in air from outside and purified it to maintain the pressure.

A shiver ran down Cal's spine as he slowly made his way through the first dome.

“Hello?” he called out, tightening his grip on his lightsaber, “Is there anybody here?” but only silence greeted him.

He stepped into one of the corridors connecting this dome with the next and as he neared the other end he finally heard something, a flapping sound coming from a room just inside the second dome. But there was more than just this strange sound coming from inside the room, the smell of decay also wafted into the corridor and Cal drew his weapon before entering.

Inside the room Cal found the reason for both the smell and the sound. Several bodies lay scattered about on the floor, pools of dried blood indicating that they had been left where they fell, while the edges of a large tear on the dome were flapping in the breeze created as the dome's overpressure system forced a steady stream of clean air through it.

Returning his lightsaber to his belt Cal turned and left the room, continuing to explore the complex.

"We've got a problem."

The vultan frowned.

"I don't want to hear about problems," he said to the woman who was bringing him bad news, "I want solutions. We are hours away from possessing one of the most devastating weapons in the galaxy. From now on when our comrades in arms make demands the Republic will have to listen. But that won't happen if all you bring me is problems. Now what is it?"

"A ship just dropped out of hyperspace and landed on Vedra. We think it's the Jedi come to question the research team."

"Well then you'll just have to deal with them in the same way won't you?"

In the cockpit of the *Bright Hope* Gayal yawned. Cal had not signalled her since entering the domed complex and there had been no signs of any movement outside the ship. But this changed when the console beeped and one look at the sensor display told Gayal that another ship had just dropped out of hyperspace as close to the planet as it was possible to get.

"Cal get back here." Gayal transmitted excitedly, "We've got company."

"Who?" Cal's voice responded.

"How the hell should I know? It's a ship and it's heading this way."

"I'll be right there, keep an eye on it."

Cal rushed back to the *Bright Hope* and into the cockpit, sitting down heavily before looking at the display for himself. By this time the newly arrived ship was just entering Vedra's atmosphere.

"You're right." He said, "They are heading this way."

"Could it be the supply ship?"

"Let's find out." Cal replied and he reached for the communications, "This is the Jedi vessel *Bright Hope* to approaching ship, identify yourself."

Again the only response was static and the ship continued to head directly towards them.

"Okay that does it." Cal said as he began to strap himself in, "We need to get into the air."

"Why?" Gayal asked.

"Because this ship isn't designed to fight on the ground." He replied.

Fortunately Cal had left the *Bright Hope's* systems on standby rather than shutting them down completely and in under a minute the ship was lifting off the landing platform and turning towards the incoming vessel, the air around it shimmering as Cal raised the shields.

By now the incoming ship was well within the atmosphere and Cal made another attempt at contacting it.

"This *Bright Hope*, identify yourself." He said and this time there came a reply.

Both Cal and Gayal blinked as the laser blasts flashed across the *Bright Hope's* shields, "I think that proves they're not friendly." Cal said and he swung the *Bright Hope* around to face their attacker.

A single burst of power from the *Bright Hope's* engines sent it streaking upwards towards the attacking ship and as Cal rolled aside at the last moment he got a look at the ship. It was a lethisk-class armed freighter, equipped with both a laser cannon and a concussion missile launcher mounted in forward firing mounts. Such powerfully armed vessels were highly sought after in frontier regions where help could be far away, but the lethisk-class was also very expensive and only a few individuals could afford such a vessel.

Individuals who had the backing of the Founding Families for example.

"I think we've found the supply ship." Cal said as he twisted his head to watch the freighter pass them by then performed a sharp midair turn to bring the *Bright Hope* in behind it.

"How do you know?" Gayal asked, gripping the arms of her seat tightly.

"Well I can't be sure, but it would fit if whoever killed the researchers also stole their ship." Cal said and he fired a quick burst of laser blasts towards the freighter, but trying to combine piloting the *Bright Hope* and shooting at the same time the attack went wide, "I wish Lara was here." He muttered and when Gayal stared at him he added, "Yes I heard it too."

"Let me try." Gayal said.

"What flying? No chance."

"No, shooting."

"Do you know how?"

"Not really, but I've played video games. The targeting system looks the same as some of them."

"Gayal this is no game. Those are real people out there."

"Yes, but they're trying to kill me. Don't I have the right to defend myself?"

Cal thought for a moment, rolling the *Bright Hope* again as the pilot of the other ship tried to get them back in his own sights.

"Oh what the hell." He said, "Go for it."

Gayal smiled and took hold of the control column in front of her as Cal transferred control of the weapons to her. The first burst Gayal fired went wild but the second was closer, skimming across the limit of the freighter's shields.

"Concentrate." Cal said, "Let the Force guide you."

"I'm not your sister Cal. I'm not a Jedi."

"No but—"

*Anger.*

"Alright, have it your way."

Gayal fired again and this time the shot punched through the freighter's shields and struck one of its drive units.

"Cal, I got him!" Gayal exclaimed.

"Great work. Don't get cocky."

With only one functioning engine the freighter's pilot was clearly having trouble controlling his ship and Cal found himself having to make use of the *Bright Hope's* much better manoeuvrability to match the sudden tumbling of the freighter. The freighter's second engine suddenly died and the knife-shaped vessel plummeted towards the ground, leaving behind it a trail of thick smoke. Following the freighter from a safe distance Cal watched as its pilot was able to bring the nose up just enough to stop the ship from burying itself in the ground when it hit. Instead it skimmed across the ground, throwing up mud, rocks and pieces of the hull as they were ripped off the bottom of the ship. Striking a large boulder the ship rolled over sideways and came to a halt, upside down with massive holes in the hull pointing skywards. Slowly Cal brought the *Bright Hope* in closer, hovering above the crashed freighter and searching for any signs of movement.

"Here we go again." He said.

"Let me guess," Gayal replied, "I'm waiting here?"

Cal nodded and grabbed his breath mask.

The freighter was filled with sound. Loose electrical cables crackled as they swung close to metal surfaces and shorted against them, leaking fluids dripped from ruptured pipes and the whole structure of the ship groaned as it lay unevenly in its inverted position. But amongst all of this Cal could not hear a single sound to indicate that someone other than him was still alive in there.

Entering through one of the holes torn in the ship he clambered through the wreckage, making use of whatever handholds were available given that he was effectively walking on the ceiling and made his way towards the cockpit. He found his way blocked by a hatch, but he held out his hand and using the force as his lever he pulled it open and looked into the cockpit beyond.

There he saw the three-man crew still sat at their stations. All of them were clearly dead. The pilot had been impaled by a support that had pierced not only his chest but also the seat in which he sat. Next to him the co-pilot's head hung at an impossible angle, his neck clearly broken and finally the third crewman was covered in his own blood, a jagged piece of the smashed canopy protruding from his throat.

Cal noticed an identity card still pinned to the chest of one of the dead crew and he plucked it loose. It had been issued by Karn Industries and identified the man as a contractor. Cal had seen similar cards on some of the bodies in the research complex and from this he guessed that the supply ship's crew had turned on the researchers. Then Cal turned his attention to the freighter's controls and he saw that some of the systems still had power. Reaching to his belt, Cal took out his datapad and plugged it into the console.

Then, before the last remnants of power could fail he downloaded as much of the flight recorder as would fit on it before heading back to the *Bright Hope*.

Most of the data stored on a flight recorder had to do with what was going on inside a ship and Cal had no interest in that. Therefore, although he had been able to copy only a small portion of the entire recorder he had been able to capture the entire travel history of the freighter for the last six months.

"There." He said, pointing to a small holographic projection of the Vedra system, "That was where the ship jumped from and that's where I think we'll find the hyperspace cannon."

"How can you be certain?"

"Because look at where it is. It's right on the edge of the system beyond even the outer debris belt. That's exactly the sort of place to put it, beyond the influence of the gravity wells of the system's planets. We put our navigation beacons in interstellar space for the same reason. The only problem is that it's likely to have limited mobility, you'd need it to be able to launch a ship on a path that would otherwise take it through your own star."

"So what if they've moved it?"

“Oh I doubt that it can move very quickly. Besides, we’ve got to start somewhere and there is the only lead we’ve got. But first I need to send a message.”

## 6.

The vultan tapped one of his subordinates on the shoulder and the man looked round from the open panel. "Any word yet Solan?" he asked.

The man shook his head.

"None Trevis." He replied, "Our sensors registered their exit from hyperspace, but from this distance we can't track them in real space. As soon as they jump back here we'll find out what happened. What could possibly go wrong anyway? They're well armed and they'll be taking the Jedi ship by surprise. The Jedi will probably think it's just a routine supply run."

It was then that one of the Sullustans from the Karn Hyperspace facility came running towards the pair. "Come quickly!" he exclaimed, "A ship just dropped out of hyperspace, it looks like the Jedi!"

"There it is." Cal said, "Right where we expected."

"It's huge." Gayal said as she looked at the massive structure.

In fact, although the hyperspace cannon was more than two kilometres long it was still much smaller than Aurek Station. However, Gayal had never studied that place from the outside as she was doing with the hyperspace cannon now.

The cannon itself was a massive tube-shaped frame more than two thousand metres long and over a hundred and fifty in diameter while a cluster of sealed units mounted along side indicated the location of the command and control facilities. At both ends there were what looked like engine assemblies, tiny in proportion to the overall size of the structure but big enough to give it the manoeuvrability Cal had spoken of. One end had clearly been modified using somewhat archaic Republic technology and an old-fashioned mass driver could be seen aligned with the cannon assembly. Clearly any projectile fired by the mass driver would pass through the cannon and be catapulted into hyperspace towards its target.

"That's what we need to take out." Cal said, pointing at the mass driver.

"Well it looks easy enough to hit." Gayal said and she reached for the controls in front of her. But before she could open fire an alarm sounded.

"Uh-oh." Cal said, "I've got a bad feeling about this." And through the *Bright Hope's* canopy he watched as dozens of gun turrets emerged from armoured emplacements.

The technology used to create the hyperspace cannon's defences was extremely primitive when compared with that of a modern ship like the *Bright Hope* and the barrage of shots that impacted on the ship's shields were unable to penetrate as far as the hull. However, given the sheer number of weapons involved it was inevitable that eventually the shields would be overwhelmed. Cal sought to delay this moment as long as he could by making the most of the *Bright Hope's* manoeuvrability and flying in an evasive pattern that seemed to throw off the hyperspace cannon's targeting system's ability to track the ship properly.

A sudden red flash erupted from each of the *Bright Hope's* wings and Gayal attempted to return fire. But Cal's piloting affected her targeting just as badly as their enemy's and the shots passed harmlessly by the hyperspace cannon.

"Can't you hold still for just a second?" Gayal asked.

"Sure." Cal replied, "Right as soon as those guys stop shooting at us for that long."

It was then that one of the enclosed structures built along the side of the hyperspace cannon began to unfold and from inside a trio of armed freighters emerged and accelerated towards the *Bright Hope*.

"Oh this just keeps getting better." Cal said.

Trevis smiled as he watched the three armed freighters drive the *Bright Hope* away from the hyperspace cannon.

"What's our status?" he called out without taking his eyes from the viewport.

"Defence grid operational and thrusters available at your command." One of the others in the command centre replied.

"Good." Trevis said, "Now what about the mass driver?"

"Loaded and ready to fire."

"Align us with Aurek Station and open fire."

"Cal look!" Gayal pointed out of the canopy at the hyperspace cannon that was now in motion, spinning slowly in place.

"They're getting ready to fire." Cal said, "We need to knock out that mass driver now. Maybe if I can get us inside the structure."

"But what about those other ships?"

"Ah, well I'm not sure about that."

A sudden flash of light from outside marked the arrival of another ship and Cal banked sharply to avoid the ship that was about twice the size of the *Bright Hope* that had suddenly dropped out of hyperspace and was even now launching fighters.

"It's the *Perseverance*!" Cal exclaimed.

"Jedi Udra can you read me?" Lieutenant Commander Veers' voice asked over the communications.

"Right here captain," Cal replied, "can you keep those freighters off our back for a few minutes?"

"Consider it done."

The fighters launched by the *Perseverance* raced towards the three armed freighters, scattering them while the frigate itself began firing on the hyperspace cannon's defences.

"It's working!" Cal exclaimed, "They've cleared us a path right down the middle. Now let's blow this thing and go home."

Aiming the *Bright Hope* for the front end of the hyperspace cannon, Cal flew the ship into the centre of the framework structure and with the mass driver lying right in front of them Gayal fired. But although her shots were right on target the structure's shields were strong enough to resist the bombardment.

"What now?" Gayal asked.

"Torpedoes!" Cal snapped and he reached out and flipped switch in front of Gayal. The targeting display changed as the *Bright Hope*'s sensors began to zero in on the mass driver. A sharp beeping sound indicated a lock and Gayal squeezed the trigger. Instantly a pair of proton torpedoes streaked ahead of the *Bright Hope* and tore through the hyperspace cannon's shields and just before Cal pulled up and flew the *Bright Hope* over it, the mass driver was blasted apart.

Trevis watched in disbelief as his ingenious weapon was destroyed.

"No!" he cried out as the deck shook under the impact of the turbolaser strikes coming in from the *Perseverance*.

"This place is coming apart!" one of the crew cried out, "We have to surrender."

A furious Trevis drew his sidearm and shot the man dead.

"Keep shooting!" he yelled, "We only need to drive them off. We can rebuild it, we can re-"

But before he could continue a turbolaser shot blasted the entire command centre and everyone inside apart.

"It's over." Cal said in relief as he saw the hyperspace cannon burning, "We've done it."

"What do you mean 'we'?" Gayal asked, "I blew up the mass driver and that frigate and her fighters took care of the rest. You didn't do much at all."

"Yeah well I flew the ship didn't I?"

"Wow. You were my chauffeur."

"Well I think it's about time I chauffeured you back home then."

Gayal sighed.

"Another twenty-one hours in hyperspace." She said, "However will we pass the time?"

General Joshua Drud watched the holographic replay of the destruction of the hyperspace cannon. He was not in the Crassis Major Defence Force headquarter now, he was in a room in the family home with his brother and sister in law to his side. Around the rest of the room were holograms of the senior members of the other Founding Families.

"There you have it." He said as the replay finished and automatically looped back to the beginning, "If the Jedi hadn't located it, that hyperspace cannon could have reduced every navigation beacon in the region to scrap and inflicted horrific damage on any world caught with its shields off line. Not to mention the effect of firing a fragmentary device into a fleet at anchor."

"Maybe so," the aged and infirm Erill Crassis said, "but can we build one from scratch?"

"Easily." Faye Karn said, "I've already contacted Keleen on Coruscant and she's accessing the information we need. With her help we can have one of those built in a year."