

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



II-VIII: INSURRECTION

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...

INSURRECTION

WHEN INSURGENTS ON TEPILLOS STAGE ATTACKS THAT THREATEN TO OVERWHELM THE REPUBLIC PEACEKEEPING FORCES THERE JEDI CAL AND LARA UDRA ARE SENT TO SUPPORT COLONEL JECK'S TROOPS. BUT A STARTLING DISCOVERY AWAITS THEM...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

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1 .

When Colonel Arion Jeck of the Army of the Galactic Republic stepped from the troop carrier he was met by one of his subordinates who snapped to attention and saluted.

"Report captain." The colonel said as he returned the salute.

"It's chaos sir." The captain replied while he and the colonel headed towards the heavily armoured command centre, "When the local insurgents realised that you'd taken troops to Teras they went crazy and started attacking."

"Attacking who exactly?"

"Err, anyone it seems. Us, local government and each other."

"What about local law enforcement?" Colonel Jeck asked.

"All sat in their police stations as if nothing's happening. They aren't even responding to emergency calls from the civilian population. Everything is being routed through to us and we just don't have the men to respond to it all. Even with the troops you've brought back with you. To be honest sir, the prevailing theory is that they've been bought off."

Reaching the command centre the two officers went inside and Colonel Jeck was confronted with a massive tactical display that showed exactly what was happening in the capital and he saw that his subordinate's report had been entirely accurate. Live feeds were coming in from Republic squads all over the city involved in firefights against small numbers of insurgents who used the civilian population as cover while they fired a few shots at the soldiers and then disappeared into the crowd. Elsewhere bombs and booby traps were being left, seemingly at random were causing massive damage and casualties. The colonel sighed. When tensions with the mysterious kinnin species had risen he had been compelled to take a large portion of his force to the Teras system, ready to support a Republic counter-assault that was never needed anyway and now he had to pick up the pieces here.

"Air support." He said, "As soon as the gunships are offloaded from the transports I want them deployed.

The same with the men, deploy them around the perimeter of the Green Zone."

"Of course sir." The captain replied as he tapped at the touch screen of his datapad.

"Oh and captain?"

"Yes sir?"

"Send a platoon to the nearest police station."

"Yes sir, but why?"

"They need reminding what their job is. If they won't get out on the streets and keep order then seize their equipment, arrest them all and bring them back here. But make sure they have enough chance to spread the word to other stations that we're conducting a purge, it'll give them an incentive to be out on patrol when we turn up at the next station."

"But what if they resist?" the captain asked.

"The police here are routinely armed aren't they captain?"

"Yes sir. Mainly firearms, but a few pulse wave weapons as well."

"Then if they resist then they are bearing arms against the Republic. Shoot them. In the meantime I'm going to try and rustle up some reinforcements. "

"So they've dragged you two into this as well have they?"

Cal Udra, the Jedi knight assigned to the Narthis Sector turned when he heard the voice form behind him. He and Lara Udra, his younger sister and padawan learner were on the hangar deck of Aurek Station where they resided and heading for their ship, the *Bright Hope*. Upon turning around he saw a large man in the uniform of a Republic Navy marine, Master Sergeant Wedge Keltan.

"Sergeant Keltan." Cal replied, "I take it you mean Tepillos?"

"Where else?" the sergeant added and he glanced around, "Your folks not coming along as well?"

"Oh they had to go back to Coruscant." Lara said, "And besides the last time they visited Tepillos our aunt got kidnapped."

"I think they put that in the travel advisories." Wedge said, "Accommodation costs can be kept to a minimum if you spend your visit chained to a heating unit in a basement. Crap view though. Anyway, I've got a favour to ask."

"Go ahead." Cal said.

"Do you mind if my unit hitches a ride with you? Our shuttle won't be on line for another six hours yet, and the *Bright Hope's* much faster."

"Its fine by us." Lara answered.

"It'll be a bit of a squeeze though." Cal added, "We're already taking Agent Raser and four other sector rangers with us."

"That's not a problem." Wedge said, "We can just hunker down on the hold floor for a few hours. You won't even know we're there. I promise." He then made a casual salute before turning around and walking away.

"First sector rangers and now them Cal?" Lara muttered, "What are we? An interstellar taxi service?"

"No, we're jedi on a tight budget. The more favours we're owed the better. What's the problem anyway?"

You heard what Wedge said; his men will be in the hold. Jule will be in the lounge with her agents and we'll be in the cockpit. So what's the problem?"

"The problem is I really wanted to take the grenade launcher we're not supposed to have with us. It's my turn to use it, but I can't put it on the ship if any of them may find it."

Cal sighed.

"Let's just get the ship ready for launch." He said, "I'm sure you'll be able to blow something up soon. I promise."

"I better."

The landing field was a very busy place when Cal brought the *Bright Hope* into land at the Republic's Green Zone on Tepillos. Crews were still unloading the large troop transports that had carried Colonel Jeck's force to Teras recently. For the time being at least the heavy ground vehicles were just being moved to one side and lined up, while the transport gunships were being readied for immediate use. The moment a ground crew stepped away and signalled that the vehicle was ready a squad of army troops would rush aboard as its flight crew powered up for launch.

"The colonel seems to be keeping his men busy doesn't he?" Lara said to Cal.

"Its what happens when you keep all those ground pounders cooped up on a ship for weeks on end."

Wedge replied before Cal could say anything, "They have to compensate for their inactivity by rushing about like insects."

"Well I think we should go and check in on the colonel himself." Cal said and he looked back into the ship, "Agent Raser? Are you coming to see the colonel with us?"

"Be right there." A woman's voice called out and then Agent Jule Raser of the sector rangers appeared behind Cal and Lara as she led four other sector rangers from the vessel. When she reached the base of the ramp she looked back at her men, "You guys head for the mess hall." She said, "I'll meet you there when I know what assignments I'm handing out."

Each of the sector rangers either nodded or otherwise indicated their compliance before heading off in a different direction while Jule accompanied Cal, Lara and Wedge towards the command centre.

They found Colonel Jeck busy administrating the deployment of his men as one junior officer after another brought him yet another report of an insurgent attack. However, the colonel's mood clearly lightened when he saw the newcomers.

"At last." He said, "Come and take a look at this." And he pointed to a wall dominated by a video display showing a map of the city. All over the map were tiny blue lights indicating the positions of the Republic Forces, a handful of yellow to indicate local law enforcement and a much larger number of red lights that represented reports of insurgent attacks. Thankfully the Green Zone, the area under direct Republic control seemed to have remained secure throughout this, with not a single red light inside the perimeter, "We're on the point of being completely overwhelmed." The colonel went on.

"The insurgents have a new source of weapons then?" Lara asked.

"No." the colonel replied, "Thankfully most of them aren't terribly well armed. The problem is the sheer quantity of the attacks, we're getting hundreds of reports of insurgents acting alone or in small groups."

"And you have to send full squads to deal with each." Cal interrupted, saying what both he and Wedge were thinking. However, as an enlisted man Wedge knew better than to try interrupting a colonel while he was giving a briefing.

"Precisely," Colonel Jeck said, "and to make matters worse the local police are doing everything they can to avoid getting involved. I've got more than a dozen in the stockade now for refusing point blank to patrol the streets. Two more under guard in the hospital after they drew weapons on my men."

While the others in the newly arrived group were focused on Colonel Jeck, Lara was inspecting the map and she noticed something that caught her interest.

"What are those?" she asked, pointing to several places on the map on the outskirts of the city where there were clusters of red dots, but so far no blue or yellow.

"She has a point colonel." Wedge agreed, "I don't see anything in those locations important enough for such a concerted effort by the insurgents."

"That's easy sergeant." Colonel Jeck replied, "We're also seeing a rather high number of red on red incidents."

"Red on red?" Lara repeated, "What does that mean?"

"It means the insurgents are shooting at one another." Cal said to her and she frowned.

"But why?" Lara asked.

"Its quite common." Wedge said, "Though extremists may all share a similar basic outlook, even the smallest differences between them are often cause for conflict."

"So we're supposed to believe that when the Republic's forces are suddenly weakened they react by attacking one another?"

"As much as it pains me to say it, my sister may have a point." Cal said, "And since so far you've been concentrating on responding to the attacks in the city centre colonel, I think that we ought to go and check out some of these incidents."

"As you wish." Colonel Jeck said, "Will you need anything?"

"Well a speeder would come in handy." Cal replied and Lara's face fell.

2.

The airspeeder came to halt, hovering in mid air above a residential street in a run down part of the outskirts of the city.

"Will this do sir?" the pilot asked, glancing back from his seat to where Cal and Lara stood looking down. "Just fine lieutenant." Cal replied, "When we've deployed I want you to circle and wait for us to call for pick up."

"What if you need support?" the pilot asked.

Cal drew his lightsaber and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he ignited it.

"I doubt that'll be necessary." He said and then he simply stepped out of the speeder and plummeted towards the ground.

Lara looked at the pilot as she also ignited her lightsaber.

"Just try not to get stolen." She said, "We can't afford it." And then she followed her brother out of the vehicle.

Using the Force to control their descent both Cal and Lara landed safe and upright and immediately held their lightsabers in front of them, ready for an ambush that never came as the airspeeder flew off and began to circle the area.

Fear.

Despite there being no attack made on the jedi, both could sense the unease in the residents of the street and it was easy to see why. Six vehicles had been reduced to burnt out wrecks here recently and windows all along the street looked to have been broken while most walls bore the marks of small arms fire. An apartment block towards the end of the street seemed to have come off worst in the recent fighting and it was from here that the greatest disturbance in the Force came.

Cal was the first to deactivate his weapon, though Lara kept hers turned on.

"I think its safe." He said.

"You're kidding." Lara replied, "All it takes is one sniper."

"I don't sense anything. Do you?"

"No, but-"

"Then its safe. Now shut off your lightsaber and lets go and see what happened down there." And Cal pointed to the apartment block, "Keep your lightsaber handy though. No sense in taking unnecessary chances."

As they approached the apartment block, Cal studied the damage pattern. It looked as if there had been a fire inside the building, started about half way up, though thankfully it did not look as though it had spread very far. Both jedi sensed that they were being watched as they approached the building, both from within the apartment block itself and the neighbouring buildings also. But each time they turned to look the hidden observers would retreat out of sight.

"Cal I've got a bad feeling about this." Lara said, flexing her grip on her lightsaber.

"I don't think they mean us any harm." Cal replied, "I still don't sense any anger or hatred towards us in particular."

"There's plenty of it about though." Lara commented.

"Yes there is and I think it's a good idea for us to find out why." Cal said and then he suddenly ground to a halt, "Ah." He said.

They had reached the gap between the apartment block and the neighbouring building, a path ran down this gap and lampposts were lined up along it. But it was what dangled from three of these lampposts that made both Cal and Lara stop and stare.

"Who do you suppose they were?" Lara said softly as she and Cal approached the gently swaying corpses.

"Obviously people not popular enough for anyone to want to cut them down." Cal replied as he climbed up the nearest lamppost that had been used as an improvised gallows, activated his lightsaber and sliced through the rope holding up the body, "Check him out," Cal said, jumping back down to the ground, "while I go cut down the other two."

All three bodies were human, but their pockets revealed few possessions and none that gave any clue to who they had been in life or why anyone would want to lynch them. However, when Cal leant closer and sniffed he smelt something familiar.

"Smoke." He said, "Not much, but these guys were definitely near a fire not long before they died. Which wasn't too long ago I'd say."

"I agree, a few hours at most." Lara replied.

Cal then looked up to the apartment window that was surrounded by the tell tale blackening left behind by the fire started within.

"So it's a fair bet that they lived up there." He said getting back to his feet, "So what do you say we go take a look?"

"What about them?" Lara asked, pointing to the bodies.

"Leave them here. If no one cared enough to cut them down then I doubt anyone cares enough to take the bodies."

Surprisingly the turbolift in the apartment block looked functional and knowing that they could always cut their way out with their lightsabers if the need arose Cal and Lara opted to take the easy way up to the burnt out apartment. As soon as they stepped out onto the landing it was obvious that they were in the right place. The smell of smoke still filled the corridor and that smell grew stronger as they headed towards the source. Occasionally they heard movement from inside other apartments, but no one opened their door to either ask why the Jedi were there or offer any answers about what had happened there.

The door to the burnt out apartment was wide open when the Jedi got there and they stood in the doorway and looked inside. The apartment seemed strangely empty, there not even being the charred remains of much in the way of furniture, but from this point it was easy to see that the worst of the damage was concentrated by the windows.

"Now that looks odd." Cal said as he carefully made his way through the gutted apartment, taking care not to tread on anything that looked like it could be evidence. He stooped in front of the window and looked at the heavily burned floor where he saw ashes scattered all around, as if someone had been burning paper here. Then he looked at the window itself and noticed something that was most definitely out of place, "Hey Lara come take a look at this." He said, waving his sister towards him.

"What is it?" Lara asked as she stood beside Cal, also looking at the smoke covered window.

"That." Cal said and he wiped his finger over the window in the corner, taking off just enough soot to uncover a logo that looked like an archaic warrior's shield, "This window's armoured."

Lara turned around and waved her hand towards the control panel for the front door. Despite the fire and smoke damage throughout the apartment the mechanism was still functional and the door instantly dropped shut with a heavy 'thud'. Once closed it was clear to see that the door had been reinforced against attack by having an additional layer of metal welded to the inside.

"Now that is interesting. Well done." Cal said and Lara smiled, "I'd say that whoever lived here, who I'm assuming were the three corpses we found outside, they were clearly concerned about their security." And then he turned around to look at the window again, but this time he looked upwards where he saw what looked like a ventilation grill about five centimetres wide and twenty long that had been pried off from the fire escape outside, "There's no way to open this window." He said.

"Pretty normal for an armoured window I'd say." Lara said.

"I know." Cal replied, "And I'm guessing that anyone else who tried to get in would realise it too. So given that the front door was armoured as well, that means the only way to get into the apartment without carrying out major building work was to make the people inside open the door for them."

"So they set fire to the place." Lara said.

"Exactly. They removed the vent and pushed burning paper through. The occupants couldn't get out onto the fire escape because the window wouldn't open and they couldn't smash their way out."

"Even if they did, whoever started the fire was out there." Lara added.

"Indeed. So that left only the front door which I notice no longer has a peep hole because of the metal plate stuck over it." Cal said.

"But when they opened the door they found that the pyromaniacs on the fire escape weren't the only ones trying to get in." His sister replied.

"And that," Cal said, "leaves only one question remaining."

"Which is?"

"Why the hell would someone go to the rather extreme length of risking burning down a n apartment block full of people just to get into this empty dump?"

A slight tremor in the Force revealed the presence of someone standing right outside the apartment door.

"Perhaps we could ask them." Lara commented and with another wave of her hand she opened the door,

"Can we help you?" she asked before even taking a good look at who was outside.

An elderly male human stepped into the apartment, supporting himself with a cane.

"My friend lived here." He said simply as he looked around the gutted apartment.

"You mean the men who were-" Cal began as he and Lara approached the man.

"No." he interrupted, shaking his head, "I mean the hard working man they murdered for this apartment. He always looked after it and now look what's become of it."

"Excuse me for asking," Lara said, "but who exactly are you?"

"My name is Devlan Keller," The man replied, "and I've lived at the end of the hall for over sixty years now. My friend Jarvo lived here for twenty."

"You say the men who were here when the fire started murdered him?" Cal asked, "When did this happen?"

"Oh, more than five years ago now. They shot him in the street and made sure that everybody knew they'd do the same to anyone who informed on them. They said they had friends in the police so the other residents were all too afraid to risk it. Me included I'm sorry to say. Jarvo was my friend for twenty years and I did nothing about his murder."

"So what did they want this place for?" Lara asked.

"Their little rebellion of course." Devlan replied, "They used this place to store weapons in. Pistols and rifles mainly. But they had at least one heavier machine gun."

"How do you know all this?" Cal asked.

"Because they never made any attempt to hide it. They'd march in and out at any hour of the day or night, openly carrying their weapons like they were daring us to go to the police."

"And nobody did anything for more than five years." Lara said.

"Of course not." Devlan replied, "We were scared of them. But at the same time their being here made us feel safer."

"How so?" Lara then asked.

"Because no one dared cause trouble with them here. They didn't want word of criminal activity bringing the Republic's troops here so they made sure the criminals stayed away. There hasn't been one murder in this neighbourhood since Jarvo's. Until today that is."

"That explains what the people who did this were after anyway." Cal said spreading his arms to indicate the damage done to the apartment, "They needed to get in to get at the guns."

"Well they got them alright." Devlan said, "I was just coming back from the store when I saw them on the fire escape outside, looking like they were trying to get in through the window. Then when I was waiting for the turbolift they dragged those men out and strung them up."

"In front of everybody?" Lara asked, "Did they say anything while they did it? Another warning about going to the authorities?"

Devlan shook his head.

"I don't think they cared. They just wanted the guns and were pretty annoyed when the men in here wouldn't just hand them over."

"Mister Keller, would you mind coming with us?" Cal asked, "I'd like you to speak to a friend of ours, a sector ranger. I think you be of great help to our work here."

"I take it that the speeder I can hear flying about outside is with you then?" Devlan asked.

"It is." Cal answered, "Going by air is the easiest way to travel."

"Fine, I'll come with you, but I want something in return."

"We're not in a position to offer much." Lara commented.

"Oh I don't want much, I just want to know that the Republic will look after the people here. I hate to think of what'll happen to us now that we don't have a bunch of killers to ward off trouble."

"I'm sure something can be worked out." Cal replied and from his pocket he took a short range point to point communicator, "Lieutenant we need a pick up." He said.

"Copy that. Where?" the pilot responded.

"There's an apartment block two hundred metres from where you dropped us. Land out front and we'll meet you there."

"Confirmed. ETA two minutes."

3.

The speeder was waiting when Cal and Lara emerged from the apartment building. Its pilot had brought it down to land in the middle of the street and was still at the controls, ready to take off in a hurry. As the two Jedi helped Devlan towards the vehicle another member of the crew rushed towards them, a blast rifle cradled in his arms.

"We're ready to go at any time." The man said, his voice raised over the sound of the speeder's engines. "Good." Cal replied, his voice also raised and then he pointed to Devlan, "This man is a witness and is coming with us, get him aboard."

"What about you?"

"There are three bodies over there." Cal replied, now pointing down the gap between buildings, "Lara and I will bring them to the speeder and then we can be leaving. Understood?"

"Understood." The crewman said and then he looked to Devlan, "This way sir." He added.

As the crewman now helped the old man towards the speeder Cal and Lara headed for where they had left the three bodies cut down from the lampposts. But when they were about half way there their attention was diverted by the sound of a repulsorlift engine and they span around just in time to see a landspeeder come racing down the street towards the Republic Army airspeeder.

Anger.

Hatred.

Sensing the hostility from the occupants of the oncoming vehicle both Cal and Lara drew and activated their lightsabers.

"Get down!" Cal yelled towards the crewman, but it was too late and from one of the speeder's windows the head and shoulders of a man appeared clutching a short-barrelled shotgun.

The weapon boomed as it fired towards the exposed crewman and Devlan. The spread of pellets caught both of them, knocking them to the ground.

"No!" Lara cried out and both she and Cal rushed towards the men.

"Go! Go!" Cal yelled, waving at the airspeeder's pilot and the vehicle rose up from the ground and banked sharply as the pilot sought to bring it around to face the landspeeder.

The crewman wore an armoured vest and it seemed that it had taken the brunt of the shotgun blast. As Cal and Lara watched they saw him roll over, pick up his blast rifle and fire a shot back at the landspeeder. On the other hand Devlan was not so lucky. Like the crewman the shotgun blast had caught him in the chest, but unlike the crewman Devlan wore no body armour and as Cal and Lara reached his side they found him staring upwards with lifeless eyes.

Without bothering to stand, the crewman fired again and there was an explosion as the energy bolt struck the landspeeder's engine. This was followed by a crash as the energy field keeping the vehicle aloft failed abruptly and it dropped to the ground and a screeching as its momentum continued to carry it forwards.

Somewhat dazed by the crash, the shotgun armed passenger staggered as he disembarked and fired again. Fortunately his co-ordination was sufficiently impaired that the shot went wide by a large margin.

Lara shut off her lightsaber and her hand went to her thigh where she carried a pulse-wave blaster in a low-slung holster. In a single movement she plucked the weapon from its holster and lined it up on the gunman.

She squeezed the trigger and the blaster kicked slightly as it fired. There was a distinct 'thud' as the projected spatial distortion struck the gunman in the centre of his chest and he was pushed backwards against the wrecked speeder before collapsing.

"Are you okay?" Cal asked the crewman as he helped him up.

"I'll be fine." The man wheezed, but Cal was not paying attention. A disturbance in the Force caused him to look around just in time to see another of the speeder's passengers pull himself from the wreckage, this time from the far side. Using the speeder as cover the man then turned towards the Jedi and the Republic soldier and lifted a belt fed slug thrower onto the vehicle's roof.

"Move!" Cal yelled and the trio began to run just as the insurgent opened fire, the sustained burst following close behind them.

Lara returned fire, holding her blaster out at arms length and not really looking at where she was firing.

However, her efforts to disrupt the gunman's attack were futile and the hail of projectiles ceased only when the trio made it around behind the apartment block.

"Gee," Lara said, "a grenade launcher sure would be useful right now don't you think?"

"Oh definitely." Cal replied, "Perhaps I should raise the issue with Master Karas next time we speak." And he returned his lightsaber to his belt and instead drew his own blaster before taking a quick look around the

corner, pulling his head back again quickly as the insurgent opened fire, "Okay this is the situation, we've got what looks like one man armed with an automatic weapon pointed his way."

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

"Easy. "Cal said, "We go another way. We just head around the building and outflank him."

"You'll need someone to draw his fire." The speeder crewman said.

"Are you up to it?" Cal asked and the man nodded.

"I'll be just fine. Trust me."

"Okay then, Lara let's go."

Cal and Lara moved quickly around the apartment block and as they ran they heard the occasional burst of slugthrower fire alternating with the unmistakable sound of a blast rifle firing as the soldier did his best to keep the insurgent focused on him. Cal took a quick look around the final corner to confirm that the insurgent was still positioned behind the wrecked speeder and this time there was no burst of gunfire in his direction. However, he did see that the speeder was still shielding the insurgent from the Jedi.

"Okay Lara," he said, "this is where you come in."

"Me?" Lara replied, "Why me?"

"Because you're the one who can cloud people's minds. I want you to put the whammy on him so we can get closer."

"How much closer?"

"Close enough to be able to take him alive."

"Right, okay. Well here goes." Lara said and she took a deep breath before focusing on the mind of the insurgent. Her task was made somewhat easier by the fact that his attention was focused on the Republic soldier who continued to fire the occasional single shot at him, so far without hitting him though the speeder had acquired several more smoking holes where the stabilised plasma bolts had punched through it. Despite this advantage Lara still trod carefully as she stepped out from behind the corner, not wanting to risk attracting his attention enough for him to be able to see through her ruse "Okay, come on." She whispered and Cal followed her just as cautiously.

The two Jedi kept their blasters aimed towards the insurgent as they made their way closer, ever alert for any signs that he had spotted them. But even as they reached the front of the apartment block there was no indication that he had noticed them at all. Lara halted here and keeping her eyes on the insurgents she whispered to Cal.

"This is it, I'll never get us any closer." She told him.

"It'll do." Cal said, "Get ready to run." And he raised his arm and held it out in the direction of the insurgent, but rather than focus on the man he focused on his weapon. Reaching out through the Force Cal took hold of the machine gun and called it towards him.

Startled, the insurgent tightened his grip and accidentally let off another burst that did nothing more than spray bullets across the front of the apartment block. But Cal's grip on the weapon through the Force was stronger and he easily ripped it free of the man's grasp, leaving it to fall to the road with a clatter.

Immediately the man was disarmed both Cal and Lara rushed at him, Cal leaping up onto the roof of the wrecked speeder while his sister went around it.

The insurgent turned to run, but both Jedi leapt at him simultaneously and tackled him to the ground.

Rage.

Hatred.

This close both Cal and Lara could easily sense the way in which the Dark Side flowed through the insurgent and as they took hold of his arms to prevent him escaping they looked at one another with worried expressions. Strangely the man stopped struggling almost immediately and instead went limp in their grip. Despite this however, neither Jedi relaxed just in case it was a trap.

"Call the speeder back!" Cal shouted, glancing over his shoulder to where the crewman was emerging from around the corner of the apartment block. In response the man nodded and Cal saw him activate his communicator, "We'll take him back to the Green Zone." Cal then said to Lara, "I want to find out what he knows." And then they looked up to see the airspeeder as it circled back around and descended to ground level again.

Jule Raser read the medical report from a datapad.

"Signs of long term malnourishment." She said, "In particular a deficiency in vitamin D. The others you say arrived in the speeder were the same, though not any of the corpses you found hanged. It looks like we're dealing with two distinct groups here."

"The malnourished ones may be part of the group that killed the others." Lara said.

Cal frowned and he looked at the wall-mounted monitor that showed an image of the insurgent sat in an interrogation cell, his wrists bound to the arms of his chair. Just like when he and Lara had taken hold of the man he appeared totally passive. Now that he studied the man, Cal could see how gaunt his appearance was and to hear that he was malnourished came as no surprise. But the vitamin deficiency was unusual.

"Did you say vitamin desh?" Cal asked.

"That's right." Jule replied, "Cresh and desh."

"But you can get vitamin desh from sunlight can't you?" Lara commented, "I mean sure maybe he's not had much in the way of decent food, but all he had to do was take a walk outside to get vitamin desh."

"Again correct." Jule said, "Though I must admit that I'm no medical officer, I'm just reading what the army doctors told me."

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Cal said, still watching the image of the man, "The Dark Side flows through him far too strongly."

"You think he's found something that corrupted him?" Lara asked.

"I think it's undeniable." Cal replied, "But how can it have remained hidden for so long without anyone finding out about it?"

"Do you think maybe it's related to his physical condition?" Lara then asked.

"I do." Cal answered, "So we need to go and speak to someone who's familiar with the medical problems around here."

4.

Neither Lynn Kerr or Jondo Veltros were natives of Tepillos and they were some of the small handful of people who had come to the planet by choice. Together the pair ran an aid agency that sought to provide assistance to the many locals who got caught up in the fighting between insurgents and the authorities or in one of the many turf wars between the rival groups. Sometimes this involved providing shelter to a family forced out of their home or distributing food supplies when local stores ran out, but it often involved providing medical help to those who could not reach a proper hospital. This gave them an insight into the medical conditions that commonly afflicted those who lived in the city.

"Hello Jondo." Cal said as he and Lara entered the lobby of the old hotel that the aid workers used as a headquarters. In its heyday the hotel had been a luxury establishment, but when the wealthy tourists it depended on stopped coming to Tepillos it rapidly fell into disuse and was abandoned by its owners. The expensive décor was faded now, but here and there traces of the building's original purpose remained. One example of this was the main desk that Jondo and Lynn still found to be useful as a point of contact with anyone who walked in through the front doors.

"Well hello there." Jondo replied, smiling when he saw the two jedi, "I hope you didn't leave your speeder outside again."

"We didn't bring one this time." Lara replied, "A gunship dropped us off a couple of blocks away."

"So what can I help you with this time?" Jondo asked.

"We're looking for information regarding the physical condition of the locals." Cal said and he produce his datapad and handed it to Jondo, "This guy was caught earlier today." He said, "He showing signs of malnutrition."

"Yeah, well unfortunately that's not too uncommon around here." Jondo said as he looked at the image and he shook his head, "I don't know this guy." He added.

"He had an odd vitamin deficiency." Lara said, "We'd like to know if-

"Vitamin desh by any chance?" Jondo asked and both Cal and Lara nodded, "Yeah I've seen that." Jondo added.

"But all they need to combat that is daylight." Lara said.

"Not quite true," Jondo replied, "but pretty close."

"So why would people not go out into the daylight?" Cal asked.

"Because they're scared." Jondo answered, "You've seen how it is around here. Some people just barricade themselves up inside their homes as much as they can, a lot don't have jobs to go to so nobody misses them. Then of course there are the underground groups."

"The insurgents you mean?" Lara asked.

"Sorry, poor choice of words." Jondo said, "I mean there are people who have resorted to living underground. Basements and sewers even. They just move about at night and scavenge whatever they can. I've seen a lot of them here and none of them were in good health. They tend to stay clear of the insurgents though, they're the ones who drove most of them underground in the first place."

"Revenge?" Lara said, looking at Cal.

"It's a good motive." Cal replied, "They killed insurgents for the weapons they needed." Then he looked at Jondo, "So where can we find these groups?" he asked.

Jondo shrugged.

"They tend to move around a lot." He told the jedi, "That's the nature of the way they live. When they've picked an area clean they go somewhere else. Its not like they have many belongings to carry."

Cal and Lara looked at one another again.

"Well we think that this guy was part of a group that had been close to something dangerous for quite some time." Cal said, "What happened to him couldn't have happened quickly."

"Then its unlikely he was one of them." Jondo replied, "He was more likely one of the shut ins."

"He wasn't alone." Lara added, "There were three more like him, all with the same vitamin deficiency."

Jondo sighed.

"Speak to Lynn." He said, "She talks to the people who come in far more than I do. I do deliveries and fund raising mainly She's back there doing inventory." And he pointed to a set of doors.

"Thanks." Cal replied and he and Lara headed through the doors.

The room beyond had at one time been used for staging large parties or conferences but now it was piled high with row upon row of boxes and bags containing emergency supplies.

"Lynn?" Cal called out, "Jondo said-

"I'm over here." Lynn Kerr responded as she stood up from behind a stack of boxes simply labelled 'FOOD', "So what brings you back here to Tepillos Jedi Udra? Have the Founding Families come up with another way to make the locals suffer?"

The Founding Families the descendants of the original explorers of the Narthis Sector who had since become incredibly wealthy. Lynn Kerr blamed them for the strife that had befallen Tepillos, even though they had nothing to do with it. In fact unknown to Lynn, Jondo secured a large portion of their funding from Vorn Torin the younger brother of the head of the Torin family and old classmate of Jondo's.

"Jondo said you might be able to help us locate a group of people." Cal said.

"We think they live underground." Lara added, "But they don't move about much."

"Then you're in the wrong place." Lynn replied, "Those sorts of people don't live here in the city."

"So where do they live?" Cal asked.

"Out in the hills." Lynn said, waving her arm in the rough direction of the hills that surrounded the city on two sides, "They're the families of the people who lived in the smaller settlements and farms when the civil war first started. Their homes were destroyed and the inhabitants of the city wouldn't have them here so they found other places to live."

"Such as?" Cal asked.

"Caves mostly." Lynn told him, "The hills are riddled with them. But there are a few old mine workings as well I think. The government flattened pretty much every structure for kilometres around the city when it suspected that the insurgents were hiding out in them. Then when the insurgents did come along they stole everything that the survivors had been able to save. As far as I know the Republic hasn't bothered to try and sort that mess out yet."

"Explains why they don't seem to like us either." Lara said to Cal.

"Do many of these people come here?" Cal said, holding out the datapad again, "Him for example?"

Lynn glanced at the image and shook her head.

"No. Only a handful come into the city. I've had a few come to us for medical help."

"Vitamin deficiency?" Lara asked.

"Amongst other things yes. But there are other issues as well. I don't think they have a single doctor out there."

"And do they ever mention where they live?" Cal then asked.

"No, never. These are people who've been attacked by pretty much everyone, government, insurgents, you name it."

"Searching all that territory is going to take forever." Lara said, looking at Cal again, "I mean if we use aircraft we'll just scare them away. Plus we'd need to be sure we got the right group of people. I'm guessing there's more than one, right?" and she turned her head towards Lynn who nodded in reply.

"You're ignoring something." Cal said to his sister.

"Really? What?"

Cal held up the datapad.

"We can just ask him."

"You think he'll answer?" Lara asked.

"I hope so. If he doesn't then we've got a big search ahead of us."

"He hasn't said a word." Jule said as once again she and the two Jedi observed the captured insurgent in the interrogation cell.

"We need his belongings tested." Cal said, "Those from his dead friends as well. We've information that they may come from outside of the city and I'm hoping that there'll be evidence of where he's from on his clothing."

"So what will you be doing while my people are running errands for you?"

"Cal thinks maybe he can get answers from the guy." Lara said.

"Be my guest." Jule replied.

Cal and Lara entered the interrogation cell together and looked at the captured insurgent. The man was still secured to his chair that in turn was fixed to the floor. Between him and the Jedi was a table and Cal and Lara sat in the chairs on the near side, facing the prisoner across the table. In response the man just stared back at them.

Hatred.

Anger.

The man's feelings were strong, almost overpowering but he remained motionless and made no effort to try and escape his bonds.

"So where are you from?" Cal asked, but the man just glared back at them.

"We know you're from outside the city." Lara added, "From one of the underground communities."

Surprise.

The man did not react visibly, but what Lara said had clearly gotten to him and Cal smiled.

"We're Jedi you know." He said, "You don't actually need to say anything for us to get information from you."

Fear.

Cal glanced at Lara and a smile appeared on his face.

"Looks like we've hit a nerve." He said.

"You know we could help the people you live with." Lara said to the insurgent, "We know you're short on supplies and a lot of you are sick. Tell us where to find them and we can see to it that relief supplies get to them."

Lara doubted that the man would just open up and tell her where he lived, but she hoped that it would make him think of the location and that either she or Cal would be able to pick up on it. Unfortunately the man reacted as if he had not heard a single word that she had said and he just glared towards Cal instead.

"This is getting us nowhere." Lara whispered to Cal.

Cal leaned forwards, resting his elbows on the table and he gazed into the man's eyes.

"You know that helping us means helping your own people as well." He said and Lara sensed him reaching out through the Force, trying to project the statement directly into the man's mind. Against most individuals it was an effective technique, but the Dark Side flowed through the insurgent so strongly that it blocked Cal's efforts entirely.

There was a knock at the door behind the Jedi and it slid open to reveal Colonel Jeck.

"May I have word with you both?" he asked.

"Of course." Cal said and then he looked back at the insurgent, "We'll pick this up later." He added before he and Lara got up to leave.

"Don't tell me you've found where he came from already." Lara said as the door closed behind them.

"No." the colonel replied, "But I wanted you to see this." And he led the two Jedi down the corridor to the briefing room where the display still showed the inside of the interrogation cell. Colonel Jeck approached the display and adjusted it to instead show a vehicle hangar. Inside the hangar bodies in bags were being unloaded from several gunships, "One of our checkpoints was attacked." The colonel explained, "The attackers were poorly armed, but had significant numbers. They set fire to the checkpoint structure and fired on my men as they evacuated."

"Were any of your men hurt?" Lara asked.

Colonel Jeck shook his head.

"They were well armed and armoured. They were able to hold their attackers back long enough for air support to arrive. The insurgents were driven off with heavy losses and we were able to secure the bodies. The fleeing insurgents made no effort to try and take the bodies with them or even wait for their injured to keep up."

"How considerate of them." Lara commented.

"So how come you wanted us to see this?" Cal asked.

"Take a look at this." The colonel replied and he handed Cal a datapad, "My men recorded images of every insurgent body they brought back. Does their general appearance look at all familiar?"

Cal looked at the datapad and scrolled through the images. Each one showed an individual that looked to be poorly fed and had a generally grimy appearance, just like the prisoner and the other who had been in the speeder with him.

"They were all like this?" Cal asked as he handed the datapad on to Lara for her to examine.

Colonel Jeck nodded.

"That's what my men said. They said that they acted with little or no concern for the safety of anyone, themselves included."

"Well I think that there's little doubt that these people were part of the same group as our prisoner." Cal said, "But I think we should make sure. Can you let Agent Raser's people have a look at the bodies?"

"I've already let her know." Colonel Jeck replied, "It was her that suggested I let you know right away."

"We've still not been able to nail down where they come from though." Lara said.

"Actually I'm starting to think that we may not need to know." Cal said, "If there are so many of them that seem to have been corrupted by the Dark Side then the problem could be widespread."

"Oh and that's good news is it?" Lara asked.

"It is from a certain point of view." Cal answered.

"Oh really?" Lara said, "What point of view is that then?"

"These don't seem like the sort of people to be living in one massive group." Colonel Jeck said, "If there are a lot of them then it figures that we don't need to worry about finding a particular underground settlement. Any would do."

"So how long until we get anything back from Jule?" Lara said.

"Someone call my name?" Jule said as she entered the room right on cue.

"My baby sister was just giving us another example of the impatience that the Jedi Council finds so annoying." Cal said and Lara frowned at his use of the word 'baby'.

"Well on this occasion there is no need for her to be impatient." Jule said and she walked over to where Colonel Jeck stood beside the display and produced a mem-stik that she plugged into a port on its side. Immediately the display changed to show the results of the initial analysis carried out on the insurgents' belongings, "We've not had chance to go over all of the soil scrapings we found," she explained, "but you can see here that we found something rather interesting amongst their actual possessions. Rutile. Quite a number had pendants made of the stuff." Jule then smiled and looked at the colonel and the two jedi, all of who stared back at her blankly.

"What's rutile?" Lara was the first to ask.

"It's a crystalline material made up mainly of titanium oxide with a few other elements thrown in." Jule said.

"And that helps us how?" Lara asked.

"There was a titanium mine outside of the city." Colonel Jeck said, "I saw it mentioned in a report when I first came here, but given that it was closed down and destroyed at the start of the civil war I didn't give it much thought. No point securing something that doesn't exist any more."

"Well it looks like someone's secured it." Jule said.

"Then that's where we start." Cal said and he turned to Colonel Jeck, "Colonel I'll need some men."

"You can have Sergeant Keltan's marines." The colonel replied, "You brought them here after all."

5.

The two gunships flew low over the uneven terrain, following the natural valleys that led all the way to the abandoned mine facility. Cal stood by the open door of one gunship and looked out.

"See anything interesting?" Wedge asked. As he and his men readied their equipment.

"Absolutely nothing." Cal responded, "I just hope that the noise of these speeders doesn't spook the people we're looking for."

"Coming up on the target zone now commander." The pilot interrupted.

"Thank you." Cal said, "Unless there's any signs of a threat I want you to halt above the area and wait while we disembark." Then he looked at Wedge and asked, "So how are your men at insertion by rope?"

"They'll do fine." Wedge answered.

Cal then activated his PTP link.

"Lara can you hear me?" he signalled to his sister on the second gunship.

"Loud and clear." Lara's voice replied, "Our pilot says we're nearly there."

"We are. Look, when we get there the gunships are going to hover while we disembark. You and I will go first and cover the marines. Got it?"

"Got it, we'll be getting shot at soonest."

"Exactly. Now get ready."

The two gunships came to a halt side by side over the ruined mine about ten metres off the ground and almost simultaneously Cal and Lara just jumped from the open doorways with their lightsabers active. As soon as they landed they spun around taking in as much of their surroundings as they could in a short space of time and came to a halt facing away from one another, protecting each other's back.

Syntherope lines then dropped from both gunships and armoured marines slid down them, sprinting away as quickly as they could to form a circle that had one of the Udras at opposite points. Then there was a roaring sound as the gunships moved off, gaining altitude and circling to provide cover should it be needed.

"Down and safe Jedi Udra." Wedge announced, "Awaiting instructions."

"Deploy around the mine." Cal ordered, "Lara and I will investigate. Be ready to follow us in if we call for you."

"Copy that Jedi Udra, we've got your back."

The remains of several buildings were clustered around the opening in the ground that was the entrance to the old titanium mine. At one time the entrance had been a properly reinforced square opening that had a monorail leading inside, but now all that was left of the monorail were a handful of corroded rail supports sticking out of the ground and the actual entrance looked to have been re-dug after the original had been collapsed.

"I don't sense anything." Lara said as she and Cal halted at the entrance to the mine.

"Me either." Cal replied, "And given how that insurgent reeked of the Dark Side I'm guessing that means there's no-one here. But we need to be sure." And he headed into the mine.

Cal had to shut off his lightsaber and crawl on his hands and knees to make it through the narrow passageway that someone had dug.

"Stang this is gross." Lara muttered as she followed behind him.

"It opens out ahead I think." Cal said and he held out his lightsaber in front of him and switched it back on so that its blade illuminated the tunnel ahead of him. Sure enough the narrow tunnel opened out into what looked to be an irregular cavern. Cal crawled onwards, taking care with his lightsaber now that it was active.

"This doesn't look like much." Lara said when she stood up beside Cal and they both looked around the cavern. A handful of simple hand tools lay rested against one wall, while tiny flecks of red in the dirt around the cavern exposed the presence of the rutile crystals.

"Someone's been working here though." Cal said, "In fact I'd say they're probably coming back and I'm thinking that we shouldn't be here when they arrive."

"What you think we can't handle them?"

"I'm pretty certain we could handle dozens of these people." Cal replied, "But I'm just worried they'll choose to just collapse the tunnel and bury us alive down here. We'll wait and watch from the outside."

"And then follow them back to where they're hiding out, right?" Lara interrupted.

The two Jedi and Wedge's marine unit spread out, forming a loose perimeter that while not intended to prevent anyone approaching the mine, made certain that anyone doing so would not go unobserved.

Meanwhile the two gunships adjusted their holding pattern to take them to a much higher altitude from where they could use their onboard sensors to sweep the area but would not be as easily visible to anyone on the ground.

"We've been here ages." Lara muttered as the sun was disappearing over the horizon and she pulled a ration bar from her tunic and began to attempt to unwrap it. She and Cal were positioned to the north of the mine, amongst several larger rocks that sat on top of what looked to be a rise formed from the spoil taken out of the mine when it had been fully operational.

"Think my young padawan." Cal replied, "We're waiting for people that as far as we know don't come out during the day much. Nighttime is when they'll come. Trust me, have I ever lied to you?"

"Yes." Lara replied as she continued to struggle with the packaging of the ration bar.

"When?"

"You told me that the temple refreshers were haunted by a Sith spectre and we had to take a bucket to class in case we needed to go."

"Oh come on, that was fourteen years ago." Cal said.

"It was my first day and everyone kept asking why I had a bucket Cal."

"Well I'm telling the truth now." Cal said, "So just be patient my young apprentice."

"Oh don't worry, I will be. If only to spite everyone who says I can't be." Lara said and at that moment she gave an extra hard tug on the ration bar pack and it split wide open, spilling the bar itself onto the ground, "Oh great." Lara said with a frown as she picked up the bar and shook bits of dirt from it, "Well there goes my dinner."

Both Jedi sensed the approach of someone from behind them and looking around they saw Wedge climbing up the side of the rise, keeping low.

"What is it?" Cal asked.

"My men have spotted a group of beings approaching from the east." Wedge explained, pointing past the Jedi, "They estimate a strength of about fifty or sixty."

"Armed?" Lara asked.

"A couple look to be, but only with primitive weaponry. Nothing my men can't handle even without your help. In fact I'm pretty sure you two could cut through the lot as well."

"Very well," Cal said, "get your men ready. Keep communications silent but be ready for my signal. For now we just observe. Understood?"

"Yes sir." Wedge replied, saluting. Then he looked at Lara and smiled, "Ah Lara, you Jedi really are mind readers aren't you?" he said, "I'm starving." And before either Cal or Lara could stop him Wedge reached out and took the ration bar from Lara.

"No wait—" Cal began but Wedge took a large bite and both Jedi just stared at him.

"Ugh." Wedge said, "I'd swear the makers of these things just stuff them with gravel." And then he took a second bite and headed back down the rise to pass Cal's orders on to his men.

In the poor light Cal and Lara relied on their acute senses as they looked eastwards and it was only a few minutes before the first of the approaching beings came into view and Lara gasped.

"Cal, is that what I think it is?"

Cal focused on the figure. It was humanoid with reddish skin and a muscular build, not as gaunt as those who followed it. But what was more interesting was what it carried and wore. The figure was clad in a suit of ornate armour that was decorated with spikes and serrated blades, with a brightly coloured plume sticking from its helmet. In one hand it held a long pole arm type weapon with an axe head at its tip and fixed in this blade were several disc shaped blades that could clearly be hurled at an opponent simply by swinging the weapon in an arc. The weapon was called a lanvarok and both Cal and Lara had seen examples of such weapons in the restricted part of the Jedi temple's museum. The weapon, like the ornate armour the figure wore was of Sith manufacture and dated back to the Great Hyperspace War of a thousand years ago.

"It's a zeltron." Cal said.

"A zeltron? But Cal look at it. Red skin, the armour, the weapon. I've seen enough images of massassi to—"

"Look more closely, focus on the face." Cal said, "A Sith would have facial tentacles and this guy doesn't."

"So where did he get the weapon and armour?" Lara asked.

"Well when we follow him back home perhaps we'll find out."

"I've got a bad feeling about this Cal. I mean people being corrupted by the Dark Side accidentally is one thing, but when they start dressing up like them and carrying their weapons about, that's when I start to think we're going to need help."

"Don't worry." Cal replied, "It's probably just a small settlement that stumbled across an old grave. It's not like we didn't know the Sith came here a thousand years ago. This gives us the opportunity to clean up some more of the mess they left behind them, that's all."

“Make that two graves.” Lara said as a second armoured figure came into view at the rear of the group. Though this one wore armour almost identical to the one leading the group the colour of its skin was well within human norms, if somewhat dirty. The jedi then watched as the two armoured figures took up a position outside the mine entrance while the others began to enter one at a time. “Looks like the midnight shift’s arrived then.” Cal said.

6.

Though Cal had been prepared for the beings working in the mine to remain underground until almost dawn, they in fact worked for less than two hours before they emerged in pairs carrying baskets filled with the red coloured rutile crystals piled up in them.

"Those guys work fast." Lara commented.

"Too fast." Cal replied, "My guess would be that there was a stockpile of the crystals near the mine entrance when it was sealed. They've probably just dug their way into it. Now let's get after them." And Cal plucked his PTP link from his belt, "Sergeant Keltan?" he signalled.

"Reading you Jedi Udra. Looks like our boys are moving out. You want us to go after them?"

"Affirmative Sergeant. Lara and I will take the lead; you and your men follow us and keep an eye out for any other groups closing in on us. Understood?"

"Copy that Jedi Udra. Observe and support, we'll follow your lead."

The Jedi gave the miners and their guards a chance to move off, tracking them through the Force. This was harder than normal, the Dark Side had clearly corrupted most or all them and it served to cloak them partially from the Jedi's abilities when they got beyond visual range. More easily perceptible were the marines trailing them who instead made use of advanced night vision equipment to search the darkness. They were led as far as a cliff face that had a single cave opening at ground level. The guards halted the rest of the group at the mouth of this cave and all them stood and waited in silence. After a short time a hunched and wiry figure emerged and the guards bowed to him. Then as the figure made his way through the group each pair also bowed as their basket of crystals was inspected.

"Stand to." The voice of one of the gunship pilots voice suddenly called out from Cal's PTP link, "we've got incoming."

"Where?" Cal demanded, lifting the device to his mouth.

"South east of your position. Three speeders heading in from the city."

"Stand to." Wedge added, "Take cover, but be ready to engage."

"Raiding parties returning?" Lara said, looking at Cal.

"Probably. Though its possible that one of the insurgent groups this lot have been hitting have beaten some answers out of one of them and are coming to take revenge."

"What if they are?" Lara then asked, "Who do we support?"

"None of them." Cal replied, "We order them all to stand down and take direct action against anyone who refuses. We do have air support after all."

The sound of repulsorlift engines then became audible, becoming louder as the speeders came closer and Cal and Lara saw the two armoured guards step away from the group they had escorted to the mine and stand ready for action. Clearly they had no way of being certain who was approaching either. However, when the speeders appeared they slowed down and made for the cave opening. Immediately the figure inspecting the loads of the mineworkers turned his attention to the speeders and made his way towards them as their occupants disembarked and began to unload their plunder.

At first they unloaded an assortment of small arms. Primarily these were slugthrowing weapons that Cal guessed had been seized from insurgents. But here and there amongst the haul of weapons he also spotted the occasion energy weapon, including a modern Republic-issue blast rifle and Cal got a nasty feeling that the trooper to whom it had been issued had met an unfortunate fate. Then the driver of one of the speeders handed something else to the figure inspecting the weapons, something small enough to be held in one hand and not easily seen from this distance.

"Is that a grenade?" Lara said.

"Sergeant Keltan can you make that out?" Cal asked via his PTP link.

"Can't tell from this angle." Wedge replied. The figure then took his attention away from whatever he was holding and began to look around, "Do you want us to move closer?"

Cal was about to tell Wedge and his men to hold their position when he saw the occupants of one of the speeders unload something else. A body.

The dead man was dressed in the regulation battle armour of a Republic soldier and when Cal looked back at the figure holding the mystery object he suddenly realise what it was and why has was now searching the surrounding area.

"Stang!" he exclaimed, "It's a PTP link. They've got our comms!" and he lifted his own PTP link back to his mouth, "Sergeant we've been made!" he snapped, "Enemy has our comms. Take them down."

Wedge sent no signal back to Cal, but a moment later there was the sharp 'crack' of a blast rifle being fired and an energy bolt took the figure holding the PTP link off his feet.

There was a saying that 'blast rifles only fire tracer' and although there was now no one listening in on the Republic force's wireless communications that single shot had given away the position of Wedge's marines and the beings around the speeders now turned their fury upon them.

Slugthrower fire boomed out in the night air, muzzle flashes lighting up the area around the cave as the insurgents opened fire on the marines who in turn returned fire with blast rifles. Cal spotted a pair marines break from behind cover and make a dash for a nearby dip that would offer them the opportunity to set up a cross fire, but one of the armoured guards took a single step forwards and held his lanvarok at arms length, swinging it in a horizontal arc. There was a flash of silver as one of the circular blades it carried shot out towards the marines. Had the guard been better trained in the use of the long obsolete weapon he would have likely tried to get the blade between the marine's chest armour and his helmet, decapitating him. But as it was his aim sent the disc low and the marine gave a howl of pain as it instead sliced into his leg and he stumbled and fell. His comrade opened fire, sending a burst of energy blasts towards the insurgents before reaching down to take hold of his fallen comrade to pull him towards the cover of the dip.

"Let's move!" Cal snapped and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated his lightsaber before leaping out into the open and rushing towards the insurgents ahead.

"Cal! Wait for me!" Lara called out after her brother, activating her own lightsaber and rushing after him.

The mineworkers had up until this point simply cowered behind their armed associates, but when one of them spotted the two charging jedi raised a hand to point at them and shouted out a single word in warning. "Jedi!"

The two armoured guards turned their attention away from the marines and faced the jedi instead and each of them let loose a spinning disc that headed towards Cal. Cal immediately realised that one of them was not going to hit him and so he focused all his attention on the other, raising his lightsaber so that its blade was in the path of the spinning disc and he sliced it in two, the two halves flying apart and passing harmlessly either side of his head.

"Cal look out!" Lara yelled from behind him and he suddenly became aware of a tidal wave of negative emotion heading towards him. Apparently so enraged by the very presence of the jedi, the unarmed mineworkers had got to their feet and were all rushing headlong towards them.

"Oh kriff." Cal said then he held out an arm with the palm of his hand towards them, "Jedi knight! Stay back!" he yelled.

Unfortunately the warning had no effect and a moment later Cal was forced to slash his lightsaber across the chest of a man who was about try and smash a rock against his head. The man let out a gasp as he died, unable to scream because of the damage done by the lightsaber to his chest but even his death did nothing to dissuade the other mineworkers.

"I don't think they care we're jedi!" Lara exclaimed as she joined the fray, taking an arm from a woman that tried to reach out and take hold of her neck.

"Oh I think they care." Cal replied, still swinging his lightsaber at the unarmed mob even as he tried to back away.

"Jedi Udra! The cave!" Wedge's transmitted warning gave Cal and Lara just enough notice to turn their heads in time to see the tide of figures come rushing from the cave.

Many held assorted improvised weapons while others wore the same sort ornate sith armour as the two guards from the mine and these charged straight towards the jedi. Others were unarmed however, and these headed for the speeders where they took hold of the first weapon they could get their hands on and turned them on the marines.

"There's too many of them!" Lara yelled.

"I know." Cal replied, "Do it!" and both he and Lara leapt straight up into the air, somersaulting backwards to land some distance from the mob, "Now run!" Cal shouted and they both dashed towards Wedge's position.

"We can't stay here." Wedge said as Cal and Lara slid to a halt beside him, "We can hold them back, but only so long as we have ammo."

"I realise that." Cal; replied, "Make the call."

"You heard the jedi!" Wedge yelled, "Take cover." And he activated the PTP link built into his armour.

The disciplined volleys of blast rifle fire kept many of the insurgents pinned near the landspeeders, but this did not seem to dissuade them from making repeated attempts to rush the marines. Of more concern to Cal and Lara however, was the general feeling that the Dark Side was steadily enveloping them as the mob that had rushed them began to spread itself out to try and surround them. If they succeeded the jedi knew that there would be no escape.

Then the sound of repulsorlifts filled the air once more. This time they came from above and were far more powerful than the landspeeders' engines. The powerful floodlights mounted on each of the gunships that had been circling overhead suddenly lit up the whole area and many of the insurgents screamed as they tried to shield their eyes, unused to such bright light.

"Down!" Cal shouted just as the gunships opened fire, sending high explosive rockets into the mob. The ground shook from the repeated impacts and clumps of dirt were hurled through the air to land all around the Jedi and the marines. This was followed by the roar of the gunships' engines as they swooped low over the area and their gunners opened fire on the surviving insurgents, the powerful energy weapons designed to destroy armoured ground vehicles making short work of infantry with little or no armour themselves. Then the shooting stopped and the sound of the repulsorlift engines began to fade as the gunships started to gain altitude once more following their run. Cal lifted his head to survey what was left of the battlefield. The oppressive coldness of the Dark Side was gone but Cal had to see for himself that the insurgents were defeated. Sure enough he could see only bodies wherever he looked, while the landspeeders that had brought the raiding parties back from the city were now just charred wrecks with not even enough left of them to keep burning.

"Are we done yet?" Lara asked, lifting her head also.

"Not quite." Cal replied as he got to his feet, "We need to secure whatever it was that corrupted all these people." Then he looked at Wedge, "Gather you men sergeant," he said, "we need to check out the cave." Cal and Lara advanced ahead of the marines as they headed for the cave, their lightsabers glowing brightly in the darkness.

"So what do you think we'll find in there?" Wedge asked.

"Cal thinks it's a grave." Lara said.

"It makes sense." Cal replied, "A tomb containing the remains of a Sith and his followers. There's probably a talisman of some sort in there that got to the unfortunate beings who chose this place to take shelter in."

The cave mouth was wide enough for Cal and Lara to enter together, walking side by side at arms length from one another. This continued for about ten metres before it opened out and both Jedi ground to a halt.

"Okay, not a tomb then." Cal said as he looked down into the massive cavern that was filled with free standing single level structures and ornate doorways set into the walls that were all examples of Sith architecture. All around the cavern he could see campfires and figures moving between the buildings.

"Cal I've got a bad feeling about this." Lara said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."