

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



II-III: FRONTIER

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ELEVEN FAMILIES.
TWELVE GENERATIONS.
ONE EVIL.

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THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO A SMALL GROUP OF INTREPID EXPLORERS SURVEYED THE NARTHIS SECTOR AND SOON IT BECAME ANOTHER PART OF THE GALACTIC REPUBLIC. THE DESCENDANTS OF MOST OF THESE EXPLORERS STILL RESIDE IN THE SECTOR, WHERE THEY HAVE BECOME BOTH FAMOUS AND WEALTHY. BUT DID THE ORIGINAL EXPLORERS DIVULGE EVERYTHING THEY DISCOVERED, OR HAVE THEIR FAMILIES BEEN HIDING SOME DARK SECRET EVER SINCE? NOW A JEDI KNIGHT HAS VANISHED WITHOUT TRACE AND THE INVESTIGATION WILL BRING ANOTHER FAMILY TO THE SECTOR. FROM NOW ON NOTHING WILL BE THE SAME...

FRONTIER

WHEN AN EXPLORATION SHIP TURNS UP EMPTY EXCEPT FOR A SINGLE CORPSE AT THE CONTROLS JEDI KNIGHT GAL UDRA AND HIS PADAWAN LARA ARE DRAWN INTO THE INVESTIGATION. BUT WHAT COULD POSSIBLY CAUSE A GROUP OF MANDALORIAN MERCHANTS TO TAKE AN INTEREST IN A REMOTE OUTPOST...?

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1 .

Jedi Padawan Lara Udra picked her way through the trash that littered the corridors of the level of Aurek Station where her apartment was located. She had just spent three weeks providing security for the sector's senator aboard a luxury liner and her homecoming was a massive reality check as she returned to the much lower quality accommodation she shared with her instructor and older brother Cal. As well as a holdall over one shoulder that contained her luggage Lara clutched a second bag containing a take out meal and after opening the front door to the apartment she called out to let Cal know that she was back and had brought food.

"Cal!" she yelled, hearing the sound of running water coming from the bathroom and guessing that he was taking a shower, "I'm home. I've brought food. It's herglic from that place on level nine." She then dropped the holdall by the door to her room and carried the food to the kitchen area.

Cal emerged from his own bedroom wearing a robe and approached her.

"Great." He said, rubbing his hands together, "I hope you brought a lot, I've really worked up an appetite."

"Oh Cal you've left the water running." Lara said.

"What?"

"The shower, I can hear it."

The sound of running water suddenly stopped.

"Very clever." Lara said, "Been practicing your telekinesis? How did you do it without line of sight?"

"I didn't." Cal replied and at that moment the door to the bathroom slid open and a young woman with dark hair emerged with a towel wrapped around her.

Lara's eyes widened as she recognised Gayal Karn, the somewhat wayward daughter of one of the sector's richest families. The last time the pair had met Gayal had abandoned Lara in a hot tub, stolen all of her clothes and set her up for a burglary charge.

"What the kriff is she doing here Cal?" Lara demanded.

"Well she needed a place to stay when she couldn't get on the liner you were on." Cal explained.

"That was three weeks ago." Lara replied.

"I didn't have my ID for a flight." Gayal said then she added, "Ooh is that herglic?" and peered into the bag of food.

"Get off. That's mine. I paid for it." Lara said, snatching the bag away. Then she looked at her brother, "So why is she still here?" she said then after a brief pause she added, "Hang on, she didn't stay in my room did she?" and Lara rushed towards her own room, "If she's touched my stuff I'll kill her."

"She didn't stay in your room Lara." Cal called out, "She stayed in mine."

Lara froze and then turned around to look her brother up and down.

"Oh you two didn't-" she began, but halted when Cal just wrapped an arm around Gayal and smiled at her.

"We'd be grateful if you didn't say anything." He said, "Gayal doesn't think her family would approve."

"Well I don't approve either." Lara said, "After what she did to me."

"Look that's all in the past now Lara." Cal said, "Gayal's promised she won't do anything like that to you again. Haven't you?"

Gayal nodded.

"A fresh start." She said.

Lara frowned.

"Fine." She said, "But you can at least bring my other bag in from the corridor before it gets stolen."

"Certainly." Gayal said, "Anything to help." And she walked towards the front door.

Deception.

Cal sensed it suddenly and he tried to figure out what Gayal could possibly be planning. She had promised to behave herself as far as his sister was concerned and the last thing Cal needed was for her to get up to more of her tricks. It was just as the door opened and Gayal stepped into the corridor that Cal noticed the grin on Lara's face and he realised that it was not Gayal's feelings he had sensed.

"Lara no!" he yelled, but it was too late. His sister raised a hand towards Gayal and using the Force she called the towel towards her. Then, even before the towel arrived in her grasp she flexed a finger and triggered the door controls, causing it to drop shut and lock.

From the corridor there was a scream and the sound of banging on the door.

"Let me in!"

"Give me twenty minutes and I'll say we're even Cal." Lara said.

Cal just removed his robe to reveal that underneath he was in his underwear and went to the door himself. As soon as he opened it Gayal leapt back inside and he wrapped the robe around her.

"So are we all even now then?" Cal asked sternly, looking from one of the young women to the other.

Gayal and Lara just stared at one another.

"Fine." Gayal said, "We're even."

"We're even." Lara said when Cal then stared at her.

"Good." Cal said, "Now dish out the food while I go and get dressed." And he vanished into his room.

Gayal and Lara continued to stare at one another as Gayal walked up to Lara and helped her unpack the food.

"We are so not even." Gayal hissed.

"Not even close." Lara replied.

"That's my seat." Lara said as she stepped into the cockpit of the *Bright Hope*, the vessel assigned to her and Cal by the Jedi Order.

"I was here first." Gayal replied from the co-pilot's seat.

"Call!" Lara called out, "You're girlfriend's in my seat."

"Then just sit in another. It doesn't matter where you sit, we're just running her back to Crassis Major before her parents get back." Cal replied from further back in the ship and Gayal grinned.

Lara was about to sit in one of the two seats located behind the front two when an idea struck her and she smiled. Cal had said it did not matter where she sat so Lara sat down in the pilot's seat where Cal normally sat and she began to ready the ship for flight.

"That's my seat." Cal said when he then entered the cockpit and saw where his sister was sat.

"You said it didn't matter." Lara told him without looking up, "Besides I've got the ship ready to go."

Cal frowned.

"Yes you have." He said, "Well if it makes things easier I suppose I can sit back here for this trip." And he sat in one of the rear seats, "Now that I've nothing to do I can enjoy the view." He added. Then Gayal got up and moved to the other rear seat and Lara winced as she heard them kiss.

"I'm going to have that in my ears the whole trip aren't I?" she said as she started the engines.

Gayal pulled back.

"Lara's right." She said and both Cal and Lara stared at her, "Perhaps we should leave your sister to fly the ship while we go to your cabin."

Lara just shook her head.

"Oh just go." She said before Cal and Gayal left the cockpit together.

The flight to the Crassis system was just under an hour at the *Bright Hope's* top speed and when Lara brought the ship out of hyperspace the blue and green orb that was Crassis Major, capital world of the Narthis Sector hung in space ahead. Lara adjusted the *Bright Hope's* course to take it towards one of the many surface beacons that indicated landing sites. She picked a commercial port located close to the Karn estate rather than the family's private facility, guessing that Cal would not want Gayal to be seen getting off the Jedi ship. Though she had no like for his new girlfriend, Lara had no wish to deliberately upset him.

She had just completed the course adjustment when an alarm sounded throughout the ship. The alert indicated an incoming vessel that was coming dangerously close. A flash of light through the canopy indicated a ship dropping out of hyperspace well outside of the normal jump zones.

"Stang!" Lara exclaimed as she pulled on the control column as hard as she could, pushing the *Bright Hope* into a tight turn that the artificial gravity could not keep up with. Narrowly avoiding the newly arrived ship, Lara banked the *Bright Hope* again to drop in behind it. She could make out the boxy silhouette, but beyond that the ship was unidentifiable and was continuing to head towards Crassis Major at high speed.

Followed by Gayal, Cal suddenly burst into the cockpit.

"What the hell are you doing?" he yelled.

"Saving us all." Lara replied, "Look." And she pointed to the ship that was getting steadily smaller ahead of them.

"That's a survey ship." Cal commented as he sat down in the co-pilot's seat and turned his attention to the sensor display. The ship was indicated there, though there was no identity being broadcast.

"Well whatever it is they're sure in a hurry to reach the planet." Gayal commented.

"They won't make it that far flying like that." Cal said, "The defence forces will launch an intercept."

Sure enough the sensor display showed a flight of smaller vessels approaching the survey ship from a low orbital altitude.

"Look's like General Drud's people are on the ball today." Lara said.

"Nothing for us to do then." Cal said, "We'll leave the intercept to the locals and file a near miss report when we're on the ground. Where are we heading by the way?"

"Here." Lara replied and she tapped the navigational display to show their destination.

"Ah, close to the Karn estate but not the private pad. Very good." Cal replied.

"Yeah, well I want her off our ship as quickly as possible brother dear. She's your friend, not mine."

Cal sighed and shrugged as he looked round at Gayal.

Cal saw Gayal off in a taxi at the starport gate, hoping that she really would go straight home and then headed for the administration building where Lara had headed to report the near miss with the survey ship. When he got there he found her speaking not only with a Bureau Of Ships and Services but also two members of the local police.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he walked up behind Lara.

"They had to disable that survey ship's engines." Lara replied, "Then they tractorized it down here."

"So why are they here with you?" Cal then asked his sister, indicating the two police officers and Lara handed him a datapad.

"This was the only person they found onboard Cal." She said.

Cal took the datapad and looked at the image. It was immediately obvious that it was of a dead body, either human or one of the more baseline near-human species.

"We believe he was dead long before the ship dropped out of hyperspace." One of the police officers said, "It flew the rest of the way on autopilot."

"Cal this guy was shot." Lara said, "Wherever the ship came from is out of Crassis Major's jurisdiction so they brought it to us since we happened to be here. Well I was here. You were off somewhere wasting time with your girlfriend."

"I take it the body's with the coroner?" Cal asked the police officer.

"It's on its way." He replied, "We expect a report by tomorrow morning."

Cal looked up at the wall mounted time display, aware of the time difference between here and Aurek Station. It read mid afternoon. Then he looked at the BoSS agent.

"So how about a look at this ship then?" he asked.

"Certainly." The agent replied, "Come this way."

Cal and Lara were led to a hangar surrounded by and separated from the main area of the starport by a tall fence tipped with spikes. Inside the hangar sat the survey ship, its engines now shot away and much of the hull covered in the darkened carbon scoring from heavy duty blaster fire that had presumably been inflicted by the defence force ships.

"Unfortunately there was significant systems damage." The BoSS agent told the two jedi, "I've not been able to access the main computer myself as I've not had time to call in a specialist."

Cal and Lara glanced at one another.

"I think we can take care of that." Cal said, "Assuming we can get the ship transported back to Aurek Station."

"I've no problem with that." The agent replied, "Do you want to take a look inside?"

Lara nodded and the agent then led the two jedi into the survey ship.

Unlike the *Bright Hope* the interior of the ship was cramped, with every available bit of space not needed for the ship's systems used for extra storage lockers that could hold a few more rations bars, medical supplies or tools. A survey team could expect to spend many months beyond the borders of the Republic and thus beyond help if anything went wrong. Therefore, it made good sense to pack the maximum amount and variety of supplies.

"Looks like someone was hurt." Lara commented when they walked past a locker that had been left open, the medical supplies it had held now scattered across the deck and the packages torn open.

"That's rather a lot for just one guy." Cal said and he looked at the BoSS agent, "You're certain there's no-one else aboard?"

"Positive." He replied, "A team from the defence force searched every room. Don't worry; they didn't disturb anything they didn't have to. All the evidence has been preserved."

"Yes but evidence of what?" Lara asked, stepping over the medical supplies littered across the deck.

"That way." The BoSS agent answered, pointing down a corridor that led towards the front of the ship. He then let Cal and Lara go on ahead of him until they reached a compartment that was where the crew would have spent much of their time off duty. In here it was not just supplies that were scattered about but also the furniture that had been smashed apart and there was a trail of blood leading from the centre of the compartment through another doorway and it was apparent by its dark green colour that it was not from a human.

“So there was someone else aboard at some point.” Lara commented.

“A ship like this typically carries a crew of six.” The BoSS agent told her, “Plus there could be up to another ten passengers for a total of sixteen.”

“I went to school. I can add.” Lara said.

“So where does this trail lead?” Cal asked out loud as he followed the green smear across the deck and with Lara close behind him he stepped through the doorway where the blood was leading. The trail led along the corridor beyond as far as a ladder that led up to the next deck where it stopped.

“So whoever it was managed to drag themselves up there?” Lara said as she looked up, “That’s impressive for someone who was obviously bleeding this badly.”

“Actually the trail just stops here.” The BoSS agent said from behind her, “One way or another whoever it was that was hurt stopped bleeding on the floor right there.”

“Okay we’ve seen enough.” Cal announced.

“Enough?” Lara asked, “Cal we’ve only been in here a couple of minutes. We haven’t even seen where they found the body.” Then she turned to the BoSS agent, “Where did you find it by the way?”

“Cockpit.” He replied, “Strapped into the pilot’s seat.”

“Well I want this ship studied properly by experts and that means getting it back to Aurek Station.”

2.

It took the only a few hours to arrange for a ship to transport the survey ship to Aurek Station and when the Udras arrived there they found a copy of the coroner's report waiting for them in their communication system.

Subject is a human male, aged between forty and fifty years. Cause of death was a slugthrower wound to the back of the head, the bullet from which was still lodged within the skull. Powder burns on the skin suggest this shot was from close range and was caused by a conventional firearm rather than a magnetic accelerator. However, significant tissue damage had also been inflicted to the chest cavity, apparently from the displacement effects of a pulse-wave weapon that was causing internal bleeding within the lungs themselves and traces of blood were found in the throat, mouth and on the skin around the mouth where it had likely been coughed up. Had he not been finished off with the shot to the head the subject would likely have perished by drowning in his own blood. There were no defensive injuries to the hands or arms to indicate a physical struggle. It is unlikely that the pulse-wave wound could have been self-inflicted and impossible for the bullet wound to be self-inflicted. Therefore, in my professional opinion this is a case of homicide.

"So no surprises there then." Lara said, "Somebody murdered him."

"Not necessarily." Cal replied, "Homicide includes murder, but we don't know the circumstances that led up to his death yet. Though I admit that the bullet to the back of the head makes self-defence unlikely. Especially since he was already dying and probably knew it. We'll know more when we find out who he was, but for that we need to know more about the ship. It should be in the hangar by now."

Sure enough the survey ship had been unloaded from the bulk transport outside Aurek Station and then moved into a secure hangar for study. When Cal and Lara arrived they discovered that there were already numerous station personnel present. Unsurprisingly Agent Jule Raser of the Sector Rangers and Captain De Kuun of the Republic Navy were present but in addition Administrator Varr'key, Aurek Station's commanding officer was also with the others.

"We weren't expecting you." Lara said to the bothan.

"I asked him here." Captain De Kuun said, the duros not taking his eyes off the ship as several navy personnel walked around it and took notes.

"I served aboard ships such as this." he replied, "The captain thought you may find my expertise useful."

"Of course." Cal said, "Thank you for your help administrator."

At that moment the group was approached by one of the navy personnel who had been studying the survey vessel's exterior. He walked up to Captain De Kuun and saluted his superior.

"Report." The duros officer said to him.

"Sir we've been able to access an external data port."

So you've got access to the computer?" Lara asked, "But the people on Crassis Major didn't-"

"I'm sorry miss," the naval technician interrupted, "but the port doesn't link to the main computer at all. It's a secondary access port used in refuelling only it identifies the ship to the fuelling depot without putting its systems at risk."

"Did you just say it identifies the ship?" Cal asked.

"That's what it sounded like." Jule said, smiling.

"That's right sir, ma'am." The technician said, "We've been able to pull the transponder code from it."

"Run it through our database." Captain De Kuun ordered, "See if it was registered in this sector."

The technician scratched his head briefly.

"Actually sir I already know the answer to that." He said, "I was stationed at Vayal and this is one of the ships from there."

"Vayal?" Lara whispered into Cal's ear and he shrugged.

"Its an exploratory base." Administrator Varr'key said, overhearing the whisper, "Little more than a starport that serves as a base of operations for numerous ships of this type."

"Has anyone contacted the base recently?" Cal asked.

"I receive daily reports," Captain De Kuun replied, "and they have reported nothing out of the ordinary."

"Well clearly we need to go out there and take a look for ourselves." Cal said and he turned to Jule, "Can your people handle the examination of the ship?" he asked.

"Sure." She replied, "I can send the results on to you at Vayal."

"And I will alert the base to expect you Jedi Udra." Captain De Kuun added, "I'm sure they will have a record of where the ship was supposed to be heading. You can compare that to whatever Agent Raser's people get from the flight recorder."

The armoured figure glanced upwards when the communications screen activated, alerting him to an incoming message from Aurek Station.

"Go get Mott." He said to the second figure in the room. This one also wore armour that covered his entire body, but its shape and colour differed somewhat, "Tell him we've got a message incoming."

The other figure just grunted before getting up and leaving the room and when he returned he was in the company of a third armoured figure. This one reached up and removed his helmet, revealing the face of a middle-aged human male.

"What is it?" he asked the warrior at the communications console.

"A message from Aurek Station Mister Mott." He replied, "It seems that there's a Jedi vessel heading this way and we're to have all information regarding a certain survey ship available on their arrival. It's signed by Captain De Kuun himself."

"De Kuun?" Mott replied, "Well it seems that ship made it away safely after all and now the Duros has gotten the Jedi involved. Too bad for them he wasn't paying enough attention to his daily reports recently." Then he looked around to the warrior that had brought him the message to come here, "Go warn the others that Jedi are coming." He said, "Tell them we will have our revenge."

"So are you going to tell me?" Lara asked.

The *Bright Hope* was in hyperspace, making the trip from Aurek Station to Vayal that was expected to take more than half the day. Cal frowned, puzzled at the meaning of the question.

"I don't understand." He said.

"Gayal." Lara replied.

"Ah. That."

"Yes that. How come all of a sudden she's in our shower after spending the night with you it seems?"

"It just kind of happened. We were in a stressful situation, she kissed me, I kissed her and so on."

"But why her Cal? You know what she's like, even other members of those stuck up Founding Families think she's no good and coming from them that's saying something."

"Yes well I think there's a reason for her behaviour Lara."

"Such as?"

"She's Force sensitive."

Lara's eyes widened.

"You've got to be kidding me." She said.

"No." Cal replied, "I sensed something when we rescued her the first time we met. But I only had a small amount of dried blood to run an MC test on and it came out inconclusive. But this time I got to do a more thorough examination."

"Oh I think I know how thoroughly you've examined her." Lara interrupted, but Cal ignored the jibe and went on.

"Well it came back positive. Not very high mind you, we're both got counts far bigger. But it was enough to class her as Force sensitive. Now I think that the way the Founding Families act has gotten to her, corrupted her and is pushing her towards the Dark Side. I doubt she'll turn into some bloodthirsty monster, but she'll come to a bad end. I was hoping I might be able to help her out."

Lara folded her arms.

"And what about me Cal? Aren't I supposed to be your padawan? Or were you just planning to ship me off back to Coruscant?"

"Of course not. Gayal's hardly Jedi material, not yet at any rate. I just wanted to try and teach her some meditation that may help calm her down a bit."

"A stun dart would do that. A stun dart and a set of strong binders."

"Well if it's of any interest to you so far she's turned me down. But at least while she's with me I can keep her out of trouble."

Lara's expression softened.

"So my big brother the Jedi in white goes charging in to save the maiden only to get knocked back?" then she paused, "Alright then, I'll give her a chance. Providing she behaves herself. If she doesn't then I'm telling mom."

Cal frowned again.

"Besides," Lara went on, "I'm still the hottest woman you've ever made out with."

Cal expression changed to a smile.

"So far you're also the only one I've ever shared a bath with." He said and Lara shuddered.

"That was a long time ago." She said, "It doesn't count."

"I don't know. After seeing our last water bill I think we may have to start showering together."

Lara punched his arm.

The Vayal system was located on the edge of the Narthis Sector where it bordered a dense cluster of star systems. The relative proximity of the stars in this cluster made hyperspace navigation difficult and the base here was established with the primary aim of mapping the few safe routes between the competing gravity wells.

"Doesn't look like much." Lara commented when she first saw the dull brown world.

"It doesn't need to be." Cal replied, "From what Captain De Kuun said this place is just somewhere for explorers to stop over. Still, hopefully it will have a few good cantinas. After six months in uncharted space I would think most survey crews would be looking for a decent drink."

Lara noticed a sudden speck of light appear outside and she glanced at the sensors to see if they were registering anything.

"Cal what's that?" she asked, "It looks a bit like a satellite, but its' too low."

Cal checked for himself.

"Is low." He said, "In fact I think the reason we can see it is because it's entering the atmosphere. Give it another minute and it'll either bounce off or burn up."

The speck of light became a sudden flare as whatever the object had been was vaporised by the heat of an uncontrolled re-entry. However, given that the *Bright Hope* was currently heading in that direction and knowing that debris was often found in tight groups, Cal kept his eyes open for any more. As it happened he soon spotted something much larger drift over the horizon.

"What the hell is that?" he exclaimed as the wreck shot overhead, the *Bright Hope's* proximity alarm sounding briefly.

"Cal I think it was a fighter, an Aurek-wing. That's a Republic ship."

Cal banked the *Bright Hope* sharply; bringing the ship around to face the direction the wrecked starfighter had gone in.

"Something's wrong." He said, "You wouldn't just abandon a wrecked ship in orbit like that, it's a hazard to navigation."

"Well we almost hit it, that's for sure." Lara said.

Cal followed the wreck as it drifted around Vayal, remaining just outside the atmosphere and moving quickly enough that it did not get sucked down to be burnt up.

"This could get a bit choppy." He said, "I'm going to try and get us in underneath it."

Lara reacted by fastening her safety harness and then looked directly ahead, watching the wreck that Cal was chasing. Cal dropped the *Bright Hope's* nose and flew it under the wrecked fighter. At this altitude there was the faintest hint of atmosphere and the ship lurched and bounced from the sudden introduction of friction to its passage.

"Watch the shields." Cal said to Lara, "Make sure they're balanced to disperse the heat."

"On it." Lara replied, turning to the shield controls on the console in front of her.

Cal had to increase speed initially in order to catch up with the wreck and this in turn required that he lower the *Bright Hope's* nose more to prevent the ship from being flung off into space and potentially colliding with the wrecked fighter. This placed even more strain on the ship's structure and shields and a tortured groan was heard.

"Err Cal," Lara said as she looked around, "I don't think we should stay here too long."

"Almost done." Cal said as the wreck appeared directly above them through the canopy, "That's definitely an Aurek-wing. It must be one of the ships assigned to protect the base."

"So how did it end up like that?" Lara asked.

"There's carbon scoring." Cal replied, "Its been in a battle."

"But Captain De Kuun said-"

"I know. Nothing out of the ordinary. Somehow I don't think that the good captain knows exactly what's been going on out here. Now get ready, I'm taking us down."

Cal cut back on the power to the engines, reducing the amount of thrust dramatically. Already located at the delicate boundary between air and space, the *Bright Hope* began to descend more rapidly as Cal brought it in for a controlled entry into the atmosphere.

"Cal?" Lara said as the flames to the front of the ship as it entered the atmosphere subsided and she could once again see further than the tip of its nose, "Where are we going? The beacon's not this way."

"I know." Cal replied, " But I thought it may be an idea to set the ship down somewhere else and head for the base on foot. I've got a bad feeling about this and I'd rather we got the drop on anyone else around rather than them surprising us. By flying this way I can keep us out of the range of their sensors while we look for somewhere to land and conceal the ship."

A solitary figure watched as the *Bright Hope* entered Vayal's atmosphere, tracking it through a set of handheld magnifiers from the moment its fiery trail first became visible until it vanished over the horizon. During this time the figure had plenty of time to make out the name of the ship stencilled neatly on the side of the hull.

Kyle Jenner, former jedi knight smiled as he lowered the magnifiers.

"Hello Cal and Lara." he said to himself, "Welcome to Vayal and welcome to the party."

Then he cast the magnifiers down to the body of the armoured warrior he had just taken them from and set off in the direction of the Republic base.

3.

Kaylor Mott emerged from the prefabricated hangar where the haul was being kept to see several of his men preparing firing positions. Some were hacking small holes in the walls of other structures while others arranged moveable objects to construct hides. Mandalorians had a history of battling against members of the Jedi Order and they knew that being caught in the open was a quick way to get killed. This was going to be an ambush, short and deadly but successful.

"Sir!" a voice called out and Kaylor saw one of his men rushing towards him from their vessel, "Our employer requests that you make contact."

Kaylor frowned. He did not like the way that the individual who had hired his group for this mission kept on demanding more information, but the money was too good for him to risk an argument, especially since there had been the suggestion that there would be further jobs to come if the outcome of this one was favourable.

Without saying a word Kaylor headed for the ship that had been moved away from the primary landing strip to keep it out of sight when the Jedi vessel approached. Resembling a large flying wing the ship used by the Mandalorian band was a dedicated planetary assault ship that had escaped destruction at the hands of the Republic during the Sith War several years earlier. The Mandalorians had fought alongside the Sith during that conflict and many of them had died at the hands of the Jedi.

Kaylor and his men were eager for revenge.

Entering the ship Kaylor made his way to the cockpit and accepted the headset that was handed to him by the warrior sat in the pilot's seat and sat down next to him.

"Mister Mott?" The transmission was heavily distorted, but Kaylor just about recognised the voice of his employer.

"I'm here." he replied, "Now what more can I tell you?"

"You can tell me how soon you will have my merchandise."

"Soon. But there has been a complication. The Republic has dispatched a Jedi team here."

"Yes, I know. My spies have informed me that you let some of the Republic explorers escape."

"Only one." Kaylor replied to the criticism, "But he was critically injured, he couldn't possibly have-"

"He was dead on arrival in the Crassis system." Kaylor's employer told him, "But the ship itself was enough to get the Jedi involved in this. My regular agents would not have been so sloppy."

"Your regular agents wouldn't have dared take on this mission." Kaylor said, becoming annoyed with his employer's tone, "If the Republic even suspected what they do for you they would be wiped out in a matter of hours, you as well probably. My men give you what they cannot. Deniability."

"Just get me my merchandise Mister Mott. I don't care about Jedi." And then the channel went dead.

Kaylor pulled the headset from his head and tossed it onto the console.

"This deal is getting worse all the time." He said.

Both Cal and Lara kept low as they moved towards the perimeter of the base. They had worked their way around to the hilly terrain on the far side from the direction of their approach. All the while they had observed the base as best they could, taking note of the location and condition of each of the structures. But throughout they noticed that no matter from where they looked they saw no signs of a single being moving around between any of them.

"There's definitely something wrong here." Cal said, peering over the crest of the hill, "I see buildings and I see ships. There should be someone that needs to get from one to another."

"What about that?" Lara asked, pointing towards one of the larger structures. The multiple sets of massive doors suggested that this was a hangar for several of the survey ships.

"That? Its just a hangar." Cal replied, "I large one I admit. But I doubt that everyone's hiding inside it."

"No Cal, I mean the ship behind it."

Cal looked again and saw that Lara was right. Poking out from behind the hangar was the wing of a transport ship. Though only part of the ship was visible Cal immediately recognised the portion that was.

"That's a Krath assault ship." He said.

"Krath? But that's just another name for Sith isn't it?" Lara asked.

"Yes it is." Cal replied, unhooking his lightsaber from his belt, "Look at how it's positioned though. If we'd landed on the main pad over there then we'd never had spotted it."

"So it's a trap?"

Cal nodded.

"It's a trap." He repeated.

"So how do we handle it? That ship could carry dozens of soldiers. Cal, they could be sith." And Lara also drew her lightsaber.

"I doubt that they're sith." Cal said to reassure his sister, "But you're right about the numbers. But I'm willing to bet that they've set up an ambush designed around us landing on the main pad and gunning us down before we know that they're there."

Lara smiled.

"So if we sneak in behind them we can spring an ambush of our own." She said.

"Exactly." Cal said, "But we need to be careful. We don't know if any of the base personnel are still alive. I think we should wait until dark and sneak in for a look around before we start slicing the place up."

Kaylor was growing impatient. Outside the hangar the sun was just starting to set and so far there was no sign of the Jedi vessel. Of course, given the remote location of Vayal and the poorly charted routes to the system their ship could still be many hours away. However, one of the patrols he had dispatched purely as a precaution as soon as he had received word of the Jedi's approach had failed to return.

Looking around he took stock of the force arrayed in the hangar. The limited room aboard the assault ship had meant that his men had been able to bring only a handful of their basilisk war droid mounts. These bulky four-legged war droids were a hybrid of vehicle and droid and mounted formidable weaponry. Kaylor's plan was for them to act as a reserve force in the ambush, striking directly at the Jedi starship if necessary but they would also be capable of searching a large area more rapidly than a foot patrol.

"Tekk!" he yelled out and one of the other Mandalorian warriors present rushed up to him and snapped to attention. Though the warrior's all covering armour concealed his exact species he clearly was not human, the term 'Mandalorian' referred to the culture of its members rather than their origins, "Take two men and search for Krayl's unit. They have not reported in and I want to know why. If you encounter the Jedi do not engage them unless you have the advantage of surprise. Return here as soon as you discover anything."

"Down!" Cal hissed, diving to the ground and dragging Lara down with him as soon as he heard the sound of one of the sets of hangar doors opening.

"Ow, Cal. There's no need to push me." Lara replied, keeping her voice low as they both watched the opening doorway.

The sound of heavy mechanical footfalls echoed through the evening air as a trio of bulky droids each carrying an armoured rider came bounding out of the hangar and then leapt into the air, kept aloft by the repulsorlift engines that roared into life as they did so.

"Mandos!" Lara exclaimed, "What the kriff are they doing here?"

"Nice language from my baby sister there." Cal said as he tried to get a look through the hangar doorway before it closed once more, "But to answer your question I'd say that they were here to plunder and kill."

"The usual then?"

Cal nodded.

"Of course the question is why? They must have been here for well over a day now, so why haven't they just taken everything valuable and gone?"

"Yeah, why bother waiting for us to turn up just to ambush us? I know Mandalorians don't like Jedi much, but this makes no sense."

"I sense the hand of someone else at work." Cal said.

"And I sense you're going to state the obvious all night." Lara replied.

Cal ignored this and went on.

"Well at least we know what we're facing now. Let's go see if we can find out what they've done with the base personnel."

Kaylor had selected Tekk to lead the search party because he was one of the few Mandalorians in his force that had seen fit to acquire night vision equipment to add to his armour. Thus able to see perfectly well even in the fading light Tekk and his party soon located the missing patrol, six bodies left scattered on the far side of one of the taller hills where the landscape would have interfered with their communications equipment had they tried to warn the base when they came under attack. To ambush Mandalorians was something not easily achieved and Tekk decided that he would take no chances about it happening again.

"Remain here and circle." He said to the other two warriors, "I will go down and investigate. If those that did this attempt to ambush me also inform Mott before supporting me."

"Yes sir."

Tekk descended to ground level and leapt from his basilisk war droid.

“Remain on guard.” he told the machine as he strode towards the scattered bodies, confident that it would follow the order precisely. An advantage of the basilisk droids over conventional speeders was that there were quite capable of fighting independently from their riders.

The first body he came to had a single circular hole in his chest plate where something had punched through it, the flesh underneath blackened and charred. The latest blaster weapons could inflict such injuries Tekk knew, but he was more concerned that it was caused by something else so he moved onto the next body. This one had been nearly decapitated, another massive scorched wound evident on its neck. Once again it was quite possible that a blaster could have inflicted that injury and so he kept on looking. Though the first two bodies offered only hints, the third gave him the proof he was looking for.

This corpse had been cut in two, diagonally from shoulder to waist and the exposed flesh on each of the two halves had been cauterised by the weapon that inflicted the wound. Tekk knew that this was no blast injury, the wound would have been full of fragments of shrapnel if that were the case and also the line of the cut was far too straight. Only a lightsaber could inflict such an injury. This meant only one thing.

The Jedi were already here.

Tekk turned and ran back to his basilisk and as soon as he had remounted it he launched it into the air.

“Back to the base!” he yelled at the other two Mandalorians, “The Jedi are here. Mott has to know.”

4.

Cal and Lara entered the first building they came to through an unlocked side door. They made their way through its darkened corridors using their jedi senses to watch for any signs of mandalorians, keeping their lightsabers deactivated to avoid giving away their position by the light or sound they would give off.

On an upper floor Cal sensed the presence of someone in the room ahead and he held up his hand for Lara to stop. However in the darkness she managed to miss the sign and instead blundered straight into him. "Careful!" he hissed, "Now there's someone in there." And he pointed to the door, "We need a way in without them noticing us."

"Or we could just get them to come out here." Lara suggested.

"Be my guest." Cal said and he pressed himself up against the wall beside the door.

Lara took several deep breaths and cleared her mind. Focusing her mind, she was able to find the mind of the individual on the other side of the door and she shuddered. This was a mind full of anger and hatred, one that burned for revenge and Lara sensed that it would happily come up with a great many unpleasant things to do to her if it got the opportunity. Putting her discomfort aside Lara pushed deeper into this mind full of darkness.

"Someone's calling your name." She muttered, her words carrying through the Force and entering the mandalorians mind.

"What?" a voice called from the other side of the door.

"Someone's calling your name. You need to come out and see for yourself." Lara said and Cal smiled.

From beyond the door there were footsteps and suddenly the door slid upwards to reveal a heavily armoured figure. Seeing Lara standing in front of him the mandalorian warrior reacted quickly, lunging through the doorway and diving right into her.

Lara let out a cry as she was knocked backwards under the assault and as she tried to bring her lightsaber into a position where she could use it to defend herself the mandalorian knocked from her grasp.

"Jedi bitch! I'll show you what fighting is about!"

There was a 'snap-hiss' and a sudden flash of blue light and a moment later Lara thought that the mandalorian had just delivered the weakest had butt ever, but instead the mandalorian lifted his head back up it just rolled off and his headless body collapsed on top of her.

"Need a hand little sister?" Cal asked, shutting off his lightsaber and extending a hand to help her up, "That was some nice work by the way, though I'd suggest in future you not be standing right in front of the bad guy when he opens the door. You're not just a pretty face it seems."

"Pretty? Is that it? Cal I'm the hottest woman you've ever made out with." Lara replied, reaching out her hand and calling her lightsaber back to her grip.

"If we could stop bringing that event up I'd like to see what was important enough to need a mandalorian warrior to guard it." Cal said and without waiting for Lara he went into the room.

As it happened there was very little of note in the room at all, however in one of the walls an irregular hole about twenty centimetres across had been crudely cut.

"A firing point?" Lara suggested as she bent down to look through the hole, "Cal this overlooks the main landing pad."

Cal smiled.

"They set up to shoot us down as soon as we got off the ship." He said, "All the time keeping themselves out of our line of sight."

"Clever." Lara said, "Though I'd rather they were idiots, makes them easier to deal with."

"Sadly that's not something you can say of many mandalorians." Cal said, "Their society tends to weed out the weak and stupid."

"Whilst preserving the heavily armed it would seem." Lara responded as she noticed a rifle lay on a chair and Cal walked over and picked it up, ejecting the power cell to make it safe before he handled it.

"A pulse wave rifle." He said as he moved a hand towards the tube-like device clamped beneath the barrel and opened it up to eject the oversized projectile from inside, "With an under slung grenade launcher as well."

"You know Cal," Lara said as she approached him, "some how I doubt that he registered either of those weapons with the sector authorities. I mean a criminal who doesn't obey the law, what is the galaxy coming to?"

There was the sudden sound of repulsorlifts from outside and Cal and Lara both rushed to the window where they saw the three basilisk war droids and their riders returning. As the trio of machines descended to

ground level the hangar doors slid open once more and this time both Cal and Lara got a better look at what was inside. Unlike the darkened room they were in the hangar was well lit inside and in the brief time that the doors were open the two jedi saw more than a dozen more basilisk war droids along with enough mandalorians to operate them all. Additionally towards the back of the building they saw a single long row of what looked to be plastic bags, each one a large enough to hold a body.

"I think that answers the question of what happened to the base personnel." Cal said as he reloaded the mandalorian rifle.

A sudden burst of static interrupted the quiet and Cal and Lara looked around at the decapitated mandalorian in the corridor.

"The jedi have arrived." A stern sounded voice barked over the dead man's communicator, "Everyone be watchful, they may already be in the perimeter. Report any sightings, Mott out."

Cal looked at Lara.

"Well there goes our surprise attack." He said.

"Cal," Lara replied, "did you notice he didn't mention guarding any prisoners? Kind of confirms that those body bags represent everyone that was here doesn't it."

"Yes it does." Cal said and he approached the hole in the wall and began to lie down on his stomach, "Spot for me." He said, "Let's see how much trouble we can stir up."

Lara positioned herself far enough back from the window that an outside observer would not notice her but somewhere from which she could still see as much of the outside as possible.

"To the north of the pad." She said, "That cluster of crates under the sheeting, I think there's someone underneath."

Cal aimed the rifle through the hole. The weapon was fitted with a light amplifying scope and though his field of vision was limited, Cal could see as clear as day. Even if everything was in black and white.

"Got it." He said and he smiled as he spotted the muzzle of a weapon stick out from beneath the sheet briefly, "Go check the body in the corridor." He then told Lara, "I'll need more rounds." and he gently squeezed the trigger of the grenade launcher. There was a soft 'pop' as the projectile was launched and travelled in an arc towards the hide erected beside the landing pad. Through the scope Cal saw a hole appear in the sheeting as the grenade dropped through and he shut his eyes to protect them just in time to avoid the sudden flash as the grenade detonated.

When Cal opened his eyes again he saw that the blast had scattered the crates and there were two bodies lying motionless on the ground. A third figure staggered away from the burning debris and fell towards a nearby wall, only managing to remain upright by reaching out an arm and steadying himself. However, the figure still clutched a weapon and represented a potential threat so Cal followed up the grenade shot with a blast from the pulse wave rifle that put the mandalorian down.

"Here." Lara said as she returned with a single, "It was in a pouch on his belt." She added, "I think it's his only spare."

"It'll have to do." Cal replied as he reloaded the launcher, "Now spot for me again."

The moment Kaylor heard the explosion from outside he knew that something had gone badly wrong.

"Who's firing?" he demanded over the communications net as the other warriors in the hangar all rushed towards their basilisk war droids.

"We're under attack!" one of his men replied, "The post by the pad is gone. Did anyone see where the shot came from?"

"Shot?" Kaylor asked, "What shot?"

"I think they fired a grenade launcher." The reply came.

Kaylor was confused, as a rule jedi did not carry grenade launchers and if the message from Aurek Station had not made any mention of them being accompanied by a unit of Freedom Warriors, the non-Force sensitive soldiers who supported the Jedi Order in its military operations. That left only one option, unless his men were mistaken and they were far too experienced for Kaylor to believe that, a mandalorian weapon had been used to fire the shot.

"Mount up!" he yelled even though most of his men were already climbing onto their basilisk mounts, "I know where the jedi are hiding."

5.

"Building to the left, second floor about half way along." Lara said calmly, having noticed the darker patch where a firing hole had been hacked.

"Got it." Cal replied and he squeezed off another shot from the pulse wave rifle, his third since this had started. In the poor light outside the optical disturbance created by the projected spatial distortion was nearly invisible even to a Jedi's senses and the only indication that Cal's shot had found its mark was when it struck the building and blasted a hole through it. Cal expected that the Mandalorian on the other side of the wall, if there was even one there at that moment would not be seriously injured but it would make him think twice about remaining there in any case.

The sound of the hanger doors opening again attracted the attention of both Cal and Lara and Lara looked to see what was going on.

"Err Cal, we've got company." She said.

Unable to swing the rifle around far enough to see the hangar doors Cal slid back across the floor and stood up, still keeping hold of the rifle. He was just in time to see more than a dozen Basilisk war droids emerge and take to the air.

"Down!" Cal yelled and he and Lara dived to the floor just in time to avoid the fusillade of laser fire that illuminated the night sky outside. The bolts of high energy ripped through the building the two Jedi were using for shelter, "Let's move." Cal said hurriedly as he began to crawl across the floor towards the door while bits of the building continued to fall around him.

"I'm right with you brother dear." Lara replied as she too began to crawl away from the Mandalorians and their war droids.

"Spread out and continue firing." Kaylor ordered, "I don't want anything to survive in there."

Immediately the dense group of droid riding warriors began to encircle the building, all the while maintaining fire on the structure, "Watch your lines of fire." Kaylor cautioned them, well aware that poorly sighted shot could punch right through the building and strike a fellow Mandalorian on the other side and it was at that moment that over the communications net he heard a sudden panicked cry as one of the Basilisk war droids fell from the sky, "Who fired that shot?" he demanded, though he had not seen any trace of laser fire hitting the war droid or its rider.

Cal and Lara had just about reached the nearest staircase when they both halted.

"Cal, did you feel that?" Lara asked.

"Yes, I did." Cal replied.

The disturbance in the Force had been sudden, powerful and close by. Moments later the building topped shaking as the Mandalorians outside ceased fire and broke off. Cal got to his feet and helped his sister to hers.

"Quickly," he said, "Let's get out of here while they're distracted."

"But Cal, what was that? Have more Jedi arrived?"

"The enclave on Moldas is too far away." Cal replied, "We'd have heard about reinforcements before we left Aurek Station."

"What about Tyshon? Dorn Station is-" Lara began, referring to a reclusive Jedi knight that the pair had discovered residing on an abandoned space station without the knowledge of anyone else in the Narthis Sector or the Jedi Order.

"He didn't have a ship." Cal said, "Besides, how would he know to come here?"

"Then who?"

"I don't know and that's what worries me."

A pair of the Basilisks suddenly manoeuvred beyond their riders' control and slammed into one another in midair with a crash, followed shortly after by another as the mangled wreckage fell to the ground below. Once again the attack had been invisible and Kaylor had no way on knowing where it had originated. He knew what the attack signified though; he had seen such methods used during the Sith War when Jedi knights had taken a heavy toll on the ranks of the Mandalorians. Someone was using the Force to attack them. However, there was something different about these attacks, during the war the Jedi had used their powers to disrupt Mandalorian attacks rather than to attack directly but whoever was doing this was definitely using the Force as a weapon.

"I see him!" one of the other mandalorians yelled and he directed his basilisk war droid mount to swoop down to where a brief movement had caught his attention.

The war droid's lasers sliced through a row of parked speeders, but the figure he had glanced was already gone. Instead Kyle Jenner was now standing just around the corner of the building beside the parked speeders and as the war droid rushed past him he was ready with a bulky carbine. There was a brilliant flash of light from the muzzle of the weapon and a blast of super heated plasma was propelled towards the mandalorian. The weapon was an obsolete type, lacking the confinement mechanisms found in the latest blasters. But even though much of the blast's energy dissipated before it struck the mandalorian there was still enough hitting power left to punch through the warrior's armour and incinerate the flesh within. The mandalorian's body rolled sideways off the basilisk and left the droid to its own devices. Lacking control the droid gained altitude to await further orders and in that time Kyle withdrew, taking care to allow the other mandalorians know roughly which way he had gone.

"Well that makes things easier." Lara said as she and Cal watched the mandalorians withdrawing, "Why do you think they're leaving?"

"My guess would be that they think whoever's out there with that plasma gun was us." Cal replied, taking advantage of the brief lull to reload the grenade launcher with the spare round.

"So what now?" Lara asked.

"We need to know why the mandalorians are here," Cal replied, "and I think that the most likely place to find answers is in their ship."

"Which is probably guarded." Lara pointed out.

Cal closed the breech of the grenade launcher.

"Somehow I don't think that that's going to be a problem." He said.

The two jedi slipped out of what was left of the building that was their hiding place, Cal keeping the rifle trained on the mandalorians flying off in the other direction. They headed directly towards the assault ship, all the time keeping close to but not directly next to the walls of other buildings and picking a route that kept them out of sight from the likely locations of mandalorian firing points.

Kyle Jenner allowed the mandalorians to keep up with him only as long as he found it useful, allowing what he thought enough time for Cal and Lara to escape before using the force to manipulate the controls of a large doorway and open the rolling door. With his plasma carbine clutched in one hand he slid beneath the door as soon as the gap was large enough to allow him under and then fired a single blast at the interior control panel that brought the door back down before the mandalorians saw that it had opened.

Through the Force he sensed the approach on the mandalorian who had been using the building as a hiding place and he looked around to see the armoured figure rushing towards him.

"Stay right there jed- Ack!"

The mandalorian dropped his weapon and fell to his knees, clutching at his throat. Kyle stared at the man, his free hand extended out towards him and tightening his telekinetic grip. He felt a sudden drop in resistance as the mandalorian's windpipe was crushed and he let go, allowing the body to slump forwards and sprawl across the floor.

Kyle picked himself up and holstered his carbine in the holster on his back. Then he took the lightsaber from his belt and ran from the room, making his way towards the mandalorians' ship.

When the assault ship was just around the next corner Cal and Lara pressed themselves up against the wall beside them and crept forwards slowly. Cal quickly glanced around the corner and then ducked back behind the corner once more.

"There's just one in sight." He said to Lara, "But I sense the presence of more inside. We need to deal with this one quickly and quietly. Can you do it?"

A look of surprise appeared on Lara's face.

"Me?" she asked in amazement.

"Lara, I know you're good at sneaking up on people." Cal replied, "People only know my baby sister's there if she wants them to. Now can you do it?"

Lara smiled.

"I can do it." She said with confidence.

"Then do it." Cal told her.

Lara breathed deeply and let the Force wrap itself around her. Cautiously she made her way around the corner and looked towards the krath assault ship. As Cal had told her there was a single mandalorian standing guard at the base of its access ramp. Lara moved closer. Even though she was making use of the

Force to conceal herself from the mandalorian she trod carefully, if she made any sudden noise the illusion could be shattered and she would find herself exposed.

She paused near the base of the ramp and when the mandalorian turned his back she dropped her illusion and instead opened her mind to who was nearby. The guard in front of her was obvious, but she also felt the presence of two others inside but neither of them was near the ramp. She took a step, but this time failed to look where she was treading and there was a sharp 'crack' as something broke beneath her foot.

"What the?" the surprised mandalorian said as he whirled around. But before he could warn his comrades in the ship there was another sound, the 'snap-hiss' of an igniting lightsaber blade just before Lara drove the tip of her weapon through his chest.

As the body dropped Lara turned to look up the ramp and into the ship, ready in case the other mandalorians had become aware of her presence. When several seconds passed with no sign of them she shut off her weapon and waved Cal closer.

Cal slung the rifle over his shoulder and took his lightsaber in his hand before making a dash for the ship.

"Nice work." He said to Lara, "Now let's go see what's so important about this place." And they both ran up the ramp.

A brief blue flash in the darkness caught Kaylor's eye and he looked down to see what had cause it. He saw a faint blue glow coming from beneath his unit's transport ship that vanished as quickly as it had begun. But Kaylor kept his view focused on the ship and through his night vision goggles he clearly saw a robed figure as it ran across open ground to the ship.

"The jedi have doubled back!" he exclaimed, "They're after the ship." And he turned his basilisk around.

6.

The ramp led up into the primary transport bay of the assault ship, a relatively spacious compartment lined with bench like seating for troops. Right now the seats were vacant, much to the relief of the Udras who did not relish the thought of fighting as many mandalorians as there were seats. But what the transport bay did contain was a stack of sealed containers in one corner that were all marked with the logo of the Republic's Astrogation Survey teams and the two jedi approached them with trepidation.

"These look like sample containers." Cal said as he picked up one of the smaller containers, "The sort used for rock samples and-

"Yes I know what they're for Cal." Lara replied and she reached out for the latch of one of the others. But as she released it with a 'click' there was a voice from behind them.

"Step away jedi." One of the two mandalorians now standing at the top of the ramp said, his weapon trained on the Udras, "And keep those hands where I can see them." The mandalorian then briefly raised his hand to his helmet and activated his communicator, "Okay I got them. Let's make a move, Mott wants the goods in space as soon as possible." And the ship began to shake as the engines were brought online.

The mandalorian gave out a sudden yell as he was dragged back down the ramp by something unseen but easily sensed by both Cal and Lara and as the other armoured warrior turned around he was cut in two by Kyle Jenner as the former jedi strode up the ramp with his lightsaber in his hand.

Cal lifted his lightsaber and activated it.

"Kyle Jenner you are under arrest!" he shouted and as Lara also activated her lightsaber he added, "Lower your weapon, you are outnumbered."

Kyle let out a laugh as with a wave of his hand he shut the assault ship's access ramp.

"Think you're a match for me boy?" he said and he swung his arm in Cal's direction. Cal let out a surprised yelp as he was lifted off his feet and thrown across the bay, his lightsaber deactivating and clattering to the floor when he dropped it.

Lara let out a yell and rushed forwards with her lightsaber held ready, but Kyle just let out another blast of telekinetic energy that jerked her head backwards under the blow and she too collapsed in a heap on the floor. Kyle looked down at the two jedi and shut off his lightsaber. Then he simply ignored them and headed for the assault ship's cockpit.

Kaylor was trailing the assault ship while the rest of his men headed towards the Republic ships that were still on the ground. In addition to the payment promised for this mission he expected to make a tidy sum from the sale of the looted ships and that the slow execution of the jedi prisoners would raise his men's spirits no end.

But then something unexpected happened.

The assault ship's steady course for orbit that would rendezvous with their primary vessel became unstable and the ship pitched and rolled for several seconds as if the pilots had lost control. When the ship's flight stabilised once more it turned away from its previous heading and instead began to fly a more horizontal course, away from the Republic base.

"Mott to assault ship, report." He transmitted but there was only static in response, "Assault ship, why have you changed course?" he added, but again no one answered him. Snarling behind his mask, Kaylor raced after the assault ship.

Dazed by Kyle's assault both Cal and Lara were just getting back to their feet when the ship began to pitch and roll beyond the ability of its inertial dampening system to compensate for the violent manoeuvring.

"We need to get to the cockpit." Cal said as he helped Lara to her feet, "Find your lightsaber and let's go."

The sudden violent manoeuvring of the assault ship ended as rapidly as it had begun and retrieving their weapons Cal and Lara went after Kyle. Leaving the transport bay neither of them noticed the sudden 'clang' as something struck the outer hull before punching a hole in the ceiling.

Cal and Lara crept closer to the open cockpit door. From their position they could clearly see the two bodies in the familiar spiked armour of mandalorian warriors and Kyle Jenner sat in the pilot's seat. Cal held up his hand for Lara to stop.

"I know you're both there." Kyle said, "Or have you both forgotten I can sense your presence?" and he turned the seat to face them.

"Land the ship." Cal said sternly, "You're coming with us."

"Actually I don't think I am." Kyle replied and he leant forwards, "Listen to me Jedi Udra, the Jedi Order in this region has been compromised. The Founding Families are plotting to move against the Republic and only I can stop them, but I can't do it alone. I need you to act as my eyes and ears within the Order. Your sister can come with me, I will complete her training and together we will defeat our enemies."

"I'll never join you." Lara told him, "You're a murderer."

"I feel the Dark Side within you." Cal added, "You used the Force for attack."

Kyle frowned.

"I have done only what was necessary." He said, "The darkness will fade with time."

"Stand down Kyle Jenner." Cal said, "You are under arrest."

"Do you even know what is in those boxes back there?" Kyle said, ignoring the command and pointing back towards the transport bay, "A hoard of sith artefacts gathered by Republic explorers from within the Levik Cluster, left there a thousand years ago. The Founding Families sent the mandalorians to seize them and murder everyone who knows they exist."

"Why should we believe that?" Lara asked.

"Because," Kaylor said as he stepped from the transport bay behind them, "it means I need to kill all three of you."

Kyle's arm shot out and there was a sudden and massive blast of telekinetic energy that sent Cal, Lara and Kaylor flying back away from the cockpit and into the transport bay. Cal was first back to his feet and as he turned towards Kaylor he raised his lightsaber and activated it. But before he could strike the mandalorian charged at him, grasping the hilt of his lightsaber himself and head butting Cal before he could duck out of the way. Shaken and with blood pouring from his nose Cal was still able to kick out at Kaylor's legs and struck one at the knee. Kaylor cried out in pain and dropped to one knee, letting go of Cal's lightsaber.

It was then that Kyle appeared in the hatchway that led to the cockpit, his lightsaber in his hand and active. Lara reacted by rushing at him with her own lightsaber held out in front of her. Stepping forwards Kyle held out his lightsaber in one hand and seemingly with no effort he parried her attack. Then, with a wave of his hand he picked up Kaylor using the Force and hurled him across the bay into the pile of containers. As the stack collapsed and the sample containers were scattered across the floor Kaylor caught sight of one that had been knocked open. Inside the container, held within a layer of foam padding he saw a computer drive. Unlike the other items that had been collected from the Republic base's storage facility this drive had been packed by the mandalorians themselves after they had transferred all of the flight logs from the exploration vessels to it.

Looking back across the transport bay he saw that the three lightsaber wielding Force users seemed to be staring one another down as Cal and Lara looked for an avenue of attack to present itself to them.

Cal moved first, rushing headlong towards Kyle with his weapon pointed at him. Kyle simply sidestepped away from the charge but was forced to spin rapidly and bring up his own lightsaber to block Lara as she sought to take advantage of Cal's attack to launch one of her own. As Lara pulled back her lightsaber Kyle shut his down briefly and using the hilt as a club he delivered a blow to Lara's elbow that made her cry out in pain and drop her own weapon. He then rolled across the deck just as Cal attempted to strike him down.

With the three Force users busy fighting amongst themselves Kaylor decided that it was best for him to leave as soon as possible and he reached out and grabbed hold of the computer drive before getting up and making a break for the hole he had cut in the ceiling. A line of syntherope hung down from the hole and Kaylor used this to climb up to the hole and out onto the hull where his basilisk war droid still waited for him. Kaylor tucked the computer drive into a pouch and then plucked a grenade from his assault vest, removed the pin and tossed it back down through the hole.

A tremor in the Force alerted both Cal and Kyle to the sudden danger from the grenade, but neither of them was able to do anything to prevent the explosion that followed.

Fear.

The burst of emotion came from Lara as the ship shook and she was thrown across the transport bay towards the hole that the grenade had blown in the side of the hull.

"Cal help me!" she cried out as she caught hold of the side of the hole with her one free hand, but even as Cal rushed to help his sister she lost her grip and screamed as she fell.

"Lara no!" Cal yelled and he dived through the hole after her.

Lara screamed as she fell, her arms flailing.

"Cal!"

Cal pressed his arms against his sides and angled his body towards Lara, directing his freefall in her direction. As he came closer he spread his arms wide and took hold of her, simultaneously Lara wrapped her arms tightly around him and Cal felt the hilt of her deactivated lightsaber digging into his side.

"Cal we're falling!" she screamed, "We're going to die!"

"Can you reach my PTP link?" Cal asked and Lara looked down at his belt where his personal communicator was secured.

"I think so." She replied and she took hold of the device.

"Channel seven." Cal said, "Just set it to continuous transmit."

"But why-"

"Just do it!" Cal snapped and Lara activated the PTP link.

In the empty cockpit of the *Bright Hope* a light suddenly appeared on the control console. Another followed this and then more as the ship's systems came online in an emergency start up. The repulsorlifts suddenly roared into life as the ship lifted off the ground and then accelerated towards the source of the distress signal.

Cal and Lara held onto one another tightly as the ground rushed towards them at a frightening rate.

Fear.

"Lara just relax." Cal said, "Trust me, we're going to be just fine. I promise you."

The noise of the assault ship's engines had faded away already, but now the sound of repulsorlifts could be heard once more and Cal smiled as he looked upwards to see the familiar silhouette of the *Bright Hope* diving down at them.

"Get ready." Cal said, "We're nearly there."

"Cal the ground-" Lara said as she looked down instead of up.

The *Bright Hope* swooped down past Cal and Lara and Cal reached out his hand. Through the Force he caught hold of the ship and Lara squealed as they were suddenly pulled towards its hull.

"Now shut off the signal!" Cal yelled over the sound of the engines and Lara deactivated his PTP link.

Immediately that the signal was cut off the *Bright Hope's* autopilot began to reduce power and levelled out. Cal was still clinging to the upper hull with Lara holding him tightly as the ship lowered its landing gear and settled on the ground.

"I told you it would work." Cal said.

Releasing her grip on her older brother Lara looked skywards.

"What about Kyle?" she asked.

"My guess is he has a ship of his own hidden somewhere." Cal replied, "He could be transferring those artefacts to it right now. We could try hanging around to look for him, but I think we'd need more than just the *Bright Hope.*"

In the distance there were the sounds of more repulsorlifts and looking back towards the Republic base Cal and Lara watched as several vessels lifted off.

"Looks like the mandalorians are pulling out." Cal said, "I think maybe we should follow their lead."

In the hold of his own ship Kyle Jenner had laid out the sith artefacts in rows. Most of them were nothing but trinkets, stone and wooden amulets carved to praise their masters, but here and there were examples of tools or weapons, all long obsolete by Republic standards. But what he really wanted seemed to be missing, he needed to know where these objects had been found.

Then he came across an empty container. Like all of the others it was lined with a thick layer of soft to protect the contents and this foam had been cut to the shape of what it had once held. Kyle instantly recognised the outline of a modern computer drive and he realised that the most important item had slipped through his grasp. The only thing he could not tell was who had taken it. Was it Kaylor Mott or one of the Udras?

"No!" he yelled out anger and with a single sweep of his arm he sent the other containers and their contents flying across he hold.

Kaylor was alone in the airlock as he waited for the hatch to open so he could meet his employers. They had been quite adamant that he was the only one they were willing to meet face to face in order to protect their identities.

The hatchway suddenly slid upwards to reveal a middle-aged couple that were flanked by a pair of armed guards in the uniforms of the Shill Security private military company.

"Mister Torin." Kaylor said as he stepped closer and the two guards reacted by raising their weapons.

"Stand down." The man ordered and the guards lowered their weapons.

"Would you care to explain yourself Mister Mott?" the man then said, his tone indicating his anger.

"Oh come now Corva," the woman who stood arm in arm with her husband said, "I'm sure he tried his best. Didn't you Mister Mott?"

Corva frowned.

"Deesa really, you are far too forgiving. He was supposed to bring us the artefacts, so where are they?"

"I think the jedi have them." Kaylor said.

"A jedi?" Deesa repeated.

"You think?" Corva said, "What do you mean you think?"

"I mean that if he survived the grenade I tossed in, the guy that has your merchandise was fighting against the other two jedi who turned up."

"So the mysterious Mister Jenner has resurfaced again." Corva said.

"Yes," Deesa added, "he really is becoming a major problem. He will have to be dealt with."

"In the meantime we are left with nothing." Corva said.

"I wouldn't say that exactly." Kaylor said, producing the computer drive and holding it out to Corva, "Its what we downloaded from the explorer ships' computers. Images of every artefact and the details of where they were found. This Jenner guy may have the original items but he won't have a clue where they came from. Will that suffice Mister Torin?"

"Yes." Corva replied as he took the drive from Kaylor, "It will do quite nicely."