

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



CORRUPTION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



THE WAY TO A MAN'S SOUL
IS THROUGH HIS HEART

**TEN 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?

CORRUPTION

KYLE JENNER HAS BEEN THE JEDI KNIGHT ASSIGNED TO THE NARTHIS SECTOR FOR MANY YEARS AND WHEN A LEADING POLITICIAN IS MURDERED HIS HELP IS REQUESTED IN INVESTIGATING THE DEATH. BUT WHAT BEGINS AS A SIMPLE CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION TURNS INTO SOMETHING THAT THREATENS TO EXPOSE SECRETS KEPT SINCE THE SECTOR WAS FIRST SURVEYED AS WELL AS END A PROMISING CAREER...

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

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1.

Kyle Jenner's starsaber-class starfighter entered the atmosphere of Tepillos unchallenged. Of all the worlds of the Narthis Sector, where Kyle had been assigned to by the Jedi Order, Tepillos was the one most in need of his skills. Several decades earlier all government and order had broken down and now the only thing preventing the various rival insurgent gangs from running amok unchecked was the regiment of Republic troops stationed there as well as the presence of Kyle himself and his padawan apprentice, the sullustan Lom Des. The detection systems possessed by the Republic troops were limited, covering only the airspace around the walled off region of the planetary capital known as the Green Zone where the troops, as well as the Jedi and what little remained of the planetary government, were based. Therefore, it was only as his fighter approached this area that he heard from the ground controllers.

"Starsaber fighter, this is Republic ground control. Identify yourself." the controller signalled.

"Ground control this is Kyle Jenner on approach. Requesting clearance to enter Green Zone airspace and land at private pad." Kyle responded and there reply from the controller was immediate.

"Understood Jedi Jenner. Welcome back to Tepillos. You are cleared to land, Ground control out."

Kyle smiled. After a week long journey from the Jedi enclave on Moldas he was anxious to get out of the cockpit again. Being cooped up for so long in such a confining space was enough to tax even the patience of a Jedi knight.

The private landing pad that Kyle was heading for was the hangar built into the squat bunker-like building where he lived along with Lom and as he neared the building he sent the signal that triggered the rooftop hangar door to open, revealing a second starsaber-class fighter docked inside. This belonged to Lom, though it was no guarantee that the padawan would be at home to greet his master. There was another starfighter landed close by the building Kyle saw as he descended towards the hangar and he smiled again. The fighter was of Mandalorian design and although there was significant animosity between the Jedi Order and the Mandalorians' warrior culture Kyle knew who this particular craft belonged to and was not concerned about its presence. In fact it was a welcoming sight to him.

Kyle's fighter hovered above the open hangar roof momentarily as he confirmed that there were no obstructions that would prevent him landing safely before he set the ship down and powered down its systems. The starfighter's canopy opened with a 'hiss' at the same time Kyle was releasing his safety harness and as soon as he was free Kyle leapt into the air, performing a somersault before he landed upright on the floor beside the starfighter. Then with a wave of his hand to close the hangar door above him he headed for the smaller doorway that led to the rest of the residence.

Exiting the hangar, Kyle heard the distinctive buzzing of an active lightsaber and he walked towards the source of the sound. As expected, he found his padawan practising the moves of lightsaber fighting and unsurprisingly these moves were indicative of Form IV, also known as Ataru. This was an acrobatic fighting form that was well suited to combat in open spaces against opponents armed with ranged weaponry. On Tepillos this was a useful form given the insurgents' habit of striking from a distance and retreating. Few insurgents wanted to get close to Republic troops and even fewer wanted to get close to a Jedi.

"Master, I did not notice you there." the sullustan said, shutting off his lightsaber when he noticed Kyle watching him and the newly arrived Jedi knight sighed.

"Lom you should know by now that knowing what is going on in places other than right in front of your face is important in battle. It would not look good if your focus on the opponent right in front of your face was enough of a distraction to allow another to stab you in the back." Kyle admonished him.

"Yes master." Lom replied, nodding, "I will remember that."

"Very good. Now has much happened in my absence?" Kyle asked.

"No master." Lom answered before he looked towards the hallway that led to Kyle's bedroom, "But you have a visitor."

"Yes, I saw her ship on my approach." Kyle said, "Now continue your exercise while I go and greet our guest personally."

"Yes master." Lom responded even as Kyle was turning away.

The first thing Kyle saw in the narrow hallway was a pair of boots meant for feet much smaller than his own. These had been dropped one after another leading towards his room. After these came a flight suit, again obviously made for someone of a much smaller build than Kyle or his padawan. The trail of discarded clothing continued after this, a shirt, a pair of socks and finally a set of undergarments casually dropped right outside the door to Kyle's room.

"Hello Belle." Kyle said when the door opened and he saw the human female in waiting his bed.

"Hi Kyle." Belle replied as Kyle entered the room, closing the door behind him, "Did you miss me?"

"Of course I did." Kyle told her, sitting on the edge of the bed and leaning in to kiss her, "What about you?"

The question was a genuine one. Unlike most people who were not skilled in the Force and could not shield

their emotions, Belle's mind was strong and collected. Kyle rarely sensed anything from her and that degree of mystery had played a big role in his attraction to her.

"A whole month without you? It drove me crazy so I just had to be here to welcome you back in person." Belle said, "How was Moldas?"

"The same." Kyle said, "Master Karas still won't send more jedi to help deal with the problems on Tepillos."

"And what about you friend?" Belle said and Kyle sighed.

"Hargood is not the man he was." he replied, "Master Karas still believes that he can be saved but I'm not so sure. I think having his family slaughtered was too much and he is forever lost to the Dark Side. But frankly I'd rather not waste time talking about Moldas right now."

"Okay, how long do you have?" Belle asked.

"Long enough." Kyle said, removing the belt that held his pulse wave blaster and lightsaber. But as he and Belle embraced and kissed again there was a knock at the door.

"Master?" Lom's voice called out, "Master, Colonel Jeck wants to speak to you. He says it's urgent."

"Tell them to wait." Belle whispered into Kyle's ear.

"I can't." he replied, "Duty calls." and he stood back up again, looking down at Belle as she pouted.

"Well just remember that I'll be right here waiting for you." she said.

"I know." Kyle replied with a grin.

"That's a bit presumptuous isn't it?" Belle asked.

"Not really." Kyle answered, "You left all your clothes in the hall and I'm taking them with me. You'll have trouble getting back to your ship without them."

Belle watched as Kyle left the room, closing the door behind him and then she reached leaned over the side of the bed and reached underneath to where she had left a small shoulder bag. Opening this up exposed the selection of weapons that it held but rather than taking out one of these she rummaged through until she found her point to point communication link and holding the blankets across her chest, she held the device up to her mouth and activated it.

"It's me." she said into the device, "Kyle's back but he's been called to see Colonel Jeck. I don't know how much longer this will take."

Colonel Arion Jeck commanded the Republic troops stationed on Tepillos. In theory his men were supposed to be hunting down and dealing with the various insurgent groups that plagued the planet but given the continuing issues of crime and corruption in the local authorities his forces were instead being forced to act in a more mundane policing role and there were too few to make any real impact on the ongoing insurgency. But as it happened, that was not why the colonel had requested the presence of the jedi.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice." Colonel Jeck said, getting to his feet as Kyle and Lom were shown into his office, "I hope I wasn't interrupting anything important." and Kyle and Lom exchanged glances. "Not at all." Kyle lied, "Though I would appreciate it if you could explain what it is that requires the attention of the Jedi Order."

"A burglary." Colonel Jeck replied.

"Burglary is a matter for the local police." Lom pointed out.

"Yes, even if many of them are corrupt." Kyle added.

"Not this time Jedi Jenner." Colonel Jeck said and he handed Kyle a datapad, "I take it you are familiar with Congressman Noll?"

"Yes, he sits on Tepillos's high council." Kyle responded, "I've met him a few times and frankly I didn't like him. He's incompetent, lazy."

"And dead." Colonel Jeck interrupted, "Someone broke into his home sometime late yesterday and killed him. Several items appear to be missing so it could just be a break in gone wrong but at the same time I can't rule out the possibility that this was a targeted assassination. That's why I want you to look into it. My men are-"

"Overwhelmed. Yes I know." Kyle responded before the colonel could finish. Then as he studied the information on the datapad that listed what details were available he frowned, "The congressman did not live in the Green Zone?" he asked. This was unusual, most inhabitants of Tepillos who still retained at least a reasonable degree of wealth lived in the Green Zone where they were protected by armoured walls and Republic soldiers. It had been many years since a politician had run on a platform of being 'one of the people' on Tepillos and meant it.

"No. He maintained a residence quite some distance outside it. I've got a squad of men keeping it secure right now. Apparently the congressman had invested quite a bit in security features to keep people out but they obviously failed him on this occasion."

"I take it that the body has been removed?" Kyle commented and the colonel nodded.

"Yes, it's been brought back to the Green Zone for a post mortem examination. But the rest of his home is as it was found." he responded.

"Very well colonel, Lom and I will go and take a look. Though if it does turn out to be just a burglary gone

wrong then I'm afraid it'll have to be handed back over to your men."

There was a marked difference between the streets of the Green Zone and those outside it. Inside the Green Zone the roads were well maintained and pedestrians walked about calmly and without fear. But beyond the Green Zone it was a vastly different matter. The streets were in a poor state of repair thanks to damage inflicted by fighting between rival gangs combined with a lack of resources and the unwillingness of work crews to spend any serious amount of time out in the open where the locals hurried to their destinations as fast as they could to avoid being caught in the middle of an insurgent attack.

Travelling by speeder bike, it took only a few minutes from leaving the Green Zone through one of the well guarded gates to reaching the home of the late Congressman Noll. An armoured personnel carrier had been parked in the open gateway to limit access to the courtyard where a Republic gunship had been landed as well. Just as Colonel Jeck had told the two Jedi, the building looked to have been modified to improve its security. The wall and gate that surrounded it did not match the architecture of the building itself, being far more utilitarian than the more ornate building.

"Commander." one of the Republic troops standing guard said as the two Jedi halted their speeder bikes and climbed off them, "Colonel Jeck told us to expect you."

"Yes." Kyle responded, "Can you show me where-" and then he suddenly stopped talking as the moment he stepped across the threshold of the gateway he felt a shiver of coldness run down his spine.

Greed.

Fear.

Hatred.

Kyle reached for his lightsaber and turned his head as he tried to locate the source of the disturbance he had sensed in the Force but it quickly struck him that there was no single source, instead what he was feeling was the pervasive presence of the Dark Side all around him.

"Master, what's wrong?" Lom asked, the padawan also reaching for his lightsaber as the sentries tensed, believing that the Jedi had sensed an imminent attack.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this place." Kyle responded as he relaxed before looking down at the ground where he saw a dark stain, "Blood?" he commented.

"Yes sir." the sentry answered, "The forensics team didn't think that it belonged to the congressman though."

"His killer?" Lom suggested and the sentry nodded once.

"A sample has been sent back to the Green Zone for analysis." the soldier said.

"Good." Kyle said, "Now please show me where the body was found."

"Of course sir. Please follow me." the sentry replied.

As Kyle and Lom crossed the courtyard behind the soldier they looked around, studying the home of the dead congressman. The house was a two-storey building that surrounded the central courtyard on three sides and the upper storey was open to it, though there were shutters all around that could be sealed to protect the upper storey from the weather if needed. There was a dry pool and fountain in the centre of the courtyard and Kyle guessed that it had been many years since this purely decorative feature had held any water.

"Don't you feel that Lom?" Kyle asked softly as they were shown into the house and up the stairs to the upper storey. Glancing down at the floor, Kyle noticed that there were more splashes of blood leading back towards the gateway. Obviously someone had been injured upstairs and trailed blood all the way out of the gate.

"Feel what master?" his padawan replied.

"Never mind." Kyle answered, deciding that if his padawan was unable to sense the influence of the Dark Side then it must just be some faint residual echo from event long past – possibly even dating back to the initial governmental collapse.

"The killers seem to have gained entry by scaling the wall to the rear of the compound." the sentry explained on the way.

"Killers? More than one?" Kyle commented.

"We've found two different sets of tracks sir. They lead from the wall as if they climbed over and jumped down. But there's no sign of them going back that way." the soldier explained as he led the two Jedi around the walkway that overlooked the courtyard

"They could have opened the gate from the inside." Lom suggested and Kyle nodded.

"That would make sense." he said, "Easier than trying to lift anything stolen over the wall." then he looked at the soldier and added, "Do you know if anything was taken?"

"It looks that way. Several of the rooms have been rifled through. Not all of them though. It's as if-"

"As if the intruders panicked after killing the congressman and fled with what they had." Kyle finished for him.

"Yes sir." the soldier answered before he reached a doorway guarded by another soldier and stood back,

"This is it sir." he added.

"Thank you. You may return to your post." Kyle said and as he stepped through the doorway he felt another

shiver.

"I sense evil master." Lom said from behind him and Kyle looked down at the tape outline of a body on the floor along with the large dark stain of blood that looked to have come from the chest of the victim and then over his shoulder at his padawan.

"You think?" he said.

"Sorry master." Lom replied as he realised his mistake.

As he continued into the room Kyle ignored the spot where the body had been found to begin with, instead focusing on the rest of the room. It was obviously some sort of office and Kyle guessed that it was probably where Congressman Noll had carried out his government work while at home. The walls were covered with images of the congressman shaking hands with other people. Some of them Kyle recognised as other senior members of the Tepillos government but there were also others of individuals who were more well known throughout the Narthis Sector. Most prominent among these were several of the descendants of the original survey team that had chartered the sector for the Republic around three hundred years earlier. Most of the crew had remained in the sector where their families had become fabulously wealthy and were now known by the collective term the Founding Families. The sector's current representative in the Republic Senate, Airia Torin, was a member of one of these families, the cousin of its head and one of the images on the wall showed her with the late congressman.

"Looks like the congressman had some famous friends." Lom commented as he studied the faces in the images.

"In my experience most of these people probably hated him." Kyle replied, "These will have been taken for publicity purposes only."

"Could one of them have killed him?" Lom asked.

"In person? Unlikely." Kyle answered, "I doubt any of them would be willing to set foot outside the Green Zone without a military escort and committing a murder while watched by a squad of Republic soldiers wouldn't be a very good idea."

"The Founding Families have a private security force." Lom pointed out.

"I know. Remember that Belle works for it, she's Han Shill's twin after all. But taking out a two credit politician seems over the top for the Founding Families. If they really didn't like him then they'd just massive fund his opponents at the next election. No, I think that the killer was more local."

"Then it was a burglary gone wrong." Lom commented.

"I think so." Kyle replied as he approached a shelf that appeared to have been looted of what had been kept on it and he ran his fingers along it before he felt something similar to a sudden static shock.

Power.

Kyle shuddered. Something about this did not seem right. Everything pointed to a burglary that had gone wrong but there was something about this house and the congressman himself that intrigued the Jedi.

"Lom I want you to go back to Colonel Jeck and tell him that we will be investigating the congressman's death." Kyle said.

"But why master? This is not a matter for the Jedi Order." Lom pointed out.

"Perhaps not my young apprentice but I sense something deeper at work and I want to know what." Kyle told him, "Now go. Take my speeder bike."

"Yours master? Why?"

"Because Belle's clothes are in the storage compartment and after speaking with the colonel I want you to return them to her. She may not want to wait for me for the length of time I'll be here." Kyle replied.

2.

With Lom gone, Kyle began to search the rest of the house. Though Congressman Noll had lived here alone the building was designed to house a larger number of people in comfort and although the congressman had given several rooms over to his official duties there were still numerous bedrooms as well as a large living area. Just as the sentry had told Kyle, several of these appeared to have been disturbed. Cupboards and drawers had been opened, in some cases clearly forced and their contents scattered across the floor. But what Kyle was hunting for specifically was an undamaged computer terminal. There were several terminals scattered around the house, as was typical of a home this size but most had been torn free of their mountings in a manner that suggested the intruders had intended to come back and remove them had they not panicked after killing the congressman. Eventually though Kyle located a functional terminal in an undisturbed room and he switched it on, sitting down in front of it.

The terminal was connected to the household network but not protected by any form of access code or key, allowing Kyle to explore the contents of the network. There were some areas of this that the congressman had protected but for now Kyle was not concerned about these. He doubted that what he was looking for would be something the congressman would need to limit access to. After a few minutes of general exploration, Kyle determined that what he was looking for was not in an obvious location and so instead he ran a search for image files and began to read through the titles given to them to try and find what he wanted.

There were several images that included the word 'office' in their title and Kyle started with these, opening up each one in turn. As he hoped they had been taken inside the office that Congressman Noll had set up here in his home, possibly for use in publicity material and they showed the late congressman posed as if he was hard at work. What Kyle was interested in though was what could be seen in the background of the images and he selected one that had been taken so that the ransacked shelf could be seen. Or more importantly its contents.

Kyle zoomed in on this, focusing on the section of the shelf where he had sensed a disturbance in the Force and he saw what looked to be an antique medallion of some sort inside a transparent display case. Though much of the medallion appeared to be metallic there were several crystals set into it in a pattern that Kyle did not recognise as being significant. The way in which it was displayed suggested that it was some sort of minor trophy that the congressman had been awarded at some point in his life but such an item would be unlikely to resonate with the Force in the way Kyle had sensed. Reaching into his robes, Kyle produced his datapad and connected it to the terminal's interface before he copied the image from the computer network to the datapad.

Now that he had an idea of what he was looking for Kyle had no reason to remain at the house and he headed for Lom's speeder bike that was still parked just outside the gate, pausing just long enough to scrape a sample of the blood trail up for his own use before continuing on his way. Once again he sensed an odd sensation through the Force as he stepped across the threshold but this time he ignored it.

"All done sir?" one of the sentries asked as Kyle mounted the speeder bike.

"For now yes." Kyle replied, "Keep the location secure though and I'd be grateful if you could tell Colonel Jeck that I'd like the results of Congressman Noll's autopsy sent to me at home.

"Yes sir." the sentry replied over the sound of the speeder bike's repulsorlift engine starting up. Then Kyle turned the lightweight vehicle on the spot and accelerated away.

Kyle did not head back towards the Green Zone. The information he now sought was far more likely to be obtained out here in the rest of the city where the ability of the government to maintain law and order was more limited and it was easier to get in touch with those who lived outside the law.

The exterior of the cantina that was Kyle's destination bore the marks of battle damage in the form of carbon scoring, bullet holes and boarded up windows that the owner had never bothered to repair. Beside the building was a row of vehicles that was watched over by a pair of muscular beings, each one obviously armed. This was not unusual for this area of the city. Any vehicle left on the street unattended was a target for thieves or vandals and by providing security for them, the cantina's owner allowed customers to enter his establishment with reasonable belief that their vehicles would still be waiting for them intact when they exited again. Kyle pulled the speeder bike up at the end of the row and climbed off, tossing a coin towards one of the guards as he headed inside the cantina.

Inside the cantina was gloomy, with the illumination coming from numerous small lamps placed on tables and above the bar, several of which were not functioning. This made it harder to pick out the facial features of the customers but to many of them this was an advantage and from the looks of things the lack of light was doing the cantina's business no harm.

The individual that Kyle was looking for was sat at the far end of the cantina playing sabacc with three others

and as Kyle walked towards them he saw that her stack of credit chips was easily the largest of the four. This was not surprising to Kyle. The woman's red skin identified her as a zeltron, a near human species that could produce pheromones to affect the mood of those around them while having just enough empathic ability to pick up on when someone was confident in their hand of cards. Added to this their ability to process minor toxins such as alcohol was massively increased thanks to their second liver. Anyone at all familiar with the species would have refused to gamble with one so Kyle guessed that none of the others around the table knew enough to realise that they were being conned.

"Kassa." Kyle said, looking down at the zeltron woman and she looked back up and smiled.

"Hi Kyle." she responded, "I'm a little busy right now but-

"Yes so I see." Kyle interrupted, "It must be a relief to find opponents who-

"Whoa!" Kassa exclaimed suddenly, "Is that the time?" and she looked around the table, "Sorry guys but I forgot about my appointment with my good friend Kyle here. I'm afraid I'll have to let you all keep the rest of your money." Then she swept up all of her winnings and got up from the table before walking away with Kyle, "What's the big idea?" she hissed, "I was just about to-

"You were just about to cheat three individuals who through a combination of intoxication and ignorance you had tricked into playing sabacc with you." Kyle said before she could finish.

"So what? I do that all the time." Kassa responded as they sat down at another table, this one at the edge of the cantina and lacking a working lamp. The shadows were better suited for what they had to discuss.

"So I need your help and I won't be a party to your tricks Kassa." Kyle told her.

"Unless they benefit you huh?"

"What I asked of you is in the public good."

"I hope you're not about to suggest I should help you for free Kyle. You know I don't pay any taxes so it's not like I can claim my services to you back as a charitable donation." Kassa said.

Kyle slid a handful of banknotes across the table and as Kassa scooped them up he placed his datapad down in front of her.

"I need to locate these items." he said and Kassa looked at the display where she saw some of the items taken from the shelf in Congressman Noll's office, the medallion and case in the centre.

"Shopping for a birthday present for the blonde you spend so much time hanging around with?" Kassa asked.

"These items were stolen yesterday." Kyle told her.

"Ah, so you need me to find the fence that has them. Could be difficult, there are a lot of fences in the city."

"But how many will buy items stolen from a congressman who was killed during the break in?" Kyle asked and Kassa's eyes widened.

"Ah. That would make them harder to move." she replied, "Unless the items had been stolen to order of course."

"I couldn't say." Kyle said, "But as far as I know the items were taken because they were on display and easy to reach. Now how long before you can give me an answer?"

"Well most fences wouldn't touch stuff associated with a murder. Too much chance of someone like you turning up at their door." Kassa said. Then she frowned, "Hey hang on a moment. If this was just some burglary then why are you interested in it? Surely there are bigger mynockes to blast than a simple breaking and entering. Even if some government type did get himself killed in the process." then the frown became a smile, "He was on the take wasn't he? Something about what was taken will lead you to whoever was in league with him. Am I right?"

"There's never any hiding anything from you is there?" Kyle asked in reply. Explaining that he was trying to track down something on the basis of a feeling caused by a disturbance in the Force so minor that his own padawan had not sensed it risked not only opening himself up to ridicule but also that Kassa would increase the price of her help.

"Glad we're on the same page." Kassa said as she took out her own datapad, "Send me that image and I'll start asking around."

"Ah, I knew I could count on you Kassa." Kyle replied as he transferred the image to the infomerchant's datapad, "Now I'll leave you to get started. When you've found what I'm looking for contact me or Lom."

"Lom? So you won't be waiting at home then?" Kassa asked.

"No." Kyle told her, "There's another lead I need to follow up first."

The building Kyle headed for next was yet another on Tepillos that had seen better days. Before the collapse of the planetary government it had been a luxury hotel but with the start of the fighting the flow of wealthy tourists had ground to a halt and the hotel had rapidly gone out of business. Since then it had been put to use by a pair of individuals who were among those trying to make life better for the inhabitants of the planet. Jondo Veltros and Lynn Kerr ran a charity that provided emergency aid to the people of the war-torn planet. Operating outside the Green Zone meant that they were risking their lives if they angered any of the local insurgent or underworld groups and the only way they were able to keep operating was to make sure that

their presence benefited everyone, including all of the outlaw groups. The easiest way for them to demonstrate their usefulness was to never refuse treatment to anyone and not to report any suspect injuries such as those associated with insurgent activity to the government unless the patient specifically asked them to. This meant that to someone who had injured themselves during a burglary the two aid workers were an obvious source of medical treatment.

Kyle left the speeder bike in the secure parking area behind the hotel where Jondo's repulsortruck was also parked before he leapt over the fence around it and headed around to the front entrance of the hotel.

Entering the building, Kyle found himself facing a large crowd of people of various species who were queuing for their share of a shipment of food aid that Jondo was distributing.

"One each." Jondo was saying to a woman who had just attempted to take an armful of the packages.

"But I need-" the woman responded angrily.

"Everyone here needs more." Jondo interrupted, "But this is all we have so it's one each. If you don't like that then don't take any and don't come back."

Kyle walked along the line, heading straight for Jondo.

"Hey mister! Get to the back of the line." someone in the queue yelled at him and Kyle just brushed aside his cloak to reveal the pulse wave blaster holstered on his hip as he continued on his way.

"Jondo." he said to the man handing out aid when he reached the front of the line, watched nervously by the people waiting for aid.

"Kyle." Jondo replied, "I'm somewhat busy right now. What brings you here?"

"Is Lynn around?" Kyle asked.

"In the clinic." Jondo replied, nodding, "She's with someone right now but she should be able to see you after that."

"Thanks." Kyle said, smiling and he turned to walk away. Familiar with how Jondo and Lynn had set up their operation he knew that their emergency care clinic was set up in what had been the administrative section of the hotel when it was run as one. This provided several small rooms where patients could be seen in private as well as offering the hotel vault for storing medications that would otherwise be the target of thieves who wanted to sell them on the black market.

Several chairs had been set up in a line in the corridor outside one of the rooms used for seeing patients and knowing that Lynn was busy, Kyle opted to sit down and wait for her to finish. A short time later the door to a treatment room opened and a man came hobbling out with the aid of a plastic crutch. Then behind him Lynn appeared and she sighed when she saw Kyle.

"Well it's nice to be appreciated." Kyle said as he got to his feet.

"Whenever you're here it's because something terrible has happened." Lynn replied. Then she stepped aside and waved him into the room, "Well come on in and tell me what's wrong."

As Kyle entered the room he took out the scraping he had taken from one of the blood spots at Congressman Noll's home and he offered it to Lynn.

"I took this from a crime scene." he told her, "I think it comes from a being who killed someone during the course of a burglary."

"I'm not set up to run samples through a DNA database. You know that Kyle." she replied.

"Yes I realise that." he said, "But I'd like to know what species the blood comes from. You can identify that can't you?"

"I should be able to to." Lynn said as she took the small bag from Kyle and tipped the scrapings onto a microscope slide and then inserted it into the microscope on a nearby workbench. As Lynn then began the analysis of the sample Kyle watched from over her shoulder, "Was it a wooden floor?" she asked.

"Yes." Kyle told her and she sighed.

"That makes things more difficult." she told him, "I need to get the scope to ignore the material of the wood or you'll be issuing a wanted bulletin for a tree." and inwardly Kyle cursed himself for not having taken the sample from the ferrocrete surface of the courtyard instead of the wooden floor.

"Can you do that?" he asked.

"Sure. It'll just take a few minutes longer with this equipment. We don't have those fancy things the Republic military has you know." Lynn replied. Then as the microscope continued to process the sample she turned her chair to face Kyle, "So how about telling me exactly what I'm getting involved in here. Jedi don't investigate burglaries, even ones that lead to murder. So what's got you interested?"

"The victim was a member the High Council here on Tepillos." Kyle told her, "Congressman Noll." and Lynn snorted.

Hatred.

Anger.

Kyle could not help but sense her reaction through the Force.

"Something wrong?" he asked, wondering whether she would have any information that may help lead him to the congressman's killers, "I can sense your feelings."

"And you noticed I didn't like him then?" Lynn responded, "Well why should I? That no good stuck up nerf

herder is supposed to be looking after the people of this planet. Not flying around the sector and sucking up to the Founding Families.”

Lynn's dislike of the Founding Families was something Kyle knew about well. As far as she was concerned it was them that had caused the collapse of society on Tepillos in the first place and them that had acted to prevent the world recovering ever since. Her hatred of them was so complete that Kyle knew better than to try and convince her otherwise by pointing out the charitable works that the Founding Families undertook, including right here on Tepillos where they sponsored numerous aid groups.

Just then there was a bleeping sound from the microscope and Lynn turned back towards it while Kyle leant in closer as well.

“Anything?” he asked.

“Sure.” she replied, “The wood comes from a species indigenous to Crassis Major. Probably a gift from his friends in the Crassis Family.”

“The blood Lynn.” Kyle said.

“The blood is from a feeorin.” Lynn told him, “Not many of them around here.”

“Have any been to see you recently?” Kyle asked.

“Perhaps with a wound that needed fixing you mean?” Lynn responded, “No. I've never had a feeorin patient.”

For a brief moment Kyle wondered whether Lynn's hatred for those she saw as agents of the Founding Families would cause her to try and cover for someone who killed one of them. But her feelings were easy for Kyle to read and he sensed no deception from her.

“Well could you let me know if any come in?” Kyle said, “It's always possible that they'll try to sort it out themselves and then come looking for help when the wound gets infected.”

“Sure.” Lynn replied, “But don't expect me to help you arrest him.”

“Yeah, I know. You have to remain neutral even when it comes down to illegal activity.” Kyle said, “You know on a lot of worlds that would be enough to have you arrested.”

“On a lot of worlds people don't need to rely on charities just to provide them with food.” Lynn said and she smiled sarcastically at the jedi knight.

“Could Lynn help you?” Jondo asked when he encountered Kyle as the jedi headed for the exit from the hotel. Jondo had finished distributing the food packages and was now clearing up.

“Oh yes, she told me what I needed to know.” Kyle replied, “She also reminded me of her opinions of the Founding Families.”

“Ah.” Jondo, “Yes.”

“You were at university with Vorn Torin weren't you?” Kyle added and Jondo's eyes widened, “When did you last speak to him?”

“Shush.” Jondo hissed, looking around to make sure that Lynn was not within earshot, “Keep your voice down.”

“You know Jondo, when someone lives their lives filled with hatred eventually that becomes everything to them.” Kyle said.

“Well what do you suggest I do?”

“How about telling Lynn that Vorn let's you use his name to solicit donations from off world, including from the Founding Families?” Kyle replied.

“Are you insane?” Jondo hissed, “She'd never speak to me again. Not only for taking money from the Founding Families but for not telling her for all these years.”

“Think about it Jondo.” Kyle said as he started to walk away, “She's bound to figure out where the money comes from to run this little operation sooner or later and it's probably going to best coming from you.”

“Sure.” Jondo muttered, “I'll mention it in my will.”

Kassa couldn't just walk up to a fence and asked if they had a particular item for sale, especially not when that item was connected to a murder. Either the fence would figure out that she was looking for clues to help solve the crime, in which case they would likely never deal with her again, or decide that she was desperate to obtain that precise item and demand a large finder's fee from her before answering any questions. So instead she claimed to represent someone off world who was looking for several items with no questions asked. She would then offer a vague description of the items Kyle had shown her as well as adding in a few other similar ones for good measure. That made her look like an agent for a genuine collector who could still afford to walk away rather than someone hunting for something more specific that could not be found elsewhere.

The problem with this approach was that she then received numerous responses that were completely unrelated to what Kyle was paying her to find and each time she had to come with an excuse not to purchase them. At least that was until she was contacted by a fence who was a member of the cha'a species.

“Mistress Kassa.” the reptilian hissed over the communication channel, each of the 's' sounds being

extended, "Vrissk Torchar is proud to offer you the merchandise your employer seeks."

"Show me." Kassa replied and the image switched to show a cluster of small statues and medallions.

Amongst these she recognised the objects in the image provided by Kyle but she kept her composure just in case the reptilian fence realised how important they were to her, "How much?" she asked.

"Two thousand for the entire set." Vrissk told her. This put the price well below the ones demanded by other fences for similar items and meant that the cha'a had obviously managed to buy them at a knock down price himself, confirming that the items were ones that someone wanted to get rid of as quickly as they could while the fence was not eager to buy.

"Can you get more?" Kassa asked, knowing that the answer would put this theory to the test.

"Yes. More can be found. But not at the same price. More expensive." the fence answered and Kassa had her confirmation.

"Okay I'll tell my client." she said, "If all works out then I'll be back in touch in a few hours." and then she reached out to turn off the communicator. But as soon as the screen went blank Kassa turned the device back on again and entered a communication address she had used enough times to have committed it to memory.

"Hello?" Lom Des said when his sullustan features appeared on the screen.

"Hi Lom it's me." Kassa said, "If Kyle's not too busy could you tell him that I've found the merchandise he's looking for and the fence is expecting a response soon."

3.

Kyle and Lom advanced towards the building that Kassa pointed out as the place from where the cha'a fence Vrissk Torchar did business. The building was an ordinary looking retail unit, its windows painted over as so many in the area were to hide the armoured plating behind them that prevented someone smashing through to get at the merchandise inside. A sign above the door identified the business as one that dealt in second hand goods, both buying and selling. The two Jedi wore the hoods of their cloaks raised as they stepped through the front door and saw Vrissk straighten up behind the counter.

"May I help you?" the cha'a hissed and Kyle noticed that he was keeping one hand below the counter where a weapon was set pointing towards the door.

"My associate and I are here looking for some very specific merchandise." Kyle replied as he signalled subtly to Lom that they should split up and the pair moved apart.

Fear.

The move had the fence worried. Both Jedi were now out of the field of fire if his weapon and even without knowing that they were Jedi they moved with the confidence of beings that knew how to handle themselves.

"As you can see I have a wide variety of merchandise available." Vrissk said, using his visible hand to indicate the shelves of items that he was offering. Kyle glanced at them briefly. Most of the stock were common household items but there were a few secure display cases that contained items more valuable than compact food and drink preparation units or cheap ornaments and dented musical instruments.

"As I said, we are looking for some very specific merchandise." Kyle said, "To be precise the items stolen from the home of Congressman Noll on the day that he was murdered."

Fear.

Panic.

Vrissk suddenly pulled a pulse wave carbine from beneath the counter and swung the weapon towards Kyle. "Master look out!" Lom yelled as the Sullustan drew his lightsaber and there was a 'Snap-hiss' as he ignited the blade. Then at the moment Vrissk fired Lom dived forwards, putting the blade of his weapon in the path of the spatial distortion that Vrissk's fired and bursting it before Kyle could be hit.

Kyle drew his own lightsaber just as Vrissk realised that he was facing a pair of Jedi and opted to flee, leaping backwards through a doorway behind him and before either Kyle or Lom could do anything to prevent him the cha'a sealed the door.

"Round the back!" Kyle snapped as he leapt over the counter and thrust his lightsaber into the door where he guessed the locking mechanism would be located, "Make sure they don't get away."

"Yes master." Lom replied as he hurried back outside, leaving Kyle to slice through the armoured door.

Kyle knew that he had picked the right section of the door when he finished cutting around it and it remained in place, held there by the powerful electromagnet used as a lock. It took just a wave of his hand for Kyle to trigger the motor that then lifted the rest of the door clear and brandishing his lightsaber in front of him he stepped through into the room behind. He found himself in a short hallway that branched off to a flight of stairs while leading to a much larger room at the far end and it was this direction that Kyle chose, assuming that the fence was unlikely to try and escape by going upwards.

The larger room was obviously where Vrissk stored the merchandise that he either did not have the room for in his shop or could not display because it was stolen and identifiable or outright illegal. Racks of various weapons were lined up beside crates of various goods and Kyle picked his way through the room carefully, alert for any signs that Vrissk or anyone else in here with him was about to try and ambush him.

Danger.

The sensation in the Force alerting Kyle to danger came just in time to stop him from being decapitated by a bulky work droid that suddenly appeared from around a stack of crates. The machine had no presence in the Force, so Kyle had been unable to sense it before it appeared and it was only a brief flash of prescience that had saved him. He swung his lightsaber low, slicing through the droid's legs and dodging the machine's flailing limbs as it fell. A tremor in the Force then alerted Kyle to the presence of an organic being and spinning around he spotted Vrissk as he darted between two stacks of crates. But as Kyle started to run towards him the cha'a leant back around the stack he had just fled behind with a sub-machine-gun in his hands and there was a rattle of bullets as he fired. The burst was intended more to dissuade Kyle from giving chase than to kill him and the bullets struck a crate behind Kyle as he dived out of the way. The problem facing him now was that the cha'a's choice of weapon was perfectly suited to fighting a Jedi. The way in which an automatic slug thrower would spray physical projectiles made it difficult to deflect or parry even a handful of them with a lightsaber or the Force. But Kyle had more than just a lightsaber to hand.

Shutting down the traditional Jedi weapon, Kyle slid it back beneath his cloak while instead drawing a short but bulky carbine and releasing the safety, producing a soft whine as the weapon powered up. Then he took

aim towards the crates Vrissk was using for cover and fired. There was a brilliant flash of light and wave of heat as the plasma carbine discharged and the blast of superheated matter blew a large hole in the crate not far from Vrissk's head, forcing the cha'a to pull back. This gave Kyle the chance he was looking for and he darted forwards before Vrissk plucked up the courage to fire again. When Vrissk next leant around the crate to fire Kyle was waiting for him, not to shoot since he wanted to take the fence alive but to send out a quick blast of telekinetic energy that lifted the muzzle of the sub-machine-gun just as the cha'a's finger was tightening on the trigger and the next set of bullet holes ended up in the ceiling.

Though slug throwers could be effective against someone wielding a lightsaber they did have the glaring drawback that they tended to run out of ammunition rather quickly and Vrissk had just emptied his weapon upwards. He had spare magazines of course but even the handful of seconds it would take to replace the empty magazine and chamber a round in his weapon would have been enough for Kyle to reach him so instead he opted to flee, dropping the firearm as he turned.

Hearing this, Kyle returned his plasma carbine to its holster and set off after the fence, following the trail of fear and panic he was leaving in the Force as he weaved in and out of the stacks of crates. Vrissk was fast though and he knew where he was going, making his way to an exit hidden behind yet more crates and reaching out to open the door before Kyle could catch up with him. But before he could get to the outside that he thought would represent freedom he found his way blocked by a sullustan.

"Going somewhere?" Lom asked, pointing the blade of his lightsaber towards the cha'a.

Anger.

Vrissk growled at the padawan.

"You will not get away with this." he hissed, "I have powerful friends."

"My guess is your friends will be more worried about what you have to say to us." Kyle responded as he walked up behind the cha'a fence and took hold of his arms.

"Vrissk Torchar, you are under arrest as an accessory to murder." the jedi knight said and Vrissk hissed at him.

"Murder? I killed no-one." he responded.

"Maybe not." Kyle said, "But you bought goods knowing they had been stolen from someone who was murdered. Which means you know who did it." and at that moment Kyle reached out through the Force, tapping into Vrissk's mind. As he hoped at the mention of knowing who the murderers were there was a brief flash of memory from the cha'a and Kyle saw a vision of him looking at a collection of objects stolen from Congressman Noll's home as they were laid out on a crate in this very room. Then Vrissk looked up and Kyle saw in his memory the flat, greyish face surrounded by tendrils of a feeorin and Kyle smiled, "Tell me about the feeorin." he said, "Who is he?" and he used the Force to push the suggestion deep into the mind of the fence.

Vrissk snarled.

"He is a minion, nothing more." he hissed and Kyle looked at his padawan and smiled.

"Did that sound like a confession my young apprentice?" he asked.

"It did master." Lom replied, "Not only did he suggest that he knows the identity of the being we seek, but also that he is familiar with the larger organisation for which he works."

"And would this organisation be a part of the insurgency perhaps?" Kyle asked, looking at Vrissk. But the question provoked only a growl in response, "I'll take that as a 'yes'." Kyle went on, "Which means that this investigation just got a whole lot more interesting. Now show us the goods you bought from your feeorin friend."

Vrissk took the two jedi to a dark corner of his storeroom where it was only possible to see that there was another door located here from a short distance away thanks to it having been painted to match the surrounding wall. The fence moved a clawed hands towards a pocket and both jedi reacted by raising their lightsabers.

"I must unlock the door." Vrissk told them before they could activate their weapons.

"Then do it slowly." Kyle warned him and Vrissk hissed again as he slid a contactless key from his pocket and held it up to a sensor located beside the door. Right away the door slid open to reveal a room beyond that lit up as soon as the door to it was opened and in here were shelves of obviously valuable goods, "Inside." Kyle said, shoving Vrissk through the door before following him into the hidden vault. Kyle let the Force flow through him as he looked around as just as he had hoped he sensed a slight resonance coming from one of the shelves and he walked straight towards it, ignoring Vrissk.

"Master what is it?" Lom asked, sensing that something was affecting Kyle.

"Exactly what we're looking for." Kyle replied as he slid a tray of stolen items off the shelf in front of him and immediately recognised the medallion he had seen pictured in a display case on Congressman Noll's office shelf. The case was gone now but the medallion was still here and Kyle reached out to take it.

With Kyle focused on the tray and Lom watching his master, Vrissk saw his chance to escape and took it. Before the sullustan padawan could react, Vrissk elbowed him in the face and darted back out of the open vault doorway.

"Keep whatever you want!" he hissed as he presented the key to the sensor and the door slid shut once more, sealing the two jedi inside the vault and at the same time the lighting deactivated and plunged them into darkness.

The darkness did not last long however, as both Kyle and Lom activated their lightsabers.

"Master, I am sorry." Lom said, "I have allowed him to escape."

"Not to worry my young apprentice." Kyle responded, "I think that Mister Torchar will lead us right to his insurgent allies."

"The Force tells you this master?" Lom asked but Kyle grinned and shook his head as he slipped the medallion into his pocket.

"No." he answered, "But the tracker I tagged him with when I grabbed hold of his arm might. Now let's see about getting out of here before we run out of air shall we?"

"What took you so long?" Kassa asked as Kyle and Lom came hurrying back to the speeder bikes that had brought the trio to Vrissk's store, "I saw that scaly nerf herder come rushing out of the back five minutes ago and get into a speeder and was starting to worry."

"Then you should have more faith in our abilities my friend." Kyle responded as he climbed onto his speeder bike and activated the receiver for the tracking device he had planted on the fleeing cha'a, "Good, it's receiving loud and clear." he added.

"Receiving? Receiving what?" Kassa asked.

"I tagged our fence before he ran." Kyle told her, "Now I'm hoping he'll lead us right to whoever was behind the congressman's death. I suggest you go home. Lom and I can deal with this ourselves."

"Sure." Kassa replied as both jedi accelerated away, leaving her alone, "Sounds much safer to me anyway."

Thanks to his jedi reflexes, Kyle was able to keep referring to the tracker receiving unit in front of him on the speeder bike while also riding the vehicle through the streets of the city. He and Lom did not risk riding their speeder bikes at too high a speed, instead keeping a discrete distance between them and their quarry. The aim here was to use the fence to lead them to what Kyle now suspected was an insurgent cell that would make the involvement of Lom and him in the investigation worthwhile. Then Kyle saw that the receiver was indicating that the tracker had slowed down massively, as if Vrissk had reached his destination and got out of his speeder.

"This could be it Lom." Kyle said, "Get ready."

"Yes master." Lom responded just as they rounded a corner and ahead of them saw a building marked with a large if faded sign that read 'Repulsorlift Repair' and beside it was a parking area filled with assorted speeders in a range of conditions.

With Lom staying close behind him, Kyle drove straight into the parking area and brought his speeder bike to a halt. Despite the gate to the parking area being open there was no-one in sight to keep an eye on the vehicles it contained, indicating that this was somewhere that the local criminal element knew to avoid.

"Only one door." Kyle said as he leapt off his speeder bike and looked towards the entrance to the building, "Stay out of sight while I get us inside."

Lom just nodded before he and Kyle hurried towards the door. The doorway was a standard size for permitting humanoids to pass through and had an obvious hatch about the size of a human head set into it. Kyle stood directly in front of this while as he had been instructed, Lom positioned himself just beside the doorway with his lightsaber in his hand.

Kyle knocked.

Moments later the hatch was slid open and a gungan peered out and growled at Kyle.

"Whatsa you wanting?" he asked angrily but before the gungan had the chance to warn anyone else about Kyle's presence the jedi knight suddenly lashed out with his fist and delivered a punch to the gungan's face that was strong enough to send the amphibian alien falling backwards.

"Is it wrong that that felt so good to punch a gungan in the face?" Kyle whispered to Lom as he then peered through the hatch himself. The gungan was sprawled out on the floor while the rest of the room appeared empty. Then with a wave of his hand Kyle triggered the door mechanism and it slid open to allow the jedi to enter.

Crossing the small room they found themselves in, the jedi peered through the open doorway on the far side into the next room and in here they saw Vrissk conversing with several other beings, among which was a feeorin. Around them were numerous other beings, most at work manufacturing what looked like weapons, particularly mortars that could be used to bombard targets at long range with home made bombs.

"Looks like this is the place master." Lom whispered and Kyle nodded as he tried to focus on what Vrissk and his associates were saying. Normally this would have been a difficult task even for a jedi as experienced in using the Force as Kyle. But on this occasion Kyle found that the Force seemed to flow through him easily despite all the distractions around him.

"They were jedi I tell you!" Vrissk snapped, "They know of your involvement in Noll's murder."

"That's your fault." one of the others responded, looking at the feeorin, "You were just supposed to break in and steal anything that looked valuable. We need money."

"It's not my fault." the feeorin replied, "Blame Targo. He was supposed to be watching out for anyone coming. The screwdriver slipped when Noll jumped me."

"Well that little accident has cost us. If those jedi manage to track us here then this little operation is blown." the other insurgent said.

All of a sudden Kyle sensed the approach of two more lifeforms from behind and he whirled around just in time to see a pair of men in crude body armour appear in the doorway that the jedi had entered the building through.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded before he glanced down at the unconscious gungan on the floor, "And what happened to him?"

"Nothing happened to him. He's fine." Kyle replied, "We're all fine. How are you?" and when both men scowled and raised battered shotguns Kyle and Lom activated their lightsabers, "Boring conversation anyway." Kyle said as he used a telekinetic shove to push both men aside before they fired their weapons. But the loud discharge of the shotguns attracted the attention of the other insurgents and as they turned around Vrissk gave a shout.

"It's the jedi!" he yelled.

"You weak minded fool!" another of the insurgents he had been talking to shouted back at him, "You led them here!"

"Never mind that now." another added, "Kill them!"

Most of the insurgents in the room had some sort of ranged weapon to hand and as they fired Kyle and Lom both dived to the floor for cover, an assortment of physical projectiles and energy blasts passing overhead. "Time to leave I think." Kyle said, "As soon as we're clear we'll call Colonel Jeck and his men in to deal with this place."

Kyle and Lom then leapt up and darted for the exit, just as the two armoured figures were stepping forward to block the doorway once more. This time however, neither Kyle nor Lom bothered using the Force to push them aside. Instead both jedi struck with their lightsabers, slicing effortlessly through the simple armoured vests the insurgents wore before the jedi continued on their way to their speeder bikes. They reached their vehicles just as the first insurgents were emerging from the building to give chase and gunfire erupted from their weapons, missing the jedi only because of the rapid acceleration of the speeder bikes they rode.

"Get the speeders!" an insurgent leader ordered, "Get after them!"

Ordinarily Kyle would have preferred to pull over somewhere safe and call for gunships filled with Republic troops to eliminate the insurgent group but with several speeders filled with insurgents now giving chase to the jedi it was too risky to do anything other than head for the safety of the Green Zone as fast as possible. But as he sped through the streets of the city at high speed Kyle felt a sudden disturbance in the Force.

Danger.

Glancing over his shoulder, Kyle saw that one of the speeders now pursuing them had a crude beam cannon mounted in its open rear cargo section and an insurgent was taking aim at him.

"Jink!" Kyle yelled, hoping that Lom would be able to hear him over all of the repulsorlifts and he veered his speeder bike off to the left just as there was a flash of light from the cannon and a crater was blasted in the road ahead.

There was more weapon fire from the pursuing speeders, but the beam cannon was the most significant threat to the jedi. All of the small arms carried by the insurgents needed to be aimed where the jedi were going to be, not where they were at the moment the weapons were fired whereas the beam cannon fired at the speed of light and not even a jedi could dodge that fast. In theory the beam could be deflected by a lightsaber, but to do this to such a powerful beam would require significant concentration and focus. Two things in short supply while trying to manoeuvre a speeder bike at almost two hundred kilometres an hour through an urban area.

Another disturbance in the Force warned Kyle that the cannon was about to be fired again and he veered his speeder bike from side to side in an effort to make it as hard as possible for them to target him. But this time the insurgent gunner had decided that Lom was a better target, the sullustan not making quite as many violent manoeuvres as Kyle.

There was a second flash as the cannon discharged again and this time the beam struck its intended target, blasting one of the propulsion pods from Lom's speeder. The explosion caused the speeder bike to lurch suddenly and Lom was thrown into the air, tumbling as he flew in an arc towards the ground at more than a hundred kilometres per hour.

Fear.

It was not just Lom's fear that Kyle sensed; it was his own as both jedi realised that the sullustan was about to die, his body smashed against the road. But then it seemed to Kyle as if everything was slowing down around him and he reached out a hand towards Lom and using the Force he caught hold of the padawan, slowing him down at a controlled rate and keeping him from hitting the ground until his speed had been

drastically reduced. At the same time Kyle leapt off his own speeder, landing between Lom and the insurgents with his lightsaber already in his hand and active while the lightweight vehicle ploughed into an already derelict building and exploded.

Looking down briefly, Kyle saw that Lom was not moving. He could sense that the padawan was still alive but the injuries he had sustained when his speeder bike was hit had caused him to black out as he fell through the air. This meant Kyle was on his own against the insurgents and he felt his anger rising within him.

The beam cannon fired again but Kyle found himself able to react quick enough to place his lightsaber blade in the path of the beam. The moment the beam struck the energy field surrounding the blade Kyle expected to be incinerated in a moment. But instead the beam was simply deflected, slicing a gouge out of a nearby building. The insurgent gunner maintained the beam however, adjusting the angle of his aim as he tried to get around Kyle's blade. But the Jedi was able to sense what the insurgent was about to do before he did it and by twisting his lightsaber Kyle changed the angle at which the beam was deflected, sending it straight back towards the battered old speeder on which the cannon was mounted. Unable to withstand the hit from its own weapon, the speeder promptly exploded in a ball of flame that sent debris and bodies flying all around.

Behind the wreckage of the burning speeder other insurgent vehicles came to a sudden halt, swerving out of the way of the flames and one another before their occupants began to leap out of their vehicles and took aim at Kyle. Waving his hand, Kyle sent a group of these gunmen flying backwards with unexpected ease at the same time as he swatted a pulse wave blast with his lightsaber. Realising that he was in a dangerously exposed position Kyle leapt into the air, gambling that the insurgents would keep their attention focused on him rather than using the opportunity to attack the helpless Lom and he landed right in front of the insurgent who had just fired a pulse wave rifle at him before slicing the man in half. Kyle then spun to face the next insurgent just as she was turning to face him and he thrust his lightsaber forwards to impale her through the chest before she could fire.

"Get back!" a voice yelled in warning to the insurgents, "Keep away from the Jedi."

It was sound advice. Anyone within arms reach of Kyle was not only a target for his lightsaber but also made it harder for the other insurgents to target him without risking hitting their own side. This second point did not matter to at least one other insurgent however, as there was the rattle of sub-machine-gun fire just as Kyle was swiping his weapon at another insurgent who had been too slow to react to the warning. Sensing the attack, Kyle was able to duck behind the insurgent he was engaging and the volley of bullets struck him instead of the Jedi.

Kyle then leapt into the air once more, somersaulting as he flew. As he came back down towards the ground, he reached beneath his cloak and drew his pulse wave blaster so that when he landed in front of a pair of startled insurgents he was able to spray pulse wave blasts towards another nearby cluster of them while he struck at these two with his lightsaber. Then Kyle sprinted for cover before any further groups of insurgents could target him while he kept firing his pistol at any insurgents he sensed, not caring whether or not he hit them so long as he stopped them shooting at him.

But the constant firing of his weapon soon depleted its power cell and as Kyle reached the cover provided by one of the now abandoned speeders the insurgents had used to get here he briefly shut down his lightsaber so that he could reload.

Danger.

Kyle sensed the threat before he heard the deep rumble of an engine and he jumped to his feet and ran, getting clear of the speeder just moments before a cumbersome ground truck smashed it to pieces and it was driven through the vehicle at speed. The truck had a large side mounted door that had been removed and in the gap created a machine-gun had been set up in an improvised mounting. This opened fire straight away, forcing Kyle to keep on the move to avoid the steady stream of projectiles.

Now on the defensive, Kyle needed a way out of the machine-gun's line of fire. Fortunately for him the insurgents' choice of vehicle to carry the weapon gave him just that. Had they selected a repulsorlift vehicle of some sort then they could have simply rotated on the spot to follow him, but in a wheeled ground truck that was not possible and all Kyle needed to do was move out of sight of the side mounted doorway. Moving in front of the vehicle would have been inviting the insurgent at the wheel to accelerate forwards and run him over so instead Kyle ran towards the truck itself, dodging from side to side to avoid being struck by the continuing fire from the machine-gun. Then at the last moment he jumped upwards, using the Force to power his leap so that he landed on the roof of the truck with a 'Thump!'

"He's above us!" Kyle heard someone inside the truck cry out and he stepped back just in time to avoid several rapidly fired slug thrower shots that came up through the roof.

Taking hold of the side of the truck above the open doorway Kyle jumped off the roof and swung himself in through the opening, igniting his lightsaber as he landed and cutting the machine gun half before turning his blade on the weapon's startled operator. Including the driver of the truck, there were three other insurgents inside the vehicle and Kyle now turned his attention towards them.

He used his arm to knock the weapon aimed at him by one aside while at the same time slashing at the

chest of a second. Then as the first insurgent attempted to reclaim his dropped pistol Kyle delivered a powerful kick to the side of his head that sent the man slamming into the inside wall of the truck. This left only the driver and as Kyle turned towards him he saw that the man had drawn a weapon of his own and was taking aim. But that was not what concerned Kyle the most, instead what caught his attention was the insurgent now visible through the truck's windscreen standing on the roof of a stationary speeder and aiming a rocket propelled grenade launcher towards the truck.

Ignoring the driver of the truck, Kyle hurled himself out of the open side door just as there was a sudden 'Whoosh!' as the RPG was fired and slammed into the front of the truck, detonating as it struck the engine. The explosion consumed the entire forward section of the truck, including its hapless driver, before the force of the blast ripped open the rear section where Kyle had been only moments earlier. The blast also threw Kyle off his feet and as he looked up from the ground he saw that the insurgent with the RPG was hurriedly reloading his weapon.

Unleashing a telekinetic blast through the Force, Kyle pushed the insurgent from the roof of the speeder before scrabbling to get clear of his exposed position before any other insurgents could target him. Finding shelter behind another empty vehicle at the side of the street, Kyle heard the impacts of small arms fire on the opposite side of the vehicle and considered what to do next. The Force seemed to be flowing through him far more easily than it usually did but he was still facing a large number of opponents and the fact that the ground truck and RPG armed insurgent had not been among those who had originally given chase to him and Lom, it appeared that the insurgents were calling in reinforcements.

The gunfire from the other side of the speeder continued and Kyle sensed several of the insurgents were now closing in on his position as they looked for a superior position. There was no where for him to run to and the only option left seemed to be for Kyle to try and leap out of his hiding place and hope he could land close enough to the advancing insurgents to be able to engage them.

The speeder.

It was as if the Force itself was telling Kyle what to do as it occurred to Kyle that the speeder he was using for cover could also be turned into a weapon. The drawback was that using it in such a way risked exposing him to the influence of the Dark Side. A Jedi did not use the Force for attack, only for knowledge and defence.

You are defending yourself and your padawan.

Kyle released a powerful blast of telekinesis, using it to hurl the entire speeder back towards the advancing insurgents. The speeder flipped over, rolling sideways and crushing the surprised and panicked insurgents before it smashed into another stationary vehicle on the opposite side of the street, producing cries of pain from the insurgents caught behind it.

But even the amount of destruction Kyle had caused so far did not change the fact that he was heavily outnumbered. Normally he would have looked for a way to withdraw but this time escape was not an option. He could not abandon his padawan to be killed by the insurgents but the Sullustan would weigh him down too much if he tried to carry him. But then he felt a familiar presence in the Force. It was not close by right then but it was closing rapidly on his location and Kyle's eyes widened.

"Belle," he said to himself softly.

Then came a roar from overhead as the familiar shape of Belle's Davaab-class starfighter swooped low over the insurgents, its laser cannon firing rapid blasts of energy that tore up the street and blasted apart speeders and insurgents alike.

"How do you like that then?" Belle said to herself in the cockpit as she pulled up, heading straight up into the air and peering out of the cockpit canopy to assess the damage she had inflicted.

The sudden appearance of air support for Kyle drastically changed the attitude of the insurgents. Before they had been convinced that all they needed to do was bring in enough reinforcements and they could overwhelm him. But the sudden and unexpected arrival of Belle changed that. Now their reinforcements could be destroyed before coming within sight of the Jedi and where there was one starfighter, more would be sure to follow as the Republic launched its own reinforcements from the Green Zone.

Now it was the insurgents' turn to look for a way out.

Fear.

Panic.

Kyle could sense the confusion all around him as the insurgents started to flee. Even though they had arrived aboard a variety of speeders and other light vehicles they chose to abandon these as they fell back. Moving on foot they could hide in buildings and duck down narrow alleyways whereas being aboard a vehicle limited them to open spaces where Belle's starfighter could pick them off easily from the air, so they left their transports behind along with the bodies of their dead and any weaponry they considered too heavy to run with.

Kyle stood in the centre of the street as Belle brought her fighter around for another pass. But with no targets left worth engaging she slowed her ship down and hovered in front of the Jedi, waving at him from the cockpit.

"Kyle, need a hand?" she signalled to his PTP link.

"Belle your arrival is as welcome as ever." he responded, "But how did you know I needed help?"

"The anti-theft trackers on your speeder bikes." Belle told him, "I've got agents monitoring them and they told me that both had stopped transmitting. So I thought I'd come out and take a look at what was going on."

"Thank you." Kyle said, "Now can you get in touch with Colonel Jeck? We need to get Lom back to the Green Zone quickly. He's injured."

"Sure, I'm right on it." Belle replied, "I've got to say though, you seem to have done pretty well by yourself." and Kyle smiled.

"Hey, it's me." he said before shutting off the PTP link and returning it to the pouch he kept it in. Then he started to walk back towards where Lom still lay unconscious in the road. All around him were the signs of the battle and Kyle could not help but wonder why he had been able to manipulate the Force so much more easily than he normally could. As a Jedi knight he had decades of experience in using the Force, but never before had he been able to pluck a falling being out of the air and land them in relative safety or dodge attacks with such ease.

Then he remembered the medallion in his pocket and he paused, taking it out to inspect it more closely. With it in his hand once more the Force opened up to him with even greater clarity and it felt like he could sense everything all around him from the faint breathing of Lom to the still evident panic of the departed insurgents.

"What are you?" Kyle said, looking at the medallion, "And where did you come from?"

4.

"So the congressman was killed by insurgents then?" Colonel Jeck asked when Kyle reported back to him, "Was it a deliberate assassination?"

"I don't think so colonel." Kyle answered, "From what I overheard the insurgents were hoping to raise money and the fact that Congressman Noll lived outside the Green Zone made him an easy target. His death was just pure bad luck."

"I hear you had somewhat better luck though." the colonel added with a smile, "I must say Jedi Jenner, even after witnessing what you're capable of I'm impressed by what you achieved today. Saving your apprentice and defeating an insurgent force?"

"I had help colonel." Kyle said, "It seems that Belle has been keeping close tabs on me," then he too smiled, "Thank the Force for obsessive girlfriends. What about the insurgents that got away?"

"I've still got air patrols hunting for them. A couple tried coming back to recover the weaponry and equipment they were forced to abandon when Miss Shill showed up in her fighter and found a squad of my men waiting for them. But aside from that they've managed to disappear. It would take a full building to building sweep of the area to track them down. I just don't have the men available for an operation like that and I think we both know that the local police aren't going to be any use."

"No." Kyle agreed, "Sadly I think they'd be more likely to tip off the insurgents than arrest them."

"I'll still be asked to account for our failure to apprehend them all of course." Colonel Jeck commented with a sigh, "Though at least this time we have some bodies we can use as proof that we, sorry – you actually beat them back."

"With Belle's help." Kyle reminded the colonel.

"Maybe, but far too many of our engagements are hit and fade operations where the enemy has gone before we can even figure out where they were attacking from. This is a victory and I'm counting it as such."

"As you wish colonel." Kyle said, "But my involvement with the investigation is now over. I'll leave you to deal with any mopping up of insurgents and reporting to the government of Tepillos. I need to check in with the enclave on Moldas."

"You've not long got back from there Jedi Jenner." Colonel Jeck said, "Is something wrong?"

"No, not at all colonel. But a question has arisen and I'd like to get the input from another jedi. One who knows more about such things than I do."

With Lom hospitalised for treatment Kyle went home alone and proceeded straight to his private communication chamber. Here an array of long range communication devices had been installed for his own use. Most of this equipment was designed to communicate with beings on other planets and starships within the Narthis Sector directly but by interfacing with the communication relays at Aurek Station, the primary navigational beacon in the sector, it was possible to establish communication with almost anywhere in the Republic. Given the need to relay signals from one point to another, communication over many sectors was frequently unreliable as relays failed or prone to delays inherent in a system so reliant on propagation or as multiple signals became caught in a logjam. Fortunately for Kyle however, Moldas was in the neighbouring sector and although even a fast ship could take a week to get there communication via subspace link was almost instantaneous.

The figure that appeared in front of Kyle as a hologram was significantly older than he was. Kraus Trevan was a respected scholar amongst the Jedi Order, having dedicated most of his life as a jedi to expanding their knowledge of the Force and the galaxy around them.

"Kyle." Kraus's hologram said, "I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon. What's the matter?"

"I have a question that you may be able to answer." Kyle responded.

"Well I'll give it a go. What is it?"

"Have you every heard of inanimate objects that react to the use of the Force?" Kyle asked.

"Yes, yes I have." Kraus answered, "Though they are very rare. There are a number of materials that seem to channel the Force in the same way as a prism angles light."

"So something made of such a material would channel the Force through it? Making it possible to draw on the Force more easily."

"Yes, that's right. Of course given both how useful this can be and how rare the materials are they are considered very valuable by those who know about them. You've found something haven't you?"

"Possibly." Kyle replied, "I've sensed disturbances where there should be none. They were faint but I wanted to ask you about whether it possible to affect the Force using an inanimate object."

"Well the answer to that is a definite 'yes' Kyle. Many cultures have featured artefacts attributed with mystical properties when in fact all that they did was affect the flow of the Force in such a way that anyone Force

sensitive who came near them could sense it. It wasn't even necessary for them to have been trained in the use of the Force, the object or the material would affect them on a subconscious level. Most such objects ended up in the possession of various holy men or local kings who used them as symbols of their power. Of course the power they were wielding came from the objects in their possession and anyone who possessed them could carry out whatever feats were attributed to the owners."

"And have you ever heard of deposits of such material being found in the Narthis Sector?" Kyle asked.

"No, as I said such materials are very rare. Though as I understand it there are three sentient species native to the sector. Perhaps one of them would have more information."

"That's right, the arten, the brenary and the kinnin. Though I doubt the kinnin would be any help, they don't like outsiders. Plus there was at least one other species that vanished before the Republic came to the sector. Unfortunately all they left behind was a space station on the fringe of the sector." Kyle said, "Though that still leaves me with the others."

"See if they have any legends about individuals who were capable of unusual feats, especially if there was more than one from a similar area. That could be a clue that there are, or at least were deposits of such minerals there."

"Thank you I will." Kyle said.

"One thing Kyle." Kraus added.

"Yes, what?"

"As well as there being certain materials that are capable of reacting to the Force there have been objects made that have had such ability included as part of their manufacture rather than as a natural consequence of their ingredients. There have been several Force using cultures that have tried this and all of them have been influenced by the Dark Side. The most famous of them was-

"The Sith." Kyle interrupted.

"Indeed. Sith alchemy created all manner of objects and creatures through which the Force flowed strongly. Be careful if you come across such an object, the Sith were well known to build traps into their creations so that they channelled only the Dark Side to corrupt unwary users."

"I'll be careful." Kyle said.

Now certain that the medallion was responsible for the strange disturbances he had felt in the Force and possibly also for the way in which his own ability to manipulate it had been increased, Kyle took the opportunity to study the object more closely in his own workshop. His conversation with Kraus had left him with even more questions needing answers. Where had the material used for the medallion come from? Who had turned that material into a medallion and for what purpose? How had the medallion come into the possession of Congressman Noll, a man who as far as Kyle knew had no connection to the Jedi Order or any Force using organisation? More importantly were there any more like it in the sector and if so who had them?

"I need to know where this came from." he said to the analysis droid as he handed it over, "I need a point of origin and age."

Kyle would have preferred to determine this for himself, without involving the Republic's regular military but only the forensics lab in the Green Zone had the necessary equipment to perform the analysis he needed.

"Confirmed." the droid replied as it held up the medallion and studied it using the single prominent eye set into the centre of its head, "Preliminary visual scan inconclusive. Material appears to be copper based with crystals of unknown composition."

"Concentrate on the metal." Kyle told the droid, "I already have information that suggests the crystal could be an exotic type not in standard databases."

"Understood." the droid responded, "Please indicate the extent to which the object may be disassembled."

"Surface scrapings are acceptable but I'd like to keep it intact." Kyle answered.

"Understood." the droid said and then it turned and walked away.

From where he was stood at the entrance to the forensics lab Kyle was able to watch as the droid carried out its analysis. The medallion was placed into a holo-scanner and rotated so that every part of it could be scanned in detail to produce an exact three-dimensional model that Kyle saw projected into the centre of the room and as the droid continued to work Kyle instead began to study this projection as it rotated.

The scanner was designed to highlight any features that could represent identifying markings using false colours to mark out contours in its surface so now Kyle saw evidence of scrapes and grooves covering much of the surface that had not been visible to the naked eye. As far as he could tell though, there were no repeating patterns in the marks that would indicate the presence of writing and they had not been prominent enough to suggest that they were decorative. Therefore, the only options left were that they were a result of the manufacturing process or damage suffered since it had been made.

The droid then came walking back over towards Kyle with the medallion still in its hand.

"Metallurgical probe complete." the machine announced, "Material is primarily copper with impurities of tin, iron and zinc. Ultrasonic probe suggests that object is solid but surrounds a core of a different element. Most

likely the same crystalline material used to decorate the exterior.”

“Does this indicate a place of origin?” Kyle asked.

“Negative. Metallic composition is unremarkable and can be attributed to numerous worlds within the sector. However, the degree of external oxidization suggests an age of one thousand years plus or minus fifty years.” the droid told him.

“A thousand years old?” Kyle said as he took the medallion back and looked at it again.

“Affirmative. Plus or minus-”

“Yes I heard, to within fifty years.” Kyle interrupted as he thought about what the galaxy had been like a thousand years earlier. The discovery of the Sith Empire had led to a brief but extremely violent war that had cost millions of lives and seen the end of them as a power. But at that stage in galactic history the Republic had not reached out as far as the Narthis Sector, it having been charted only three hundred years ago so the Great Hyperspace War as it had become known would not have reached out as far as here while subsequent revivals in Sith practices had not come near the Narthis Sector either.

There was of course the possibility that the medallion had not originated in the Narthis Sector at all, in which case Kyle was wasting his time investigating it. But if there was even a chance that there were artefacts scattered around the Narthis sector that reacted to the Force then he needed to find out before any of them got into the wrong hands.

“I need a copy of the holographic scan and all of your analyses.” Kyle told the droid, “Then delete all records. This is Jedi business.”

“Understood.” the droid answered and as the rotating hologram of the medallion vanished the droid handed Kyle a mem-stick, “All scan findings now purged from memory. Caution, back ups of data are no longer available and scans must be repeated to replace lost or corrupted files.”

“Thank you.” Kyle responded as he tucked both the medallion and the mem-stick into his robes before turning to walk away. As he did so his PTP link sounded and he took out the device, “Hello?” he said.

“Master.” Lom's voice said and Kyle smiled when he heard it.

“Lom. How are you?” he asked.

“I have been discharged master.” Lom told him, “Once I regained consciousness my injuries were classified as relatively minor. I have a concussion and have been advised to rest for a week before being examined again.”

“Are you at the house?” Kyle said.

“Yes master, I was expecting you to be here.”

“Something's cropped up about the investigation into Congressman Noll's death. Something possibly of interest to the Jedi Order. I'll explain when I get back.”

“Yes master.”

As Lom had said, when Kyle returned home he found the sullustan waiting for him.

“Take a look at this.” Kyle said and he held out the medallion for his apprentice to take.

“Yes mast-” Lom began, stopping suddenly when he took hold of the object, “That sensation.” he said.

“Exactly.” Kyle replied, “Lom, this thing resonates with the Force. Possibly amplifies the ability of someone holding it to make use of it. That's how I was able to save you.”

“You saved me with this master?” Lom asked.

“I think so. Your speeder bike was destroyed and I caught you using the Force. Using that I think.”

“But where does it come from? And how did the congressman get hold of it?”

“That's what I'm trying to find out.” Kyle replied, “According to the analysis droids in the forensics lab it's a thousand years old, putting it about seven hundred years older than the Republic's presence in this region of space. My guess is that it was produced by an indigenous civilisation. Of course I could be wrong, it could have come from elsewhere in which case I'm just wasting my time. But I need to find out either way.”

“But how master?”

“Well I can't do it here. I need to go to Crassis Major.” Kyle said. Crassis Major was the capital world of the Narthis Sector with a large population and well developed, “I'm hoping that the libraries and museums there will be able to shed some light onto this that droids designed to carry out forensic examinations can't.”

“Master I cannot go with you.” Lom said, bowing his head, “My injury-”

“Don't worry about it.” Kyle said before Lom could finish, “I understand fully. You can stay here and keep an eye on things. But I'll leave you with a copy of what the droids came up with. While I'm gone I want you to see whether there have been any other reports of similar items. I know the records from before the start of the civil war are patchy but just do your best.”

“Of course master.”

“Oh and if anyone comes looking for me you can tell them I've gone to Crassis Major but don't call me unless it's a real emergency. I'll check in daily and you can give me whatever messages there are then.”

“Yes master.”

5.

The space around Crassis Major was far busier than that around Tepillos. At one time both worlds had been almost equally important in the sector but the economic collapse and start of the civil war on Tepillos had seen the flow of ships to that world die off almost completely. On the other hand Crassis Major had continued to prosper over the last fifty years and so it was still visited by thousands of ships every day from all around the sector and even as far away as Coruscant in the Core Worlds. Crassis Major was well defended as well, with a fleet of warships at anchor as Kyle flew towards the world under the guidance of a traffic control system that reached well out into space rather than being limited to a small area around one primary space port. The surface of the planet looked a lot different as well, with the gleaming lights of cities illuminating the night side rather than there being pitch blackness there due to a lack of power. To Kyle this mattered little however, he just wanted access to the knowledge and expertise held within the libraries and museums of the planet. Particularly those in the capital city itself.

Rather than land at the primary starport on the outskirts of the capital, Kyle brought his fighter down at a smaller facility located within the city itself on a platform above an office building. This was commonly used by the planet's wealthy elite for their private shuttles and his was the only starfighter there when he landed, the unexpected appearance of the military craft piloted by a Jedi knight attracting significant attention as Kyle climbed out of the cockpit.

"Master Jedi!" a voice called out from across the landing area and Kyle saw a landing official scurrying towards him.

"Yes? Is there a problem?" Kyle responded.

"Why have you landed this vessel here?" the official asked, "This is a shuttle port, not a military airbase."

"I have business close by. You do not need to worry, all fees will be covered by the Jedi Order."

"What? Oh, err, yes of course." the official said, unsure of how to react. The presence of Kyle's fighter broke no regulations but it was still out of the ordinary.

Leaving the official behind, Kyle made his way from the landing facility and down to ground level using the turbolifts available. From there it was just a short walk to the nearest library, a large building that housed tens of thousands of printed volumes along with millions of electronic records that could be searched. If there was information to be had about the medallion then this was the most likely place for it to be kept.

Lom had begun his investigation into the occurrence of any artefacts similar to the medallion with an image search, using the scan provided by the analysis droids as a reference for image matching. His search was in two parts, one focusing on anything to do with medallions or similar items and the other to do with senior figures in the Tepillos government over the last few decades, the padawan reasoning that perhaps the medallion had been a gift relating to Congressman Noll's time in office and that other politicians could have received similar gifts. The search was largely automated and this meant that Lom was left with a great deal of time on his hands. Ordinarily he would have practised his lightsaber fighting technique but given that he had been warned to take things easy while he recovered from his injury he instead opted to pass the time meditating, trusting in the flow of the Force help accelerate his healing. But his meditation did not go uninterrupted.

The sound of the communicator panel disturbed Lom and he opened one eye and sighed before getting slowly to his feet and making his way over to the communicator.

"Hello?" he began as he activated the device. Then when he recognised Belle's face on the screen he added, "Oh hello Belle. My master is not here right now. He's on Crassis Major."

"Crassis Major? What's he doing here? He never told me he was planning a trip." Belle responded.

"It was a last minute thing." Lom answered, "A matter arising from our last investigation."

"What? You mean Congressman Noll? I thought that was settled."

"The events leading to the congressman's death have been settled." Lom replied, "But Kyle found an item among the congressman's belongings that appears to be affected by proximity to a Force sensitive individual and he wants to find out more about its origin."

"So he's here on Crassis Major to try and find out about some trinket?"

"Yes, he's planning on visiting museums and libraries that have information regarding the pre-Republic history of the sector. The medallion he found is a thousand years old after all." Lom explained, "In the mean time I'm running image searches to see if there are any more leads here."

"Wow." Belle said, "Well look, I'm sure Kyle's got you busy so I'll let you get on. Tell Kyle I called would you. I'm at home if he needs me." and then the screen went blank as Belle shut off her communicator. In her apartment on Crassis Major Belle then leant back in her chair and exhaled deeply, "Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said to herself.

As CEO of Shill Security, the most prestigious private military company in the Narthis Sector, Han Shill was generally kept busy by reports from units of his men deployed all over the sector. The vast majority of their work came from the Founding Families, providing protection for family members, their property and on occasion conducting covert military operations on their behalf. But Han was not so consumed by his work when his twin sister Belle entered his office unannounced that he did not look up at her. He had left instructions not to be disturbed for a while with the staff in the command centre outside his office but it was not surprising that none of them were willing to challenge Belle about coming in. Their careers and possibly even their lives could be threatened if they annoyed her too much.

"Belle what?" Han began.

"We've got trouble." Belle exclaimed, "The Families need to be warned."

"Warned? Warned about what?" Han asked.

"Kyle's found something, a medallion apparently. It's a thousand years old and it has a connection with the Force." Belle told him.

"Oh kriff." Han exclaimed, placing his face in his hands. Then he lowered his hands and looked at Belle,

"Have you seen it?" he asked, "What has he told you?"

"Nothing." Belle replied, "I found out from Lom. Kyle's got his lackey searching for clues on Tepillos while he's here on Crassis Major hunting for information."

"Then you're right. We need to let the Families know." Han said and he activated the intercom set into his desk, "I need to organise a live conference with the Families." he said, "Get it organised as soon as possible. This has top priority."

It was not practical to gather representatives of all seven of the Founding Families together in one place at short notice, especially considering that the heads of two of them were not based on Crassis Major so instead the conference was a virtual one with each being present in holographic form rather than in person. Though there were seven Founding Families there were nine holograms present in Han's office when the meeting began. Given the ill health of the elderly Erill Crassis he was joined by his son Luke, while also present was a man called Hugo Callan. Like the members of the Founding Families he was descended from one of the crew members of the first ship to survey the Narthis Sector for the Republic but his ancestor, Trent Callan, had returned to the core and used his share of their discoveries to set up a shipping company. The head of the Callan family still made frequent trips to the Narthis Sector, however and it was normal to include him in such meetings when he was available.

Only the Drud family was not represented by its actual head. General Josh Drud was also the chief of staff for the Crassis Major Defence Force and this left him with little time for running his family, especially when it came to matters that the Families did not want made known to his subordinates in the military. So instead that duty often fell to his younger brother Heddren, whose hologram now sat among the others.

The remaining families were all represented by their heads. The hologram of Lorna Fayl was positioned beside that of Heddren Drud and Han could see the stern look on her face as she tried to ignore the man from her family's arch rivals. Faye Karn was the only other woman present and she looked far more relaxed than Lorna. Next to her was Trent Narthis, the direct descendent of the survey expedition's captain Jayk Narthis. Trent was the last of the individuals present who was physically located on Crassis Major, both the nautolan Ket Runn and Corva Torin were located elsewhere in the sector. Ket, the head of the only non-human Founding Family rarely left his family estate on the ocean world of Delvad and never left the planet itself while on the other hand Corva spent most of his time with his wife aboard their luxury yacht as they travelled the sector.

"Thank you for joining me on such short notice." Han announced to the gathered Family leaders, "I'm sorry I couldn't give you more notice but-"

"You may dispense with the pleasantries Han." Erill Crassis wheezed, "Just tell us why you have summoned us all together."

"I'll let Belle explain." Han replied, looking at his twin sister, "I'm afraid that she has some disturbing news." and he stepped back to allow Belle to move into the frame of the holorecorder.

"Gee thanks." she muttered as she stepped forwards and looked at the holograms arrayed in front of her, all looking directly at her, "I'll make this simple." she told them, "Kyle Jenner's found what could be a Sith amulet and he's trying to figure out where it came from."

"Where did he find it?" Hugo asked.

"On Tepillos." Belle answered, "Some local politician got himself killed by insurgents and he had it among his belongings."

"Well at least it can't be connected to us." Heddren commented.

"Yet." Lorna added, "What if he traces it to a source we use?"

"I believe that preventing that is the purpose of this meeting Lorna." Trent said and she snarled at him while he avoided eye contact with her.

"Do you know anything about this amulet that could help us get to the source before the Jedi does Belle?"

Corva asked.

"Nothing." Belle replied, "I haven't seen it."

"Where is it now?" Luke asked, glancing at his father and then back at Belle.

"I'm guessing Kyle has it." she replied.

"Then we must acquire it." Ket said sternly, "Plus any records he has of it."

"If the padawan is investigating the amulet on Tepillos then there must be multiple copies of the notes." Trent pointed out.

"Perhaps seizing the amulet alone will be enough." Faye suggested, "After all if it came from someone's private collection then there may not be a direct link to its source without it."

"At the very least it would slow the jedi down." Hugo agreed.

"And it could give us some idea of just how much other knowledge he possesses." Erill added, "If he is forced to abandon his quest then we know that we are in the clear. If not -"

"Then perhaps we should kill the jedi." Ket interrupted.

"Are you insane?" Luke exclaimed, "Kill the jedi and you'll bring the Republic down on us."

"The Jedi Order never ignores the death of one of its own." Faye added.

"Perhaps if the death could be made to look accidental." Lorna suggested.

"And how exactly do you propose that we arrange for a jedi to die in an 'accident' Lorna?" Heddren asked,

"They aren't known for being careless. Besides we'd still have the issue of his padawan."

"Perhaps Lorna is considering a more serious accident." Trent said, "One that would take care of both of the jedi."

"Tepillos is dangerous." Ket pointed out, "We could lure them into an ambush and Han's men could deal with them. It would look like insurgents were responsible."

"Only until anyone looked closely." Han replied, "My people are good. Far better than any rebel scum."

"And it would be obvious to any reasonably competent investigator that it wasn't insurgents that killed them." Belle added.

"I think we can all agree that the amulet needs to be obtained from the jedi though." Erill said and his hologram looked around at the others present and there were nods of agreement.

"Then it's settled." Trent said and he turned towards Belle, "Belle, you will arrange for the amulet to be taken from the jedi and delivered to us." and at that point Trent's hologram flickered and vanished, followed rapidly by the others until just Belle and Han were left in the office and the twins looked at one another.

"Looks like you've got your work cut out for you little sister." Han said, "Reckon you can handle it?"

"Hey, it's me." Belle replied.

"The problem with history," Kyle muttered to himself, "is that there's more of it every single day."

The massive hallways of the central library were lined with books while every desk featured a computer terminal where someone could access the vast catalogue of digital records but even though a great deal of effort had been put into organising the library in a logical manner the amount of information it held was so vast that Kyle barely knew where to start.

"I'm sorry sir, I didn't catch that." the librarian leading him towards the ancient history section said.

"Nothing, just a joke." Kyle replied, "And not a very good one at that."

"Oh, of course sir. Ah here we are. Narthis Sector history in the pre-Republic period." the librarian said and he pointed towards a set of shelves.

"This entire set of shelves?" Kyle asked.

"The whole row sir. Both sides." the librarian said and Kyle looked up and down the row of shelves that clearly held thousands of books.

"What about specifics?" Kyle said, "I need information on metalworking."

"I can't say sir." the librarian said, "I'm not familiar with the contents of the section. But the catalogue can be searched by key words."

"And the search results include the contents of books or just their titles?"

"Titles only for hard copy documents I'm afraid. But for digital texts you have the choice between the two. Searching by titles only is obviously faster."

"Thank you." Kyle said, "Now if you don't mind I'd like to study privately."

"Of course sir. You can use the terminal to summon assistance should you require it." the librarian said before turning around and walking away.

Kyle sat down and the terminal in front of him activated automatically as he took out his datapad and the medallion. Then turning to the computer terminal he input the search term 'Pre-Republic metalworking' and limiting the search to texts relating only to the history of the Narthis Sector.

From the roof of a building adjacent to the library two masked figures used wide scan binocs to observe Kyle through a large window at the end of the ancient history section. The jedi had several tomes on the table beside his computer and every so often he would get up to either fetch another or return one to the shelf

where he had found it.

“Okay that’s him.” one of them said, “Send in the droid.”

6.

Since the departure of the librarian, Kyle had been alone in the ancient history section but that changed when he heard footsteps. He noticed that he felt nothing in the Force and as he glanced over his shoulder he was not surprised to see a droid walking towards him. The humanoid machine stopped in the ancient history section and began to search through the shelves just behind the Jedi. Kyle had seen several droids of various types at work in the library, most often replacing books on the shelves after they had been returned but there were also some being used to obtain specific books that had been requested from the central desk. This droid however, definitely looked as if it was looking for something that it could not find. Kyle had been careful to return each book that he had taken to the same place he got it from but there was no guarantee that other users of the library would be so considerate and it occurred to him that the droid was hunting for a book that someone had either removed without permission or had put back on the shelves in the wrong place. Getting out of his chair, Kyle went to find another book and as he reached the shelf he noticed the droid backing away from the shelf it had been studying. Then Kyle looked back at the shelf in front of him and removed a book before turning back towards the table he was working at, whereupon he saw that the droid was now gone.

As was the medallion that Kyle had left on the table. Dropping the book he had just removed from the shelf onto the floor Kyle darted to the end of the row of shelves and looked both ways, searching for the droid. The machine had continued to move at a normal walking pace, obviously not wanting to attract any undue attention, so its lead was minimal and Kyle began to hurry after it. But as he started to close on the droid its head spun around and the moment it saw him it broke into a run.

"Stop that droid!" Kyle called out, his voice carrying around the quiet library and attracting a lot of attention as he accelerated to give chase before the droid did something unexpected.

The machine had been heading towards a set of stairs that would lead it down towards the exit from the library but all of a sudden it veered off and instead headed between two rows of shelves.

"I have you now." Kyle said to himself. When the librarian had led him to the ancient history section they had walked along here and Kyle had seen that each of the rows was a dead end. But as he rounded the corner to follow the droid he saw that it had raised one of its arms and the muzzle of a weapon had emerged. The weapon was not pointed at Kyle however, instead the droid was still facing down the rows of shelves and running straight towards the large window at the far end.

There was the sound of a pulse wave weapon discharging followed immediately by the sound of breaking glass. The energy blast from the compact weapon was not enough to totally destroy the toughened window but it did punch a fist sized hole through it and produced a pattern of fractures that spread out from this point so that when the droid charged into the window it smashed right through before disappearing from view as it fell towards the street below.

Kyle rushed to the window and looked through. He was just in time to see the droid land on its feet among startled pedestrians, some of whom had been hit by the falling glass. The droid paused briefly to determine its location and then began to run down the street. Knowing that he could not afford to let the droid out of his sight, Kyle took a deep breath and then leapt through the already smashed window, letting the Force flow through him to control his fall until he too landed among the startled beings in the street below. Kyle then started to run after the droid, drawing his lightsaber and activating it just in case the droid decided to turn around and attack him with its built in pulse wave blaster. The glowing blade also had the added advantage of alerting other pedestrians to his approach and made them get out of the way. Though he knew that recovering the medallion had to be his priority he guessed that the very fact that it had been taken in broad daylight meant that someone else was interested in it enough to risk stealing it and if he followed the droid for long enough then it could just lead him to those responsible and they likely knew more about the medallion than he did.

With these two objectives in mind Kyle began by closing the gap between him and the fleeing droid to just a few metres before reducing his speed to match it. Then each time the droid rounded a corner Kyle would speed up, making sure that the machine did not have the opportunity to escape.

"The droid's on the move." one of the masked figures watching the chase said.

"And the Jedi's right behind it. I knew we shouldn't have left the job to a walking tin can." the other replied.

"What, you think we should have done it ourselves? Maybe you fancy getting up close to a Jedi but I'd rather avoid it."

"Well we've got to do something now haven't we? The droid will never outrun the Jedi."

"I can see that. Let's move. I'll drive."

The droid continued to weave in and out of the crowd ahead but was unable to escape Kyle. As well as standing out among the largely organic crowd the droid still had hold of the medallion that Kyle could sense resonating through the Force. But Kyle's attention was attracted by a change in the sound of the traffic passing by as a speeder pulled out of traffic and came to a sudden halt close to the droid. The droid suddenly ceased trying to flee and turned on the spot to face Kyle, raising its arm mounted weapon. "Everyone get down!" Kyle yelled just moments before the droid fired at him and there were screams of panic from the crowd as they dived for whatever cover they could find.

Kyle blocked each shot from the droid effortlessly using his lightsaber. But the attack was intended just to prevent him from preventing the droid from passing the medallion to one of the occupants of the speeder before the vehicle's engines roared as it gained altitude to position itself above the authorised level of ground traffic and sped off.

The droid was still firing but with no need to continue following it, Kyle charged forwards and with a single slash of his lightsaber decapitated it before kicking the staggering headless body to the ground. Looking around, Kyle then saw an open topped speeder close by. The vehicle had come to a halt when the escaping vehicle had swerved in front of it to reach the droid and the surprised driver had yet to get going again.

"I need your speeder." Kyle told the driver, "Jedi business."

"What?" the driver replied, not having paid attention.

"You will lend me your speeder." Kyle repeated, waving his hand as he used the Force to push the suggestion directly into the drivers mind.

"Of course I will lend you my speeder." the driver said, climbing out of the vehicle and making way for Kyle to leap in and start off after the fleeing speeder. Copying the other vehicle, Kyle increased the altitude of his 'borrowed' speeder to take him above the authorised level for traffic, a move that allowed him to move far more quickly than he could have at low altitude. The driver of the fleeing speeder obviously saw this as a way of escaping from Kyle faster than the amount of traffic would allow but it also made it easier for Kyle to track him.

But the other speeder still had a significant head start on the Jedi and was too far away for him to be able to sense the stolen medallion through the Force. This left Kyle having to begin his pursuit by driving in the general direction taken by the fleeing thieves until he spotted their speeder hovering above the level of traffic and sped towards it.

"It's that damned Jedi! He's coming right for us." the driver of the other vehicle said when he saw Kyle approaching.

"So drive faster." his passenger told him.

"I'm driving as fast as I can. Why don't you do something about him?" the driver snapped back.

Kyle saw the hatch on the passenger side of the fleeing speeder rise up and a masked figure dressed all in black leant out of the open doorway with a weapon in his hand. Twisting the control column in his hands, Kyle swerved just in time to avoid the first volley of pulse wave fire. He kept behind the other speeder, doing his best to position himself out of the line of fire of the passenger. This was made more difficult by the continued jinking of the driver but at the same time these violent manoeuvres only served to hinder the accuracy of the passenger's shots.

Two speeders travelling at high speed above the authorised altitude for civilian traffic while the passenger of one fired at the other did not go unnoticed, however and there was the sound of sirens as a pair of speeder bikes in police colours suddenly drew level with Kyle.

"This is the police." and amplified voice called out from one of them, "All drivers are to decelerate and descend to ground level. You are under arrest."

Taking one hand of the controls of his speeder, Kyle took out his PTP link and activated it on what he knew to be the local police channel.

"This is Jedi Knight Kyle Jenner." he broadcast, "I am in pursuit of the vehicle ahead of me on official business. Be warned, my target is armed and-" but before he could finish his warning there was another volley of pulse wave fire that blew one of the police riders from his speeder bike. The remaining driver took evasive action before the gunman could target him as well while Kyle took the opportunity to try and close the gap between his speeder and the one he was chasing.

The differences between the two speeders worked in Kyle's favour here. His was lighter, faster and more manoeuvrable than the enclosed model being driven by the thieves so it took little effort to get closer to it while its occupants were still distracted by the police rider still trailing them and feeding their position to other nearby police units that Kyle spotted closing in from the sides. Taking his lightsaber in his hand, Kyle stood up as the other speeder came within a couple of metres and then leapt into the air. With no-one left at the controls the speeder he had been driving continued in a straight line, steadily losing speed until it came to a halt and just hovered in mid air.

Meanwhile Kyle activated his lightsaber as he somersaulted through the air before landing with a loud 'Clump!' on the roof of the other speeder.

"He's on top of us!" the passenger yelled and he released his safety harness before trying to slide further out

of the hatchway so he could bring his rifle to bear on the jedi. But Kyle was too quick and he swung his lightsaber at the man, slicing through his rifle as well as one of the arms gripping it before also taking a chunk out of the roof of the speeder itself. Screaming, the gunman let go of what was left of his weapon and tried to grab hold of the stub of his ruined limb. But in doing so he overbalanced and without his harness to hold him in his seat he toppled out of the speeder, plummeting downwards where he landed on the road right in the path of another vehicle that was unable to stop in time.

Panic.

Shocked at the sudden loss of his comrade, the driver's reaction was easy for Kyle to sense. As the presence of the medallion inside the speeder and Kyle did not need to be Force sensitive to figure out what the driver was going to try next. The speeder began to lurch from side to side as the driver tried to literally shake Kyle off. But the jedi reached out and took hold of the vehicle's open door and gripped the handle tightly. Satisfied that his position was secure, Kyle then shut off his lightsaber and swapped it for the plasma carbine under his cloak. He took aim at the engine pod of the speeder on the side nearest him and there was a flash of light and heat as the weapon discharged, destroying the engine in an instant.

The speeder shook as its driver tried to keep it going on just one engine while trailing smoke and flames from the other while at the same time as trying to shake off Kyle. Ahead the driver saw just what he needed, a walkway ran across the road several metres above the altitude that he was currently operating at and he drove straight for it, increasing his altitude so that there would be little room between the roof of his speeder and the underside of the walkway.

Seeing what was about to happen Kyle leapt into the air again at the last minute, landing on the walkway itself among the shocked pedestrians as the speeder passed by underneath. The open hatch was torn right off the vehicle but that was not the limit of the damage. The driver had misjudged the angle of his approach and the hull of the speeder clipped the walkway as well, spinning it around so that the surviving engine struck it as well and was smashed apart. With no engines remaining the speeder was now nothing but an unpowered lump of metal hurtling through the air and the driver threw his arms up in front of his face instinctively as he screamed while the speeder hurtled towards the ground.

Vehicles below scattered as their terrified drivers saw the falling speeder before it smashed into the road and skidded along until its passage was finally brought to a halt as it skidded off the road and crashed into a wall where it exploded in a ball of fire.

Belle lowered the wide scan binocs she had been using to follow the chase and sighed as she shook her head.

"It's getting so hard to find good help these days." she said to herself before she took out her PTP link and activated, "Han it's me." she said when the connection was made.

"I take it from the tone of your voice that everything has not gone to plan?" her brother responded.

"Not gone to plan? Those two clowns who I trusted to get us the amulet failed miserably. Plus they've left a trail of bodies and wreckage across the city for the cops to pick up. I've got a bad feeling about this."

Watching from the walkway, Kyle then hurriedly made his way down to ground level and approached the burning remains of the speeder just as the police speeder bike and other emergency vehicles were starting to arrive on the scene. Studying the wreckage Kyle opened his mind to the Force and reached out through it. Then he smiled as he felt a tremor from within the wreckage and holding out his hand he summoned it to him. The medallion burst out of the wreckage and flew towards Kyle, coming to a halt in mid air right in front of him as he let it cool off before he took hold of it and returned it to his pocket.

"Jedi Jenner." a deep voice called out and Kyle turned to see a duros in a police uniform getting out of a newly arrived speeder. The markings on his uniform indicated that he was a senior officer, "Can you explain what is going on here? My precinct is being bombarded with distress calls from concerned citizens."

"Someone decided to try and disrupt my investigation inspector." Kyle replied, "Though their efforts were startlingly ineffective."

"And what exactly is this investigation Jedi Jenner?"

"I'm sorry, that's classified inspector."

"Classified?" the duros police inspector exclaimed, "I have wrecked vehicles and dead bodies, including one of my own men, spread all over this sector."

"And I cannot promise that there won't be any more of them." Kyle told him, "But I am not in a position to be able to give you all of the answers you need. In fact I'll be needing information from you."

"Answers? From me?"

"That's right inspector. I want to know who it was that tried to block my investigation. Now the body in this wreckage is likely to be badly damaged but the passenger shouldn't be in quite such a state. I want an ID for one or both of them. There's also the speeders registration to be checked and there's the remains of a droid back there that need examining. Any of that could give you a hint about who is responsible for this." Kyle told him.

"My precinct doesn't have those sorts of resources." the inspector replied, "We'll have to arrange for an outside agency to handle the examination."

"That's fine." Kyle replied, "Just let me know what they find." and then he turned and started to walk away, heading back towards the library.

Meanwhile the duros police inspector took out his own PTP link and activated it.

"Good afternoon." he said, "This is inspector Vemm, police precinct one-one-three-eight. I need you to carry out a forensic examination for me."

"Why of course inspector." the voice of the person he was speaking to replied, "Shill Security will make it a priority."

Returning to the library Kyle found that the police were there as well, having been summoned by the library staff following the actions of the droid.

"Jedi Jenner sir." the librarian who had earlier shown Kyle to the ancient history section, "What is going on?"

"Sorry about the mess." Kyle replied, "But it seems that my interest in ancient history is not unique and there are others that would like to stop me." then he looked around, "I don't suppose that there would be somewhere more private that I can continue my studies would there?"

Fear.

It was obvious that the librarian was not happy about the idea of Kyle continuing to work in the library after the damage inflicted by the droid but Kyle was not finished with his research yet. However, before the librarian could reply Kyle's PTP link sounded.

"Sorry about this." Kyle said as he took it out, "I forgot to set it on silent." then he held up the link to his mouth, "Go ahead." he said.

"Master it's me." Lom said, his signal obviously being relayed to Kyle via his starfighter.

"Lom, have you found something?" Kyle asked.

"Possibly master." Lom answered, "I have found a news report from approximately ten years ago. It concerns the theft of several artefacts similar to the medallion from a museum on Tepillos and the accompanying image shows several of these. They do not match the medallion exactly but they appear to be made from a similar copper material and have crystals set into them."

"Does the article say where they came from?" Kyle said, hoping that this would be the break he was looking for.

"Unfortunately not master." Lom replied, "But it does indicate that they pre-dated the presence of the Republic in the sector and that they were similar to an artefact found on Atch."

7.

Atch was a world on the edge of the Narthis Sector and not part of the Republic and even with the high speed that Kyle's starfighter was capable of when travelling through hyperspace it was still a two day journey from Crassis Major. The planet had a stone age population and over the years there had been several expeditions sent to study the world and its people. Most of these expeditions had been carried out by just a handful of researchers who had spent brief periods of time living among the natives. The current expedition was different however, large and well funded it had enabled a team of more than thirty to set up a long term camp that as well as studying the native arten civilisation was also excavating the ruins that had been left behind by another, more advanced species that had settled the world long ago before vanishing.

The man who met Kyle at the simple area of open ground that served as a landing field for the expedition's transport was even taller than the Jedi was.

"Doctor Larson?" Kyle asked as he climbed out of his fighter's cockpit.

"Please, call me Dayle." the other man replied and he held out his hand in greeting, "This isn't the sort of place to stand on ceremony."

"Then you must call me Kyle." Kyle said, shaking Dayle's hand, "Now is there somewhere we can talk in private?"

"Of course, come on I've got my ATV over there to take us to the camp." Dayle said and he pointed to a compact wheeled all terrain vehicle that was parked close by and the two men then made their way over to it and climbed aboard.

"So how long have you been on Atch Doctor- ah, Dayle?" Kyle asked as the vehicle set off.

"Oh about three years now." Dayle responded, "Apart from short breaks back to Crassis Major of course.

Though I've been studying the planet for longer than that. I spent a couple of months here while I was completing my doctorate. Then I spent most of the time after that trying to drum up funding for this little camping trip. You'd be amazed how expensive shipping everything we need out here is." Dayle answered.

"And have you learnt much in your three years?"

"Oh lots. We've learnt that we don't know who the aliens that settled this planet were. That we don't know where they came from and we don't know what happened to them." Dayle told him, grinning.

"Well at least you know what you don't know." Kyle commented and he smiled back.

"The problem is that the aliens who settled this planet established themselves as rulers, effectively enslaving the arten. They took them away from the villages beside the rivers, lakes and oceans that the arten had built and made them live in their own cities. So since the arten are amphibian they deserted the cities as soon as their alien overlords vanished and largely abandoned the culture that had been forced on them. That meant that they then fell into ruin and the arten didn't bother to preserve much since it was of no use to them."

Dayle explained.

"Largely abandoned?" Kyle commented, "So are there still some that stuck to the lives that the aliens had pushed on them?"

"A few yes." Dayle replied, "But there are legends about a group that stuck by what they'd been taught.

Presumably those who'd done better out of the occupation. They were known as the Blood Tribe because their weapons dripped red with blood. But they don't exist any more either. After a thousand years they've long since died out."

"A thousand years?" Kyle repeated.

"Yes. Why, is that important?" Dayle said.

"Interesting." Kyle answered.

"Well here we are anyway. Welcome to my current home." Dayle told him as he drove the ATV into a clearing.

Ahead of the vehicle was a collection of tents. Also visible were several portable fusion generators to provide power, water processing and storage systems and the antenna for a subspace communication system.

Moving between these, Kyle could see other members of the research team and also several members of the indigenous arten who had been hired to work for them.

Dayle parked the ATV outside one of the tents and climbed out before opening up the tent flap and heading inside. Kyle followed and found himself inside a tent that served as both Dayle's private quarters but also as a work space and both men sat down at a collapsible table.

"So how about you explain to me properly what brings a member of the Jedi Order all the way out here past the borders of the Republic?" Dayle asked and Kyle grinned as he reached under his cloak.

"I came across this on Tepillos." he said as he took out the medallion, "And my padawan found information that links it to Atch."

"Tepillos is a long way from here Kyle." Dayle replied as he took the medallion from the Jedi. Then he

frowned, "Is this copper?"

"The analysis droids say so." Kyle answered.

"And these stones?"

"Unknown. But the stones are what's really interesting about it. I need to find out where it came from." Kyle told him, "Though I suppose I ought to warn you, I'm not the only one interested in it."

"Oh really?" Dayle said, looking up from the medallion and at Kyle instead, "I take it you don't mean someone who wants to put it in a museum?"

"Unlikely. In my experience museums don't employ mercenaries to shoot up the streets of a city. Though it could just be someone who wants it for no reason more than to put it in their own private collection."

"Or they could be agents of the Dark Side?" Dayle asked, "If this has the Jedi Order interested then it must be related to the Force somehow."

"That is possible." Kyle admitted, "Though it would be the worst case scenario." then he paused while he watched Dayle studying the medallion, "Well? Does it look at all familiar to you?" he asked.

"The arten are a stone age civilisation." Dayle said, "So metalworking isn't something that's part of it. But we have found the remains of metal tools and other items at some of our dig sites. Obviously any civilisation that can travel between star systems isn't going to be able to do that without the ability to produce metal tools and vehicles." then he paused before putting the medallion down on the table, "In fact we did find something interesting a couple of months ago." he said as he hurriedly got up and went over to a trunk, opening it and rummaging through until he found a datapad that he brought back to the table and began to search through its contents, "Ah yes, here we are. We excavated what looked to be a primitive foundry. It featured what looked like stone pouring moulds for spear tips along with a furnace and what looked like a channel that had been created to bring water into it. Plus there were carvings on the wall that showed figures looking like arten bringing material to be worked and leaving with weapons."

"Do you have any images of this?" Kyle asked and Dayle nodded.

"Of course, right here." he replied and he put the datapad down on the table, setting the device to show the images that had been taken of the foundry.

Kyle flipped through the various images of the tools and furnace that had been taken from a variety of angles until he reached those that had been taken of the carvings on the walls. Just as Dayle had said the carvings seemed to show the process of bringing in raw material, working it to produce weapons and then those weapons being taken away. But there was no sign at any of the stages that related to producing any form of medallion or anything that was specifically decorative. Then Kyle noticed something at the bottom of the image showing arten warriors marching out of the foundry with spears and he tried to zoom in on it. But he found that the detail he was interested in had been cut off the bottom of the image and he frowned.

"What's wrong?" Dayle asked.

"I can't make out what's down here." Kyle replied, pointing to the bottom of the image.

"Oh that's one of the mysteries we're still trying to figure out." Dayle told him, "The arten do have a written alphabet and there are examples of it carved all over the ruins. The problem is that they aren't generally literate. There are only a limited number of them that can read and write and none of them that know how are willing to share their secret with us no matter how many times we ask or what we try and offer them in return."

"So you haven't bothered to record them yourself? Isn't that odd I your line of work?"

"I record what I can work on." Dayle replied, "I've got someone else working on translating the carvings so they've got the images of them on their datapads."

"I'd like to see them." Kyle said.

"Sure." Dayle replied, "I'll show you to her tent. She's generally there at this time of day working on-

"No." Kyle interrupted, "I mean I want to see the actual carvings themselves, not the images your student has."

"Sure." Dayle replied, "It's not too far, I can take you there now."

What remained of the ancient city was still largely buried with just parts of ruined structures extending above ground. But other areas had been excavated by the research team, with the ground dug out in neat rectangular sections marked out with coloured tape.

"As you can see we're nowhere near finished finding out what's here." Dayle said as the pair walked among the ruins, "We found this city about a year ago and it's easily the largest one we're aware of. Ground penetrating sensor scans suggest that it extends as far as the base of those hills over there."

"And what sort of structures do you think you've uncovered so far? Kyle asked as he peered at a partially buried wall and noticed more carvings, these obscured by the moss that had grown over them.

"Oh a mix really. We've found the homes that the arten lived in. Obviously some places like the foundry where they worked for their alien overlords and one or two buildings that allowed relatively large numbers of arten to gather." Dayle replied.

"Markets?" Kyle said.

"No, we're thinking that they are some sort of temple. One of my students suggested that they could be theatres but there's nothing in arten culture to indicate that. Look, here's the foundry." and Dayle pointed out a ruined stone building. Over the centuries it had been abandoned the ground around it had been built up to the point where most of it had been buried. But Doctor Larson's research team had carefully dug away the dirt until the building was exposed right the way down to floor level. Dayle jumped down into the excavation and walked through what remained of the foundry's doorway, with Kyle following him.

"Well here we are. One copper foundry." the xenoarchaeologist said.

"Operated by a species that could not possibly have built it on their own." Kyle added as he looked around the inside of the building.

The roof was completely missing from the foundry, leaving it open to the elements but also ensuring that there was ample light to see by without the need for artificial illumination at this time of day.

"Given how much we're finding here, we're considering moving our camp closer." Dayle said as Kyle continued to look around, "It'll make life easier for us when we start removing some of the bigger artefacts we've found."

"You remove artefacts from this site?" Kyle asked.

"We do. It's all logged if that's what you're worried about. Should the arten ever decide that they want them back then they'll be easily traceable."

It was then that Kyle spotted something he had not noticed on any of the images of the foundry he had seen on Dayle's datapad and he frowned. Part of the exposed wall was decorated by some sort of statue carved out of the same sort of stone.

"What's this?" he asked as he moved towards the strange feature. The wall at this point was lower than most of the rest of the building, it having collapsed at some point in the distant past before the foundry was buried. But more significantly the wall around the edge of the statue had had markings carved into it. Like those that Dayle had said were a common feature on the ruins they had the look of writing. But these were so badly damaged that they were illegible.

"Oh we've found a lot of those." Dayle told him, "Small ones like that in almost every building we dig out and much larger versions in the public gathering spaces. Our current theory is that they are some sort of shrine. Though not one related any native arten belief, so we're guessing that it's something else that was imported by the aliens who settled here. Especially since the alphabet is obviously different."

"Different?" Kyle asked.

"Yes, significantly. Though we've had no more luck translating any of that one than the local arten writing."

"The writing here is damaged." Kyle said, "I'd like to see an intact example."

"How about one of the temples?" Dayle suggested, "There's alien writing all over those and in much better condition than here."

"Take me there." Kyle responded, nodding.

"This way." Dayle told him, heading back out of the ruined foundry and climbing out of the excavation. He then led Kyle further into the ruined city and as they walked Kyle spotted a small group of researchers working to carefully remove the dirt from around another ruined structure, assisted by several arten who were working to remove the excavated dirt from the area, "That's one of the temples there." Dayle said when a larger ruined structure came into view. Like the foundry this had been dug out of the ground and so sat at the bottom of a wide hole that the two men jumped down into. The exterior wall of the temple was more badly damaged than that of the foundry and Dayle and Kyle just stepped over a section of wall to get inside. Deeper into the building however, the walls were in much better shape and it appeared that someone had used a chemical cleaner to remove dirt and moss so that the markings on the wall could be read more easily.

Evil.

Kyle felt a shudder go down his spine as he stepped into the central area of the temple and Dayle looked at him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." Kyle answered, "There's something odd about this place that I can't quite put my finger on. Something unnatural."

"Some of my students and the other researchers have said the same thing." Dayle told him, "They say it's like something's watching them. The arten don't like the temples either, but I've been putting that down to just superstition relating to the aliens. As if being here will summon them back."

"Speak of devils and they shall appear." Kyle commented and Dayle smiled.

"Kind of." he said before looking around to a ruined statue, "You'll find the best examples of the alien writing around the base of that." he added, pointing to the statue he was looking at.

Nodding, Kyle approached the statue. It looked like at one time it had been about Kyle's height and depicted a humanoid figure clutching a weapon in front of it. But now the statue had been broken off just above the waist, making it impossible to determine the species from its facial features or the style of the weapon it carried. Seeing the carvings that Dayle had told him about, Kyle crouched down at the base of the statue and

looked down. There on the raised base that the statue was stood on Kyle saw the carvings and just as Dayle had told him they did not match those that belonged to the arden language. But they did remind Kyle of a writing style that he had seen examples of during his time studying in the jedi temple on Coruscant, a writing style that had not been used for hundreds of years.

Quickly he took out his datapad and activated it, searching through it for files that he had not had need of in many years but that he needed to refer to now. Calling up a list of symbols, Kyle placed the datapad on the base of the statue and began to scroll though the list. As he came across each of the carved symbols in turn he tapped it on his datapad, building up a body of text that his datapad began to translate automatically as he went along.

"Kyle?" Dayle said, "Do you know what this says?" and Kyle paused, unwilling to give anything away to the xenoarchaeologist.

"They are similar to something I've seen in jedi records." he replied, "But I don't know what they mean." That much was true from a certain point of view, he told himself. Kyle did not know what the inscription meant but his datapad had deciphered the words.

BEHOLD BREYOS VORSEN – THE TEACHER OF WORLDS.

It was obvious that Breyos Vorsen was the name of the individual depicted by the ruined statue but why he would be referred to as 'The Teacher' was something Kyle could not tell. All he knew about this Breyos Vorsen was that he had been a Sith.

"You say that you have removed artefacts from this site?" Kyle asked, looking back at Dayle.

"That's right." he answered.

"And have any had carvings such as these been removed?"

"From other dig sites for further study maybe, but I've not signed off on any of them being taken off world or allowed anything from this structure to be taken. Not physically anyway. Images of pretty much everything gets sent back to the university. Oh and copied to our sponsors of course. They get regular updates on what we've discovered so they can tell that their money is being put to good use."

"And what about the stone floor panel that was over there?" Kyle said and he pointed towards an area of the floor where a square section of stone had obviously been prised out of place and removed.

"That's odd." Dayle replied frowning, "I never authorised that."

"Do you know exactly what it was?" Kyle asked.

"Most likely another floor stone like the rest in here. Though some of them are engraved as you can see here." Dayle answered and he wiped his foot across the flat piece of stone he was standing on to reveal a shallow engraved pattern.

"Where would they be taken if they had been removed by accident?" Kyle said.

"Back to camp." Dayle told him, "We've got a tent set up where we can clean artefacts up before studying them more closely."

"Then that's where we need to go next." Kyle said, "I want to know exactly what this temple was built for."

Returning to the camp, Dayle took Kyle to one of the larger tents and led him inside. In here Kyle saw rows of sturdy work tables that were packed with artefacts, each of which had been tagged with a serial number. "The tags list the date and location where each item was found." Dayle explained, "And all of them are listed in this log." and he walked to the far end of one of the tables and picked up a datapad that had been left there.

"Does that list everything you've taken from a dig site or just what is in here?" Kyle said as he looked around and saw that there were no large square pieces of engraved stone that could have come from the gap in the temple floor.

"It should list everything that's come through here." Dayle told him, "If it's been sent back to Crassis Major then there'll be a note of when as well as my authorisation number. Assuming that proper procedure was followed anyway."

"Check please." Kyle said and Dayle looked down at the datapad, searching through its contents. Then he shook his head.

"Nothing." he said, "No artefact matching that description has been brought here. That means that it hasn't been removed from the site, not officially at least."

"Then Dayle, I would say that it appears you have an issue with theft."

"Stang!" Dayle exclaimed, "I hand picked this team. Now you're telling me that one of them is a thief? Plundering ancient ruins and selling artefacts for profit? That goes against everything I believe in."

"It may not be one of your people." Kyle said, "After all you said yourself that images of all your findings get sent back to your university."

"But who else could have taken them?" Dayle asked, "Someone had to come here and dig that stone out of the floor. The only people here are my team and-" and then he suddenly stopped mid sentence.

"And who Dayle?" Kyle asked.

"And the crew of the ship that brings our supplies and takes artefacts cleared for removal back to Crassis

Major." Dayle responded, "But that ship is inspected when it reaches Crassis Major so I don't see how it could be used to smuggle anything off world either."
"I need to know when that ship is coming here next." Kyle said.

8.

Kyle hid his starfighter a short distance away from the landing field in a direction that kept it clear of the research team's camp and also any of their nearby dig sites. It was also positioned away from any of the large bodies of water that the arden preferred to stay near when they weren't working for the research team. With the starfighter located where it would not be discovered, Kyle then sat in his cockpit and waited. According to Dayle the supply ship would arrive in two days and until then there was nothing more that Kyle could do.

He passed the time by meditating, having set the sensors of his starfighter to alert him when the supply ship arrived. But as it happened the warning did not come from the intended source.

They are here.

Kyle opened his eyes suddenly at the warning that came through the Force and he looked at his console. Still powered down, there was no indication that the supply ship had come within the distance the jedi had specified when he set the alert. But reaching out through the Force he could sense the six man crew of the supply ship while it was still outside the atmosphere of Atch. Then he remembered the medallion in his pocket and took it out, feeling the Force flowing through it.

All of a sudden the starfighter's console lit up and an alarm sounded.

"Attention pilot." an automated voice said, "Vessel approaching on specified course."

"Confirmed." Kyle responded as he put the medallion away again and opened the canopy before climbing out of his ship and hurrying towards the edge of the landing field where he concealed himself in the undergrowth that surrounded it.

It was not long before the supply ship appeared in the rapidly darkening sky above the landing field and Kyle saw that it was a typical light transport that was ideally suited to short hops around the sector, armed with a single laser cannon just in case it encountered anyone who wished it harm while far from the sort of protection that existed within the Republic's borders.

The transport ship set down in the middle of the landing field and for a short while nothing happened. The nose of the transport was marked with a serial number and using the Force to enhance his vision Kyle read and memorised it, intending to check its registration when he returned to civilisation. But then the main access ramp hissed open and two of the crew appeared. Each crewman was at the controls of a lightweight skiff that was laden with cases and they flew the repulsorlift vehicles in the direction of the camp. Kyle remained where he was however, more interested in what the other four crew members of this vessel that needed only the two that had already exited to operate were about to do. Thanks to the medallion he could still sense them inside the ship and they did not seem to be relaxed and just waiting for the other two crew members to return. Instead they were obviously planning something.

Then all four appeared on the access ramp, darting down it one after another before rushing into the undergrowth on the far side of the landing field. In the direction of the ruined city, Kyle noted. Each figure was dressed in dark clothing that covered their entire bodies and carried the sort of hand tools that would be needed to excavate dirt and prise apart pieces of stone that could then be stored in the packs on their backs.

Guessing where they were heading for, Kyle gave them a head start before he started to follow. The four beings ahead of him were being cautious not to give away their position to anyone who happened to be close by, whether they be part of the research team or a native but simply avoiding making noise and not making use of artificial lights was not enough to hide them from a jedi knight like Kyle and he was easily able to follow them all the way to the ruined city.

"Okay what we're looking for is about six hundred metres that way." one of the figures said, studying a datapad and pointing out a direction to follow and then the group started to head through the ruins carefully, even though there was no-one working here at night they did not risk using flash lights and so had to pick their way between the ruins to avoid injuring themselves.

Keeping close enough to see what they were doing, Kyle stayed behind the four beings and he noticed them passing right by several structures that were still packed with artefacts until they came to a specific one. Immediately they unpacked their tools and Kyle saw them start to dismantle parts of the structure, removing stones from the walls and floor as well as uplifting free standing features. Seeing them bypass the other structures in favour of this one did not surprise Kyle. The artefacts contained with the others were of interest only to academics studying the history of Atch and most of those were here already. On the other hand there was an established black market for anything relating to the Sith. The Jedi Order had long acted to suppress detailed knowledge of the Sith. The typical Republic citizen was well aware of the formidable warrior society that had waged war against the Republic a thousand years earlier as well as that they were a mirror image of the jedi, using the Force but doing so by drawing on the Dark Side. But what the Jedi Order did its best to

keep secret from everyone was the way in which the Sith had been able to use their knowledge of the Force to achieve many unnatural things. This was done simply to limit the opportunities for the unwary to attempt to make use of Sith knowledge for their own purposes. The consequences of this could be bad enough if the being attempting it was not sensitive to the Force, but if they were then they could easily be corrupted and the Republic could face the threat of a new Sith Empire. Even Jedi were not immune to this and some of the most recent attempts to resurrect the Sith Empire had come from within the Jedi Order itself. But prohibition only created desire in some elements of society and there were those who sought to obtain forbidden artefacts before they could be discovered and destroyed by the Jedi Order. Most of these were just collectors who got a thrill out of possessing something they were not supposed to but each one represented the possibility that someone could try to use the power they contained and nothing good would come from such acts.

Kyle listened as the four beings spoke to one another, reaching out through the Force to better hear them. But unfortunately their entire conversation was based around what they were doing there and then, there was no mention at all of who it was that was employing them to carry out this act of theft. Kyle doubted that they would be doing all of this themselves and he had hoped that one of them would identify who was really behind whatever was going on here. It was obvious that the four beings were removing more than they would be able to carry in their packs but when they were done, two of them opened up their packs and removed larger holdalls from them. All four then worked to pack up their haul of stolen treasures, placing smaller items in packs and the largest two in the holdalls. With the artefacts packed the four beings put their packs back on and got into pairs to carry the holdalls between them as they set off back towards the landing field.

Given that he knew exactly where they were heading to, Kyle did not bother to follow them. Instead he took advantage of the fact that he could move far more quickly than the heavily laden group to make his own way back to the landing field ahead of them, arriving there in plenty of time to conceal himself in the undergrowth at the edge of the landing field once more so that he could watch them as they returned and carried their bounty inside the transport.

Once again the ship was devoid of visible activity though Kyle could still sense the four crew members working inside it to store what they had taken from the ruins. A short time later there was the sound of repulsorlifts and Kyle saw the two skiffs, now carrying only a few small boxes instead of the large number that had been unloaded from the transport. Without pause, the drivers of the skiffs drove them up the ramp into their ship and the ramp promptly began to close.

Realising that the ship would be taking off shortly, Kyle got up and hurried back to his own fighter where he jumped into the cockpit and began to bring it on line. He waited for the transport to take off before he too launched his ship, heading up out of the atmosphere after it while letting it retain enough of a lead that he hoped the crew would not notice him following them. As the transport got far enough away from the planet to be unaffected by its gravity well there was a sudden flash of light as it made the jump into hyperspace and was gone. But this did not worry Kyle, the transport was a long way from escaping him yet. Having tracked the ship since it left the atmosphere of Atch, Kyle had been able to determine its exit vector and it was obvious that the transport was heading for the Lovas system, following the only charted route away from Atch that Kyle knew of. Once there it was possible that the ship would stop to offload its illicit cargo on the lightly populated world or alternatively it could carry on to *Cresh Station*. Fortunately for Kyle his starsaber-class starfighter was not only faster than the transport ship at sublight speeds, but was also much faster when travelling through hyperspace. This meant that even though the transport had already departed the Atch system he still had plenty of time to plot a jump to Lovas himself and be there several hours before the transport.

Exiting hyperspace near Lovas, Kyle could do nothing but wait once more and he powered down all of the non-essential systems aboard his starfighter to be running silent when the transport finally arrived almost four hours after he had. Kyle tracked the ship using his passive sensors, ready to follow it down into the atmosphere of Lovas if necessary. Glancing at his sensor display Kyle saw the icon that represented the transport. There was no name next to this, but there was a registration number that had been picked up from the transport's transponder and Kyle saw that it matched the number painted on its nose.

But instead of heading towards the planet the transport ship turned away and continued to fly through space as it lined itself up on a heading towards *Cresh Station*. Then, just as before it vanished with a flash into hyperspace. Having arrived ahead of the transport, Kyle already had the jump to *Cresh Station* plotted and loaded into his navigation computer. Therefore, making the jump himself was simply a matter of aligning his ship and engaging the hyperdrive. The route from Lovas to *Cresh Station* was better charted than the one from Atch to Lovas and it took barely a quarter of the time than the first jump did. This meant that although Kyle still arrived ahead of the transport his lead was cut to about an hour rather than four.

Cresh Station was one of three navigational beacons that provided the data necessary for plotting hyperspace jumps to shipping within the sector. The largest of these, *Aurek Station*, also served as the administrative hub for the Republic in the sector and had developed into a well travelled trade port. On the

other hand *Besh* and *Cresh Stations* were much smaller facilities that were unmanned, although they did maintain habitable interiors where stranded travellers could seek refuge while they waited for help to arrive. Once more Kyle set his ship to run silent while he waited for the transport to arrive. Other than heading back to Lovas, *Cresh Station* offered three distinct routes to other systems in the Narthis Sector so Kyle could not plot another jump until he had seen where the transport was heading.

It was just under an hour before another ship dropped out of hyperspace nearby and at first Kyle thought that the transport had arrived faster than he had anticipated. But his sensors identified the other vessel as a starstorm-class courier instead of a larger transport. Kyle was familiar with this class of vessel, lightweight, fast and agile they were popular with many Jedi knights who wanted something bigger than a starfighter as transport. Kyle doubted that this vessel was carrying another Jedi knight though. For starters he would have been informed if another Jedi was being deployed to the Narthis Sector and secondly the newly arrived ship was obviously trying to mask its identity by emitting pulses of energy that were designed to block its transponder.

It was obvious that this ship was up to no good so using only carefully judged bursts from his fighters manoeuvring thrusters, Kyle moved his ship in closer to gather as much information about it as he could. But before he could gather enough data to be able to penetrate the jamming signal there was another flash of light from outside his cockpit as the transport ship finally arrived from Lovas. Quickly, Kyle activated his communication system. He had no intention of sending any signals to either of the two vessels outside but he hoped that with the equipment aboard his starfighter he might be able to pick up any conversations they had with one another.

"*Distler's Luck*, is that you Ren?" a transmission from the transport asked and Kyle could not help but smile. This signal had just given him the identity of the starstorm-class courier as well as the first name of its pilot. "Right here. Got the merchandise?" the pilot of the courier responded.

"All aboard. Everything was right where it was supposed to be. Commence docking manoeuvres."

"Copy that, moving in."

The two vessels then started to move closer to one another, obviously lining up to dock with one another. This made them vulnerable. With the pilots of both ships focusing on the relative positions and speeds of one another rather than watching what was going on elsewhere around them it would have been easy for Kyle to bring his weapons online and swoop in to attack. But even if he failed to disable both vessels in one pass then they could simply flee and if neither was disabled then by heading in opposite directions then at least one of them was guaranteed to escape. But by continuing to watch the two ships and then following the *Distler's Luck* after the exchange was complete Kyle had the chance to find out where the artefacts were destined for.

It did not take long for the exchange to be completed it seemed, for after only a few minutes locked together the two ships split apart again and powered up their engines. Kyle waited before powering up his own, hoping to be able to determine which route the *Distler's Luck* would take. But he was surprised to see that both ships started to move off in the same direction before jumping into hyperspace almost simultaneously. The exit vector of the two ships indicated that they were heading for the ocean world of Delvad which was logical for the transport if it was bound for the Crassis system. Delvad was considered a playground for the wealthy, with many of its inhabitants living on luxurious artificial islands that hovered above the oceans on powerful repulsorlift fields. This meant that Delvad was a good place to find a buyer for the forbidden Sith artefacts but at the same time something about the idea that this was where the *Distler's Luck* was heading for did not seem right.

There would be no need to transfer the artefacts off the transport. It could land at Delvad itself.

Initially Kyle was surprised by the thought that came from within the Force itself but then he considered what it was telling him and compared it with what Dayle had told him on Atch.

The ship would be searched on Crassis Major.

If there were any forbidden artefacts aboard the ship then they would likely be discovered and the crew arrested. Therefore it was logical to have them transferred to another vessel far from the prying eyes of the Republic and the Jedi Order. Presumably the courier's pilot had some way of bypassing customs not available to the transport ship. Kyle then brought his ship's systems back to full operating capacity before setting a course for Crassis Major via Delvad and following the other two ships into hyperspace.

Dropping back out of hyperspace in the Crassis system Kyle quickly studied his sensors. Unlike all of the systems between here and Atch, the space around Crassis Major contained a large number of other starships. But even among the crowd he was still able to pick out a starstorm-class courier that was no longer acting to conceal its identity by masking its transponder and he saw the name *Distler's Luck* beside the icon on his sensor display as it began to enter the planet's atmosphere on a heading that would take it away from any of the primary starports.

For a moment Kyle considered contacting the authorities on Crassis Major and having them intercept the courier. But then he realised that even the closest of the defence force or customs units was too far away to reach the *Distler's Luck* before it could land and making the attempt would only tip off the pilot that Kyle was

looking for him. Instead Kyle turned his ship away from Crassis Major, laying in a course for *Aurek Station*. The sector's primary navigation beacon was the best place to access the Bureau of Ships and Service database that in theory at least held the registration details of every starship in the Republic.

9.

Aurek Station had been constructed close to the Crassis system in the early days of the Republic's expansion into the sector and it took less than a hour for Kyle's starfighter to reach it. The massive station had a vaguely mushroom-like appearance to it with a large tapered disc section at the top and four tower structures extending downwards. Docking ports for ships of all sizes were spread all over the outer edge of the station and between the towers for smaller classes. But Kyle did not head for one of these, instead he flew his starfighter into the cavernous main hangar and touched down in the section reserved for vessels belonging to the Republic. Here he could see the squadron of aurek-wing fighters that were stationed at *Aurek Station* to protect it as well as four of the six gunships that patrolled the sector.

As Kyle climbed out of his fighter, making his way down a set of steps pushed up against it by a service droid he saw one of the fighter pilots smile and wave to him.

"Kyle!" she called out, making her way over from her own fighter as it underwent maintenance and towards Kyle's.

"Erin." Kyle replied. Erin Shill was Belle's younger sister and like her older brother and sister she was a twin. But whereas Belle and Han worked for their own private military company, Erin and her twin Corlay had chosen to serve in the Republic's armed forces instead. Erin was a lieutenant in the navy while Corlay was a Freedom Warrior, one of the non-Force sensitive troops that supported the Jedi Order, "How are you?"

"Fine. What are you doing here?" the pilot replied, "Your Belle's been wondering where you've been the last couple of days?"

"Yes I had to go somewhere in a hurry. Right now I'm here to see Agent Raser though." Kyle told her, "I need her input on an investigation."

"Okay. Well let me know if you need a pilot." Erin said, smiling again before she returned to check on the work being carried out on her fighter.

Meanwhile Kyle headed for the nearest turbolift that could take him to one of the station's administrative levels and from here he headed for the sector rangers office. Sector rangers were the Republic's interstellar police force that dealt with crime on a galactic level. As such they had access to the resources necessary to run checks on people and starships at a higher level than just across a single planet. Jule Raser was the most senior sector ranger in the sector, running her department from *Aurek Station*.

"Jule." Kyle said in greeting when he entered the sector rangers' station and saw her standing beside one of her staff at a console.

"Jedi Jenner." she replied, looking up from the console, "What brings you here today?"

"Official business I'm afraid." he told her, "I need a BoSS search running for two ships."

"That's a shame." Jule said, "Well you know there's always an extra seat at my family's dinner table if you want it."

"Perhaps some time soon." Kyle responded as he approached Jule and the other agent before producing a mem-stick from under his cloak, "I need you to run a check on these two ships." he said when Jule took the mem-stick from him.

"Sure, let's take a look." she said, plugging the device into the terminal in front of her and looking down at the other sector ranger, "Check them out." she told him.

"Yes ma'am." he responded.

The registration details that Kyle had obtained for the two starships involved in the artefact smuggling operation were clearly marked and the sector ranger copied both sets into the BoSS database search.

"Do you know if they're registered locally?" Jule asked while the junior agent began to run his search.

"I expect at least one of them is." Kyle answered, "Though the other could be registered elsewhere deliberately to make tracing it harder."

"Well if it is we can put in a request with-"

"Got them." the junior agent said before Jule could finish her statement, "Both ships."

"Let's see." Jule responded as both she and Kyle looked at the display.

"The freighter is a Hyperdyne five-seven-eight-R." the other agent said,

"Yes, that's right." Kyle said, "I saw the registration painted on its nose as well as grabbing it from the transponder."

"Well it looks like it's registered to a shipping company here in the Narthis Sector Kyle." Jule said as she read the search result off the screen, "Farris Shipping."

"Farris? As in Del Farris?" Kyle asked.

"The very same." Jule replied, "More commonly known as Mister Faye Karn now, husband of the head of the Karn family. He won't be pleased that someone's using one of his ships for illegal activity."

"And what about the second ship?" Kyle asked.

"The *Distler's Luck*." the junior agent said, "Starstorm-class courier. A registered private transport ship belonging to a Ren Distler."

"Do you have a residence on file?" Kyle said.

"No, but there is an arrest record." the agent replied.

"Let's see it then." Jule told him and the man brought up the related file that came complete with an image of a human male that was obviously Ren Distler himself.

"Smuggling." Kyle said, "I see plenty of arrests here. How did he manage to keep his licence to operate a hyperspace capable starship?"

"Easy." Jule replied, "Because none of the charges have ever stuck. Look." and she pointed to another section of the record file where it was described how on each occasion that Ren had been arrested the charges had been dropped within a few hours, "I'd say that this guy has a damned good lawyer." she added. "Have you ever heard of a smuggler that could afford a good lawyer?" Kyle asked and Jule shook her head. "Only those that were connected to something bigger." she said, "Their bosses would send in an expensive lawyer to make sure they were turned loose before they got to the stage of selling out their boss for a more lenient sentence."

"Can you tell me who his lawyer was?" Kyle said and Jule nodded.

"That should be possible." she responded before looking at her subordinate and added, "Bring up one of those arrests. See who his lawyer was."

"Yes ma'am." the sector ranger said and then a moment later he responded, "The log indicates he was represented by a Heddren Drud of Drud Legal."

"As in the Drud Family." Kyle commented, "That's two of the Founding Families connected to this."

"Kyle, surely you're not suggesting that the Founding Families are behind whatever it is that you're investigating." Jule said.

"I'm saying that the Druds are very expensive lawyers." Kyle said, "I've heard of Heddren's wife taking on cases for free for charity but never Heddren himself. Plus Del Karn's companies own hundreds of starships that could be put to criminal use by their crews. Neither man actually needs to be involved in what I'm investigating for there to be a connection. Somehow I doubt that Heddren Drud will be willing to discuss his clients with me but I may be able to get some answers out of Del Karn."

The custody area of the police station was frequently crowded as it was now at this time of the day on the last day of the working week when revellers who had had too much to drink were brought in. However, very few of them had lawyers who charged ten thousand credits an hour or more arrive to represent them.

"Public drunkenness, public disorder, theft, assault, criminal damage and resisting arrest." the custody officer behind the desk said to Heddren, reading the list of charges.

"Where is she?" Heddren asked.

"Being brought out now." the custody officer replied and he looked in the direction of the police station's detention cells as another officer led a young woman out. Barefoot but wearing what was obviously an expensive dress the woman had her hands bound behind her back and tape over her mouth.

"Is the gag really necessary?" Heddren asked.

"Not if you're not too worried about the little rancor cow trying to bite you as well." the custody officer replied and Heddren sighed.

"Very well." he said, "Now about those charges." and he removed a bulging envelope from his pocket before placing it on the counter in front of him, keeping his hand on top of it. In response the custody officer tapped a key on his terminal keypad and the list of the screen vanished.

"What charges?" he said and Heddren smiled as he slid the envelope towards the other man who quickly removed it from sight.

"Thank you. Now I'll take this young lady off your hands." Heddren said and he reached out to grab hold of the woman by her arm, "Come on Gayal." he told her, "Time to get you home." and then without bothering to have her untied he started to pull her towards the exit.

Outside there was a luxury landspeeder in the police station's parking lot and as Heddren pulled Gayal over to it the driver got out and opened the rear passenger door closest to them.

"Get in." Heddren said as he shoved Gayal into the speeder before getting in as well and sitting down facing her. Only then as the driver was returning to his seat did Heddren reach out and rip the tape from Gayal's mouth.

"Ouch! What the kriff?" she snapped.

"Shut up Gayal." Heddren told her, "Your latest little stunt has just cost your parents another sixty thousand credits even before my fees are adding in. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Get these off me." Gayal replied, moving hands out from behind her as much as she could.

"Unfortunately I don't happen to have a key on me. I expect one of your parents' security officers will though." Heddren said and then he looked towards the driver, "To the Karn residence." he said and the driver nodded.

"Yes Mister Drud." the man responded as the speeder started to move off.

Gayal just stared out of the window as the speeder drove towards her family's home, while Heddren watched her. However, when they were about a block away from their destination the PTP link in his pocket sounded and he took it out.

"What is it?" he asked, aware that the call was coming from his office despite the lateness of the hour.

"Sir we've just received a ping from the spike in the sector's BoSS database. Someone just carried out searches on two ships that we've flagged." a female sounding voice told him.

"Which ones?" Heddren asked.

"A vessel registered to Farris Shipping and also an independent courier, the *Distler's Luck*."

"Stang." Heddren said softly, "Look, I'm almost at the Karn residence now. I'll let them know but I need you to find out all you can about who ran the search and why." and then without waiting for a reply Heddren shut off his PTP and put it away, "Congratulations young lady." he said to Gayal, "It seems that you won't be the focus of your parents' attention when we get you home after all."

"We're there sir." the driver announced as he turned the speeder off the road and drove to a set of gates manned by a pair of armed guards in Shill Security uniforms. Recognising the vehicle, the guards immediately opened the gates and waved it through without bothering to check who was inside. The speeder then drove up to the front of the house where it was met by two members of the household staff, including another guard from Shill Security.

"The Karns are expecting you sir." the servant told Heddren as he got out of the vehicle. Then he snarled at Gayal and added, "And her as well."

"Do lead the way." Heddren said, allowing the servant to take the lead while behind him the guard took hold of Gayal and began to drag her along with him.

They were shown into a lounge where Faye and Del Karn were both sat, as were their two younger daughters Sial and Keera. All four were watching a video broadcast on a massive wall mounted display when Heddren and Gayal were shown in and Faye paused the image as she got to her feet, scowling.

"Gayal you can't imagine how disappointed we are." she said, "You being arrested again is bad enough but I'm told it's only luck that your sisters weren't as well."

"We were sober enough to run quicker." Keera muttered as she and Sial smiled at one another.

"Just get me out of these kriffing binders okay?" Gayal said with no hint of remorse for her situation.

"Do it." Del said to the guard standing behind Gayal. But as the guard was reaching for a key Heddren spoke up.

"Something else has come up." he said, "Something important. Have either of you had contact with Ren Distler recently?"

"Yes. Why?" Del asked.

"Because someone just ran a BoSS search on his ship as well as one of your transports." Heddren replied.

"Girls go to your rooms." Faye told Sial and Keera, "Take Gayal as well."

"What for?" Keera asked.

"Just go." Del told her sternly and she got to her feet.

"Sure, why not?" Sial added and she leapt up and dashed towards the doorway where Gayal and the guard were standing where she snatched the key to Gayal's binders from the guard before waving them in front of Gayal's face, "So what are they worth sis?" she asked before darting out of the room.

"Hey get back here with those!" Gayal called out as she tried to give chase. Then after Keera had also left the room Faye looked at the servant and guard.

"Leave us." she commanded and both of them exited the room as well, closing the door behind them and leaving the Karns alone with Heddren.

"Ren collected another shipment from Atch for us today." Del said as soon as he was sure no-one was listening in, "It was done in the usual way. One of my transports collected the artefacts and then rendezvoused with Ren's hip at *Cresh Station* before he brought them the rest of the way here."

"Well it looks like someone's been able to connect the two ships." Heddren said.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Faye said before Heddren's PTP link sounded again.

"The office." the lawyer told her and Del, "I asked them to find out more about the search." and then he activated the link, "Go ahead." he said. Then he just nodded, "Okay I understand." he said, "Let me know if anything else crops up." and then he shut off the device.

"Well?" Del asked.

"The search was carried out from *Aurek Station*." Heddren said, "From the sector rangers' office."

"Oh no." Faye responded.

"Let's not panic just yet." Del told her, "We still don't know what prompted the search."

"But can we take the chance that the Republic is on to us?" Faye asked.

"No. No we can't." Heddren said, "But we need to make sure before we start making any rash decisions. I suggest we contact Han and see if he's heard anything from Erin."

"I'll do it." Faye replied and she walked to the communication unit set into a nearby table and activated it, selecting Han's communication address. Then a few moments later a miniature hologram of Han Shill

appeared on the table.

"Faye. Del. It's a little late for a social call. What's wrong?" he asked.

"Han." Heddren said as he stepped into the field of the holo-scanner in the lounge, "The sector rangers just ran a check on a ship belonging to Farris Shipping and Ren Distler's as well. Del tells me that they just had another shipment brought in from Atch and we were wondering if you'd heard anything from Erin."

"Stang." Han hissed.

"I take it that's a yes." Del commented.

"Kriffing right it's a yes." Han replied, "She called me just over an hour ago to let me know that Kyle Jenner had suddenly reappeared on the station after having vanished into thin air a few days ago – even Belle couldn't find out where he'd gone. He told Erin that he was there to see Agent Raser of the sector rangers. Said she could help him with an investigation."

"Han can you get in touch with Erin again?" Heddren asked, "See if she can find out anything more."

"Sure. I'll get right on it." Han said, "I'll give Belle a call as well. Maybe she can get some answers out of the jedi now he's back. I'll get back to you as soon as I have anything more." and then the hologram faded away. At that moment there was a knock at the door.

"What is it?" Faye asked and the door opened to reveal the servant who had greeted Heddren when he had arrived.

"I'm sorry to disturb you ma'am." he said, "But there is a vessel approaching." Like many of the luxurious residences in the area, the Karn's home included a private landing facility in its grounds that was capable of handling most airspeeders and a number of smaller classes of starship.

"Do you know who it is?" Del asked.

"Yes sir." the servant answered, "The pilot has identified himself as Jedi Knight Kyle Jenner and he is requesting permission to land and speak with you."

"Did he say what he wants with us?" Faye said.

"Actually ma'am the jedi specifically said that he wanted to speak with Mister Karn. He made no mention of you at all ma'am." the servant explained.

"What does this mean?" Faye said, looking at Heddren and in response he smiled.

"It means that the jedi knows nothing." he said, "Let him land and bring him in."

"Do it." Faye added, nodding as she looked at the servant.

"Of course ma'am." the servant replied before leaving the room again.

"Are you sure about this Heddren?" Del asked.

"Of course I am." Heddren responded, "Kyle knows that your ship met Ren's. But he doesn't know that you arranged the meeting. He's probably thinking that some of your employees are using their position to conduct a little unauthorised business on the side. If he knew what we were really up to do you think he'd come here alone?"

"We're taking an awful risk Heddren." Faye said, "You better be right about it."

Kyle climbed out of his starfighter after landing it on the private pad and found a single servant standing at end of the path that led to the main residence waiting for him. He could sense the presence of more beings close by and he guessed that they were probably guards posted to make certain that he really was alone.

"If you'd like to come with me sir, you are expected." the servant told Kyle and the jedi nodded.

"Of course. Lead the way." he said and the servant began to walk back towards the large house.

Kyle followed and was shown directly into the lounge where both Faye and Del Karn waited along with Heddren Drud. Along the way he sensed some excitement within the residence but it was not coming from the room he was shown to.

"Mister Drud." Kyle said, "I did not expect to find you here."

"I happened to be here when your call came in." Heddren replied, "The Karns asked me to remain as their legal counsellor."

"I'm not here to question Mister Karn as a suspect." Kyle said.

"Then there should be no problem with my being here." Heddren told him.

"Excuse me Jedi Jenner," Faye commented, "my husband and I are very busy people. Could you please get to the point of why you are disturbing us at this hour?"

"Of course." Kyle responded and he looked at Del, "Mister Karn, what do you know about a research team on Atch?"

"Atch? That's not a Republic world is it?" Del replied.

"It's the site of an xenoarchaeological dig." Heddren commented.

"Supplied by ships from Farris Shipping." Kyle added.

"Ah, one of my companies." Del said, "Well I can look up what we do for them if you need me to."

"Though we will need to be satisfied that you have good reason for requesting such confidential information." Heddren added.

"Of course we will." Faye said.

"Mister Karn, when your company assigns ships to make regular runs do you have a policy of always using the same crews? Or do you switch between different ones?" Kyle asked.

"That depends on where the job takes the ship." Del answered, "Common routes like Crassis to Delvad or *Aurek Station* are so routine that any crew that happens to be available can be used."

"But to an out of the way world like Atch?" Kyle added.

"Going beyond the borders of the Republic or outside the sector involves more risk and takes much longer." Del said, "That means fewer crews will be willing to work them. So typically those that are willing to operate ships on a route like the one to Atch will be used for each trip needed."

This was what Kyle had expected. Anyone planning to remove artefacts from the dig site would need to know in advance who was going to be aboard the supply ship and it also meant that he could find out exactly who it was that had been aboard. It also meant that Kyle had a trail that could lead him back to whoever it was that was taking the artefacts.

"I'm going to have to speak with the crew of the last ship." he said.

"Then as Heddren has said I'm afraid that you're going to have to go through proper channels." Del told him, glancing at the lawyer. Kyle looked at Del and then at Faye and Heddren as well, opening his mind to the Force.

Fear.

The Karns clearly did not like having the jedi asking them questions. But that was not proof that they were actually involved in smuggling contraband Sith artefacts. Many beings felt intimidated by jedi, something that members of the Order often made use of where they could to encourage co-operation without having to resort to the sort of mind tricks that were not always effective. Nor could he sense the resonance in the Force that came from the medallion anywhere else in the Karns' home. That was generally what gave such collectors away. Gathering together too many objects relating to the Dark Side produced a shadow that nearby jedi could sense and Kyle sensed nothing like that here.

"In which case I shall let you get on with your business." Kyle said. He had hoped that the Karns would have been more co-operative but it was obvious that they were not going to volunteer any information that they did not have to and Kyle suspected that this was at least in part due to the presence of Heddren. As a lawyer he would know exactly what the Karns were required to tell Kyle and what they could keep private, "I'll be in touch if I need anything more."

"Via my office if you don't mind Jedi Jenner." Heddren commented.

"Of course." Kyle responded as Faye summoned a servant to show him out.

After Kyle had left Del, Faye and Heddren waited for a short time before speaking to one another again, just in case the jedi was still able to either hear or sense what they were saying.

"See?" Heddren said, "I told you he didn't know anything. He was just looking for information, not making accusations."

"Though he could cause trouble if he does take the time to get a court order for the names of the transport crew." Del commented, "You can only protect us from having to answer questions Heddren. If Kyle Jenner starts following the crew around then one of them is going to let something slip."

"Quite." Heddren replied, "I think that maybe we should contact Han about that. I'm sure that he and Belle can come up with a solution."

"One that looks like a tragic accident?" Faye asked.

"Or at least something that can't be connected back to any of us." Heddren said, nodding in agreement.

10.

After several days away, Kyle finally returned to his home on Tepillos and he found Lom waiting for him.

"Master, I have looked into the dig on Atch as you asked." the sullustan padawan told him.

"And have you found out anything unusual about it?" Kyle responded.

"No master. Everything about the dig appears to conform with other examples of such expeditions. It was organised by a Doctor Dayle Larnson who had previously made two visits to the world of shorter durations." Lom said.

"Yes, I spoke with Doctor Larnson myself." Kyle said, "He told me that he'd been to the planet before and that this latest expedition was his idea." then Kyle stopped speaking and concentrated on what Dayle had told him about his history relating to Atch and the arten.

"Master, what's wrong?" Lom asked.

"Nothing, but you may have just given me an idea." Kyle responded, "What did you find out about the funding for Doctor Larnson's current expedition?"

Lom looked at the datapad the information he had gathered was stored on.

"Doctor Larnson was turned down for a grant so had to seek private funding instead." Lom told Kyle.

"I thought so." Kyle said, "He mentioned to me that information about everything they found was sent to their sponsors as proof that their money was being well spent. But who are the sponsors of the expedition?"

"I have that here master. The expedition is listed as a not for profit operation by the university and all donations are listed." Lom explained, "Yes, here it is." and he handed his datapad to Kyle who took the device and read from the screen. The names made for interesting reading.

Crassis.

Fayl.

Narthis.

Runn.

Torin.

Five of the Founding Families were providing the funding for the expedition while a sixth was involved in the supply operation that appeared to be a front for smuggling Sith artefacts off Atch to be sold on the black market via an agent represented by the seventh Family. After leaving the Karns' residence, Kyle had still considered it a possibility that the Karn family was involved in the smuggling operation but now it looked like he was dealing with more than just them.

He was dealing with a conspiracy involving all of the Founding Families.

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

Rather than explain everything to Lom, Kyle chose to meditate on the issue in the hope that he would be able to find some guidance in the Force. He kept the mysterious medallion close to him and throughout his meditation he could sense its presence. If as he suspected the medallion was of Sith creation then it had the potential to be very dangerous. He still had no proof that it had come from Atch and what information he did have suggested that the distributing of Sith artefacts in the sector predated the current expedition. The apparent involvement of the Founding Families was a cause for great concern. Kyle would need strong evidence before publicly accusing any of them of wrongdoing, let alone all of them. There were those like Lynn Kerr who believed that everything that went wrong in the sector was due to some conspiracy by the Founding Families but such allegations were dismissed by the vast majority of the population and now that Kyle found himself suspecting the existence of just such a plot he needed to tread carefully.

Investigating beings against who there was no firm evidence was not unusual for a Jedi. Their skills often gave them clues that could not be used as the basis for getting warrants but most of the underworld subjects they focused on lacked the massive resources of the Founding Families and could not afford the level of security that they possessed.

But you know someone who can get you through that security.

Kyle opened his eyes suddenly when the idea came to him through the Force and then he smiled. Belle not only specialised in covert operations, her position within Shill Security providing protection could give him access he would otherwise not have.

Getting to his feet, Kyle went to the closest communication terminal and called up the address of Belle's home on Crassis Major.

"Kyle." Belle said when her face appeared on the display, "How are you?"

"I need your help with something." he replied, "Can I come over and discuss it?" and Belle smiled.

"Of course you can. But what's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't want to discuss it over a comm channel. This needs to be talked about in person."

"Ooh, mysterious." Belle said, "Well I'll be right here waiting for you." and then she shut off her communicator. Kyle made his way to his starfighter without bothering to disturb Lom and then took off for the neighbouring Crassis system. After he entered the atmosphere he set a course for the area where Belle lived, landing his ship on the private pad at Belle's apartment building itself right next to hers. Making his way to her penthouse apartment the first thing he noticed was that the front door was unlocked. Suspicious, he drew his lightsaber and with a wave of his hand he opened the door.

"Belle?" he said as he entered the apartment cautiously.

"In here." Belle's voice replied from her bedroom, "Lock the front door and come on in."

Kyle headed for the bedroom and found Belle lay on the bed in a short nightdress.

"Like I said," she said when he appeared in the doorway, "I've been waiting for you."

Kyle smiled as he crossed the room and bent down to kiss her.

"And what if it hadn't been me that came in first?" he asked and then Belle smiled as well.

"Oh, I'd have come up with something." she said as she slid her hand under her pillow and produced her slug throwing pistol with an attached silencer.

"And you wouldn't even disturb the neighbours." Kyle commented, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Well they do get cranky." Belle replied and she pulled Kyle closer to kiss him again.

"Belle I didn't come here for this." he told her and she frowned.

"Kyle we've had hardly any time together since you got back. What's wrong now?"

"Belle how closely do your people monitor the activities of your clients?" Kyle asked.

"Seriously? You really came here to ask me about work?" Belle said with a frown. Then she sighed as she sat up and swung her legs around to sit beside Kyle on the edge of the bed, "How closely we monitor our clients depends a lot on them." she added, "Some of them hire us to keep a very close eye on them or more likely their family members. Normally offspring that they're worried about mixing with the wrong sort of people. The Karn family's big on that. Or alternatively it can be a spouse they suspect of having an affair. But for the most part the person paying the bill doesn't want us getting too deep into their business."

"You mentioned the Karns there." Kyle noted, "How close are you to the Founding Families? I know that Shill Security didn't always protect them all."

"Well obviously." Belle replied, "We've only been in the sector a decade or so and the Founding Families have been around for about three centuries."

"So before Shill Security was set up?"

"Before Han and I set up Shill Security the Founding Families each operated their own private security force. But Han convinced them all that they were wasting their money carrying out all the checks they needed to when they hired people and it would be better if they let us take over the running of their security. Then in lieu of the first year's payment the Families each signed their security divisions over to us. We got a leg up on setting up our company and they got rid of a drain on their massive bank accounts. Even multi-billionaires like the Founding Families like to save a few thousand credits here and there. But why the sudden interest Kyle? Normally you don't ask about my work. It's like you don't approve of it or something."

"Belle I need you to keep what I'm about to tell you a secret." Kyle said, "Promise me."

"Sure, I promise. You can trust me, you know that." Belle responded.

"I think that the Founding Families are dabbling in smuggling contraband." Kyle said and Belle's eyes widened.

"Are you insane?" she exclaimed, "Kyle, the Founding Families make a fortune every week just from the rights they hold to what their ancestors found here when they surveyed the sector. Why on Coruscant would they need to turn to smuggling contraband?"

"Like you said, even wealthy beings like the Founding Families will act to save a few thousand credits. So why wouldn't they do something dubious to make few million more?"

"Million?" Belle snapped, "Kyle what do you think they're smuggling?"

"Sith artefacts for collectors." he told her, "I took a trip out to visit a research team on Atch that's digging up the remains of a city built by aliens a thousand years ago. Belle, I think those aliens were Sith and think that Founding Families know this. They're using their funding of the dig to cover for removing artefacts that they can then sell on the black market. The research team doesn't have a clue what they're uncovering."

"But sell to who? What sort of person buys that stuff?" Belle asked.

"Those who get a thrill out of owning something that is forbidden generally." Kyle replied, "But occasionally there are those who think that they can harness the knowledge of the Sith for their own ends."

"And you think the Founding Families are doing this? So who are they selling to?"

"I'm not sure but-" Kyle began.

"But what?" Belle asked when he suddenly tailed off.

"Belle, Hugo Callan was in the sector a few days ago right?" Kyle responded.

"Yeah, that's right. He visits the Founding Families whenever one of his ships is coming this far out from the Core. Sometimes he brings along some woman called Keleen Delvad. They're both descended from members of the survey mission as well, only their ancestors decided to head back to the Core instead of

staying out here.”

“But what does Hugo Callan move that makes his frequent visits to the Narthis Sector worthwhile?” Kyle said, “Moving bulk cargo more than a few parsecs just doesn't make economical sense. On the other hand running small items of extremely high value can.”

“Kyle that doesn't make sense.” Belle said, “I've been told that Hugo Callan's family have been visiting the sector regularly for generations. If what you're saying is true then the Founding Families would have to have been shipping Sith artefacts out of here ever since the sector was settled. I thought Atch was some primitive backwater planet that was only contacted recently. Are you saying the Founding Families already knew it was there but hid it?”

“No, that's not what I'm saying.” Kyle replied and then his eyes widened, “Belle, I doubt the ruins on Atch could have been supplying the Founding Families with artefacts for three hundred years. But what if there was more than one source in the sector? They could have been gathering them for centuries from a variety of sites and Atch is just the latest. The the Callans move what they find back into the Core where they can be sold on the black market. I wouldn't be surprised if that was Keleen Delvad's part in all this.”

“You mean like Tepillos?” Belle asked, “Kyle, is this related to whatever it that you found there when that congressman was killed?”

“How did you know about that?” Kyle replied.

“Lom told me when you were putting in time at the library.” Belle answered.

Kyle then slipped his hand into his robes and took out the medallion.

“There are no markings.” he said, “But I can feel it through the Force?”

“Is it safe to have that thing around?” Belle said.

“Oh don't worry about that. Just because it can channel the Force through it doesn't mean it can control you. I've sensed things because of it but I've not sensed the Dark Side in any of it.” Kyle reassured her and then he passed the medallion towards her.

“No thanks.” she said, “You can keep hold of it.”

“So will you help me try and find out if the Founding Families are up to something?” Kyle asked.

“Ah.” Belle replied, “Kyle if they find out I'm poking about in their private business then Shill Security is finished.”

“All I need is a way to get through their security Belle. You don't have to do anything yourself.” Kyle said and Belle smiled at him.

“Now look who's trying to seduce someone to the Dark Side.” she said and she kissed him, “Okay I'll help. But on one condition.”

“What's that?” Kyle asked.

“We don't start until after we've had breakfast tomorrow morning.”

Kyle put the medallion away and wrapped his arms around Belle.

“I love you.” he told her.

“I know.” she replied.

Belle hurried into Han's office.

“Are they ready?” she asked.

“Just waiting for you.” Han replied as he got up from behind his desk, “We even managed to get a real time signal through to Hugo and Keleen. This had better be worth what we're paying for it Belle.”

“Hey, it's me.” Belle said as Han activated the holographic systems in his office and once again numerous figures appeared in front of them. Most of there were the same as those who had been at the previous meeting Belle had called but there were some differences. Firstly given the importance that she had placed on the meeting Josh Drud was present as well as his brother. Secondly as Han had told Belle, signals were being relayed out of the sector to where Hugo Callan's ship had reached since departing it and also all the way to Coruscant itself where Keleen Delvad resided. There was one other change that Belle noticed as well, though this made less sense. On this occasion there was no sign of Erill Crassis and the Crassis family was represented by just Luke.

“Where's your father Luke? He should hear this.” Belle said.

“My father is not a well man.” Luke replied, “And recent – ah, recent events have taken their toll on him. He is resting. You can be sure that I'll pass along everything that is said here though.”

“Well Kyle knows that we're smuggling Sith artefacts.” Belle said, not bothering to sweeten the blow and she saw the posture of the holographic figures stiffen.”

“He has no proof.” Heddren said.

“No.” Faye agreed, “When he visited us it was to-”

“He doesn't need proof.” Belle interrupted, “He's pieced it together and wants me to help him get proof.”

“Perhaps you should explain how he has determined that we are searching for Sith artefacts.” Keleen Delvad suggested.

“He got a list of who was funding the dig on Atch and put that together with the transport ship he saw taking

artefacts from it." Belle replied.

"The recovery team were your people Han." Trent commented, "You assured us that they would not be detected."

"He also knows that Drud Legal has been making sure Ren Distler never sees the inside of a courtroom." Belle added, looking towards Heddren, "Then he started wondering why the Callan family have kept coming here since the sector was settled and guessed that it was related to smuggling Sith artefacts. But given the amount of time that this had been going on he figured out that it was about more than just a few ruins on Atch."

"Perhaps the time has come to eliminate him." Ket Runn said without making eye contact with any of the others.

"Can we go one meeting without you suggesting killing someone Ket?" Corva Torin asked in response.

"Hang on a moment." Hugo said, "Belle, you said that this jedi has figured out that we are gathering Sith artefacts. But does he know why?"

"No. That's the one bit of good news." Belle answered, "Kyle's got a theory about us selling the artefacts on the black market."

"So he's in the dark about your family's role in this I suppose?" Josh said and Belle nodded.

"He's asked me to help him get to you." she replied.

"What if we approached him and tried to turn him to our cause?" Lorna Fayl said unexpectedly, "He could be a powerful ally."

"That has got to be the stupidest thing I've ever heard Lorna." Josh exclaimed as she snarled at him.

"Josh is right Lorna." Trent added, "Right now we're dealing with two jedi. You open your mouth and we could be dealing with a dozen by the end of the week."

"Perhaps we can use what Kyle thinks against him." Han said.

"What do you mean by that Han?" Hugo asked.

"I mean what if we could arrange for him to uncover someone offering to sell Sith artefacts from the dig on Atch? Someone that can't be connected to us but is conveniently linked to the leads he already has?" Han explained.

"A four man team?" Belle added and Han smiled.

"Exactly." he said.

"Why a four man team?" Luke asked.

"Because that's how many were in the team on Atch that he saw." Belle replied.

"The team was transferred to Ren's ship with the artefacts." Han said, "So we set up four people to take the fall and leave just enough evidence around to make it look like they paid off the transport crew."

"Who won't be around much longer to tell either." Belle noted and Han nodded.

"And then Kyle Jenner thinks it's all over." Han said.

"But what if he keeps digging?" Corva asked.

"We can pause our operation for a while." Trent said, "After three hundred years a few weeks delay won't hurt. Besides, it's not like any of us is going to tell him anything is it?"

"Stop looking at me like that." Lorna hissed as she noticed both Heddren and Josh looking in her direction.

"Ah." Luke commented and then all of the others looked in his direction.

"What is it Luke?" Trent asked.

"We may have a problem." Luke replied, "Charity."

"Your sibling? What about her?" Ket asked.

"Charity and I had something of a disagreement about her commitment to our cause." Luke said, "Father tried to calm her down but I afraid that she may have done something rather rash."

"Is she going to the authorities?" Faye asked.

"I should have been told about that." Heddren commented.

"So should we." Han added, looking at Belle as he said it.

"She's not going to the authorities." Luke said, "But she has left the house. Permanently it would seem. According to her she doesn't want anything to do with any of us any more."

"So she's unprotected." Josh said.

"I can put people on her." Han suggested.

"No. No, she said that if she thought she was being followed she'd contact the police." Luke said, "Let's face it, having the police investigating Shill Security isn't much different from having the Jedi Order after us. The problem is that if Kyle Jenner decides to start looking for a weak link then Charity is it."

"She has money as well doesn't she?" Trent asked, "From your mother."

"Yes, both of us inherited money when she died. But father is still going to pay her an allowance." Luke said.

"Why?" Lorna said with a frown, "If she has turned her back on us then let her go."

"Leverage." Heddren said, "Make her as dependent on them for funds as possible, then trust in her own greed to prevent her rocking the boat by talking out of turn."

"We should still try and have someone speak with her." Corva said, "See where she stands. I'd hate to

gamble the future of this venture on a momentary tantrum from a wayward daughter.” then he glanced at Faye and with a smile he added, “No offence.” and Trent and both of the Druds present also smiled at the obvious reference to the Karn family's daughters.

“Perhaps not one of us though.” Faye said, ignoring the barb, “Perhaps someone less intimidating.”

“I think we can handle that.” Josh replied and he looked at his brother.

“Kayza?” Heddren replied.

“Yes, I think our sister should be able to assess whether Charity Crassis may become an obstacle or not.” Josh said.

“And what about the jedi?” Ket asked, “How will we turn his attention to the decoys we set up?”

“Well since he's asking me to help spy on all of you I ought to be able to control what he finds from that and I'm sure we can find a way of getting information to him regarding the group we'll set up to take the fall for us.” Belle answered.

“You'll have to keep a close eye on him Belle.” Josh said, “We need to know the instant he does anything out of the ordinary.”

“Round the clock.” Corva added, “Think you can handle that?”

“Oh I wouldn't worry about that.” Han said with a grin, “I think my sister finds keeping close to the jedi quite, ah, pleasurable.”

When the holograms of the other heads of the Founding Families vanished from her lounge Lorna Fayl remained seated, scowling. Her expression did not soften even as the door opened and her daughter Nissel entered.

“Mom, what's wrong?” Nissel asked.

“Those fools.” Lorna hissed and Nissel sighed.

“I take it you're talking about the meeting you just had? I was told it was over.” she said.

“It is.” Lorna replied.

“So it didn't go well then?”

“Not as well as it could my dear. One day it will fall to you to lead our family and then you will discover just how blind the heads of the other Families can be. If they'd listen to me then we'd have the opportunity to advance the work we've been carrying out for generations rather than pausing it.”

“What work mom?” Nissel asked, “You keep telling me how important it is that I'm ready to be a strong leader but you won't tell me what all this is about.”

Lorna averted her gaze.

“All in good time my dear.” she said.

When Belle returned to her apartment she found Kyle polishing his boots.

“Hit a road block in your investigation?” she asked him, “Or is this the 'meditate by cleaning footwear' technique I've heard so much about? Because if it is then I've got plenty of shoes you could practice on.”

“I doubt I'd live long enough to clean all your shoes Belle.” Kyle replied, “And no, this isn't about meditating. Frankly cleaning boots is one of the dullest things I can image.”

“Then why not get your apprentice to do it for you?” Belle said as she sat down beside and leant her head on his shoulder.

“Firstly because Lom is learning to be a jedi knight, not a domestic servant and secondly I need to look my best tonight.”

“Tonight?” Belle responded, “Why?” and Kyle reached out to the table in front of them and picked up a rectangle of decorated plastic.

“Because while you were out someone delivered this invitation to a charity gala on behalf of the 'Society for the Elimination of the Suffering on Tepillos'. It's you and a plus one.”

“Oh so now you're automatically my plus one are you?” Belle said.

“Who else would it be?” Kyle asked in reply, “So did you manage to find a way of keeping tabs on the Founding Families at the office?”

“Perhaps.” Belle said, “Though I'll need to look into it further.” then she frowned.

“What's wrong?” Kyle said when he saw the expression.

“I don't get it.” Belle replied.

“Get what?”

“What does the 'Society for the Elimination of the Suffering on Tepillos' want? Do they want to stop people suffering or do they want to find suffering people and eliminate them?” Belle said and as she asked the second part of her question she formed her hand into the shape of a weapon and mimicked firing it.

“Yes, I wondered that as well.” Kyle said, “Perhaps Miss Drud will be able to tell us.”

The figure that approached Kassa in the cantina was covered from head to toe and obviously wearing some form of breath mask. This meant that as well as being unable to precisely tell the species and gender of the figure, Kassa also guessed that the pheromones she could release would probably not be effective against them.

"You trade information?" the figure asked in Basic as it sat down and from the deep tone of the voice Kassa decided that it was probably a male.

"Buy, sell, swap." Kassa replied, "What's your preference?"

"Depends." the figure said, "I have merchandise to sell. If you already have someone to buy then I will buy their identity from you. If not then I sell details to you."

"What are you selling?" Kassa asked.

"Rare and precious artefacts from beyond the Republic." the figure told her and Kassa remained unimpressed. It was not difficult to obtain a starship simply to travel out beyond any of the commonly travelled hyperspace routes and find a backwater world where a cargo hold could be filled with trinkets.

"You'll have to do a lot better than that." Kassa said, "Now if these artefacts are from a highly sought after civilisation then—"

"They are Sith." the figure whispered, turning his head to ensure that no-one was listening in.

Kassa frowned. Genuine Sith artefacts were rare and expensive given how keen the Jedi Order was to remove them from circulation. The problem was that this also meant that there was a booming market for fakes.

"I'll need proof." Kassa said and from beneath his cloak the figure sat across from her produced a datapad that he slid towards her.

"Nice pictures." Kassa said as she began to scroll through the images it contained. From what she could tell the artefacts were a mix of carvings and statues, "Of course anyone can mock up a few photographs."

"Can they produce this?" the figure asked and he then handed Kassa a sheet of flimsiplast that had been folded up much smaller than its original size. Swapping the datapad for the flimsiplast, Kassa unfolded it and saw that the sheet had been placed on a carved stone and a pencil rubbed across it to produce an image that detailed not only the carvings themselves but also the texture of the stone. Flipping the sheet over, Kassa also saw that the pressure of the flimsiplast against the stone had resulted in moss from the stone staining the flimsiplast green in places.

Kassa reached into her own pocket and took out several bank notes.

"Have you approached anyone else about these?" she asked as she counted out a hundred credits.

"You are the fourth." the figure told her, "My associates are eager to sell these items before the Jedi can sense them."

"A pity." Kassa replied, "Here's a hundred credits, if you'd given me an exclusive then I'd have offered you five times this. But I'm willing to see if I can find you a buyer. But I'll also expect ten percent of the sale price."

"Two." the figure replied and Kassa pulled back the money she had been offering.

"Be sensible." she said.

"Okay then, five." the figure said and Kassa smiled.

"Pleasure doing business with you." she said, "I'll need a way of getting hold of you though."

"Take this." the figure told her, sliding a much smaller sheet of flimsiplast across the table. Kassa took this and saw that there were communication details on it.

"I'll be in touch." she said, getting to her feet, "But you need to let me know if they're sold beforehand. Understood?"

"Understood." the figure said, nodding before he watched Kassa leave. Then once the Zeltron was gone he got up and returned to his own speeder. Inside the enclosed vehicle he removed the covering from his head, including the breath mask to reveal his human features and activates the communicator built into the speeder.

"Inform Miss Shill that the information has been delivered." he said.

The charity gala had managed to attract a large number of celebrities, most likely Kyle decided because it was being organised by Kayza Drud and the younger sister of Josh and Heddren not only had a name that generated interest all on its own but also had spent a number of years making use of that name to build a list of contacts useful in public relations.

Keen to avoid having her face included in any of the images taken by the media reporters and camera droids waiting outside the main entrance to the building where the event was being held, Belle had Kyle enter with her through a rear door instead. This brought the pair of them into the area being used to organise

everything needed to keep the event running and Belle smiled when she spotted a dark skinned woman in an expensive dress scurrying about among the serving staff and droids.

"Kayza." she said, "Aren't you a little overdressed for a waitress?"

"Belle." Kayza replied, "I didn't think you'd be coming. Normally you pass on these."

"You can blame my date." Belle told her, patting Kyle on his arm, "He wanted to come since he spends so much time on Tepillos."

"That's right." Kayza said, smiling and she looked at Kyle, "Could I persuade you to say a few words about life there? I'm sure the charity would be overjoyed to get your endorsement."

"Sorry Miss Drud." Kyle replied, "I'm forbidden from making public endorsements. Though I will happily answer any private questions put to me about the situation there."

"That's a pity, but I suppose I should just be grateful you're here." Kayza said. Then she looked back at Belle and sighed, "Now I need to go and check that the bar staff remember that Gayal Karn is the only one of the three Karn girls who can drink alcohol." then she frowned, "Though I wish she couldn't either. I swear I'll get my own back on her parents for getting them all invites behind my back." and then she turned around and hurried away.

"See? That's why I don't like dealing with the public." Belle told Kyle, "They're nerf herders."

The pair then followed Kayza out into the main hall where tables had been arranged in front of a stage when executives of the charity would make their speeches to the invited crowd. Given that the meal had yet to be served many of the tables were currently unoccupied while guests were gathered beside stalls that had been set up to promote the charity and especially around the three different bars in operation.

"Good turnout." Belle commented as they walked across the room.

"What? Oh yes." Kyle replied.

"What's up? Tremor in the Force disturbing you or something?"

"No, I was just taking a look at which members of the Founding Families were present."

"That's why you wanted to come isn't it?" Belle hissed, "So you can try to interrogate them."

"The idea did cross my mind." Kyle said, "Though if the only ones present are the likes of the Karn sisters then I doubt I'll get anything useful. No criminal mastermind would trust them."

Belle looked around as well and was relieved to see that the only member of the Founding Families who knew anything about their ongoing interest in the Sith she could see was Kayza and it was clear that she was too busy to allow herself to be distracted by Kyle asking questions. But then she saw someone else arrive that made her less happy.

Vorn Torin was the younger brother of Corva and unlike his sibling he did not spend most of his time travelling around the sector. Instead he resided here on Crassis Major and so given that his name was often used in connection with fund raising related to Tepillos, it was to be expected that he would have been invited to this event.

"A-ha." Kyle said, smiling, "I think I've just seen my opportunity. Go find our table and I'll get you a drink."

"Make it a large one." Belle told him as he headed towards the same bar that Vorn and the friend he had arrived with were now heading for as well.

Kyle had met Vorn Torin before, though he was not very familiar with the man. The member of the Torin family that Kyle encountered most often was Corva and Vorn's cousin Airia who was the sector's current senator. Therefore, the Jedi was not certain that Vorn would recognise him despite the robes he wore.

"Vorn Torin." Kyle said as he approached Vorn from behind, "I see your support for the charities on Tepillos is greater than just letting your old school friend use your name."

"Why Jedi Jenner." Vorn responded, smiling as he turned around, "Do you know my friend Dal Corun?"

"I don't believe we've met." Kyle said as he shook Dal's hand.

"Well I'm here to support Vorn's interest this evening." the other man said.

"Yes, we're both hoping that we'll be able to find some nice young women who are feeling exceedingly charitable." Vorn added and both men grinned.

"And what about your brother Vorn? Will he be making an appearance?" Kyle asked.

"Oh I doubt it. He's off orbiting Delvad or Xyros or Ralta or wherever the hell he's got to know." Vorn answered.

"He does get about a lot doesn't he?" Kyle replied, "In fact I'd say he gets to more places than I do. Any idea what he gets up to at these places?" but before Vorn could reply Dal spoke up instead.

"Incoming." he said.

Excitement.

Both Kyle and Vorn turned to face the same direction as Dal and they saw a group of young women heading through the crowd towards the bar. Vorn smiled as he recognised the three Karn sisters.

"Now this could be entertaining." Vorn said, looking back at Dal.

"Entertaining?" Kyle asked.

"What, don't you know about the Karn girls?" Dal asked.

"I've heard rumours but-" Kyle began.

"Well those three are as wild as they come." Vorn interrupted, "The only question is what antics will they get up to tonight?"

"This is why I keep a recording rod to hand." Dal added, "To relive events the next day."

"We'll need to get some alcohol into them first." Vorn said.

"Ah yes, could you get this one Vorn? I'm a little short right now." Dal said.

"Vorn!" Gayal called out as the trio of young women approached the bar, "Can you do us a favour?"

As every Kyle got an odd feeling as Gayal came near. Like many of the more junior members of the Founding Families he had met them only in passing and did not really know them. But Gayal had always struck him as odd, her behaviour seeming to be a result of something more than a spoiled upbringing.

"Let me guess," Vorn responded, "you three need someone to help you get drinks."

Kyle knew that with the three Karn sisters around there was no chance of being able to question Vorn further, his attention as well as that of his friend Dal was now firmly focused on them. But Kyle needed a way of removing them without annoying Vorn to the point where he would not speak to him.

"Kayza's watching the bars." he said, "She knows you're trying to get drink and is watching out for anyone else passing it on to you."

"So what? She can't throw me out." Vorn replied.

"Maybe not, but if she actually sees these young ladies buying soft drinks then she won't even suspect you."

"Soft drinks?" Sial responded, snarling, "What's the point?"

"The point is I know where the drink supplies for the bar are being kept." Kyle told her, "And I can show you."

Put a bottle in your purse and you can add it to your drinks when no-one is looking."

"Who knew jedi could be so much fun?" Keera said.

"Oh we have fun." Kyle replied, "Now if you'd all like to follow me I'll show you what you need to see." and he started to lead the three young women back towards the rear entrance he and Belle had entered through.

However, the route took them past the table where Belle was sat waiting and as Kyle passed she reached out to tap him.

"Kyle," she said softly as he stopped while the three young women continued on their way, "what exactly are you doing?"

"Getting rid of an obstacle." he replied, "Trust me."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Belle responded as Kyle then moved off as well.

Kyle led the Karn sisters towards the kitchen area where he had seen food and drink being prepared but he directed them to a side passageway instead.

"Not in there." he said, "You'll be seen, go this way and wait in here." and he pointed towards an open doorway.

"That's a closet." Gayal said.

"Yes and it will keep you out of sight while I distract the staff long enough to be able to move one of those trolleys over to the doorway and you can help yourself. Now get in there quickly before anyone notices you." The sisters all hurried into the closet and with a wave of his hand Kyle closed the door behind them, sealing them inside. Then he allowed himself to smile.

"Did you just lock the Karn sisters in the closet?" a voice asked from behind him and Kyle's face fell.

"Ah." he said as he turned around. Then he frowned as he tried to place the face of the woman now standing in front of him.

"Charity Crassis." she said.

"Of course." Kyle replied, "And yes, I did just lock the Karn sisters in a closet."

"Good." Charity said, "I can't stand them."

"Do you mind explaining what you're doing back here?" Kyle asked.

"Oh I came in the back way." Charity told him, pointing back through the kitchen at the same doorway Kyle and Belle had used upon their arrival, "I didn't want any of the reporters out front asking me about my own family."

"Is there a problem with them?" Kyle said.

"You mean aside from them being obsessed about the family businesses? Frankly that's something I can well do without and I told them as much. From now on I'll look out for myself." Charity told him.

"Well let me show you to your table." Kyle said as he realised that Charity represented a potential source of information. If she was as disgruntled about her family as she appeared to be then it was possible that she could let something slip by accident. Kyle offered her his arm and Charity smiled as she took it and they walked in the direction of the main hall, ignoring the muffled sounds coming from within the closet behind them.

They had just reached the main hall when Charity came to a stop.

"Oh no." she said.

Anxiety.

"What's wrong?" Kyle asked.

"Over there by the bar. Vorn Torin."

"You have a problem with Vorn Torin?" Kyle asked.

"I have a problem with his free-loading friend." Charity said, "No doubt they'll have rigged things so that I'm at their table and I'll spend all night trying to keep his hands off me."

"Then come and sit at my table." Kyle suggested, "Belle and I will keep you safe I assure you."

"But my ticket-" Charity began.

"A piece of plastic is nothing compared to the power of the Force." Kyle reassured her, "No-one will ask you to move. At least not twice."

"Thanks. You're a life saver." Charity said and Kyle could sense her relaxing as they walked towards the table where Belle waited.

"Belle." Kyle said, "Look who I ran into. I invited her to-" and then his PTP link sounded, "I better check this." he commented as he removed the device from his pocket and activated it. But before he could say anything Kassa's voice spoke out.

"Kyle, code red." she said and then the device went silent.

"I'm sorry." Kyle said, looking at Belle and Charity, "I'm afraid I have to leave. There's a problem on Tepillos that requires my immediate attention."

Not long after Kyle left, Belle made her way over towards one of the bars. But on the way she paused as she ran into Kayza.

"Did it work?" Kayza asked.

"It worked." Belle responded, "Kyle got a call and is on his way back to Tepillos." then she looked back at the table where Charity was still sat, "And might I add it was just in time too."

"Is Kassa here?" Kyle asked as he climbed out of his fighter and found Lom waiting for him in the hangar.

"Yes master." Lom answered, "She arrived about two hours ago. Can you tell me what this is about? All she said was 'Code red'."

"Code red is something we came up with to disguise a particular situation before you became my padawan."

Kyle replied, "Basically anything that has to do with the Force is a code red."

Entering the lounge, Kyle found Kassa waiting for him.

"This had better be good Kassa." Kyle said to her, "I was just about to sit down to dinner with Belle and Charity Crassis."

"Well I'm sorry to have interrupted the threesome you've obviously been dreaming of Kyle, but I thought you'd want to know about this." and she held out a the sheet of flimsiplast on which the rubbing of the Sith carving had been made, "

"Master what is that?" Lom asked.

"This Lom, could be the clue we've been waiting for." Kyle said. Then he looked at Kassa, "Where did you get this?"

"Someone wanting to sell the original artefact contacted me." she told him, "But I'm not the only one he contacted so we need to hurry."

"He has it here on Tepillos?" Kyle said and Kassa shrugged.

"I can't be certain. Could be here or could be somewhere else. But I figured you needed to know." she told him.

"You're right Kassa. This is very important, so where can I find the man who gave you this flimsi?"

12.

The company that had managed the apartment building where the address given to Kassa led Kyle and Lom had long since stopped operating and now the building had fallen into disrepair. Many windows were boarded up and the lack of mains power meant that the turbolifts would not function. But that did not mean that the building was empty. Given that it remained structurally sound it had attracted many beings who had nowhere else to go. Now they simply squatted in the apartments that had been vacated by their original inhabitants and did their best to maintain what they needed.

"I don't see any signs of guards master." Lom said as the two Jedi watched the building from the end of the street.

"My guess is that our quarry don't need them." Kyle replied.

"You think that the other inhabitants of the building will warn them of an impending raid?" Lom asked and Kyle nodded.

"We've seen it before." Kyle said, "It's a common insurgent tactic. Our targets may not be insurgents but the same tactic could protect them so I suggest we use the same method to bypass it."

"Of course master." Lom said. Then he paused, "But what if the address we have been given is fake?"

"You mean a decoy to draw out anyone like us?" Kyle responded, "Then they will have overlooked the fact that the artefacts they are offering, if genuine, resonate in the Force. I will guide us to them without worrying about exactly which apartment the dealer told Kassa they could be found in. Now hurry my young apprentice, I want to get this over and done with as quickly as possible." and then he raised the hood of his cloak to conceal his features.

Lom copied this and the two Jedi then began to make their way towards the apartment building. At this time of day there were other beings moving about in the street and the Jedi observed these passers by carefully, watching for any signs that they had seen through the Jedi's somewhat simple disguises and were alerting any of the building's residents to their approach. But no-one else in the street with the Jedi seemed to be paying attention to the two hooded figures even as they walked right up to the apartment building.

There was no door blocking the main entrance. Given the lack of power to operate it, the one that had been there originally had long since been removed by the squatters who needed to be able to move in and out unimpeded. Of course this also allowed the Jedi to enter the building without needing to override a lock or make use of their abilities to trick someone into letting them inside. The pair moved through the litter strewn lobby to the doorway labelled 'EMERGENCY STAIRS', when the building had been in its prime these stairs had been intended for use only in an emergency but since the turbolifts had shut down for lack of power they had become the only way of moving between floors.

"Follow me." Kyle said quietly as he started to climb the stairs, one hand resting on his lightsaber and the other ready to reach for his plasma carbine if he felt it was needed.

Opening his mind to the Force, Kyle could sense hundreds of beings in the building at that moment but more significant was a strange disturbance that felt as if the Force was being drawn through one particular place several floors above him. This did not feel like the way the medallion resonated in the Force but it was different to anything Kyle had felt before and the only explanation he could think of was that it was being caused by a concentration of Sith artefacts.

"This is the right place." he said to Lom softly, "Be cautious, there is no telling what effect they may have had on the residents of this place."

In response Lom just nodded as the pair continued to climb the stairs. As well as being able to sense the building's occupants through the Force, the two Jedi could also hear the sounds associated with an occupied structure with the sound of crying infants or arguing adults drifting along corridors and down the stairs. But Kyle ignored these as he continued to home in on the disturbance that was coming from one particular place.

"Master I sense something." Lom said, "Something, something-"

"Odd?" Kyle asked.

"Yes master. Something abnormal."

"I think that is what we are looking for my padawan." Kyle said, "The Dark Side of the Force is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be unnatural. I think that artefacts created by such abilities are what you sense. I sense it too, straight ahead."

Looking out of the stairwell Kyle saw one of the building's inhabitants sat at the end of the corridor. The dishevelled individual was located in the opposite direction to where Kyle could sense the disturbance in the Force but if he was a lookout then he needed to be distracted while the Jedi exited the stairwell. Kyle achieved this with a wave of his hand, using the Force to convince the man that he had just heard something from inside an apartment with a doorway that stood open and the moment that he looked away Kyle and Lom darted out of the stairwell and around the corner unnoticed.

Looking down the corridor towards the source of the disturbance Kyle and Lom saw that where the apartments had once all been fitted with modern powered doors these had now mainly been replaced by crudely fitted manual ones or even just curtains hung across open doorways. However, there was one doorway near the end of the corridor that still possessed a powered door and it was one that looked far cleaner and newer than the walls that surrounded it.

"That is our target." Kyle whispered and as he began to advance towards the door he slid his lightsaber from under his cloak.

Danger.

"Master lookout!" Lom exclaimed at the same moment as Kyle sensed the tremor in the Force alerting him to the attack. Someone in one of the apartments that the Jedi needed to pass by in order to reach their destination had spotted them and screamed as he came charging out of his front door with a knife in his hand. But Lom was perfectly positioned to respond to this and there was a 'Snap-hiss' as the Sullustan ignited his lightsaber and swung it upwards. The blade sliced through the assailant's arm and his scream turned to one of pain as he staggered back, flailing what remained of his limbs.

Rather than opt to pursue the being that Kyle was not certain was one of the ones he was looking for he brought his plasma carbine out from under his cloak, flicking off its safety catch as he did so. Levelling the weapon in the direction of the new looking door Kyle discharged it and the corridor was suddenly filled with warmth from the energy blast that struck the door and blew a hole in it large enough for Kyle and Lom to pass through. Or at least they would be able to once there was a break in the weapons fire that erupted from inside the apartment moments later.

"Down!" Kyle yelled as he dived to the side of the corridor for cover. The weapons fire coming from inside the apartment was a mix of pulse wave blasts and projectiles from a rapidly firing slug thrower. From the slight gaps between the shots and the way that the round seemed to embed themselves in the walls where they struck instead of punching right through Kyle guessed that it was a pistol rather than a sub-machine-gun or more powerful weapons such as a rifle and this meant that he would have an opportunity very soon. Whoever it was that was firing the pistol emptied the magazine relatively quickly and Kyle activated his lightsaber as he charged forwards, using the weapon to block the pulse wave blasts that continued to come through the hole in the door while his apprentice followed him.

As he closed in on the door Kyle leapt forwards, levelling himself out to make it through the hole he had created with his plasma carbine. With his lightsaber held horizontally in front of him, Kyle made it through the hole but the blade of his weapon did not and instead it gouged a slot through what remained of the door as well as a section of the wall to one side of it. Rolling as he landed, Kyle quickly got back to his feet and burst another pulse wave blast before it could take his head off. Now that he was inside the apartment he could see that there were two humans positioned at the end of the hallway inside the front door who were using doorways as cover while they tried to defend their position. The one armed with the slug thrower finished reloading his weapon and aimed it at Kyle again. But just as he was about to pull the trigger the Jedi used the Force to knock his hand aside, hoping to send the weapon flying out of his grasp. However, the gunman was able to keep hold of the weapon and instead it went off as his hand was suddenly twisted aside and by chance the projectile struck the second gunman rather than Kyle. The gunman gasped as he realised that he had just shot his comrade and Kyle and Lom took advantage of his confusion to advance. Lom followed Kyle through the hole in the door while Kyle ran forwards and cut down the second gunman.

But just as Kyle had struck there was a sharp 'Crack!' and a fast moving projectile came from within the room behind the second gunman to miss Kyle by only a few millimetres before punching its way through the wall on the other side of the hallway.

"Back!" Kyle snapped, leaping out of the way just as there was the roar of high velocity projectiles fired on fully automatic. These did not need to be aimed at the doorway, being powerful enough to rip through the apartment wall instead. Whoever was hiding in the room beyond the doorway fired only a short burst on fully automatic before switching back to semi-automatic fire instead.

"His position is strong master." Lom said as the Padawan positioned himself next to his master. Both Jedi remained a short distance from the doorway just in case the gunman decided to turn his fire on the wall in an attempt to shoot the Jedi through the wall.

"But the Force is stronger my young apprentice. Have faith in that." Kyle replied and he closed his eyes as he let the Force flow through him. He could sense the presence of the third gunman in the room on the other side of the door though it was close to being overshadowed by the unusual disturbance that had guided Kyle to the apartment. But what Kyle could sense was enough for him to target, "There is no way out." Kyle called out, "Lower your weapon."

"Kriff you Jedi!" the gunman responded before three bullets in rapid succession came through the wall between Kyle and the doorway.

"I said Lower your weapon." Kyle repeated calmly and this time he used the Force to project the idea of the gunman lowering his rifle straight into his mind.

No reply came to this and Kyle looked at Lom and nodded before he crept forwards. Stepping into the

doorway with his lightsaber held up in a defensive position, Kyle saw that the gunman was positioned behind a couch and that his rifle was now pointed downwards as he stared blankly into space while behind him a large container was positioned against the wall and it was from within here that Kyle could sense the disturbance in the Force. But the moment that the Jedi came into view the gunman recovered his wits, gasping as he started to raise his rifle once more. Now that Kyle had a direct line of sight to the gunman though, he had far more options open to him and reaching out through the Force he grabbed hold of the gunman himself and pulled him forwards. Given that his weapon required both hands to hold, the gunman was powerless to prevent this and he fell forwards over the couch before landing in a heap on the floor. Kyle and Lom both charged forwards and Kyle kicked the rifle away before the gunman could recover.

"Stay down! You are under arrest." Kyle told him and the gunman just looked up at the two Jedi as they both stood over him and pointed the blades of their lightsabers down at him.

Before the Jedi could attempt to either question the gunman or investigate the container there was the sound of something hitting the floor of the hallway behind them and Kyle glanced over his shoulder just in time to see a fist sized cylinder roll up to the doorway.

"Grenade!" he yelled and both he and Lom hurled themselves over the couch and to the floor before it went off. However, fortunately for the Jedi the grenade was not filled with explosives. Instead it contained a chemical agent of some kind and instead of an ear-splitting explosion there was just a soft 'Pop' following by a fizzing sound as this was released.

"Master it's gas." Lom exclaimed.

"Use your respirator." Kyle replied as he reached under his cloak for the breath mask he carried there.

Putting it on their masks meant having to shut off their lightsabers but it was clear that they had at least a short window of opportunity before their new assailant would be in a position to strike. The room began to fill with the cloud of thick white gas rapidly making it difficult to see much more than a metre ahead but Kyle still saw Lom reach to reactivate his lightsaber when he had his mask in place, "No." Kyle told him, his voice muffled somewhat by the mask covering his face.

"But master-" Lom began.

"Think." Kyle said before the Sullustan could finish, "Ignite your blade and our opponent will be able to see you. Keep it shut down and use the Force to see through the cloud." and he drew his pulse wave blaster before slowly getting to his feet and making his way towards the doorway.

Fear.

Panic.

At first Kyle thought he was sensing the emotions of the being who had thrown the grenade into the apartment but then he remembered the gunman lying on the floor and realised that he was sensing his reaction to suddenly finding himself in the midst of a cloud of choking gas and Kyle heard the sound of him gasping for breath. The fact that he was able to do this indicated that the gas was some form of riot control agent rather than something more lethal. But that did not mean that breathing it was without risk.

Then he felt another presence inside the apartment, one that seemed to be just entering it through the front door that Kyle had blown a large hole in. Kyle paused just inside the doorway leading to the hall and pointed his sidearm straight out ahead of him. Then as the outline of a humanoid figure appeared in the doorway he pressed the muzzle of the pulse wave blaster to the side of its head. The figure was significantly smaller than Kyle and he guessed that it was female.

"Don't move." he said but his opponent did exactly the opposite, spinning around and lashing out with a foot towards the Jedi. As soon as the spin started Kyle jumped back to avoid her attack. Given that he knew how she intended to try and strike him, Kyle knew exactly where she would be at each point in her attack and he reacted accordingly. Thrusting the palm of his hand forwards Kyle attempted to deliver a blow to his opponent's abdomen to knock the wind out of her. Given that she would have to be wearing a breath mask to protect herself against her own gas this would be an attack that was difficult to recover from and Kyle hoped that he could disable her with a single blow. But rather than striking her at the base of her ribcage as Kyle had hoped, he instead felt his hand hit an armoured vest and all he managed was to send his opponent flying backwards.

There was the clatter of something hard hitting the floor near Kyle's feet and he guessed that although his blow had not had the effect he had wanted it had still been enough to make his opponent drop whatever weapon she held and Kyle moved in to try and take advantage of this. But his opponent reacted quickly and with another kick she was able to knock his legs out from under him and he too collapsed to the floor and dropped his pulse wave blaster.

"Master!" Lom called out as he saw Kyle fall.

"I'm fine! Stay back!" Kyle responded, not wanting the Padawan to get in his way as he struggled with the mysterious woman.

Then even through the cloud of gas Kyle saw the glint of a blade as his opponent drew another weapon. Kyle reached out towards this with both hands and managed to grab the woman by the wrist before she could drive the blade into him. In response she then clamped her other hand over his and both began wrestling for

control of the knife. Kyle was significantly larger and stronger than the woman and so this was a fight that could have only one winner as he twisted her arm to point the knife away from him. But the woman still tried her best to resist him and the amount of effort she put into trying to keep hold of the knife meant that Kyle had to put his full strength into preventing her from stabbing him with that. Therefore, when the woman's strength finally gave out just as the knife was angling towards her own throat Kyle abruptly found himself pushing against an opponent who was not resisting and the knife suddenly lurched away from Kyle and embedded itself in the throat of its owner.

There was no scream, only a muffled gurgling sound as the knife tore open the woman's throat and she began to cough blood up into her breath mask where it could not escape. Kyle knew that there was nothing he could do to help the woman and now his focus had to be on protecting the innocent residents of the apartment building from the effects of the gas that she had unleashed.

"Lom! The window! Break the window!" he shouted as he used the Force to drag a table out of the room opposite the one Lom occupied and hurled it towards the front door of the apartment to block the hole he had made in it. The seal was not air tight but it would be enough to keep the gas that was able to leak out into the main hallway to a minimum.

Acting quickly, Lom drew his own pulse wave blaster and aimed it at where he could see sunlight coming into the room even through the cloud of gas before firing several shots in rapid succession. The impacts of the artificial spatial distortions shattered the glass with each hit and the cloud of gas began to seep out into the open air where given how high above the street the apartment was it could dissipate harmlessly. Meanwhile Kyle untangled himself from the body of the woman and retrieved his pulse wave blaster before getting back to his feet.

"Master are you okay?" Lom asked as he hurried over towards the Kyle.

"Fine." Kyle responded as he looked down at the woman he had just killed, "That makes four." he added, "Not counting that guy from down the hall. I think he was just a hired lookout."

"You think that is all there are?" Lom asked and Kyle nodded.

"It makes sense." he replied, "I saw four people taking artefacts from the ruins." then he looked towards the container on the far side of the room, just about visible now through what remained of the gas, "What do you say we take a look at what they thought was worth killing us for?" he said and Lom just nodded.

The two Jedi advanced towards the container and Kyle knelt down in front of it. Two latches held its hinged lid shut and Kyle looked at these carefully. There was no lock and he was able to release each one in turn before he started to lift the lid.

Whereupon there was a high pitched bleeping sound from within.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." he said, "The window!"

As the Jedi rushed towards the window, both unravelled lengths of synthrope from the dispensers they carried, tipped with small grappling hooks. Then as they jumped out of the window, smashing through what remained of it they hooked the end of their lines onto the window frame. Just as they dropped to the level of the floor below there was an explosion from overhead and a wave of heat as flames erupted out of the ruined apartment window. At the same time both Jedi reached the limit of their synthrope lines and their fall was brought to a rapid halt as they swung back towards the side of the building. This brought them crashing into the windows of the apartment below and the occupants of this apartment cried out in surprise as the two Jedi burst in, still wearing their breath masks.

"There's no need to concern yourselves." Kyle said as he removed his mask, "Jedi business."

Across the street from the apartment building the same man who had given Kassa the information about the Sith artefacts for sale watched what happened through a set of wide scan binocs. A recording rod was clamped to the top of these, along with a transmitter that carried the image to a relay station that in turn sent it back to the head office of Shill Security and the homes of every head of the Founding Families.

"The Jedi escaped." Ket Runn said as he watched the footage together with his wife. There were no holograms of the other Family heads but they could all hear his words.

"It wasn't targeted at them in any case." Han reminded him.

"Yes," Trent added, "we want Kyle alive to tell the Jedi Order that there is no further need to investigate the trade in Sith artefacts."

"And all it cost us was a few lumps of stone and cheap trinkets." Corva said.

"Thanks to me." Lorna commented, "If it was up to the rest of you then you'd have had to decide which items of your own collections you'd be giving up. For all we know you could have lost the key to completing everything we've been working towards."

"How exactly did you come to have such a large quantity of cloned midi-chlorians on hand Lorna?" Heddren asked.

"As a lawyer you ought to understand the concept of confidentiality Heddren." Lorna hissed in reply.

"This bickering is getting us nowhere." Erill Crassis gasped before he began to cough.

"My father is right." Luke agreed, "Now we need to see how the Jedi reacts."

13.

There was no firefighting service in this part of the city and Kyle had to summon Republic troops to contain the blaze before the entire building could be burned down. While waiting for them to arrive it was all that he and Lom could do to ensure that the evacuation ran as smoothly as could be expected for a building with an unknown number of occupants, many of whom were worried that by leaving their on unlawful activities could come to light. However, even when a platoon of troops arrived via gunships along with a dedicated fire-ship to tackle the blaze from outside the burning apartment no-one was concerned with what any of the other residents may have been up to.

"What can you tell me lieutenant?" Kyle asked the platoon commander when the fire was out and the soldiers were securing the apartment where the fire had been concentrated.

"Obviously some sort of incendiary sir." the armoured officer answered.

"Yes, that much I got. But what sort of incendiary device?" Kyle said.

"I'd say that it was a professional charge sir, not something rigged up from household or industrial chemicals. You'll need to wait for a more formal forensic examination but I'd wager that the charge burned itself out in the first few seconds. After that it was just whatever happened to have been ignited in the initial blast that kept the fire burning."

"We should be thankful master." Lom said, "If the device had been longer lasting then the entire building could have burned down and we would have never got everyone out."

"There were four bodies in the apartment where the fire was located. Plus one down the corridor." the lieutenant commented.

"Yes, we know about them." Kyle replied, "At least four of them were dead before the fire started though."

"We did manage to recover this." the lieutenant then told Kyle and he handed the Jedi a datapad that had managed to escape the blaze intact, "It was located in the kitchen sink of all places. It's a model intended for outdoor use and is waterproof. My guess is that someone was cleaning it and the water it was immersed in when the fire started protected it."

"Possibly." Kyle said, "Now is it safe to go inside?"

"Safe? I suppose so. There's only a limited amount of structural damage and I've left two men on guard until I hear whether a forensics team is coming or not."

"Good. Then I need to examine what is left." Kyle said and he beckoned for Lom to follow him as he headed back into the building.

Even before the two Jedi reached the apartment where the disturbance in the Force had been located Kyle could tell that something was very different. No longer could he feel anything in the Force beyond what he would normally expect to sense in an almost deserted building where beings had just recently died violently. Reaching the floor where the apartment was located Kyle started to see signs of the fire in the form of discolouration of the walls and ceiling as well as pools of water on the floor where the Republic troops had doused the flames with portable equipment. As the Jedi approached the apartment where the fire had started the two Republic guards snapped to attention. They were positioned either side of the front door that Kyle saw was now little more than a frame after the Republic troops had forced their way inside. The apartment itself was even more heavily damaged than the corridor outside, with every surface blackened and the residue from the heavier fire-fighting equipment aboard the fire-ship spread over almost every surface. Kyle and Lom made their way into the lounge where the container that Kyle had sensed as the epicentre of the disturbance in the Force was located and they found that it was still relatively intact if somewhat warped by the flames. But still Kyle could sense nothing out of the ordinary from inside it even as he walked right up to it and opened it.

"There is nothing left master." Lom said as they both looked at what was left inside the container. There were fragments of stone that looked to have been shattered by exposure to extremes of heat along with melted metal statues and ashes of primitive wood pulp documents but there was nothing to suggest that any of them was having any effect on the Force whatsoever.

"It seems not." Kyle replied as he began to rummage through the remains of what had been inside the container. There was nothing on any of the pieces of the now ruined artefacts that could prove what they had been before the fire but as he continued to search Kyle came across something else at the bottom of the container.

"What is that master?" Lom asked as Kyle removed what looked to be part of a clear polymer cylinder that was now badly melted.

"I'm, not sure." Kyle said, studying the object, "But perhaps whoever put these things in here thought to keep records." and he reached for the datapad that the lieutenant had given him.

"Kassa did claim to have been shown images of the artefacts." Lom commented as Kyle tried to turn on the

datapad. Nothing happened when Kyle pressed the activation switch but then he remembered where the lieutenant said it had been found. If it really had been left soaking in water then that would have boiled off during the fire and although the datapad was sealed against moisture the gasket around the battery compartment would be vulnerable to heat. Kyle went to remove the battery cover and found that the gasket had indeed melted, meaning that as he prised the device open the remains of the gasket tore apart as different sections stuck to different parts of the datapad. Inside the battery compartment he saw that the battery itself now looked discoloured as well. Obviously the melting gasket had allowed steam to get inside where it had attacked the battery.

"We need a new battery." Kyle said.

"Here master, use mine." Lom responded, producing his own datapad and opening up its battery compartment while Kyle removed the damaged one from the datapad he held. Taking the replacement, Kyle fitted it to the datapad found in the apartment and tried activating it again. This time the datapad turned on normally and Kyle found himself looking at an image menu. Picking one at random he began to scroll through the contents of the datapad and he saw what looked like one image of some ancient artefact after another. On some of the images Sith lettering was clearly visible whereas others showed unmarked objects. "The spoils of plundering Sith ruins." Kyle said softly before he came to the end of the images and instead found himself looking at a message log.

"Communications with others involved in the plot master?" Lom suggested.

"I think so." Kyle replied but he felt disappointed to see that none of the communication addresses were obviously those of members of the Founding Families. Then he tried opening some of the messages but failed when he found them all protected by passwords, "But I can't tell what was being said. We need to have this examined properly." he added.

"What you have here," Jule began when both Kyle and Lom were sat in her office on *Aurek Station* awaiting the results of the sector rangers' examination of the datapad, "is a record of several conversations between whoever owned this datapad and beings at two other communication addresses."

"Yes, I saw that much." Kyle replied, "But I couldn't identify either of the addresses."

"Well that's not surprising because they're both fake." Jule told him, "They've been used to conceal the genuine address to try and hide who was really sending the messages."

"Please tell me you managed to read the genuine addresses Jule." Kyle said as the hint of a smile appeared on his face and she smiled back at him.

"Sort of." she said, "Though I'm afraid it's a mixture of good and bad news. We were able to trace one of the addresses to a university message node on Crassis Major but can't narrow it down any further. My guess is that it's an unregistered address that isn't accessible from any particular staff or student account."

"So it could belong to anyone with access to the network?" Lom asked.

"I'm afraid so." Jule said.

"In other words there are thousands of suspects." Kyle said before he added, "What about the other address."

"Ah, now there we thought we were in for more luck." Jule replied, "It's registered to a transport ship that you're familiar with."

"A Hyperdyne five-seven-eight-R by any chance?" Kyle asked and Jule nodded.

"Registration trill herf xesh one one three eight." she replied, "But there's a problem with that as well." and she held out a sheet of flimsiplast to the Jedi.

"Transport attacked by pirates in the Ralta system." Kyle read out loud, "Hyperdyne five-seven-eight-R. No survivors."

"The ship you asked us to keep an eye on." Jule said, "According to Farris Shipping it was hauling a cargo of ion engine parts out to one of the trade fleets in the Brena system when it was ambushed just after dropping out of hyperspace."

"Who did the gang trying to sell the artefacts contact first?" Kyle asked.

"The university address." Jule replied, "Or rather it looks like they reached out to the gang. One of the first messages gives details of the transport ship and shortly after that communication starts between the gang and the ship."

"So someone at the university realised what the research team had and what it was worth on the black market so they got in touch with someone who could move it for them. In turn they bought off the crew of the transport so they could move back and forth from Atch without being noticed." Kyle said.

"It looks that way yes." Jule agreed.

"Then what about our investigation master?" Lom asked.

"What investigation Lom?" Kyle responded, "We can link the crew of the transport ship to the gang and the gang to someone at the university that organised the research mission."

"But what about the smuggler?" Lom said.

"What, Ren Distler?" Kyle asked in reply, "My guess would be that he was just hired to get the artefacts past

customs. But without catching him in possession of any Sith artefacts himself we can't tie him into this operation. From his arrest record I'd say that the gang had been using him for quite some time. The money they could make from selling the artefacts would more than pay for a lawyer like Heddren Drud."

"Though in future he may have more difficulty in obtaining such high priced representation." Jule added with a smile, "We'll get him for something, mark my words."

"Then I think that we are done here." Kyle said, getting to his feet, "Though it may be worth contacting the university where some of the messages originated from so that they can investigate whether someone is providing information about artefacts that can be sold for profit."

Returning to Tepillos, Kyle and Lom landed their fighters in their private hangar and leaving Lom to make sure that the vessels were fuelled and armed should they be needed in a hurry, Kyle headed for the lounge where his computer terminal was located. Now that the investigation into the smuggling and sale of Sith artefacts appeared to be complete it was time to make sure that all of the details were properly recorded for future reference. This included storing the physical evidence that had been gathered even though in this case the physical evidence was limited to the medallion that had been the start of the investigation and the datapad that had survived the apartment fire.

All too easy.

Kyle froze as he sensed the thought as soon as he held the medallion and stared at it.

"Far too easy." Kyle said to himself.

You know that there is more to be found. At the very least there are more artefacts out there.

Kyle put the medallion down on his desk and turned to the computer again. Now rather than just placing the data gathered in an archive he started to look through it, focusing on the images that his padawan had found of various dignitaries on Tepillos pictured with artefacts that resembled the medallion in their method of construction even if they were not medallions themselves.

Yes, that's right. You must find them all. Only when you know the source of each one will your quest be complete.

"I'll need Lom's help."

Be careful. Your padawan is not as strong with the Force as you are. You know what exposure to the Dark Side can do.

"He could be corrupted."

Yes, corrupted. You know you are strong enough to resist. But are you sure that he is?

"No. No, I'm not." Kyle said.

"Not what master?" Lom said as he suddenly appeared in the doorway to the lounge without Kyle having sensed him thanks to his being so focused on the medallion and the thoughts that came to him while he was.

"Not satisfied that our investigation is done my young apprentice." Kyle said and Lom tilted his head.

"But you told Agent Raser that-"

"That our investigation into the removal of artefacts from Atch is complete." Which it is. Kyle interrupted,

"From a certain point of view."

"A certain point of view master?"

"Yes. While we no longer have any need to investigate Atch there is still the matter of the artefacts you discovered in your early search. I want to be sure that we recover as many of them as possible."

Good. But you know that it was not just Atch that was visited by the Sith. They must have come here as well. Who knows where else as well?

"Of course master. I can begin to trace them immediately." Lom said.

"Excellent, that's just what I want." Kyle responded, "I need you to focus on the artefacts that are already in private hands. Find out who has them and where they are. In the mean time I'm going to try and find out just how widespread the presence of the Sith was in the sector. We could be sitting on a mountain of their creations and not even know it."

"Yes master." Lom said, "But why not ask Master Karas for help. I am sure he would-"

"No." Kyle said before his padawan could complete his suggestion, "I have no intention of bothering Master Karas with this until we know that it is bigger than what we can deal with ourselves. Let's face it, it could be nothing more than a few ancient trinkets and empty holes in the ground. However, there is someone I need to speak to."

"Who master? Lom asked and Kyle smiled at him.

"Belle of course." he replied, "If I'm going to head off to the fringes of the sector for however long this takes then I can at least warn her we won't be able to go on many dates any time soon."

"Of course master. I shall leave you alone to make your call." Lom said and he bowed slightly before turning around and heading for his room.

Meanwhile Kyle activated the communicator built into his desk, placing the call to Belle.

"Hello?" Belle's voice responded, the lack of video indicating that she was away from home and was answering using her PTP link.

"Belle it's me." Kyle said.

"Hi lover. So are you nearby?" Belle asked.

"Still on Tepillos. In fact I may not be able to make it to Crassis Major for a while Belle. Something's come up." Kyle told her.

"Come up? Kyle what's wrong? Is it related to what you asked me about before?"

"Kind of. But it's complicated. I tell you what, I could probably delay my departure for a couple of hours. How about we go out for dinner one last time before that?"

"Deal." Belle said, "How soon can you be here?" and Kyle looked at the chronometer built into his computer terminal.

"I can be there for seven." he said.

"Then I'll make a booking for sometime after that then. It'll be my treat though. I can afford better places than you." Belle replied and Kyle smiled even though she could not see him.

"Ah Belle, I love you to the bottom of your sizeable credit account." he said.

14.

When Kyle's starfighter dropped out of hyperspace in the Crassis system he received an automated message from Belle that gave him details of the restaurant she had booked them into. It was not one that Kyle was personally familiar with but from the look of the district it was going to be very expensive. One advantage of the restaurant however was that it featured a private hangar located on the lower levels while the restaurant was constructed on top of this. Primarily this was intended for land and airspeeders but it was also capable of handling shuttles and other small space vessels.

Disdain.

Annoyance.

Kyle's arrival in a heavily used starfighter obviously did not sit well with the member of staff who stood in greeting in the hangar as he landed the ship and disembarked.

"Your name sir?" the man asked with the emphasis on the 'sir' suggesting that it was not meant respectfully.

"Jedi Knight Kyle Jenner." Kyle replied, "The booking will be under the name Shill." and the man's eyes widened.

Fear.

Obviously he knew the name and was concerned about the prospect of losing his job for offending a customer who would be paying a small fortune to eat without being insulted by employees of the restaurant.

"Please follow me. Miss Shill is expecting you." he said.

Kyle was led from the hangar to a turbolift that took him straight to the restaurant itself where he found Belle waiting for him at the bar wearing a dress that hugged her slender frame.

"Belle." he said as she kissed him.

"Like my dress?" she asked.

"Very nice." Kyle replied, "I think it's the first time I've ever seen you unarmed though."

"What makes you think that?" Belle said.

"Because there's nowhere for you to hide a weapon under it." Kyle said and Belle smiled before leaning forwards to whisper in his ear.

"That depends on where I hide it." she said. Then she looked around and picked up a glass from the bar,

"Here, I ordered you a drink. Don't worry I know you're flying, it's not intoxicating."

"Excuse me Miss Shill." an electronic voice said and both Belle and Kyle looked around to see a highly polished droid standing in front of them, "Your table is now ready if you and your guest would like to accompany me."

Belle and Kyle were then escorted to a table located towards the centre of the restaurant, close to the kitchen. This would be one of the cheaper tables, though 'cheaper' was a relative term here, rather than the premier ones closer to the windows but Belle's obsession with maintaining her privacy meant that she avoided placing herself where she could be observed as much as possible. As they sat down a projector set into the ceiling above the table activated to project the menu into the air between them.

"So how about you tell me what's going on?" Belle said as Kyle was reviewing the menu.

"The gang that was removing the artefacts from Atch has been killed, as has the crew of the transport ship." Kyle replied.

"I take it that this wasn't an accident." Belle commented, glad that she had been taught to hide her thoughts from Jedi.

"No. The transport was ambushed by pirates while the gang resisted and forced Lom and myself to use a lethal level of force against them. Three were killed by us and the fourth may have been killed when an incendiary device they had set went off."

"What were they using an incendiary device for?" Belle asked.

"It was rigged to destroy the evidence." Kyle told her, "Or at least that was what they thought. It destroyed the artefacts they had stolen but the Republic troops that came out to fight the fire were able to recover a datapad that not only included proof of what they had been dealing in but also records of communication between them, the transport crew and someone at the university who tipped them off."

"So where does this leave your theory about the Founding Families?" Belle asked.

"Nowhere. Though I can link them to the dig on Atch, the transport ship belonged to one of the Karn family's companies and the smuggler used to get the artefacts past customs was represented by the Druds there is nothing to prove that they themselves had a hand in the smuggling operation."

"I don't get it." Belle said, "If everyone you know was involved is dead except for an informant right here on Crassis Major is dead then why do you need to take off around the sector?"

"Because I still think that there is more going on here than just a few artefacts being removed from Atch Belle." Kyle answered, "I think that this gang has been dealing in forbidden Sith artefacts for some time. That

means that there are beings in the sector who have bought them and also that there could be other sources. I need to stop anyone else putting more artefacts into circulation and deal with the ones that already are."

"Yourself?"

"Of course. Many of the artefacts left behind by the Sith resonate with the Force and I can detect that. I can't take Lom with me because he may not be strong enough to resist the power they'll try to exert over him, so that leaves only me." Kyle explained.

"Well it sounds insane to me." Belle said, "But I suppose I'm not going to be able to talk you out of it am I?"

"Would you love me if you could?" Kyle asked with a smile and Belle smiled back at him.

"Of course not. Look I need to go to the bathroom. How about you order for me while I'm gone?" she said.

"Sure, I know what you like." Kyle replied.

Belle picked up her purse as she headed towards the bathrooms but when she was out of sight of Kyle rather than continue towards them she found somewhere out of the way where she could use her PTP link without worrying about being overheard.

"It's me." she said quietly, "Are you there?"

"Right here Belle." Han answered, "So what's your boyfriend's big secret?"

"Well to start with I'm sure you'll be happy to hear to our big plan to put him off the scent of the Families worked but the problem is that now he's figured out that Atch isn't the only place that the Sith visited. He's planning to go hunting for others."

"Stang no." Han exclaimed, "Look Belle, you need to find a way of talking him out of this."

"Oh like anyone can do that. You told me to get close to Kyle and I've done just that. That means I know him a damned sight better than you do. There's no way I can talk him out of doing what he wants."

"Then I'll have to organise a unit to take him out."

"Are you insane?" Belle hissed, "Look Han, Kyle will spot someone tailing him a parsec off and he only needs to hang in a fight long enough to get off a signal and he'll bring the whole Jedi Order down on us."

"Then what do you suggest Belle?" Han asked and she sighed.

"Let me go with him." she said.

"Now you're the one that's sounding insane." Han said.

"Listen to me Han, if I go with Kyle then we can use him. He may come across things that we can use and give us insights that we could never come up with. Just make sure that everyone stays out of my way and doesn't do anything stupid." Belle told him.

"Okay I'll try but I'm not making any promises Belle. You know Ket Runn would like nothing more than to have Kyle killed. Even if I make sure he can't use any of our people to do it, there's nothing to stop him from hiring outside help."

"Thanks, that's all I need." Belle replied and then she shut off the PTP link and put it away.

On her way back to the table she ducked into the bathroom briefly to wash her hands, making sure that there would be the scent of sanitizer on them for Kyle to smell.

"I got you the fish." Kyle told her as she sat down and she smiled at him.

"Excellent." she said, "But I've got better news."

"What?" Kyle asked, looking confused.

"I'm coming with you."

"With me? With me where?"

"Well wherever it is that you're going while you hunt Sith." Belle said, "You know it makes sense. You'll need someone to watch your back and it's not like any ancient spirit is going to try and tempt me to the Dark Side. I don't have the power they want."

Kyle reached out across the table and took hold of Belle's hand.

"Belle," he said, "you're the best girlfriend a man could ever hope for."

"I know." she replied, still smiling.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this Han." Ket said as the heads of the Founding Families were once again gathered together, "If Kyle Jenner cannot be kept out of our business then he should be removed."

"Removed?" Erill Crassis said, "What are you planning Ket? To pick him up and carry him back to Coruscant?" and as Ket scowled most of the other Family heads smiled, only Lorna remaining as humourless as ever.

"My sister knows what she's doing." Han said, "My question to you is are you ready to support her? I can have a strike team on standby if that's what she needs but if Kyle is able to locate anything new then you need to be ready to react and step in before it can be destroyed."

"I still say that he could make a powerful ally." Lorna Fayl commented, "Perhaps that sister of yours could try using her charms to-"

"Lorna we've discussed this before now." Trent Narthis snapped, "Kyle Jenner is too dangerous. If we try to recruit him and fail then we will have given ourselves away. But even if the attempt is successful, do you want to him to have the power that what we are trying to do would give him?"

"Of course not." Lorna replied.

"Then perhaps you should stop repeating the same suggestions that we have already rejected Lorna." Corva Torin said.

"Or perhaps you start to listen to me." Lorna said.

"Say something worth listening to and we might." Josh Drud muttered and there were more smiles from the holograms in Han's office.

"Your sister can count on us Han." Faye Karn said, "With the number of ships we have at our disposal I'm sure that we can have someone stay close without making the Jedi suspicious."

"This had better work." Ket added sternly.

"Belle I'm not so sure about this." Kyle said as he looked at the transport ship waiting at the starport. Though much bigger than the starfighters he and Belle possessed it was much slower and was not designed for long haul flights.

"Don't worry, I've overseen some special modifications myself." Belle replied, "The engines have been upgraded and most of the living quarters have been ripped out."

"How does ripping out bunks help us?" Kyle asked.

"Because it gives us the room we need to expand the cargo hold enough that we can fit a pair of starfighters inside." Belle told him, "All the life support for those removed bunks is still in there as well so instead of just a couple of weeks worth of food and water we've got about three months worth. That ought to see us through a pretty long journey. Though I do need to know where we're going first."

"The Sith were here centuries before the Republic." Kyle said, "So we need to speak to others who were present in the sector back then. I know the Sith were on Atch but if the Arden still knew much about that era then they'd have already told Doctor Larson's research team. That leaves us with the Kinnin who won't speak to anyone and the Brenary. So we'll start there, in the Brena system."

"The Brena system?" Belle exclaimed, "But there's nothing there. Brena itself was rendered uninhabitable hundreds of years ago."

"But the Brenary themselves survived." Kyle pointed out, "I want to speak with them, not explore their world." Belle sighed.

"Oh very well." she said, "Let's get your fighter loaded aboard with mine and get on our way. Brena's the best part of three days from here."

While heavy loading droids were lifting Kyle's starfighter aboard the transport, Belle and Kyle boarded the vessel and made their way to the cockpit. Inside Kyle could see the extent to which the vessel had been modified and he smiled.

"What's so amusing?" Belle asked when she saw this expression.

"Oh just wondering why Shill Security would need a vessel capable of moving starfighters around in secret." he replied.

"It's important because some of our customers are eager to avoid attracting attention." Belle told him, "More than one pirate has thought they were attacking a helpless freighter when in fact there were starfighters inside."

The pair then began to strap themselves in and Belle powered up the transport.

"Starfighter is loaded." a mechanical voice announced over the intercom, "It is secure in your hold."

"Understood." Belle responded, "Launch sequence will commence in one minute."

"Affirmative. Launch area will be cleared." the machine voice said.

The freighter took off and ascended into the sky above Crassis Major. As it exited the atmosphere Kyle began to enter the details of their journey into the navigation computer. Having already planned this mission the Jedi had already worked out all of the jump details and all he needed to do was load them into the computer.

But what he did not realise was that the data was not only being loaded into the transport's navigation computer. A pre-installed device intercepted all of the data automatically and fed it into the transport's communication system as well where it was relayed to the headquarters of Shill Security, thus ensuring that when the transport jumped into hyperspace it did not do so alone.

15.

When their home world had been rendered uninhabitable by an ecological disaster the brenary had been fortunate enough that they possessed a level of technology advanced enough to build large numbers of spacecraft with interplanetary range. There were no other planets in their system capable of supporting life and without access to hyperdrive technology they had been unable to reach any other systems. Therefore, the brenary had instead adapted to a life in space and turned fleets of sublight craft into travelling colonies that could move from one planet in their system to another in accordance with their needs. The later arrival of the Republic had changed little for them. Some had obtained starships capable of travelling through hyperspace and formed new mobile fleets but the bulk of their population remained exactly where it had been before that. Across the Narthis Sector the brenary had now built up a reputation as both scavengers and traders and it was well known that all manner of illicit goods could be purchased from their fleets, if not from those that travelled through Republic space then from those that remain in the Brena system beyond the Republic's borders.

Kyle hoped that the combination of their presence in the sector pre-dating that of the Republic by many centuries along with their reputation he would be able to discover some other clue about how widely the Sith had spread.

"I've got three groups of contacts on the scope." Belle said shortly after the transport ship dropped out of hyperspace at the end of the final leg of its journey from the Crassis system to Brena. This made perfect sense. The brenary tended not to travel in individual ships that could fail, instead they moved about fleets that could feature more than two hundred ships. Only when people or goods needed to be moved between fleets that were not already on intercept courses would single ships be used for transport.

"Sizes?" Kyle added. This was important for two reasons. Firstly because a larger fleet would obviously offer more options for asking about Brena's history but also because like any other culture the brenary had their own criminal element and sometimes these criminals banded together in fleets of their own. Fortunately these tended to be much smaller than the ordinary trading fleets and by simply heading towards the largest they could be avoided, especially when piloting a vessel using the superior Republic engine technology rather than the slower brenary drives.

"One has twelve ships, one has about sixty and the largest somewhere between a hundred and twenty and a hundred and fifty." Belle told him as she studied the sensor display.

"The dozen could be pirates." Kyle said, "We'll avoid them unless we have no choice. Though I doubt they'll be a match for our fighters."

"Told you it would work." Belle commented, smirking as she continued to look straight ahead.

"We haven't had to use them yet." Kyle pointed out, "Anyway, we should head for the largest fleet and then try to get permission to dock with the largest ship."

"Bigger the better." Belle said, "I always said size was important." then she glanced at Kyle, "Which is probably why I'm so attracted to you."

"Just get us there Belle." Kyle replied.

"Fair enough."

Belle turned the transport towards the largest fleet visible on their sensors and accelerated towards it. The fleet was clustered around an asteroid and even from a distance it was possible to see the engine flares of shuttles travelling back and forth between the ships of the fleet and the surface of the asteroid, indicating that they were conducting mining operations.

"Attention Republic vessel. State your identity and purpose of visit." an accented voice announced over the communication system as the transport approached the fleet.

"This is transport ship *Haven* operating out of Crassis." Belle responded, "We seek permission to dock on private business." then she shut off the transmitter and looked at Kyle, "Hopefully they won't ask for anything more than that." she added.

"I doubt it." Kyle replied, "Asking too many questions would put off paying visitors."

"That reminds me," Belle said, "how are you planning to pay for information? There's no guarantee that they'll accept Republic credits."

"That's why I brought these along as well." Kyle replied and he took a small pouch from inside his robes and tipped some of the contents into his hand, "Gold coins are good most places you go."

"That's my man. Thinks of everything." Belle said.

"Transport *Haven* you are cleared to dock." the voice of the brenary flight controller then announced, "Follow beacon one-one-three-eight."

"Understood control. I have the beacon on my scopes, coming in to dock." Belle said.

The beacon led Belle and Kyle to an external docking port on a vessel more than two thousand metres long

rather than an internal hangar but this had the look of having been either added or modified some time after contact had been established with the Republic so that it could be used to connect with ships that had not been manufactured by the brenary themselves. Once their ship was docked, Belle and Kyle made their way to the airlock and waited for the brenary vessel's hatch to open.

"Two pistols Belle?" Kyle commented as he saw the weapons holstered under Belle's shoulders.

"A girl has to be careful." she replied, "Besides, I bet you've got that lightsaber of yours under that cloak as well as a pulse wave blaster and plasma carbine."

"Well a man has to take care of himself." Kyle said and they both smiled as the hatch opened.

Immediately the pair found themselves facing a crowd of brenary, furred humanoids that stood about as tall as an adult human female. It was obvious from the outset that this crowd was eager to see how they could turn a profit from their latest guests. Some carried with them examples of goods they could offer and loudly announced them in accented basic.

"Spice! Best spice!"

"Death sticks!"

"Jewels for your female?"

"You want weapons? I have finest weapons in the galaxy."

Rather than listen to the words being shouted out Kyle instead opened his mind to the Force to try and determine the motivation of the brenary, paying special attention to those who had remained further away and appeared to be studying Belle and Kyle while not attempting to attract their attention. Without mentioning to Belle that he even had the artefact with him, Kyle gripped the Sith medallion that he had in his pocket as he reached out through the Force and he felt the power flow through it.

Greed.

Deceit.

Hatred.

It was obvious that a good portion of the population of this ship, or least of those present would rather not be welcoming visitors from the Republic though Kyle doubted that any of them knew who he and Belle were. Brena's status as an independent system meant that Kyle had no formal authority here and so had rarely visited it. On the other hand Belle did her best to avoid anyone being able to avoid being remembered wherever she went.

Curiosity.

Kyle suddenly sensed that one of the brenary watching them was doing so because he or she genuinely wanted to determine what it was that they wanted before making an approach.

"This way." Kyle said, taking Belle by the hand and leading her through the crowd. He ignored the offers being made by the other brenary and also the insults that some chose to hurl in both their own language and also in Basic when they failed to make a sale.

"Why?" Belle asked at the same moment as she elbowed a brenary in face when she noticed him trying to pick her pocket.

"Because I think we can find someone over here that can help us." Kyle said and then he ground to a halt in front of a brenary whose greying fur indicated that he was of much greater age than most of those present,

"Why are you watching us?" Kyle asked.

"Why are you here?" the brenary replied.

"We're looking for something." Belle said.

"Well you have found something." the brenary told her, "Lots of things in fact. Though whether any of them are what you seek is another matter."

"We're looking primarily for information." Kyle said, "We want to know about your history."

"Oh my life story has very little in it to interest honoured visitors from the great Galactic Republic. I am just a humble brenary who no longer even has the strength to try and sell substandard merchandise to those who will be long gone before they discover that they have been tricked." the brenary said.

"No, not your personal history. The history of your people." Belle said.

"Ah, then what you seek is available and I can take you there." the brenary said, "Though it will not be free. I am old but I am not."

"Will this do?" Kyle asked as he produced a pair of coins and held them between himself and the brenary so that none of the others would see.

Excitement.

It was obvious that the coins were enough to get the brenary's attention and moments later he spoke.

"They will do just fine." he said as he took the coins, "You may call me Noslom."

"Very good Noslom." Kyle replied, "My name is Kyle and this is my friend Belle."

"Friend?" Belle commented.

"Okay girlfriend. Is that better?" Kyle responded.

"Much." Belle answered.

"Friend Kyle, friend Belle. Please follow." Noslom said and he beckoned for them to accompany him.

As they followed Noslom deeper into the ship Belle kept a close eye on him just in case he decided to flee now that he had been paid in gold. On the other hand Kyle could sense that the brenary had no intention of trying to fleece them and would instead help them to the best of his abilities. They were led past several galleries where markets had been set up either in the form of stalls erected in large open spaces or rows of small units that were obviously part of the structure of the starship they were aboard. But Noslom did not point any of these out to Kyle and Belle, instead continuing to lead them through the starship until they came to a doorway that appeared to be stuck half open.

"Here." Noslom announced, "The history of the brenary." and he pointed them inside.

"Allow me." Kyle said to Belle as he took out a compact flash light and shone it through the gap in the doorway. In the darkness beyond he saw a large chamber that had seating either side of it.

"What is this place?" Kyle asked as he stepped inside and shone the flash light over the walls.

"From the looks of the seating I'd say it was some sort of debating chamber." Belle said as she followed, producing a flash light of her own, "Look, one side sits on each side of the room and the moderator sits up there at the end."

"This place was created so that our people could remember where we had come from while they decided how our society should be run." Noslom said as he too entered the chamber, though he had no light of his own and so remained by the doorway.

"This feels familiar." Kyle commented.

"How does this remind you of anything?" Belle asked, "Is there something about the seating that's significant?"

"It's not the seats Belle," Kyle said as he directed the beam from his flash light upwards, "it's the ceiling. Look."

Belle tilted her head back and shone her own flash light upwards as well and then let out a gasp when she saw the way in which the ceiling of the disused chamber had been intricately painted.

"What you wanted to see, yes?" Noslom asked.

"Quite possibly." Kyle answered as he continued to study the ceiling.

Rather than there being just a single image covering the whole surface of the ceiling there were instead numerous smaller ones that had been designed to flow into one another and it was clear that they depicted the flow of time covering the recorded history of the brenary up to the point where they had been forced to evacuate their world.

The first images showed the primitive brenary as tribal farmers, then progressing to a society that worked metal and organised armies led by warriors clad in armour made of such metals. Then came depictions of shadowy figures that towered over the brenary and were surrounded by lightning. The first few showed the figures striking down brenary warriors while the next showed them leading brenary armies, only now the brenary were not armed with bows and spears instead they looked to have relatively modern appearing firearms.

Then all of a sudden the shadowy figures were gone and the brenary were shown fighting among themselves for a time, the cities built under the direction of the shadowy figures being torn down. When this was complete however, new cities were depicted being built under the sole direction of the brenary themselves while their society seemed to have kept much of the technology that had been brought to their world. Soon after this the images showed the brenary taking the first steps off their world and exploring space until the time when their world was rendered uninhabitable and they were forced to flee. The final image showed a swarm of spacecraft departing their dying world.

"Incredible." Belle said.

"Noslom," Kyle said, shining his flash light beam at the section of the ceiling where the images of the shadowy beings were located, "what can you tell us about them. They aren't brenary are they?"

"No friend Kyle." Noslom answered, "They came to our world long ago. They were strong and conquered us. Then they made us their servants and taught us many of their ways so that we could serve them better. But they soon left, why I cannot say but when they left they did not take with them all that they had brought with them. With them gone there was no need to continue to follow the way of life they had forced us to but we kept as much as we could of the science they had taught us."

"Looks like their departure caused some problems though." Belle commented.

"Yes friend Belle. Some wanted to destroy everything that they had left behind and abandon the new technologies we had been granted while others who had become powerful under their rule wanted to remain so. It took many years for our own culture to win out."

"But who were they?" Kyle asked.

"I do not know. My people do not care. They were invaders and they stayed for only a short time." Noslom answered, "All that was important to us was how we could use their technology to better ourselves. If we had not then we would likely have perished when our world died."

"What did happen to your world?" Belle asked, "All I see here is what looks like flames in the sky."

"Something struck one of our moons. Some say that it was a comet or asteroid while others at the time

suspect that our alien conquerors had returned and used some sort of weapon. But debris fell from the sky for many months and the sun was blotted out. With no other choice we left our world to live out here in space.”

“Noslom I'd like to know more about these aliens who invaded your homeworld.” Kyle said, “Are there no records from this era?”

“Perhaps. But the fighting that followed their departure destroyed a lot of the cultural information, after all it was the intention of the winning side to purge what little remained of their influence over us.” Noslom answered.

“You keep saying 'departure'.” Belle commented, “Did they just leave? They weren't driven off in an uprising?”

“I don't think so.” Noslom replied, “Certainly I have never heard of any uprisings.”

“And I take it that there isn't a booming trade in antiques from that period?” Kyle added and Noslom shook his head.

“No. Even though we had many ships on which to flee the room aboard was still limited and space had to be given over to essentials. Some vessels did return to Brena after the debris storms had finished to see what they could recover, but the damage done was severe and only a few items were ever recovered.”

“What condition is the surface of Brena in now?” Kyle asked and Belle winced.

“Oh no.” she said, “I've got a really bad feeling about what you're about to suggest Kyle.”

“If there is evidence of the Sith being present in this system then it is most likely still on Brena.” Kyle pointed out to her.

“Yes. Buried under kilo-tonnes of rock.” Belle added but Kyle just grinned.

“Do not underestimate the power of the Force.” he said.

Especially when you will have a head start.

At one time Brena had been a lush, green world that support a wide ecosystem. Even the occupation of the Sith and the widespread fighting that following their departure had not changed this. However, the destruction wrought by whatever impact had struck one of the original three small moons had done what the Sith and global war had failed to do. Now far more than three moons orbited Brena, but most of these were no more than a hundred metres or so across and they formed a ring of debris around the planet. Every so often one of these pieces of debris would drop out of orbit, either because its course had been changed by a collision with another piece of debris or because its orbit had been unstable to begin with and the gravitational pull of Brena had finally won out. This continuing barrage of meteorite impacts was the primary reason why the brenary themselves avoided coming back towards their ancestral homeworld. Even if they constructed shelters that could protect them against the high levels of dust in the atmosphere and severe wind storms the risk of another impact striking them was too high.

As Belle piloted the Haven towards Brena the trails of numerous meteors passing through the upper atmosphere were clear to see.

"I don't like the look of that Kyle." Belle said.

"Perhaps I ought to go down there alone." Kyle suggested, "I can take my fighter and you can stay up here with the transport. If anything happens to take out my ship you can come and get me."

"Oh no, you're not ditching me now." Belle exclaimed, "Never mind your ship, what if something happens to you? You'll need me to watch your back."

"So you've changed your mind then? Don't think it's such a bad idea coming here now?"

"I didn't say that. I still think it's a bad idea coming here but I'm staying right with you." Belle answered.

"Well I still think we should take the fighters just in case." Kyle said, "We'll see if we can find any promising looking locations from orbit before going down for an aerial survey. Then if the site still looks promising we can touch down and see what we can find."

"Sounds good to me." Belle said, "Angling sensors for a ground sweep. But I'm not sure how much sense we'll get out of them. There are some pretty thick clouds of dust in the atmosphere that are bound to get in the way."

Kyle smiled.

"What?" Belle asked.

"Never tell me I don't take you anywhere nice." he said and Belle scowled.

"Oh shut up." she said.

A mix of heavy meteorite bombardment and thick clouds of dust being blown around had served to wipe most trace of the old brenary cities off the face of the planet but here and there were still some traces of civilisation remaining and Belle was able to locate one of these along what had been the shoreline of a large body of water before it had been boiled away by the impact of a large meteorite. Now only fragments of machinery that had made up part of the docks that had served the vessels that centuries earlier had plied the waterways of Brena but it was enough to give Belle and Kyle somewhere to start their search.

As Kyle had recommended, the pair left the transport ship in orbit around Brena while the pair took their fighters from the hold and headed down into the atmosphere.

"Scopes are blind. I can't see a thing." Kyle signalled as his ship flew into a storm cloud.

"Still think it was a good idea coming here?" Belle responded from her own fighter that was also having trouble navigating through the clouds.

"Good? No. Essential. Yes." Kyle said, "Wait, I think it's- Kriff! Pull up!" and he pulled back on his control column just in time to avoid flying into the mountain that appeared in front of his fighter just as it emerged from the lower levels of the cloud.

"Stang Kyle! That was too close." Belle said as she too took last minute evasive action and the two fighters zoomed around the mountain. Then directly ahead of them they saw what remained of the brenary city. None of the structures remained standing and dust storms had covered most of the rubble but here and there pieces of wreckage that could be identified as being artificial because of the straight lines that could be made out.

"This is it Belle." Kyle said, "We need to find somewhere to set down."

"What about back near that mountain? It would give our ships cover from any meteor activity." Belle suggested.

"Possibly." Kyle replied, "But I don't think we should land in the same place, just in case. You find somewhere near the mountain and I'll look for something within the city itself."

"Copy that. Make sure your PTP link is broadcasting. I'll follow it's signal to find you." Belle replied before her fighter peeled away from Kyle's and headed back towards the mountain.

Meanwhile Kyle dropped his fighter's altitude as he circled the city in his hunt form somewhere to land. With the sensors on his ship proving unreliable in the atmospheric conditions outside, Kyle instead relied on his own senses to guide him and he reached out through the Force. Immediately he felt a shudder go down his spine and the medallion in the pocket of the environment suit he was wearing felt suddenly colder than it had before.

You are close now.

It was obvious that there was something with a connection to the Dark Side below him and Kyle began to tighten the circle he was flying. Then he noticed an area of ground that was much flatter than the surrounding terrain and he decided that this was significant. A ridge had been formed by rubble being buried in layer after layer of dust and grit on the edge of this area and it was to here that Kyle steered his fighter, landing it as close to the ridge as he could for maximum protection. Then he powered down the fighter and opened the canopy.

Right away Kyle was met by the wind blowing dust in his face and he lowered the visor of his helmet for protection before climbing out of the fighter. In order to stop the cockpit filling with dust while he was gone Kyle then lowered the canopy again and checked that his PTP link was broadcasting his position before he headed off, following the disturbance he could sense in the Force.

Moving across the surface of Brena was difficult. Kyle's feet sank into the dust that covered everything and it took significant effort just to be able to walk through it even without the strong winds blowing against him.

Get back.

The warning from the Force came just in time and Kyle jumped backwards as the ground opened up right in front of him. Obviously his movement had disturbed something that had been holding up a layer of dirt and that had now given way, prompting it to collapse. Kyle then peered into the hole that had been created, shining his flash light down into the darkness. There appeared to be some sort of structure below him and Kyle lowered himself down onto the ground so that he could get a better look down the hole, slowly sticking his head into it.

The room immediately below Kyle held nothing but debris, but the disturbance in the Force felt stronger down here than on the surface so he picked himself up and looked down into the darkness again. Alert for any danger that may have eluded his detection, Kyle swapped his flash light for his lightsaber and ignited the weapon before simply jumping into the hole. Using the Force to control his descent, Kyle landed on his feet and took a look around. Even down here he could see only debris, now coloured pale blue by the light cast by the blade of his lightsaber. Kyle then began to move in the direction of the disturbance he could feel in the Force, sensing it becoming progressively stronger as he went on.

The disturbance led Kyle to a large chamber where he emerged through a doorway onto a raised metal walkway that groaned as he put weight on it for the first time in around four hundred years. Looking over the edge of the walkway Kyle found himself looking down a row of aircraft, each of which had a distinct military look to them and he realised why the ground above looked flatter than that nearby.

"This was an airbase of some sort," he said to himself.

The walkway was still strong enough hold Kyle but it did continue to creak and groan with each step he took towards the stairs that would take him down to the main hangar level below. Once more he felt the disturbance in the Force grow stronger as he descended, reaching a peak as he stepped onto the solid floor and looked along the row of aerospace fighters. But as far as Kyle could tell the disturbance was not coming from in here at all but from further below him. Looking around Kyle could see no obvious way of getting to a lower level, if one still existed. It was possible that another set of stairs or a turbolift shaft existed in another part of the hangar building but Kyle did not plan on spending an unknown amount of time wandering aimlessly in this underground structure. So instead he turned his lightsaber upside down and plunged it straight down into the floor beneath his feet, plunging himself into total darkness as the blade pierced it right the way up to the grip. But light returned as Kyle started to cut through the floor, producing a circular slot that eventually became a circle that dropped out of the floor entirely and plummeted into the darkness below.

Where it promptly bounced off something made of metal.

Kyle looked down through the hole, once again using his lightsaber for illumination and he gasped when he saw what had obviously been down there for some time. For at least four hundred years it had been undisturbed and given the time scales involved it could have been down there for another six hundred before that. But no matter how long it had been down here, Kyle knew that this find alone made his coming here worthwhile.

Kyle was looking at a Sith starship.

Jumping down through the hole, Kyle landed on top of the ancient vessel's hull and he looked up and down the length of it. The ship had a somewhat insectoid look to the shape of its hull, along with two long wings extending out from about half way along its hull on each side that curved backwards. Overall he estimated that it was a similar size to the transport ship that had brought Belle and him to Brena and thinking back to what the Jedi Order had taught about Sith vessels this meant that it was an escort gunship. Vessels such as this had made up the bulk of the Sith fleet during the Great Hyperspace War, providing protection for the

larger derrick-class battleships as well as serving as troop transports for small commando units that were often led by one or two Force-wielding Sith.

Scaffolding had been erected around the gunship at some point and this made Kyle think that the brenary had been studying the ship to try and unlock secrets that eluded them right up to the point where they had been forced to abandon it here. Secrets such as those of hyperspace travel. If the brenary had been able to reverse engineer that on their own then there would have been no need for the massive fleets they now inhabited. Instead they could have just made their way to one of the other worlds in the sector that the Republic had since settled.

Taking advantage of the curvature of the hull, Kyle slid down to the floor and looked along the length of the ship once more, studying the scaffolding. He saw that a small platform had been set up outside a hatchway that stood open and wasted no time in making for it. Carefully he climbed up onto the platform and started to make his way inside the ship, holding his lightsaber out in front of him in a defensive posture. Kyle doubted that any of the original crew could have survived all this time, but it was not impossible that there would still be some functioning defences meant to prevent a rebellious crew from absconding with the ship.

Conceivably there could also be Sith droids present that the brenary had not dealt with so Kyle decided to err on the side of caution as he made his way towards the front of the ship where he expected to find the cockpit.

Belle struggled through the stormy conditions as she searched for the signal from Kyle's PTP link. The device did not have the range to reach her on its own so she was forced to follow a beacon from his fighter to begin with until she got close enough to pick up Kyle himself. But when she reached Kyle's fighter, Belle found only a very weak signal and whatever tracks he may have left in the soft ground had already been erased by the wind.

"Damn you Kyle." she said to herself, "Couldn't you have waited for me before heading off on your own?" Then using the weak signal she was getting from Kyle's PTP link she headed off in the same direction he had gone.

Kyle was amazed by how little damage appeared to have been done to the gunship. Here and there a panel had been opened and components removed but he guessed that this was a result of the brenary trying to determine how various systems functioned rather than any hostile action. However, when he finally reached the cockpit he saw that it had not come off so lightly.

Every single control console and access panel had been opened up, with wires trailing out of them. Kyle did not think that these had been ripped out of the gunship however, but instead inserted by brenary engineers who wanted an easy way of accessing what lay behind the panels. Though the Republic had seized a great many of these ships following the Great Hyperspace War, the examples that had been studied had never been fully operational and Kyle could only guess what some of the control positions were intended for. All of the original seating was still present and given that one of these had a distinctly throne-like quality to it rather than the more basic functionality of the others, Kyle decided that this was likely to be the commanding officer's position. Another console was fitted with a control column as well and this made Kyle think that this was the helm station. But neither of these was what interested the Jedi knight. Kyle walked over to the helm station and then studied those close by, figuring that one of them was likely to be the navigator's console. The problem for Kyle was that he was not only dealing with technology that was a thousand years old but also that had not been constructed by any civilisation in the Republic. At its heart though the Sith gunship was still based on the same science that Republic technology was, it was just that it had diverged around two thousand years before the gunship had been built. Kyle tried to put what he did not know out of his mind and instead focused on the things he knew would have to apply to the navigation computer he sought. He knew that no matter how primitive it was, the computer would have to be able to communicate with many other systems such as sensors and flight controls. This meant that there would inevitably be a hard-wired connection between the navigator's console and the helm and comscan stations. Therefore, with the comscan station also unidentified Kyle started his search at the more obvious helm station.

"Come on nav computer." he said to himself as he crouched down and started to try and follow the larger clusters of wires from the helm to the nav computer, "Where are you?"

"Kyle!" Belle's voice suddenly called out from his PTP link and he started to straighten up, forgetting that his head was inside an open console and he winced as he struck the back of his head.

"Ouch." Kyle muttered, frowning and rubbing his head as he took out his PTP link and activated, "Yes Belle? What is it?"

"Kyle where the hell are you?" Belle asked. Her signal was heavily distorted but the Jedi was still able to tell what she was saying over the static, "My signal trace is telling me I'm right on top of you."

"That's because you are. Literally." Kyle responded, "Belle I've found an underground hangar."

"A hangar? What's in it?" Belle said.

Is this really for her to know about? She has no power to sense the Force.

Kyle paused, wondering whether he should tell Belle about the Sith gunship or not.

"A Sith starship." he said eventually, ignoring the question that had come to him out of the Force itself. As far as Kyle was concerned, Belle had proven herself trustworthy.

"Stang Kyle, is it functional?"

"I doubt it. It looks like the brenary were trying to figure out how everything worked when they were forced to abandon it here. Maybe they thought they'd be able to come back for it later."

"So what do you want to do with it? I'm sure I could get a team here—"

"No." Kyle snapped.

"Whoa. I was only making a suggestion." Belle said.

"Sorry. But I don't want any more people knowing about this than necessary. The last thing we need is hundreds of scavengers descending on this planet to try digging up a Sith ship of their own." Kyle replied.

"So what do you want to do with it? Surely you're not just going to blow it up."

"No, of course not. I'm trying to find the nav computer. With any luck there'll still be information on where this ship has been buried somewhere inside its memory."

"You're hoping to find a record of every planet visited by the Sith aren't you?" Belle said and Kyle smiled.

"If the Force is with me, yes." he told her, "Though even just one or two more systems would prove useful."

"Okay, I'll come down there and help you. How do I get in?"

"A hole opened up back in the direction of my fighter." Kyle said, "But don't come down. Just wait for me to get done here and I'll make my way back to you."

"Okay but hurry." Belle replied, "There's something about this planet gives me the creeps." and then she turned off her PTP link.

Meanwhile Kyle returned to searching for the Sith nav computer, following what looked to be the largest clusters of data lines until they all led into one case that was located below the floor. Carefully turning his lightsaber upside down again, Kyle began to cut away the deck plates that covered this piece of equipment until it was fully exposed and he smiled as he saw that he had found what he was looking for. Although all of the labelling was in the Sith language that he was unable to read, Kyle could see that there were openings in the case for multiple data storage drives. Though in modern terms each drive had only limited capacity, probably being equal to a typical mem-stick at best, they would have been state of the art in the Sith Empire and just the sort of thing that would be used to hold jump co-ordinates. Initially Kyle considered using his lightsaber to cut the entire computer free of its mounting before he noticed that the drive ports made this unnecessary. All he had to do was unplug the individual drives and take them with him. They were what held the information he sought rather than the processing and data communication elements that made up the bulk of the nav computer's bulk and weight.

Kyle swapped from using his lightsaber for illumination back to his flash light so that he could put the device down on the deck safely and use both hands to remove the drives one by one, placing them in his backpack. Then once the last of them was stowed he picked up both the pack and his flash light and started to head back towards the surface.

"Kyle is that you?" Belle called out when she saw light suddenly appear in the hole she had been sat beside for what seemed to her like an age and she peered down.

"Who else?" Kyle replied as he appeared at the bottom of the hole, angling his flash light upwards.

"I'll drop a line down to you." Belle said.

"No need. Stand back." Kyle told her and before Belle had the change to get clear of the hole Kyle suddenly jumped upwards, using the Force to power his leap just as he had used it to control his descent and he came close to crashing into Belle.

"Stang Kyle! Watch where you're jumping." she said.

"Sorry, I thought you'd be further back." Kyle responded. Then Belle frowned, "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Where's the nav computer? Don't you have it?" she asked him.

"My pack." Kyle said, turning just enough so that she could see that his backpack was full.

"That's a bit small for a nav computer isn't it?" Belle commented.

"It's just the storage drives." Kyle explained, "I figured there was no reason to bring all the other bits. I can get something rigged up to stand in for all of that when we get home."

"So we're just heading back already?"

"That's the idea. We know that the Sith came to Brena, now I want to see where else they went. There's no point wandering around at random when I have a massive clue right here." Kyle answered and he tapped his back pack, "Once I've seen what's on these, then I'll decide where to head next."

"Okay, then let's get moving. But don't forget that wherever you go, I go too."

Belle and Kyle returned to their fighters, flying them back up to the transport ship waiting in orbit before Belle set a course that would take them to Tepillos. But soon after the ship jumped into hyperspace and was running on automatic pilot she excused herself and headed for the hold where the two fighters were stored.

Because there was just the two of them aboard the transport, Kyle had not thought to secure his fighter and Belle was able to easily open the small storage compartment of the starsaber-class vessel. Inside she saw the backpack filled with Sith computer drives and selecting one at random she removed it before setting everything else back as it had been before.

She then concealed the drive in a hidden storage compartment located behind a false bulkhead before she made her way back to the cockpit where Kyle was monitoring the autopilot.

"Find what you were looking for?" he asked.

"Right where I thought it was left." she replied.

17.

Belle left Kyle on Tepillos before taking the transport back to Crassis Major, telling Kyle that she was checking in with her brother about events while they had been gone and from a certain point of view that was true. But rather than her asking him what had happened in her absence from Crassis Major, Belle was going to inform Han of what had transpired during her journey with Kyle.

It was late by the time Belle reached the capital and she knew that Han would have gone home by that time so rather than wait until he returned to work the next day she headed for where he lived.

"Nice work Belle." Han said as soon as he opened his apartment door to her, "A team from the Torin family is already exploring that hangar."

"Well unless there's something down there Kyle missed the best stuff is gone." Belle replied as she sat down and leant back in a heavily padded chair while Han sat nearby. Then she looked around and sniffed the air, "Perfume?"

"I had a guest." Han told her.

"No glasses or empty bottles around I see though. Purely a business arrangement was it?"

"Someone Vorn Torin recommended. Expensive but talented." Han said then he smiled and added, "And flexible. Maybe she could give you a few hints for keeping Kyle occupied while you secretly betray him at every opportunity."

"It's not betrayal." Belle said, "I'm just making sure that he doesn't get into a position where his activities conflict with our interests."

"Why Belle, are you falling in love with him?" Han said, smirking and his twin reacted by hurling a cushion at him, "Must have hit a nerve there." he added.

Belle sighed.

"Funnily enough I didn't come here to swap notes on our sex lives big brother." Belle said, "I came to give you this." and from inside her jacket she produced the Sith computer drive she had taken from Kyle's backpack.

"What's that?" Han asked.

"A computer drive from a Sith navigation computer." she told him, "One of the ones that Kyle pulled out of the gunship in that hangar complex."

"He won't miss this?" Han asked as he reached out and took hold of the drive.

Belle shook her head.

"He's got a bag full of them. Even if he counted them he's got no way of knowing where he lost this one. He could have dropped it in the hangar or on the way back to his fighter." she said.

"You'd better be right about this Belle. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise we'll have an angry jedi coming after us. Starting with me." Belle interrupted, "Well maybe not angry. But definitely irritable."

"This is serious Belle. You were told to watch him."

"And I did. Plus I got us that. If Kyle's right then I reckon that there ought to be a record of at least one jump that the ship made on that and hopefully it will lead us to somewhere new. Even if it doesn't then it's one less route that Kyle's got."

"This isn't standard Republic tech." Han commented, examining the data port at one end of the drive that had been used to connect it to the nav computer aboard the Sith gunship.

"So what's new? Look Han, we can pass that along to Del Karn and his people can put something together that will interface with it. It won't be the first time now will it?"

"I suppose so. I'll let the others know first thing tomorrow and see what the Karns can do with it. But what's your boyfriend up to now?" Han asked.

"He's at home trying to do what we're going to ask the Karns to do for us." Belle replied.

"Perhaps if you told me what you were trying to do I could help you master." Lom said while he watched Kyle tip a container filled with various electronic connectors across a workbench. Given that assembling their own lightsaber was a part of their training, all jedi had at least some skill with electronics and Kyle was obviously intent on building something.

He is not strong enough. He will be corrupted. What you have found is for you alone. Only you are strong enough to master it.

"I've got other work for you Lom." Kyle replied.

"If that is your wish master. What are your instructions?" Lom asked.

"I reviewed your list of potential Sith artefacts identified in public records. It was very thorough."

"Thank you master."

"No need to thank me. That list is about make you even more work. I need you to investigate the individuals you identified as potentially owning Sith artefacts in person." Kyle told him, "Of course that means that you'll have to visit each one in turn."

"Master, some of the information I uncovered is decades out of date. The beings concerned may no longer live where they once did and some may not even be alive." Lom pointed out.

"In which case you'll have to find out where they are now and who their descendants are. Things as old as any Sith artefact will be are likely to be kept in the family after the original owner dies. Even if it isn't then any living relative may be able to tell you what happened to them." Kyle responded, "Don't let anyone know why you want to talk to them until you're already inside their home though. Oh and don't mention the Sith openly. Some may not know what they've got and I'd like to keep it that way until the time comes to seize whatever artefacts you do come across."

"What am to say to them master?"

"Just ask if they can remember where they obtained them. If they ask what any of this is about then tell them that similar items have been targeted for thefts in neighbouring sectors and that the Jedi Order has been asked to intervene."

"And if they refuse to answer my questions master? Or will not see me at all?"

As good as an admission of guilt. If they have nothing to hide they have nothing to fear.

Kyle smiled.

"Then we'll know that they've got something that they want to hide from us won't we?" he said.

"Yes master." Lom replied, bowing slightly before he turned around and left the workshop, heading towards the hangar where his fighter was fuelled and ready for launch. On the way he paused and looked back towards the workshop. Something about Kyle's response did not sit well with the padawan but he was sworn to obey his master's instructions and he did not want to risk creating a rift between them by going over his head to Master Karas on Moldas, "I've got a bad feeling about this." he said to himself.

Meanwhile Kyle got to work on a device to adapt the Sith computer drives to connect to standard Republic technology. Such devices had been relatively common a thousand years earlier when the Jedi Order, backed by the Republic's armed forces had destroyed the Sith Empire and captured Sith equipment needed to be studied for intelligence purposes. But since then there had been no need for such technology and even the plans for the original devices were now far from easy to find.

It would have been easy for Kyle to let the Jedi enclave on Moldas know what he had found, a fellow Jedi knight named Seth Ashran was a expert starship pilot and knew more about every system aboard them than Kyle could ever hope to. But Kyle saw no reason to bring in anyone else. He knew he was stronger with the Force than many of his peers and saw no point in risking anyone being corrupted by what he had found when he had no proof that anything more than a handful of Sith had done anything other than just pass through this sector briefly before moving on. Clearly their efforts to enslave two local populations had met with failure and there did not seem to be any immediate threat to the Republic.

Each individual drive had only a few connection points and it was easy to determine which carried power and which carried data from their size, the larger terminals were obviously designed to carry the higher current needed to power the device. A quick connection test on the two power terminals rapidly told Kyle what polarity they were but determining exactly what level of power should be used was somewhat harder. The back up power cell had been drained long ago so there was no point in trying to measure its output so instead Kyle combined this with his test to determine the functionality of the data lines.

There were three lines to be identified and Kyle knew that these would be an input, output and a clock line to synchronise the drive with the computer it had been plugged into. Kyle connected all three to a suitable probe unit and set it to freeze as soon as it picked up any changes. Then he plugged the two power terminals into a variable supply that he began with set to nothing and gradually increased the potential difference it was supplying.

After a few seconds there was a whirring sound as the drive's internal cooling system activated and a burst of data appeared on one of the probe outputs.

"Got you." Kyle said, knowing that as soon as the power had reached a suitable level the drive had looked for a system clock and then reported an error when it found none, thus identifying the output line. The format of this error report told Kyle two things, firstly it told him how quickly the drive was designed to communicate and secondly by comparing the patterns of the data pulses it confirmed that the drive used the same communication protocol that had been in use in the wider galaxy going back to before the formation of the Republic more than twenty thousand years earlier. Unsurprisingly the power requirements appeared to match those of Republic drives as well. With this in mind Kyle decided that it was reasonable to assume that the arrangement of the data lines would also match current Republic standards even if the size and shape was different and he began to hunt through the available parts for something that would allow him to construct a cable that would connect the Sith drives to a Republic computer.

Unlike the rather limited equipment available in Kyle's workshop, the laboratory that Faye Karn took Han Shill

to was equipped with every possible modern tool. The room was sealed, accessible only by a single door that remained closed as Faye and Han walked along the transparisteel wall that allowed them to observe the whole of the room on the other side. Han noticed that there were only droids inside the lab, with not a single organic being in sight.

"Here we go." Faye said, stopping beside a small hatch set into the transparent wall and she waited while Han placed the Sith computer drive in the alcove on the other side. As soon as he withdrew his hand the hatch slid shut and the drive was bathed in blue light.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"An ultraviolet cleansing to clear the contents of the airlock of contamination." Faye told him, "It's followed by a vacuum cleaning."

"Rather over the top isn't it Faye?" he commented.

"Not when you could be dealing with highly sensitive equipment." she replied, "We use only droids in there because they don't shed skin cells, hair, scales or fur. Unless one of them breaks down the lab remains permanently sealed and even if one does we only send other droids in to get the broken one out. What you're looking at here is the ultimate clean room." then she smiled and added, "The added benefit is that we can wipe the droids' memories after this is done rather than having to eliminate an organic research team. A buzzing sound indicated that the decontamination of the drive was complete and one of the research droids rolled over to collect it as an inner hatch opened.

"Orders mistress?" the droid asked, looking at Faye.

"Data recovery." she said to the machine, "The power and communication profiles of the device are unknown."

"Confirmed mistress." the droid replied as it removed the drive from the decontamination compartment and then rolled across the laboratory where it was joined by three other droids that began to study the drive.

"So how long will this take?" Han asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Since your beloved twin didn't manage to get us the rest of the computer and the team sent in by the Torins haven't reported in yet we're operating in the dark here." Faye answered, "The drive could be damaged, or it could be partially corrupted. For all we know it's a trap."

"A trap? How?" Kyle said, "My people checked it for explosives."

"My dear Han," Faye said, turning away from the transparisteel wall to face him directly, "I realise that in your line of work you are used to traps that explode in your face but there are others that are more insidious than such crude methods. There could be components inside that device designed to produce dangerous levels of current or electrical potential to destroy any unauthorised computer it is plugged into. Or it could include malicious code designed to corrupt one."

"Okay I get it. We need to be careful." Han said.

"Yes we do." Faye added as she looked back towards the droids that were still carefully examining the drive.

A cluster of wires soldered at one end to individual clasps that Kyle had hooked onto the terminals of the first Sith computer drives he had chosen to examine ran to a standard data plug that Kyle inserted into the workshop's terminal. The possibility of there being some malicious code included on the drive had occurred to him but by simply isolating the terminal from the rest of the building's network he limited the damage any sabotage could do to the one terminal alone.

Then he turned on the computer and waited to see what would happen.

The computer began to start up normally until it reached the point where it checked for peripheral devices that had been connected to it. At this point Kyle saw the status lights of the Sith drive come on and he watched carefully, ready to disconnect it if anything appeared to be amiss. But nothing unusual happened at all, instead the computer finished its start up sequence and the top level operating screen appeared on the monitor. Hurriedly Kyle opened up the file navigation system and looked at the list of drives available.

"Yes!" he exclaimed as he saw an entry for an 'Unknown Drive Type' and he opened this option.

The Sith drive lit up again as the computer began to access it and a list of files stored on the drive appeared on the computer screen in front of Kyle. Unfortunately the file names themselves were illegible. Stored in the Sith language, the computer had been unable to interpret their meaning and used the closest available characters in the aurebesh system. However, the computer had been able to determine how large each file was and the pattern to this told Kyle that as he had hoped he was looking at the files necessary to perform a jump through hyperspace.

There was a holo projector plugged into the computer and running the files through a navigation decoding program first, Kyle passed the output to this device and turned around. In the air in front of him Kyle saw representations of two star systems appear, connected by a single line that represented the route to be taken through hyperspace and he smiled. The computer had been unable to interpret the names given to the two systems in question but even if it had this information would have been of limited use to the Jedi. Most of the systems of the Narthis Sector had been named by the original survey team who had not arrived until seven hundred years after the Sith had left and the fact that many planets and systems had been named after

members of the survey team, as had the sector itself, meant that they had not discovered the old Sith names and reused them.

Most of the information on the drive was technical data on gravitational forces and radiation levels that was used to ensure that the jump between the two systems was carried out safely but was of no immediate use to Kyle in what he was trying to do and so he discarded this while keeping just the visual data currently projected in the form of the hologram before disconnecting the drive and taking another from the row of them laid out on the workbench. Kyle then plugged this into his computer using the same improvised connector as he had for the first drive and waited for the computer to discover it. When this was done he accessed it just as he had done with the first, creating another holographic representation of the jump recorded on the drive beside the first.

This was a procedure that Kyle repeated time after time as he went through each of the drives one at a time and added another route to the growing collection of holographic representations of hyperspace jumps. Not all of the drives contained usable data. Over a thousand years some of the drives had failed for one reason or another and Kyle was forced to discard several without adding to the holograms. But by the time he had gone through each drive he had a collection of more than a dozen recorded hyperspace jumps over interstellar distances to examine.

Standing amongst the holographic representations of these jumps, Kyle looked at each one in turn and focused on the depictions of the star systems at each end. These were shown in some form of standard format that Kyle did not know how to interpret but that was not important right now. What mattered that each time a system was shown it was shown in an identical manner without reference to differences caused by the changing positions of planets. That was among the data Kyle had discarded for now.

"A-ha." he said to himself, "The first piece falls into place." and he raised an arm to touch one of the holograms where it showed a star system. Then he looked around and touched a system shown in another. With each touch the hologram changed colour as the projection system detected his movement and it moved both so that the systems Kyle had touched were overlaid and he smiled when he saw that just as he thought they would, they matched, "Lock." he said and the two holograms were merged into one.

Once again this was a procedure that Kyle repeated time after time. Each time he found two systems that matched one another among the holograms he moved them together to create a single image until with the exception of two jumps that he could not connect to anything else, all of the previous separate holograms created from the contents of the Sith computer drives had been merged into one.

The problem was that although Kyle now had a star map that illustrated how the Sith had travelled around what he felt was safe to assume was the Narthis Sector he had no fixed point of reference to work from. In the Republic such maps were produced so that they were aligned pointing towards the Core Worlds and also included the network of navigation beacons that littered the commonly travelled space lanes. However, although the Dark Jedi exiled following the Hundred Year Darkness had come from the Republic they could not have maintained the convention of aligning their maps towards Coruscant even if they had wanted to. This meant that even though Kyle tried looking at the map from different angles he was unable to positively identify any of the systems it showed. But as a Jedi Kyle knew how to be patient and he did not give up easily. However, as he continued to stare at the hologram he did slip his hand into his robes and subconsciously he took hold of the medallion he still had in his pocket.

No matter how long your route your destination is always the same distance from where you started.

Kyle laughed at the simplicity of the solution. Though the Sith had travelled among the same stars as the beings of the modern Narthis Sector did now, the routes that they had charted had not been the same as the ones used now and this made it impossible to identify systems by which ones the gunship had jumped between. However, any two systems in the sector would be the same distance apart now as they had been a thousand years earlier. Stellar drift would not make any noticeable difference over such a short period of time in astronomical terms.

"Computer I need a sphere. Calculate the radius to equal one point six parsecs and place over this point." Kyle said and he pointed to one of the systems represented on the map. As he had instructed, the computer then created a sphere centred around the system and Kyle was able to see whether there were any systems that touched the outer shell of the sphere. He had chosen the radius carefully. One point six parsecs was the distance between the Crassis and Tepillos systems, meaning that if the sphere was centred on either then the other would touch the edge. On this occasion however, no systems touched the sphere so all that Kyle did was move it so that it was centred over another possible candidate and repeated this until he found a pair of systems the correct distance apart.

"Computer adjust radius of sphere to two point one parsecs." Kyle said, this being the distance from Crassis to Delvad and as the sphere expanded he saw that it now touched a different system on the map. Kyle smiled. He now had highly probable identifications of three systems on the map, Crassis, Delvad and Tepillos and that was all he needed, "Computer delete sphere." he said and when the no longer needed sphere vanished he added, "Now give me a map of the sector scaled and aligned to place Crassis here, Delvad here and Tepillos here." and as he spoke their names he pointed to the systems he thought he had identified in

the Sith hologram.

The computer automatically calculated the scale and rotation necessary to produce the map Kyle had requested and added it to the projection, overlaying the thousand year old travel logs with modern Republic hyperspace routes and names for star systems. Now that he had names to go by Kyle could see just how widely even this one ship had travelled through the Narthis Sector, visiting all of its key systems as well as a large number of the minor ones. Many of these lacked any significant Republic presence, being red dwarf systems that lacked sufficient resources to attract any attention. Most of these were located at points where the gunship appeared to have dropped out of hyperspace to alter course en route to somewhere else and it occurred to Kyle that the Sith may have established a network of small outpost at these otherwise worthless stars to act as waypoints for their ships, these having a much shorter range and inferior navigational capabilities to modern Republic designed vessels.

But it was the currently inhabited systems that interested Kyle more. Crassis, Delvad and Tepillos were all places that the gunship had visited and as expected the routes extended as far out as the Brena system where the gunship looked set to end its days in an underground hangar. Just as they were now, these would have been the key locations in the sector to the Sith and they would undoubtedly have made some effort to exploit their resources. But the question remaining to Kyle was just how much had they left behind?

"Time to bring in some help I think." Kyle said to himself. The map he was looking at proved that the Sith had done more than pass through the sector and try to set themselves up as rulers of a pair of primitive worlds. They had settled in the sector and travelled it widely. This meant that almost any world could be littered with forgotten Sith artefacts just waiting to be misused by anyone who happened to stumble across them, assuming that any defences left by their creators did not kill whoever found them first. Such danger outweighed the risk of other Jedi being corrupted and Kyle turned around, intending to head for the communications suite so that he could contact Moldas.

Why?

Kyle paused. Once more he had not noticed himself taking hold of the medallion and he removed it from his pocket.

"The risk is too great for me to attempt to recover everything left behind by the Sith alone." he said as if the medallion were a person that had just spoken to him.

Are you really so afraid? Fear is a path to the Dark Side, you know this to be true.

"What do you think I am afraid of?" Kyle asked.

There are no Sith left to be fought and no-one else has the information you now possess so the only thing left to fear is your own weakness.

"There is no weakness in asking for help."

There is when it is not needed. You know that you are strong enough to deal with whatever the Sith left behind by yourself. All you are offering the Jedi Order is a thousand year old map and begging them to help you. Offer them everything the Sith left behind and they will acknowledge your strength by making you a master. That is what you want, isn't it? Follow my lead and you will achieve this. Alternatively you can contact your masters and spend the rest of your life in this backwater sector, alone and forgotten.

Kyle smiled and then turned towards the workbench. Walking up to it he set the medallion down before searching through the components stored above the bench until he came across a length of chain. Cutting this to a suitable length he hooked both ends onto the medallion before hanging it around his neck and tucking it under his robes to keep it out of sight.

Lom had rarely had cause to visit Delvad. The population was relatively small compared with the nearby Crassis and Tepillos systems and the local authorities had no trouble in maintaining the peace when the bulk of the population lived on artificial islands protected by the best security that money could buy. But the same wealth that could buy the best possible personal protection could also buy other, more illicit things and Lom's research into the spread of Sith artefacts in the sector had led him to one of the artificial islands that floated above the waves on powerful repulsorlift fields.

Varis Kall had been the Minister of Justice on Tepillos when the government collapsed several decades ago and his family had escaped the ensuing violence by fleeing to Delvad. Varis himself was long dead, by natural causes as far as Lom was aware, but his family remained here on Delvad and Lom intended to find out whether or not they had retained ownership of anything other than his luxurious home.

Like most of the artificial islands, the one occupied by Varis Kall's son featured a landing pad large enough to take several small vessels at once and Lom set his starfighter down beside a pair of luxury air speeders.

There would be other hangars dotted around the island he knew, but those would be dedicated to an assortment of low level repulsorlift or aquatic vehicles.

A pair of smartly dressed security guards came rushing out of the entrance to the island's main structure just as Lom was climbing out of his starfighter's cockpit. Obviously his unannounced arrival had caught the island's security off guard and they suspected an attack of some kind.

"Stay where you are!" one of the guards yelled as both aimed their weapons at Lom but with a wave of his hand, Lom sent the pistols flying from their grasp.

"My name is Lom Des," he announced, "and I am here to speak with Etrius Kall. You will take me to your master now."

"We will take you to our master now," the guard replied and then he turned to lead Lom into the structure.

Escorted inside by the two guards, Lom was then led through a series of luxuriously decorated hallways.

Lom took note of the decoration of these rooms. Each one was lined with expensive looking paintings and ornaments, some of which the sullustan padawan recognised from his research and their markings as probably being of Sith origin.

The guards paused at a doorway and when it opened Lom saw that the room beyond was some sort of private study and a grey haired human male that he took to be Etrius Kall was sat at a computer terminal.

"Yes?" the man asked without looking up, "What is it? And what was that racket outside? It sounded like an aircraft approaching."

"You have a visitor Mister Kall," one of the guards announced.

"A visitor? But I'm not expecting anyone," Etrius replied.

"No one expects the Jedi Order," Lom said as he stepped between the guards and Etrius's jaw dropped.

Fear.

Surprise.

"Mister Kall, my name is Lom Des and I would like to ask you a few questions about your father's estate."

Lom went on and he walked right up to the desk Etrius was sat behind and sat down in a chair opposite him.

"My father has been dead for almost twenty years," Etrius said, "If there was a problem with his will then—"

"The Jedi Order is not concerned with matters of probate Mister Kall," Lom interrupted, "But when important citizens of the Republic are being targeted by criminals we take note."

"Targeted? Targeted for what?"

"Robbery with violence I'm afraid," Lom said, "A gang has been operating across several sectors, selecting individuals such as yourself who own a significant collection of valuable antiques. They break in using whatever violence is necessary to subdue their victims and take all they can."

Fear.

"And you think I may be targeted soon?" Etrius asked nervously, "As you can see though, I do have my own security."

"Who failed to stop me," Lom pointed out, "I should warn you that when I say we are dealing with a group that is willing to use violence I am not kidding Mister Kall. It is possible that your property is of interest to the most violent group I have ever come across."

"Then what do you suggest I do?"

"Well first of all I would like to inspect what I see is a sizeable collection of antiques that you have in your home. The gang only steals very specific items and appears to have very good intelligence on who owns examples of what they are after. I understand that you inherited your collection from your father," Lom told him.

"Yes, that's right. He was the Minister of Justice on Tepillos just before the civil war. When the fighting started

he brought us all here.”

“Us?” Lom asked.

“His family.” Etrius answered, “Myself, my mother and my two younger brothers. We were lucky that he had access to a large ship or he wouldn't have been able to bring along his treasured antiques.”

Lom could not help wonder when Etrius said this whether any living beings had been left behind so that Varis Kall could squeeze one more statue aboard his escape ship.

“Do your brothers also have some of the antiques?” Lom asked.

“Oh no. Father wanted the collection kept together so I inherited them all. My brothers were compensated in other ways instead.”

“Good.” Lom said, “That means I don't need to bother either of them. But I really do need to see your collection.”

“Very well, come with me.” Etrius said, getting to his feet, “I'll give you the full guided tour.”

“Thank you.” Lom replied as he also got to his feet.

Etrius then began to show Lom through the rooms of his home, pointing out each of the precious antiques that he had inherited from his father. Some were obviously perfectly innocent but Lom did nothing to prevent Etrius from telling him about each of these as well. Just in case Etrius was leaving out any knowledge of the history of a significant part of his collection, Lom did not want him to know that these were the only artefacts that interested him. Instead he made notes about every item that Etrius described to him, using a recording rod to make sure that he had a full holographic record of everything the man owned as well.

But although Etrius was able to provide Lom with fine stories about what each and every item in his collection was supposed to be and any meaning that was supposedly attached to it he did not make any mention of how his father had come by them. Nor did Lom notice any attempt to deceive him, suggesting that Etrius was genuinely ignorant of what he had right under his nose.

“If you don't mind Mister Kall,” Lom asked as they reached the end of the tour, “how did you father come by such an impressive collection? The Tepillos I know does not have a thriving antique market.”

“Ah well, you should have seen it before the civil war. Back then Tepillos was a world that rivalled Crassis Major, though things began to go wrong when I was still rather young.”

“Yes, I have heard this. But how was your father able to build this collection?”

“Well I remember him buying those paintings at auction.” Etrius said, pointing along the wall at a row of painting that Lom knew had nothing to do with the Sith since all depicted scenes on worlds in the Narthis Sector during the time that the Republic had been here, “But as for the rest I can't say. All I remember was that our home was full of them.” and then he sighed, “Ah, I can't tell you how much I miss that place young jedi. We had a fine house built around a courtyard with a fountain.”

Lom suddenly took notice. It was unlikely that the home Etrius had grown up in was unique, but it seemed like a significant co-incidence that it was built in the same form as the one where Congressman Noll had lived. That made two members of the Tepillos government, even if they were separated by fifty years, that had lived in similar buildings.

“I wonder Mister Kall,” Lom said, “could you give me the address of your old home?”

Lom found Kyle reviewing the regular reports of insurgent activity that Colonel Jeck supplied the two jedi with when he returned home.

“Back already?” Kyle asked, looking up from the computer terminal.

“Yes master. I-” Lom began.

“So exactly how many of the beings on your list did you speak with?” Kyle said.

“Just one master.” Lom told him and Kyle scowled.

“You were told to try and speak to them all.” he said, “When I give you an instruction I expect you to-”

“Yes master, I am sorry but you need to see this.” Lom interrupted and he handed his datapad to Kyle.

Kyle took the device and looked at the display. Then he frowned.

“Is this for real?” he asked.

“Yes master.” Lom answered, “Minister Kall lived in the same building as Congressman Noll. Two government officials in possession of Sith artefacts at the same address.”

“So Etrius Kall was in possession of Sith artefacts?” Kyle said and Lom nodded.

Kyle remembered how he had sensed the Dark Side as soon as he had stepped across the threshold to the late congressman's home. Until now he had put this down to the events that had transpired there as well as the lingering influence of the medallion he now wore discretely under his robes. But now he had second thoughts. It was known that places could become a nexus for the Force, either the Light or Dark Side. If there was a nexus of Dark Side energy somewhere within the property then it was likely that the Sith had discovered it also. The nexus could even have been created because of them. In either case the building deserved further investigation.

“Copy what you found to my datapad.” Kyle ordered, “Then continue to question the beings on your list. But do not return until you have completed your work or if I summon you. Do you understand?”

"Yes master." Lom replied.

Kyle began his next move by checking with the local government records office. Located outside the Green Zone, the building was protected by armed guards, who despite their best efforts to look menacing were not considered effective by either Colonel Jeck or Kyle. Kyle headed for the main reception desk to ask for access to what he needed to know but he found it surrounded by a crowd of civilians, all of whom were demanding that their problems be given priority by the government.

You are better than this. You do need to wait for their trivial issues to be dealt with. Most of them are probably criminals anyway.

Kyle waved his hand subtly and the crowd began to part and allow him to make his way right up to the desk and attracted the attention of one of the staff using the Force as well.

Anger.

Kyle sensed the reaction of another member of the crowd who was stood close by. But before the woman could speak up he slid back his robe just enough to reveal the plasma carbine holstered at his side as well as his lightsaber on his belt. Scowling, the woman retreated in silence.

"I need information about land ownership in the city." he then told the council worker behind the desk before he could speak first.

The information that Kyle was looking for was not in any way restricted and he was shown immediately to a computer terminal that was already configured to provide him with access to the property registry. In theory this database gave full details of who owned all of the land in the area administered by the capital's city authority. However, like much about Tepillos the reality was somewhat different. The civil war had seen large amounts of property abandoned by those able to flee off world and many of those had not bothered to go through with the formality of selling their homes in a market where few were willing to buy let alone inform the government that they were not coming back. Then when squatters broke into abandoned homes they would not register themselves as the occupants and so the database rapidly fell out of date. But there were still some properties that had listings at least partially up to date and the home where Minister Kall and later Congressman Noll had lived was among these. Both men had exploited their positions in the government of Tepillos for their own gain here. Varis Kall had sold his home to the government itself and in doing so had secured himself a price far beyond what anyone at the time would have paid for a home in the middle of a war zone. Because the house was now government property what remained of the government had made sure that it remained free of squatters until the time when Congressman Noll decided that the time was right to purchase it from the government for himself. Like its previous owner, the congressman appeared to have been able to manipulate the price paid for the property by exploiting his links to the government and he had paid only a token amount for it. However, as a condition of the sale the ownership of the property had been returned to the government when Congressman Noll was killed and this presented Kyle with an opportunity. Copying details of the house to his datapad, Kyle returned to the main reception desk and once again used the Force to distract the crowd long enough for him to make his way up to the counter ahead of them and be seen immediately.

"Yes sir, how may I help you?" the council worker asked ahead of Kyle this time.

"I wish to register an interest in purchasing this property." the jedi replied and he held up his datapad.

"Of course sir." the receptionist replied with a smile. Always short of funds, the city authority knew that land was the one asset it still had in abundance. The problem was that very few people were willing to purchase any outside the Green Zone and this had produced a massive divide of high prices that few locals were able to pay inside the Green Zone and significantly lower ones outside that no-one was willing to pay. So now that Kyle was offering to purchase an otherwise useless asset from the council the receptionist had no intention of letting him, or the commission she could stand to earn, get away, "Please come this way."

Kyle was then shown into an office and asked to wait while the excited receptionist went to fetch an equally excited council executive who could process the sale.

"Jedi Jenner." the woman said as she entered, "It is a pleasure to meet you. I understand you wish to purchase property in the city?"

"That's correct." Kyle replied, "Most of my work is centred on Tepillos outside the Green Zone. This is a property that will make it easier for me to help the local citizens. As well as contributing towards your economy in some small way." he added and he smiled.

Good. Remind her how she will profit from this. Greed is good.

The woman sat down opposite Kyle and looked at the display screen in front of her.

"Ah yes, here it is. The property you have expressed an interest in is listed as being for sale for four hundred thousand credits."

"Your records indicate that it was last sold for less than a quarter of that." Kyle pointed out. Not only did he not see the point in paying the full rate, he needed to purchase the property for an amount that he could afford without needing to approach Master Karas for funds.

"Ah yes, but that sale was to a congressman." the woman replied, "It seems that the price was discounted on

account of his years of public service.”

“Do the jedi not act in the public interest?” Kyle asked and then he reached out through the Force and with a minor gesture he added, “Eighty thousand is a fair price.”

“Eighty thousand is a fair price.” the woman repeated.

“Yes it is.” Kyle said and before she could realise that she had been manipulated he took a credit stick from beneath his robes, “You’ll find the funds on here.” he told her.

Smiling, the woman accepted the credit stick and inserted it into the computer in front of her. Then she entered the payment details and returned the stick to Kyle.

“Now if you could just hand me your datapad.” she said, “I can issue you with a deed of ownership and the sale will be complete.”

“Of course.” Kyle replied as he gave her the datapad, “And might I say what a pleasure it has been doing business with you.”

“And we’re done.” the woman said, returning the datapad to Kyle, “Now is there anything else I can help you with Jedi Jenner?”

“Yes there is. Two things actually.”

“Go ahead.”

“Firstly I need you to remove my name from your records and then I need you to forget you ever saw me.” Kyle said, smiling as he used the Force to push the order into her mind.

"You're really leaving?" Colonel Jeck said in amazement as he saw for himself that Kyle and Belle were both loading possessions into a speeder.

"Only the Green Zone colonel." Kyle replied, "I'll still be around to help you deal with insurgents. In fact I'm hoping that by moving out into the outer city I'll be able react better to incidents out there."

"You'll also be more vulnerable to attack." Colonel Jeck said and Kyle paused and stare at him, "Okay maybe not you." he added.

"In a way I'm hoping that the insurgents will find out where I am and try to kill me." Kyle commented.

"You are?" Colonel Jeck responded in amazement.

"Well it will mean that they aren't terrorising someone who can't defend themselves against a dozen at a time."

"And what if there are two dozen of them?"

"That's what Lom's for." Kyle said.

"Ah yes, your padawan. Will he know where to find you? You haven't given me your new address."

"He hasn't even told me where we're heading to yet." Belle commented.

"Well firstly yes, Lom will be able to find me. I've left a message for him. We'll still be using this location as our base in the Green Zone and as somewhere to store our starfighters. But as for the second point colonel, you don't need to know where I'll be living. My intention is to try and remain anonymous. The overwhelming majority of people here on Tepillos don't know what I look like. With any luck this move will enable me to gain access to a part of Tepillos society that we've failed to crack so far. Don't worry though, I'll check in regularly and if you need me in a hurry then the communication system here can relay a signal to me."

"So I suppose the idea of my being invited to a house warming party is out of the question?" Colonel Jeck added with a smile.

"So where are we heading anyway?" Belle asked as Kyle drove the speeder through the city towards his new home.

"I told you it was a surprise." he replied, "Besides, it's just up ahead."

"Great neighbourhood Kyle." Belle commented as she looked out of the speeder, "There's crime scene tape on that alley up ahead. You that to get that stuff put up around here means someone has to have been murdered."

But rather than respond Kyle just smiled and drove the speeder into the alleyway, breaking through the tape.

"Stang Kyle!" Belle exclaimed, "You bought a house where someone was murdered?"

"Congressman Noll." Kyle replied, "He lived here."

"The guy you got that talisman from you mean?" Belle said as Kyle brought the speeder to a halt while he got out to open the gates to the courtyard.

"The very same." he said as he got back into the speeder and drove it into the courtyard. Then after parking the speeder he and Belle disembarked and he continued, "I've had Lom looking into other beings who may have Sith artefacts in their possession and he came across a former government minister who just so happened to live here once as well. I think that there could be a connection."

"Lom's looking into others that may have Sith artefacts you say?" Belle said, "Kyle, would this happen to include the Founding Families?"

"No." Kyle answered, "At least not yet. But if I find any evidence that can connect them with the trade in forbidden artefacts then I will start investigating them again. So anyway, what do you think of my new home?"

"It's a palace." Belle responded as she looked around. The shutters of the upper storey had been closed when the last of the troops guarding the building had been removed following the elimination of the insurgents responsible but it was still easy to see how large the structure was, "How much did this place set you back?"

"Eighty thousand." Kyle replied.

"Eighty?" Belle exclaimed, "Kyle that's a steal. Even given that someone died here not so long ago there's no way it should have been that cheap."

"I did have to haggle." Kyle said, "Fortunately the woman from the city council was open to being persuaded."

Belle thought about this. It was entirely possible that Kyle had been able to strike a genuinely good deal on the building he had just purchased but at the same time it sounded almost as if Kyle was suggesting that he had used the Force to help him get the price reduced. The issue there was that the Jedi Code forbade the use of the Force by jedi for personal profit. Had Kyle needed to obtain the house as part of an assignment then it was conceivable that using the Force to influence the deal would have been permissible, but only if

the Jedi Order was not able to provide sufficient funds, but the way Kyle had described the purchase to Belle was as a personal one and this house and its grounds were now an asset of his own.

"So what's your big plan then?" Belle asked, "I don't believe that poodoo you told Colonel Jeck about just wanting to be closer to the people."

"Do you know what a Force nexus is?" Kyle replied and Belle shook her head.

"New one to me." she said. This was a lie however, she was well aware of the existence of places where the Force had a particularly strong influence but wanted to keep that from Kyle.

"The Force is all around us." Kyle began as he walked across the courtyard and stretched out his arms, "But its flow is not even and there are certain places in the galaxy where it is especially strong. Most of these are triggered by some great event in the past and whether they relate to the Light or Dark Sides depends on the nature of that event. Belle, I think that there is a nexus of Dark Side energy somewhere on this property and I intend to find it."

"I don't know Kyle, I've got a bad feeling about this." Belle said.

"Don't worry." Kyle responded, turning back towards her, "If I'm right and there is a Dark Side nexus here then I'll find it and make sure it never causes anyone any trouble again and combining that with my securing of the artefacts left behind by the Sith we can be certain that I have purged the Narthis Sector of the danger it faces. Even the Jedi Order will have to recognise what I have achieved then."

Han Shill was getting ready to leave his office when the intercom sounded.

"Yes?" he said as he activated the device.

"Sir there's a signal coming in from your sister."

"Which one?" Han asked, "I have three."

"It's Miss Belle sir. She says it's urgent that she is put through to you."

"Then get on with it." Han ordered.

"Han is that you?" Belle's voice then asked.

"Yes Belle it's me. Where are you and what's so important?"

"I've just dropped out of hyperspace so I should be with you within the hour." Belle responded.

"What's wrong?"

"Han it's Kyle. He's not letting go of this investigation into the Sith and I think that it may be getting to him."

"What do you mean 'getting to him'?"

"I left him unpacking in his new home a few hours ago and he's not acting like himself. It's just little stuff but it's there. I think he's using the Force for his own gain and he spoke like he was getting more ambitious." Belle explained.

"Okay fine. I'll be here when you land." Han said, "I'll put a call through to Faye and see whether she's been able to make any sense out of the data her droids recovered from the computer drive. See you soon."

"Copy that. Over and out." Belle said and then the channel was shut off. Meanwhile Han activated the intercom again, opening a channel to the command centre outside his office.

"I need to make a priority call to Faye Karn." he said, "Now."

"Yes sir." one of the technicians on duty replied. There then followed a delay of several seconds as a connection was made and a hologram of Faye Karn appeared in Han's office.

"Han what is it?" she asked.

"I was wondering whether you'd found anything on that computer drive." Han said in reply.

"As a matter of fact I was just talking to Keleen about that. One moment, I'll patch her in." Faye said and moments later the hologram of Keleen Delvad appeared, "This better be good Han. You know how expensive real time links to Coruscant are."

"Yes, I appreciate that." Han said, "But I need to know what was on that drive."

"Nothing much." Keleen said, "At some point the ship that drive was taken from made a jump from the system we know as Brena as far as Tepillos. The weird thing is that it went via Heras."

"Heras?" Han said. Heras was not widely known of in the Narthis Sector and although the system had been named there were no records of anyone having visited it thanks to a massive disturbance in hyperspace that surrounded it and made approaching it at faster than light speeds impossible, "Are you certain?"

"Yes I'm certain." Keleen replied sharply, annoyed at having her findings questioned, "Look, we've built up a pretty good understanding of the Sith language and I was able to match the data on the drive with the name they gave to Tepillos and working from there I identified Brena as the system at the opposite end of the jump. Now the ship made several stops along the way in several irrelevant systems, most likely to check jump co-ordinates and avoid mass shadows. But one of those systems was definitely Heras. I checked the data on the drive against the Republic's central library."

"How does the Republic know about Heras?" Faye asked.

"According to the library the unmanned probe that passed through the sector about two thousand years ago got close enough to conduct a long range scan and it found a habitable world in the system. Of course by the time the *Starlight Glory* brought our ancestors here the system was cut off."

"Do you think that the Sith could still be at Heras? Hiding behind the disturbance perhaps?" Faye asked.

"That would be less unpleasant than some of the alternatives." Han commented.

"Such as?" Keleen asked.

"Such as the Sith found something there that scared them so much that they trapped it there forever." Han answered.

"Han of all the people to sound like a scared youngling, I never thought it would be you." Faye said disapprovingly.

"Just being cautious." Han said.

"Why did you need to ask about this now though Han? I was going to present Keleen's findings to all the Families tomorrow." Faye said.

"Belle just called and there may be something happening with Kyle Jenner."

"He's not about to start making accusations about us to the Jedi Order is he?" Keleen asked, "The temple is just a few minutes from here and I don't like the idea of a hundred freedom warriors turning up unannounced."

"Belle thinks he's starting to behave strangely. I was wondering whether you'd found anything that could explain that. He has the other drives after all."

"Yes, but can he understand their contents?" Keleen said, "From what I know most Jedi can recognise the Sith language but that's not to say that they can read it. Even within the Jedi Order knowledge about the Sith is suppressed. If anything they're more afraid of what their own people could do with it than the rest of the population."

"I don't know." Han said, "I'll have to ask Belle. But she said something about him moving home."

"Is he still on Tepillos?" Faye asked.

"I don't know. I didn't ask. But if he has left Tepillos then he's not here in the Crassis system." Han replied.

"Well that's something at least." Faye commented, "The last thing we need here is a Jedi breathing down our necks. But I don't like the idea of not knowing where he's basing himself."

"I'll see what Belle has to say when she gets here." Han said, "She said that she'd left him at his new home so it sounds like she knows where it is. In the mean time let me know if you find anything more on that hard drive."

"Sure, I'll keep on it." Keleen replied, "Now if there's nothing else I suggest that I end this call and get back to work."

"Of course." Faye said, "But you must come back to the Narthis Sector soon. It's always a pleasure to see you in person."

Keleen smiled and then her image faded away as the signal was shut off at its source. Then the hologram of Faye looked directly at Han.

"When you speak to Belle make sure you find out everything she knows Han." she said, "If the Jedi is behaving erratically it could be something we can take advantage of but at the same time it could be a great danger to us."

"Oh don't worry Faye, I know exactly what I'm doing." Han replied before the image Faye also disappeared from his office.

Belle arrived shortly after, rushing into Han's office so fast that she had to squeeze between the doors that had been designed to slide open gracefully rather than as rapidly as possible like many modern doors were.

"Belle are you okay?" Han asked.

"Fine I think." she replied, "But I could do with a drink, I ran all the way from the landing pad."

"Of course." Han said and he went to the bar at the fully stocked far side of his office to prepare his sister a drink, "Here." he said when he returned and handed her the glass.

"Thanks." she replied.

"So how about you tell me what's got you so bothered about your boyfriend?" Han said as he sat back down.

"He's gone and bought the house where Noll lived." Belle replied as she sipped at her drink.

"Noll? You don't mean-"

"Congressman Noll? Yes I kriffing well do." Belle interrupted, "Apparently the house was also owned by some government minister that Kyle thinks owns a bunch of Sith artefacts. Oh and he also thinks that there's a Dark Side nexus somewhere within the grounds of the house."

"A nexus? Belle that's serious. There's no way that a Dark Side nexus would have passed the Sith by. Either they'll have gone there as well or it was something that they did that created it."

"Yes I realise that big brother." Belle said, "Obviously the Sith went to Tepillos and if there's a nexus there then they probably had a serious presence there. The problem is that thanks to the civil war operating there isn't easy."

"We need to ask someone who knew Tepillos before the war." Han said.

"I don't know where you get your delusions from laser brain. Who do we know and trust that could tell us about what happened on Tepillos more than fifty years ago?" Belle responded and Han smiled, "I don't like that look." she added.

"Erill." Han said and Belle winced.

"Erill Crassis? Are you insane?" she said.

"He's old enough." Han pointed out.

"Yes and also at death's door. I'll bet the stress of Charity walking out on the family hasn't helped either. Luke could become head of that family at any day."

"Then perhaps you should go round to see him right away." Han said, "If you hurry you may just get there before his bedtime. It would be a shame if the old rancor died in the night and you never got any answers for us."

"Fine I'm going." Belle said before gulping down what remained of her drink.

"Belle wait." Han said as she headed for the door, "I better come as well. You shouldn't drink and fly."

When Han set his airspeeder down on the Crassis family's private landing pad he could see that there was a luxury speeder parked outside the front door of the main house.

"Does the Crassis family have company?" Han asked the guard in the Shill Security uniform that met him and Belle.

"Yes sir." the man answered, "Several members of the Drud family."

"That's okay then." Belle added, "We know they can be trusted."

"We're here to see Erill Crassis." Han said, "Take us to him."

"Yes sir. This way please." the guard said and he led Belle and Han into the house. Like all of the mansions owned by the Founding Families, the home of the Crassis family was very large and the two Shills had to be led through several hallways before they came to the large lounge where the Crassis family and their guests from the Druds were gathered.

Han and Belle recognised everyone present. In addition to Erill and Luke Crassis, Luke's wife Salla was present while from the Druds Heddren had brought along his wife Millel, son Hiran, daughter Jaynie as well as his father in law Kerden Larrenod. Kerden had been a mechanic when he was younger and had worked hard to save enough money to send his daughter to law school where she met Heddren. In thanks for this the couple had brought him to live with them in the Drud family home when his occupation of repairing repulsorlift vehicles was turned into a hobby as he took over the looking after the Drud family's collection of antique and custom vehicles. The problem was that, unlike his daughter and grandchildren, Kerden had never been let in on the Founding Families' activities and their quest find out as much about the Sith as they could was never discussed in his presence.

"Han. Belle. What brings you here this evening?" Luke asked.

"We're here to speak with your father." Belle told him and she looked at where Erill sat beside Kerden.

"Erill you old dog." Kerden said, looking at the man next to him, "You've still got young women turning up on your doorstep?"

"One gets used to it after a while." Erill replied.

"I would not exactly say I was young though." Belle commented.

"My dear," Erill said, "in my time of life anyone who can get to their feet unaided is young." and Belle smiled.

"We need a private word I'm afraid." Han added.

"Actually I think it's about time we were getting going anyway." Millel Drud said, understanding that although what the Shills had come to discuss was something that the Drud family would soon have to know about anyway, the presence of her father made discussion of it impossible.

"And just as I was starting to get used to this fine wine." Kerden said.

"I'm sure you were after the amount of it you drunk." Millel said.

The Druds got to their feet and as they were saying their goodbyes Heddren made his way over to Han and Belle.

"I take it that I'll be updated as soon as possible?" he said softly.

"Of course." Han replied, "Your brother as well."

"Very good." Heddren said and then he and his family were shown out of the house to their speeder. Luke went with them and the Shills sat in the seats that the Druds had vacated while they waited for him to return.

"Sorry about that." Luke said as he returned.

"If you'd called ahead we'd have made sure Kerden was out of the way before you got here." Salla added, looking at the Shills.

"You know it would be far easier if something tragic happened to him." Belle commented.

"You are talking about Heddren's father in law there young lady." Erill said sternly, "As well as someone I consider a personal friend. It's not like there are any other members of the Families left from my generation now."

"So what did you come here to discuss?" Luke asked, eager to change the subject.

"We came to ask about Tepillos." Han answered.

"Tepillos? What's happening there now?" Salla said.

"I think Belle's best placed to answer that." Han told her and he looked at his sister.

"Your jedi is up to something isn't he?" Erill said suddenly.

"Yes." Belle replied, "How did you know?"

"Because you're still wearing a flight suit and that tells me you came here in a hurry." Erill said, "Since anything unrelated to the jedi could have been relayed to us by your brother here that leaves only the jedi himself."

"He's bought a house." Han commented.

"Is that all?" Salla asked.

"It's the nature of the house that is at issue." Belle said, "Kyle thinks that there could be a Dark Side nexus somewhere in the grounds."

"He's still pursuing his investigation into the Sith then?" Erill said and then he began to cough heavily. At this point his personal droid stepped forwards from behind him and handed him a mask that was connected to an oxygen cylinder and the old man began to breathe deeply from it.

"I thought you were supposed to be monitoring this quest of his." Salla said, staring at Belle.

"Yes." Luke agreed, "Why couldn't you have prevented this?"

"Because I didn't know about it." Belle responded, "I left him trying to put together data from a Sith navigation computer. I didn't expect him to suddenly go out buy a house that had been owned by a succession of members of the Tepillos government."

"By who?" Salla said when she heard this.

"A congressman who was killed recently and also their minister of justice at about the time that the civil war started." Han responded.

"Ah, so now I see why you needed me." Erill said as he lowered the mask from his face, "You think I may have some insight into what's going on."

"The Crassis family did have holdings on Tepillos before the war and we thought that maybe your mother would have involved you in operations there." Belle said.

"Indeed she did." Erill said, "In fact that was how I encountered my first jedi knight. One of your Kyle Jenner's predecessors. Before that the jedi stationed in the sector tended to base themselves either on *Aurek Station* or here on Crassis Major. But the woman I met relocated to Tepillos when the fighting first started in an attempt to calm things down. In that she was less than successful, but since then Tepillos has been the favoured base of operations for the jedi in the sector. However, I can tell you with certainty that is the first I am hearing of a Dark Side nexus being present there."

"The Sith were present on Tepillos though." Han pointed out.

"The Sith were everywhere in the sector young man." Erill said sternly, "But so far nothing that we have found indicates the presence of a Dark Side nexus on any of the settled Republic worlds. Perhaps if you tried Centau or Brena you might find something."

"Kyle's already been to Brena." Belle told him, "I went with him. It's where he found the ship."

"And has anything been found out from it?" Salla asked.

"Only that the Sith also managed to get to Heras." Han answered, "Apparently you could approach it from hyperspace a thousand years ago."

"Interesting." Erill commented, "Though likely unrelated to our current situation."

"Unless he's found something in whatever he recovered from Brena." Luke added, "Perhaps Tepillos was their capital."

"But apart from his purchase of this house, what is the jedi doing now?" Erill asked, staring at Belle.

"Nothing as far as I know." she replied, "He's got his padawan going around the sector trying to speak to beings who may have owned Sith artefacts."

"Just speaking to? Not confiscating?" Luke asked.

"Interesting." Erill added before Belle could answer.

"Perhaps we should think about having the padawan followed then." Salla suggested, "Played right he could be doing our work for us."

"Maybe." Luke agreed, "But at the same time we need to be cautious about moving against either of them. If we start arranging break ins to recover the artefacts then word is bound to get back to the jedi and if Lom spots any of our people then he and his master will have all the excuse they need to start moving against us."

"But perhaps we can predict where the padawan will be and arrange to be there ahead of him." Erill said and he smiled, "Then when Lom pays a visit to one of his suspects he'll find that we're already there. Then we can find out precisely what he's doing."

"We do know that Lom's going to be focusing on people who left Tepillos when the war began." Belle commented.

"Important people who could afford black market Sith artefacts." Luke added, "There can't have been many of them."

"Arranging to be in the right system could be tricky though." Salla commented, "Unless we happen to find any suspects right here on Crassis Major."

“If it's us that's sitting in when Lom meets with them yes.” Luke replied, “But the Torins spend all their time travelling. I'm sure they wouldn't mind changing their plans to find out what the Jedi are saying to people.”

20.

From space Ralta appeared to be an ideal world for colonisation with vast jungles covering its land area. But those jungles concealed a deadly secret. The pollen that was released by many types of plant was deadly to most of the galaxy's species with only native lifeforms and a handful of other more tolerant types having any immunity. This had led to the world being ignored until it was discovered that the potentially deadly jungles could also be the source of many chemicals with useful medicinal properties and settlers had been drawn here anyway. The problem of the pollen was overcome by constructing enormous towers in the jungle that stretched hundreds of metres up into the air, above the level of the pollen at concentrations high enough to be dangerous and the settlements were constructed around these base towers. Travel between towers was undertaken by either cable cars on a network of cables that criss-crossed the settled regions or if more flexibility was needed by aircraft and so there was an abundance of landing facilities on the tower that Lom flew his fighter towards.

Lom landed his fighter on the upper surface of one of the disc-shaped modules attached to the side of the central tower. There were several airspeeders parked here as well, all of superior types in keeping with the upmarket nature of the module. In addition Lom noticed that there was an Empress-Teta class space yacht landed on the far side from his fighter. Such vessels were rare this far from the Deep Core but a handful of the mega-rich throughout the galaxy favoured the luxurious ships.

This particular module contained the residence of the woman he was here to see, a chemist who had escaped Tepillos at the start of the civil war and built a new life and company here on Ralta instead. At this altitude breath masks were not needed for protection from pollen inhalation but Lom saw that the landing zone staff all wore safety harnesses to prevent them from being swept over the side of the landing zone by a sudden gust of wind or the blast of an aircraft engine.

"My name is Padawan Lom Des. I am here to visit Nayalia Laysom." he told the man who came rushing up to him with a datapad.

"And the expected duration of your stay?" the man asked.

"Less than a day." Lom answered.

"Very good." the man said, entering the details he had just given into his datapad before hurrying towards another approaching aircraft.

Lom made his way to the turbolift cluster located at the centre of the landing zone and used it to travel down to the level that his information told him was where he could find Nayalia Laysom. Exiting the turbolift he found that the six residences that comprised this level extended out from a circular hall in the centre and he approached the door bearing the number he wanted. After pressing the intercom control beside the door he expected to have to explain his presence via this but instead almost immediately the door slid open to reveal a serving droid.

"I am here to see Nayalia Laysom." Lom announced.

"Please state your identity and the purpose of your visit." the droid responded.

"My name is Padawan Lom Des. I am here on behalf of the Jedi Order to alert your mistress to a possible threat to her safety." Lom told the machine.

"Understood. Please enter." the droid said, Lom's identity and the serious nature of his visit meeting the criteria by which the droid was programmed to permit entry without consulting its owner first. The droid closed the door behind Lom before speaking again, "Please follow me Padawan Des." it said before it started to walk down the hallway that appeared to lead most of the way to the outer edge of the module. There were doors either side of the hall as well as one right at the far end and it was to this that the droid led Lom. As they neared it the sullustan heard the sound of voices coming from the far side. The door slid open in response to the presence of the droid and Lom saw that the white haired and elderly Nayalia was not alone. Sat on the balcony at the far side of the lounge he now followed the droid into were two other humans, a man and a second woman. Both of whom he recognised immediately. Corva Torin was the current head of the Torin family while the red-headed woman with him was his wife Deesa. Now Lom understood the presence of the luxury space yacht in the landing zone. The Torins preferred to spend their time travelling from world to world within the Narthis Sector rather than settling on any particular one, though they did maintain a home on Crassis Major and another on Delvad. This meant that the vessel obviously belonged to them.

"Miss Laysom you have another guest." the droid said, "Padawan Des is here to warn you of a threat to your safety."

"Heavens." Nayalia exclaimed, "Should we summon the police?"

"There is no immediate need Miss Laysom." Lom replied, "The danger is a theoretical one and relates to certain property in your possession."

"Property? What property?" the obviously concerned woman asked.

"Perhaps it would be better to discuss this when you do not have other company." Lom suggested, glancing at Corva and Deesa.

"Ah yes. Do you know the Torins Padawan Des?" Nayalia said, "They arrived right before you did."

"To discuss business." Corva added.

"Though we were just admiring some of the antiques she has on her walls." Deesa added.

"I believe we met briefly last year at the senator's ball." Lom said.

"Ah yes that's it." Corva said, "The problem with being Airia's cousin is that she expects us to turn up at all her official functions."

"Perhaps we ought to excuse ourselves while the Jedi speaks with Nayalia." Deesa suggested to her husband.

"Oh nonsense, I won't hear of it." Nayalia responded, "Padawan Des can say his piece in front of you I'm sure."

"This may be difficult for you hear Miss Laysom." Lom said.

"Oh spit it out. I've survived civil war and fifty years of corporate life and let me tell you the war was more civilised." Nayalia replied sternly.

"if that is your wish." Lom said, "Miss Laysom-"

"Oh and call me Nayalia please." Nayalia interrupted.

"Nayalia," Lom said, "the Jedi Order has been requested to investigate the activities of a gang of violent criminals. These beings have been moving from sector to sector and staging a number of break ins that target the owners of very specific types of antique. Our information suggests that you may own some of these and thus be a potential target."

"That sounds horrific." Deesa said and she looked at Corva, "Darling, perhaps we should put Nayalia in touch with Han Shill. He'll keep her safe."

"Yes he would." Corva agreed and then he looked at Nayalia, "And of course we'd pick up the cost. If we're going to be doing business together I need to know that you are safe."

"That is most reassuring." Nayalia replied.

"Before you take any action I would like to ask you about the antiques you own." Lom added, "It may be that your collection is not at risk."

"Of course. What would you like to know?" Nayalia asked.

"As much as you can tell me about where each item comes from and how it came to be in your possession." Lom said and Nayalia smiled.

"In that case let me show you around." she said and she looked at Corva and Deesa, "All of you. After all you were saying how interesting you found my collection. You may as well let me tell you all about it."

When he had first come to the building that was his new home Kyle had focused only on the places relevant to Congressman Noll's murder. Now though he wanted to explore every corner of the building, convinced that the Force would guide him to the nexus of Dark Side energy he believed was located somewhere within the grounds. The coldness that he sensed in the Force led Kyle down into the basement level he had not even known existed on his initial visit. This occupied most of the area under the house and from the looks of it also ran under the courtyard. Most of the level was given over to storage, though whatever had been stored here had been removed long ago and it looked as if the building's previous resident had made little or no use of the basement at all. But the disturbance in the Force was definitely strongest down here and Kyle continued with his search. This continued until he reached what seemed like the strongest point of the disturbance in the midst of a set of empty shelves.

"This doesn't make any sense." he said to himself, "The disturbance is centred here."

No, not centred. Just strongest within the places you can reach. Look closer.

Kyle frowned and inspected the shelves along one wall. These were simple a modular unit and peering through them Kyle noticed that the wall was a different colour compared to that beside the shelves. Grabbing hold of the shelving unit Kyle pulled it away from the wall, stepping aside as it crashed to the floor and he saw that there was a patch of the wall about two metres across that had obviously been repaired some time after the rest had been completed.

Drawing his lightsaber, Kyle activated the weapon and plunged its blade through the discoloured wall and sliced across to create a slot that he then pushed his hand into. Bending his fingers around he found that the repaired wall seemed to be covering over a hollow of some sort and he removed his hand before starting to hack at the wall until the hole he created was large enough to allow him through.

Behind the wall Kyle saw the entrance to a tunnel illuminated by the glow of his lightsaber and he held the weapon up in front of him as he started to creep along it. The most obvious thing about the tunnel was that it was most definitely not a natural fissure in the ground. Instead the surfaces were all covered in regular stone tiles that had been fitted neatly together. But it was clear that whoever had built the tunnel, it had not been used in a long time. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and water was collecting in places where the floor had started to sag.

Kyle sensed life close by, though not of the sentient kind and inspecting the ceiling closely he spotted a crack through which insects were crawling in and out. He stepped around the floor under this tiny fissure, guessing that there was a nest of some sort above him that he did not want to disturb before continuing on his way. Only a short distance further on Kyle saw the tunnel open out and as he reached its end he saw that the surfaces of the chamber beyond were covered in carefully carved stones that matched the tunnel behind him.

Kyle stepped forwards slowly, well aware that the Sith were infamous for rigging their temples and libraries with traps for those who were arrogant enough to think that they could plunder the riches they contained. But as no pits lined with spikes opened up in the floor, no weights fell from the ceiling, no poison darts were fired from the walls and no boulders came rolling towards Kyle he continued to advance and inspect the chamber. Though at one point it had obviously held more than it did now, there was almost nothing left for the Jedi to see. Rows of plinths were positioned at regular intervals along the length of the place but whatever had stood on these at one time had since been taken. However, there was one feature that remained and it was undeniably of Sith origin. Located at the far end of the room and towering over Kyle was a statue of a Sith lord. Unsurprisingly the disturbance in the Force seemed to be coming from the direction of the statue and Kyle made his way towards it.

Good. Focus on the Dark Side and you will find what you need.

As Kyle got closer he felt as if he could hear screams of pain in his mind and he knew from experience that these were the screams of the dying. Obviously there was no-one dying inside the chamber at this time but a thousand years earlier things could have been far different. Then as he drew closer to the statue the sounds became a vision.

The room was filled with armoured Sith warriors and the plinths were no longer empty, instead a relic of Sith culture was positioned on each of them. In small groups the warriors held other Sith down on the floor while what looked like members of their priest caste plunged ceremonial daggers into them. As blood flowed from their wounds the priests pressed cups up against them to collect it and when each cup was filled it was carried towards the statue.

In front of this and surrounded by candles made from burning body fat another Sith priest sat on the floor, dipping the tip of a writing stylus into a blood filled cup and chanting as he then began to write in a thick book made of and bound in the unmistakable bright red skin of a sacrificed Sith. The priest chanted as he wrote, continuing until the book was filled. At this point the priest got to his feet and the chamber was emptied apart from a pair of warriors who stood either side of the priest as he walked right up to the statue and reached down to press on a stone set into its base. This triggered a mechanism built into the statue and a concealed compartment in the base slid open, into which the priest placed the book.

Kyle gasped as his vision came to an end.

You know what you must do.

Kyle walked up to the statue, still using his lightsaber for illumination and he was tempted to bring the blade down on the base of the statue. But then he considered the risk of damaging the contents of the hidden compartment and so instead he knelt down in front of the base and moved his hand across it until he felt a sudden coldness through the Force and at that moment he pressed down hard.

Even after a thousand years the mechanism still functioned and the compartment Kyle had seen in his vision slid open to reveal the book constructed from the preserved skin of a Sith. Removing the book from its hiding place Kyle looked at it. In the blue light of his lightsaber the dried blood on the pages was just about visible but as was to be expected it was all written in the language of the Sith. Flipping through the pages Kyle saw numerous illustrations as well, all of them depicting scenes of violence, but these were not enough to all him to decipher any of the contents.

"This is illegible." Kyle said to himself.

Concentrate. Picture the author and put yourself in his place. Everything will become clear.

Closing the book, Kyle stared at the front cover and tried to remember the parts of his vision where he had seen the chanting priest writing on the pages in blood. But nothing happened and Kyle began to become impatient.

"You ask the impossible!" he snapped as if he could direct the statement at the voice that spoke to him from the Force and in that moment of anger all of a sudden the letters on the cover changed. Though Kyle could still see each character was part of the Sith alphabet, by looking at the whole text he now found himself able to understand the meaning of what was written.

THE RISE OF PRAETEN TYRR: THE CONQUEROR'S STORY

Kyle smiled as he opened the book and flicked through the pages once more. Now the meaning of the contents was clear to him even though he could still see the Sith writing whenever he focused on just a few letters. In his hand he held the key to unravelling the secrets of the Sith in the Narthis Sector. All he needed was the time to read it.

But he began to relax and all of a sudden the writing in the book became indecipherable once more. Kyle scowled with frustration and once more he found that he could read the contents.

The gift of translation comes with a price. Only when you are properly attuned to the Dark Side will you be able to read the book you hold.

“Surely there must be a way without depending on the Dark Side?” Kyle said, “The Jedi Code-”

A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge, you know that Kyle. What is this if not knowledge. With that book you will be able to master the Dark Side, not become its slave.

Kyle stood up and turned to leave with the book.

No. It is too dangerous.

“Dangerous for whom?”

Dangerous for you. What if your padawan should find it? Leave the book here and only come when you are certain not to be disturbed. No-one else must know of this place. No-one else can be trusted. Not until you have translated the book and learned all its secrets. Only then will you have mastered the Dark Side and proven yourself strong enough.

21.

Safely back aboard their ship, Corva and Deesa Torin made their way to a private lounge and sealed themselves inside. Then as they sat down they activated the long range communication system, directing it towards the Crassis residence on Crassis Major. Almost immediately an image of Luke Crassis appeared in the room with them, positioned as if he was sitting opposite in a vacant chair.

"I take it you've caught up with Lom Des then?" he asked and both Corva and Deesa smiled.

"I didn't need to be a jedi to see how frustrated he was that we were there while that nerf herder Nayalia went on about artefacts she obviously knew nothing about." Deesa answered.

"What did Lom have to say?" Luke said.

"Oh he had some nonsense about how there's a gang going around burgling people who own certain types of antique and the Jedi Order have been asked to look into it." Corva told him, "As if the jedi investigate burglaries."

"Perhaps that could work to our advantage though." Luke pointed out, "If we could stage some break ins then the jedi have already established our cover."

"But would the Jedi Order allow Jenner and his padawan to behave like that?" Deesa asked.

"It doesn't sound like the sort of thing we're used to from them." Corva added.

"No it doesn't." Luke agreed, "Perhaps we ought to have Han ask his sister if she's heard anything."

"It's worth a try I suppose." Corva said.

"Now what this Nayalia Laysom?" Luke said, "Does she have anything of interest to us?" and Corva and Deesa exchanged glances.

"Oh yes." Corva said, "She has some very interesting pieces just hanging on her walls as if they were common trinkets."

"Her security is a joke as well." Deesa added, "I'm sure Han's people would have no problem getting in if that's how we're going to handle it."

"The jedi was of help in identifying them as well." Corva said and Luke frowned.

"Really?" he responded.

"He tried to be subtle about it but that sullustan isn't quite up to the art of recording images while no-one's looking." Corva said.

"Every time he saw a Sith artefact he'd look aside after lining up his recording rod to take the picture." Deesa commented with a smile.

"And since he was looking the other way it gave us the chance to take a picture of our own." Corva said,

"We'll send round a full set as soon as we're clear of the system."

"Where are you heading next?" Luke asked.

"On to Brena to check on our team there." Corva told him, "We figured that Lom is unlikely to be heading that way as well so we're unlikely to run into him by accident and make him suspicious."

"Good. In the mean time I'll get in touch with Han and see if we can find out just how much the Jedi Order knows about what their agents here are up to." Luke said and then his image faded.

Getting up from his seat in his father's study, Luke left the room and was about to head up the stairs to find Erill when he encountered his wife coming down them.

"The doctor has gone Luke." she said.

"Already?" Luke asked in reply and she nodded.

"He gave your father a shot but he said there was nothing more he could do."

"And father?"

"Resting. Perhaps now isn't the best time to be disturbing him with anything that could excite him one way or another." Salla suggested and Luke sighed, "Luke you must realise that it's just a matter of time now." she added.

"He could have years yet." Luke responded.

"Perhaps. Or weeks. Or days. Or even hours." Salla said.

"I know. But can you blame a son for loving his father?"

"Of course not. But you could be heading this family at any time and I've known you long enough to know that you're capable of acting without running every last detail by him."

Luke smiled.

"Perhaps I should let him rest." he said, looking up the stairs. Then he looked back at Salla and added, "I hope you'll excuse me my darling but I have a call to make."

The company of freedom warriors was just returning to their barracks following an exercise when they were

approached by Whillam Antess, one of the more senior jedi knights at the enclave on Moldas. "Corporal Shill." he said to one of them, a young woman who shared the same fair hair as all of her siblings. "Yes sir?" she responded, snapping to attention. "At ease corporal." Whillam told her and as she relaxed he added, "You have a call from the Narthis Sector. Your brother. You can take it in your quarters." "Yes sir." she replied and she saluted once more before hurrying away. Calls from Han were rare and when they came she knew that they were important. As a non-commissioned officer in the freedom warriors Corlay Shill had small but private quarters in the barracks so she had no fear of being overheard. There was always the possibility, no matter how remote, that electronic means could be used to listen in on the conversation but in order to try and make this more difficult she took a compact encryption module from a hidden place in her quarters and plugged it into the communication terminal before activating it. "Corlay." Han said when his face appeared on the display, "Are you free to talk?" Corlay knew that he was really asking whether the line was secure. "As free as I can be." she replied, "So what's so urgent Han?" "Kyle Jenner." Han told her, "He's sniffing around far too much for our liking." "What do you mean 'sniffing around'?" Corlay asked. "He's figured out that the Sith were once here in the Narthis Sector and he's been hunting for traces of what they left behind. He's been hunting for them in person and also sent his padawan out to speak with people he thinks have got some in their possession. What I need to know is whether the Jedi Order has sanctioned his actions or if he's operating on his own." Han said. "I'll see what I can do." Corlay responded, "But orders issued to jedi knights aren't generally copied to us non-Force sensitive grunts." "Just do your best. If the Jedi Order is about to move against us then we need to know." Han said and then the display went blank. "Nice to see you Corlay." Corlay said to herself, staring at the blank display, "How are you Corlay? I hope you're well Corlay. Snap to it Corlay. Kriffing nerf herder."

The mess hall was crowded when Corlay walked in. Most of those present were other freedom warriors but there were also a handful of civilian serving staff and also a small number of jedi and it was the latter that Corlay was interested in. Four robed humans sat around a single table and after collecting a tray full of food Corlay headed towards it. The path she took also took her past a table where several other freedom warrior NCOs were sat and one of them looked up as she passed. "Too good to eat with the rest of us grunts today corporal?" he said. "Sorry Sergeant Gall." she responded, "I just spoke with my brother and he had news about Lom Des. I thought the other padawans might want to hear it." "Fair enough. But just don't go getting any delusions of grandeur okay?" "I'll try not to bend the cutlery with my mind sarge." Corlay replied before continuing towards the table where the four jedi sat. Only three of them were padawans, Keana Vreyes was apprenticed to Master Karas himself while Rich Cryne was apprenticed to Whillam Antess and finally Pedrus Ketam was a new arrival who had been assigned to the shistavanen battle master Vrish Khal. Vrish's previous padawan, Dac Yale, had been promoted to the rank of jedi knight only a few weeks earlier and he was the fourth jedi at the table, "Still sitting at the younglings' table Dac?" she asked with a grin as she looked down at them. "He's younger than I am." Rich pointed out. Hailing from a remote world, Rich's Force sensitivity had not come to the attention of the Jedi Order until recently with the result that he was much older than the other padawans and even two years older than Dac. "Age is a state of mind." Dac said. "Well do you mind if I join you?" Corlay asked and Dac pointed to an empty chair. "Go ahead." he said. "Just keep the insults to a minimum okay?" Rich added. "So what brings you over here today then corporal?" Dac asked as Corlay sat down and took a bite of her meal. "Not the food I can tell you." she said, wincing. Then she looked at what the four jedi were eating, "I didn't see any of that at the counter." she commented. "Dac made it." Pedrus said. "Sort of a celebratory meal." Dac added, "I wanted share my good fortune with my former peers by giving them edible food." "Talking of your fellow padawans, have any of you heard from Lom Des recently?" Corlay asked. "I don't really know him at all." Pedrus said. "Me either." Rich agreed, "He's all the way over in the Narthis Sector after all." "What about you Keana?" Dac asked, looking at the only female padawan among them.

"Are you kidding?" Rich commented, "She'd have to tear herself away from Hargood Nollar for five minutes to check her messages first."

"I do not spend all my time with Hargood." Keana protested.

"But you still think you can bring him back to the Light Side don't you?" Dac said, "Trust me. He's been gone for too long. He'll spend the rest of his life locked in his quarters."

"Apart from when Master Karas turns him loose to do his dirty work." Rich commented.

"It's all part of his rehabilitation. That's all." Keana said, "He's not beyond saving."

"Right." Dac said, stretching out the word. Then he looked at Corlay, "So what's up with my old mate Lom? He's not said anything about what he's up to to me."

"According to my brother, Kyle Jenner has him rushing all around the Narthis Sector interviewing the rich and powerful." Corlay said, "I was wondering whether any of you had heard anything about something going on in the Narthis Sector that would explain it."

"Nothing." Dac replied, "As far as I know everything's quiet and peaceful out that way." then he looked at Keana, "What about you?" he asked her.

"What about me?" she replied.

"Well your master is Master Karas." Rich pointed out.

"The most senior jedi for fifty parsecs." Pedrus added.

"Doesn't mean he lets me in on everything that's going on." Keana said.

"No, but you'd hear things." Corlay said, "I hear stuff I'm not directly involved in all the time."

"And hopefully you don't go broadcasting it." Keana said.

"Why the interest anyway?" Rich asked, looking directly at Corlay.

"Because my family's in the Narthis Sector." she answered, "If something's about to happen I want to make sure they're safe."

"Well you can take it from us," Dac said, "there's nothing going on in the Narthis Sector that we're aware of."

"Thanks." Corlay replied, "That's all I needed to know."

Kyle looked at the irregular hole he had created to give him access to the tunnel leading to the ancient Sith temple. By simply moving the shelving back into position he could conceal this but that did not get around the problem of what to do if someone, Lom in particular, happened to come looking for him while he was in the temple. Using the Force would make it possible to move the shelves over the hole from inside the tunnel but would not prevent Lom from realising that Kyle had seemingly disappeared into thin air.

What was needed was some system whereby Kyle could be warned about the return of his padawan. Or while Lom was gone of any other visitor. Ideally whatever Kyle chose should also be able to deal with some visitors itself without needing to disturb him. The answer when it came to him was obvious.

He needed a droid.

A droid could have other uses as well. Suitably programmed it could take care of all of the maintenance that Kyle's new home required, thus leaving him with more time to dedicate to his study of the Sith text. All of these features could be had in a common service droid such as a 3DO unit. But Kyle wanted something more as well. He knew that it was a real possibility that he could have to enter battle as he collected Sith artefacts, either from some left over creation of the Sith themselves or from owners reluctant to give up their valued possessions. Normally he would rely on Lom or alternatively requisition troops from the Republic's various armed forces or law enforcement branches. But a service droid could be more of a liability than an asset in combat so Kyle would have to seek out something more specialised. The Republic made use of battle droids such as the sentinel or rocket pack equipped juggernaut types to supplement its forces of organic troops but these were easily recognisable and Kyle needed to avoid anyone asking questions about why he had one. This meant that Kyle would have to look for something far more specialised than a common battle droid. He needed something that could not only act to support him in combat but would be as inconspicuous as a service droid, ideally being able to double as such a droid when needed.

He needed an assassin droid.

Assassin droids were rare and highly illegal. The Republic and especially the Jedi Order had no use for them and the merest hint that one was at large was enough to attract the attention of every military and law enforcement body. Questions about why Kyle needed a battle droid would be nothing compared to those that would be asked if he was found to be in possession of an assassin droid so he knew that he had to be careful about how he went about procuring it.

Fortunately he knew someone who could help.

Surprise.

"Are you insane?" Kassa exclaimed as she glared at Kyle. The jedi had invited the infomerchant to visit him in his new home and she had come willingly, knowing that the invitation was not just a social one and that he wanted to discuss business in private.

But she had not expected this.

"Can you obtain one or not?" Kyle asked.

"An assassin droid? Kyle, what are you thinking? No wait. Are you even thinking? Do you know what you're asking for?"

"Yes. I'm asking for an assassin droid." Kyle said.

"Yes I know. A kriffing assassin droid? What the kriff do you need one of those for Kyle?"

"Jedi business." Kyle told her calmly.

"Poodoo!" Kassa snapped.

"If you cannot help me then obviously I need to find someone else that can." Kyle said.

"Whoa, hang on a moment there Kyle." Kassa said, "I've never let you down before now have I?"

"Not yet."

"And I'm not about to now. So I'll find you your assassin droid but it might take some time. Oh and money. You're talking top of the line merchandise here."

"I can give you ten thousand credits now and another ten thousand to the supplier upon delivery."

"Twenty thousand credits?" Kassa said, drawing in breath. Then she smiled, "I'll make some calls."

"So the Jedi Order knows nothing about what Kyle's doing?" Han said. Sat behind his desk he looked at a flat projection of his younger sister's face while his twin Belle perched on the side of the desk.

"That's what I just told you isn't it?" Corlay responded, "Neither Kyle nor his padawan have breathed a word of what they're up to to Master Karas."

"And you're sure that he hasn't just kept it to himself?" Belle asked.

"You're asking me if I can read his mind?" Corlay commented, "Look, if your boyfriend sent signals without telling you and Master Karas received them without going through any of the communications staff here and then chose not to tell a single other soul then yes, it is possible that he knows what Kyle's up to. But other than that it's like I've told you. The Jedi here don't know a kriffing thing."

"Thanks Corlay." Han said, "We'll let you know if we need anything else."

"Yeah, I'm sure you will." Corlay commented before she shut off the channel ahead of Han.

As the floating screen faded Han looked at Belle and smiled.

"Well there you have it." he said, "Kyle Jenner is acting on his own."

"But we still have to figure out what the hell he's up to." Belle replied.

"And that dear sister, is something I'll leave in your very capable hands." Han said.

"Gee," Belle commented, "thanks."

22.

The air in this section of the city about thirty kilometres outside of the capital was thick with the smell of industrial by-products and most of those walking the streets wore breath masks to keep out the fumes. As well as providing protection from the pollution, the masks and goggles that Kyle and Kassa wore also served to conceal their identities from passers by. Not that this was the sort of area where anyone paid too much attention to anyone else.

"We're here." Kassa said and she looked towards a large door set into an archway under a disused rail line.

"And the droid is ready?" Kyle asked.

"That's what they told me." Kassa replied and as they halted outside the door she banged on it with her fist three times.

"What do you want?" a voice asked through a speaker set into the wall beside the door.

"We're here for the droid." Kassa answered, "Mylo is expecting us."

Then came a pause before there was a rumbling sound and the door slowly rose up about a metre, allowing Kyle and Kassa to duck underneath it into the workshop on the other side.

The workshop was as large as the hangar where Kyle and Lom kept their starfighters but rather than housing spacecraft it held numerous smaller surface vehicles along with an odd assortment of other machinery, all of which Kyle guessed was stolen. The beings at work here bought stolen goods for a fraction of their value before either breaking it down into anonymous constituent parts or modifying it sufficiently that it was no longer identifiable before selling it on for a profit.

"I was wondering whether you were going to turn up or not." a male vultan said from the back of the workshop as he raised the faceplate of his welder's helmet to reveal the mass of cartilage located on top of his head where a human's hair would grow.

"You must be Mylo." Kyle said.

"The very same." Mylo responded with a smile.

"Do you have my droid?" Kyle asked.

"It's my droid until you pay. Do you have my money?" Mylo asked back.

"It's my money until I see the droid." Kyle told him.

"Kyle, let's be nice huh?" Kassa whispered to him.

"I have already paid ten thousand credits." Kyle said sternly, "I want to see what I am getting for my money before I part with any more."

"Sure. That sounds reasonable." Mylo replied and he nodded towards one of his men. In reaction to this nod the man walked over to a nearby human sized object that was hidden beneath a sheet that was covered in stains from lubricants and paint. Pulling back the sheet the man revealed a 3DO service droid standing motionless beneath it. Fixed to the machine's chest was a restraining bolt and Mylo produced a control unit that he aimed at the droid. As soon as he pressed the controller there was a buzzing and the droid suddenly came to life, walking directly towards him.

"Reporting." the droid said flatly and Mylo smiled at Kyle.

"All you've shown me is a service droid." the masked jedi said as he studied the droid carefully, "And one that's obviously not in prime condition."

"That's just the casing." Mylo replied, "Haven't you ever heard not to judge a data file by its header? The electronics are top of the line. Came from a brand new droid that never managed to reach its buyer in the Green Zone. We stripped back most of the paint and put a few dents in to make it look used then upgraded the internal systems."

"Upgraded how?" Kyle asked.

"Well, we overrode the life preservation programming by replacing the core processor with one taken from a sentinel battle droid we had parts from. That also gave us a basic combat programming and we built on that by increasing the output of the motor power units. More potential difference gives better speed. You've seen this shuffle like a regular droid, well let me tell you that it can run. In fact over short distances it can run fast enough to catch a moving repulsortruck. Plus the upgraded power provides more force in its grip. Of course we had to match this with increased resilience in its finger servos. The basic ones would have just blown if it tried to grasp something as hard as it could."

"How strong is its grip?" Kyle asked.

"Strong enough to do this." Mylo said and he picked up a nearby length of metal pipe that had been crushed in the middle. The shape of the deformed section matched the shape of the droid's left hand exactly.

"What about weapons capability?" Kyle said.

"There aren't any built in. That way if anyone checks it out, all they'll find is that it's a three-DO with a few upgraded electronics. But it can operate the full range of firearms and energy weapons. Plus we stuck in a

piloting program from a cybernetic brain unit." Mylo explained.

"Interesting." Kyle said as he stepped closer to the droid, "I need to see it move. Configure it to follow my orders."

"Sure." Mylo said and as he tapped the restraining bolt controller Kyle removed the coverings from his face, "Okay you're set." Mylo added.

"Droid, do you see my face?" Kyle said to the machine and it looked directly at him.

"Affirmative." it announced.

"I am your master." Kyle said.

"You are my master. I will follow your orders." the droid replied.

"Good." Kyle said and then he pointed at Kassa, "She is my friend. She is not to be harmed." he added and Kassa removed her mask and goggles as well so that the droid could see her facial features and commit them to memory.

"Affirmative." the droid said.

"Good." Kyle repeated as he stepped even closer to the droid, "Who is that?" he asked, pointing towards Mylo.

"Unknown." the droid answered.

"There wasn't much point in imprinting any of us on it." Mylo commented.

"Clearly not." Kyle said, slipping his pulse wave blaster from under his cloak and pushing it into the droid's hand with the safety disengaged, "Kill him."

Mylo gasped as the droid spun on the spot to face him, raising the weapon Kyle had given it. Then he remembered the restraining bolt still fixed to the droid's chest and he reached towards the keypad of the control unit he held. But his boast about the speed of the droid's movement was not exaggerated and before he could act to shut down the droid it fired the pulse wave blaster and a single shot struck the vultan technician in his chest from point blank range, smashing his ribcage and sending him flying backwards.

"Stang! He killed the boss!" one of the other outlaw technicians snapped as he watched his employer die.

Danger.

"Die kriffer!" another yelled as he charged towards Kyle wielding a large wrench like a club. But Kyle side-stepped the charge, drawing his lightsaber at the same time and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he ignited it followed by a scream as he slashed at the man and came close to cutting him in half.

Surprise.

Fear.

Panic.

"Jedi!" someone yelled.

"Kill them all." Kyle said, looking at the droid.

"Affirmative." the machine replied and it took aim at another of the outlaw techs, firing at her twice.

In response the remaining members of Mylo's band took what cover they could. The group did not normally carry weapons while working but there were plenty of them lying around in various states of repair and each of them now sought to arm themselves as Kyle and the droid hunted them.

"Stang Kyle!" Kassa exclaimed as a shot rang out only to miss her by a narrow margin and she dived for cover, "Why couldn't you just pay up?"

"With what?" Kyle replied at the same time as he removed the arm of another outlaw tech who had just pointed a weapon at him, following up this initial strike by plunging his lightsaber into the man's chest, "In fact I'm rather hoping to be able to get my down payment back when I'm done with this lot."

"Oh great." Kassa muttered, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Then she looked around and saw that one of the surviving outlaw techs was at that moment crawling towards Mylo's body and she wondered why. Then she remembered the restraining bolt fitted to the modified assassin droid. If the outlaw tech was able to reach the controller than Mylo had been holding when the droid had killed him then they could shut it down before turning it on Kyle. Kassa had little doubt that Kyle was more than capable of taking on the droid by itself but when he had to defend himself against the remains of Mylo's gang of outlaw techs as well the odds may not be quite so firmly in his favour.

So at the same time as the outlaw tech was reaching for the control unit Kassa was reaching for her pulse wave blaster and just as he was about to reach the device she shot him in the back.

"I guess this is a source I won't be able to use again." she then muttered as she scabbled across the floor to grab hold of the controller for the restraining bolt herself. With the device safely in her possession, Kassa then sat and watched while Kyle and the droid continued to make their way through Mylo's gang, killing each member in turn.

Not all of the gang's members attempted to take Kyle on directly. The last one remaining was able to outlive all of his comrades by concealing himself while Kyle and the droid killed everyone else they saw. But when the fighting died down Kyle sensed the presence of this final gang member and turned towards him.

Realising that he had been discovered the gang member opted for the only sensible option and attempted to flee. The assassin droid fired its pulse wave blaster but the outlaw tech ran behind a large repulsorlift motor

just in time to avoid being hit as he headed towards the main door at the front of the workshop that represented his only hope of escape and survival. The man rushed up to the control panel that operated the heavy front door and slammed his hand down on the activation switch. Then came the same rumble that had been heard when the door had been opened to allow Kyle and Kassa to enter and once more the door started to rise up slowly.

Kyle could see that there was no way for him reach the final member of Mylo's gang before he made it to the door but he still had another weapon at his disposal and he reached for his plasma carbine. Taking aim at the man just as he ducked to try and get under the door, Kyle fired and there was a flash and blast of heat before the packet of superheated matter hit the man at the base of his neck and the smell of burned flesh mixed in with the more acrid chemical scents coming from under the door.

"Get that door sealed." Kyle called out to Kassa, the zeltron woman being closer to it than he was and she hurried to close the door once more. Then she glared at Kyle.

"There'd better be a good explanation for this." she said.

"No witnesses." Kyle replied, "Plus like I said, now I get my money back. Plus all of these men were criminals. Who knows how many innocents have died because of the goods they sold? What I did here was a public service."

"A public service? Kyle what's happening to you? I've never seen you be so – direct before." Kassa said.

"The Narthis Sector stands at a cross roads Kassa." Kyle told her, "There are few beings I can rely on. You. Belle. No-one else. Unless I can master the secrets I have uncovered then billions may die."

"Seriously? You can't even trust your own apprentice?"

"It is not his fault. Lom is not strong enough to guarantee that he will not be corrupted. I have sent him to gather information but only I can take the action needed. The same goes for the other jedi in this region of space. The more that know of what is happening here, the greater the risk that some will fall."

"Risk? What risk? Kyle what the kriff is going on here?"

"The Sith." Kyle said sternly, "They were here a thousand years ago and if I cannot prevent it then they could rise here again."

"Kyle? Kyle are you there?" Belle called out from outside the main gate to the jedi's new home and the gate slid open. But rather than seeing Kyle standing in the courtyard on the other side Belle was surprised to see a 3DO service droid looking at her.

"Master Jenner is currently occupied." the droid said, "Who should I say is calling?"

"Tell him it's Belle. He'll know who I am." Belle replied.

"Would that be Belle Shill?" the droid asked.

"The one and only."

"Please enter. I have standing orders to admit you." the droid told her and it moved out of the way while she got back in her speeder and drove into the courtyard. The droid shut the gate behind her and then began to walk towards the nearest entrance to the house, "Please follow me Mistress Shill." it said and Belle shrugged as she got out of her speeder again.

"Why not?" she muttered.

Without speaking to Belle any further, the droid led her into the house and down to the basement level where Kyle had begun work on turning it into a physical practice area. But the most significant feature down here was the shelf that had been slid out of position to reveal a irregular opening to a tunnel. The droid walked right up to this opening and stood beside it, pointing into the darkness.

"Master Jenner is expecting you." it said.

"What? In there?" Belle asked.

"Affirmative."

"Aren't you going to show me in then?" Belle asked.

"Negative." the droid replied, "My standing orders are to never go beyond this point. My duties require my presence in the main house to receive visitors."

Belle paused as she stared into the tunnel.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." she said softly before she entered the tunnel.

Though there were no lights in the tunnel itself some illumination leaked in from the basement training area behind Belle as well as from whatever lay ahead and so she was able to make her way down the tunnel without banging into anything in the dark. But she was not prepared for what she found when she reached the far end of the tunnel and it opened out into the Sith temple.

"Stang Kyle." she exclaimed, "What is this place?"

Kyle was sat with his back to the tunnel entrance, facing the Sith statue while on the floor in front of him he had the Sith book open and a datapad beside it that he was making notes in. But when he heard Belle speak he shut down the datapad, closed the book and got to his feet.

"Do you like what I've done with the place?" he asked, smiling as he turned to face her.

"That depends on what you're planning to do down here." she replied. "Are you making a horror holo or just

planning to sacrifice some virgins to that thing?" and she pointed to the statue.

"Actually I'm learning the secrets of the Narthis Sector." Kyle said and he bent down to pick up the book, holding it up as he walked towards Belle.

Do not trust her. You should not have let her in here.

"A thousand years ago a Sith priest recorded everything that happened in this region of space." Kyle went on, ignoring the voice that spoke to him through the Force, "He wrote of the Sith themselves, The Traveller, The Conqueror, The Artisan, The Teacher, The Corrupter, The Creator, The Scholar and The Beast. And he wrote of what they achieved here."

"You can read that?" Belle asked when she saw the writing on the cover.

"If I focus enough yes." Kyle answered, "Through the Force it all becomes clear. Belle this book is the key to mastering the knowledge of the Sith, I'm sure of it."

Belle stared at the book.

"Kyle that's amazing." she said, glad that she was able to prevent him from sensing the fear that she felt at that moment. If Kyle really did uncover all the secrets of the Sith in the Narthis Sector then the activities of the Founding Families over the last three hundred years, as well as her own involvement would be exposed. But the fact that he had obviously not yet gained that knowledge gave her a chance to prevent that, "Just tell me what I can do to help."

"Wait one moment." Kyle said before he returned to the statue and carefully placed the book back in the compartment it had been stored in for the last thousand years.

"What are you doing?" Belle asked.

"The book needs to stay here." Kyle answered, "If it fell into the wrong hands then the results could be disastrous." and then he made his way towards the tunnel that led back to his basement.

Belle took one last look around before she joined him. Though the chamber appeared empty she was well aware that the Sith had a habit of concealing their relics and where there was one hidden compartment in a room there could be more.

Kyle took Belle back to the basement training room before he slid the shelf back in front of the tunnel to hide its existence from anyone who entered the room. Then he took her upstairs to a partially furnished lounge.

"Started redecorating I see." Belle commented as she sat down beside Kyle and looked around, "But what's with that droid?"

Do you really want her to know you slaughtered the people you took an assassin droid from?

"Oh right, the droid. Ex-three-DO" Kyle said, "It was a gift."

"A gift?" Belle repeated.

"A gift." Kyle repeated, "An anonymous donor gave it to me."

"Taking in a random droid off the street doesn't seem too bright to me Kyle." Belle commented.

"Oh don't worry. I've had its memory wiped and checked for hidden programming. Besides, what could a three-DO unit do to me?" Kyle said.

"Nothing I suppose. But still, I've got-" Belle began before there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine from the courtyard outside.

"Ah, it would appear that Lom's back." Kyle said without letting Belle finish her sentence, "Remember, not a word about the temple. Lom must not find out about it." then he got up and headed for the courtyard where Lom had just climbed off his speeder bike and was looking around.

"Master," he said when he saw Kyle appear with Belle not far behind, "I received your instruction to come here but I do not understand why."

"Welcome to our new home my young apprentice." Kyle responded.

"Master?" Lom said.

"I decided that we should acquire lodgings outside the Green Zone and this seemed to be the logical choice." Kyle said, stretching out his arms, "With a little work we can fortify it properly and there is more than enough room for us. Feel free to pick any of the vacant rooms as your own."

"Yes master." Lom said.

"And then you can tell me about everything you've found." Kyle added.

"Perhaps I ought to let you get on." Belle said.

"Really? Leaving so soon?" Kyle replied.

"Well you've obviously got work to do." Belle answered, "And I do as well in fact. But like I said, let me know if there's anything I can do to help you Kyle." and he smiled at her.

"Count on it." he said. Kyle then watched Belle leave before he turned to look at Lom instead, "This way." he said, "I've already got an office set up."

"Of course master." Lom replied and he started to follow Kyle through the house. On the way he noticed the service droid at work unpacking and assembling the modular furniture Kyle had obtained for the house,

"Master, why do we need a droid?" he asked.

"Because maintaining this entire house and its grounds would be a full time job that is beneath us both." Kyle responded, "And as fortune would have it I received that droid as an anonymous donation to the Jedi Order."

It will make sure that the house is kept clean and can also help with the more menial tasks we have to carry out. Ah, here we are. My office.”

The room that Kyle had selected to turn into his office was the same one that the late Congressman Noll had used for the same purpose and was the same room that he had died in. Lom paused as he stood in the doorway and looked around. All traces of the body were long gone but the strange sensation that the two Jedi had picked up on through the Force remained and Lom found it unsettling.

“Something troubles you?” Kyle said as he sat down behind his new desk.

“The Force.” Lom said, “It feels wrong somehow.”

“An after effect of what happened here.” Kyle said, “Nothing to worry about though. Our presence will calm it I’m sure. Now show me what you found in your travels.”

“Yes master.” Lom replied and he handed Kyle a mem-stick as he sat down across the desk from Kyle.

Plugging the mem-stick into his computer Kyle began to search through the contents. Lom had organised these according to the beings he had questioned and each sub section of the stick’s contents was dedicated to a single household.

“Did you have any trouble getting any of this?” Kyle asked.

“A little.” Lom answered, “I had to use the Force to influence the owner of the pendant collection so that they would show them to me. But all of the others were willing to answer my questions.”

Just then Kyle came across an image of a small statue depicting some kind of animal that resembled images from Jedi texts of creatures created by Sith alchemy. But more significant was that the statue was located beneath a mirror and in the part of the reflective surface that was visible in the image it was clear that there were more than two beings present, one of whom had distinctive long red hair.

Kyle frowned.

“Master, what’s wrong?” Lom asked.

“Who were these other people present when you took this image?” Kyle asked, turning the desk mounted monitor so that Lom could see the image.

“Corva and Deesa Torin were present when I visited Nayalia Laysom on Ralta master. They had been discussing her collection of antiques when I arrived and accompanied us while she showed them to me.”

So, the Founding Families were able to intercept your padawan. How interesting.

“And did you have any other supposedly accidental encounters with the Founding Families on your travels?” Kyle said.

“No master. Just on that occasion.” Lom said, “Do you still suspect that they may be involved somehow?”

“I’m not discounting the possibility.” Kyle responded, “But somehow I doubt you’ll be able to get guided tours of their homes.”

“No master, they do not fear being burgled.”

“Of course they don’t. Not when they’ve got a private army to call on to protect them. It would take a Jedi’s skill to get past them.” Kyle commented, “But I sense a plot to thwart us. We must move quickly if we are to succeed.”

“What do you intend for us to do master?” Lom asked.

“For the time being we need to swap our roles.” Kyle told him, “I need to go to Crassis Major and begin proceedings to obtain the Sith artefacts you have found. Meanwhile you must stay here on Tepillos and cover for me in my absence. Colonel Jeck does not know that we’ve taken over this particular building and I’d like it to stay that way. But he knows that he can reach us if he needs to so you need to make him think that I’m still here.”

“But why not ask for his help master?” Lom suggested.

“Because it’s quite possible that our enemies could have eyes within the Republic. The more people we involve the more likely it is that word will get out. So while you’re taking care of things here I’m going to go and get hold of the artefacts as quietly as I can.” Kyle replied and Lom looked at him oddly.

“But won’t the colonel notice that you’ve left Tepillos master?” he said.

“Not if I don’t take my fighter.” Kyle answered, “I’ll make some more discrete arrangements.”

23.

Kassa's conductor-class shuttle had several glaring disadvantages when compared to the starsaber-class starfighter that Kyle preferred, it was slower both at sublight speeds and in hyperspace and lacked any form of defensive armament. But it was anonymous enough that the pair of them would be able to move from system to system without attracting the same level of attention that a military craft like Kyle's would do.

"Did you have to bring that thing along Kyle?" she asked, looking at X-3DO as the assassin droid boarded her ship and sat down behind Kyle.

"I can't load the artefacts onto this ship alone Kassa. I need to keep watch on their owners and a look out for any other interested parties that could try and intervene and I need you to wait in the ship and keep it running just in case we need to make a quick getaway. That leaves X-three-DO here to do all of the heavy lifting." Kyle explained but Kassa just frowned.

"I don't know Kyle." she said, "Ever since I saw how you and that thing dealt with Mylo and his gang I've got a really bad feeling about that droid."

The first stop for the shuttle was not the home of one of the beings listed by Lom as being in possession of Sith artefacts. Instead Kassa flew it into the atmosphere of Crassis Major and set it down on the landing pad of a courthouse in the capital. The unscheduled arrival drew the interest of the building's security and several armed bailiffs were waiting as Kyle descended the shuttle's access ramp alone. Initially they aimed their weapons at the hooded jedi but as soon as he brushed aside his cloak to reveal his lightsaber they stood at ease.

"Jedi Jenner." the senior bailiff said as he holstered his sidearm, "We were not expecting you."

"My presence here is classified." Kyle replied, "I need to speak with Judge Kravo."

"Of course sir." the bailiff said, "I'll take you to see him right away."

Judge Kravo was a rodian who had served as a judge for more than twenty years following a career as a lawyer. Kyle had chosen the judge for two reasons. Firstly, although he had a reputation for harshness Kyle knew from experience that the rodian's mind was easy to read and thus to manipulate if necessary. Secondly and just as important was the fact that he had no association with the Founding Families at all. The law firm he had worked with had often been in direct competition with Drud Legal and the Druds were known for doing their best to get Judge Kravo removed from any cases that they were to take part in.

"Your honour." Kyle said as he was shown into the judge's office and lowered his hood.

"Jedi Jenner." the judge replied, getting to his feet, "I can't remember the last time you were here so what brings you to my office today?"

"A matter of the uppermost importance your honour." Kyle said, "The Republic itself could be in danger." The rodian glared at Kyle.

"The Republic itself? Being a bit melodramatic aren't you Jedi Jenner?"

"I wish I was your honour." Kyle answered and he took out his datapad, activated it and handed the device to Judge Kravo took the datapad and looked at it, scrolling through the sets of images Kyle had called up.

"What am I looking at?" he asked.

"Proof that the Sith were once active in this region of space." Kyle told him, "Your honour the artefacts in those images were all made by the Sith and right now are in private hands in contravention of Republic statutes. I need you to issue an order that allows me to take them into custody."

"Jedi Jenner, are you saying that there is a Sith cult active in the Narthis Sector?"

"Not necessarily. But there are many beings that have inadvertently come into possession of Sith artefacts."

"So apart from having these items in their possession the owners have committed no other crime?" Judge Kravo said.

"Not yet your honour. But it may only be a matter of time." Kyle said and with a wave of his hand he added, "You will sign the order." and used the Force to help push the instruction into the judge's mind.

"Very well. I'll sign your order. But I'm only giving you permission to remove these exact items. You are not to use this as an excuse to engage in a fishing expedition looking for any other criminal activity. Do I make myself clear Jedi Jenner?"

"Perfectly clear your honour." Kyle said.

"Good. Then we both understand one another." Judge Kravo said, turning to his computer and drawing up the necessary documents for Kyle to be able to seize the Sith artefacts located by Lom. Then he transferred these to Kyle's datapad and handed the device back to the jedi, "There you are Jedi Jenner. Now everything's official. I'll send the necessary copies to our records office and I'll copy them to *Aurek Station* and the enclave on Moldas."

"Thank you your honour." Kyle replied, smiling as he took the datapad back, "But I'm afraid I can't let you do

that. I need all of this to be kept secret.”

“What are you talking about Jedi Jenner?” Judge Kravo said, confused, “I have to-” but then as Kyle glared directly at him the rodian suddenly stopped speaking and started to gasp for breath as he felt his chest tighten. He reached out for the switch that would activate the intercom set into his desk but before he could reach it, Kyle leapt forwards and grabbed hold of his wrist, pulling the rodian's hand away from the button. “I really am sorry about this your honour.” Kyle said, still staring at Judge Kravo, “But I think that the time has come for you to retire from office.”

Then the rodian went suddenly limp and collapsed in a heap behind his desk. Kyle's arm then extended out and he activated the intercom himself.

“Medical emergency!” he snapped, “Judge Kravo has just had a heart attack.”

Kassa was waiting inside the shuttle when Kyle returned, walking back on board and strapping himself into the seat beside hers without speaking.

“Get what you came for then?” she asked.

“Everything.” Kyle replied.

“Well you missed the excitement.” Kassa commented, “A medi-speeder came hurtling in and back out again a few minutes ago. I couldn't see much from in here but I'd say someone was taken seriously ill.”

“It was Judge Kravo.” Kyle said, “Unfortunately he suffered a fatal heart attack just moments after he issued the order permitting us to seize all of the Sith artefacts we've found.”

“And would this heart attack have happened right before he uploaded those court orders to the central systems that would have alerted the sector rangers and your superiors to what we're doing by any chance?” Kassa asked.

“The orders are legal.” Kyle said, “What does it matter if they are kept secret?”

“I'm just wondering how far you're willing to go in all this Kyle.”

“As far as I have to. When I'm done the end will justify the means.”

Once more the heads of the Founding Families were gathered together to be addressed by Belle and Han. “I've got a very bad feeling about this.” Trent Narthis commented as he looked around at the gathered holograms. Not only were the seven Family heads as well as Hugo Callan and Keleen Delvad present but other senior members of the Founding Families had been included on this occasion as well, including Airia Torin, the Narthis Sector's representative in the Republic Senate. Had they been gathered together in person rather than in holographic form even Han's office would have been crowded.

“I take that this is yet another explanation of how Kyle Jenner has done something unexpected.” Lorna added.

“It is.” Han replied.

“And how bad is it this time?” Erill asked.

“Very.” Belle answered, “Kyle's found a Sith temple under the house he bought. The one that Congressman Noll used to own.” and many of the holograms exchanged nervous glances.

“Intact?” Keleen said, her image flickering slightly due to data transfer limitations.

“Someone had got there first and emptied it of most of its original contents.” Belle said, “I'm guessing that it was the source of the artefacts Kyle's had his padawan running all over the sector looking for. Unfortunately there was one key relic left.”

“I just know I'm going to regret asking this.” Del Karn commented, “But what was it?”

“A book. Kyle says that it describes everything that the Sith did in this region of space.” Belle explained.

“Then he's translated it?” Ket Runn said but Belle shook her head.

“He's just started. Right now I think all it's provided him with is a list of the Sith that were active here.” she said.

“But we can't rely on that being all he finds.” Hugo added.

“No we can't.” Heddren said and he looked towards Airia, “Airia, you're in the senate. Do you think that we could put pressure on the Jedi Order to withdraw him from the sector?”

“I doubt it.” the senator replied.

“Even if we did, I doubt he'd go quietly.” Belle commented.

“Perhaps the time has come to consider a more permanent solution.” Ket said.

“You mean kill him?” Calleen Narthis asked.

“Kill a jedi?” her husband Trent added, “Are you serious Ket? We've already considered that and-”

“No.” Fial Runn interrupted, “You dismissed the idea out of hand.”

“Because it's bad idea.” Josh Drud said, “A really bad idea. Apart from the difficulty of killing a jedi knight as experienced as Kyle Jenner, the Jedi Order will send a replacement to investigate his death.”

“My husband and I have been looking into ways around that.” Fial replied, “We have-”

“Kyle is not the issue here. He is not the threat.” Erill Crassis said without bothering to let the nautolan woman finish.

"What do you mean he's not a threat?" Kayza Drud snapped, "Has your brain rotted faster than your body is doing?" and both her brothers winced.

"The book is the threat." Luke said.

"And you'd be best keeping a civil tongue in your head Kayza." Salla added, "Unless you want someone to rip it right out."

"If we could try and keep this orderly." Han said, holding up his hands, "We obviously need to decide on a course of action to prevent Kyle from translating the book. Ideally we'd like to get hold of it for ourselves but if that's not an option then perhaps we can destroy it."

"Destroy it?" Keleen exclaimed, "Han are you insane? That goes against everything our families have been doing for the last three hundred years. We must have that book."

"We haven't faced this situation before." Hugo commented.

"I realise that." Keleen admitted, "But for twelve generations our families have collected together every scrap of information on the Sith. Destroying it just because of one man would set a dangerous precedent."

"One man who could destroy us all." Trent commented and he looked at Belle and added, "Right?"

"Right." she said.

"Do you know where your jedi lover keeps this book?" Millel Drud asked.

"In the temple under his house." Belle told her and Millel and her husband looked at one another and smiled.

"What?" Corva Torin asked, "Why is that significant?"

"Because we happen to know that Kyle Jenner is not currently on Tepillos." Heddren answered and Han looked at his twin sister.

"He never said anything to me about leaving Tepillos." Belle said, "I thought he was going to stay home and do nothing but read that book from cover to cover."

"Well a few hours ago we got word that he was here on Crassis Major." Heddren said.

"My people keep Kyle's home in the Green Zone under constant surveillance." Han pointed out, "If he'd taken out his starfighter then they'd have warned me about it."

"It would appear that he has used alternative transport to get here." Kayza replied.

"But what exactly is he doing here?" Luke asked.

"Visiting an old rival." Heddren said, "A rodian judge named Kravo. Now exactly what they discussed is something we haven't been able to discover yet. It seems that the judge was unable to upload any records of what transpired during their meeting before he was struck down by a fatal heart attack."

"While Kyle was there?" Belle asked.

"It appears that way." Heddren answered.

"Do we think that the judge had any Sith artefacts in his possession?" Del Karn asked.

"None that we know of." Millel responded, "And given his history in relation to our family we've kept him under very close observation for many years."

"But the key fact is that Kyle Jenner is not on Tepillos." Josh added, "That means that the book is unprotected."

"Lom may still be on Tepillos. Have your sources seen him?" Belle said.

"No, but I'm certain that we can lure the padawan away from the target site and arrange for his return to be delayed." Josh said, "Then we can strike."

"I can put together a team in-" Han began but Josh held up his hand as he interrupted.

"Actually I was thinking that this would be a good time to make use of my position." he said.

"You are suggesting using a special forces team from the Crassis Major Defence Forces?" Erill said, looking straight at Josh suspiciously.

"Why?" Deesa Torin asked.

"Because it can be disguised by a counter-insurgency raid, right?" Trent said and Josh smiled.

"Exactly." he replied, "I can feed information to the Crassis Major government that we've uncovered a supply line from the underworld here on Crassis Major to the insurgents on Tepillos. Then Airia and I can take and offer to launch an assault on the receiving position on Tepillos to Colonel Jeck and the High Council of Tepillos. Both are struggling to keep order so they'll jump at the chance for us to help them. We've carried out similar strikes before so it's nothing new. But this time while the main attack force is hitting some phantom target, a warehouse filled with obsolete weapons maybe, we detach a smaller team to hit Kyle's residence. None of the strike team needs to know the true nature of the target, only that they need to recover or destroy a particular item."

"We can use the raid to draw out the padawan." Faye Karn suggested.

"That would work, yes." Josh said, "And I'm sure some of Han's people can arrange for the padawan's transport to be disabled to make sure he can't get back home in a hurry."

Han nodded.

"That shouldn't be a problem." he said, "We're going to have to stock the warehouse with weapons anyway to make the raid look worthwhile."

"What sort of weapons are you considering?" Lorna asked.

"Cheap poodoo." Belle commented, "A few pulse wave weapons but mainly older stuff like beam tubes, plasma fusils and slug throwers. Maybe with a few exotics like gyrojets and rocket assisted projectiles thrown in. The sort of stuff outlaws would collect."

"Then when everything's finished our book gets a military escort all the way back here without us needed to worry about customs." Josh said, "And at no stage do any of our troops have to engage either of the Jedi."

"Then it looks like we have a plan." Erill said, looking around at the others present in the meeting, "Are there any objections or other issues? Or shall we consider this meeting at a close?"

The sound of the communicator roused Lom from his meditation but rather than get up to answer the call he activated the microphone using the Force.

"Hello?" he asked.

"Lom, it's Colonel Jeck." the colonel's voice said, "Is Kyle there?"

"Unfortunately not colonel. He is currently following an important lead." Lom replied.

"Stang. We could really do with his help on this." Colonel Jeck said.

"What's wrong colonel?"

"What's wrong is that the security services on Crassis Major have just busted open a support ring for one of the insurgent groups operating here on Tepillos. Neither us, nor the locals have the manpower to deal with it right now but the CMDF have offered to send a strike force. They'll be here as soon as they can assemble but they've requested Jedi support."

"I can assist them colonel." Lom said, "My master left me with instructions to provide you with whatever help I could in his absence."

"Excellent." Colonel Jeck replied, "I'll tell the strike team to expect you and forward you the details as soon as I get them."

Kyle shuddered.

"What's wrong?" Kassa asked when she noticed the movement beside her.

"I just felt a disturbance in the Force." Kyle told her, "Something is happening back on Tepillos."

"Something Lom can't handle?"

"I think Lom is part of it." Kyle said before staring straight at her, "Turn the ship around. We're heading back to Tepillos now."

"Sure. Whatever, we've almost a full load of this dusty old poodoo anyhow." Kassa said, glancing back over her shoulder at the boxes filled with Sith artefacts that Kyle had taken from their previous owners simply by waving his datapad at them.

24.

A single frigate brought the strike team from Crassis Major and two assault shuttles were deployed from its hangar while it remained in orbit, not even bothering to announce its presence to the Republic forces on the surface below. The two shuttles then followed parallel courses as they entered the atmosphere of Tepillos and headed for an area on the outskirts of the capital city. Only then were they detected by the tracking systems in the Green Zone and they identified themselves simply as shuttles *CM-One* and *CM-Two*. But the course selected for them had not been selected purely to get them to the target zone as rapidly as possible instead it was also intended for it to enable *CM-Two* to deploy a secondary strike team from the air. While the primary team numbered more than thirty troops armed with pulse wave rifles and wearing heavy battle armour this second five man unit was only lightly armoured and carried state of the art blast rifles. In addition their all covering black uniforms bore no identifying markings of any kind.

The five men of this secondary team leapt out of shuttle *CM-Two* as soon as the vessel's speed dropped to subsonic. All five spread out their arms and legs as they dropped until they were less than a hundred metres above the ground, at which point each man triggered the repulsorpack on his back and their rate of descent fell sharply and allowed them to land on their feet without injury in an area of deserted wasteland.

"Team Dorn down and safe." the team leader signalled as he took out his datapad to double check their position. The local navigation system had broken down decades earlier but with the frigate in orbit, the team was able to get accurate information on their position, "Distance to target eight hundred metres. Moving out." Then without any further spoken orders, the team leader pointed to indicate where he wanted each of his men to go and the unit darted from one hiding place to another as they headed towards Kyle's unguarded home.

Shuttles *CM-One* and *CM-Two* touched down on the rooftop parking lot of a supermarket. The supermarket remained in use but the local economy meant that none of its customers could afford their own transport and the parking lot was deserted apart from a single speeder bike that had Lom Des standing beside it.

"Commander." the platoon commander called out as he hurried out of *CM-One* while his men unloaded the skiffs that would take them to their destination, "Have you been able to survey the target?"

"I have." Lom replied, "I saw no visible signs of occupation, but I felt the presence of several insurgents." then looking around at the force that had now deployed from the two shuttles that were rising back into the sky he added, "I would say that we have the definite advantage of numbers."

"Then let's try and make the most of it. If we can take them by surprise as well this should be easy."

"Be careful of your overconfidence captain." Lom warned the officer from Crassis Major, "The enemy may yet prove to be stronger than we realise."

"Then perhaps you could lead the way." the captain suggested, "If you sense anything amiss you can let us know."

"A wise precaution captain. Have your drivers follow my lead." Lom said and he climbed back onto his speeder bike before adding, "Just make sure that you keep up."

The three repulsorlift vehicles sped through the streets of the city towards the warehouse building that was being used to store the weapons supposedly intended to arm one of the planet's insurgent groups. Moving too quickly for any pedestrians to take in the fact that the two skiffs were laden with armed troops rather than cargo, Lom hoped that they would reach their target without any advance warning being given. But as he turned the final corner before the warehouse came into view there was the rattle of slugthrower fire from one of the lower windows.

"It's a trap!" Lom exclaimed, "They're expecting us."

From the open topped skiffs the CMDF soldiers fired grenade launchers. Not wanting to risk civilian casualties, these were loaded with smoke rounds that burst open close to the warehouse and rapidly created a thick barrier that blocked the line of sight of the beings defending the building while the strike team and their jedi leader disembarked from their transports to attack.

"Okay this is it." the leader of the Shill Security commando team inside the warehouse told his men, "Lay down suppressing fire as they advance and fall back to the sewers, "Squad two, take out those vehicles. Keep the jedi here."

As the main strike team closed in on the warehouse, Team Dorn was approaching the wall surrounding Kyle's home.

"Ascension guns." the team leader ordered and his men raised their blast rifles and fired the grappling hooks mounted beneath them. These all secured themselves to the top of the wall and the commandos began to reel in the lines connected to them. With the grappling hooks fixed in place, this served to support the

commandos as they simply ran up the wall until they reached the top and dropped over to the other side. The team halted as they looked around to make sure that they had not been spotted. As far as they were concerned they were launching a raid on the hideout of a senior insurgent and had not been told that the building would necessarily be empty. While his men kept watch, the team leader checked his datapad again, in particular he looked at the floor plan he had been given. This had been taken from official records but additional information had been added that showed the existence of an expanded basement section where his team would find the object they had been sent to retrieve. Then he looked up at the building in front of them and pointed at the nearest entrance. According to the floor plan he had been given, this would provide his team with access to the basement by the shortest route possible.

Lom flinched as the grenade blasts echoed from behind him.

"The skiffs!" one of the assault team exclaimed and Lom saw that the insurgents had been able to get a second group around behind his force where they had attacked their vehicles with explosives. Now both skiffs and his own speeder bike were nothing but twisted metal.

So far the assault was proving frustrating. The CMDF troops had surrounded the warehouse and were steadily tightening their perimeter around it and had done so without injury to any of their number. But at the same time the assault team had yet to make a single confirmed kill of their own. No matter what approach route they tried there seemed to be insurgents positioned to delay their advance with suppressing fire.

"Keep moving." Lom broadcast over the PTP network the team was using, "We must get inside the warehouse." and he burst out from his hiding place and charged towards the building ahead of him. As he had expected there was a sudden burst of gun fire from a window at street level but by twirling his lightsaber in front of him Lom was able to block each round in turn before grinding to a halt with his back pressed against the wall of the warehouse.

It was then that something else about the insurgents defending the warehouse struck him as odd. All of the defensive fire had come from the lowest level of the structure rather than the upper ones where the defenders would have had a superior line of sight and field of fire.

"Captain." he signalled, "I'm at the wall and about to breach the building. I want Besh team to lay down cover while you advance to join me. But have any of your men seen any fire coming from the upper floors?"

"Negative commander. All defensive fire is coming from the lower floor."

"I thought so. Something about this is not right." Lom said, "I've got a bad feeling about this." and then he shut off his PTP link and plunged the blade of his lightsaber into the wall, moving it in a circle to form an improvised doorway he and the rest of the strike team could use to gain entry to the warehouse.

Meanwhile, the secondary team easily breached the locks on Kyle's home and darted inside.

"You. You." the team leader said, pointing at two of his men, "Stay here and cover our retreat. It doesn't look like anyone's at home but if they return I don't want us getting trapped inside."

"Yes sir." one of the indicated soldiers replied before they both took up positions just inside the doorway so that they covered the courtyard with their blast rifles. Then the team leader beckoned for the other two members of his unit to come with him as he followed the map he had been provided with that gave directions down to the Sith temple.

Although they had yet to see any signs of life or automated defences the three soldiers still moved through the building cautiously, with one man moving forwards while his two comrades kept watch. The basement level was dark as the unit leader looked down the stairs and he took a chemical light stick from his webbing, activated it and threw it down the stairs ahead of them. Then when there was no response he crept down the stairs, still holding his blast rifle at the ready. At the bottom of the stairs the soldiers spread out, especially alert to the fact that there were various weapons mounted on the walls. Most of these were simple hand-to-hand combat weapons but if there was anyone hiding in the basement area those weapons could still be used against the soldiers.

"That shelf over there." the team leader said, pointing to the set of shelves marked on his map. Then the soldier at the back of the group halted and turned to keep watch on the stairs they had come down while the others slung their rifles as they darted over to the shelves. Inspecting the shelves closely they found no trigger mechanism and so opted to just push them out of the way. There was a grinding sound as the shelves moved slowly to one side until the team leader saw the tunnel entrance, "That's it." he said, unslinging his rifle. The problem was that, just like the basement itself, the tunnel was unlit. To counter this the team leader took another chemical light from his webbing and activated it. But this time instead of tossing it ahead of him he hooked it back onto his webbing and stepped into the tunnel.

The warehouse's defenders were falling back rapidly now that the strike team had breached the building. But their retreat was not typical of the behaviour that Lom had experienced on previous occasions when fighting insurgents. When pressed they tended to become either fanatical or totally disorientated. The fanatical would hurl themselves at the government forces only to be cut down while the disorientated would flee in panic in

whatever direction seemed to be the best one at that moment. However, the retreat of this particular group was well ordered, with some groups laying down covering fire for their comrades as they pulled back. In addition to this, Lom sensed no panic or fear from them at all and all of this combined to make him suspect a trap. The insurgents were acting as if everything that was happening was something that they had expected and thus prepared for, right down to the specific orders that were being given.

Lom looked around at the stacks of crates, all marked with shipping labels that gave their point of origin as Crassis Major and an idea came to him. Deactivating his lightsaber he climbed up onto the nearest stack and lay flat so that he could look down without being seen himself. From this vantage point he could see several small groups of insurgents, including a pair of them that were hiding from the advancing defence force troops in a position from where they would be able to launch an ambush that would slow them down even further. But to withdraw from that position meant that they had to follow a particular route between two other stacks of crates and that was something that Lom could make use of.

Concentrating, he reached out his hand and focused on the crates beyond the two insurgents. It would have been easier for him to focus on the crates either side of the insurgents themselves, but with what Lom had in mind that would have meant using the Force to inflict injury in a manner forbidden by the Jedi Code. So instead he used it to simply collapse the stacks of crates behind the insurgents, completely blocking their escape route but leaving them unharmed for now at least. But this did not last for long as Lom got to his feet and then leapt from one stack of crates to the next, using the Force to power each jump until he was able to jump down and land right in front of the two insurgents he had trapped.

Surprise.

Fear.

It was clear from the insurgents' reaction that this was not something they had planned on. But this did not prevent either of them turning their weapons, relatively modern pulse wave rifles, towards the padawan. Fortunately Lom was prepared to face resistance and as he had made his final leap he had ignited his lightsaber again and now he slashed the blade across both insurgents, cutting them down in a single stroke. He was about to turn away from the two dead insurgents and see what else he could do to accelerate the CMDF's advance through the warehouse when a thought occurred to him and he crouched down beside one of the bodies and tilted its head to one side. There he saw that the insurgent had a compact earpiece in his ear, an advanced piece of technology for the insurgents of Tepillos. Curious, Lom removed this and held the tiny device close to his own ear. As a sullustan his ears were a significantly different shape to those of the dead human insurgent but he was still able to get it close enough that he was able to hear the sound it was producing.

It was the same as he could hear through his own PTP link's earpiece that had been set to communicate over the CMDF network.

Somehow the insurgents had not only known that they were going to be raided and formed a very efficient plan of controlled withdrawal under fire but they must also have had forewarning that the attacking troops would be CMDF rather than Republic military and been technically proficient enough to be able to slice into their frequency hopping and encrypted communication network.

"Enemy has our comms!" Lom snapped, even though this would alert the insurgents as well as the CMDF assault troops, "All units go dark. Visual communication only."

This course of action would undoubtedly slow the rate at which the assault team could advance but at least now they could do so without their every move being revealed in advance to the insurgents, Lom reasoned. However, the reality turned out somewhat differently.

As soon as the insurgents heard that they would no longer be able to listen in on the strike team's communications there was a series of popping sounds as they unleashed a barrage of grenades that burst open to release a pale blue gas and from the smell of it Lom was able to identify it as a riot control agent. The strike team had not planned on the insurgents being able to use a chemical weapon against them in their defence of the warehouse, but they planned for the possibility of using a similar agent themselves if necessary so they were well equipped with breath masks that could filter out the irritant gas. This inevitably caused a delay so the strike force paused to put on their masks before they could continue their advance. When the advance started again the soldiers encountered another issue that acted to slow them down. The cloud produced by the gas limited their visibility and warnings had to be called out to anyone seen moving through the haze before shots could be fired. Potentially this was a recipe for disaster. Acting too quickly could easily result in a so-called blue-on-blue friendly fire incident. But at the same time taking too long in trying to identify a target could just as easily result in a soldier being shot by one of the insurgents. But rather than exploiting the potential of the gas to improve their defensive situation, the insurgents just used it to help them disappear and the only shots that were heard came from the weapons of the strike team as they picked their way through the gas filled warehouse. This situation lasted until a shout went out.

"Hole! Hole! Hole!"

Lom and the CMDF captain both headed for the source of the shout and almost simultaneously they found three troopers standing around an open manhole in the warehouse floor.

"Put a light down there." the captain ordered and a chemical light stick was dropped into the hole. As it fell it illuminated the sides of the sewer until it landed in the filthy water at the bottom and was swept away. "It would appear that the insurgents were prepared to stage a retreat from this place." Lom commented. "All too easily." the CMDF captain responded, "I don't have the men for us to be able to go down there and hunted them down."

"Agreed." Lom replied before looking around again.

"So what do you want us to do now commander?" the captain asked.

"Your job captain." Lom answered, "We have just seized a warehouse that is supposed to be filled with weapons intended to arm insurgents. I suggest we find out exactly what it is that we have denied them."

Kassa flew her shuttle low over Kyle's house, also keeping its speed low enough that the Jedi was able to safely leap from its access ramp and land just beside the pool in the courtyard. Seeing the lightsaber armed Jedi land in front of them, the two soldiers left to cover the secondary team's retreat exchanged glances.

"Looks like someone decided this part of the op needed Jedi support as well." one commented, "Wait here and I'll go identify us." then the man stepped out into the open, "Hey!" he called out and Kyle looked around and started to stride towards the soldier now walking towards him, "Nobody told us that-" but then his words were cut off as Kyle calmly thrust the blade of his lightsaber into the man's chest.

"Man down!" the second soldier snapped into his PTP link, then he paused for a moment before he added, "It's the Jedi." then he levelled his blast rifle at Kyle and yelled, "Drop it!" but the Jedi ignored him and continued to advance towards the open doorway instead, "I said drop the weapon!" the soldier shouted but Kyle continued to advance. Not wanting to risk letting the mysterious newcomer get too close after witnessing how easily he had dealt with his comrade, the soldier then fired his blast rifle. His aim was good and his weapon was lined up directly on Kyle's chest. But the Jedi was able to place the blade of his lightsaber in the path of the enhanced energy bolt in time to prevent the shot from hitting him. Unlike a shot from an older pulse wave weapon, the shot from the blast rifle was not merely blocked. Instead the lightsaber blade deflected it away and by angling the blade correctly Kyle was able to control the direction of the deflection, sending it straight back at the soldier where it struck him in his chest instead. With his lightsaber still active, Kyle stepped over the corpse and into his house before heading directly for the basement.

The team leader and the second soldier to have gone into the tunnel with him suddenly came rushing back out of it into the basement.

"What's going on?" he demanded, "We heard part of a signal but it was cut off."

"I heard it too sir." the soldier left to guard their retreat and the team leader raised his hand to his ear to activate his PTP link to the other two members of his unit.

"Comm check over." he said simply, issuing an instruction for them to communicate with him immediately. But there was only silence, "Comm check over." he repeated. Then when there was still no reply he lifted his rifle and aimed it up the stairs, "Okay we'll have to go and-"

"You're going nowhere." Kyle's voice called out from the top of the stairs and the three commandos looked up to see him standing there with his hood raised to hide his features and his lightsaber glowing.

"What the hell is this?" the team leader said, realising that he was looking at a Jedi knight even though no such support had been promised to him for this mission, "Where are my men?"

"Dead." Kyle said simply as he began to descend the stairs, "I killed them."

The commandos all aimed their blast rifles at Kyle and started to back away.

"Okay that's far enough." the team leader said, "I don't care who you are."

"Likewise." Kyle responded, "All that matters to me is that you are here when you should not be and that is a situation I must remedy."

"Okay, one more step and we drop you." the team leader called out sternly but from beneath his hood, Kyle just smiled.

Then with a wave of his hand he unleashed a wave of telekinetic energy through the Force that picked up every weapon from a nearby rack and sent them flying through the air. Most of the weapons were bladed and the commando caught in their path stood no chance as he was sliced open and impaled by the flying blades. In response to this blatantly hostile act the remaining two commandos opened fire with their blast rifles set to automatic and two streams of energy blasts flew towards Kyle. With so many shots being fired towards him, Kyle did not have time to calculate the best angle to hold his lightsaber at to send them back at the firers so instead he opted to just block the two streams and not worry about where they went.

Holding his lightsaber in just one hand, Kyle pointed the other towards the team leader and pale blue lightning erupted from his fingertips, engulfing the commando who dropped his weapon and collapsed as he screamed in agony.

Fear.

The final commando now looked around, searching for an escape route but the only ways out of the basement were the stairs and tunnel entrance. Kyle blocked the commando's route to the stairs so this left

only the tunnel and even though he had no idea of where it led it would at least put more distance between him and the enraged jedi so he ceased fire and started to run.

Kyle knew immediately what the commando intended but he did not pursue the man. Instead he waited, biding his time until the commando was just about to enter the tunnel at which point Kyle waved his hand once more and send the shelving unit he had used to conceal the tunnel smashing into the commando, crushing him between it and the wall.

"All too easy." Kyle muttered as he shut off his lightsaber. Then he looked down at the leader of the commando team. Badly burned by the Force lightning, he was nevertheless still alive and Kyle bent down to grab him by the throat. Letting the Force flow through him to boost his strength, Kyle then lifted the man off the floor one handed and lowered his hood so that he could stare the commando straight in his eyes, "Now tell me why you are here." he said.

"The book." the commando croaked as h tried to prise Kyle's fingers from around his throat.

"What book?" Kyle asked, snarling.

"Some book written in code. It's wanted for intelligence. This op is official."

"Official? Who are you?"

"Defence force."

"Tepillos has no standing military. It can barely organise a police force." Kyle responded.

"Crassis Major."

"You are a long way from Crassis Major."

"It's all been cleared. General Drud and the senator authorised-"

"Senator Torin?" Kyle said, interrupting the commando, "She knew of this?"

"She issued the order."

The Founding Families move against you. But how did they know about the tunnel and the book?

"How did you find the tunnel?" Kyle asked.

"The map." the commando replied, gasping for breath, "My datapad."

Kyle looked at the man's webbing and spotted the datapad sticking out of a pouch. Removing this he looked at the display and saw a technical diagram of his house that had been modified by hand to show the location of the hidden tunnel and the temple at the end of it. The position of the statue within the temple was also marked and labelled and Kyle recognised the handwriting used immediately.

"Belle." he hissed, "Belle wrote this." then he took a deep breath and snarled at the commando, "She betrayed me!" and he tightened his grip until there was a 'crunch' and the man went, "No!" he screamed, extending the sound until he needed to take a breath.

She was not to be trusted. I told you so. But now you must ask yourself why is the book so important to the Founding Families?

"There must be something in it that they want." Kyle said and then he took out his PTP link, "Kassa." he added.

"Right here Kyle. What's your situation?" Kassa asked.

"Everything's fine now." Kyle told her, "But I need the droid. There are bodies to be disposed of and a mess to clean up. I'll contact you again when I need you." then without waiting for a reply he shut off the PTP link and headed for the hidden temple.

The statue of the Sith was still intact when Kyle reached it, the commandos apparently not having had the opportunity to attempt to remove the book from its hiding place. Kyle walked up to the statue and took out the book, opening its pages and staring at them. In his enraged state he found it easy to translate the words as he flicked through the pages but there was so much information in them that it was hard to know where to begin to look for the reason why the Founding Families would be so desperate to get hold of it.

25.

There were hundreds of weapons in the warehouse that the CMDF troops removed and laid out on the ground to be photographed and catalogued. Even though this was not a residential area of the city, the battle had attracted a lot of attention and now about half of the strike team was occupied in keeping back the growing crowd on onlookers.

A low rumble then attracted Lom's attention and the sullustan turned to see a truck being driven by a being he was familiar with turning a corner towards him. Immediately a group of troops rushed to head the vehicle off, waving for it to stop and aiming their pulse wave rifles at the driver just in case this was some sort of plot by the insurgents to recover their lost weapons or take revenge on the CMDF strike force.

"Stand down!" Lom ordered as he hurried over to the nervous troops, "I know him." then as the truck came to a halt and the driver opened the door and climbed out Lom added, "Hello Jondo. What brings you here?" "You do I guess." Jondo answered, "Lynn and I heard about a lot of shooting and figured that there had to be a raid going on. Raids generally mean casualties and collateral damage so I came to see what help I could offer."

Lom looked around.

"Surprisingly there are no injuries and the only damage was to our own vehicles." the padawan said and he pointed towards the three wrecked vehicles. Then he looked at Jondo, "However, my work here is now complete. I was going to wait for the defence force shuttles to pick up the strike team to drop me off closer to home but perhaps I could trouble you for a ride?"

"Sure. Why not?" Jondo replied.

Kyle continued to turn the pages of the ancient Sith book. Before now he had been reading the pages in the order in which they were presented in the book but now he skimmed through, hunting for anything that looked relevant to why the Founding Families would attempt to steal it and even risk using regular military forces to do so.

Ask yourself, what do the Founding Families want?

Kyle paused. Whatever this strange presence in the Force was, it had been correct when it warned him not to trust Belle. Though he had loved her she had taken his love and used it to get close to him, obviously reporting on his every move to her masters in the Founding Families. Now he considered the point that the voice raised carefully.

As far as he could tell, the Founding Families had been gathering Sith artefacts for the whole of the three hundred or so years that they had been in the Narthis Sector. But there had to be a bigger reason than just because they were aiming to sell off the artefacts on the black market. If that was the case then they would not have been so desperate to obtain the book.

Perhaps it is not what they would do with the book, but what you could do with it that they need to prevent.

"I would use the book to gather what the Sith left behind." Kyle said, "Perhaps there is something that they do not want me to find. But that would have to be something that they could not move."

And what could be so important that they would fear you controlling it?

"Something that would grant them more power and wealth than they already have." Kyle said.

And what is the source of great power?

"Knowledge." Kyle said, "For three hundred years the Founding Families have been collecting knowledge of the Sith. But all they have is fragments. This book could change that."

It is still only one artefact. Little more than a diary of a Sith priest. It was not even written by a Sith Lord.

Kyle smiled.

"But the priest could have recorded everything that their lords did." he said, "And everything that they built."

And if knowledge is power then who could offer your enemies the greatest power?

"The Sith Lord who collected the most knowledge." Kyle said, "The Scholar." and he began turning the pages of the book frantically, looking for the section on the Sith lord referred to in its opening passages as The Scholar.

The lock on the main gate responded to Lom's telekinesis and swung open when he released it using the Force. Kyle made good use of such locks to prevent anyone not skilled with the Force from gaining entry into his homes while at the same time avoiding the need to carry a key that could be lost or damaged. The padawan entered the house, intending to head for his private quarters when he sensed a strong presence in the Force. The presence was similar to that he was used to from Kyle but something about it was different, darker and colder somehow.

"Master?" he called out but there was no response so Lom moved cautiously in the direction of the unusual

presence. This took him down into the basement training area where he immediately smelt the cleanser that had recently been used in large quantities to clean something up. But of greater significance was the shelf that had been moved aside to reveal the entrance to a tunnel that Lom had not known had existed and it was from inside this tunnel that he could sense the strange presence in the Force. Lom considered calling out again but decided against the move, if it was not Kyle at the other end of the tunnel then he would be giving away his presence to an intruder. So instead he took his lightsaber in his hand and began to walk down the dimly lit tunnel.

"A library." Kyle muttered as he sat in front of the Sith statue and read the ancient book, "A vast library. *All the knowledge of the Sith contained in one place. Hidden away for a thousand years.*"

The book described how The Scholar had sent his minions throughout the Narthis Sector to gather every scrap of knowledge that they could and how The Scholar then placed all of this in a library along with a collection of artefacts that he had either created himself or been able to gather from the others. The book gave a name to the world on which this storehouse of knowledge was located but the problem was that, as with any proper noun, there was no way of determining what the equivalent was in modern Basic.

"But do the Founding Families only know of its existence, or have they found it but been unable to enter?" Kyle said.

Does it matter? With this book it is only a matter of time before you can determine where the storehouse is located and claim it and its contents for yourself. Then all of the power will be yours.

"Master?"

Kyle turned his head in surprise to see his apprentice standing in the entrance to the Sith temple and staring at him in disbelief.

"Lom." he said calmly as he set the book down on the floor and got to his feet to face the padawan, "You should not be here."

"Master what is this place?" Lom asked, "And what are you doing here?"

Kyle smiled.

"This is one of the temples that the Sith built in the Narthis Sector when they ruled it a thousand years ago Lom." Kyle replied, "I was guided here by this." and he slid his hand under his robes to produce the Sith medallion.

"But master was that not supposed to have been sent to the enclave on Moldas?"

"Why? What would they do with it?" Kyle said, "Lom, using this I have uncovered far more in a few weeks than the Jedi Order has managed in this sector over the last three hundred years and now I have the power to claim the greatest prize of all." and he summoned the Sith book to his grasp through the Force, "Here, look for yourself."

"Master what is this?" Lom asked as Kyle handed him the book.

"The key to ultimate power." Kyle replied.

"Master, is this Sith?" Lom said when he saw the writing on the cover.

"A full record of everything they achieved here my young apprentice. With that book in our possession we will become unstoppable."

"Unstoppable? But master the language of the Sith is-"

"As clear as basic thanks to the same medallion that led me to the book in the first place." Kyle interrupted, "It has granted me the power to read the words written inside. Now we will find the great library left behind before the Founding Families can take control of it."

"No master." Lom said, "This goes against everything you have taught me. The Sith were evil and no good can come of their teachings." then staring at the medallion hung around Kyle's neck he added, "Or their creations. I can sense the darkness within you. Please stop this madness."

Kyle smiled and then laughed.

"Darkness? I do not fear the Dark Side Lom. That book will teach me to be its master, not its slave and when I present the Sith library to the Jedi Council they will recognise my achievement with a place among them. You can be right there with me as well Lom. I can't do this alone, I need your help."

"No master." Lom replied, backing away from Kyle and holding up the book, "This has poisoned your mind. You should destroy it now."

"Destroy it? Never."

"Then I will!" Lom snapped and before Kyle could stop him the padawan plucked his lightsaber from his belt once more and pressed the emitter against the book at the same moment that he ignited the blade.

"No!" Kyle yelled as he saw the book burst into flames and he heard a screaming through the Force that was so overpowering that he dropped to his knees and clutched his head in pain.

"Master? Master are you-" Lom said, looking down at Kyle but he stopped mid sentence when Kyle looked up and glared at him.

Rage.

Kyle thrust his hand forwards and unleashed a telekinetic blast that lifted Lom off his feet and hurled him

back into the tunnel behind him. Lom's lightsaber fell from his grasp as he landed and the blade shut off as soon as his grip was released. But the sullustan was not badly hurt by the impact and recovered in time to hear a 'snap-hiss' as Kyle ignited his own lightsaber.

"Now you die." he hissed at his apprentice.

Fear.

Lom looked around and quickly retrieved his weapon. He knew that Kyle was a far superior fighter to him and that he would undoubtedly lose any fair fight. Therefore, he opted for the only sensible path and started to run.

Meanwhile Kyle just strode forwards, not bothering to break into a run himself. He could clearly sense his padawan's fear through the Force and this enabled him to track the sullustan no matter where he ran to. Eventually Lom would tire and slow down and at that moment Kyle would strike.

26.

Lom burst out into the courtyard and headed towards the main gate at the far end. He had engaged the lock after him when he returned and so he reached out through the Force to release it and open the gate so he could escape. But as he felt the locking mechanism start to move all of a sudden he felt resistance as well and he came to a sudden stop as he sensed a dark shadow in the Force behind him.

"Leaving so soon Lom?" Kyle asked and he raised his lightsaber, "I didn't dismiss you."

Lom looked up at the upper storey of the house. The shutters of the balcony that ran all around it were currently open and the sullustan knew that this offered him a potential escape route. From the upper floor he could jump to the top of the wall surrounding the property and then make his escape. Letting the Force flow through him, Lom leapt up into the air and somersaulted as he flew before making a perfect landing on the balcony.

But as he ran along the balcony Kyle also leapt into the air, landing ahead of him and blocking the route to the room where the wall came nearest to the house and he smiled at Lom as the sullustan ground to a halt once more.

"Not going to stand and fight? Fear is a path to the Dark Side you know. Pledge yourself to me and I may just let you live."

"I'll never join you." Lom replied and he activated his lightsaber, trusting in the narrowness of the balcony to prevent Kyle from being able to evade the blade if he decided to charge. But the Jedi knight was not put off by this show of determination and he advanced towards Lom, holding his own lightsaber low.

"Then you leave me no choice my young apprentice." he said, "If you will not join me then you must die." and using the fact that Lom's attention was focused on his lightsaber, Kyle took advantage of the sullustan's distracted state to suddenly raise his other hand and unleash a burst of Force lightning towards the padawan.

Lom was just fast enough to sense the build of power through the Force and angled his lightsaber to absorb the attack. But he was visibly stunned by this undoubted use of the Dark Side. Had he been more experienced then he may have been able to deflect the attack back on Kyle, but as a padawan the best he could manage was to simply stop himself being consumed by the lightning.

"I see that knowledge of the Sith language is not the only thing you have been gifted by the Dark Side." Lom said, backing away as he tried to find a way out of his situation. He knew that he could jump back down into the courtyard at any time he wanted but all that would happen then would be that Kyle would follow him and he would be right back where he started. Therefore, Lom chose to continue with his original plan, backing away from Kyle in the direction of the room he felt gave him the best chance of getting over the perimeter wall.

However, Kyle obviously sensed what Lom was planning and just as the padawan reached the entrance to the room he was backing towards he suddenly raised his lightsaber and broke into a charge. Reacting quickly, Lom opened the door and dived through before closing it behind him. Then he held the tip of his lightsaber to the control panel and there was a flash accompanied by a shower of sparks as the control mechanism exploded. Turning around he ran towards the window in the far wall. Through this he could see the perimeter wall rising up to just two or three metres above the level of the window itself. Lom knew that he would have to climb out of the window and pull himself up onto the roof to be in with the best chance of making it to the wall and so he shut off his lightsaber and hooked it back onto his belt before he attempted to open the window. Obviously the window had not been opened in some time and even applying a significant amount of force meant that it opened only a few centimetres, not enough for Lom to squeeze through.

Then there was a pounding on the door as Kyle reached the outside and attempted to open it and Lom looked at the door nervously, just in time to see another flash from the control mechanism as Kyle destroyed the outside panel as well with his own lightsaber. But rather than the control mechanism, Kyle had aligned his blade so that it also destroyed the magnet that held the door shut. With this gone all that was stopping it from opening was the resistance of the motor shaft itself and by channelling the Force into a burst of telekinesis, Kyle sent the door slamming back into the slot in the wall designed to take it.

Lom gasped as his master stepped into the room. Now he knew that there was no chance of evading Kyle, he could only hope that he could last long enough in a fight for him to make a mistake that Lom could exploit. Drawing his lightsaber again, Lom ignited it as he charged and swung the weapon towards Kyle who responded by effortlessly parrying the strike.

"Brave boy." Kyle said as they stood with their blades locked together, "Or perhaps just foolish. You can't win."

"Perhaps not. But I can try." Lom replied and he pulled back his blade and struck again. But once more the blow was easily blocked by Kyle.

"There is no try!" Kyle yelled, "Only do or do not." and then he suddenly use his lightsaber to push Lom's aside before head butting the sullustan, "And you obviously did not." he added as Lom staggered backwards, dazed by the blow.

It took Lom just a few seconds to recover his wits and he was just in time to be able dodge a swing from Kyle's lightsaber that would have cut him in half if he had stayed where he was. Bringing his lightsaber up horizontally, Lom was barely able to parry a second swipe that Kyle brought down at him. Lom then tried to step around Kyle, hoping that he could make it back to the doorway but Kyle brought his elbow around and struck Lom in the side of his face hard enough that sullustan's vision blurred briefly. Kyle then swung his lightsaber one handed, using it push Lom's own weapon out of the way long enough for him to deliver a blow with his fist to Lom's side and there was a 'Crack!' of breaking bone that made the sullustan cry out.

Pain.

Kyle stepped back to see what would happen next, if as he hoped Lom collapsed then the jedi would be in the perfect position to deliver the final killing blow. But Lom kept his footing, using the Force to help numb the pain of the broken rib. Kyle was not done yet though and as he swung his lightsaber at Lom again he also stepped forwards and hooked his foot around the sullustan's leg. Then as Lom raised his lightsaber to parry Kyle's, the older jedi stepped back and dragged Lom's leg out from under him. Kyle could not stay close as Lom fell though, there was too much risk that he would be able to get in a lucky strike with his lightsaber while he was below Kyle's. But as soon as Lom hit the floor Kyle lunged forwards again, hoping to deliver the final blow only for Lom to roll out of the way and jump back to his feet, gasping as he suddenly felt the pain from his rib once more.

Hoping to avoid being kept permanently on the defensive, Lom struck but his attack was poorly timed and executed and Kyle was not only able to step out of the way to avoid it but as Lom moved past him he delivered a kick to the side of his knee that sent the sullustan tumbling back to the floor in a heap and his lightsaber rolling from his hand. Lom reached out to try and retrieve the weapon but Kyle moved quicker and he unleashed a powerful telekinetic blast that hurled the weapon as well as several pieces of broken furniture across the room as well as sending Lom sliding across the floor until he slammed into the wall.

By chance his lightsaber bounced off the wall close by and Lom was able to reach out and grab hold of it before it got too far away. But Kyle had seen what was happening and charged forwards to bring his foot down on the weapon just as Lom took hold of it and Kyle crushed Lom's hand under his foot, provoking another cry of pain.

Then Lom did something that Kyle did not expect, however. Rather than try and free his injured hand he reached out with the other and grabbed hold of the leg Kyle still had on the floor by the ankle and pulled as hard as he could. With his other foot on top of Lom's hand and the cylindrical lightsaber, Kyle was suddenly left without a firm footing and now it was his turn to collapse and drop his lightsaber as Lom was able to free his trapped hand. However, the hand in which he normally held his lightsaber was no longer able to maintain a firm grip, or any grip at all for that matter and so Lom had to swap the weapon to his other hand before activating it. Part of his training had included lightsaber fighting using his off hand, but as with the vast majority of beings Lom was still better with his main one. To counter this disadvantage Lom tried to act before Kyle could recover from his own fall and retrieve his lightsaber. Lom leapt forwards and swung his lightsaber but Kyle saw the attack coming. Rather than attempt to evade it though, he used the Force to drag Lom towards him so that he was able to grab hold of Lom's arm before the lightsaber could make contact with him. Then while he held Lom's lightsaber in place Kyle delivered two rapid punches to Lom's face that resulted in blood spraying from the sullustan's mouth onto Kyle.

But Kyle did not intend to simply batter Lom to death, that would take far too long and using Force lightning from such close range would risk a portion of it flowing back onto Kyle himself. So instead Kyle turned his attention to the hand in which Lom was now holding his lightsaber and with his free hand he struck at Lom's elbow, pushing it the wrong way until Lom screamed as it broke and he dropped his lightsaber again. Then Kyle brought his leg up under Lom and used his foot to flip him through the air over Kyle's head before letting him come crashing back down to the floor.

Kyle jumped back to his feet and summoned his lightsaber back him, igniting it as soon as it was in his hand. Then he advanced slowly towards Lom. The sullustan was gasping for breath and there was blood starting to spread out on the floor under him. This combined with the sound of his breathing suggested to Kyle that one of Lom's lungs had collapsed, presumably as a result of the broken rib rupturing his chest. Kyle stood beside his padawan and looked down at him, smiling.

"All you had to do was remember which of us was the master and which was the apprentice." Kyle said, "You could have learned so much."

Lom's mouth moved but he was unable to form any words in reply and Kyle turned his lightsaber upside down before he plunged it down through the sullustan's heart, killing him instantly.

There is no going back now. You are ours.

"Ours?" Kyle said, confused, "What do you mean?"

Ah foolish jedi, the Dark Side is no-one's slave. You serve it.

"No. No, I am too strong to fall."

The corpse at your feet would suggest otherwise Kyle Jenner. Now the Jedi Order will hunt you down and kill you. Your only hope is become what I know you can be. Find the library of The Scholar and use its contents to found a new Sith Empire with yourself at its head. The only other choice is oblivion.

"No, you promised that—"

I lied. I manipulated you and you allowed yourself to be led so easily to the Dark Side. What happens next is up to you Kyle Jenner, I have told you all that I needed to. From this point on you are on your own. Live or die, do or do not, it will be up to you.

Kyle took the Sith medallion in his hand and glared at it.

"No. No, you can't just abandon me now. There must be some way out of this." he said but the Force was silent. Kyle could still sense the Force flowing through the medallion just as it had the first time he had held it but now the voice that had guided him, falsely as it now appeared was absent.

Then he looked down at the body of his padawan and Kyle knew that there really was no coming back from what he had just done. Hargood Nollar had slaughtered dozens when he fell to the Dark Side whereas Lom Des was just one individual. But Hargood had killed followers of the Sith, not a fellow jedi. Let alone the padawan entrusted to him. Sooner or later the Jedi Order would discover what had happened here and they would send someone to deal with him. Unlike in Hargood's case, Master Karas was unlikely to simply imprison him either. Just as the voice had said the jedi who came to deal with Kyle would be his executioner. Even if he defeated this jedi another would be sent until finally one was strong enough to defeat him. Unless he did as the voice had said.

With the resources of the Sith storehouse, wherever it may be hidden, Kyle could make himself invincible and even find new recruits to train to serve him. A new Sith Empire would rise and he would be its Emperor. But the reaction of the Jedi Order remained an issue. If they were actively hunting Kyle then it would make matters far worse for him.

On the other hand, he thought, if they believed him to be dead as well then perhaps their efforts would be distracted.

Looking around he spotted Lom's lightsaber where it had ended up and then he looked at Lom's body again. Any reasonably competent forensic scientist would be able to determine the cause of Lom's death as being from a lightsaber wound and that pointed directly to Kyle. But if Lom's weapon was missing then it could instead be attributed to him having being killed with his own lightsaber. Deactivating his own weapon, Kyle summoned Lom's lightsaber to his grasp as well before turning around and hurrying out of the house. He leapt from the balcony down into the courtyard and rushed for the gate, opening it with a wave of his hand. Without access to any other transport thanks to his speeder bike being at his other home in the Green Zone Kyle was forced to travel on foot for the initial part of his journey.

That lasted only until he spotted a speeder truck with a single being loading boxes into it and Kyle ran towards him.

"I need your vehicle." he said and the man loading it looked at him and frowned.

"Like hell." he replied but Kyle had no time to waste and he extended a hand towards the man's throat.

Immediately he dropped to his knees, choking and Kyle leapt into the driver's seat and set off towards the Green Zone. But Kyle did not take the most direct route available to him. Instead he took a slight detour that took him through a neighbourhood that Republic intelligence reports had indicated was a hotbed of support for insurgents and as he drove through this he tossed Lom's lightsaber out of the window. Who found the weapon did not matter to Kyle. If it was discovered by the authorities on one of their extremely rare visits to this neighbourhood then they would assume that it had been dropped by an insurgent. On the other hand if as seemed most likely it was one of the locals that found it then they would likely pass it on to an insurgent group and it would be only a matter of time before they attempted to make use of it and the blame for Lom's death would fall on them.

With the lightsaber disposed of, Kyle now turned towards the Green Zone. As he drew closer he entered an area of the city where he knew that there was coverage for a PTP network, something lacking at the building he had briefly called home and he took out his PTP link and activated it.

"X-three-DO come in." he signalled.

"On line master." the droid responded.

"Where are you?" Kyle asked.

"I am located at your residence in the Green Zone master."

"Good. I'm on my way there now." Kyle said, "I need you to double check that both fighters are ready for launch and then cause as much damage as possible to the interior of the house as possible without attracting attention from the Republic troops in the Green Zone. Do you understand?"

"Affirmative master."

"Good. Continue with your instructions." Kyle said before shutting off his PTP link again. Satisfied that the droid would be obeying his instructions to the letter he focused on reaching the Green Zone as rapidly as possible. He knew that there were Republic troops on guard at every access point but thanks to his being in

the speeder truck slipping past them was a simple matter of using the Force to distract them, "You don't need to see my identification." he told the guard that challenged him, "Allow me to go about my business."
"You can go about your business." the sentry responded, "Move along. Move along."
Kyle drove off, taking care not to attract any attention until the point where he simply abandoned the speeder truck at the side of the road and continued to his home on foot.
Entering the building he saw that the assassin droid had carried out its instructions perfectly. Furniture had been upturned and broken and the contents of drawers and cupboards scattered across the floor.
"Are the fighters ready?" he asked as X-3DO appeared.
"Affirmative. Space vessels were already fuelled and required no further attention."
"Good. I'll take one, you follow me."
"Affirmative." the droid responded, turning its head to watch Kyle as he walked past towards the hangar.

"Colonel I think you should see this." one of the technicians in the Republic command centre called out and Colonel Jeck walked over to see what the woman wanted.
"Yes? What is it specialist?" he asked.
"Sir I have an unauthorised launch on my sensors. The transponder indicates that it is Jedi Jenner's starfighter but he isn't answering my signals."
"Let me try." Colonel Jeck said, connecting his headset to the communication port built into the sensor panel, "Jedi Jenner what are you doing?" and when there was no reply he added, "Kyle do you read me? It's Colonel Jeck."
"Sir I've got a second unauthorised launch." the technician said suddenly, "Looks like another starsaber-class vessel."
"Lom's ship." Colonel Jeck said, "What the hell are they playing at?"
"I don't know sir, but they look to be in a hurry. They're accelerating quickly. Too quickly in fact." and then there was a sudden flare on the sensor readout, followed by a second.
"Stang!" Colonel Jeck exclaimed, "Did they both just trigger their ion drives in the atmosphere?"
"It looks that way sir. I've lost them, they've both gone out of range."
Colonel Jeck frowned.
"Let me know when they get back." he said, "I don't give a damn who they are, firing an ion drive over the city is downright reckless and I intend to get some answers about why they're doing it."

Satisfied that he was now out of range of the Republic's sensors on Tepillos, Kyle paused to consider his next step as both his own fighter and the one being flown by the assassin droid hurtled towards the outer reaches of the system. There was a gas giant there and Kyle knew that he could hide for some time in its subsystem of moons and rings. But hiding was only a temporary solution and Kyle now needed to find a way to travel the sector in anonymity, something that was impossible if he was piloting a starsaber-class starfighter. If it was seen then it would not take long for people to realise who he was. On the other hand a starfighter could potentially prove useful, so destroying both ships seemed like a waste.
"X-three-DO respond." he signalled to the second fighter that was still following behind him, matching his course with machine precision.
"On line." the droid responded.
"X-three-DO we are approaching a gas giant." Kyle said, "Your orders are to conceal your vessel among the rings and enter a power saving mode until I return. If you are at risk of discovery by any other vessel that does not positively identify itself as being piloted by me you are to destroy it. Do you understand?"
"Affirmative master." the droid replied and Kyle turned his attention to his nav computer. There were few vessels in the Tepillos system so he knew that he would have to look elsewhere for a suitable ship. The obvious place to obtain one would be the Crassis system where there were thousands of ships operating. But that included a large number of military and law enforcement vessels that Kyle did not want to risk encountering. On the other hand there were numerous ships in the Delvad system but a much smaller military presence and so Kyle programmed a jump that would take him there.
With a flash his fighter vanished into hyperspace, watched from the second fighter by X-3DO and the droid reacted by simply continuing to fly towards the gas giant ahead exactly as Kyle had ordered it to.

It was an eight hour flight to Delvad from Tepillos in Kyle's fighter. Normally on such a journey he would meditate while the ship's autopilot did all of the flying. But on this occasion achieving the concentration necessary for meditation escaped him and it was a relief when at long last the blurred lights of hyperspace gave way to the stars of realspace.

Kyle immediately turned to his sensor display and started checking the transponders of the other ships in range. In orbit around the ocean world there were several large transports that were used to bring goods that could not be manufactured on Delvad itself and that would leave with their holds filled with preserved seafood. These ships were too large for Kyle's purposes. They needed crews of at least a dozen to keep

them running and there were only a handful of starports that could handle them. On the other hand most of the smaller ships were too upmarket, meaning that they were easily identifiable.

But then he saw a single ship just as it was entering the atmosphere of Delvad that looked to be just what he needed. A vaya-class scout ship, this was a vessel that he could operate alone and was common enough that it would blend in wherever he went. The transponder identified the ship as the *Pride of Grek* and Kyle smiled as he turned his fighter to follow it.

"I have you now." he muttered.

Kyle's starfighter was much faster than the scout ship and he caught up with it low enough in the atmosphere that the sky was bright blue and the air was breathable. This second point was important to Kyle as lacking a vacc suit he needed to be able to reach the scout ship without risking suffocation.

He drew level with the *Pride of Grek* before ascending to a slightly higher altitude but matching his course and speed with it exactly. The pilot of the scout ship had obviously seen him and was sufficiently concerned about his close proximity that he was yelling abuse at Kyle over a communication channel. But Kyle ignored this and instead reached for the release for his safety harness and lifted his other hand up to the cockpit canopy. With the ship in flight the control to release the canopy would not normally function, but by unleashing a powerful telekinetic blast through the Force Kyle ripped it free and he felt the outside air rushing into the cockpit. Then he suddenly leapt up into the air, allowing his fighter to simply plummet down towards the ocean below.

As he fell Kyle reached out through the Force and guided his fall towards the upper surface of the *Pride of Grek's* hull and landed beside an upper hatch. Activating his lightsaber, Kyle sliced open the hatch and jumped down into the ship, surprising two crewmen who had come to see what had caused the sound Kyle had made when he landed. Before either of them could react Kyle struck, slashing at both with his lightsaber and leaving their bodies where they fell he headed towards the front of the ship.

The screams of the two crewmen alerted the others to a problem and when Kyle stepped into a lounge area he found three more crew members in the process of arming themselves. Only one had a ranged weapon, a shotgun that Kyle knew would be impossible to parry with his lightsaber and so he unleashed a blast of Force lightning at this man before he could make use of the weapon. On the other hand the other two had simply armed themselves with heavy tools that they intended to use as clubs and without a word Kyle sliced through one of these improvised weapons and kept the blade of his lightsaber moving until it impaled the man behind it through his throat.

Fear.

Panic.

Kyle turned towards the third crew member and was just in time to see him vanishing through a hatch. A grin appeared on Kyle's face. On a ship the size of a vaya-class scout there was only so much room in which to flee and when that ran out there would be no escape for the man

"You can run all you like." Kyle said, "But you can't hide forever. Just come out and I'll make this quick for you."

The fleeing crew member headed for the cockpit and Kyle followed. As he approached the hatchway leading to the cockpit he saw the crew member that had fled through it staring back at him and then a second stepped into view. This one held a pulse wave blaster that he fired at Kyle, but with a flick of his wrist the former jedi blocked the shot with one hand while the other reached for the plasma carbine holstered under his shoulder and he returned fire. The high powered energy blast struck the armed crew member in his chest and he collapsed as the air in the corridor filled with the smell of burned flesh. Kyle then dropped his carbine and reached out towards the only crew member now in sight and through the Force he applied pressure to his throat and crushed it from within.

"Emergency! Emergency!" a voice then cried out from the cockpit and Kyle broke into a run. As he reached the hatchway to the cockpit he saw one final crew member strapped into the pilot's seat desperately trying to send for help.

"And now..." Kyle said to him, "You will die." and he thrust his lightsaber through the back of the pilot's seat until it erupted out of his chest.

No longer controlled, the ship lurched and started to descend towards the ocean. Kyle quickly sat down in the co-pilot's seat and took hold of the control column in front of him, pulling back on it to bring the scout ship's nose up just in time to prevent it from crashing into the water.

"*Pride of Grek?*" he said to himself as he looked around at the dead crew members, "Well I don't know who or what Grek is or was. From now on you are the *Destiny's Shadow.*"

EPILOGUE.

“And that Master Karas was the last time we saw them on our scopes.” the hologram of Colonel Jeck said to Jedi Master Karas.

“And you’ve not had any news of either Kyle Jenner or Lom Des since then?” Master Karas asked.

“No sir. They haven’t contacted any Republic official and no-one has come forward to say that they have seen them. It’s as if they’ve just vanished and I’m starting to be concerned.”

“Understandable colonel.” Master Karas said, “But have faith. Jedi Jenner is very resourceful and I am sure that we will see him safe and sound again.”

“But until then-” Colonel Jeck began before Master Karas interrupted.

“In the meantime I will inform the Jedi Council of what you have told me. If there is even the remotest chance that something has happened to either Jedi Jenner or Padawan Des then they will send someone to discover what.”