

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



II-IV: BREAKOUT

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...

BREAKOUT

WHEN UNKNOWN FORCES STAGE A BREAKOUT FROM THE SECTOR'S MOST SECURE PRISON THERE HAS TO BE A REASON FOR IT. BUT WHO WOULD BE WILLING TO GO TO SUCH TROUBLE AND WHY...?

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

"A reduction?" Jedi knight Cal Udra said in astonishment, "But Master Karas—"

"But nothing." The image of Jedi Master Ben Karas replied, "Our resources in this region are limited and given that a large portion of your budget in the last period was spent on compensating the Republic Army for a speeder you lost through your own carelessness it has been decided that your budget for the next period will be reduced. You are no longer paying off the lost speeder so you have no need of those funds."

"But Master, our accommodation here on Aurek Station—"

"Is adequate for your needs Jedi Udra."

Cal sighed.

"What about the equipment I requested?" he asked and the look on Master Karas' face hardened even more, "I take it that means no." Cal said.

"If you are referring to the case of forty-five millimetre grenades then you are correct Jedi Udra, the answer is no. Now answer me this, has the Jedi Order issued you with a grenade launcher?"

"No master."

"Have you been certified in the use of a grenade launcher?"

"No master."

"Then why would you think that we would issue you with the ammunition for such a weapon? I would hate to think that you were planning to purchase such a thing for yourself."

"Of course not master."

"Good. Then you will have no need of the ammunition for it would you? Now tell whoever the grenades were intended for that they will have to go through the proper channels to obtain them. Karas out." And the screen went blank.

Sighing again Cal got to his feet and looked around the living room. The apartment on Aurek Station that he shared with his younger sister and padawan learner Lara was severely run down. But owing to their limited finances after the incident in which an army landspeeder lent to them had been stolen the siblings had had no other option unless they wanted to live aboard their ship, something to which Lara had vocally objected. Cal decided that he ought to let Lara know right away that they would be staying here longer than expected and he headed for her bedroom, opening the door as soon as he reached it.

Inside he found his sister standing on her bed wearing only the rather plain looking single piece underwear provided to her by the Jedi Order. In her hands she held a pulse wave rifle that had an under slung grenade launcher mounted beneath the barrel, a weapon that they had captured from a force of mandalorian warriors and neglected to inform their superiors in the Jedi Order about it. She had the weapon braced against her shoulder and was pivoting around mimicking the sound it would make when fired with her mouth.

"Cal!" she exclaimed she noticed him in the doorway and simultaneously she dropped the rifle and used the Force to call a robe from where it lay draped over a chair to her hand, "Knock before you come in." she said as she donned the robe and climbed off the bed, "I could have been naked."

"You're my baby sister, I've seen you naked before." Cal replied.

"Well I'm not a baby any more Cal." Lara said, "I've changed since then. Now what do you want?"

"I've just been discussing our allowance with Master Karas."

"Oh goody." Lara said, smiling, "Cal I can't wait to get out of this dump. But I think we need a place with a proper cabinet for the rifle. Cal, can I keep it my room? Please?"

"We're staying here." Cal told her, "Our budget's been cut."

Lara's face fell.

"This is because you lost that speeder isn't it?" she asked.

"Kind of. But I also think that the fact that Master Karas doesn't like either of us has something to do with it. You especially."

Lara frowned.

"There won't be any grenades either." He added.

"But what use is a grenade launcher without grenades to launch?"

"None." Cal replied, "So you may as well keep making the noises with your mouth, it's the best we can do until we get hold of more than the one we've got left from somewhere else."

"It's so unfair." Lara said glumly, "No grenades and we have to stay in this place."

Cal spotted the jar of cash beside Lara's bed. She had obtained this while carrying out an investigation in a strip club, disguised as an employee.

"Well I bet you could earn more of that by going back to work as a stripper again." He said, pointing at the jar.

"I'm not a stripper!" Lara yelled and she used the Force to call a pillow to her hand that she then threw at Cal who blinked as it struck him.

"I tell you what though little sister, you can keep the rifle in your room if you want." Cal then said and Lara smiled.

"Really?"

"Really. But there is one rule."

"What? Anything."

"If you're going to play with it, you have to be wearing clothes."

"Oh get out." Lara snapped and she shoved Cal back out of the doorway and shut it behind him. Then she smiled, "I don't need to play by your stupid rules." She said to herself, locking the door and she quickly took off her robe and then slipped off her underwear before reaching out and using the Force to call the rifle and grenade launcher weapon to her grasp.

The transport was travelling from a moon orbiting the gas giant Seris to a space station orbiting the same world. At one time the space station had been a mining platform, set to up to exploit the temporary abundance of valuable chemicals in the planet's atmosphere created by a comet impact, but when the compounds became depleted the Republic had turned the space station into an orbiting prison and now the convicts were put to work on mining the remaining minerals present on the gas giant's moons.

The timing called for by the mission was precise. The Republic had seen fit to incorporate a weapons grid on the space station and there were other vessels on the moon the transport had just departed that could respond to a distress signal. Therefore, the attack had to come when Seris itself blocked the line of sight from the transport to both the moon and the station. The path of the transport took it far too close to Seris for the attacking vessel to approach using its hyperdrive and in any case the energy burst of a ship leaving hyperspace would have been too easily detectable, even on the far side of the planet. Therefore, the attack ship had slipped into the atmosphere of Seris almost a day earlier in anticipation of this moment and as the prison transport passed overhead the ship gradually ascended from within the dense clouds of gas, emerging like some marine predator seeking to attack an ancient sailing vessel.

"Hit it." The attack ship's pilot said as the clouds outside dissipated in favour of the blackness of space and beside him his co-pilot grinned. There was the sudden blue-white flash of a single ion cannon blast. The transport jerked as the blast struck it, the charged particles overloading its systems.

"Okay here we go." The attack ship pilot called out and he accelerated his ship towards the transport. The transport was tumbling now and in danger of falling into the gas giant.

"Almost there." The co-pilot said, "Get me just a little closer."

The pilot brought the ship closer as his co-pilot kept his view trained on the targeting display in front of him. A high-pitched tone indicated that the transport was now in range and the co-pilot activated the attack ship's tractor beam. The tumbling of the transport ceased abruptly and its size through the cockpit canopy grew as it was pulled in closer.

"Got it!" the co-pilot exclaimed gleefully.

The pilot grinned also and he activated the intercom.

"Prepare to board." He announced.

The panic aboard the prison transport had receded when the ship stopped the random tumbling that its disrupted inertial dampening system had been unable to disguise. But the vessel's captain knew that the violent motion had only ceased because the ship was caught in a tractor beam and right now a group of figures in space suits was making the crossing from the attacking ship to his.

"Be ready for decompression." The captain said to his men as he added the gloves and helmet to his flight suit that would protect him against prolonged exposure to hard vacuum. Around him other members of his crew were doing the same while another who was already suited up had opened several wall-mounted lockers and was removing the weapons held within. None of these were the latest military specification weapons; instead they were antiquated beam tubes that used heavy batteries mounted on armoured vests as power sources, "Give me one of those." The captain said as he took hold of one of the armoured vests and put it on. Then he picked up a weapon and connected it to the battery on his back before he made his way towards the airlock nearest to the group of figures approaching his vessel.

The captain and his crew found what cover they could in the corridor facing the airlock and waited.

"They're in." a voice in his ear told him. The captain had left one of his men on the flight deck to keep watch on the boarding party nearing the ship. If they changed direction to head for another entry point then he

could move his men to cover that instead, it was preferable to splitting his men up and defending each airlock only lightly.

"Twelve minutes!" the captain called out, "We only need to delay them that long and the station will see us and send help."

There was a grinding sound from the airlock door, and sparks flew as someone inside the airlock began to cut through the door where the magnetic sealing was located and the transport crewmen all braced themselves. The door suddenly slid upwards as its seal was destroyed and a figure was briefly seen moving out of the way inside the airlock before a fist-sized object was tossed out into the corridor.

"Grenade!" someone yelled a moment before the device went off. But there was no sudden blast of heat and light accompanied by flames or shrapnel, instead a dense cloud of smoke began to fill the corridor.

"Open fire!" the captain ordered and his men all fired in unison.

Their ancient weapons were true lasers, firing energy beams that were normally invisible to the naked eye but in the smoke filled corridor the beams were clearly visible and when the first return fire erupted from the airlock the captain realised what the attacking troops were doing. The boarding party was equipped with pulse wave weapons, directed energy weapons that projected an artificial spatial distortion. In the smoke filled corridor the blasts from these were invisible whereas every time one of the transport's crewmen opened fire the beam of light from his weapon gave away his position.

There were screams as the boarding party picked off each of the defenders while still managing to remain concealed in the smoke themselves.

"Fall back!" the captain shouted, "Cease fire and fall back!"

His men were slower off the mark than when ordered to open fire and another was killed before he could stand up as he tried to let off one last shot from his beam tube. Only three of his men followed the captain out of the smoke, out of the eight he had had before the ship was boarded.

"Where now sir?" one of them asked.

"The flight deck." The captain replied, "If they're going to seize the ship then they have to take the flight deck."

At that moment the first of the boarding party emerged from the smoke behind them and fired a short burst from his weapon that cut down two more of the crew. The captain spun around and took aim at the figure, the first of the intruders that he had gotten a clear look at. It took less than a second for him to bring up his beam tube and fire, a plume of blood that burst from the wound and illuminated the end of the beam where it struck the intruder providing a visual confirmation of a hit. But even as this figure collapsed to the deck another emerged from the smoke and opened fire on. The captain felt the impact of the pulse wave blast as it shattered the armour plate on his chest and slammed into his chest like a hammer blow. He heard a clattering sound and realised that it was his beam tube that he had just dropped and it took a few moments to sink in that he was falling. Lying on the deck the captain could taste the blood in his mouth as he coughed it up. The next thing he saw was a vacc suited figure standing over him with a pulse wave rifle. The final crew member cowered before the boarding party, his hands raised and staring at the body of his captain.

"On your feet!" one of the intruders ordered as he ripped the beam tube loose from the man's armoured vest, "And take us to the flight deck."

2.

"What's all this about then Cal?" Lara asked as they stood in the turbolift on their way up to Aurek Station's operating levels.

"I don't know exactly." Cal replied as he adjusted his robes, "But I do know that Jule's requested us and the military attend. So be on your best behaviour."

Agent Jule Raser was the most senior agent of the sector rangers, the Republic's interstellar law enforcement body in the Narthis Sector. The Udras had dealt with her on several occasions since their deployment and they had built up a good working relationship.

"Sure whatever you say." Lara said as the turbolift door slid open.

The conference room was only a short walk away and when Cal and Lara entered they found that Jule had requested the presence of far more than just the Republic personnel aboard Aurek Station, at most of the seats around the table were holographic representations of law enforcement agents from around the sector and even Master Karas from the enclave on Moldas, several parsecs away from the border of the Narthis Sector.

"Running late Jedi Udra?" the projection of Master Karas asked.

"My apologies Master, Agent Raser." Cal replied as he and Lara sat down.

"Actually I hadn't begun yet." Jule replied, the middle-aged woman smiling at the jedi.

"We were waiting for you." A duros in a navy uniform sat opposite said. This was Captain De Kuun, the head of the naval detachment for the sector. Unlike Jule, Cal and Lara did not enjoy such a good relationship with him.

Jule activated a projector and in the middle of the room a floating hologram of a starship materialised.

"This is the transport ship *Broad Stroke*." Jule explained, "It was one of the vessels assigned to the prison station in the Seris system."

"Was?" Lara interrupted, but stopped speaking when she noticed Master Karas' hologram glaring at her.

"Was." Jule repeated, "Two hours ago the station reported that the ship had gone missing on a routine flight transferring prisoners from one of the gas giant Seris' moons back to the station."

Cal raised his hand and when Jule paused and looked at him he spoke.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but how does a ship go missing when it's only got to get from a moon to a space station that's orbiting the same planet?"

"The two places were on opposite sides of the planet when the transport was lost. There was a short period of time during which it was not visible from either the moon or the space station and it was during this period that it vanished. It was a routine flight and nothing was reported as being wrong when the ship entered eclipse."

"I take it you do not suspect an accident Agent Raser." Master Karas spoke.

"No Master Karas." Jule replied, "Even if something had gone wrong with its systems the ship would have had enough kinetic energy to take it around the planet as far as the station. The only way it could have vanished is if it was attacked while it was in eclipse. This could have been an external attack or a hijacking by the prisoners, we can't be certain either way. Now its possible that the ship crashed into Seris, but so far the station hasn't noticed any of the atmospheric disturbance they'd expect from such an event so we're assuming that the ship was piloted away from the planet, using the other moons as cover."

"Is the ship equipped with a hyperdrive?" Captain De Kuun asked.

"No." Jule answered, "Just in case there was a hijacking we didn't want to leave the prisoners in charge of a ship that could take them out of the system before we knew anything was wrong. I believe that the *Broad Stroke* is still in the Seris system somewhere, but I don't have the ships to go hunting for it. That's why I've requested that all of you join me. I am formally asking for help in locating the ship and the four hundred convicts who seem to have escaped incarceration."

"Did you just say four hundred?" Master Karas asked.

"Yes Master Karas. Four hundred, serving sentences of between seven and two hundred and fifty years."

"The *Bright Hope* can get us there in under eight hours." Cal offered.

"One moment Jedi Udra." Master Karas' image said, "I believe that tackling four hundred hardened criminals will be beyond the powers of just you and your padawan. Remain on Aurek Station and I will send you help."

"But Moldas is at least twelve hours away." Lara pointed out, "Surely we should-"

"Do not be so impatient padawan," Master Karas said sternly, "and remember your place. You will await the arrival of reinforcements before you leave for the Seris system. Until then leave this to the military."

Captain De Kuun frowned and it was obvious to both Cal and Lara that he would have preferred them to have departed immediately, most likely under his command. However, Master Karas was their superior and it was his orders that they followed. For now at least they would have to wait.

"Can you believe that Cal?" Lara asked as the meeting ended, "Hundreds of criminals on the run and we're ordered to sit back and do nothing about it?"

"I know." Cal replied, "I think that there is more to it than Master Karas' concern for our ability to take on so many enemies with only the full resources of the Republic in the sector for our support. I think he wants someone to check up on us in person and this is just his excuse. Now you go back to the apartment and wait. I've got some business to attend to."

"Business? What business?"

"I don't want to say. It may not pan out and I don't want you dragged into it for no reason, especially if Master Karas decides to show up in person."

The lightsaber blades clashed.

"Not bad." The bald headed jedi knight said to his much younger opponent, "But you're still making it far too obvious where you're about to be."

"Listen to him Pedrus." The wolf-like shistavnen jedi sat to the side of the room said, "Whillam taught me the basics of lightsaber combat. Though I have long since surpassed him of course." And the shistavnen smiled at his fellow jedi knight, baring his fangs.

"Sorry master." Pedrus replied to his watching master.

"Perhaps we should have our padawans duel each other Vrish." Whillam suggested, shutting off his lightsaber and he looked at young human sat beside the other jedi knight, "I know mine could do with the practice as well."

Whillam approached the two sitting jedi as his padawan got to his feet.

"Remember Rich," he said, "you need to concentrate on your own blade as much as your opponents, otherwise you may end up cutting the head off the wrong person."

Fear.

"Oh do calm down Pedrus." Vrish called out, "Those training sabers couldn't cut through cheese." and he looked at Whillam as the other jedi knight sat in the place vacated by his padawan, "That boy needs more confidence." He added softly.

The two padawans stood in the sparring area facing one another and both activated their lightsabers. But before either could strike the door slid open and Master Karas entered in the company of his own padawan, a young woman by the name of Keana.

"I'm sorry to interrupt Whillam." Master Karas said, "But I have an assignment for you and your padawan. It concerns the Udras."

"Hello Ren." Cal said, sitting in the vacant bar seat next to the smuggler, "Can I get you another drink?"

"That's very kind of you Cal." Ren replied, "I was just about to buy that very expensive bottle of Corellian whisky up there."

"Well so long as expensive means no more than the cost of a beer I'm paying."

Ren looked around.

"So where's your sister Cal?"

"I don't want her involved in this." Cal said and he slid a datapad along the bar, "I need these items. Can you tell me how much they'll cost?"

Ren picked up the datapad and looked at it, causing his eyes to widen.

"Grenades Cal? This is serious stuff. If you need these why not just ask the Order for them."

"I did." Cal replied, "They said no. I could apply for a permit myself, but if I do that Jule Raser will have to check with Master Karas and he'll say no. Now I know that you know people and can move goods about, so can you get me those?"

Ren looked at the datapad again.

"Forty-five millimetre projectiles. You haven't specified what types you want. Explosive? Smoke? Gas?"

Cal shrugged.

"Just give me prices Ren. I'll make up my mind when I find out what's on offer and how much it is."

"I notice you're not asking for the hardware to launch these things." Ren said, "Am I to take it that you've already managed to acquire yourself a new toy?"

Cal looked around.

"Well actually its Lara who likes playing with it." He said, "She thinks I don't know she dances round her bedroom with it naked."

Ren just looked at him.

"I know what you're thinking Ren. Stop it. That's my baby sister."

Ren held up his hands.

"Sorry Jedi Udra." He said, "But don't worry, I like my nose on the outside of my face too much."

Cal and Lara stood beside the *Bright Hope* on Aurek Station's hangar deck, waiting for the shuttle bringing their reinforcement to arrive from Moldas. The ship that arrived was an unremarkable vessel that entered the hangar at a leisurely pace and settled gently on the deck.

"Well its not Seth." Cal said, referring to the jedi pilot Seth Ashran who they had worked with before. Seth's flying style was nothing like as casual as that displayed by the shuttle pilot, "Now let's go see who's been sent to spy on us."

The shuttle's hatch opened as Cal and Lara approached and a pair of humans that neither of them had met before emerged.

"Whillam Antess." Whillam said to introduce himself and he held out his hand to Cal, "And this is my padawan Rich Cryne. Master Karas sent us to help you." And he pointed to the young man who Cal noticed did not look much younger than him.

Cal could not sense any sign of deception from the older jedi knight, but the very fact that he was a jedi knight meant he was quite capable of controlling his feelings.

"Cal Udra and this is my sister Lara." Cal deliberately referred to Lara as his sister rather than his padawan in an attempt to trigger a reaction from Whillam, but he failed. Even Rich seemed to let the reference pass, "If you'd like to come with me our ship is already prepared to leave." Cal said, "We can discuss the mission further en route, I think we've already lost enough time already."

As Whillam followed Cal towards the *Bright Hope*, Lara approached Rich and smiled.

"Hi I'm Lara." She said with a smile and he took the hand she offered.

"Rich Cryne." He replied, "Nice to meet you."

"So how long do you have left?" Lara asked and a puzzled look appeared on Rich's face.

"I'm sorry, how long until what?"

"Until you lose this." Lara said and she took hold of the braid of hair that marked him out as a padawan.

"Oh that. I've got years yet, I've not been a padawan for a year yet."

"A year? But you're older than me. How is that possible?"

"I grew up on a frontier world. My sensitivity to the Force wasn't discovered until I hit twenty-two. It took another couple of years for the order to accept me for training. I'm actually the lowest ranked padawan on Moldas."

"He's also why Master Karas picked us to help you." Whillam said, overhearing the conversation, "Rich is an expert tracker, a skill we may have great use for."

"Assuming the Republic hasn't already found all the fugitives by the time we get there." Lara said.

3.

The subsystem of moons around the gas giant Seris normally saw little space traffic, but when the *Bright Hope* dropped out of hyperspace the ship's sensors identified more than a dozen Republic vessels present. These were a mix of naval, sector ranger and prison transport ships, all in constant contact with one another and the various bases in the subsystem as they searched for the missing transport.

"*Bright Hope* this is Seris Station." A voice said over the communications system, "Approach and dock at port twelve. You are expected."

Cal looked around the *Bright Hope*'s cockpit. Whillam was sat beside him in the co-pilot's seat while both their padawans were sat behind them.

"Did you hear that?" Lara said as Cal looked at her, "We're expected."

"Yeah." Cal replied as he turned back to face the front, "They've probably got a whole day's worth of files for us to catch up on before we can actually do our job."

The primary structure of Seris Station was a disk surrounded with docking ports for vessels of various sizes, one of which extended outwards as the *Bright Hope* neared it. This was the port the station controller had directed them towards and Cal brought the ship to a halt, moments later there was a dull 'clang' as the docking port made contact and sealed itself against the hull.

"Right then," Cal said as he released his safety harness, "let's go see what we've missed shall we?"

Seris Station lacked the more advanced holographic displays found on Aurek Station, an orbiting prison was run on a tight budget and such things were considered an extravagance. Therefore, the oversized display in the room serving as Jule's operations centre was a more basic flat screen.

"We've been over nine of the twenty-three moons so far," Jule explained and she pointed to the representations of the searched moons that had been highlighted in a different colour to the rest, "and I've had two ships looking for any signs of the transport hiding inside the planet itself."

"What about elsewhere?" Rich asked, "Can we see the rest of the Seris system on this thing?"

"I think so." Jule said and she paused to look at the controls for the display. After a few button presses the image zoomed out to show the entire star system, "As you can see," Jule explained, "there aren't any habitable worlds in the system. That's what made it so suitable for a prison."

"I was actually wondering about what other ships may be around." Rich said.

"You're thinking that the prison transport was flown away from Seris itself?" Cal asked.

"It's just a theory." Rich said.

"But why?" Lara asked, "The transport couldn't reach a habitable planet and if there was a second vessel involved then why not just take that one?"

"Because maybe the second ship didn't have enough room for four hundred beings." Rich said.

"That's a problem." Jule said, "We've no sensor details for anything more than five million kilometres away. But there were no traces of the transport ship departing Seris local space."

"What if they just drifted?" Rich asked, "A short burst at full burn from the engines and then they just coast away. Running silent."

"I actually considered that." Jule said, "But the ship would have been in sight of Seris Station's active sensors."

"Not if they turned around." Rich pointed out, "I believe that the mining camps themselves have only short range sensors. The transport could have been angled to keep it in eclipse from the station as long as possible without needing to worry about the camps on any of the moons."

Whillam smiled.

"I told you he was good." He said to Cal.

"Timing would have been critical." Rich continued, "They'd have to stay in the system's orbital plane to keep in eclipse as long as possible, but they'd also have to think about which way they were headed. If they headed further out system then it's all empty space with no where to hide if they were spotted, whereas going deeper in system takes them into the asteroid belt. How dense is it?"

Jule looked at her datapad and scrolled through several pages of system data.

"Slightly denser than average for a system of this type." She replied, "A mean spacing of forty thousand kilometres between asteroids."

"That's good enough." Whillam said, "far apart enough for a ship to drift through without serious risk of collision, but enough things to hide behind if followed."

"That gives us a heading." Lara said, "A heading we can follow in the *Bright Hope*."

"Lara's right." Cal said, "We can execute a micro jump to get us close to where the ship could have drifted to and keep going under power. The *Bright Hope's* far faster than the transport so it shouldn't take us long. If we find nothing we can come back and help search the local area."

Finding a single ship in deep space when it did not want to be found could be problematic, so the moment the *Bright Hope* came out of hyperspace Cal brought the ship's full range of active sensors online. If the missing transport was still running silent then he hoped that this would be enough to detect it.

"I suggest you use engines only until we reach the asteroid belt." Rich said.

"You're kidding." Lara said, looking at him and then turning to her brother, "Cal that's stupid. How are we supposed to catch up to them if we can't use our engines?"

"If we use our engines in the asteroid belt we'll never find them." Rich said.

"How do you figure that out new boy?" Lara asked.

"Because a drifting ship will be affected fully by the gravitational pull of the asteroids." Whillam told her,

"Whereas a ship under power will continue in a straighter line." Then he looked around at his padawan, "Am I right?"

"Yes master." Rich replied, "Even a slight deviation could send us thousands of kilometres off course.

Ideally we need to be travelling at the same speed as the transport, but we don't have that information."

"Master Karas warned me about your impatience young Lara." Whillam said, "Do not confuse Rich's inexperience in the Order for ignorance. Doing so reveals more about your own failings than his."

Embarrassment.

Lara frowned, clearly unhappy at being rebuked by the older Jedi knight.

"Okay, so I'll take us as far as the asteroid belt." Cal said, "I'm not happy about just drifting through it though. I'd rather run a sensor sweep from the edge and see if we can pick anything up. If not then we'll see if we can project the path that a drifting ship would have taken through the asteroids. Call it impatience if you want, but I prefer it to drifting blindly through an asteroid field."

He felt a slight tremor in the Force from beside him, a flash of suspicion that Whillam failed to conceal fully. But though Cal knew that what he had said went against the advice of Rich Cryne, he was the commanding officer of the *Bright Hope* and as such entitled to make decisions such as this. Cal suspected that Whillam's feelings were somehow related to whatever Master Karas had said to him before sending him here.

The edge of the asteroid field existed only as an arbitrary line in the *Bright Hope's* navigation system where Cal brought the vessel to a halt. From this point most of the asteroids were little more than tiny specks of light, noticeable against the star field only because of the way in which they moved.

"So what do you want to look for Jedi Udra?" Whillam asked.

"You can call me Cal you know." Cal replied as he leant towards the sensors, but Whillam just stared at him, "I'm actually interested in the asteroids themselves." Cal went on after a brief pause.

"Rocks?" Lara asked from behind him, "What's so special about lumps of rock drifting in space?"

"Rich said it on Seris Station." Cal replied.

"I did?" Rich said, his surprise obvious.

"The transport didn't have the range to get anywhere the prisoners could live, so I figure they were planning to meet another ship that did. Which means that ship must have been hidden somewhere in the system where the station couldn't see it."

"In the asteroid field." Whillam said.

"Exactly." Cal replied, "I think that the transport came here to meet another ship. Hopefully to transfer the prisoners and not to take it under tow. Now the best way to avoid a collision would be to actually land on a suitable asteroid and wait for the transport to arrive. At which point they would land the transport as well to transfer the prisoners, but they'd have left the transport on the asteroid when they left."

"So you're looking for an asteroid big enough to land a ship on." Whillam said, smiling.

"Amongst other things yes." Cal replied.

"Other things?" Lara asked and then she noticed the way Cal was configuring the sensors, "Life form scanners? Cal, I thought you said that the prisoners would have been transferred off the transport." She added.

"I did." Cal said, "But given that the transport would be pretty much shut down it'll be nearly impossible to spot on an asteroid."

"So how are you going to find it using life form scanners?" Lara asked.

"He's looking for mynocks." Rich said.

"Mynocks?" Lara repeated.

"They'd have been attracted to the transport and the other ship that met it." Rich explained, "Both ships would have had to use their engines to land and that would have brought in every mynock for a millions kilometres."

"Some of which are still moving between the asteroids." Cal said as he leant back in his chair and pointed to the scanner display. There it showed hundreds of tiny returns concentrated on one of the larger asteroids as well as moving towards it."

"Gentlemen, Lara," Cal said as he began transferring power to the *Bright Hope's* engines again, "I give you the location of the missing transport. Now Lara go break out our blasters, we may need them to keep those mynocks from chewing on our power cables."

As Lara departed the cockpit Cal piloted the *Bright Hope* into the asteroid field. With the asteroids themselves so widely spaced it required only the bare minimum of effort to avoid colliding with any, but the energy-devouring mynocks that inhabited the area were a different matter and through the canopy the jedi in the cockpit watched as several of the creatures came closer and attached themselves to the ship.

"Don't worry." Cal said to Whillam and Rich, "I'll have Lara clear them off."

"You'll have me do what?" Lara said as she returned with a pistol holstered to her leg and holding a second one in its holster in her hand.

"You will be remaining behind to watch the ship young padawan." Whillam told her, "You will need to clear the mynocks from the vessel's hull while we are gone."

"Clear the mynocks? Aw Cal." Lara said, looking at her brother.

"Padawan Udra," Whillam said sternly, "remember your place."

"Which is waiting here for us." Cal added and Lara frowned.

"There, that looks good." Rich interrupted, leaning between Cal and Whillam and pointing at the massive asteroid looming ahead of them. The asteroid was just large enough that the pressure of its own gravity had given it a spherical shape and craters from the impacts of smaller bodies dotted its surface. It was into one of these craters that Rich pointed and as the asteroid tumbled through space the sunlight suddenly reflected off something made of metal within it. Cal flew closer and looked at the sensor display, noting the surface density readings.

"The surface looks good." He said, "We should be able to make a safe landing and take off again."

"Assuming the hull's kept clean of mynocks." Whillam said.

Cal brought the *Bright Hope* in lower over the crater and directed the beams of its floodlights downwards. There, illuminated in the beams was the missing transport ship with mynocks crawling all over its hull.

"Okay, this is it." Cal said as he began the process of landing the *Bright Hope*, "You lot suit up, I'll be with you a couple of minutes."

Cal set the *Bright Hope* down beside the *Broad Stroke*, keeping the ship within the beams of the floodlights to illuminate the ground between them. He then made his way to the airlock to meet up with the other three jedi who were already wearing their vacuum suits.

"I'll lead the way." Cal said as he began to put on his own suit, "I've got a blaster so I should be able to keep any wandering mynocks off us."

"Do you have experience dealing with these creatures?" Whillam asked.

"None." Cal replied, "But I figure I've got to learn sometime."

"Then why not start by getting rid of the ones on our own hull?" Lara asked, "Then we can all go and check out the transport together."

Whillam frowned at her.

"Your instructions were quite clear." He said sternly, "The hull must be cleared and kept clear." Then he looked at Cal, "You are too lenient with her." He added.

Cal ignored the comment and took his helmet from its locker.

"Let's go." He said, "Stay behind me and Lara take care of yourself. Keep your distance from the mynocks and try not to shoot any holes in the ship."

4.

The mynock attached to the outside of the *Broad Stroke* ignored the trio of Jedi as they made their way between the two ships and with two such tempting sources of energy nearby only two of the new arrivals came close enough that Cal had to shoot them.

About half way to the transport Rich suddenly halted and knelt down.

"What's wrong?" Cal asked.

"Tracks." Rich said as he ran his hand across the ground, "They lead away from the transport."

"It's looking like your theory's still holding up." Whillam said to Cal.

"There aren't enough." Rich said before Cal could reply.

"What do you mean not enough?" Cal asked, looking down at the well-trodden ground, "It looks like a lot of people came through here."

"How many is a lot?" Rich asked, "Because I'd say no more than a couple of dozen walked over this ground."

"But the transport ship held hundreds of prisoners." Whillam replied and both he and Cal looked towards the *Broad Stroke*, reaching out through the Force and trying to determine if there was anyone still inside the ship. But the Force was silent.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal said and he ran towards the nearby hatchway that lay open.

"Cal wait!" Whillam called out, aware that if the prisoners aboard the transport were somehow shielded from their Jedi senses then the younger Jedi knight could be rushing headlong into a trap and as he ran after Cal he beckoned for Rich to follow him.

Cal reached the hatchway well ahead of either Rich or Whillam and he fired a single shot from his pulse wave weapon through it. At first the two Jedi following considered the possibility that at least one of the prisoners had been waiting just inside the airlock and they both drew their lightsabers, holding back from igniting them just in case they attracted the attention of any nearby mynock. However, as they two reached the airlock they instead found that one of the creatures had crawled inside and that Cal had shot it so he could enter safely.

"Come on." He said as he holstered his blaster and switched to his own lightsaber, "We need to get inside."

"This door has been repaired, look." Rich said, pointing to the base of the inner airlock door and when the two more senior Jedi looked down they saw that a section looked to have been removed and then welded back in place.

"A boarding action?" Cal suggested, looking at Whillam.

"Makes sense." The older man replied, "Force an entry and then conduct repairs once the ship was secured. The question now though is did the boarding party leave anyone behind when they left again?"

All three Jedi stood with active lightsabers held out in front of them as the airlock's interior door slid open, ready to take action should anyone be waiting for them on the other side. But only corpses waited as the Jedi stepped cautiously from the airlock.

"The suits look like crew issue." Cal commented, noting that the vacuum suits worn by the dead men were all emblazoned with an identical patch on one sleeve that read '*Broad Stroke*'.

"And they're armed." Rich commented, "Isn't that strange?"

"How so?" Cal asked, "I'm guessing they were trying to repel whoever forced their way onto the ship."

"Remember where you are Cal." Whillam said, "This was a prison transport. I believe that my padawan is merely questioning why it seems that the convicts decided against looting these men of their weapons, despite their obsolescence. Is that correct?"

"Yes master." Rich replied.

"That bad feeling of mine is getting whole lot worse." Cal said.

All of a sudden the lights began to flicker.

"Master what's happening?" Rich exclaimed, "Is someone else aboard?"

"No." Whillam told him, "It's just the mynock. Some of them must have found a lighting cable. I think it prudent that we keep these suits on, just in case one of them finds the power feed for the life support systems and takes a bite of that."

Cal reached a junction slightly ahead of the others and stopped.

"So which way?" he asked without turning around, "I'm guessing the cockpit is forward and the hold to the rear."

Whillam paused and concentrated, letting the Force flow through him.

"I sense that we will discover more by finding out what happened to the prisoners." He replied.

"The rear it is then." Cal said and he headed down the corridor that he guessed would lead him to the ship's hold.

Sure enough the corridor ended in an open hatchway that gave access to the hold. To facilitate its role as a prisoner transport the hold of the *Broad Stroke* had been fitted with row after row of reinforced seats that prisoners could be secured to and it appeared that the ship had a maximum transport capacity greater than the figure given for the number of prisoners who had been aboard when the ship disappeared. Prisoners who were still in their seats.

Dead.

"Well I guess this is why we couldn't sense them through the Force." Cal said as he shut off his lightsaber, "There was nobody left alive to sense."

"Indeed." Whillam said, frowning as he looked around the room at the corpses still chained to their seats. Each of the bodies displayed similar injuries, as if they had been subjected to tremendous localised impacts that had shattered bones and disrupted softer tissue. Cal was familiar with this sort of injury; it was caused by the pulse wave weapons that were common throughout Republic territory.

Cal switched his vacuum suit's communications from short to long-range operation.

"Lara can you hear me?" he said.

"I'm here brother dearest. Up to my elbows in mynock gunk."

"We're aboard the transport now and have located the missing prisoners. I need you to signal Seris Station and get Jule to send a ship to pick them up. Tell her there's no rush though, they're not going anywhere."

"But why hijack the ship just to kill all the prisoners?" Rich asked as he examined one of the bodies more closely.

"We should do a head count while we're waiting for Jule to send a clean up crew." Cal said, "I've got a feeling that we're going to come up at least one short."

The shuttle touched down on the landing pad, seemingly unaffected by the strong sea breeze. Saren Keshistel stood on the walkway that connected the pad to the rest of the complex that floated over the seas of Delvad and watched as two figures dragged a third from the ship and came towards her.

"You're late." She said.

"I'm sorry Miss Keshistel, but we took the long route. The pilot didn't want to risk us being spotted in the Crassis system so he took us around via Jovan."

"Never mind now." Saren replied to the thug, "Is that him?" and she pointed to the hooded figure being dragged between the others.

"It is. He has offered no resistance."

"Good. Bring him."

Saren led the others into the complex. Inside the décor was what many humans would describe as 'tacky', but to the individual that Saren was taking the others to see it was the height of good taste.

The chamber to which Saren took them had a high ceiling and the soft sound of music being played through concealed speakers filled the air.

"Oh mighty one." She called out, "I have the individual you wanted." And she pulled the hood from Lacko Dabb.

In reply there was a deep, echoing laugh.

"Lacko Dabb?" Cal exclaimed as Jule handed him a datapad with the file on the missing prisoner displayed,

"All this was to rescue Lacko Dabb?"

"Who's Lacko Dabb?" Rich whispered to Lara.

"An aqualish pirate." She replied with a look of annoyance on her face, "A really nasty piece of work. I worked really hard to catch him and now the locals have let him slip right through their fingers."

"I'm afraid I can't offer any suggestions about why anyone wanted to set him free." Jule explained, "But I do have some good news."

"Good." Cal said, taking a seat without being asked and putting his feet up on the desk in front of him,

"Because I could use some."

"The *Broad Stroke*'s sensor logs were intact." Jule said, "They captured everything from the moment the ship was ambushed to when the raiders made off with their passenger."

Cal smiled.

"Did you get an exit vector?" Whillam asked.

"Indeed we did." Jule replied, "Though its not terribly helpful. The raiders made for the Besh Station construction site."

There were three Republic navigation beacons in the Narthis Sector, Aurek, Besh and Cresh Stations. Unlike Aurek station Besh and Cresh were automated platforms that could double as emergency shelters to the crews of ships in trouble nearby. However, as a result of an anti-Republic insurgent group's attack Besh Station was being rebuilt at this time.

"So he could already be out of the sector." Lara commented, remembering Besh Station's position on the primary hyperspace route through the Narthis Sector.

"I doubt it." Jule replied, "Dabb's a local thug. Who's even heard of him outside the sector?"

"I know I hadn't until now." Whillam replied.

"Wasn't he involved in the war between the aqualish and the correllians?" Cal said, taking his feet from the table and leaning forwards towards Jule, "Maybe he has a few old war buddies hanging round."

"That's something I've considered." Jule replied, "I've got people looking into the histories of all the aqualish known to us in the sector, but so far we've come up empty."

"Frankly I'm amazed a sleemo like Dabb would have any friends." Lara said, "But then again I can't see anyone wanting him for anything else. Can you?" and she looked at Cal.

"You were in the Phillos system Mister Dabb," Saren said to Lacko, "and the mighty Uggaro wants to know what you found there. Before the Founding Families took it."

"Well you can tell the mighty Uggaro that he can kiss my-" Lacko replied before an electrical baton was jabbed into his spine and he dropped to his knees, screaming in pain. The guard with the baton jabbed him with it again, stepping back only when Uggaro the hutt raised his hand.

"Come now Mister Dabb," Saren said, "all you need to do is tell us what was so important that the Karn family spent tens of millions of credits on organising an expedition on Republic orders. Credits our sources say they didn't get back in full."

The Karns were one of the Founding Families, the descendants of the Narthis Sector's original explorers. Rich even amongst that select group of mega rich families, the Karns were known for their business acumen and did not generally lose money on a deal.

"So supposing I tell you?" Lacko asked as he got back to his feet. He had no intention of dying on his knees, "How long until I end up like the rest of those poor nerf herders on the transport? Dead with my insides scrambled by a pulse wave blast?"

Saren smiled and stepped forwards with a datapad in her hand and she held out the device for him to see the display.

"Perhaps this will help convince you." She said, still smiling at the aqualish pirate.

Lacko looked down and was surprised at what he saw on the display.

"My ship?" he asked.

"Of course. The Republic auctioned it off and we were able to obtain it. Unfortunately the authorities had seen fit to erase all of its databanks so we were unable to find out what it's sensors detected in the Phillos system. However, if you were to tell us then you would be free to leave. With your ship."

Lacko's expression changed.

"Your boss only had to ask nicely miss." he said.

5.

The *Bright Hope* dropped out of hyperspace in deep space. Here, far away from the disruptions caused by the mass shadows of stars and planets the Republic was rebuilding Besh Station. Right now it consisted of a somewhat skeletal structure surrounded by a cluster of construction craft and engineers in spacesuits. At the centre of this structure however, the navigational beacon was already running and as soon as the *Bright Hope* appeared its own navigational systems were contacted by the beacon.

Cal and Lara were alone in the cockpit, their guests having decided to withdraw to the hold where Whillam could make use of the travel time to further instruct his padawan in the ways of the Jedi.

"We're there." Cal said using the intercom to alert Whillam.

"I'll be right with you." Whillam replied after a few moments.

"I suppose this means I have to move." Lara said, looking at Cal from the co-pilot's seat.

"Not if you can make yourself useful in the meantime." Cal said as he leant back in his seat, "By searching the beacon's database for our target for example."

Lara smiled and turned her attention to the navigation systems. Using the *Bright Hope's* status as an official Republic vessel she was quickly able to connect with Besh Station's database of navigational data handed out. The sensor record of the *Broad Stroke* had provided Jule and thus the Jedi also with the time of departure from Seris and also the classes of the two ships involved in the assault on the transport. One was the combat vessel that had carried out the initial attack, while Lacko Dabb had apparently been spirited away from the Seris system in a long-range shuttle. Knowing the classes of ship and time of departure, Lara was able to estimate how long it would have taken the two ships to reach Besh Station and request further jump data from the beacon. Sure enough, she found the two ships in the database but it seemed that only one of them had made a request for jump data.

"Anything to report young padawan?" Whillam's voice asked as he stood in the cockpit doorway and looked down at Lara.

"I've got her looking for the ships in Besh Station's database." Cal said, "I think she's making progress."

"I am." Lara replied, "But the shuttle doesn't seem to have asked for any jump data."

"That's interesting." Whillam said as he sat in the seat behind Lara and looked over her shoulder at the console, "Do you have an opinion as to why?"

Lara glanced at Cal who shrugged.

"Take a guess." Whillam said, "Let the Force guide your intuition."

Lara looked back at that screen full of data, focusing on the jump plotted by the beacon for the attack ship.

"They didn't want us to know where the shuttle was going." She said.

"Good." Whillam said, "Now why?"

Lara did not answer.

"Because they're taking Lacko Dabb to meet whoever was in charge of the operation," Cal said, "and that person wants to remain anonymous. They'd already plotted a jump without the beacon. Slower but more effective in hiding their destination from us. Especially since the construction crews won't have been tracking them to establish an exit vector."

"Precisely." Whillam said, still looking at Lara, "But if you have the destination of the attack ship then maybe we can find someone who knows where they went."

Lara selected the database entry that was associated with the ship the Jedi believed to be the one that attacked the *Broad Stroke*.

"Ralta." She said.

"Isn't that the place that's covered in poisonous jungle?" Cal asked.

"I think so." Lara replied.

"It's the pollen that's poisonous." Whillam said, "I went there once. The settlements are located in spires that stretch high enough above treetop height that drifting pollen doesn't get up to them in sufficient quantities to become life threatening. But watch out for hay fever like symptoms."

"Okay I'm requesting the jump data now." Cal said, "Looks like journey time will be about seven hours."

The city the *Bright Hope* approached consisted of a vertical scaffolding structure that extended more than a kilometre into the air and near the top there were several large disc shaped structures where the inhabitants lived and worked. The relatively flat tops of these discs were used as open air docking ports for starships and aircraft while thick, taut cables could be seen emerging from the sides of the discs that carried cable cars towards other similarly constructed cities just about visible in the distance.

Cal circled the city and all four jedi looked down at the open air landing pads, attempting to identify the attack ship.

"What if they went somewhere else?" Lara asked.

"Then the planetary navigation system would have tracked them to wherever they went." Whillam said, "The advantage of all the cities being built so high up is that it's nearly impossible for anyone to move from one to another without being detected."

"There it is." Rich said suddenly, pointing to a ship slightly smaller than the *Bright Hope* that was located on one of the city's uppermost disc sections.

"He's right." Whillam added, "Take us in."

"I'm on it." Cal said, "Lara, power up the guns just in case they spot us coming in."

"Rich and I will deploy first." Whillam said as he got up from his seat, "Take us in low and we'll make sure they're not going anywhere before you can put the ship down."

"Got it." Cal said, "I'll make a single pass over the ship with a low speed and altitude. Just be ready."

Whillam and Rich left the cockpit to head towards the *Bright Hope's* access ramp Cal piloted the vessel towards the attack ship on the landing pad below with Lara ready to open fire if necessary.

"Lasers only." Cal commented, "We don't want to take out the entire platform."

"I know that Cal." Lara replied, so far she had not touched the targeting system, aware that should she adjust the direction of either of the *Bright Hope's* turrets towards the attack ship then she could give away the jedi's presence.

A warning light on the control console alerted Cal to an open exterior hatch.

"Okay," he said, "Whillam and Rich are in position. Here we go."

He cut the *Bright Hope's* speed suddenly and flew it over the landing pads at an altitude sufficiently low that workers and crewmen of other vehicles ducked for cover.

"Now!" Whillam leapt from the open access ramp to the landing pad as soon as he saw the attack ship below and activated his lightsaber in mid air. He landed safely, looking directly at the attack ship and he ran towards it.

Pain.

Behind him he heard a brief cry as Rich landed badly, but without having to turn around he knew that his padawan was not badly injured and he heard the sound of Rich running after him.

"Split up! Check the hatches!" Whillam called out upon reaching the ship and he and Rich moved in opposite directions, moving around the attack ship and searching for any signs of life or a possible way in. From overhead there was the sound of repulsorlifts as Cal brought the *Bright Hope* around. But this time rather than making another low level pass over the landing pad he brought the ship into land, setting it down immediately in front of the attack ship even though it was not an area marked out as an approved landing zone. Even as the ship's engines were still powering down Cal and Lara were out of their seats and rushing down the access ramp with their lightsabers in their hands.

"Are you okay?" Lara asked when she noticed Rich limping slightly as he approached.

"I'll be fine." The other padawan replied, "That last step was just a bit more than I'm used to."

"Well sit down and I'll take a look at it." Lara said and Rich limped to the *Bright Hope's* ramp and sat down.

"We're clear." Whillam announced, shutting off his lightsaber, "The ship is abandoned and sealed."

"You there! Stay where you are and get your hands up!" a voice called out from across the landing pad and the jedi all looked around to see a trio of men armed with shotguns running towards them.

"Jedi business!" Cal shouted back towards them.

"How do we know you're really jedi?" one of the men replied as they all halted, directing their weapons at the jedi, "How about some ID?"

Cal and Whillam glanced at one another briefly.

"Oh come on." Cal said, "You've just seen us wielding lightsabers and jumping from starships in mid-flight. Surely you don't need to see our identification?"

"I'm the dock master. I see everybody's identification. Jedi included."

"Then it's fortunate you have seen it." Whillam said with a subtle wave of his hand.

"Yes," the dock master replied, "that was easy now wasn't it. Now what the hell are you doing flying about like that? You have gotten someone killed."

"The occupants of this vessel are wanted by the Republic." Cal said, "Can you tell us where they are?"

"One moment." The dock master replied, slinging his shotgun over his shoulder and reaching for a datapad. He quickly called up the information regarding the attack ship and who the vessel was registered to, "It belongs to a devaronian called Ghint." The dock master said, "According to this he's acquired lodgings on level seven." And he held out the datapad towards Whillam.

“Okay, I can find that.” the jedi knight replied, “Just make sure that this ship stays where it is. If anyone tries to get inside the I want you to arrest them.”

“On what charge?” the dock master asked.

“Anything you want.” Cal replied, “These guys have probably done everything at one time or another.”

6.

The group responsible for breaking Lacko Dabb out of prison and killing the others aboard the transport had obtained lodgings on the outer edge of the disc structure where their ship was landed. Accommodation on level seven of this disc was clearly for those who needed lodgings for large groups of beings but did not want to spend a great deal on it. There were automated food dispensers dotted around the corridors but most of these had been vandalised at some point and not repaired, while most of those still intact offered only the most basic of foodstuffs, in some cases in packaging that suggested that it was a long time since anyone had bothered to purchase anything from them.

"This place is a dump." Rich said softly as he made his way along at the back of the group, still limping, "What sort of person lives in a place like this?"

"We live in a place like this." Lara replied, "Well I suppose it used to look like this before it went downhill." "You're kidding." Rich said.

"No, just ask Master Karas." Lara said, "He won't let us have enough money to get anywhere nice."

"Padawan Udra," Whillam said sternly, "the Jedi Order does not exist to provide you with the means to live in luxury."

Lara frowned.

"I don't want luxury." She muttered, "I just want clean."

"This is it." Cal said, halting suddenly at a junction and peering around the corner, "There's a door at the end here that I think is the way into their lodging."

"So how do we get in?" Rich asked.

"Well we could just try cutting through the door." Lara suggested.

Whillam sighed.

"Young padawan," he said, "this is a task that calls for subtly. Forcing an entry will alert the beings inside to our presence. We need to get that door open while they are focused on something else."

"But what?" Cal asked and Lara smiled.

"This will need some modifications to my outfit." She said and she began to remove her boots.

"Oh no." Cal said, "Look Lara I know what you're planning and I forbid it."

"What's she planning?" Rich asked, then added "Whoa." As Lara slipped off her trousers from beneath her robe.

"Hold these a moment." She said, tossing the trousers at Cal.

"I said no Lara." He said as she took the knife carried on her belt from its scabbard and then took back the trousers only to cut off the legs, making them as short as she could, "Look," he went on as she put the modified trousers back on under her robe, "you're my baby sister—"

Anger.

"I am not a baby Cal!" Lara snapped at him, taking off her robe and tunic, "Now let me do this. How do I look?"

The effects of the modifications were significant, where just few minutes earlier Lara had been wearing the modest robes of a Jedi she was now wearing the tight fitting single piece underwear and a pair of extremely short trousers.

"Wow." Rich said and Cal frowned at him.

Anger.

"Just look after my stuff." Lara said and when I go in there be ready to follow me as soon as the door opens again."

"I don't like this." Cal said as Lara put her boots back on, "It'll never work."

"What? You think I'm not showing enough skin?" Lara asked him.

"Enough." Whillam said looking at both Cal and Lara, "We must do this." And looking at Lara alone he added, "Go."

Lara smiled and dashed to the door. She paused, took a deep breath and knocked.

"Hello?" she called out, "Someone wanted to party?"

Cal frowned, tightening his grip around his lightsaber as he heard the door slide open.

"Well hello there little girl. Why don't you step inside and tell us why you're here? We love to party."

Anger.

Beyond the door was a communal lounge that featured numerous chairs and tables along with several amusements and exercise machines. Most of the occupants were either human or near human, but Lara

also noticed a pair of duros sat near the kitchen area. Transparent pains of transparisteel that offered an impressive view of the jungles far below dominated the wall opposite the door.

"So what do you lot do?" Lara asked as she made her way to a nearby couch.

"We do whatever we're paid to." One of the men replied, "Now how come you're here?"

"I got a call to come and see someone called Ghint." Lara replied, brushing her hair back over her shoulder casually.

"Hey boss!" one of the men shouted and from a room leading off from the lounge a devaronian stepped.

"What?" Ghint asked.

"Someone sent you a present."

Lara stood up and smiled at Ghint, who looked at her with a puzzled look on his face.

"Who sent you?" he asked.

Lara shrugged.

"Someone who paid me in advance." She said.

"If you don't want her can I have her?" another man asked and he stepped towards Lara and placed a hand on her shoulder. Lara fought the urge to strike him. Looking around she reasoned that few of the individuals in the room were armed and she sensed the presence of the other jedi just beyond the door. Still with a smile on her face she suddenly reached out a hand towards the door and using the Force she activated its control circuit.

There was a hiss and the door slid upwards, opening the way for the other jedi to storm through.

"Everyone on the floor!" Whillam shouted, "You are all under arrest!"

"It's a trap!" the man with his hand on Lara's shoulder yelled and he dragged her closer to him, attempting to use her as a shield. But Lara was ready for this and taking hold of the unsuspecting man's arm she tossed him over his shoulder and then as he landed heavily on the floor in front of her she bright her heel down sharply in his groin.

"Lara catch!" Cal shouted, tossing her lightsaber towards her.

From the kitchen one of the duros produced a rifle that Lara had not seen leant behind the counter.

"Down!" she shouted as the alien fired a burst of energy blasts towards the doorway that was enough scatter the three jedi who had just stormed inside. The duros then turned his attention towards Lara and pointed the rifle at her. But before he could open fire Lara activated her lightsaber and brought it up between them. The rifle was a modern blaster weapon and when the duros fired again Lara was ready to not only block the attack, but reflect the blaster bolts back towards the kitchen and her assailant suddenly ceased fire as one of the blaster bolts punched through his chest. At her feet the man Lara had thrown to the floor grabbed at her leg and without looking Lara drove her lightsaber down into him, lifting the weapon up again when she felt his grip loosen.

Cal rolled aside just as another of the men brought a lightweight metal and plastic chair down towards him. The chair broke on impact with the floor, leaving the man clutching the jagged remains of one of the legs that he then attempted to use to stab Cal. But Cal was ready for this and he pointed his lightsaber directly at the man, using his own momentum to drive him onto the blade.

Whillam on the other hand had used the leap he made to get clear of the blaster fire to go on the attack, jumping high and rolling in midair to land right in front of a pair of Ghint's men and with a single swing of his lightsaber he cut them both down as they reached for the nearest objects they could use as weapons.

Rich moved towards the kitchen, recognising the danger that the rifle there presented if anyone else was able to get hold of it. Had he been trained more in the ways of the Force he knew that he could have simply reached out and taken hold of it from across the room, but for now he would have to just try and get to it himself. Though still surprised by the killing of his comrade by the deflected blaster bolt the second duros saw Rich charging towards him and instantly knew why. He reached out and took hold of the rifle, swinging it towards the running padawan. But just as he had it pointed in the right direction Rich was upon him and the novice jedi swung his lightsaber downwards. The energy blade sliced through the rifle easily, cleaving it in two and given the amount of force that Rich had put into the swing it continued on and sliced open the duros as well.

Cal got back to his feet just as a massively built man seized him from behind, wrapping his arms around Cal's waist and lifting him up from the floor with his arms pinned to his sides. Another man came at him with a knife, but Cal was able to deliver a good strong kick that hit him square in the face and the man crumpled and fell.

"A little help here?" Cal gasped as the man holding him tightened his grip, threatening to crush the life out of him.

Lara ran towards him with her lightsaber held high. She thrust the blade out directly ahead and it pierced the big man's arm at the elbow. Screaming, he immediately let go of Cal and staggered backwards,

clutching at his injured arm. Cal dropped to the floor and spun around, facing the man side-by-side with his sister and when the man stopped screaming and charged at them they both stepped forwards in unison and impaled him on their lightsabers.

Ghint ran across the room, seeking to put as much distance between himself and the Jedi as he could and as he ran he drew his blaster and fired randomly, the shots intended more to discourage anyone from following him than actually hit them. Meanwhile his few remaining men were desperately seeking anything they could use as a weapon against the Jedi.

One was able to vanish into one of the adjoining rooms and re-emerged holding a pulse wave rifle. Whillam saw him taking aim at Rich and held out his arm. Using the Force to attack was an easy path to the Dark Side, but Whillam did not focus his mind on the gunman, instead focusing on the weapon itself. Thus just as the man was about to fire the rifle was suddenly pushed aside and the blast went wide, slamming into the transparisteel windows and shattering them. There was a rush of air as the interior pressure dropped to match that outside. At this altitude there was more than enough air to breathe, but the sudden wind caused Ghint and his men in the room to pause and grab hold of something.

On the other hand the Jedi were able to remain focused on their opponents and all took advantage of the confusion to press home their attacks. The man armed with the pulse wave rifle could not react in time to take aim as both Cal and Lara charged at him. He tried to swing the butt of his rifle around like a club. Lara ducked beneath the swung weapon and swung her lightsaber above her head. The man screamed briefly as she sliced the hand holding the rifle from his arm, to be silenced permanently when Cal's lightsaber pierced his chest.

Across the room another man turned his attention towards Rich and hurled a chair towards the Padawan. Unable to simply deflect the chair as it flew towards him Rich ducked but still failed to get clear and the chair clipped his shoulder. Rich fell backward, dropping his lightsaber. He reached out to reclaim the weapon but the man rushed at him, drawing a knife from his belt and just before Rich was about to grab hold of his lightsaber the man put his foot down upon it.

"Too slow Jedi." He hissed, holding the knife in front of him ominously. But before he could strike the man's eyes suddenly widened as Whillam's lightsaber was suddenly thrust through his torso.

This left only Ghint himself and he eyed the Jedi nervously from the edge of the room as they surrounded him.

"It's over." Cal said, "Put down the blaster and surrender."

"Yeah," Lara added, "come quietly and maybe you can still make a deal with the sector rangers."

"A deal?" Ghint said as he watched the Jedi slowly closing in around him, "Nobody informs on them." And he took a step backwards through the shattered window.

"No!" Lara cried out as she watched him vanish downwards, falling to the dense jungle and its poisonous pollen more than a thousand metres below.

The Jedi moved closer to the shattered window, peering down over the edge.

"Why would he do that?" Lara asked.

"He seemed to be concerned that his employers would not look favourably on him surrendering to us." Whillam said.

"And that they'd find a way to get to him." Cal added, "Which given the fact that he was hired to break someone out of a maximum security prison doesn't sound so unreasonable."

"But who could inspire so much fear?" Rich asked.

"Only one group of beings comes to mind." Whillam told him, "The Hutts."

Cal noticed that Lara was shivering in the cooler outside air and he removed his robe before wrapping it around her.

"Here." He said, "But you should remember we don't have much money for new clothes. If you keep treating yours like this then you won't even have anything left to wear when you go stripping."

"I am not a stripper Cal!" Lara yelled.

Saren entered the audience chamber of Uggaro the Hutt to find him watching several human females dancing around in front of him. She glared at the bloated alien.

"Leave us." Uggaro said, clapping his hands together and his attendant dancers and bodyguards made their way from the chamber; "Well?" he asked when he and Saren were alone.

"Lacko Dabb found the remains of a Republic battle group in the Phillos system." she announced as she walked up to Uggaro, "It dates from a thousand years ago and the Karns bid low to guarantee they got the contract to recover the ships."

"But why would they do that?" Uggaro asked, "The technology is obsolete, good only for scrap."

"Maybe." Saren answered, "But Dabb said that there was also a number of sith vessels present, but according to the figures I've seen the Karns haven't recovered a single one of them."

Uggaro frowned.

"So you were right." He said to Saren, "The Karns did find something in the system that interested them. But why would they want ancient sith warships?"

"I don't know yet." Saren said, "But I'll figure it out."

"Of course you will. Your intelligence never ceases to amaze me."

"That's why I'm in charge around here." Saren said.

"I've got it!" Cal called out as he went to answer the door of the Udras' apartment. Opening the door he saw a man standing there holding a case of beer, "Han?" Cal said.

"Who else?" Han Shill replied as he walked past Cal into the apartment, "I thought I'd bring you a gift."

"Beer? Really?" Cal asked, confused.

Han Shill was the head of an exclusive private military company, Shill Security that handled most of the security for the Founding Families.

"Not quite." Han replied, setting down the case on the living room table. Then he looked around, "Did someone break in?" he asked as he looked at the mess.

"Err, no." Cal said, "Now what's with the beer?"

"Did someone say beer?" Lara said, emerging from her room and when she saw the case on the table she added, "What are we celebrating?"

"Nothing as far as I know." Cal said to her.

"You spoke with Ren Distler recently." Han said as he produced a small knife and began to slice open the case.

"No we didn't." Lara said.

"Yes I did." Cal said and he looked at his sister and added, "I asked if he could get us a price for what we were looking for."

"Grenades." Han said, "Well as a good citizen Mister Distler did what all good citizens would do when asked to obtain black market ordnance."

"He called the cops?" Lara asked.

"He called his lawyer." Han replied.

"The Druds." Cal said, referring to the Founding Family whose members were mainly expensive lawyers. Quite how a smuggler like Ren had ended up as their client had never been properly explained to the Udras, but Cal guessed that they found his services useful.

"Exactly." Han said as he peeled back the top of the case to reveal that it was filled with grenades designed to be fired by a launcher, "And they told me to bring you these."

"Han I don't know what to say." Cal said as he and Lara each took one of the rounds from the case and inspected it. Then he asked, "How much are these?"

"Free." Han replied, "You've helped us out in the past and now we're returning the favour. Never hesitate to come to me with stuff like this; my company gets through thousands of these every year just in training. We can arrange for a few to be diverted to you. You've got explosive, smoke, flash and white phosphorous. If you want anything more exotic it may take a while longer. Now I need to be going."

"Sure." Cal said, "Thanks for these."

"You're welcome." Han said before turning to leave. In the corridor outside he paused to take out his communicator.

"I've delivered them." He said, "The trackers are in place."

As Rich walked away towards the padawans' quarters Whillam stood with Master Karas.

"Well?" the Jedi master asked, "What do you think?"

"I sensed no darkness in them." Whillam replied.

Hesitation.

"But you are concerned." Master Karas said, "Tell me why."

Whillam sighed.

"She is reckless and impatient. He is over protective of her." He said, "If her rash actions lead to her fall then I think it is likely that his love for her will take him down as well. I still can't say when this would happen though."

"Soon." Master Karas said, "I fear it will happen very soon."