

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



II-VII: PROVOCATION

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...

PROVOCATION

THE NORMALLY RECLUSIVE KINNIN SPECIES HAVE SUDDENLY START THREATENING AUREK STATION AND THE REPUBLIC FORCES IN THE NARTHIS SECTOR FIND THEMSELVES PREPARING FOR WAR. IT IS UP TO GAL AND LARA UDRA TO FIND OUT WHY THE MYSTERIOUS SPECIES HAS SUDDENLY ALTERED ITS BEHAVIOUR...

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1 .

Administrator Ishtel Varr'kay stepped from his office and into the command centre of Aurek Station, the Republic jump beacon he commanded. The bothan knew every last one of the officers present by name and had made sure to study the personnel files of them all in detail. Making certain that he knew enough about them to be able to predict the methods any of them may use to undermine his position.

"Status." He called out.

"Vessels dropped out of hyperspace two minutes ago." One of the comscan technicians responded, "One primary vessel and two smaller ones that performed a flyby and have looped back around."

"What about us?" the administrator asked.

"Defences are on line sir, but alien vessels are now beyond battery range." Another of the command staff replied, "Squadrons launching to intercept. Captain De Kuun reports thirty seconds to position."

Lieutenant Erin Shill felt the sudden acceleration as her starfighter was propelled out of the launch chute. The intruding ships were located on the far side of Aurek Station and she banked sharply to steer towards them.

"Okay guys," she broadcast to the rest of her fighter squadron, "you know the drill, they haven't fired yet and we won't be the ones to start a shooting war. But keep your eyes open and make sure they don't get a clear shot at you if they decide to start one."

At that moment a stern sounding voice came over the communications net. It was Captain De Kuun, Erin's duros superior who commanded from the lead vessel of his gunship squadron.

"Lieutenant my squadron will target the primary intruder, you keep the support ships off us."

"Copy that captain, moving in now."

The Republic craft approached the intruders, spreading themselves out so as not to present an easy target should the aliens decide to open fire. An alert sounded from Erin's console and for a moment she feared that the aliens were targeting her fighter, but then she noticed that the energy emissions from their ships were coming from their engines rather than sensors and weapons.

"Do you see that captain?" she transmitted.

"Affirmative lieutenant. All craft break off, enemy is jumping to hyperspace."

There were three sudden flashes and the alien craft vanished, returning to where they had come from.

"Sensors show no further enemy contacts." Captain De Kuun broadcast, "All craft return to base."

"Third kriffing time this week." Erin muttered, keeping the comment to herself rather than sending it to any of the other Republic ships, "Wish they'd make their damn alien minds up."

Cal Udra, the jedi knight assigned to the Narthis Sector twisted as he tried to get to sleep in the chair.

"You know what I don't get?" a voice said from the couch where his younger sister and padawan learned Lara was laid down. The pair were having to sleep in the lounge of their apartment because they currently had guests that had arrived in such a hurry that they had not been able to book accommodation elsewhere on Aurek Station. Right now the Udras' parents Varn and Neari were in Cal's bed while their aunt Elle was in Lara's. The two younger jedi had opted for the couch and a chair rather than laying out beds on the floor because they wished to remain well above whatever vermin they knew existed at the lower level.

"Any more sleep than me?" Cal suggested as he tried to roll over again, his eyes still closed.

"No."

"Then what?"

"How come mom, dad and Aunt Elle find your girlfriend in your room and she's able to explain everything away?"

Cal opened his eyes.

"That is somewhat surprising." He said, "I mean remember when we were growing up and got into trouble dad could just grab hold of you and it felt like he was sucking the truth from you."

"You think its because she's Force sensitive?" Lara asked.

"I don't know. Dad never mentioned anything about that. That's odd as well; I'd have thought he'd have sensed it in her. Aunt Elle as well, it is her job after all."

"Well I just wish I'd know how to trick them when I was a child." Lara said.

"You still are a child." Cal replied.

"I'm twenty-one!" Lara snapped and she threw her pillow at Cal, who caught it and slipped it under his head.

"That's better." He said, "Thanks."

Lara frowned.

"Hey, give that back." She said.

"No way, you gave it to me."

"Did not."

"Yes you did."

"Did not."

"Did."

"Right, that does it." Lara said and she took a deep breath, "Mom!" she yelled, "Cal stole my pillow!"

"Cal give your little sister her pillow back." Neri called out in response.

"But she gave it to me." Cal shouted.

"Don't make come out there." Varn replied sternly.

"And keep the noise down." Elle called out from Lara's room, "Some of us are trying to sleep in here."

"I'm trying to sleep out here." Cal muttered as he threw the pillow back to Lara. Then he added, "I can't believe you told on me."

Lara smiled, but before she could say anything the apartment communicator sounded.

"Who's calling at this hour?" she then said, looking towards the communicator.

"I'll ask." Cal said, getting up from the chair and walking across the apartment, "Hello?" he asked when he activated the device.

"Jedi Udra you are needed." The voice of Captain De Kuun said, "The main briefing chamber, the meeting starts in ten minutes. De Kuun out." And then the duros officer broke the link from his end.

"What? No please?" Cal said to the inactive machine. Then he turned to Lara, "Nap time's over." He said.

"What? We're going just like that? Cal, that nerf herder De Kuun never treats us with the respect he should. Why not just ask for the minutes of the meeting afterwards?"

"Because it may actually be important. Now get up."

"I'm sleepy."

Cal took a deep breath.

"Dad! Lara's neglecting her jedi duties!" he shouted.

"I can't believe you told on me." Lara said as she stood in the turbolift with Cal, adjusting her robe while he just grinned.

The turbolift doors hissed open and the two jedi stepped out onto one of Aurek Station's upper levels. Unlike the level where their apartment was located, this part of the station was clean and tidy. They then walked the short distance to the briefing chamber and went straight inside.

They found Administrator Varr'kay, Captain De Kuun and several other military officers waiting for them. In addition to those physically present there were three present only as holograms. The first of these was Colonel Arion Jeck, commanding officer of the Republic's peacekeeping force on Tepillos. This represented the largest single Republic military deployment in the Narthis Sector. Next to his image was one of Lieutenant Commander Austin Veers, captain of the patrol frigate *Perseverance* and finally General Josh Drud, the commander of the defence forces of Crassis Major, the Narthis Sector's capital world.

"Now that we finally have everyone here," Captain De Kuun said as he stepped into the centre of the room, "I would like to bring you all up to date with events at Aurek Station." And he activated the holographic display there. Immediately an image of Aurek Station itself appeared in mid air, "In the past six days the station has been approached by small groups of ships from the planet Kinnis. On each occasion they have made one or more close passes by the station though not actually fired on it." And as he spoke the images of several alien starships were added to the display he was presenting, "When we launch defensive craft to intercept them they have disengaged and withdrawn."

"Where's Kinnis?" Lara whispered to Cal, but her brother just shrugged.

"For those of you who don't know," Captain De Kuun said, looking towards the two jedi as if to let them know he had overheard the question, "Kinnis is located here on the fringe of the Narthis Sector." The hologram shifted to show star map and the duros pointed a finger towards a system located towards the coreward part of it. The systems on the map were connected by various coloured lines to indicate the mapped hyperspace route between them and the route leading to the Kinnis system was narrow and pale, "The nearest Republic system is Teras," Captain De Kuun went on, "But the installations there have reported no problems from the kinnin, so it seems that Aurek Station itself is being specifically targeted."

"But why?" Lara asked.

"We cannot say." Captain De Kuun answered, "But we believe that their hyperdrive capability means that it is taking more than a week for each group of ships to reach us here and make the return journey."

"So one before one flight even gets here the next one is launched?" Cal said, noting the difference between the calculated flight time and average time between incursions.

"Indeed." Captain De Kuun said.

"Well what have the kinnin had to say for themselves?" Lara asked and Administrator Varr'kay snorted.

"Young lady," he said, "you do not just ask the kinnin what they are doing or why they are doing it."

"Why not?" Cal asked.

"Because they won't answer." The hologram of General Drud spoke, "I've lived in this sector all my life and not once met anyone that's encountered a kinnin face to face. The only encounters I've even heard of have been done using remote presence systems, droids relaying the words of the kinnin. Those beings like their privacy."

"Well maybe I can help you out with that." A woman's voice called out from the door and those in the chamber looked around they saw a female human wearing jedi robes enter.

"Jedi Tyran." Cal said, getting to his feet and smiling.

"Jedi Udra." The woman replied, looking back at him and then she looked at Lara and added, "Padawan Udra." Then she continued to the centre of the room, "For those who don't know me," she said, "I am Jedi Peacemaker Karrie Tyran and I am here to bring about a peaceful resolution to the actions of the kinnin."

"Perhaps we can be of help as well." Varn Udra announced as he too entered the room accompanied by his wife and sister. The sudden appearance of another two jedi knights and a master surprised all of those present other than Cal and Lara.

"What are you doing here?" Karrie asked, "Master Karas said nothing—"

"Master Karas doesn't know." Varn replied, "The last time we were here he was not exactly welcoming and neither were others," and at this point he threw a glance at Administrator Varr'kay, who's fur ruffled at this remark, "so it was decided that this time we would not announce ourselves to anyone while we came to see that Cal and Lara were alright."

"This is most unusual." Karrie said to Varn, "Ben will—"

"Ben?" Neri interrupted, noting that Karrie had used the first name of the jedi master in charge of the nearby enclave on Moldas, "Not Master Karas?"

"Master Karas will not approve." Karrie corrected herself.

"Then Ben can ask us to leave." Elle said.

"Nicely." Varn added, "He has no authority over me."

"Alternatively you can accept help where it's offered." Neri said, "I'm sure there are others who would welcome it." And she looked first at her children and then at Captain De Kuun.

"Then it's settled." Captain De Kuun said, "We rendezvous in the Teras system in twelve hours. If we are quick we will be able to intercept the next kinnin incursion before they reach Aurek Station."

2.

From his private office on Crassis Major General Josh Drud watched as the hologram of the briefing faded. "This is not good." He said, looking over his shoulder to where his younger brother Heddren sat. Unlike Josh, Heddren was not in the military and he wore finely tailored civilian clothing, "There is little doubt about what has pushed the kinnin into this course of action."

"Of course we know why the kinnin are behaving this way." Heddren replied, "But there's little chance of the Republic finding out. Even if they did it'll be the Karns in the firing line, not our family."

"I hope so." Josh said, "But I still don't like the presence of so many jedi. Our spy was supposed to warn us of such deployments. I've got a bad feeling about this."

The next incursion by kinnin forces came as expected, only this time there were Republic vessels on hand to engage them in the Teras system rather than letting them get as far as Aurek Station. Readings taken by the mining platforms around Teras had revealed the location that the kinnin ships dropped out of hyperspace before making the final jump towards Aurek Station on early occasions and so when they appeared in the same place this time the Republic force was already waiting for them.

At this point only the Republic ships that had come from Aurek Station and the fighter squadrons possessed by the local defence forces were available to challenge the kinnin, but this still amounted to a sizeable force. Including the two armed jedi vessels piloted by Cal and Elle there were fourteen gunships and more than fifty starfighters. Separate from these was Karrie's unarmed transport. Despite the risk of piloting a ship with no weapons into a combat zone the jedi peacemaker had insisted, believing that a ship that presented no threat would make an offer of peace more readily accepted.

"This is Captain De Kuun of the Navy of the Galactic Republic." Captain De Kuun broadcast, sending the message over a wide range of frequencies to increase the chance that whoever was in charge of the kinnin would be able to hear him, "You are violating Republic territory, stand down and state your purpose."

Whether or not the captain's words were understood or even received the kinnin reacted to the presence of the Republic ships almost immediately and the tight formation of two frigate-sized vessels, six smaller gunships and a fifteen strong fighter group split up.

"Teras Defence forces go after those gunships." Captain De Kuun ordered, "Republic fighters take on theirs, everyone else follow me against the frigate." The duros officer had chosen the targets for his ships carefully, betting that his fighter pilots had better dog fighting skills than the local pilots in their older ships and reasoning that the more powerful weapons of the gunships would provide a much better chance of disabling the capital ships, especially en masse. Moments after the Republic forces began to accelerate he added to his order however, "And remember, do not fire until we are fired upon."

The kinnin ships manoeuvred to try and keep the Republic vessels at a distance, all the time flying in evasive patterns to prevent themselves from being targeted. However, neither side seemed willing to fire and as she watched the swarms of starships dodging around one another and waiting to see who would blink first and either retreat or open fire Karrie decided to make her move and flew towards the frigate.

"This is Karrie Tyran of the Jedi Order." She broadcast, like Captain De Kuun using a wide range of frequencies and using no encryption, "I have been authorised to conduct negotiations on behalf of-" but before she could finish her sentence the kinnin took action.

A pair of the alien gunships veered off, their sudden manoeuvre taking the Teras Defence Force starfighters by surprise and breaking away from them just long enough to set up a run on Karrie's ship, the *Emissary*.

"Jedi Tyran look out!" Varn warned as he watched from the cockpit of Elle's armed courier, the urgency of his statement clear even before the emissary's systems alerted Karrie to the missile lock.

Two bulbous missiles erupted from each of the kinnin vessels and began to accelerate towards the defenceless jedi vessel while the gunships broke off as several Teras Defence Force fighters moved towards them.

"Emergency! Emergency!" Karrie signalled in alarm, trying desperately to shake the missiles that getting rapidly closer.

"On it!" Cal snapped and he veered his own ship, the *Bright Hope*, away from Captain De Kuun's formation. Beside him in the cockpit Lara prepared the ship's weapons and they drew closer ship opened fire with the *Bright Hope's* twin laser turrets.

"Oh this too easy." Lara exclaimed as one of the missiles exploded, "They're hardly moving."

"Don't get cocky." Cal replied as he steered the *Bright Hope* towards the next missile, "There's still three more."

"Two." Lara said excitedly as her shooting was rewarded with the destruction of a second kinnin missile. By now the missiles were getting close to the Emissary and as Lara tried to lock onto a third missile she knew that she would not be able to get them both before they struck the Emissary. She still opened fire however and a third missile was promptly destroyed, leaving only one last one that Lara tried desperately to lock onto.

"Jedi Tyran, do you have shields on that bucket?" Cal asked, having also calculated that there was not enough time for Lara to aim and fire the *Bright Hope's* lasers again.

"No, this ship is defenceless." Karrie replied.

"Then it's a good job we do." Cal said, "Switching particle shields to full front."

"Oh no!" Lara exclaimed as she realised what her older brother was doing and she leant forwards in her seat and put her arms over her head.

Cal brought the *Bright Hope's* engines up to full power and the multitude of synchronised ion drive units propelled the ship forwards rapidly and just as Cal had hoped it made the *Bright Hope* faster than the final missile.

The force of the impact of the missile's tail against the *Bright Hope's* shields caused the weapon to break apart, debris spreading out before the warhead finally detonated and sent shockwaves through the *Bright Hope*.

"Status!" Cal snapped and Lara sat up and looked at the console in front of her.

"Everything functional." She responded, "Looks like the shields kept everything out. Cal I don't think much to their firepower."

"Still more than Karrie's ship could take." Cal said, "Now let's go see what's happening behind us." And he turned the ship back towards the Republic and kinnin taskforces.

As soon as the kinnin gunships had launched their missiles against the *Emissary* the Republic ships were authorised to engage them and rather than merely trying to get into a favourable position Republic ships were now firing on the intruding ships and the kinnin were responding in kind. However, it seemed that the poor performance of the kinnin missiles that Lara had noticed was typical of their weapons technology and while even the older Teras Defence Force ships were equipped with relatively modern directed energy weapons the kinnin were reliant on magnetic accelerators and their painful slow and poor manoeuvring missiles.

One of the frigates was already on fire as the other tried to protect it against the nimble Republic gunships and there was a sudden bright flare as one of the kinnin gunships was destroyed in a series of massive internal explosions. Only the kinnin fighter squadron had escaped loss and they had done this by evading the Republic fighter group rather than making any attempt to stand and fight. The destruction of the gunship and the damage done to their frigate seemed to have taken the fight out of the kinnin though and as Cal and Lara watched all of their ships began to withdraw, laying down a wall of fire to dissuade the Republic ships from following. Then, with a rapid succession of flashes of light the kinnin ships re-entered hyperspace, heading for their home system.

"This is Captain De Kuun to all ships. Mission accomplished. Fall back to Teras Station Two for debrief. Well done everyone."

The briefing chamber available on Teras Station Two was not as impressive as that one Aurek Station. This was a mining platform orbiting a gas giant and the room was intended for the station's senior personnel to discuss mining operations, not run post mission analysis of starship battles. It was equipped with a holographic display system however, though this was somewhat limited and not tied into the station's communications system. Therefore, when Josh Drud and Austin Veers arrived with their vessels to reinforce the Republic force they had to attend the debrief in person rather than virtually. Colonel Jeck also arrived in time for the meeting, bringing with him two companies of troops from his garrison on Tepillos. Together with the platoon of marines from Aurek Station this meant that the Republic had been able to assemble a force capable of conducting major operations not only in space but on the ground as well. It also meant that rather than being a purely defensive force that could resist further kinnin incursions it capable of acting as a limited invasion force if the need arose.

"As you can see," Captain De Kuun said as the holographic projector replayed the battle, "the technology of the kinnin ships encountered here lags far behind our own, though we have no way of knowing if these represent the cutting edge of their technology or if they were sent because they were considered expendable."

"Have any reconnaissance missions been attempted into enemy territory?" Austin asked.

"Enemy territory?" Karrie responded before Captain De Kuun could reply, "Why are we suddenly calling them the enemy?"

"I think the fact they tried to shoot you down is a hint." Varn replied, without taking his eyes from the display. "Indeed." Captain De Kuun said, "In fact I would remind you Jedi Tyran, that until you sent your message the kinnin had not opened fire on us during a single one of their incursions." Then he looked towards Austin, "And in answer to your question, no. We have not yet made any attempt to penetrate kinnin territory since this crisis began."

"Since this crisis began?" Elle said, "But you've tried before right?"

"Yes we have." Captain De Kuun answered, "We have despatched numerous probe droids and scout ships towards Kinnis over the years and all of them have reported the same thing, the approach to the system is blockaded." At this point he adjusted the display to show a representation of the route between Teras and Kinnis. Several bright dots were arrayed between the two star systems, "The kinnin have placed numerous large objects in the path that a ship would take to reach Kinnis from here and they frequently move these around to prevent us from plotting their locations. On the other hand, their ships know exactly where they are at all times. Reaching Kinnis is a slow and dangerous task."

"Is it possible that these missions are what provoked the kinnin into their recent actions?" Karrie asked, but Captain De Kuun just shook his head.

"I doubt it. The last such mission was more than eight months ago. I personally cancelled further flights when it became apparent that they were of negligible value. Perhaps if I had not then we would have received more warning of their sudden change in behaviour."

"But like you said captain," Neari said from beside Varn, "it was only when Jedi Tyran attempted to make contact that the kinnin opened fire and they specifically targeted her ship. Why not launch a full missile spread at the gunship group and try to take out our bigger guns? The ones that did so much damage to their capital ship."

"She identified herself as a jedi." Erin Shill commented, having spent the meeting up until then in silence, watching from behind Captain De Kuun, "I'm guessing that the kinnin don't like them."

"Neither does Captain De Kuun." Lara whispered to her brother, "But he's not tried to shoot us yet." Then she noticed that Cal was staring at the holographic display of the route from Teras to Kinnis, "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Ask me later." Cal replied, "When we're alone."

The meeting was adjourned without any specific course of action being decided upon and Cal and Lara took the opportunity to slip away to the hangar deck where the *Bright Hope* was docked.

"So what's your big idea then big brother?" Lara asked.

"Well first you can get me a caf and then meet me in the cockpit." Cal replied.

"Why not just get it yourself?"

"I want to check the ship's computer but I want a drink as well. Besides I'm in charge here."

"Says who?"

"The Jedi Council. Padawan."

Lara sighed and headed for the galley while Cal instead made for the cockpit and when Lara joined him there with two cups of caf she found him studying the navigational database of the station.

"So you think you've found a route to Kinnis that no one else knows about?" she asked, handing Cal one of the cups.

"Thanks." Cal said as he accepted the drink, "And in answer to your question, maybe."

"But how come no one else knows about it?"

"Because of where we start from." Cal told her, "Look." And he pointed to a point on the display that was unlabelled. However, though no name was attached to the location both Lara and Cal knew exactly what was there because they had already been there once. Dorn Station.

Two hundred years earlier the Republic had discovered the massive alien built space station lying abandoned. Eager to put it to use as a way station for interstellar travel the Republic had dispatched a team of engineers to refit it as the Narthis Sector's fourth navigation beacon. However, there had been a series of tragic and mysterious accidents that had convinced the Republic to abandon both the effort and the station. In the centuries since it had been largely forgotten about and now saw visits only from outlaw traffic that needed somewhere to stop out of the way of the Republic's prying eyes.

"Dorn Station? Cal you can't be serious."

"Oh I'm serious. I mean just look at the location, its perfectly placed for there to be a hyperspace route to the Kinnis system. Its less than two parsecs away. For all we know it was the kinnin that built Dorn Station in the first place."

"So you plan to fly the *Bright Hope* to Dorn Station and then just figure out the jump route to Kinnis from there yes?"

"We'll I'm hoping we may get some help along the way." Cal replied, but before Lara could speak the ship's communications system warned the two jedi of an incoming message and when Cal activated the system an image of their mother appeared on screen.

"Cal, Lara, where are you?"

"Aboard the Bright Hope." Cal replied.

"Don't get smart with me young man, you know what I mean. Why aren't you here? Captain De Kuun is restarting the meeting, he and General Drud have come up with a plan to force their way to Kinnis."

Cal sighed.

"Look mom Lara and I have an idea. But we need time to figure it out."

"How much time?"

"I don't know. A week or two."

"Two weeks? Cal, you need to speak to the captain."

"The captain's not the boss of us mom." Lara said and then after taking a deep breath she glanced at her brother and added, "Cal's the senior jedi in this sector."

Neari frowned, knowing that Lara was correct. It was for Cal and Lara to decide whether or not to assist the military unless they received orders from Master Karas on Moldas and to obtain such orders could take days.

"Very well then." Neari said with a sigh. "Then before she cut the link she added, "Good luck, and may the Force be with you."

3.

The light cruiser was the flagship of the Crassis Major Defence Forces and General Josh Drud had handpicked its entire crew. Fiercely loyal to him above all others he knew he could count on them to follow almost any order without hesitation or question. So when he asked that they not only watch for further incursions by the kinnin but to also monitor Republic shipping and report anything odd to him they readily agreed.

"Look at that." The comscan operator said to one of his colleagues as he watched the *Bright Hope* leaving the space station and head into deep space, "Where the hell do you think they're going?"

"I don't know." The other man replied as the *Bright Hope* entered hyperspace, "There's nothing along that vector. Record it and let the general know. I think this is the sort of thing he wanted us to watch for."

Back on Crassis Major Heddren Drud looked at his son, Hiran who was sat opposite him in the back of their luxury speeder.

"I still don't see why I'm here." The young man said when he became aware that he was being watched.

"Because your uncle has no children of his own." Heddren said, "So it is likely that when he dies you will become the head of our family and as such you should learn the correct way to deal with the others."

"Oh yeah? When it comes to the Karn sisters I'll do it from a safe distance and through intermediaries if you don't mind." Hiran replied, the unruly behaviour of the three Karn sisters being distasteful to the more levelheaded Hiran.

Heddren smiled.

"You know we make a fortune thanks to the fact that the Karns can't control their offspring." He said, "If ever one of them does something that we can't help the Karn family bury before it gets to court then we'll make even more at ten thousand credits per hour."

"Its still not enough for me to want to be in the same room as Gayal." Hiran said.

"Well we're here now Hiran." Heddren said as he looked out of the speeder window while it pulled off the main road and proceeded up a wide driveway towards a massive mansion. Outside several other speeders were parked. Most of these were luxury types, designed either for the levels of opulent comfort the Druds' speeder provided or for levels of performance that pushed the limits of technology. However, one of them was a more practical vehicle though it too was still an up market vehicle.

"Ah," Heddren said, "it looks like Han has got here before us. A pity, we could have charged more if we had to wait for him."

As Heddren and Hiran stepped from the speeder when it too was parked in front of the mansion they were met by a serving droid.

"Good day sirs," the machine spoke, "do please follow me. You are expected."

The droid then led them into the mansion and from there into a study where five humans waited for them. Faye Karn was the head of her family, though many people mistakenly assumed that her husband Del made the decisions. In fact though he was an outstanding businessman and could find a way to turn a profit from almost any situation he acted only with his wife's approval. The third individual present was Han Shill, head of Shill Security the company that provided protection for all of the Founding Families. These were the families who like the Druds and Karns were descended from the original survey team that had charted the Narthis Sector three hundred years ago. Finally came Sial and Keera Karn, the two younger daughters of Del and Faye. From the looks on their faces Hiran guessed that their father had been having stern words with them about their behaviour yet again. Hiran glanced around to see if the elder daughter, Gayal was lurking somewhere but he could not see her.

"Get out the pair of you." Del said, scowling at his daughters and with frowns their faces they walked past the Druds towards the door.

"Hello Hiran." Sial said with a smile as she brushed past him, but he did his best to ignore her before he and his father both sat down and accepted the drinks that another serving droid offered to them.

"So tell me Heddren," Del said from behind his desk, "what exactly is so urgent that you needed to speak with us?"

"And me." Han added, "Though I do find it so entertaining to see Del trying to instil discipline in his children."

"Children we pay your people to keep an eye on." Faye commented.

"We're here about the kinnin." Heddren said flatly, "My brother is somewhat concerned that you're trying to start a war. A war that could bring the jedi down upon us."

Though long since abandoned by the Republic, Dorn Station's basic systems remained active. It had heat, light, gravity and an atmosphere suitable for sustaining human life. Only the station's major systems had resisted Republic efforts to reactivate. Therefore, when the *Bright Hope* dropped out of hyperspace after travelling for almost two days Cal was presented with a choice of docking bays. But rather than simply fly into the nearest bay he piloted the ship around the six kilometre wide structure to a very specific hangar. Once inside the empty hangar Cal set the *Bright Hope* down and he and Lara disembarked. As they walked down the access ramp a voice called out from the shadows beyond an open hatchway leading deeper into the station.

"Wondering I was, when return you would."

"Tyshon!" Lara called out with a smile as a diminutive green figure stepped forwards from the shadows.

Tyshon was a former Jedi knight who had come to Dorn Station to investigate the string of accidents that eventually drove the engineers away. However, sensing the influence of the Dark Side he had remained behind to continue his investigation. His presence in the Narthis Sector had never been officially sanctioned by the Jedi Order and so he had simply been listed as missing by the Jedi Order who now presumed him dead. Neither Cal nor Lara could identify Tyshon's species and the alien himself never discussed it.

However, after he had saved them from arms smugglers on their first visit here the Udras trusted him and had agreed to keep his continued existence here a secret.

"Tyshon, how are you?" Cal said in greeting to his fellow Jedi knight and the tiny alien halted and looked upwards.

"Continues to evade me, the truth of this place does." He said, "Mocks me, I feel it does at times. Though lately, the evil here quiet has been. Perhaps sated it the others have done."

"Others?" Cal asked, "More smugglers?"

"Oh no." Lara muttered, but Tyshon shook his head slowly.

"Warriors. Come they do and then go again. Several ships and always the same route."

"Towards Kinnis?" Cal asked.

"Ahh," Tyshon said, his large ears raising, "know of the kinnin you do?"

"They've been launching missions into Republic territory." Cal answered.

"And the last time they opened fire on a Jedi transport." Lara added.

Tyshon let out a sigh.

"Unfortunate this is." He said, "Hoped I had, that their hatred of us would they overcome."

"Have you encountered them then?" Lara asked.

"Met, no. But know of, yes." Tyshon replied, "When first arrived here I did the Republic's ambassadors try and meet them they did. But few meetings allowed were. Never with Jedi at all."

"So people from the Republic have met the kinnin then." Cal said.

"Not themselves no. Use droids the kinnin do. To outsiders speak directly they do not and little at all through droids even. Their reason for disliking Jedi a mystery still is."

"But if people are travelling to their home system then they may know more about them." Lara said.

"And perhaps that's what the kinnin don't like." Cal added, "And that's why they're suddenly making their presence felt in the Republic. Lara, I think we need to get aboard one of those ships heading for Kinnis."

Then he turned to Tyshon, "Can you show us where they dock?"

Cal and Lara followed Tyshon across to the far side of Dorn Station.

"Here." The tiny Jedi knight said as he waved a hand and the hatchway in front of them opened to reveal another docking bay. This one was stocked with several piles of crates, all secured to the deck with security netting, "What is in these I have not looked to see. But to those who have been visiting lately do they belong."

"Somebody's trusting that no-one's going to come along and steal their cargo." Lara said as they entered the docking bay.

"I think not." Cal replied as he approached the nearest stack of crates, "These are rigged. Look." And he twisted one of the sections of net holding the crates down. There Lara saw a narrow length of wire running behind the netting itself, "My guess is that somewhere in amongst this lot is an explosive charge that would take out the cargo along with anyone foolish enough to try and steal it." He added.

"So what do we do now?" Lara asked.

"We wait." Cal replied and he looked at Tyshon, "So how long do you think before anyone shows up to collect this?"

"Hmmm." Tyshon said, "Top of my agenda, timekeeping is not."

"But you must have some idea." Lara said.

"Every few days do they come by here." Tyshon replied, "Though no exact pattern have I seen."

"Then we'll just have to hide somewhere and wait." Cal said.

"Really? That's your big plan? Just hide?" Lara asked, "And where do you suggest we hide?"

Cal just looked up.

"Oh no." Lara said as she looked up into the metal framework that criss-crossed the ceiling.

Cal took a deep breath and then leapt straight up, using the Force to bolster his leap and Lara watched as he caught hold of the framework and pulled himself up into it. Then she looked down at Tyshon.

"Well here goes." She said, "My turn to try."

"No." he said.

"What? You think I shouldn't do this?" Lara asked.

"There is no try." He replied, "Do or do not."

Lara frowned.

"Yeah, right." She said and as she leapt upwards she extended her hand to reach out to grasp the framework. She gasped as she realised that she was not going to make it, but all of a sudden she felt Cal's hand take hold of hers as he reached down to grab her.

"I've got you." He said reassuringly and as he pulled her up Lara glanced back down to where Tyshon stood, slowly shaking his head. Then he turned around and left the docking bay.

"Well that's handy." Cal said when the first of two ships arrived in the docking bay after the two Jedi had spent several rather uncomfortable hours waiting in the framework. The ship was a delaya-class vessel like the *Bright Hope* and Cal eyed it up as he continued, "If its configured anything like our own vessel we shouldn't have any trouble finding somewhere to hide in it."

"More importantly we know its fast." Lara said, "I don't know about you, but I don't like the idea of having to spend several days cooped up without a refresher."

It was then that the second ship arrived, setting down next to the first. At about the same time hatchways to both vessels opened up and the occupants disembarked. From the delaya-class ship three figures emerged, two human and one spine-headed Rodian while from the other ship only two appeared. One of these was clearly human, though the other was hooded to conceal their features.

"You're being reckless." The hooded figure said, the tones suggesting that the mysterious figure was human and female, "The Kinnin are sending ships into Republic space after you and now the Republic is planning on sending a major task force towards Kinnis."

"So what?" one of the humans from the delaya-class ship said.

"So even though the Kinnin can't trace you back to us, the Republic sure as hell can if they reach Kinnis while you're there." The woman replied.

"I know that voice." Cal whispered to Lara but she just looked at him, unable to place the voice herself.

"Look, just give me what you got this time." The woman said.

The Rodian stepped forwards and held out a bag.

"Is this it?" the woman asked.

"The Kinnin surprised us." The human replied, "We made a break for it earlier than expected. Don't worry; we've plotted out some good sites. We'll get more next time, I promise."

"You better." The woman told him as she took the bag and handed it to the man who still stood beside her, silently. Then they both turned around and returned to their ship.

The occupants of the delaya-class vessel watched as the other ship was started up and backed out of the docking bay. Then the human who had addressed the hooded woman looked around at the others.

"So let's get the ship loaded. The quicker we get back here, the quicker we can get her off our backs." He said and after a brief pause they all approached one of the stacks of crates, disabled the security system and began to move crates into their ship.

"Here's our chance." Cal whispered, "We'll drop down on top of the ship and sneak in while their backs are turned."

Waiting until all three of the crew were inside their ship Cal and Lara silently dropped down onto the upper hull of the ship and crawled towards the point nearest to where the access ramp extended and waited for them to emerge again. Cal felt through the Force for the minds of all three, searching for the weakest and when he found it he waved his hand once.

"What was that?" the man asked, looking towards the doorway leading into the station and reaching for the weapon holstered under his shoulder.

"What was what?" the other human asked as all three now looked towards the doorway and while they were distracted Cal and Lara lowered themselves to the deck and crept into the ship.

"This way." Cal said when they were safely inside and out of sight and he pointed towards the rear of the ship.

"Lead the way." Lara replied as Cal began to move towards the engineering section and she followed him.

Cal went as far as the cargo hold before coming to a halt and he looked around.

"Good," he said, "its the same as the *Bright Hope*."

"So what are we looking for?" Lara asked as Cal headed towards a bulkhead.

"This." He replied and he knocked against a bulkhead plate to produce an echoing sound, proving that there was an empty space behind it, "Inspection panel." He said as he took a knife from his belt and prised the panel loose.

"Cal that's tiny." Lara said.

"We'll fit." Cal said, "Plus we're close to the inspection hatches for the water processing system. If we're careful we can get out for a drink and open up the waste system to use as a refresher. Now get in."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Lara replied as she climbed into the cramped space behind the bulkhead and waited for Cal to follow her.

4.

Cal's eyes snapped open when the ship shuddered. He was familiar enough with space flight to realise that it had just dropped out of hyperspace and given that the clock function on his datapad indicated that they had been in hiding for almost two days it seemed reasonable to assume that they had finally reached the Kinnis system. Glancing beside him Cal saw that Lara was still sound asleep, leaning against him with one of her thumbs in her mouth.

"Ah, my baby sister." Cal muttered to himself and he gently slid his robe out from between them and wrapped it and his arm over his sleeping sister. Then he smiled, took a deep breath and concentrated hard. Just as planned, he both heard and felt the release of pressure and all of a sudden through the Force he felt the sudden increase in brain activity as Lara wake up and promptly let out a muffled cry of distress. Briefly he held his arm in place tightly as she struggled to get out from under his robe. Then he released his grip and Lara scrambled out from beneath his robe, holding the fabric of her own over her nose and mouth. "Stang Cal!" she exclaimed, her voice muffled slightly by her robe, "That's kriffing gross. What have you been eating?"

"Same as you." He replied, "The ration bars we found in the hold."

"Well they're obviously full of fibre." Lara said, "Now we're stuck in here with that. I should have brought a breath mask."

"Oh don't worry I think we're there. Kinnis I mean." Cal said and then he sniffed the air, "Actually that is quite bad isn't it?" he said and he began to work to undo the panel in front of him. As soon as it opened Lara pushed past him.

"Me first!" she snapped, "You can stay and breath that, its yours." And as Cal was following her into the hold Lara took several deep breaths, "You know Cal," Lara said to her brother, "I may not like your girlfriend but don't ever do anything like that to her. Not even Gayal Karn deserves the gas chamber."

Cal just smiled as he replaced the panel once more and before he could reply both he and Lara sensed the approach of someone.

"Quick, in there!" Cal said, pointing to the door that led into one of the engine compartments and both he and Lara darted through before the door leading forwards opened and the two humans in the ship's crew entered.

"Okay lets get the stuff." One of them said, "You know what we're looking for?"

"Sure, this isn't my first salvage mission you know." The other replied.

"So tell me then."

"Spare oxygen cylinders for the suits and cutting torches for the hull."

"Good. Now - Hang on, do you smell that?"

Listening from the next room Lara glared at Cal.

"Smell what? I don't - wait hang on. Stang! Did something die in here?"

"Smells like it. I think it's coming from behind this panel."

"Well don't open it. Its bad enough as it is."

Cal and Lara then heard the sound of the inspection panel being opened.

"What the kriff?" one of the men exclaimed as he saw a discarded ration bar wrapper inside the tiny space,

"We've got a stowaway!" and he drew his weapon, followed by the second man doing the same.

At that moment the ship's intercom activated and the rodian's voice called out.

"Get back here, we've got company."

One of the men rushed to a nearby intercom panel and activated it.

"Well get rid of them, we've got company back here as well."

"What do you mean?" the rodian asked.

"I mean we picked up a passenger at Dorn Station you idiot. Now just get us away from those blasted kinnin."

In the engine room Cal drew his lightsaber.

"Well we're here now." He said to Lara, "We may as well introduce ourselves." And Lara nodded as she drew her own weapon.

The door was suddenly opened from the other side and the two jedi found themselves confronting two armed men.

"Jedi!" one of them exclaimed and he fired a shot from his pistol before either Cal or Lara could react.

Fortunately he did not take the time to aim properly and the energy blast passed between them harmlessly, striking the bulkhead behind them with a loud 'thunk' that put a fist sized dent into it.

His lightsaber still inactive, Cal reached out and grabbed hold the man who had just shot at him and Lara by the wrist and pulled him forwards, slamming his head into the bulkhead beside the open doorway. Stunned, the man collapsed as his comrade turned to run.

"Oh no you don't!" Lara snapped and she leapt over the prone man and ran after the fleeing one. Knowing that he would not reach the door ahead of Lara the man span around, raising his gun. There was a sudden 'snap-hiss' as Lara ignited her lightsaber and she swung the weapon upwards in an arc that sliced through the arm holding the gun before the man could shoot and he staggered backwards, screaming in pain and clutching at the cauterised stump of his arm.

"What's going on back there?" the rodian's voice demanded over the intercom, "I heard screaming."

"The cockpit!" Cal said and he rushed past Lara to the door ahead of her. As soon as he opened it he saw that every door along the length of the ship was open and he could see as far as the cockpit where the rodian pilot was looking back at him, "Get him!" he snapped and he too ignited his lightsaber and charged towards the cockpit.

Knowing that sealing doors would do little to slow down a pair of lightsaber-armed jedi the rodian leapt from his chair as he drew his blaster and aimed it down the length of the ship before opening fire.

Both Cal and Lara dived aside, using whatever obstacles they could find for cover as the characteristic blasts from a pulse wave weapon shot past them.

"Get him?" Lara said, pressed up behind a protruding support frame, "That was your great idea?"

"I was improvising." Cal replied from inside one of the compartments that had been left open along the main corridor.

"Well it's just a pity you couldn't get a bit closer." Lara said, "Perhaps you could have gassed him into submission. You've tried it on everyone else aboard so far."

"Oh don't be stupid." Cal replied, "You know that's a war crime."

Just then the entire ship lurched suddenly and the rodian ceased fire as he looked around for the cause. Then the ship was filled with the sound of grinding metal.

"Cal what's happening?" Lara called out.

"What do you think?" Cal responded, "We're in the Kinnis system after all. I think the kinnin have come to find out why. And if you remember rightly they don't like jedi."

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Lara said as the grinding sound grew louder.

"Back to the hold!" Cal snapped when the rodian, panicked by the sound of the kinnin forcing their way into his ship ceased fire. Cal shut off his lightsaber and rushed back down the corridor past Lara, heading towards the hold. Lara paused, looking forwards until there was a sudden loud 'clang' as whatever section of the ship's hull the kinnin were cutting through gave way.

"Come on!" Cal yelled, waving her towards him from the doorway to the hold and Lara copied Cal by shutting off her lightsaber before she leapt from her hiding place and rushed towards him in the hold. As soon as she was through the door Cal slammed his hand on the control panel beside it and it slid shut. But in the brief time the door was closing Cal caught sight of a bulky mechanical figure emerge into the corridor and look towards him.

"I think they know we're in here." He said and then there was a shriek that sounded as if it came from the far end of the ship, "I think they just got the pilot too." Cal added.

"So what now?" Lara asked.

Cal looked around.

"We need information." He said, "And they're the only ones who can give it to us." And he pointed to the two men lying on the floor. Cal strode across the hold to where the man who had lost an arm lay against a stack of boxes, still cradling the burnt and blackened stump, "Okay then." he said, "Talk. Tell me what you're doing in this system."

"Kriff you jedi." The man replied, snarling at Cal.

"How rude." Lara said, looking at Cal, "I don't think he likes you."

"Really?" Cal replied, "Because he ought to. After all we're the only things between him and a bunch of angry kinnin." And then he brought his foot down on the stump of the man's arm and he screamed.

"Okay!" he cried out, "We're after their tech."

"Industrial espionage?" Lara said, "But we've seen their technology in action. It's way behind ours."

"Not all of it." The man said, "Have you seen their droids?"

Cal nodded.

"There's at least one aboard now." He said.

"Figures." The man said, "They use them for everything. No-one's ever seen a kinnin, but a fair few have seen how good their droids are."

"I thought it was some sort of remote presence system." Cal said, "Simple remote control."

The man snorted.

"Then you don't know anything." He said, "We've scanned some of the places they're being used. There are no control signals. Those things are fully autonomous, but they act like they're alive. That's centuries ahead of Republic droid tech at least. But that's not what we were contracted for originally. At first we were told to look for starship wreckage."

"Now I know that's poodoo." Lara said.

"Indeed." Cal agreed, "Their ships are slow and poorly armed."

"Alien ships." The man said, "The outer system is littered with the wreckage of them. The kinnin seem pretty interested in them too. We first saw their droids in action when we saw some cutting one up. They seemed to know to pull out the electronics and study them before they chopped up the hull for scrap."

"So we're not the first ones to come this way then." Cal said.

"Who do you think they were?" Lara said to Cal, "The aliens I mean."

"I can't say for certain." He replied, "Perhaps the same species that built Dorn Station. It is conveniently positioned for the jump."

"Yeah, but if no-one else has ever been here then how did they know that there were alien starship wrecks here?" Lara then asked.

"How should I know?" the man said, "We were just given jump data to get us here via Dorn Station, bypassing the kinnin blockade along the Teras route."

The sound of tearing metal caused both Cal and Lara to whirl around and face the doorway just as a kinnin war droid tore through it. Acting instinctively Cal grabbed hold of Lara and dragged her behind the nearest stack of crates in the hold.

"No wait I-" the one armed man called out, raising his one remaining hand. But he was interrupted by a beam of light that shot from a tube mounted on the droid's shoulder that sliced through his chest and the boxes he was lent up against.

Behind the crates Lara gripped her lightsaber tightly, but before she could activate it Cal placed his hand over hers.

"Wait for the other one." He whispered as the droid moved towards the other crewman who was still out cold. Despite being no threat to the droid, the machine aimed its beam tube and fired a single blast at the unconscious man and killed him.

"What other one?" Lara asked quietly, "I only saw one droid."

"Use the Force Lara. What can you sense?"

Lara reached out through the Force and smiled as she realised what her brother was talking about.

"I can sense something living." She said, "A kinnin? A real one?"

"My thought's exactly." Cal said, "Maybe the droid is being controlled after all."

"So if we deal with the controller the droid should be no trouble at all." Lara said, still smiling.

"Precisely." Cal said, "So I'll distract the droid while you watch for its master." And before Lara could answer Cal activated his lightsaber and burst out from behind the crates, "Looking for me?" he called out and the droid whirled around to face him.

The beam tube fired again, but as quick as the droid was it was not as fast as Cal's Jedi reflexes and he was already gone from its point of aim, the beam instead slicing through the crates behind him and making Lara jump. The droid turned again to face Cal's charge, quicker than he thought any machine could react. This time Cal kept charging towards the droid rather than evading and when the machine fired its beam tube he held the blade of his lightsaber in front of him and deflected the beam back towards the droid.

Pain.

The sudden disruption through the Force surprised Cal. The deflected beam had sliced through one of the droid's knees and the machine had dropped onto all fours, but that could explain why Cal had felt the pain of its hidden operator. Unless Lara had got to him of course.

"Well done Lara!" Cal called out as he rushed up to the damaged droid and prepared to finish it off.

"What?" Lara called out from her position behind the crates, "I didn't do anything yet."

Confused Cal ground to a halt and looked around.

"Cal look out!" Lara warned as she abandoned her position and rushed towards the droid also. Cal looked down again just in time to see the droid look up and aim its beam tube at him. Quickly, he thrust the tip of his lightsaber forwards, ramming down the muzzle of the beam tube and the weapons exploded in a shower of sparks.

Pain.

Again the sensation that Cal sensed through the Force confused him until he finally realised where it was coming from.

"Lara no!" he cried out as his sister swung her lightsaber at the droid, but it was too late. The blade cut through the droid's chassis effortlessly, slicing a path from the ruined shoulder mounted beam tube to the opposite armpit and the two parts of the machine collapsed in a heap on the deck.

"Now where's the operator?" Lara said, looking around with her lightsaber at the ready.

"There's isn't one." Cal replied, "Not any more at least."

"Huh?"

"You just cut him in half." Cal said and he point to the ruined machine at their feet.

"You're kidding me." Lara said as Cal knelt down.

"No." he replied, shutting off his lightsaber and studying the machine's head, "The moment you destroyed the droid the life form I could sense through the Force died as well. Ah, here it is." And he found a circular panel on the back of the machine's head that was not fixed in place. Cal tried turning it first one way and then the other and he smiled as he felt it move. After several more turns the panel came loose and both Cal and Lara looked inside.

"Cal, is that what I think it is?" Lara asked.

"I think so." Cal replied and he carefully slid a transparent cylinder through the hole. From the base of the cylinder a cluster of cables and tubes extended back into the cyborg's head casing while inside the cylinder was a cloudy fluid. But it was what floated within that that concerned Cal and Lara, "Its an organic brain. The kinnin are cyborgs."

"So that's why everyone thinks that their droids are so good. They are the droids that people have seen. But why keep it a secret?"

"Why tell anyone?" Cal responded, "They probably think it's none of the Republic's business."

The sound of heavy footfalls from towards the front of the ship attracted both jedi's attentions and looking down the main corridor they saw two more kinnin emerge from where they had breached the hull.

"And it looks like this had friends who are wondering what happened to him." Lara said, "What do we do?"

"First we hide." Cal replied as he returned the brain and its container to its mounting in the cyborg head and replaced the cover. Then both he and Lara ran towards the engine room they had hidden in from the ship's crew earlier.

"So what now?" Lara asked quietly. Even with the door closed both she and Cal could hear the kinnin cyborgs moving about in the hold, presumably examining the body of their fallen comrade and also those of the two dead crewmen.

"We need to get control of the ship." Cal replied.

"Well hopefully the pilot won't have had time to secure the controls before the kinnin killed him." Lara said, "But how do we get past those two in the hold? I'm guessing that before they leave they'll come and take a look in here."

"I know. We need to be gone by then. Once we have control of the ship we need to get out of here, back to Dorn Station. We can figure out how to deal with the kinnin later. For now at least we know why they're suddenly acting the way they are."

"Yes, very good. We know they're probably just reacting to these guys trespassing in their territory. But that still doesn't explain how we're going to get past the two in the hold Cal." Lara said. In response Cal just smiled and pointed upwards. Looking up Lara saw that there was a ventilation grill set into the ceiling above their heads.

"That should take us all the way to the bridge if this ship is like the *Bright Hope*." Cal told her and he cupped his hands in front of him, "Now get up there and undo the cover."

5.

Though they were both familiar with the layout of a delaya-class vessel, the ventilation shaft was incredibly cramped and it was slow going for the two jedi to make their way as far as the ship's cockpit. There were several places along the way where they could have left the shaft, but to do so would have risked giving themselves away to the kinnin who for now at least seemed content to both remain towards the rear of the ship where their comrade had been killed. Having been the first one into the shaft it was Lara that was the first to look into the cockpit.

"Looks like the coast is clear." She said, glancing over her shoulder at her brother and keeping her voice low just in case there were any kinnin just out of view.

"What about the pilot?" Cal asked.

"Dead I think." Lara replied, "I can see him in the corner, but I can't feel him through the Force."

"Then let's get down there. But remember not to let the grill drop, we need to avoid detection if we can, for as long as we can."

The ventilation grill was not designed to be removed from the inside of the shaft and so the easiest way for Lara to remove it was to simply slice it off with her lightsaber, carefully running the blade along each edge while she kept hold of the centre. Then, when she was left holding what she had cut loose she shut off her lightsaber and jumped down from the shaft.

"Okay Cal, the coast is clear." She said as she looked down the main corridor towards the hold and Cal promptly crawled out of the ventilation shaft himself and sat down in the empty pilot's seat, "How come you get to sit there?" Lara asked him.

"Because I'm in charge." He replied, "Now keep an eye out for those kinnin while I figure out if we can fly this thing."

Lara was about to argue when something outside the ship caught her eye through the cockpit canopy.

"Err Cal." She said, tapping him on the shoulder.

"What?" he asked.

"Take a look outside." Lara replied and when Cal looked up his eyes widened.

"Stang." He said when he saw the wrecked starship floating ahead of them.

"That's a Sith ship isn't it?" Lara asked.

"A personnel carrier I think." Cal replied, nodding his head, "Well I guess we know who the aliens that invaded this place were. The kinnin must be trying to improve their technology by reverse engineering the wrecks." Then he looked at the kinnin vessel that was latched onto the delaya-class ship. It was similar to the gunships that the Republic had fought at Teras and was only marginally larger than a delaya-class courier. Plus, if it had similar performance to those ships then Cal knew that it would be relatively slow and poorly armed. But of course, a way still had to be found to detach it from the hull of the courier. For that Cal turned to his sister.

"Sit down and ready the weapons." He said and with a wave of his hand he shut the cockpit door.

"The weapons? But Cal, that kinnin ship is right next to us." Lara said as she nevertheless sat in the co-pilot's seat and activated the targeting display.

"I know." Cal replied, "But I've got a feeling we may need them."

"Why?"

"Because I'm about to put as much power into the engines as I can and I'm guessing that when we break free of their ship the kinnin will open up on us so I want you ready to shoot down whatever they throw at us."

"That's your plan?" Lara exclaimed, "Just fly away and hope I can shoot down their missiles?"

"You got a better one?"

"No, but that doesn't stop me having a bad feeling about this one. I mean what about the two onboard?"

"Hopefully as soon as they realise that they're cut off from their ship they'll be more willing to talk."

"And if they don't?"

"Then we'll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Funny thing about bridge's Cal," Lara said, "in a war zone they tend to be places that people fight over."

"Just strap yourself in." Cal said, "Because we're ready to go."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Lara muttered as both jedi fastened their safety harnesses.

Taking hold of the control column in front of him Cal transferred as much power as he could to the courier's ion drives. Delaya-class ships were built with speed in mind and when the fourteen ion engines fired together at maximum thrust the effect was dramatic and immediate. At first both the courier and the kinnin gunship accelerated forwards, but the imbalance between the force being applied by each vessel propelled

them in a circular path with the gunship on the inside. Additionally the strain of this sudden acceleration fell upon the short boarding tube that the kinnin had used to latch onto the courier and after only a few seconds it snapped, sending the gunship flying off in a different direction to the one that the delaya-class courier now accelerated in. The break happened quickly, leaving the end of the tube still attached to the courier's hull but it also left a large hole open to space where the kinnin had cut through and an alarm sounded in the cockpit. "Decompression!" Lara snapped.

"I know." Cal replied, "The system should seal the section automatically."

Sure enough the ship's computer closed the door to the damaged compartment and the alarm stopped, though a light continued to blink on the control console to indicate that part of the ship was now in vacuum. Then a second alarm sounded as the kinnin gunship regained control of its flight path and acquired a missile lock.

"Cal they're firing." Lara said, frantically taking hold of her own control column and using it to direct the ship's lasers. The instruments indicated a lock and Lara squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

Confused, Lara squeezed the trigger again repeatedly but was rewarded with nothing but the 'click' of the trigger movement itself.

"Anytime before those missiles hit us would be good Lara." Cal said.

"I know that." She replied, "But the lasers aren't working."

"The kinnin." Cal said simply, "They must have disabled them." And he looked over the control console briefly for any signs of other system failures, particularly the shields, "Everything looks fine." He said, "Take over."

"And do what?"

"Just keep flying. Try to stay ahead of those missiles for as long as you can. I've focused the shields aft, but they may not hold for long."

"And what will you be doing while I'm keeping us in one piece?"

Cal released his harness and as he got up he drew his lightsaber.

"Dealing with those kinnin before they disable anything vital, like engines or life support." He replied.

6.

Cal ignited his lightsaber the moment he left the cockpit and began to make his way down the main corridor. When he was about half way along the lighting units in the ceiling suddenly cut out and only the pulsing blue light of his weapon illuminated the corridor.

"Lara," he said into his point-to-point communicator, "please tell me you accidentally shut off the lights."

"Err, no. But they've gone out in here too." Lara responded from the cockpit.

"Oh stang." Cal muttered, then in a louder tone he added, "That mean's they're into the basic systems." And he began to move more quickly down the corridor. But before he had gone ten paces he felt a sudden disturbance. Not through the Force, but in the ship's environment as if he were getting lighter, "Lara kill the engines!" he yelled into the PTP link.

"But Cal-" Lara began.

"Just do it!"

Just as the sound of the engines receded Cal found himself floating off the deck and he was hurled down the corridor towards the back of the ship. The rate at which starships could change their velocity and heading meant that without an active artificial gravity field to create a stable environment inside it, the occupants would be crushed against the back of the ship as soon as the main drives were fired and though Lara had cut the power to the engines as quickly as she could Cal was still caught in the open when the gravity field gave out.

He reached out a hand as he tumbled towards the cargo hold and using the Force he pushed against the far wall of the hold, just visible to him in the poor light and gently slowed himself down. He came to a halt just before reaching the destroyed door to the hold and he lifted his PTP link to his mouth.

"Lara, are you okay?" he asked, knowing that his sister would have been subject the same forces as he was.

"Fine." Lara croaked, fortunately she had been strapped into a seat that was designed to protect its occupant from acceleration, up to a point.

"Good. I'm leaving my PTP link on." Cal said as he clipped it to his robe, "Let me know if you need to fire the engines and I'll brace myself. Just try and keep it under six gees."

"Got it Cal."

Knowing the location of all of the vital systems aboard a delay-class courier, Cal pushed himself off the bulkhead he had been resting against and across the hold where crates and corpses were now piled up and broken against the rear bulkhead. Using the Force, he pushed against a bulkhead to propel himself towards an open doorway that he knew led to one of the engineering rooms and as he drifted closer he smiled as he sensed the presence of two life forms.

Reaching the doorway he halted himself by grabbing hold of the doorframe and looked inside. There he saw that the two kinnin cyborgs had ripped a large section of one wall open and were busy interfering with the machinery behind it. He noticed that both cyborgs were still standing upright on the deck as if the artificial gravity was still active and Cal guessed that they had some way of maintaining their own gravity field, perhaps something as simple as magnetic clamps on their feet. As soon as Cal appeared in the doorway they noticed the light from his lightsaber and the beam tubes mounted to their shoulders swivelled around to face him.

In unison the weapons fired, but both kinnin had selected to target Cal dead centre of his chest and he was able to place his lightsaber so that it blocked both attacks simultaneously. The two beams were deflected in different directions, neither initially striking either of the kinnin. But the kinnin sustained their attacks and Cal twisted his lightsaber slightly, diverting one so that it was angled back towards the kinnin that fired it. There was a flash of light and a shower of sparks as the beam sliced open the cyborg's lightly armoured casing at the waist.

Panic.

Cal was initially surprised that the damaged cyborg would react in such a way, but then he saw a fluid leaking from the hole that looked similar to that contained inside the brain holding cylinder of the kinnin Lara had destroyed earlier and he realised that this one had just suffered damage to the systems that were sustaining its organic parts.

There was a sudden hiss from the other kinnin as it leapt from the deck, making the most of its powerful hydraulic legs and propelled itself towards Cal with its arms outstretched. Pushing himself off the doorframe Cal flew through the air past the kinnin. Unable to alter its course in mid flight the alien cyborg reached out

and tried to grab hold of Cal, but the Jedi simply swung his lightsaber and sliced the kinnin's hand off midway between the wrist and elbow.

"Cal! Breaking left!" Lara's voice suddenly called out via the PTP link and Cal was able to grab hold of a cable conduit on the ceiling just in time to prevent himself from being thrown violently across the compartment. The undamaged kinnin on the other hand was caught unprepared for the sudden manoeuvre and slammed into the bulkhead with a crash. Having been caught out twice while floating in zero gravity the alien reactivated the magnetic clamps built into its feet and slid towards the deck. Now standing upright again it took a step towards Cal.

The ship rocked again, unexpectedly this time and there was a low rumble.

"What was that?" Cal exclaimed, knowing that his PTP link would pick it up and transmit the question to Lara.

"Missile strike." She replied, "I dodged one, but there's more coming up fast."

The cyborg suddenly rushed towards Cal and once again the Jedi reacted by pushing off from where he was located and floating across the compartment with his lightsaber held between him and the kinnin. This time however, the alien was ready and had full control of its movement and it simply sidestepped the floating Jedi. Additionally as Cal flew past the kinnin swung at him with its damaged arm and pushed him off course, sending him flying into the deck. As he lay there Cal saw the kinnin advancing towards him, its footfalls echoing with every step it took and he realised how to shift the odds in his favour.

Leaping up off the deck Cal somersaulted backwards through the air to put more distance between himself and the kinnin and then he hurled his lightsaber towards the alien. The weapon spun as it flew and the glowing blue blade sliced effortlessly through the legs of the advancing kinnin, causing the startled cyborg to suddenly float upwards, unable to control where it went.

Reaching out with the Force Cal called his weapon back towards him, shutting it off as he caught it and then he pushed himself towards the doorway once more and positioned himself leaning against the frame towards the rear of the ship.

"Lara! Fire the drives! Nine gees, quick!"

"Nine?"

"Do it!"

There was a roaring as the engines were fired and Cal felt himself being pressed hard against the doorframe. The effect on the floating kinnin was more dramatic however. Unable to control itself as it floated freely, the legless kinnin was suddenly propelled backwards as the acceleration of the ship created a sudden difference in velocity between it and the cyborg. As it hurtled towards the rear of the compartment, falling with a relative acceleration of nine times standard gravity it slammed into the other kinnin that was frantically trying to stem the flow of life sustaining fluid that was leaking from its waist. The force of this impact snapped its legs at the knees and it too was propelled backwards to where both cyborgs crashed into the rear bulkhead.

"Lara! Kill it!" Cal yelled as his vision began to blur. For a moment he feared that his sister had blacked out at the controls and the ship would continue to accelerate until the pressure eventually killed them but then the noise of the engines was cut off and Cal exhaled deeply as he felt the pressure on his body vanish.

Looking around he saw the two kinnin lying in a mangled heap against the rear bulkhead. The one that had lost limbs was now motionless, its head crushed against the bulkhead, but the other one still twitched as fluid continued to leak from its side. Cal pushed himself off from the doorframe and drifted towards them.

As he moved closer Cal could sense the surviving kinnin's life signs becoming weaker as its presence in the Force faded. The cyborg turned its head towards him and suddenly in Basic it spoke to him.

"You will never win." It said in a machine-generated voice, "We defeated your first invasion and we will always—" and then it was gone.

"Breaking right!" Lara's voice called out and Cal was thrown across the chamber before he could react and only narrowly avoided being crushed by the remains of the two kinnin cyborgs that were also hurled in the same direction.

"Lara's what's our status?" Cal asked as he looked towards the tangle of wires that dangled from the exposed systems.

"Five more missiles incoming." Lara replied, "Plus that gunship's closing in on us. Cal we need to get out of here."

Cal looked at the exposed ship's systems again and saw that the kinnin had been trying to reach the hyperdrive motivator. Fortunately they had not had the chance to destroy the only means that the two Jedi had of leaving the Kinnis system but there was still a major problem. In the brief period as a starship entered hyperspace the vessel underwent hundreds of gees of acceleration and while the structure of most starships could withstand such forces the same was not true of the human body. If Lara activated the hyperdrive

without the ship's artificial gravity field operating then both she and Cal would be reduced to a thin red smear over the rear facing walls of the chambers they occupied.

"Give me time." He said, pulling himself towards the damaged systems, "Meanwhile plot us a jump."

"A jump to where? Cal, I'm not an astrogator."

"Just something simple, a parsec straight ahead will do. That'll give us chance to figure out the jump back to Dorn Station." Cal told her and he then looked around the compartment. Aboard the Bright Hope he had a set of tools for conducting starship repairs and he assumed that the crew of this ship would also keep some on hand. However, at seventy metres long there were a lot of places that a briefcase-sized toolkit could be kept and Cal had no time to search for them. Instead he reached for the knife he kept at his belt.

The kinnin had disabled the ship's systems by simply severing power and control lines, presumably so that the delaya-class vessel, an example of the cutting edge Republic technology could be recovered and reverse engineered. This meant that all that was required to reactivate the ship's artificial gravity was to find the correct matching ends of the severed lines and repair them. Frantically Cal began to rummage through the bundles of wires and optical fibres that had been severed and stripped away the insulation surrounding the metal-cored wires, hunting for any connected to the artificial gravity control system. This would work only so long as it was just metal wires that had been damaged, Cal could not repair the more advanced optical fibres simply by twisting the broken ends together.

The Force was with him however and Cal grinned as he found that although the primary power line to the gravity control circuit had been cut through, the optical lines were all intact. Taking the loose end connected to the circuit board in his hand he was just starting to search for the other end when he heard Lara's voice calling out.

"Breaking right again!"

Cal's first instinct was to keep hold of the power cable and use it to brace himself, but he knew that this risked ripping out the entire circuit and leaving them in an even worse situation so instead he let go and allowed himself to be flung across the compartment, pushing against the far wall with the Force to slow himself before he too could end up mangled like the two kinnin. Pushing off from the wall, Cal floated back to the exposed wiring and took hold of the power cable to the artificial gravity system. Locating a second broken wire running in the opposite direction he used his knife to strip of the insulation before touching the two bared ends together. Whereupon he promptly dropped to the deck. As he landed the two wire separated again and he felt himself go weightless once more.

"Cal you had it there for a moment!" Lara called out.

"Hang on." Cal replied and before the motion of the ship could lift him from the deck once more he twisted the two loose ends together, "Now Lara! Punch It!"

From the cockpit of their own ship a trio of kinnin, all more lightly built than the cyborgs who had boarded the delaya-class vessel watched their missiles closing in on their target. All of a sudden there was a brilliant flash of light as the Republic ship entered hyperspace, leaving the missiles and the gunship chasing only empty space.

The hooded figure walked into the offices of Shill Security on Crassis Major and through the security checkpoint without being stopped. Every single employee knew better than to try and stop this individual. Getting into the nearest turbolift the woman inserted a key into the control panel that gave her access to the uppermost level of the building and she waited as she was carried upwards to that floor. When she emerged from the turbolift she found Han Shill and Del Karn waiting for her.

"Hello Belle." Han said as his twin sister lowered her hood.

"Han." She replied, "Del." She then added.

"Is that for me?" Del asked, indicated the case she held, "I did provide the navigation data after all."

"And almost started a war." Belle said as she handed the case to her brother instead, "You know how this works Del. We hold onto this to begin with, just to make sure you're not holding anything back. It's not like my people will be bringing anything more back from Kinnis now is it?"

"So you heard then?" Han asked as he took the case.

"Of course I did. The jedi got aboard the ship. Now what's the latest news about the kinnin themselves?"

"They seem to have gone quiet again now that no-one's trespassing in their system any more." Han said, "Josh Drud is staying at Teras with some ships to watch out for them for a bit longer though and there's been a suggestion that the Republic will reinforce its forces in the sector just in case."

"So for the sake of a few trinkets we're now going to be lumbered with a larger Republic force to deal with?" Belle said and she glanced at Del in an accusing way.

“The Republic’s conventional forces need not concern us.” Del said, frowning, “What we need is a way to get rid of the jedi in the sector while we carry out our work.”