

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



II-IX: NECROPOLIS

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



ELEVEN FAMILIES.
TWELVE GENERATIONS.
ONE EVIL.

**ELEVEN FAMILIES.
TWELVE GENERATIONS.
ONE EVIL.**

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...

NECROPOLIS

THE DISCOVERY OF AN ANCIENT CITY HIDDEN BENEATH THE SURFACE OF TEPILLOS BRINGS A LARGE REPUBLIC FORCE TO INVESTIGATE. BUT IT ALSO ATTRACTS THE ATTENTION OF THE FOUNDING FAMILIES...

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

Star Wars is the intellectual property of Lucasfilm Ltd. This story is unofficial and Lucasfilm has not approved any of it.

1 .

Jedi Master Ben Karas ran into the room where the Jedi knights under his command were already present. "What's going on?" he demanded.

The assembled Jedi turned their attention away from the assorted images they were pouring over on the strategic display and it was the eldest of these that responded. Though older than Master Karas, Whillam Antess held only the rank of Jedi knight.

"The Udras have sent us these images master from Tepillos." He said.

"Let me see." Master Karas said and he looked at the display.

"These images were taken by a marine unit acting with the Udras master." The older Jedi explained.

"How did they come across them?"

"They supporting the Republic peacekeeping force there." The only woman amongst the Jedi said, "They report sensing the influence of the Dark Side on a section of the population that dwells beyond the capital city. They tracked them to this place."

Master Karas continued to study the images. They showed an entire settlement built underground and there was no doubt that the builders of this place had been either devotees of the Sith or the Sith themselves.

This raised an important issue for Master Karas and every Jedi in the room knew it. Ever since Cal and Lara Udra had been assigned to the nearby Narthis Sector he had been troubled by premonitions that their family would join with the Sith. His attempt to convince the council of this had fallen on deaf ears and he had been forced to resort to merely having the Udras watched as closely as was possible from the neighbouring sector. But an entire Sith city could be filled with artefacts imbued with the power of the Dark Side and the chance of the Udras getting hold of such power was too great for him to risk.

"We can't leave them to deal with this alone." Master Karas announced, "Gather your padawans we are heading for Tepillos, all of us. In the mean time contact Cal Udra and tell him not to go into the settlement until we arrive. And summon Sergeant Gall, tell him we will be taking Mister Nollar with us also."

"Lights." Keleen Delvad said as a knocking at her bedroom door awaked her. Then as she sat up, holding the bed sheets across her she turned her head and added, "Come in." The door opened to reveal a service droid standing in the hallway outside. "What is it Victor?" Keleen asked.

"Could you please come with me Miss Delvad?" the droid asked, "Master Erill and his son require your presence in the study urgently."

A puzzled frown appeared on Keleen's face and she got out of bed. After donning a robe and slippers she followed the droid through the mansion home of the Crassis family to the study where Erill Crassis himself along with his son Luke and daughter in law Salia were waiting.

"What's going on?" Keleen asked.

"Why does anything have to be going on?" Erill asked, his voice hoarse. Then he began to cough heavily. Luke stepped forwards and held out the mask from the oxygen cylinder that was beside Erill, but the old man waved him away, "Perhaps we just desired the pleasure of your company." He then said to Keleen.

"At three in the morning?" Salia commented.

"You should be in bed father." Luke said, "I can handle this."

"Perhaps, but I think it better that I am personally involved in something this serious. Don't you agree?"

"Of course father." Luke replied.

"So are you going to make me guess what's going on then?" Keleen asked.

"The Jedi have apparently uncovered the remains of a massive Sith settlement on Tepillos." Salia told her. Then she looked at her husband and father in law and added, "Well someone had to tell her."

"How massive?" Keleen asked as Luke handed her a datapad.

"Bigger than anything we've found intact so far." Erill wheezed.

"And it's not empty." Luke said, "It seems that some of the locals decided to take shelter there some time ago and came across something that has affected them."

"Affected? How?"

"By filling them with the energy of the Dark Side." Salia said, "And its scared the Jedi enough that there's a large force of them heading there now. A master, at least three or four knights plus padawans and freedom warriors. It is possible that there is a Dark Side nexus located there."

"I take this came from our friend on Moldas." Keleen said, still scrolling through images of the underground settlement.

"She's part of the force." Salia answered.

"We'd like you to accompany me there." Luke said, "We need to get first hand knowledge of this."

"Will it be just us?" Keleen asked, "Tepillos is dangerous."

"You'll have adequate security." Erill said, "Han has provided a protection detail for you and the others."
"Others?"

"You don't think that the other families are just going to sit back and watch do you?" Luke asked, "They're too worried we'll find something big and keep hold of it."

"That's why you and some of Han's people will be going." Erill said, "You can insure our impartiality. But Vorn Torin and Trent Narthis will be going as well. It seems that the other families are unable to spare anyone."

"Or unwilling to risk going to Tepillos." Salia added, "Or at least that was the impression I got from Lorna."

"How will we excuse being there?" Keleen asked, "People don't just visit Tepillos for fun."

"We'll be catching up with Doctor Larnson." Luke said, "It seems that the Jedi have asked him in as a consultant. Since you're footing the bill for his little expedition to Atch it seems reasonable that you should be able to find out why. Trent and Vorn will be delivering aid."

"Vorn's old school friend?" Keleen commented, knowing that one of the aid groups on Tepillos was run by a former classmate of Vorn Torin.

"One last thing my dear." Erill then said, "There will be a third party going, one that will be less obvious than yours or Trent and Vorn. She will take action against the Jedi if needed."

"She?" Keleen commented, "Let me guess. Belle."

The man had been strong. Drinto Huladra had not seen anyone hold out under torture like that for a long time. The man had been part of a group that had launched attacks on several insurgent groups in the capital city of Tepillos, Drinto's included. The origins of this group were a mystery to everyone and so when one of the raiding groups had been beaten off leaving an injured man behind Drinto wanted answers. But he had eventually broken when Drinto himself became involved. Drinto was one of the rare breed of stennes known as shifters. Some believed that stennes shifters were true shape shifters that evaded capture by altering their appearance, but in truth they merely manipulated the Force to help them blend into crowds to escape. To manipulate the Force in this way required them to drain it from nearby living beings, so when the man being tortured was holding out only because his body had become saturated by the Dark Side of the Force somehow he gave out as soon as Drinto was able to channel this power into himself.

"An entire city hidden underground?" he said to one of his associates.

"It seems that way. It certainly has focused the attention of the Jedi. Our people are telling us that they chased some of his friends out of the city and they haven't come back yet."

Drinto scowled. The Jedi Order had seen his people as a threat and driven them to near extinction. His motivation for getting involved with the insurgency on Tepillos was purely to cause trouble for them and their precious Republic.

"Find out more." He said, "This may be an opportunity to strike a blow against the Jedi and the Republic. We will liberate Tepillos."

Kraus Trevan had been a Jedi knight for many years and during that time he had become known in the order as an accomplished scholar. He had therefore been a logical choice to leave on the frontier world of Atch when it had become obvious that the research team needed help in studying the ruins of the ancient Sith ruled civilisation that had dominated the planet a thousand years earlier. When the Jedi assigned to watch over the Narthis Sector itself had sent word of the discovery of a previously unknown Sith settlement on the war torn world of Tepillos both he and Doctor Dayle Larnson had jumped at the opportunity to help unravel its mysteries.

As the pair strode down the access ramp of their ship they found Cal and Lara Udra waiting for them. The Udras were a brother and sister team. The older one, Cal was a Jedi knight while his younger sister Lara had been assigned as his padawan learner. Though Kraus bore neither of the young Jedi any ill will, Master Karas' warning was foremost in his mind now that they had found what could be a treasure trove of Dark Side artefacts. Any one of which could lead them down the path to the Dark Side.

"Kraus." Cal Udra said, walking up the ramp to meet the two men, "I'm so glad you're here. And you also of course Doctor Larnson."

"How could we stay away when your message seemed so urgent?" Kraus asked in reply.

"Plus the images you sent." Dayle added.

"Well you can thank the marines for those." Cal said, "Sergeant Keltan's troops were equipped with surveillance and recording gear."

"I don't mean to sound impatient," Kraus aid, "but I believe that you already have some artefacts in your possession. I'd like to see them."

"And I'd like to see this city." Dayle said.

"Of course." Cal replied and he turned to his sister at the bottom of the ramp, "Lara, take Kraus to see the stuff we took from those insurgents would you? I'm going to show Dayle the cave."

"Sure." Lara said with a smile, "Come on, we've got them stashed in the ship."

Kraus expected Lara to lead him to the *Bright Hope*, a delaya-class starship that had been assigned to the Udras. However, on this occasion she instead took him to a Republic gunship that lacked the ability to leave the atmosphere. The gunship had been landed and its crew currently stood guard. Lara led Kraus into the equipment hold towards the rear of the vehicle to where there was a secure locker.

"We stashed he stuff in here." Lara explained as she entered the code to unseal the locker, "We didn't want to take the chance on anyone getting their hands on anything dangerous."

"A sensible precaution." Kraus agreed, "There is enough danger in those with our training being exposed to such things without the inexperienced-" he then stopped speaking in mid sentence as Lara removed the first of the captured artefacts from the locker and handed it to him. It was a disc about ten centimetres across, the edge of which looked razor sharp. It had even sliced through the plastic bag used to store it in places. Kraus could not help but notice that one side was covered in blood.

"We took that out of a marine." Lara told him, "The insurgents were making use of what they found."

"A Lanvarok." Kraus exclaimed, his eyes widening as he examined it, "Did they just throw it? Or did they have-"

"One of these?" Lara interrupted and she produced a polearm type weapon from the locker. Mounted on one side of the axe head at its tip was a rack that held several more of the circular blades that had been secured in place with a length of tape wrapped around the head of the weapon.

"Remarkable." Kraus said, taking the weapon in one hand and staring at it, "Weapons such as these have not been made since the fall of the Sith Empire a millennium ago."

"Well it looks like there are still some outside of our archives." Lara said, "Though at least the Republic's weapons seem to be more than a match for antiques like that."

"Were these all that were found?" Kraus asked.

"No." Lara replied, "But they are what survived the gunship strike more of less intact. We've got bits of massassi armour as well. The first guy we saw wearing it was a zeltron and I almost freaked out, it was pretty dark so he looked really like a genuine Sith."

"I wouldn't worry about that padawan, the Sith species is all but extinct. Now all we have to deal with is their legacy. And now I would like to see this cavern for myself."

2.

Republic marines surrounded the cave entrance, though they were clearly not on alert and they barely reacted as Kraus and Lara made their way inside. Almost immediately Kraus felt a shiver go down his spine as he felt the unmistakable presence of the Dark Side. There were more marines inside, including their leader Wedge Keltan. The marines here had set up a heavy weapon that was directed into the cavern. Cal and Dayle were crouched beside the marine gun crew and Dayle was studying the settlement buildings.

"Have the occupants attempted to break out?" Kraus asked.

"Not yet." Wedge replied, "The blaster's just a precaution."

"We've only a few men," Cal added, "and even with you, me and Lara I doubt we could hold back a city full of fanatics."

"Especially if they've got any genuine Force users amongst them." Lara said.

"This place is amazing." Dayle said. He was the only one who looked at the city in terms of its historical significance rather than in terms of the danger it posed, "How soon can we go down for a closer look?"

"We should wait for Master Karas to arrive." Kraus said, "He will determine the correct course of action."

"Master Karas?" Lara said, "Why's he coming?"

"I sent for him." Cal said.

"But why? You know he can't stand us."

"We need help Lara." Cal replied, "There are three of us, plus a small marine force. I contacted the enclave on Moldas because I knew that Master Karas would come to investigate personally."

"And he is not coming alone." Kraus added, "I heard from him when we passed through the Crassis system. He is bringing a large force of both Jedi and freedom warriors. He takes this discovery most seriously."

The cave began to tremble and there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine from outside the cave.

"Sounds like they're here." Lara said.

"No." Cal replied, "It's too soon."

"Then perhaps we find out who it is." Kraus suggested, "If news of this place has spread then others may come in search of its treasures." And he reached for his lightsaber before marching out of the cave.

Surprised at this, Cal and Lara briefly glanced at one another before following the older Jedi knight.

"Hey what about me?" Dayle asked.

"Just keep looking down there." Wedge suggested, pointing into the settlement, "You can let me and my men know if you see a hoard of barbarians about to charge us while the Jedi are gone."

Outside the cave the marines were now ready for action. The arrival of the expensive looking transport ship had been unexpected but they were professional troops and they had taken up positions to cover the vessel as it set down beside the one that had just brought Dayle and Kraus.

"Did they identify themselves?" Cal asked as the Jedi rushed up to the marine position.

"No commander." The lead marine corporal replied, "Though we didn't try signalling either. I thought it better to try and remain hidden rather than give ourselves away with a transmission."

"An excellent idea." Kraus said, "Wait here and I will find out who our guests are."

Watched by Cal, Lara and the marines, Kraus approached the vessel as its engines slowly wound down.

There was a hiss and the transport's access ramp descended beneath it. A man and a woman then descended the ramp; both smartly dressed with four armed and armoured men following them. Kraus eyed the armed men, but sensed no hostility so left his lightsaber inactive for now.

"Hello." The smartly dressed man said to Kraus and the Jedi could feel the arrogance coming from him. This man was used to getting his own way, "I am Luke Crassis."

Kraus had heard the name before of course. It was difficult to spend any time in the Narthis sector without hearing it. However, Kraus had no intention of letting Luke feel superior.

"I'm sorry," he said, "am I supposed to know you?"

Anger.

The reaction was exactly what Kraus was looking for and it confirmed to him that Luke Crassis was not to be trusted with unrestricted access to the underground city. The Dark Side would find him an easy target.

"And what about you young lady?" Kraus asked, "Mister Crassis did not introduce you."

"Keleen, Keleen Delvad."

"Ah, of course." Kraus said, "Doctor Larson has spoken of you. Though I was not aware that you were in the sector. I thought you were based on Coruscant."

"I am normally." Keleen replied, "But after that recent business on Atch Erill Crassis invited me to stay for a while."

"Ah, an offer you could not refuse. But what brings you to Tepillos?"

"You do." Luke answered, "You've taken the lead researcher from a project we are financing and we're curious as to why you did it."

Deception.

Luke knew more than he was letting on and so did Keleen it seemed, years of experience had enabled Kraus to sense when people were holding back information as well as directly lying to him.

"And that required you to bring a force of armed soldiers?" he asked, looking around Keleen and Luke at their security detail.

"A man like me goes everywhere with protection and Tepillos is a dangerous world Jedi Trevan." Luke answered, "I think you'll find that Shill Security is fully licensed."

"Of course it is." Kraus replied, noting that he had not told either newcomer his name.

Jondo Veltros showed his pass to the guards at the perimeter gate and after a cursory inspection of his truck was waved through into the Green Zone. The change in the landscape was immediate and drastic. Instead of poorly maintained buildings and streets strewn with rubbish the Green Zone was well maintained, ironically this work was carried out mainly by locals who could perhaps have instead worked on cleaning up the rest of the city. Of course, the Republic had the money to pay workers while the local government did not.

He made his way to a nearby cantina, parked his truck outside and went in. as he entered the building he noticed that there were several armed men in uniforms that did not belong to any Republic or local government agency watching him and he knew that the man he was looking for was inside. At this hour there were only a handful of patrons and he quickly spotted the one he was looking for.

"Slumming it a bit aren't you Vorn?" he asked as he sat down at the same table as Vorn Torin and another man he had not met, but knew by reputation – Trent Narthis, direct descendant of Captain Jack Narthis, the man from who the sector took its name.

"We're here to see all the good works that are being done in my name." Vorn replied. Though he cared little about anyone but himself, Vorn allowed Jondo to use their past connection to help with his fundraising efforts.

"Perhaps you'd rather we'd just shown up at your headquarters." Trent said sternly, "We could have introduced ourselves to your lady friend."

Jondo's face fell.

"Don't even joke about that." He said. He was not being protective of the woman who he helped run their aid agency, but rather protecting himself. Lynn Kerr despised the Founding Families, wrongly holding them responsible for the fate that had befallen Tepillos and Jondo did his best to conceal how he raised money from her, "Now what do you want? Really."

"What are the Jedi up to?" Trent asked.

"How the hell should I know?"

"Because they visited you three days ago. We keep tabs on their whereabouts as best we can." Vorn said, "Now we know they've found something big outside the city and we need to know about it."

"Then I suggest you go and ask them, because what goes on outside the city stays there as far as I'm concerned."

"Others are taking care of that." Trent said, "We're here to see if any of the lowlifes you're giving a free ride to have said anything about them."

"Well not to me they haven't." Jondo replied, "Lynn handles most of the direct contact and she's not going to tell you."

"But she would tell you if you asked her." Trent said.

"Why should I risk that?" Jondo asked.

"Because if you don't then I'll take action to stop you mentioning my name to get doors and credit accounts to open for you." Vorn said, "See how much good you can do then."

"Plus I'm going to give you this for your trouble." Trent added and he slid a credit stick across the table towards Jondo, "There's a hundred thousand credits on there." He said, "What will that do for your operation?"

Jondo held up the credit stick and stared at it, trying to take in that he was holding the operating budget for almost six months in his hand.

"I'll ask." He said eventually, "But a hundred thousand?"

"It's nothing." Trent replied, "My wife can spend that before breakfast."

When Jondo left the cantina with the credit stick still firmly in his grip he failed to spot that in addition to the uniformed men he was also being watched by a hooded figure standing by a public comm. booth and as he got into his truck the figure stepped into the booth to place a call.

"Tell Drinto I may have a lead for him." he said.

Lara stood in the cave mouth, blocking Dayle from going back inside. It was not really him that she was concerned about, but the xenoarchaeologist wanted to show the cavern to both Keleen and Luke and that meant that their security detail would be going inside as well.

"I don't see what the problem is." Dayle said, "The cave structure is sound so there's no risk of a collapse and between their guards and your marines there's about as much chance of us being attacked by any of the people living in that city as there is of the roof falling in."

Lara then spotted Cal and Kraus approaching and she called out to them.

"Cal! Over here!" she shouted, waving.

"What's wrong?" Cal asked.

"Your apprentice is refusing us entry into the cave Jedi Udra." Luke replied, turning his head from Lara to Cal.

"As well she should." Kraus said, "It is a dangerous place to be."

"Well we've been here since yesterday and so far nothing's happened to anyone." Keleen said, "Doctor Larnson tells me its safe and since he works for us I suggest you let us in if you unless you want me to order him back to Atch."

Deception.

Cal sensed it as soon as Keleen made her threat.

"Do it." Cal said.

"What? Let them in?" Lara asked.

"No," Cal replied, "I wasn't talking to you." And he glared at Keleen, "Go on, order him back to Atch. Then you and the guy who tried to plant a tracking device on me the first time we met can go as well."

Surprise.

Clearly neither Keleen nor Luke had expected such a forceful response from any of the jedi.

"Or alternatively you can wait in your ship and the good doctor can bring you a report every day. Trust me, it's as close to going in that cave as your going to get. Unless you want to try forcing your way in." and he slid his robe aside and placed his hand on the hilt of his lightsaber.

The guards tensed and sensing this both Kraus and Lara also moved their hands to their lightsabers.

"Very well." Luke said, knowing that a direct confrontation was not in his interests at this time and the jedi relaxed, "Make sure not leave anything out." Luke then said to Dayle before he, Keleen and their bodyguards turned towards their ship.

"So why don't you want them in there?" Dayle said to Cal as they watched the group heading away from them.

"The city holds many potential dangers." Kraus said before Cal could answer, "It is best if we keep the numbers inside to a strict minimum."

"Plus I just don't like them." Cal then added and Lara smiled.

A starfighter suddenly shot silently overhead, trailed a few moments later by the roar of its engines. The compact vessel banked sharply and then turned back towards the cave mouth.

"Is he going to attack?" Dayle exclaimed as the fighter descended at high speed.

"No." Lara replied, "He's just showing off." And all of a sudden the fighter came to a complete halt, lowered its landing gear and came in to land. Before the engines had even completed their shutdown cycle the canopy opened and a man in jedi robes leapt from the cockpit, somersaulting through the air to land right in front of Cal, Lara and Kraus.

"Miss me?" Seth Ashran asked.

"Not particularly." Lara replied.

"Well then it's a good job I was talking to my old friend Kraus isn't it young lady?" Seth replied and he stepped forwards and shook Kraus' hand, "So what's going on around here?" he asked, "I was on my way back to Moldas when Master Karas just told me to come here without saying why."

"Then come and see for yourself." Kraus said and waved Seth towards the cave.

"That bare minimum just increased by one I see." Dayle commented right before a second vessel, this one a transport ship flew overhead towards the area that had become an impromptu landing zone.

"Actually I think it's about to get a whole lot bigger still." Lara said.

3.

The transport was much larger than either of the other starships landed close by and it bore the hallmarks of being a military vessel. It was of a class designed for use by the Republic's rapid response forces and was capable of carrying a sizeable force over interstellar distances in relatively short time. This particular example had never been in Republic service, instead it had been commissioned by the Jedi Order for deployment of its own forces and now it had brought them to Tepillos.

The Jedi had already begun to unload by the time Cal and Lara arrived to greet them. Master Karas himself was stood back from the unloading operation, dividing his attention between the unloading work and Keleen and Luke who were also taking an interest.

"You got here quickly." Lara said to Master Karas and Cal winced.

"Master." Master Karas said.

"Huh?" Lara replied.

Master Karas turned to face the Udras, focusing on Lara.

"Must we go through this again?" he asked, "You will address me as 'master' Padawan Udra." Then he looked at Cal, "It is your responsibility to teach her." He said.

"Of course master." Cal replied, "Thank you for coming so quickly. We really need your help on this one."

"I am glad that you asked for it Jedi Udra." Master Karas told him, "I hate to think of the consequences had you attempted to secure the site by yourself. Rest assured the resources I have brought with me will dramatically increase the odds of success."

"You're not kidding." Lara said as another squad of freedom warriors marched from the transport under the watchful eye of their leader. Then as Master Karas glared at her she belatedly added, "Master."

From another hatchway Lara spotted the Jedi themselves disembarking from the transport and she recognised all of them, both knights and Padawans. Lara was about to head over and greet the other Padawans when she felt a shudder down her spine and another figure appeared in the open hatchway, flanked by a pair of freedom warriors. Lara spun around to face Master Karas again.

"We are dealing with the legacy of the Sith." He said without prompting, "Hargood's strength could prove valuable."

"If you don't need us any further I'd like to bring Sergeant Keltan and his marines up to date." Cal said as he too watched Hargood Nollar disembarking from the transport.

Master Karas frowned briefly and then relaxed. He sensed that there was something more to Cal's motivation, but could not tell exactly what it was.

"Of course." He said and he turned away from the Udras.

Cal nodded at Lara and she followed him as he headed back towards the cave.

"Cal did you see that?" Lara asked when she was certain that they were out of earshot of Master Karas, "He brought Hargood."

Hargood Nollar had been a powerful Jedi knight until during the Sith War when he witnessed the followers of the Sith slaughter his family. Consumed with rage and hatred, Hargood slaughtered them all and was consumed by the Dark Side. Typically such fallen Jedi were exiled to remote places where they could cause no harm, but since Hargood retained his burning hatred of the Sith Master Karas sensed an opportunity for redemption and so instead kept him in custody at the enclave on Moldas. Occasionally, when the involvement of the Sith was suspected Hargood would be released and his impressive skills put to use. Of course he was returned to his prison as soon as the threat was eliminated.

"Yes I did see it." Cal replied, "Which means this place has got him spooked. Frankly I'm not surprised, it's got me spooked as well. Something in there corrupted a whole bunch of people and I won't be happy until it's either removed, destroyed or we call in an orbital strike and bury it under several thousand tonnes of rock for all time."

Freedom warrior Corporal Corlay Shill slipped away from the landing zone when no one was looking and headed towards the brief flash of light she had seen from the ship. It had come from a cluster of rocks at the crest of a nearby hill, but when Corlay got there she found the area deserted.

"Where the hell are you?" she muttered to herself.

"Looking for me?" a voice called out and she turned around to see a woman who had been able to sneak around behind her sat on one of the rocks. The woman smiled, "Hi sis."

"Belle what the hell are you playing at?" Corlay asked her older sister, "What if someone else had seen your little signal?"

"Then by the time they got here I'd be gone." Belle replied, "Now how about you tell me what the Jedi are planning."

"Master Karas wants to find out if there are any more ways into the cavern." Corlay answered, "Sergeant Gall's going to take a unit to scout around."

"Any of the Jedi going with them?"

Corlay shook her head.

"No. Master Karas is keeping them together. He wants to concentrate their strength. He's brought Nollar."

"Ah." Belle said, "That complicates things somewhat. He's strong. But at least your sergeant's unit will be without support."

"Are you going to attack it?"

"Of course not. I saw that fighter overhead and we aren't equipped to bring it down. If we try and take out a patrol at the wrong time Karas will have Ashran raining death down on us from the skies. We'll follow the patrol ourselves and let them lead us to any other entrances. Then we'll make it look like the insurgents attacked the freedom warriors left on watch and head inside without Karas knowing we're about. What's your comm. frequency?"

"I knew you'd ask that." Corlay replied and she tossed a point-to-point communicator to her older sister, "Its set and keyed in to our encryption."

"Very good." Belle said, smiling.

"So can I go now?" Corlay asked, "The longer I'm here the more likely I'll be missed."

"Of course." Belle replied. Then as Corlay was walking back towards the landing zone Belle called out after her, "And call Erin. She's your twin you should speak more often. Like me and Han."

"Whatever." Corlay muttered.

Returning to the landing zone Corlay ran into two more freedom warriors.

"Where've you been corp?" one of them asked.

"Shovel recce." Corlay responded.

"Why not just use the refreshers on the ship?" the other asked.

Corlay stopped and placed her finger on her rank markings.

"You see these?" she asked, "They mean you don't get to ask about my bathroom habits. Okay?" and then she stormed past them.

"So there have been no further attempts at assaulting our position?" Master Karas asked. The senior Jedi had gathered together all of the available Jedi and the leaders of both the marine detachment and freedom warrior force in the briefing chamber aboard the Jedi transport.

"No general." Wedge replied, "The occupants of the city tried to drive us off when we first arrived with Cal and Lara, but since then there hasn't been any activity at all."

"So either they're not ready to attack or they see no need to." A non-human voice growled, this was the Shistavanen wolfman Vrish Khal. A Jedi battle master his presence here was considered essential by Master Karas.

"Though in each case we have to ask 'why?'" Whillam responded, "What are they waiting for before they attack? Or why do they see no need to attack?"

Lara raised her hand.

"What is it padawan?" Master Karas asked.

"They're afraid because we beat them already master." She said.

"We've seen them moving about though." Cal said, looking at his sister, "They're not so afraid of us that they're trying to stay out of sight."

"What are we actually trying to achieve here?" a female Jedi knight asked. Karrie Tyran was primarily a negotiator and Cal was unsure why Master Karas had brought her along.

"We need to determine the source of the corruption and secure it." Master Karas responded, "And for that I propose two strategies that we will undertake simultaneously. Firstly you will approve the denizens of this place openly. It is possible that the corruption has not spread to them all and we may be able to negotiate with them. Should that fail a second unit will enter the city covertly and attempt to track the corruption to its source."

"I wonder who they've found to pull that off?" Lara whispered to Cal.

"Jedi Tyran, you will take a squad of freedom warriors with you just in case." Master Karas said, "In the mean time I want Jedi Udra and his padawan to seek out the source of the corruption." And Lara's face fell.

"Just us master?" Cal asked.

"Yes, just you two. You have been surveying the city for some time now and I want you to put that knowledge to use."

Cal looked at Lara.

"You had to bloody ask didn't you?" he muttered.

"While the two teams are inside the cavern the rest of us will remain here with Sergeant Keltan's marines stand watch at the cave entrance. I believe that our freedom warrior patrol has discovered several other potential routes in and out and guards have been posted at them all. Now are there any more questions? No? Good, then let us begin and may the Force be with us."

The meeting broke up with the Jedi leaving in various groups. Karrie however, remained behind.

"You have another question?" Master Karas asked.

"No Ben." She replied as she approached him, "I just wanted to thank you for letting me try and talk to these people."

"Be careful. I'd hate to lose you."

"Oh I'll be fine. I can take care of myself you know, especially with a squad of your soldiers at my back." And then she too left the room.

"You're taking a risk aren't you?" a shimmering figure said to Master Karas as it materialised beside him.

"Not really, Karrie was speaking the truth when she said that she could take care of herself."

"That's not what I mean my old padawan." The figure replied, "I'm talking about the Udras. I doubt I was the only one surprised that you chose them to go after the source of the corruption. What if this triggers their fall?"

The Udra family will serve the Sith.

The warning from his vision echoed in Master Karas' mind again.

"Then we are perfectly placed to deal with it immediately. I have a large force of both Jedi and freedom warriors and there are few innocent bystanders."

4.

By monitoring the signals of the freedom warriors Belle had tracked their progress easily. So when they discovered a cave that apparently offered an alternative point of entry to the underground city she had taken her men to investigate for herself.

Belle watched the squad of freedom warriors left on guard carefully. The small unit of men she had with her were the best Shill Security could offer, but she doubted that they could overpower all of the freedom warriors before one of them as able to get off a signal. If she was to gain access to the cavern without the Jedi finding out then either she had to be able to wipe out the freedom warriors before the alarm was raised, or alternatively she needed to draw them away from this entrance long enough to make use of it.

Looking around she selected two of her men.

“Corr, Shan, flank them. Stay out of sight until you reach that river. Make your way through the reeds and make as much noise as you can while staying low. When those guys come after you fall back.

Understood?”

The two men nodded once each.

“Good, then go.”

The two men moved off and Belle turned her attention back to the cluster of freedom warriors standing watch over the cave. It was not long until the sound of movement came from the river, a mix of the rustling of vegetation and the sloshing of water. Belle grinned. The effect on the freedom warriors was immediate. Alert and professional the nearest troops turned towards the noise, aiming their weapons. The squad leader moved from his central position to investigate, using wide scan binocs for a better view. Belle watched as he signalled to his men to follow him, advancing towards the nearby river and leaving only two on guard.

“Nice work lads.” Belle muttered and she reached for the pistol holstered beneath her shoulder. The weapon was a relatively primitive slug thrower, of a type available throughout the sector. But this particular example was fitted with a suppressor to mask the sound of its discharge. Levelling the pistol she aimed for the nearest freedom warrior and squeezed the trigger. The freedom warrior crumpled and collapsed, his comrade turned with his weapon at the ready as he searched for the source of the attack. Belle saw him reaching for his PTP link, but before he could alert the rest of the freedom warriors she fired a second shot and his head jerked backwards suddenly before he too fell.

“Okay boys,” Belle said as she returned her pistol to its holster, “let’s move. Quick and quiet. Make more noise than those bullets and I’ll take you out too.”

The remaining freedom warriors would undoubtedly discover the bodies of their comrades upon their return, but by using a slug thrower Belle hoped that suspicion would be cast on the inhabitants of the underground city and the presence of her unit would remain a secret. The unit moved quickly and quietly into the cave, alert for either more freedom warriors that they had not been aware of or any of the city’s inhabitants who may be waiting inside to ambush intruders. The way was clear however, meaning that the entire unit was able to enter the cave in secret and make their way deeper inside until it opened out into the cavern.

“This place is huge.” One of Belle’s commandoes exclaimed.

“Hence the word ‘city’.” Another responded.

“Pipe down.” Belle said sternly, “Now let’s see if we can figure out where this lot keep all their goodies.”

Having been told of the second entrance to the cave system by the prisoner, Drinto’s subordinate had wasted no time in despatching a small group of his best men to attempt to gain access to the underground city. But their efforts had been frustrated when they found the way already blocked by the unit of freedom warriors, so instead they settled down to observe the soldiers from a distance.

They saw the bulk of the unit leave to investigate a disturbance then watched as an unseen opponent swiftly dealt with the two remaining sentries. Then, after they saw the black-clad commando unit rush into the cave their leader put his viewer away and turned to his men.

“Now.” he said, “This is our chance.”

Fear.

Karrie could sense the apprehension of the city’s residents as she made her way through it accompanied by a squad of freedom warriors, even though they held their weapons low. Karrie was not surprised by their reaction however; from what she knew these people had come to this place to escape the persecution of the myriad of armed groups on this world and they could not be certain that her party was not just another

of them. She had no idea where to go of course. Her hope was that word of her presence would be passed to someone in a position of authority and they would come to her.

As it happened the welcoming committee that eventually came to meet her was not quite what she had hoped for.

At least twenty armed beings surrounded Karrie and the freedom warriors. She had no doubt that between them she and the soldiers would be able to deal with these individuals, armed as they were with long out of date weapons against the more modern pulse wave rifles of the freedom warriors. The worrying thing was that the weapons and armour the beings carried were clearly of Sith origin. Immediately the freedom warriors raised their weapons and the handful of locals who had been watching nervously turned and fled.

"Lower your weapons." Karrie ordered the freedom warriors.

"But commander-" the squad leader began.

"Now." Karrie interrupted, "Lower your weapons."

The squad leader nodded and the freedom warriors lowered their weapons but continued to eye the armed beings nervously.

"My name is Jedi knight Karrie Tyran." Karrie announced, "I have been sent here to speak with your leaders."

Cal and Lara made use of the blatant presence of Karrie and the freedom warriors to slip through the gloomy city streets un-noticed while the locals' attention was focused on the jedi peacemaker's party. The hoods of their robes were raised to cover their faces, not that they thought that any of the locals would recognise them but they did not have the same pallid and under nourished appearance as those who lived here. Like Karrie they began with no idea of the location of their destination, the source of the corruption. But unlike Karrie they could at least make use of their jedi sense to tell them. All they had to do was follow the source of the darkness in the Force that hung over the entire city.

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

"I know." Cal replied, "I've got it too. Don't worry; I think it's just an effect of the strength of the Dark Side here. Now let's keep going, Master Karas is relying on us."

"No, he's relying on Karrie – Does she seem over friendly with him by the way? We're just plan Besh. We're expendable."

"Well yes I suppose we are. But do you think anyone that's been corrupted by the Dark Side is just going to hand over whatever trinket caused it? Dark siders are known for –Wait, shush."

Cal and Lara halted as a woman carrying buckets of water with a yoke on her shoulders walked past them in the opposite direction, two young children following quietly behind her. While Cal turned away Lara initially watched the woman, the Dark Side seemed to swirl around her more than was normal even for this accursed place. But then she noticed that the coldness also came from the children, though not as strongly.

"Cal did you feel that?" Lara asked.

"What? The way the Dark Side was focused around her?"

"And her children."

"Yes I did and that's odd."

"Everything about this place is odd." Lara commented.

"Think about it Lara." Cal began, "Whatever is causing the corruption here is clearly something that everyone's exposed to. Now if it's some artefact or artefacts that were left behind by the Sith-"

"Like their weapons you mean?"

"Exactly. If it's something like that then you wouldn't expect everyone to be exposed to it would you? Dark siders aren't known for sharing out their treasure and children certainly wouldn't have access to their weapons."

"So what then?"

"I'm starting to think that we're not looking for a thing, but a location. Somewhere everyone could get to, perhaps without even knowing about it. It doesn't have to be a temple or anything like that."

"Hang on a moment." Lara said, halting again, "You're talking about a nexus, aren't you? A nexus of Dark Side energy."

"Perhaps. Though it may not be that strong." Cal replied, "This is a Sith city after all. Who knows what they got up to here, but it could have left all sorts of imprints on the Force."

"But I still don't see how the corruption could get to everyone. There'd be bound to be someone that never went to wherever the Dark Side was focused. How would they get exposed to it?"

"A good point little sister." Cal said, "So it has to be something that's mobile. Either by itself or carried by the general population. Wait, think about the woman that just went past."

"What about her?"

"Didn't you see the way the Dark Side was so strong around her? Stronger than anyone we've seen here so far?"

"Yes, so?"

"So what did she have with her?"

"You mean the younglings?"

"No, what was she carrying?"

"Just buckets. Buckets of-" and then Lara's eyes widened as she stared at Cal.

"Its in the water." Cal said.

"Nothing." Keelen signalled. She and Luke were sat beside an analysis computer, running tests on the data being sent to them by Belle's team in the city, "This midi-chlorian count is well within normal limits."

"Yeah, well so were the last four I sent you." Belle responded, "Now its not that I mind slitting a few throats so I can send you blood data to analyse, but I'd like to think that it's got a purpose to it."

"Look Belle," Luke said, "I think its obvious that these people aren't abnormally sensitive to the Force, so whatever's going on down there must be caused by something more tangible than the inhabitants' own fears. Find it."

"Care to draw me a map sonny boy?" Belle asked.

"I still think its environmental." Keelen said, "Can you get me samples of food and water?"

"Sure." Belle answered, "There's bound to be a take out around here somewhere."

Karrie was escorted into a building larger than most of the others in the city where she was confronted by a group of beings sat behind a long table. She noticed guards all around the edge of the room, all of whom wore ancient Sith armour that looked to be held in place with a mixture of animal hide and modern straps and here and there simple lengths of string.

Fear.

Hatred.

It was obvious that she was not welcome in the city, but at least these people had agreed to meet with her. A chair was positioned in front of the table and Karrie sat down.

"Say your piece outsider." An elderly feline alien said. Karrie studied the alien briefly, but was unable to identify its species exactly. Like everyone here it did not seem in the best of health.

"Something here is poisoning you." Karrie said, "We are here to help."

"Help? Hah!" this came from a hairless male human, "Your bring an army, kill our people and barricade us in down here and you claim to be here to help? We have seen your sort of help before outsider and that is what drove us down here to begin with."

Karrie paused. Negotiations were always easier if other jedi had not already decided that the solution to any particular problem was to start swinging a lightsaber.

"I assure you that we have acted only in self defence." Karrie replied, "Any violence is a result of tragic misunderstanding."

"I see." the feline said, "Now what is it that you are proposing to resolve this so called misunderstanding?"

"As I said," Karrie replied, "you are being poisoned down here. Help me find the source of this poison and it can be removed. Or if that is not possible we can relocate your people instead."

"Ah, there it is!" the bald man exclaimed, "You are here to loot our homes. Let me make this clear to you, this city is our home and we will protect it. If you think yourselves so strong then I suggest you bring your army down here and try and take it."

Anger.

It was not just the human speaking to her that Karrie could sense this from, almost all of the beings arrayed before her now seemed to be contemplating harming her. But Karrie was nothing if not persistent and she would continue to try and negotiate.

If all else failed there was still Cal and Lara after all.

5.

Water was running down several narrow channels in the cavern's wall where the rock had been worn away by the continuous flow over uncounted centuries. It then collected in a massive pit at the base of a near vertical rock face. A handful of burning torches had been set up near the lake, but even with the light cast by these reflecting off the surface the water was a body of cold blackness both to the eyes and also in the Force.

"Lots of tracks around the shore." Cal noted, "I'd say that this is where they get their water from."

"Cal I don't like this." Lara said, remaining further from the edge of the water than her brother.

"We need to check it out." He replied, producing a compact flashlight from his pocket, "Whatever is causing all this is in there somewhere and we're not going to find out what it is by sitting on the bank. Now you know the drill."

"Yeah, I know." Lara said as she slipped off her robe and began to remove her tunic.

Dressed only in their underwear and each clutching a flashlight the two jedi dived into the water. Their lightsabers would not function underwater so they were left concealed on the shore with the rest of their clothing. Lacking breathing apparatus, Cal and Lara initially remained near to the surface and shone their flashlights down. Cal caught a glimpse of something below him and signalled for Lara to return to the surface with him.

"Did you see that?" he asked as soon as they both broke the surface and were treading water.

"The flecks of white you mean?" Lara replied.

"Yes, I think there's something buried in the lakebed."

"Let guess, we need to check it out."

"Exactly. Think you can make it?"

"Easy." Lara said and the pair each took a deep breath and dived below the surface again.

Cal and Lara swam straight down, fighting their natural buoyancy to reach the layer of silt at the bottom of the lake and using their flashlights to illuminate the lakebed they wiped away the silt to reveal what lay beneath.

What they uncovered were the bones that had lain hidden there for a thousand years.

Lara gasped as she broke the surface once more, clutching a skull in her free hand. She swam towards the shore until the water was shallow enough for her to stand up and study the skull more closely. Humanoid, she was unable to identify the species but the large hole at the back indicated a cause of death. Hearing Cal surface behind her Lara looked around and saw him swim towards her before he too stood up and held out a handful of small bones.

"What are they?" she asked.

"Finger bones I think." Cal replied, "And a lot of them look broken."

"Not as bad as this I bet." Lara said, holding out the skull.

"No." Cal said, "Lara I think that these are the bones of the Sith who built this place. From the looks of these bones they were tortured before they died and then their bodies dumped in the lake. We know that as a species the Sith were Force sensitive so I think that all the fear, hate and anger at the time of their death polluted this place with the Dark Side."

"If all the bones were removed would that put an end to it?" Lara asked.

"I don't know." Cal replied, "That's for Master Karas to determine. Right now we just need to-" and he stopped speaking.

She will turn on you.

The sudden warning through the Force took Cal by surprise and he dropped the handful of bones he was holding.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked.

Suddenly Cal found himself elsewhere, a massive chamber filled with machinery. In it he saw himself, or rather an older man who looked similar to him and he was engaged in battle with a young blonde woman who looked very much like Lara dressed in black and wielding a red lightsaber.

Kill her first.

Cal snapped back to reality and realising that the Dark Side was trying to influence him he wrapped his arms around Lara and hugged her.

"I love you." He said.

"Huh?"

"I just want you to know that little sister."

"Err, right. But could you have waited a while longer? Its kind of creepy when we're standing here in our underwear."

"You want me to let you go?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay then." Cal said and he began to relax his grip.

"Actually I think you should stay like that a while longer." A voice called out and Cal and Lara looked around to see Drinto's men standing on the shore and aiming weapons at them.

"Oh kriff." Lara said.

"Find their gear." The leader of Drinto's men said to one of his subordinates.

"What?" the man replied, having been paying less attention to his leader than to Lara in her underwear.

"Well I doubt they came here like that." The leader said, "So find where they stashed the rest of their stuff."

"Would you believe we were mugged and this is all they left us with?" Cal asked.

"No."

"Oh well, worth a shot."

"No it wasn't." Lara muttered.

"Here!" the man searching for Cal and Lara's belongings called out as he found where they had concealed their possessions.

"Right then," the leader said and he produced a pair of plastic cable ties from his jacket pocket and handed them to another of his men, "Go tie them up." He said, "We'll take them back to Mister Drinto. He's eager to meet them."

The man waded into the water and pulled Cal and Lara apart before binding their wrists behind their backs.

"Hey boss," he called out as he stood in front of them once more, "are you sure we need to give them both to Mister Drinto?" and he glared at Lara, smiling in way that exposed the gaps between his badly discoloured teeth, "We could have fun with this one."

Anger.

Lara's disgust at the insurgent was suddenly overcome by a sense of foreboding as she realised that they were still standing in the Dark Side infused water and what she was sensing now was coming from her brother. Before his leader could respond the insurgent turned towards Cal and drew in breath to speak, but before he could utter a word Cal suddenly head butted him in the face. There was a 'crunch' from the man's nose and he fell backwards into the water.

Rage.

"Why you-" he cried out as he got back to his feet and drew a knife. But as he held it out towards Cal's throat there was a soft 'pop' and blood from the man's head sprayed across both Cal and Lara.

The other insurgents looked about, searching for their assailants. Movement attracted the attention of one of the insurgents and he fired a burst from his carbine, the gunshots echoing loudly against the nearby cavern wall. In return there was the dull 'thud's of pulse wave fire from out of the darkness. As the insurgent who had fired was thrown backwards by the salvo the others all fired seemingly at random into the darkness in desperation. The response was more pulse wave fire as the insurgents were cut down by much better aimed fire and after less than two minutes Cal and Lara suddenly found themselves standing alone in the lake with their hands bound behind their backs.

The line of burning torches disrupted the night vision equipment Belle was equipped with, but fortunately they provided enough light around the lake that she was able to make out Cal and Lara standing knee deep in the water of the lake.

"Your orders?" one of her men asked and Belle saw that he had his weapon lined up on the Jedi.

Belle paused for thought. She had intervened to prevent the insurgents from taking the Jedi back to their leader and perhaps giving him an edge on Tepillos. But although she now had an opportunity to eliminate the Jedi themselves she had no specific orders to do so. Besides there was no real way of keeping her involvement secret if she gave the order to take the shot. No one was going to care about the dead insurgents, but the deaths of Jedi would attract attention, especially if energy weapons the locals had no access to were used to kill them.

"Leave them." Belle ordered, "Come on, we've still got to find out the source of the Dark Side energy around here. I'm betting we'll find it in the heart of the city."

The sound of gunfire in the distance reached the council chamber.

"It's a trap!" the bald man yelled, leaping to his feet, "You were here talking peace and all the time your comrades were infiltrating our city to make war!" and with a wave of his hand he gave the signal for the guards to advance on Karrie.

The Jedi responded by jumping to her feet and drawing her lightsaber. She ignited the weapon just as one of the guards swung his pole arm, bisecting the shaft of the weapon.

"I'm not here to fight you," she said, "but I will defend myself."

Hearing the commotion the freedom warrior squad sent to guard Karrie burst into the chamber, knocking aside the guards by the doorway. The city leaders eyed the troops warily as they formed up behind the Jedi.

"This can still be resolved peacefully," Karrie said.

"I think not." The feline city leader said.

"Your orders?" the leader of the freedom warriors said to Karrie as he watched the nervous guards.

"Fall back." Karrie said.

"Would one of you guys like to come down here and untie us?" Cal called out, but not a single one of the freedom warriors that Cal expected to emerge appeared out of the darkness.

"Are they just going to leave us here like this?" Lara asked, then she looked into the darkness beyond the torch lit perimeter and yelled, "Come on guys this isn't funny."

"They're gone." Cal said, "I don't sense anyone out there."

"Oh come on," Lara replied, "how can you sense anything with the Dark Side clouding everything around here?"

"I can still sense you. But I suppose you are stood right next to me and you're my baby sister. How could I miss that?" and then Cal waded out of the water and towards where his and Lara's belongings were scattered about the body of a dead insurgent.

"Cal, what are you doing?" Lara asked as her brother crouched down and fumbled about behind his back.

"If no-one's coming to untie us then we need to do it ourselves." Cal replied, "Ah-ha. Got it." And he suddenly took his hands from behind his back, the plastic tie cut by his knife, "Now come and I'll cut you free."

Lara walked out of the lake and turned her back just long enough for Cal to cut her free, then she spun around and punched his arm.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Stop calling me your baby sister!" Lara snapped, "I'm not a baby."

Cal shook his head.

"I so wanted a dog." He muttered and Lara raised her fist again, "Okay I'm sorry!" he exclaimed, "Now find your PTP link and see if you can raise Master Karas and let him know what we've found here while I check these bodies."

"But Cal, he hates me."

"All the more reason for you to be the one bringing him good news." Cal replied.

Lara sighed and took her PTP link from amongst her belongings.

"Padawan Udra calling Master Karas, are you there master?"

"I'm here." Master Karas' voice responded, distorted slightly because of the amount of rock between him and Lara, "Go ahead Padawan."

"Cal and I have located the source of the corruption master." Lara said, "It's a lake about a thousand metres from the cavern entrance. The locals seem to draw their water from it."

"That's excellent Padawan Udra. Can you tell me the nature of the corruption?"

"Cal thinks it a psychic echo master. The lake is full of bones of dead Sith."

"Very well. Now I need you both to reinforce Jedi Tyran's unit immediately. Negotiations did not go well and they are under attack. They've attempted to withdraw, but are surrounded."

"Okay," Lara replied, "we'll be there as soon as we've had chance to put our clothes back on." And she spotted Cal suddenly place his head in his hands.

6.

"Excitable lot aren't they?" Belle commented. She and her commando unit were taking shelter in a building that had not seen use in centuries, but that offered a commanding view of the large central building in the city. This was where Belle expected to find whatever artefacts had been left behind when the Sith abandoned this place. But it appeared that they were not the only ones heading in that direction and she had watched several groups of beings rushing past, all armed with an assortment of primitive weapons. "I'd say they're mad at someone." One of the commandos replied. "We at least its not us." Belle said, "We'll wait for a gap and then follow them. Quietly."

Karrie steadied the injured freedom warrior against her. The man had a large wound on his side where a lanvarok blade had embedded itself just below his armour. In theory withdrawing from the city should have been easy. The freedom warriors' pulse wave weapons could easily blast large holes through stone walls with just a few shots to create an exit route, while grenades could be used to dispersed the ever growing mob now pursuing them. However, Karrie was unwilling to allow the use of explosives against what was a primarily civilian mob, no matter how far under the influence of the Dark Side they may be and with only the ammunition they could carry the freedom warriors could not use their energy weapons for both self defence and demolition work.

A crossbow bolt whizzed past her face to embed itself in the back of another freedom warrior. But it failed to penetrate his body armour and the soldier turned, fired a short burst from his rifle at the shooter on a nearby roof and then carried on moving as the group attempted to retrace its steps through the city. The narrow street they were moving down suddenly opened out into a square that Karrie recognised and the group came to a sudden halt, not because of the terrain but because of the mob of several hundred people standing before them.

"Lay down your weapons!" a voice called out from the mob and Karrie recognised it as the bald man from the council chamber.

"Not going to happen." The freedom warrior squad leader shouted back, then he glanced around and said, "Prepare to move back. I'll cover you."

"No corporal." Karrie said, "We can't-" and then she stopped speaking as she felt a tremor in the force.

All of a sudden two figures somersaulted overhead and landed in the square between the two groups.

There was a 'snap-hiss' and both Cal and Lara activated their lightsabers.

"Guards, attack!" the bald man yelled and a cluster of beings dressed in their piecemeal Sith armour rushed towards the jedi, hurling spinning lanvarok blades ahead of them while the rest of the crowd looked on.

Karrie set the injured soldier down against a wall and turned to the squad leader.

"Cover us corporal." She said, plucking her lightsaber from her belt, "Target immediate threats only." And then she charged into the fray herself.

The mob had charged past the building Belle so desperately wanted to get to and she discovered that it was all but deserted. But what had seemed to be a lucky break turned out to be nothing of the sort when neither she nor any of her commandoes were able to locate a single Sith artefact.

"Damn it!" she snapped as she activated her head mounted PTP link, "Keleen are you there?" she transmitted.

"Yes we're both here." Keleen responded, "What do you have."

"Kriff all. We're standing right where all the goodies should be and there isn't so much as a lucky necklace."

"Can you see anything that may be a trigger for a secret door?" Luke asked.

"That's why I was calling you." Belle answered, "I can't see any of the usual stuff. I was hoping Keleen would have some more ideas."

"Well I-" Keleen began to reply.

"Keleen are you still there?" Belle asked.

"Yes I'm here." Keleen said, "Belle you need to get out of there."

"What for? We're not done."

"Yes you are." Luke said, "we've just got word from your sister, "The jedi are moving into the city in force. All of them. Now get out before they find you there."

So far only the armoured guards had attacked and they were mercifully few enough in number that the trio of Jedi had no difficulty in holding them back. But all three knew that if the crowd charged as one they would be faced with the choice of either abandoning the freedom warriors or being overwhelmed.

Panic.

The sudden tremor spread throughout the crowd as in the distance explosions were heard. Cal recognised these immediately as coming from stun grenades and he realised that help was on its way. There were screams as the crowd was suddenly parted by a wave of Force energy and through the gap created Cal saw the form of Hargood Nollar striding forwards, Master Karas' padawan Keana and Seth Ashran behind him.

"You will not pass!" the bald man shouted and he stood in the gap facing the approaching Jedi, "This is our home and we will-" then he was abruptly cut off as Hargood raised his hand and lifted the man off the ground. He hung in the air, choking and clutching at his throat and Hargood glared at him.

Panic.

There were more screams as the crowd began to flee. Even the armoured guardsmen who now found themselves facing six Jedi instead of the one they had originally pursued here had second thoughts about continuing to fight and began to disengage. The Jedi let them go, they were a beaten foe and no good would come from chasing after them and risking running into another fearful mob. This left only the bald man, dangling in mid air and kicking wildly as he clawed at his throat.

"Let him go Hargood." Seth said sternly.

"The Sith and their spawn need to be dealt with." Hargood replied, "Permanently."

"You heard him." Cal said, advancing on Hargood with his lightsaber held ready, "Let him go."

Hargood scowled.

"Why should I listen to you? Master Karas has seen your-"

"Put him down!" Seth bellowed and he held his lightsaber to Hargood's throat.

"Hargood please!" Keana called out.

Hargood looked around, careful to keep his neck away from Seth's blade and he grinned at Keana.

"Well since you ask so nicely." He said and he released his grip on the man and let him drop to the ground, where he lay in a heap and gasped for air.

"Thank you." Karrie said to Seth, "You got here just in time I think. Now what's going on?"

"Master Karas and Sergeant Gall have taken the bulk of our forces to the lake." Seth replied.

"What lake?" Karrie asked.

"There's a lake at the edge of the cavern." Lara replied, "It's a mass grave for the Sith who lived here and the locals seem to be getting their water from it. It's what's corrupted them."

"What about the advanced unit of freedom warriors?" Cal asked.

"What advanced unit?" Seth responded.

"The lot that left us standing in the lake." Lara said.

"They took out a group of insurgents that ambushed, then just disappeared." Cal explained, "They were using pulse wave weapons, so they weren't local and they weren't marines either. They've got blast rifles."

"Well I was with Master Karas for the planning of this op," Seth said, "and neither he nor Sergeant Gall mentioned anything about an advanced group. Now look, I hate to change the subject but we should get moving. If that mob suddenly decides that odds of a hundred to one aren't that bad they may decide to come back and I don't fancy having to fight my way through them. Master Karas' orders are that we hook up with him at the lake."

"What about him?" Karrie asked, indicating the bald man who was still lay on the ground where he had fallen.

"Leave him." Seth said, "Master Karas isn't interested in the locals, just the source of the corruption. Hopefully once we've removed that these people will recover."

The mixed force of Jedi and freedom warriors began to make their way towards the lake. They followed behind Hargood who strode ahead of them, radiating his anger and both Cal and Seth kept a watchful eye on him.

"Hey Keana." Lara said as she moved closer to Master Karas' apprentice, "What was that Hargood was saying about Master Karas?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." the other padawan replied without looking at her.

Deception.

Lara was surprised, both by the fact that another Jedi had just lied to her and also that it was such a bare faced lie that Keana could not conceal it.

The panic caused by the sudden Jedi invasion had spread all around the city swiftly. Fear had driven people into the cavern to begin with and the steady influence of the Dark Side infused water supply had made this fear dominant in everything they did. Here and there individuals had instead come to rely on hatred or anger, but for the vast majority of the inhabitants of the ancient city all they could think of to do was run. This fitted perfectly with Master Karas' strategy however. All he was interested in doing was securing the lake and the fewer civilians his troops had to deal with the better. The liberal use of stun grenades and irritant gases had channelled them away from the advancing Jedi and opened a pathway through the city. But the fleeing civilians also benefited Belle and her commandoes. The fleeing civilians would keep on running, which meant that they would inevitably try to leave the cavern. Something Belle herself wished to do. However, the Republic forces watching the exits would inevitably notice a group of well-armed soldiers amongst the locals. Several well aimed volleys of pulse wave fire into a small group of fleeing locals was all it took to provide Belle's unit with all they needed to disguise themselves and in just a few minutes they too were rushing towards the nearest way out of the cavern, their rifles abandoned and more compact weapons concealed beneath their clothes.

Master Karas stood facing the lake, to his Jedi senses the water was nothing but blackness and he could feel the Dark Side reaching out to him. However, his will was strong enough that the lies and temptation whispered to him was easily ignored. Then he felt another coldness from behind him and he turned to see Hargood walking towards him.

"So this is it then?" the fallen Jedi said with contempt as he looked into the water, "A bunch of Sith get what they deserve and now we're cleaning up the mess."

"Perhaps you should consider this a lesson Hargood." Master Karas said.

"Are we back to this old man?" Hargood asked.

"We never get away from it." Master Karas replied.

"Master!" Keana called out as she approached Master Karas with Cal and Lara.

Master Karas smiled.

"Ah Keana my young padawan." He said, "And the Udras." He then added looking at Cal and Lara, "You two have done well, you are to be congratulated."

"What is your plan from here master?" Cal asked.

"We will drain this lake and remove every trace of the Sith from it." Master Karas answered.

"What about the beings who live here?" Cal then asked.

"What about them? The ground water flowing into this lake is devoid of contamination. We will set up a system to pipe the flow directly into the city so that when they return the inhabitants will have a clean water supply. I see no reason to drive them from their homes permanently. In fact they are probably safer down here, the limited access points will help the Republic peacekeepers keep insurgents out."

"So you're not worried about anything else the Sith left behind?" Keana asked and Master Karas shook his head.

"A few weapons and pieces of armour? No. We will collect what we can of course, but I see no threat."

Master Karas replied. Then he looked at Lara who had not yet spoken. She was standing further away from him with her arms folded and glaring at him, "You have something to say padawan?" he asked.

"No master." She said sternly and then she looked at Cal, "May I go now?" she asked, "I'm hungry."

"If you wish." Master Karas said before Cal could reply, "You are dismissed Padawan Udra."

Cal watched as his sister walked away and then he realised that Master Karas was now looking at him.

"Is something troubling you Jedi Udra?" he asked.

She will turn on you.

Kill her first.

"No master." Cal lied.