

STAR WARS virtual edition Episode X : *The Riddle of the Pirates*

Following their victory that ended the 'Bogan War', the Galactic Alliance began negotiations with Governor Tagge of the Imperial Remnant regarding the latter's re-settlement and trading deals. But as peace seemed to take hold, an inexplicable increase in piracy now threatens the stability. Meanwhile, Jedi Master Luke Skywalker swiftly expanded his growing Jedi Order with academies across the galaxy, on planets and on training vessels....

Deep space. The darkest of blacks. The brightest of starlight. Unfathomable leagues lie between the stars, traversed primarily by faster-than-light spacecraft. Not much else would journey out here, save for those rumoured sentient cetacean *Purrgil* that galactic historians maintained inspired the early interstellar astro-physicists and pilots.

But something else did float here against the inkiness of space : three short cylinders that gently rotated about a small oblong green crystal as if the shard belied its size and was a massive planet shepherding its moons. One cylinder sported a mount with two buttons on it, while another had a clip at one closed end, and the remaining one finished with an open emitter dish. All three parts had wires and clips protruding from the open ends.

Slowly, almost balletically, the rotating parts spiralled towards each other, slotting together, and encompassing the green crystal within. The wires and clips fastened, and the single tubular shape twisted and clicked locking into place. With a *snap-hiss*, a green light about a metre long flashed from the emitter dish and held fast. The glowing blade *thrummed*.

An elderly human hand appeared and reached over to reverentially slide the palm around the tube. The spindly fingers closed firmly around the handle, and then, with a masterful flick of the wrist, the green blade spun a dramatic figure-of-eight. The sizzling beam of light settled vertically, and framed the face of an old man wearing brown and cream coloured robes. When he spoke, the voice was deep and steady and assured.

"The lightsabre. The weapon of a Jedi Knight, deadly and precise in skilled hands, and demanding respect by those who use it and those upon whom it is used. Powered by a Kyber Crystal that, when divined, resonates uniquely to the midichlorians that lie within your cells."

Master Jedi Dree Tan gazed over the assembled group, a myriad of junior students of many species learning the ways of the Force. They sat upon the floor of the dimly lit chamber in rapt attention. Behind the old man the starry vista seen through the large window of the starship provided a solemnity to the lesson.

Master Tan paused to consider when he last had to use his sword in combat. The fearsome bogan had taken the lives of many of his warrior friends, but – thank the Force – Masters Skywalker and Seren had been able to extinguish that ancient Sith abhorrence about seven years ago. Since then, his sword had faced down a handful of skirmishes from space pirates, a growing scourge that desperately needed to be nipped in the bud before it brought too much instability to the galaxy at large.

“And now you, my young padawans,” the old master went on, “you will learn how to construct your own lightsabres, customised to your needs and style.”

A shiver of excitement and murmurings in several different languages rippled through the group. Finally ! This was what they had been waiting impatiently for. From exercises in mental and physical fortitude to simple duelling with wooden staves, they were now on the cusp of nesting training crystals into sword handles. When they had boarded this training vessel at Coruscant, the whisper was that they would move on to this next stage in their studies.

Master Tan smiled, for he was not immune to recalling the same excitement when old Master Yoda had first introduced his Youngling clan to the near-mythical lightsabres. Even during his own years of exile from the Empire, he would look upon his silent sword with fondness and respect.

“Use the Force for knowledge,” he said, “and it will guide you down the right path.” He switched off his lightsabre and the weapon powered down with its distinctive *shhh-zupp*. He stretched out his hand and presented the handle for display. “As you can see, there are some basic parts that are necessary to the functionality of the lightsabre, but the overall design can be unique to you and your culture.” He paused. “However, the ability to construct the handle and align the crystal inside correctly will demonstrate your mastery with the Force.”

He looked up and waved the fingers of his left hand at the back wall of the chamber. Two wooden panels slid open to reveal an array of many pre-fabricated handle parts, built from different materials and, although following the same basic design, all showing subtle differences in their shape and outline. In the centre of the display shone small crystals in varied hues of blue and green. The students turned their heads and gasped in awe, but to their credit none of them leapt from their places.

As Master Tan walked past the youngsters, several hologram emitters positioned about the floor of the chamber clicked into life, and a simple wireframe lightsabre was displayed at each. An animation showed how the handle was to be constructed, and where the crystal was to be located.

“As you know from your studies, the Kyber crystal is divined by the Jedi at only one location in the galaxy : the icy moon of Illium that orbits under the gaze of Kyber. And the Kyber system can only be found by someone fully attuned to the ways of the Force.”

He regarded the children. Although they were all youngsters, their actual ages were recorded against their home worlds’ star ; but, as was the custom across much of the Galaxy where the Old Republic had reached, it was accepted that they were all about six standard – or *Coruscanti* – years old.

And this was the most unusual aspect about his new life as a Jedi mentor to Grand Master Skywalker’s Jedi Academy : for the last seven years, since the spectacularly abrupt extinction of the bogan creatures and their Sith Lords, there had been a sheer explosion in the number of babies born across all sentient species with a high enough number of midichlorians to keep Luke’s mentors busy day in and day out. Not since the sudden Galactic take-over by the accursed Emperor and his stormtroopers had there been any new Force-adepts born, a gap of 30 standard years or so, and very much at least one generation where very few people were aware that the Jedi had ever safeguarded their existence. Exactly why the Force had re-awakened in this manner he could not

guess, though he had suspicions that Master Skywalker knew the real reason behind this phenomenon.

Master Tan's mind returned to the moment before him. "One of the Final Trials Padawan Jedi of old were to face was the opportunity to travel to Illum and divine their own kyber crystal uniquely attuned to them, and then to construct their own distinctive lightsabre handle." Dree Tan nodded to the array of handle components on the wall across from the group. "These are parts that can be used to build *training sabres*, and the kyber crystals are generic stones that have been harvested in bulk by the Council Masters." He paused. "In time, you will divine your own crystal and secure it within a handle fit to lie at your side."

He smiled and raised his arms. "Rise, and explore the designs available to you."

The students scrambled to their feet, murmuring to one another in anticipation. They quickly stepped up to the display, their eyes hungrily scanning what was on offer.

"Take whatever appeals to you," announced Master Tan. "Then sit beside a holo-projector, and let the Force guide you in constructing your very first lightsabre."

One by one, the students took down the components and settled cross-legged around the holograms. Within moments the parts were floating in the air before each of them, slowly revolving and spinning.

Master Tan allowed himself a wry smile. "And this, my friends, is where you'll find it's not as easy as you might have imagined. At the same time as you study the schematic before you, you must feel the pulse of the crystal in the Force. As you correctly line up the containers and the wires and the activators, you must listen to the Force and let it guide the crystal to an insertion that is aligned to the polarities of the ashlan lay-lines that lie all around you. These lay-lines bind the galaxy together ! A sabre that is built *here* is aligned *here*, in this place, in this moment. It imprints to *you*, *here*, in this chamber on this ship in this sector of space."

As he finished speaking, one of the students, a four-armed reptilian *Besalisk*, looked up and proudly held a completed lightsabre handle in the air. The species was known for their wide mouths, and the triumphant grin that adorned this youngster deserved to be present.

"Ah, Krastor, well done !" Master Tan's eyes sparkled not without a little mischief. "Let us see how well you've accomplished this task. Ignite your sword !" he commanded.

Krastor beamed, and shuffled on to his two broad feet. The webbed claws tensed in anticipation and slightly scratched the floor of the chamber. Grasping the handle in two hands, with the fingers of his remaining hands twitching with nervous excitement, the boy thumbed the activation switch.

The bright flash took all but Dree Tan by surprise, and the handle exploded into its various parts that scattered across the floor. The crystal clattered at Krastor's feet. The Besalisk blinked several times, his eyes widening in shock and guilt. The other students, overcoming their initial fright, watched in anticipation.

Master Tan's laugh broke the tension. "Try again, Krastor, and let this be a lesson to you all that this is definitely not as easy as it looks. Let the Force *guide* you, and when you have been successful in constructing the handle and aligning the crystal, the Force will *sing* out to you!"

The spiral galaxy throws its arms wide out across the depths of space, and much of these 'fingertips' of star matter remains uncharted. From the Core interior to the flattening disc to the recognised bands that make up the Inner, Mid, and Outer Rim territories, for over ten thousand years sentient beings have been journeying between the stars. From the early astro-navigators tentatively mapping their way between local star clusters, to the invention of faster-than-light hyperdrives that enabled the voyagers to traverse huge distances, very little of the galaxy is unknown. But there still remained far-flung areas that astro-cartographers and steersmen yearned to explore. Under the rules of Republic and Empire with their own agendas of economic expansion and conquest respectively, Interstellar Survey Vessels would diligently and methodically push out beyond the known hyper-routes. Isolated as their role demanded, the crew had to accept a life of separation from the rest of their known civilisation. Thus, families were found on these survey vessels, comprising of the specialist and their partner, and even any children they may have had prior to departure. Vague news might come and go, but without the circumstance to be affected by it – or to affect it – such crews quickly re-adjusted their mindset to focus on their isolated work.

In modern times, however, lobbied not only by humane rights but by crippling economics, and greatly improved with reliable technology, such supra-distance vessels ceased to be crewed by sentients, and became fully automated. Usually there would be an ultra-AI protocol droid-captain overseeing a crew of worker drones, that would allow for analysis of any problematic situations the vessel would find itself in. Though communications could be delayed by vast chunks of time and distance, the digital squawk and hiss that was directed back to the 'mother' mainframe on Coruscant thus continued endlessly without a care for such animalistic concerns such as friendship or nourishment or breathing.

The Imperial Galactic Survey vessel *Nubian Herald* drifted towards a cloudy nebula. The mass was still several parsecs away, but even at this great distance flashes of lightning could be seen dancing over the outer surface of the cloud. The *Herald's* design brought to mind the old Imperial Star Destroyer, in so far as the great T-shaped command tower loomed large ahead of a boxy wedge-shaped rear comprising of delicate sensor arrays and receiving stations, super-computers processing the astro-navigational information, and hangar bays filled with probes and their hyper-drive capable drop-ships. A vast singular engine thruster pushed out at the back of the wedge. From nose to tail the ship was a quarter of the length of a traditional military Star Destroyer.

On the simple bridge, Droid-Captain Four-Dee Sixkay reviewed the stellar oddity ahead of the ship. The cloud marked the furthest boundary of charted space. Its mission, for this was one of the first vessels heralding the rise of the populist Chancellor Palpatine, was to explore this vast interstellar obstacle. Mapping its properties – size, chemistry, density - was crucial, but also to punch a way through to the interior and possibly beyond, for early observations from Coruscant had suggested

flashes of possible *artificial* activity, glimpsed in the gamma spectrum through brief moments when the cloud had apparently thinned in patches.

The droid's photo-receptors caught a glint of starlight reflection, and they zeroed in on a returning probe. Anticipating the announcement from the helm that monitored local flight control, Four-Dee turned to regard the multi-armed drone stationed on the other side of the control centre.

"Captain," the droid announced, "probe seven-three-seven-seven has returned from the cloud. Initial data-cap suggests it successfully reached its proposed trajectory and depth."

"Excellent," confirmed the Captain. "We might now be in a position to see beyond the initial obscurity, and determine what lies inside. Ensure the quarantine hangar is ready for its arrival."

As Four-Dee returned to the view ahead, the droid was already rapidly computing the possible consequences of the probe's known path.

The marbled blue and white swirl of hyperspace did not even register on or distract Captain Karbeck of Local Law Enforcement, as he and his wingmen completed ship checks prior to re-entry to sub-light speed. The mayday call had not long been received, and, since they were only a system away, with any luck his '*Ellie*' team would be able to intercept the pirates and take them down.

He turned to his comms board and flicked a switch.

"Standby to revert," he instructed, and his wingmen returned with acknowledgements. Nodding, he activated another switch on the board. "Ellie Precincter Niner-One-One, this is Karbeck, lock on to our co-ordinates as soon as we are system-side, and be ready to jump."

A crackly voice replied, "Affirmative Karbeck, tractor beams are powering up now. Clear skies to you."

The Captain muttered a gruff "Thanks", and settled into the padded seat awaiting the jolting recoil of hyperspatial reversion. The new Ellie starfighters were modelled on the old Rebel A-Wing thrust engines, and although the ships were equipped with dampeners as standard, the stronger engines always lurched to a near halt whenever they dropped out of lightspeed.

"Sublight on my mark, team, then go into survey formation followed by attack pattern *grafflex*." The captain tightened his grip on the accelerator lever, and watched the hyperspace countdown. "Three, two, one, now !"

He pulled back on the lever, and the beautiful curtain of blue-and-white was suddenly replaced with a jolt into pinpoints of starlight against black. Below and to the left was the Mid Rim world of Sellesk Mot. At once, his on-board computer was clicking away analysing the situation ahead of them, and a calm but artificial voice announced, "Perpetrators at two-eleven, five small attack-fighters, and one

cargo ship. The distressed is a large oil tanker, with auxiliary service craft in escort. Activating targetting computer now.”

Karbeck glanced to his right and saw one of the Ellie ships fan out wide. Over his comlink he heard Ellie Three report an update. “The tanker’s guns have damaged one of the pirate ships, but it looks like they’re targetting those turrets.”

Ellie Four had checked remote shield strengths. “The tank’s shields are failing fast, sir ! A few more direct hits, and she’ll be like a snoozing lothcat.”

Karbeck switched the comms to the open channel allowing him to make rapid-fire commands to his four wingmen. “All wings, accelerate to attack speed and move into *grafflex* now, if we’re lucky we’ll catch them by surprise !”

The five Ellie starfighters fanned out and dived towards the conflagration ahead of them. Racing in, they opened fire : one pirate ship was destroyed and another took a disabling hit. As the remaining three fighters spiralled away from the tanker, the pirate’s cargo ship began to turn to face the Ellies.

“Stay sharp, boys, the mothership has teeth !” Karbeck called out.

Although the primary pirate ship only sported two gun turrets, they were heavy-duty turbo-lasers hacked onto the hull. Bright green laserfire lanced out towards two of the Ellie ships that had circled round and were now flying in formation. The main blast just barely missed the fighter craft, but the smaller ships’ shields took a hammering, and Ellie Five was thrown to one side. One of the pirate attack-craft rose up from below, its guns blazing, and the Ellie was subjected to a nasty battering.

Over Karbeck’s open comms he heard a wingman call out. “Ellie Five, are you okay, Don ?”

“My shields are about to go,” replied Don, “Those pirates are carrying some weight !”

Karbeck quickly switched his comms fliter. “Niner-One-One, jump now !” And with that, he yanked hard on his aerofoil lever and dived to starboard as enemy fire sprayed over his cockpit.

“I’m coming up behind you now, Captain!” yelled Ellie Two, and the Ellie starfighter dropped in behind the pursuing pirate. The two lead ships jinked about, one trying to make a bead, the other desperate not to be caught.

“Krag, can you cover Five before his shields go ?” ordered Karbeck. The captain swung back around towards the oil tanker, then turned sharply to try and shake the pirate. As his pursuer arced with the captain, Ellie Two saw an opening and fired : the pirate ship recoiled under the strafing, and rolled to one side.

Just then the Ellie command ship burst into view. The lumpy frigate immediately turned onto an intercept vector towards the pirate cargo ship, and a red light glowed from between two large squat forward mandibles. The cargo ship plainly jolted as the tractor beam took hold with a vice-like grip. At the same time, Niner-One-One opened fire with disabling ion guns, auto-targeting three of the four remaining pirate ships. Two ships became encased in a cage of blue sparkling electricity as on-board motor systems shut down, while the third swooped around the oil tanker, and, along with the final pirate attack craft, accelerated for the planet below.

“Let the perps go,” instructed the captain. “It’ll do us good for them to spread the word that we’re watching out for these Mid Rim systems.”

“Yeah,” answered Don, whose ship was limping back to the Precincter frigate. “Lucky the pirates targeted this world, and not a backwater Outer Rim territory with no Ellies.”

“That’s rotational deployment for you”, confirmed Krag, with a grin in his voice. Karbeck recognised the adrenaline in the younger man who had recently been transferred to his constabulary division.

But the jaded captain countered his jubilation with a salutary warning. “But it’s like blind sabaac, we can’t be everywhere at once, we were just as lucky as they were *unlucky*.” Karbeck sighed, not really wanting to get overly political. “If piracy is increasing as everyone thinks it is, then the Interior needs to find more funds to ensure all systems have some level of protection.”

The towering brown-furred Wookiee growled and sighed in satisfaction. Chewbacca regarded the backs of the departing students with some pride – for this marked the completion of the first full term in the new Academy – and, for two particular trainees, with fondness, for their father was his life-long friend. Han Solo was married to Leia Organa of Alderaan, who was the sister of Luke Skywalker, the greatest Jedi Master of modern times, the master who had directly instructed him. And the Solo twins, aged about seven years old, were unsurprisingly naturally gifted in the Jedi arts.

The hubbub of excited chatter receded as the pupils left the assembly chamber through the double doorway. Chewie turned and loped with his long strides towards a comms console that was situated on one side of the large round dojo, and below one of three large panoramic windows. The hovering translata-droid, *CB-2*, moved with a barely audible anti-grav hum just above and behind his left shoulder ; the Wookiee had grown used to its presence after initially refusing to accept its companionship. But since Grand Master Skywalker had encouraged him to take the teaching post here on Kashyyyk, Chewie acknowledged the practical benefits of such a droid in supporting his mentoring, a position that he found rewarding and not without a little pride.

Reaching the comms unit, he flicked a switch with a finger hidden under his great hairy paw, and growled and harrumphed. The droid above him announced that the students had left the Assembly Hall, and were heading for their private quarters to finish packing.

“Thanks Chewie,” came a human voice, “I’ll alert the shuttles on the landing pad.” Chewie barked, and the droid reminded the operator that the Wookiee was going to fly some of the students home himself. “I’ll make sure the deck officer adjusts his manifest accordingly,” the voice replied.

Satisfied, Chewie flicked the comms to silence. He glanced up at the vista seen through the broad sweeping window, and purred with affection for his homeworld. From here on the mountain side, he had an impressive view across the jungle canopy as it descended away to the horizon. This primary assembly chamber was towards the top of the bell-shaped structure, with two more windows affording views across the other valley falling away on the corresponding shoulder of the mountain. The building was still being finished, but the majority had been completed to allow for

comprehensive studying of the Force and sword training, along with full housing facilities below to ensure the students were comfortable and catered for. A landing pad for shuttles and service vehicles, and a corresponding traffic control centre, jutted out on one side as an asymmetric arm. Being Kashyyykian in design throughout, the flowing arboreal lines of the arm wove sympathetically towards and around and into the bell, which in turn was 'rooted' against the mountain side.

Chewie sighed with love for Kashyyyk. At about 215 standard years old, he had spent the majority of his life here. But when the Old Republic convulsed into the New Empire and the stormtroopers switched allegiances, circumstances meant that he found himself under Imperial slavery for a while, until he had crossed paths with the smuggler Han Solo. The pirate had freed him in return for a life chasing the credits and, when the credits didn't roll, a life on the run from the gangsters' bounty hunters. That lasted until a relatively simple and innocuous ferrying job to Alderaan propelled them into the Rebel Alliance, Death Stars, and Jedi Knights. He chuckled quietly. His life would never be the same again, and what he once knew as the *Kashyyykian Spirit Essence* he would re-identify as *The Force*.

He turned and regarded the wood panelling of the floor and wall that curved upwards to form the dome. This building *existed* precisely because of *his* involvement in the Rebellion, and that fateful commission to Alderaan that Captain Solo had taken. The rich browns and reds of the coastal timber glimmered in the late afternoon sunlight, supported by soft down-lights discreetly recessed into the walls at varying heights. The Wookiee inhaled and he could smell the familiar tones of the maritime forests. Eyes now closed, he let the aroma transport him across the jungles to the great ocean. He could *feel* the heat rising from the canopy, the salt breeze in his face, he could *feel* the weight of the ocean against his gills, the tickle of leaves against his thick hide ; he shared the planet with all other living things, and he could *feel* the Force !

Eyes still closed, Chewbacca slid into movement, a balletic flow to long furry limbs, his lightsabre inexplicably in his hand now, dwarfed by the hairy paw that lightly held it. The handle was a typical blend of local wood and machined metal parts, warm hues and cool alloy. As the blade ignited to green with the oh-so distinctive and welcoming *snap-hiss*, the Wookiee raised his arm and strode into the first of several training poses. He marched through one then another, precisely and effortlessly. His left paw met his right on the handle as the glowing sword was swirled over his head, and then down in a sweeping low cut. Chewie lightly spun on the ball of his foot, and the sword spun out high with him, then he stepped into a crouch and the lightsabre was stabbed ahead.

Immediately, the warrior rose and followed the sword point, sashaying left and right with the blade horizontal then vertical then horizontal again. The Wookiee gracefully worked his way across the breadth of the panelled chamber, the hum of the lightsabre rising and dipping as it sliced through the air. Chewie made a final pivoting spin, coming to a rest facing the assembly hall, and powering down his sword. A round of applause broke the silence as the lightsabre quietened. Chewie glanced up, and the translate-droid floated to a discreet intercept.

Kura Solo stepped forward from a smaller service doorway, still clapping, and beaming widely. CB-2 clicked to itself a few times as its memory banks identified the new arrival, and it drifted back a pace or two. The human was solidly built, with a mess of white hair and short bristle. He wore loose trousers with wide brimmed boots, but the shirt was smart and tucked in to a wide belt.

“That’s amazing, my friend,” he said, “You make it look so easy !”

The Wookiee growled and harrumphed with a shrug.

“So what if you can’t do that. Believe me, I wouldn’t know where to start even if I could ! Don’t be so hard on yourself. Give it time, and I’m sure it’ll all come together.”

Chewie barked sharply and waved a furry arm in the direction of the departed students.

“Hey, if Master Skywalker felt you were good enough to take this teaching post out here, then that’s all that matters.”

Chewie smiled and mewled softly. He clipped his sword handle to his cross-bandolier, and then growled a question.

“Oh, I’m picking up Connie. She deserves a break just as much as her students ! I’m just back from the trade talks with the Trandos....”

Chewie growled cynically.

“No, I think it’s going okay. Of course, a trade *network* should be more positive than just a deal between two parties.” He added with a grin, “That’s what we’re all hoping for, anyway !”

Chewie allowed himself a small chuckle.

Kura went on. “And I wanted to say goodbye to the grand-kids before they headed home.”

The tall Wookiee gave an affirmatory bark.

“Oh ? You’re taking them home ? Well I guess there’s no rush then. I’ll get Connie, and we can freshen up. Call us when you’re ready to go ?”

Chewie harrumphed and nodded his shaggy head. Kura clapped the Wookiee on the arm, and headed for the double doors. With a *shurrrp* the doors slid open, and the old man raised a departing hand behind him.

“Oh, and tell my royal daughter-in-law to keep my son out of mischief !”

Chewie laughed with the hearty *hu-wuff* typical of Wookiees. He turned towards the comms unit, raised his arm, and gestured with his fingers. As three switches on the unit flicked of their own accord and some operational lights changed colour, horizontal blinds slid vertically down through the three window frames, and then angled to a few degrees. The Wookiee barked a command to CB-2, and the two of them made their way out of the chamber via the service door.

Alliance General Han Solo regarded the two misfits before him. Both were humanoid, though the one on the left was a leathery-skinned *Weequay* who sported the traditional top-knot of stringy

black hair. They were dressed in loose tunics and slacks, and had small holstered handguns ; nothing overly unusual in this establishment perhaps, but there was an air of *recklessness* about them that would identify them as *pirates*. Han wore a large over-coat that half hid his trademark black vest-jacket and white shirt ; a red-hued drink of *something* sat on the table beside him. The three were seated in a booth tucked out of the way in the cantina. Han had ensured he was sat against the wall, facing into the den of drink and gambling. *Always keep an eye out for an exit*. Years of smuggling followed by a life of dodging and fighting debt hunters then Imperials, marrying a princess, accepting her Jedi powers, and nearly dying at the hands of a bogan, were all experiences that afforded him valuable life lessons. His parents, re-discovered, would laugh not unkindly in disbelief and utter amazement at his exploits, but his closest friend, the Wookiee Chewbacca, would grunt in understanding and solidarity. It had been a hard life, and Chewie had shared much of it with him.

With a mental sharpness belying his age, he snapped his attention back from the daydreaming to the cantina. He had spotted a Grundall entering the establishment shortly after these two had arrived, and the creature was now at the bar. It was about four feet tall, with a high shoulder line that pushed the ugly head forwards, and it had loped along on two reverse-jointed legs. It was nursing a drink, but was staring intently into the mirrored glass behind the barman. With one eye on the barfly, Han zoned in on what the two pirates were telling him.

“Yeah, real *Jedi* weapons,” said the first one, known as Acer. “Not just cheap replicas with a blade yer can’t trust yer life on.”

His Weequay companion nodded. “But only the best fighters get ‘em.”

“And only the most loyal”, added Acer. “But some of ‘em have those light-whips, too. Tell ‘im about those damn things, Paytrit.”

Paytrit nodded again, this time more vigorously. “Bloody dangerous ! Stoopid if ya ask me.” He leaned in as if this would add to the drama of the revelation. “A single blade that splits in to several whips ! But so difficult to control !”

Acer leaned in as well. “The number of injuries we saw from those things on the guys themselves.” He nodded. “Nasty.”

Han raised an eyebrow quizzically. “So pirates with Jedi and Bogan weapons, yeah ?” he drawled. “Sword-fightin’ an’ stuff, an’ pickin’ up self-inflicted injuries ? Nasty, right ?”

The two nodded eagerly. They were pleased to have provided him with good intel.

But Han’s tone changed sharply, and his left hand shot out and grabbed Acer’s wrist, squeezing it. “Tell me something I *don’t know*, Acer. We already know about these trophy weapons picked up from battles years ago. That ain’t new”.

Acer glanced at Paytrit, who swallowed and licked his lips nervously. Han tightened his grip and Acer winced. With his right hand still tucked under the table, Han shifted his shoulder to show that he was very probably releasing his own blaster from its holster. Paytrit gave a slight nod to Acer.

“Alright, alright,” whispered Acer. “There is something.”

Han dipped his head in acknowledgement and let go of the man's wrist, resting his hand nonchalantly on the table top.

Acer glanced around nervously. Han allowed himself a quick look at the bar, and realised that the Grundall had disappeared. *Damn !*

"Go on," he said, encouragingly.

Acer leaned in even closer, and said softly, "They've got at least two big ships. Pincer attack you see."

Acer saw that Han was about to scoff, so hurriedly added, "One of 'em's a gravity well type."

Han's eyes narrowed in interest, and Paytrit nodded and confirmed. "Very powerful electro-mag stuff."

"They pull 'em out of hyperspace, see, and then they're sittin' ducks." Acer couldn't help but grin.

Han took the glass from the table and sipped at the red liquid. Then he put the drink down.

He nodded. "Okay guys, this is good." He moved his left hand to inside his large over-coat, and pulled out two credit chips, which he placed on the table softly. "500 each."

Acer moved to complain, and Han clicked the safety off his blaster. "I wouldn't if I were you," he said quietly.

"Acer, come on," whispered Paytrit.

"Okay, Rabahtt, 500 it is." Acer nodded to Han.

Still with the quiet tone, Han asked, "When does your supply ship leave?"

Paytrit answered. "In about an hour."

"You'd better get going, then," suggested Han.

Acer glowered at Han, but Paytrit pulled his friend to his feet. The two of them shuffled towards the exit.

As Han watched them leave, he noticed the Grundall reappear in the crowd, and move towards the exit too. He quickly holstered his blaster, and pulled his coat over the gun. He took a swig from the glass, and then rose to his feet. Sliding around the table, Han made quickly for the door.

Outside, he quickly got his bearings and headed towards the hangar bays. It was evening, but the streets were lit well enough, and passers-by were going about their business. Han walked quickly past the tables of a street cafe, and turned onto a new street. Slow-blinking lights rising and descending in the sky above the roof tops confirmed that the space port was ahead.

Just then, he spotted the short Grundall loping along before it turned a corner and disappeared from view. Han picked up his pace, turned the corner, and saw Acer and Paytrit up ahead. The Grundall

had seen his quarry and also increased its pace and was soon catching up with the two pirates. Han could hear it bark something, and as the other two turned to see who had called them, he moved to a jog to intercept the group.

The Grundall was gesticulating and jabbering in a coarse guttural language. It caught up with the two pirates, and Acer started to respond.

"I don't know what you mean, we've just grabbed a quick drink before the provisions ship is ready," he answered.

The Grundall growled and barked.

"No... no... we didn't speak to anyone..."

Han could see the Grundall's right hand dropping to a blaster on his belt. He called out.

"Hey, Fordie ! Long time, no see ! How ya doin' ol' buddy ?"

Acer and Paytrit glanced up to see Han approaching, his jog now slowing down to a walk. The Grundall shifted on its feet and turned at its waist to look around and behind him.

It growled, and in guttural basic speech said, "Knew it !"

"Hey, sorry, didn't mean to..."

"Git lost !"

Han stepped closer, grinning stupidly, and opening his arms wide. "I just wanted to say hello, that's all."

"Ya sed it, nah git lost !"

But Han pushed past the short Grundall, and advanced towards Acer, lifting his hands to push the pirate on his way towards the spaceport.

"Hey !" shouted the Grundall, and grabbed at Han with a thick hand.

Han quickly twisted, snatched the Grundall's arm, and pulled it off-balance, pushing it down to the cobbled street. The creature grunted as it landed, but its jointed legs quickly snapped it back up onto its feet.

"Ya ded !" it shouted, and it threw a punch towards Han's jaw. Han anticipated the punch and side-stepped it, but the Grundall immediately followed with a left jab into Han's side. Han was barely able to block it with his arm, but used the momentum to grab at the creature and twist it over his hip and down to the ground again. The Grundall lashed out with a foot, the jointed leg extending further than Han expected, and the vicious kick sent him sprawling.

As Han rolled and clambered to his feet, he heard Acer call out in alarm. Years of instinct and reflexes honed with muscle memory brought Han's blaster into view just as the Grundall, still on the ground, was beginning an aim with its own handgun. Han barely had time to think, but the laser bolt caught the Grundall squarely in the chest, and the creature slumped back down.

Panting, Han flopped back down on to the cobbles, his blaster hanging loosely in his hand that rested on his knee.

He looked up at the two pirates who were staring at the old man who had felled the Grundall. "You kids better get goin'," he said.

Acer and Paytrit nodded and started for the port.

Han looked around and up at some of the pedestrians who had paused to watch the altercation.

"Nuthin' to see here, guys, this is Ellie work, move along, move along."

The spaceship was large. It held a vast globular structure in its middle, with interconnecting structural arms linking with the rest of the triangular flat plane flying wing. At its lead point, a squat cylindrical tower provided the control centre and command bridge a 360 degree view. At its rear lay a long narrow line of engine thrusters in assorted sizes comprising both sublight and lightspeed capability. The globe took up at least three-quarters of its overall mass, which was unsurprising for this vessel was a *Velocirrestor* gravity well ship : the device for generating and containing an artificial gravity strong enough to pull ships from hyperspace required a huge structural body. Small gun turrets dotted along the two remaining edges of the triangle provided defence.

Its design was based on prototypes developed in the latter period of Palpatine's New Empire, but this was staffed by no Imperial crew. Instead, organised and disciplined *pirates* ran a tight ship, under the watchful eye of their captain, Chekkel.

He sat in an expansive seat near the middle of the round command bridge. At its centre was an access elevator, and radiating out from there on descending stepped plates of metal decking were various command desks, with the Captain's Chair at the highest vantage point. Astro-nav map panels were located at the lowest point, near the tall glazed wall that curved all around, providing the captain and his crew an almost uninterrupted view of the horizon plane ; above the central decks the ceiling was glazed too. Looking back towards the mid-section of the ship afforded a view of the massive sphere that gave the ship its technical name.

Although Captain Chekkel was dressed flamboyantly, his personality was the exact opposite : careful, cautious, methodical, thoughtful. His brother, Yuide, an identical twin, however, was known – and feared – for his explosive tempers and sadistic temperament. They shared a similar wit, and they both respected and trusted each other. If they hadn't, they wouldn't have survived this long, they wouldn't have escaped the slums of *Corellia* all those years ago.

What stood him out as an unconventional space pirate, however, was that at Chekkel's waist hung two lightsabre handles. In fact, the majority of his crew wore sword or light-whip handles, all

'trophies' taken from the long war that had been waged against the Sith Bogan, lost on the battlefields across a multitude of worlds. Those who did not carry such energy weapons sported blasters or conventional long daggers, but all were fearsome warriors. Significantly, though, most of the crew had the sharp reflexes normally found with the Jedi, and as such any midichlorian counts of their blood samples would find noticeable amounts of those special cells that allow nearly every sentient being to be receptive to some degree to that permeating mystery known as The Force. What marked these warriors out from the Jedi in their latent ability was that very few had had any formal training to hone these skills to an advanced level, and so the talent to carry out any of the 'magical' attributes like levitation or telekinesis was largely absent. Unbeknown to most of the crew, Chekkel and his brother were gifted greatly in the raw power of the Jedi and other practitioners of the Force. Ignorant of the term *The Force*, the brothers referred to it affectionately and colloquially – and appropriately - as the *buzz*.

Chekkel swept his eyes across the starry vista before him. The ship had recently dropped out of hyperspace into the interstellar leagues that describe the unimaginably vast distances between star systems. There was no one else out here save for the odd passing comet on its own icy elliptic. If he looked carefully, he could see a slightly denser starfield to his right, and technically, he would be looking towards the core of their galaxy, where he would find the administrative home of the scourge of all hard-working pirates up and down the star systems, namely *Coruscant* and whoever was currently in judicial authority, specifically the *Pan-Alliance*.

The *buzz* whispered to him, and he turned to the holo-comms projector dais.

"Cap'n," called the comms officer, "*Troig Two* is calling in."

Chekkel nodded and focused his attention just as the dais shimmered with sound and light. Although it was a little distorted by the holocast-interference, it was uncanny to say the least to see an image of himself appear before him. The two-headed *Troig* callsign was apt. The flickering blue hologram of his twin brother Yuide spoke.

"Chek, we're nearly at your position, standby on my mark from five..."

"Engage anti-grav drain to standby level", instructed Chekkel. He could feel the *buzz* quicken and swirl around him and his ship.

As the hologram faded away, the crew smoothly went into position and readied themselves at their respective command helms. A distinct hum ran through the ship.

"Five," came his brother's disembodied voice over the general tannoy, "Four... Three... Two... One."

"Engage Anti-Grav !" Chekkel commanded, the adrenaline racing through him.

The helmsman at the Grav control station pushed a lever forward and, as the hum grew a little louder, three ships appeared suddenly on their starboard side, and, instead of advancing across the view as they decelerated, the vessels stopped hard.

"Engage holding strength, and tighten the target vectors," ordered Chekkel. The hum dropped in pitch but remained a presence.

Another ship appeared from the starboard as well, but this one smoothly swept overhead and arced back around. It was larger than the size of the convoy ships, but dwarfed by the Gravity sphere of its sister ship. Its design was quite blocky, with raiding shuttles strapped to its side and grappling mandibles with tractor beam emitters fore and aft. Primary turbo lasers bracketed the forward mandibles above and below, with secondary gun turrets positioned across the remaining four hulls ; an array of large thrust engines were offset vertically above and below the aft mandibles. Four hangar bay doors on its sides were now sliding open. *Troig Two's* ship name was *The Smash*, while its counterpart was known as *The Grab*.

As *The Smash* lined up on the convoy that sat between it and the Velocirrestor, small one-man attack fighters swarmed out from the hangars, and the raider boats detached from the sides. The smaller ships swarmed towards their prey like angry *bissps*, and then the raid parties broke off to dive for the docking stations.

Well-practiced pilots smoothly lined up the raid boats against emergency docking rings, egress tubes already extending out and reaching for the magnetic connectors. Within moments all the raid boats had found sufficient handholds and boarding access was secured.

Inside the boats the nervous tension was tempered by crew well-trained in procedure. Lined up in alternating offset positions, they held their weapons ready : blasters, long daggers and curved blades, deactivated lightsabres and lightwhips.

Across all the boats, a green light activated and a loud whoosh emphasised both boarding hatches opening. With a yell, pirates ran through the egress tubes and on to the three vessels.

On the lead convoy ship, the pirates raced through the corridors, splitting into teams of three, allowing them to systematically comb through the ship. As one section was checked and secured, one pirate was left behind as the rest pushed ahead. They would protect the teams' backs, and be the last to fall back.

While most groups flowed towards the passenger and cargo holds, one team quickly navigated its way to the command bridge.

Any armed resistance was met by blaster or blade or whip, with echoing yells and screams and charred smoke drifting through the corridors.

The trio of pirates who had pushed to the bridge found themselves against blockading double-layered blast doors. Two of the pirates stood side by side and stabbed with their lightsabres, slowly cutting two arcs that would meet at the bottom. The third pirate, a four-armed brute with two lightwhip handles and two small hand blasters defended their backs. A straffing of red laser bolts heralded four security droids marching determinedly towards them, armed with heavier two-grip blasters and a glow of flickering blue about them that marked a small personal ray-shield. The defence pirate fired off a volley of shots and downed one of the droids with several direct hits, and then, as the droids got closer, he ignited his lightwhips and strode into their midst ! With wide alternating sweeps, he cut two droids in half, jumped behind the remaining droid, and, flicking the lightwhip control to separate the single tendril into several vicious strands, he slashed down vertically across the front of the droid raking its plating and components. The droid spluttered, turned as if in shock, the knees buckled, and it collapsed in a heap. Grunting, the pirate looked

across to his comrades, who were just completing the arc. Holstering his weapons, the third pirate ran full pelt at the blast door his arms outstretched. He collided with the stencilled section, which burst through revealing the command bridge !

As he rolled to the floor grabbing his hand blasters, a volley of random blaster bolts caught one pirate at the door in the shoulder and he spun around in pain. The second pirate swung his lightsabre to parry another round of bolts. The four-armed brute just inside the bridge brought his blasters up and caught the security droid squarely in the chest.

“Surrender or die !” yelled the second pirate. Clutching his shoulder the first pirate moved past his comrades, and stabbed his lightsabre blade into the controls of the hyperdrive operating station.

The small crew held their hands aloft, and the second pirate jerked his head back towards the corridor. “Out !” he commanded.

“We-we’re just a refugee convoy,” spluttered the captain. “This is senseless and barbaric ! Wait til the Pan-Alliance hears of this...”

The pirate roughly pushed at the captain. “Zip it ! All of you to the port side corridor !”

On the bridge of *The Smash*, Captain Yuide clapped his hands together and grinned with relish. He was identical in appearance and dress to Chekkel, but there was clearly a sadistic glint to his eye. At his belt hung a *lightwhip* handle, and a curious arrangement of three short *lightsabre* handles fused together to form a ‘T’ shape.

“Activate the tractor beams, and ready the processing crew at the mandible hatches,” he instructed. “Make sure their ships are locked on tight.”

“Yes, Captain,” confirmed a helmsman.

“How many injured or killed ?” he demanded. He wasn’t enquiring after the health of the refugees he had ambushed.

Another crewman monitoring the teams checked a screen that listed all those who had participated. “Three, sir, two injured, one killed.”

Yuide growled in frustration. “Argh ! We’re not partying out here. I can’t afford to lose anyone. Double training when we get back !” he ordered.

“Yes sir !”

Yuide strode over to a comms helm, and stood behind the crewman. “Update Tagge that we’ve taken the convoy, and he’ll have the passengers and cargo shortly.”

The ever-beautiful and mesmerising marble of blue and white hyperspace swirled around the large vessel. As with most contemporary star-ship designs, it was incongruently un-aerodynamic ; but even on a planet with enough air resistance to warrant wings and fins, its four large engine thrusters and smaller discrete attitudinal directors would afford it enough manoeuvrability to keep it aloft. The main body of the ship was tube-shaped, with a high prow at the front end forming a squat ‘tower’ for the compact command bridge, and the blocky engine housing projecting out at the rear. In between, across the dorsal face were three ‘turrets’, the middle one being an array of powerful comms and sensor equipment, while those that flanked it were 270 degree rotating gun turrets. Protruding from the underside was a single 360 degree rotating gun turret. This was a Jedi Consular multi-purpose starship, an updated variant on the gunships used during the *Bogan War*.

Within the main body of the ship, three decks could be found. The lowest one housed the living quarters which comprised of a small kitchen and canteen, and sleeping and refreshment cubicles. Above was an open multi-purpose training deck, and then came rooms equipped for schooling and hosting diplomacy. Between the living and training decks ran the engineering that powered the engines, comms, and defence shields, as well as the components that ensured there was water and air for the occupants.

Master Jedi Alana Seren – now Alana Skywalker - walked between the students as they fenced with ignited lightsabres. As she studied their moves critically, she quietly exulted in the comforting *swish-hum* of the distinctive swords. Behind her golden locks, on her back was slung a carrying pouch, and in it sat a toddler of about two standard years. She wore the close-fitting tunic of the Jedi, but in light tan and white colours, marking her as a Council member ; her calf-length brown skirt swished lightly over leggings and boots as she walked. Alana carried a metal-tipped green-coloured crystalline stave with her, and would tap it on the floor in time to a rhythm that orchestrated the students in their dance.

The pupils were a variety of sentients, mainly humanoid and many were human, though some sported four sets of limbs, or carried themselves on thick serpentine tails. They were mostly all of a similar age, recognised as being between six or eight years old. There numbered twenty students, and all were grouped in twos or fours. What marked them out specifically, was their attunement and aptitude with the Force. Younger and less able padawans tended to remain in the *Principalle* Temple on Coruscant, or in some of the newer *satellite* Temples, such as the one on Kashyyyk, though it was not unheard of for some of these to accompany the older children on field trips.

Their lightsabre blades glowed with blue and green hues, which burst with golden white flashes when they came together with the characteristic *clash-sizzle*.

A poorly executed move caught Alana’s eye. “Sweep higher, Tobyn,” she instructed. “Force Jared to jump higher !”

The mystery that is the Force nudged her with a prompt, and she pivoted on her toe, turning to face the four combatants behind her. One, a female student with her hair fixed in a long pony-tail, held a light-whip, a new design based on the resurrected weapons brandished by the Sith-created bogan only a few years before.

“Amar, straighten your arm, flick your wrist, and let the tendrils lead,” she instructed. “But you three,” she said to the others, “you need to parry the tips. Don’t let any of the length attempt to wrap around your blades.”

She paused for a moment as she regarded the students’ adjustments. Suddenly, she twisted, and flicked her stave out behind and to her right. It caught a blue lightsabre blade which glanced off the green crystal with a brief flash of white, and a flick of her wrist sent the sword down towards the floor. She looked pointedly at the student with steely eyes. The group in the training room immediately paused and fell silent.

“S-sorry, Master Skywalker,” stammered the pupil. Alana could see that the *Snivvian* had large cumbersome hands, and although he had been improving his dexterity, he hadn’t improved in the area where it mattered.

“Use the Force, Kerule, not your muscles ! Don’t think where your hands need to be or how they should hold the handle, let the Force position them. Allow the Force flow from your shoulders to your fingertips.”

“Yes, Master Skywalker,” Kerule was contrite.

“That’s why this kyber stave met your blade, and not my back.” She paused. “Nor my child.”

The toddler seemed to agree with her. “Kyber stave !” he chirped.

The room exploded with laughter as the tension was broken.

“That’s right, Benji,” chuckled his mother. “My kyber stave.”

On the deck above, Grand Master Skywalker was summarising the state of the world that was to be their destination. His soft boyish face remained even after all these years of war-torn strife and personal hardship. His blues eyes twinkled with an ever-present bemusement, a sense of adventure rescinded in favour of a sense of perpetual amazement at the majesty and subtlety of the Force all around him. This youthfulness was belied by a little grey in his hair, and the soft bristle that marked his jaw-line. As if in sympathy with his greying hair, Luke’s attire was all white, in contrast to his wife, Alana, and the other Councillors. He wore the ubiquitous over-cloak that draped around him like an enveloping sleep sheet.

The students, arranged in a semi-circle before him, sat in respectful and attentive silence. The room was darkened, with the focus on the holographic displays shimmering in their centre. These were scrolling as Luke spoke, illustrating and detailing his words, outlining the current socio-economic state of the world they were tasked to aid, as well as informing the audience of its recent troubled history.

“As you can see, my friends, Serreillea was a richly arable planet, with consortiums and communes of power spread across its continents. But the bogan war ravaged this world. The psyche of her

people was of nationalism and loyalty, and they fought the Sith creatures valiantly and long. Only when Darth Monstross had sent in wave after wave of his accursed pets did the resistance fall. Rather than utilise her resources, Monstross allowed the bogan to run amok, and the fertile land was ruined. The farmers have since been rebuilding the health of the land, but old enmities over land ownership, nullified while they fought a common foe, have unsurprisingly re-surfaced.”

Luke turned from the holograms and regarded his young students.

“And that is why we have been tasked with intervening. This, your first diplomatic mission, will bring your current term to a close. We must trust in the Force that an answer will come to us.”

The students, all mixed species and of a similar age to those on the deck below, pondered their Master’s words and looked thoughtful. Luke could feel the Force tingling between them and through them, as they deliberated on the difficult situation they faced. He had to remind himself how *young* they really were, gifted in extraordinary abilities for sure, but still young and inexperienced even if they were more well-informed than most of their peers. His last crop of students, those who had served with him defending the galaxy from the bogan, had all been older than him, mature and experienced with the responsibilities and hardships of life. Until his twin sister Leia had ventured into the *Netherworld* of the departed and reunited their parents, the Force had mysteriously ceased to allow any new Force-sensitive to be born. The Skywalker Twins had been the last of those touched by the grandeur of the cosmic energy ; even Luke’s wife, Alana, was older than him, all be it by a mere seasonal cycle or two. These people before him were *still children*, and he and the other Masters were their sentinels.

He sensed the Force coalesce around a young *Rodian*.

“You have a question, Benito ?” Luke gently asked.

The Rodian’s long snout lifted, and he nodded. “Old enmities, you say ? What were old enmities, please ?” His delivery of the universal *basic* speech was fractured, but the intent came across.

Luke shifted on his feet, and slid his hands into the wide sleeves of his white Jedi over-robe.

“The Serreilleans are descended from ancient families that not only worked the lands, but fought over the precious resources. The mineral-rich silts of the flood plains, the purest water sources, the high terraced fields in the reduced atmosphere, these are just some of the elements that the farmers would desire. Neighbour would wrestle neighbour for these with sly trickery or outright violence. Even now with industrialised procedures, certain families are not above a little sabotage.”

“So, greed, then ?” summarised Benito.

“Absolutely,” agreed Luke, “A common and understandable flaw in most species, not just humans.”

“The Dark Side of the Force,” muttered another student.

Luke nodded, but tempered the insight. “A *facet* of darkness only, certainly prevalent and with ease, that might, only might, lead to a fuller subsumption by the Dark Side. We need to understand this if we are to find a way through their predicament.”

Another student, Jannee, a tall slim female humanoid with very long arms and legs, and equally long thick hair, spoke up. "We need to listen to all the factions involved, hear their concerns, and see if we can help mediate concessions," she said, towering head and shoulders above the group. "They need to come together and work as one for the good of Serreillea."

Benito shrugged. "That's why we here. Alliance Courts already tried this."

Luke nodded. Although this was the first diplomatic mission for these students, their teachings had grounded them in their understanding and insight. Now they had the opportunity to exercise their special abilities for the greater good.

"That's right, Benito," he agreed. "Our abilities as Jedi, our greater connection to the midichlorians, give us a special duty of care to others." He paused. "A position of authority that we ought not to abuse," he warned.

Jannee, one of the oldest at eight standard years, nodded earnestly, and added, "The *judiciary* of the Force gives us a sense of the rightness of a person or a situation..."

Luke quickly interjected. "But know that the Dark Side implemented deliberately and masterfully will shroud our judgement. Our Jedi Elders tell us that Chancellor Palpatine moved freely among the Jedi of the old Republic, and no suspicions were raised."

The students shifted uneasily, aware of their history lessons.

Luke continued. "Normally, when we're not being tricked by sly Sith Lords, the *Unity* of the Force allows us to divine the history of a person or a place that in turn might show us the path ahead. This informs us in tandem with the *moral guidance* from the Force, and the Jedi are then able to carry out their role as mediator or judge. When your actions feel right and untroubled then you are following the *Whill* of the Force.

"But as you know, 'seeing the future' is not at all easy, even for a Jedi. Some of you have already been exploring this ability, but on a small personal scale. It requires the most focused of mind, the greatest of control. In this state we walk a very fine line to see with any clarity."

Jannee spoke again, this time from insight. "I've tried Master Billaba's exercises to predict the future, but the variety of paths that I see are bewildering..."

Luke nodded in understanding and sympathy.

"You not only have to quieten your mind to allow the meditation to occur in the first place," he explained. "But you need to then exert the control required to discipline that quiet mind ; only then might you find the most likely of outcomes."

He went on. "The Force allows us to glimpse many possible near-futures. With deeper meditation, we might see further, but with less clarity. The Force can show us past events and other places ; it *can* show us the future. Finding the right balance between the *Living Force* and the *Unifying Force* when we meditate helps us see these things."

"Living moment by moment," Benito remarked.

“Yes,” affirmed Master Skywalker. “We must focus ourselves fully in the *now*, if we are to look back to the *nether* and glimpse ahead to the *next*.”

The students quietly pondered his words. *The nether, the now, the next*. The eddies of the Force matched the restless movement at the back of the group, and Luke focused his attention there.

Kinjara raised his hand. Luke recognised him as one eager to know the Academy’s gossip, one who would feel bereft if he missed out on anything that could be informative, especially if it was exciting or sensational. Luke smiled to himself.

“Yes, Kinjara ?” he prompted.

“Master, we heard a rumour that your sister can actually travel to other places using the Force... she can teleport ? Is this true ?”

Jannee sighed. “Oh, Kinji, give it a break !”

Luke chuckled. “That sounds a particularly supernatural power, even for a Jedi. What do you think ?”

“I don’t know. We should use the Force for knowledge and understanding, in our minds it can help us identify people and reveal places far away. But to physically go to those places ?” Kinjara shook his head. “I guess not.”

As Jannee and some of the others broke into a muffled commotion over Kinjara’s bold question, Luke turned away and glanced at the window controls on a nearby console, pretending to be preoccupied. It was imperative that his sister’s unique ability was kept secret for as long as possible, even from the majority of the new Jedi Order. Only a very few knew of it, and they recognised how dangerous it could become if it were to be exploited, regardless of loyalty and agenda.

Although the students had been attentive to his lecture, he could tell they needed to experience this unity between the Living and the Cosmic for themselves. As he had just acknowledged, future-sight wasn’t an easy ability, it required the most balanced of mind. But he knew of a useful trick that he used to employ when learning to meditate deeply.

“Let us take this opportunity to connect the Living Force with the Unifying and make it as one, and in so doing, we might glimpse the *Cosmic Force*.”

He gestured with his fingers. The holograms faded away, and the shutters covering the ship’s portholes slid silently to one side. The bright marbling bathed the chamber in flickering blue and white.

“Face the windows and settle yourselves,” instructed Luke. “Gaze into the beauty of hyperspace and let yourselves go.” As the students complied, he continued to speak. “Allow the majesty and the humility of the Force to enter you and guide you... feel the Force around you and within you... feel it connect you to your neighbour... and to the ship... and to the reality of hyperspace... let the Force tell you where you are about to go...”

Leia Solo walked gracefully under the shade of wide canopied trees on the side of a cobbled road. The two suns were warm and clear in the blue-pink sky, fortuitous considering the event that was due to take place a little later. She wore a loose fitting dress, cinched at the waist with a braided rope belt, and velvety high boots. Her dark brown hair was tied back at several points in a long single ponytail. Her outfit and hairstyle did not look out of place amongst the other pedestrians milling around her. Leia's eyes sparkled as she took in the spectacle around her. She retained her delicate features, though lines were beginning to show at the sides of her eyes, and soft streaks of grey had begun to highlight her hair. She carried no bag and wore no weapon.

The road led towards some market stalls, before cutting directly into the civic heart of the city where the coronation was to take place at midday. Crowds were moving in that direction, a joyous excited chatter among the people, and Leia was happy to be carried along by the buoyant mood.

The smell of sweet pastries caught her attention, and she angled her way through the crowds towards an open stall, where she found a cheery baker and his apprentices working easily over a hot plate, with ovens behind and counters to the side. The multitude of sweet and savoury pastries were partnered with cards describing their fillings and their prices. The wide awning gave some shade from the bright suns, and Leia was grateful to dip under it and wait beside a customer being served. The chatter was all about the new monarchy and today's pomp and ceremony.

"Isn't this exciting?" cooed the lady beside Leia. She was on the large side and Leia was not at all surprised that she had made a beeline for the sweet pastries. Three young children fidgeted at her side, eager for the snacks. "We haven't had a coronation for many years!"

"That's right," agreed the Master Baker. "We deserve some excitement now, if you ask me. The Royals and their ministers say it's time for a change, so I'm hoping that it's a change for the better."

"Oh, I know, that run of republican convenes and commissions were rife with scandal and corruption, they did nothing for the people, and thought only of their own precious position."

The baker nodded, but said wisely, "No one is ever immune from selfishness, dear lady, but I think there is a change on the wind now." He waved his hand expansively. "Just look at everyone here today, that's testament to the new feeling in the country."

With a deft flick of the wrist, he wrapped the last of the pastries in a paper bag, and announced the price.

"Keep the change!" announced the lady grandly as she handed over the money. With the children clamouring for their treats, she led the entourage away.

Leia smiled her characteristic wry grin and lifted an eyebrow. "Well that looks like the most popular pastry here. I'll take one please."

"Certainly madam," answered the baker briskly.

"And judging by the crowds and the conversation just now, I get the feeling that the new monarchs will receive an equally warm reception...?"

“That they will !” he beamed. “You’re not from round here, then ?” he asked, as he collected a freshly warm sweet pastry bun.

“No,” replied Leia smoothly, “From the other continent. But I couldn’t miss this for the world ! I just had to make the journey across to see this historic occasion !”

“It certainly is ! They’ve promised many changes, and all for the better, and I for one think it’s going to happen this time !”

“The previous rulers weren’t so good... ?” began Leia.

The baker shook his head, and leaned in closer. “Corruption, scandal, privilege, you name it, they had it and we endured it. Ever since the old Empire fell. We never got wind of any benefits that the new lot might have offered us, but now there’s a chance of rebuilding our trade routes with local systems again.”

The baker took a paper bag, slid the bun inside, and twisted it close.

Leia nodded in sympathy. “Let’s hope so !”

She handed him some small change, and the baker gave her the wrapped bun.

“Thankyou, and good day to you,” she said.

“And to you, madam !”

Smiling, Leia turned and rejoined the crowd as it steadily moved through the streets. She slipped the bun to the top of the bag and munched on it as she walked. There was a joyous mood about the air, expectant but carefree. She allowed herself to move with the flow.

Up ahead, she could see a plaza open out with colonnaded arcades on the sides fronting more expensive shops and boutiques. Several groups of crowds were converging at the square and being marshalled on again. Leia couldn’t see the exit, but could tell that the crowds were being directed through a building.

As her group flowed through the plaza, she turned to one of the chattering people now crowded next to her.

“Excuse me,” she said and nodded ahead. “Do you know where we’re being directed ?”

“Yes,” replied the stranger. “Through the Grand Halls, which have been decked out with paintings, sculptures, and costumes describing the history of the Royal Family.”

“You’ll see the Coronation dais when you come out, it’s on the other side,” added another person.

“Oh, okay, thankyou,” answered Leia, but she visibly stiffened and appeared to steel herself for what lay ahead. She took a breath, calming and centring herself, and let the crowd – and the Force – carry her forward.

Journeyed to the Netherworld you have, came a familiar voice, and returned you did. If the inverted syntax didn’t provide enough of a clue, the characteristic gravelly voice of the *supercenten-*

nonagenarian certainly did : Yoda, the small and venerable Grand Master of the Jedi Order of the Old Republic, erstwhile mentor for her brother Luke, who had died about twelve standard years ago. Hearing his voice did not come as a shock to Leia ; rather, it helped comfort and focus her. The wise words came from afar but were carried through the Force, for Master Yoda was one of only a very few Jedi who had learned to retain their identity after death. *No different is this path, the voice continued, only different in your mind. Unlock your constraints, you must, if you are to learn to move more freely.*

“Yes, Master,” muttered Leia quietly to herself. *Though it was I, she thought, not you, I alone who broke through to the Netherworld, even to Hell, and safely returned.* She briefly recalled her experience in that Tatooine grotto meditating with the Shaman of the Whills, where she was not only reunited with her adopted parents and her paternal grandmother, but also her biological parents, and the monsters that had kept them shackled in that deepest and darkest of mysteries. Monsters she hoped that were now finally gone.

The crowd was dense now, and there was no way Leia could have broken to the side to escape the relentless forward momentum. She could see the proscenium arch high above her head, and could discern the heads of statues and the top edges of paintings above the well-wishers.

As the shadow line inexorably pushed towards her and engulfed her, Leia took a sharp involuntary breath, as if she were falling under water. The crowd funnelled into the decorated Grand Hall, and one of its members faded from sight.

Those immediately beside Leia noticed the lady disappear, but they were so distracted by the joyous mood and the decorations coming into view, that their brains could hardly comprehend the logic of what they had just witnessed, and, seeing no evidence of a person fallen to the ground and in danger of being trampled upon, the easier option was to simply forget.

Leia opened her eyes, and exhaled. She wasn't annoyed or even frustrated, just resigned as she accepted the same outcome as previous occasions. *She still could not enter a man-made structure !*

She sat cross-legged in loose white Jedi tunic and grey trousers on a raised cushioned dais in a dimly lit room. She was back in the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. She had just been in the midst of the celebratory crowd on Winsha, the primary world of the multi-planet system, that was about to welcome its new Monarchs, the first in decades. Not just projecting an image of herself through the Force, but actually there in physical form. She had felt the cobbled road under her boots and the warmth from the twin suns on her face, she had interacted with the baker and the others, she had even given the artisan some local coins to pay for the sweet pastry, which she had eaten heartedly. When she had *travelled* from the Tatooine grotto she was aware that she was merely a fleeting spirit among other such ghosts ; here, as with previous exercises that focused her mind with even sharper clarity, she was tangibly on another world. But, and this was the rub, she was finding she could only re-appear in an organic natural environment. And all the while, her *origin body* remained *anchored* in a safe place : this private meditation chamber hidden deep within the old Jedi Temple.

Every failure is a lesson, came Yoda's encouragement from afar.

"I know," she said aloud, wearily.

She gently eased her legs out from underneath, and slid her feet to the cool floor. One leg was cybernetic, but she hardly noticed it now. "At least we know for certain that the King and Queen of Winsha, who are being crowned right *now*, have a strong wave of popularity supporting them."

Yuide stood with his hands on his hips, almost daring the Imperial Captain to complain. The manifest droid was chuntering away to itself as it downloaded the resources into the Star Destroyer's mainframe. The Imperial vessel's vast primary hangar bay towered above them, and the echoes of the hustle and bustle bounced around the far walls.

"We don't want to waste our time with refugees who can't lift the machinery," said Captain Inchpace gruffly.

"With the right encouragement, they'll do your work," countered Yuide. "The food provisions and oil will help your effort, not to mention the personal wealth that we lifted."

"Don't presume to know our intentions, *pirate*," snapped Inchpace quickly.

Yuide bristled, and his right fist clenched. The Imperial Captain looked startled and took a step back, his hands involuntarily grabbing at his throat. He gasped for air.

"I answer to Tagge, not you," he spat. His right arm spasmed in angry tension, and then he relaxed his fist. The invisible choke hold was withdrawn.

Captain Inchpace took a deep shuddering breath, his eyes wild, and he nodded.

Suddenly, like a changeling, Yuide gave a wide grin as if nothing untoward had happened. "Be seein' ya !" he flicked a lazy salute with his hand, and turned his back on the captain. He strode back to the shuttle that sat on the shiny floor. He could see beyond to the hijacked transports held fast in the Star Destroyer's powerful tractor beam ; pneumatic grab-arms held them above the gaping ventral opening of the bay, and boarding tubes stretched across the intervening space.

The fate of the ships and their occupants did not even cross Yuide's mind ; this was business, that's all. With a jog, he climbed the boarding ramp and entered his shuttle.

"Get us outa here," he growled, as he stepped into the cockpit cabin.

"Right away, sir," confirmed the pilot. A whine began to sound through the ship as the initiators were powered up and the engines engaged.

Yuide looked out through the cockpit window at the Imperial captain receding towards the primary entrance doors. He didn't care to be enchained like this to Tagge, but the Imperials were paying handsomely for the work he and his brother were doing. What he didn't like to admit to himself was

the sour taste of blackmail that bound them to this duty. While their younger sister was held captive by the Governor, they were constrained by a tight leash. He silently cursed Tagge, all that was left of the Remnant Empire now struggling to rebuild, and their own lapse in judgement and security, for their family's predicament. He vowed to rescue Robbiee-Luiee, and reunite the core they once were.

Yuide gripped the back of the pilot's seat as the shuttle lifted, and his reverie was broken. The ship tilted slightly as it rotated, then advanced over the gaping bay. It dropped smoothly clear of the Star Destroyer, and then accelerated towards the *Smash*. They were in deep space and no star system was nearby. All the resource transfers took place at random interstellar coordinates ; neither party wanted to be traced.

A ping broke the silence in the cabin, and a voice from the mothership came through.

"Captain Yuide, this is the comms officer from *The Smash*." The crewman sounded brisk and disciplined.

"Captain, I'm hearing reports of a pirate raid at Bayakov Two. That's only three parsecs away. The target is calling for assistance."

"Assistance ?" smirked Yuide. "We could give'em assistance, alright !" His eyes gleamed. "Monitor the traffic, and update me if anything changes."

"Yes Cap'n."

There was an audible click as the comlink with *The Smash* disconnected. Without prompting, the co-pilot tapped some switches and within moments a scaled down upper torso of his twin brother appeared above a holo-pad on the dashboard in flickering blue and white.

"What is it Yuide ?" Chekkel knew his brother wouldn't have called him after such a routine and pedestrian handover to the Imperials.

Yuide smiled. "Chekkel, how do you fancy a little pirate raid before we head home ?"

"Sounds good to me," came his brother's voice. "No harm in supplementing our Imperial fee."

"Just what I was thinking," Yuide grinned.

Han lay on his bunk in the private cabin of the *Falcon*. His eyes were closed but he wasn't asleep. His mind was turning over the recent events on Lenovell, and what Acer and Paytrit had revealed. He had removed his shirt, and the dumpy astro-mech droid, Artoo Detoo, had extended a utility arm to interrogate the cardio-support unit embedded in Han's chest. Although the droid couldn't easily communicate without his *Goldenrod* counterpart, with Chewie's time partly taken up with the Jedi mentoring, Han had found him a reliable co-pilot. Ever since that fateful passenger charter to *Alderaan* all those years ago, the droid had grown on him like a comfortable but ragged old coat, too sentimental to junk in favour of a newer model. And if old droids' maintenance schedules lapse in

memory flushes, it tends to make for a quirky personality, and Artoo, with no known mem-recycle for quite a while, was no exception.

The droid beeped and whistled to itself, but since the tone wasn't in any alarm, Han wasn't too concerned about its diagnostics. Artoo's arm clicked and whirred as it completed the survey, and then withdrew with a pneumatic hiss into one of the front compartments.

"All clear?" Han asked, not unkindly. Artoo replied brightly with a melody of beeps and woos.

"Well that sounds good enough to me, then," he grinned. Swinging his legs off the bunk, Han grabbed his shirt, threw it around his shoulders and shoved his arms through. "We'll be coming up on *Coruscant* soon," he announced. "Why don't you go check the braking dampeners?"

Artoo whistled happily, spun on his three wheels, and scooted out of the cabin.

Han got to his feet, and winced slightly. He rubbed his back. "Gettin' too old for this sort o' thing," he muttered. He grabbed his over-jacket, glanced around, and then left the cabin. He moved through the rear hold and primary maintenance bay where Artoo was already at work, past the escape pod bay and the starboard boarding hatch, and into the cockpit corridor. As he stepped into the iconic cockpit the marbling light of hyperspace did not distract him for it was as familiar to him as his trusty hand blaster ever-holstered at his belt. Instead, he clambered into his captain's seat, and checked the readouts before him.

He leaned back in his chair and flicked some switches just behind his left shoulder, and then leaned forward to grasp the hyper-drive handles at the centre of the dashboard. With the navi-computer chrono-display in the corner of his eye and its prompt alert lighting up, he smoothly pushed forward on the levers, and the blue-white swirl quickly resolved itself into pinpoints of starlight and the massive planet-wide vista of metropolitan *Coruscant*.

Han couldn't help but marvel, as always, at the sight before him. A bored voice broke his reverie.

"This is Coruscant Air Control", the comm transponder announced. "Prepare to be picked up by auto-control, and declare your destination so you can be routed accordingly. Customs will be in touch shortly."

Han smiled at the bureaucratic protocols, but settled back in his seat as the navi-computer liaised with Air Control.

"Where *is* Artoo when I need him??" See-Threepio moaned at the locking mechanism on the trunk. The students' luggage was piled high on one of the hovering repulsor-lifts next to the Academy; the landing platform stretched away behind him and elevated above the side of the mountain. Other protocol droids, bipedal and multi-wheeled, were busying themselves with luggage and inventories, while all around were groups of excited chattering pupils, eager to begin their journeys home. Shuttle craft sat at intervals on the pad under the cloudless blue sky, with some being re-fuelled while others were ready for lift-off.

“Let me help you with that, Threepio,” came a woman’s kindly voice. The droid turned and registered the old lady as Connie Solo. She bent over and deftly flicked switches and pressed buttons, and the trunk’s lock snapped shut with a satisfying *click* !

“Oh, thankyou, Professor Solo,” complimented Threepio. “I was afraid your grandson had too much in the trunk.”

Connie laughed. “That sounds like Gana.” She paused, and then, laying her hand on his golden-hued plating, said wistfully, “Look out for them, will you, Threepio ? They may have inherited their mother’s powers, but they’re like any other seven year old And don’t forget the Solo precociousness - Corsa’s not an angel, either !”

Although Threepio had had extensive experience as a diplomatic aide, the irony was a little lost on his nuance processors. With utter seriousness, he responded determinedly. “Yes, ma’am, absolutely. Being entrusted with their care is an honour and I will uphold my duty to the best of my ability. Why, I feel certain that their stay here during this last semester has not only been educational but socially enlighten--”

“Threepio !” The jovial bark came with a hearty slap on the droid’s shoulder plate. Kura Solo grinned at the flustered protocol droid, as Gana and Corsa Solo followed beside, hugging their grandfather tightly at the waist. “Good to see you again ! Glad to see you’ve got the kids’ luggage in order !”

Connie beamed at her husband, kissed him lightly on the lips, and then scooped up her grandchildren into her arms. She sighed loudly with the love that only a grandmother feels for her wards. “Ohh, this is lovely ! If only I could bottle this and take it with me !”

The twins giggled. They both wore dark brown hair, the boy sporting an unruly mop, the girl with a neat array of tight buns hiding the length. They had inherited the delicate features from their mother, but the assured innate confidence of their father. They wore variants of the tan coloured tight-cinched tunics of Jedi, adjusted for their age and height.

“Aww, grandma,” cooed Corsa. “You saw us yesterday, in the lecture hall.”

“Ah, well,” said Connie, with mock seriousness. “That was me as your professor of anthro-socio studies. *This* is me as your grandma !” She hugged them both even tighter.

Gana glanced up at Kura, and the older man’s heart flipped as he saw a young Han Solo looking back out from behind the eyes. “Grandpa, are you and Gran coming home with us today ?”

“No, not today, sorry, Garny,” Kura answered. “I’ve got a few things left to sort out with the Trandos, and your Grandma has to finish up here at the Academy.”

“But we’ll be back down again soon, sweethearts,” added Connie. “We promise.”

Threepio flustered a little and gestured his arms to catch their attention.

“Well, young Solos, I do believe it’s time to board the shuttle soon. We don’t want to be late, do we ?”

“Hey, Goldenrod,” Gana replied flippantly. “Chewie’s taking us home, so we’re not going anywhere until he’s here !”

“Gana !” Connie spoke sternly. “I can’t fault your logic, but at least pay Threepio a little respect !”

Gana glanced down, contrite. “Sorry, Threepio, I know you only want us to be ready.”

Corsa, whose eyes sparkled like her mother’s, defended her brother. “Thankyou for getting our luggage sorted, Threepio.”

“Why, that’s quite alright, Mistress Corsa, it was my pleasure.”

In the distance an engine whine began to ascend, catching their attention, and one of the shuttles gently rose from the platform.

Just then, a hearty but friendly roar bellowed across to them, and, turning, they saw Chewbacca striding towards them, waving a huge hairy paw. The Wookiee wore a short cream-ochre patterned poncho, loosely open at the front, the white piping of which denoted him as a Jedi Mentor. His bandolier could be seen across his chest through the opening, and his wood-metal lightsabre swung from its clip as he walked. All sense of respectful solemnity between Teacher and Student dissolved away, and the Solo Twins, calling out his name, ran excitedly to their shaggy guardian, wrapping their arms around his legs.

Chewie effortlessly scooped them up high and into the crook of each arm. He strode to the older Solos, and stopped. He barked and harrumphed a question at Threepio, and cocked his head to one side.

“That is correct, Master Chewbacca,” answered Threepio primly. “Everything is accounted for. We have another eight students travelling with us, and their flightplans have been inputted into the shuttle’s navi-computer. Their service droids are just finishing loading their trunks into the cargo bays. We should be ready to leave soon.”

Chewie nodded, and then turned to the older humans. He growled and harrumphed, and Kura nodded. “Yes, once the trade negotiations have been finalised, Connie and I will make our way in to Coruscant and catch up with everyone.”

Satisfied, Chewie gently lowered the Twins to the floor of the landing platform, leaned over to Kura and gave him a hug. Then he turned to Connie, and, offering a quiet growl and purr, gently embraced her too.

“Yes, I’ll miss you too, Chewie,” whispered the old lady. “Thanks for all your support and encouragement this term.”

Chewie stood up and nodded, and then gave a bellow, gesturing towards one of the shuttles on the pad.

Threepio turned and activated the repulsor-lifts on the luggage sled, which rose softly a few feet into the air. As the golden droid stepped towards the waiting ship, the sled followed at his side.

“Come on, Chewie !” called Gana. “What are we waiting for ?!” He ran to catch up with Threepio.

Kura and Connie laughed. Corsa gave her grandparents a final quick hug, and then ran after her brother.

Connie looked up at Chewie and gave him a wry look. "Good luck with them," she smiled.

"No-one argues with a pilot, and definitely not a Wookiee pilot !" laughed Kura. "They'll be fine. See you soon !"

The grandparents raised their hands in farewell, as did Chewie, who turned and loped after the others.

Governor Cassius Tagge, Grand Moff to the Imperial Remnant, was a shrewd and cautious man, knowledgeable and authoritative. His family was one of the wealthiest and influential in the Galaxy, having supported the Old Republic for many centuries, and in turn loyal to the New Order of Palpatine's Empire ; in fact, his father, a high-ranking general, had perished on the first Death Star. With the relatively brief Second Empire spearheaded by Palpatine's deputy, Mas Amedda, the younger Tagge remained loyal, and in doing so, he ensured a more comprehensive control on the Imperial Territories that persisted following the Battle of Endor. Armies and navies need to be fed and resourced, and he was more than happy to take on such a critical role, especially since it bought him populist attention and support : feed the people, fight their corner, and they will follow you anywhere. That's not to say he could not govern with an iron hand when the need arose. He supported Palpatine precisely because the Emperor instigated a clearly structured martial rule, and there was no doubt about it, peace reigned for twenty years. The Rebel Alliance was not an unexpected nuisance, he conceded, but they got lucky, that's all.

What Tagge didn't care for was the sorcery and the unnatural, those things that epitomised Palpatine's singular henchman *Darth Vader*, and in turn that which that warlock Amedda seemed to bring to his rule and ultimately rely on. Declaring himself a Sith Lord – whatever that was – and announcing himself as *Darth Monstross*, any sense of military regimen went out of the window and against all that his loyal servants stood for. Those vile creatures he had apparently brought back from a centuries old grave, *the bogan*, may have brought the upstart New Alliance to its knees but they had also stripped the Galaxy of its resources, its life, its *spirit*. Suffice to say, he was not sorry when his Second Emperor was toppled from power. In the last nine standard years or so, he had heard of the rise of the new Jedi Order, based on the ideals of those traitors from ancient history. He may not have witnessed them first-hand until recently, but he had heard enough to surmise that they were a *whiter* version of Vader and Monstross ; they supported this new *Pan-Alliance* with their own type of magic tricks, but seemed happy to only apply them to negotiations. In short, he was certain they were not to be trusted.

All the more imperative, then, for his Empire to rise, and to rise swiftly and with strength. Through Amedda's last few years, his policy to depend on his bogan rather than the assured might of the military was not only his undoing but also that of the Imperial Remnant. Answering first to his accursed Legion Commanders – sorcerers all of them - Tagge and the other regional governors were sidelined and rarely able to seek a private audience with the Second Emperor, and so were stymied

in their judicial mandate to promote and re-establish a significant defence. But once the Emperor and his creatures had gone, Tagge, manoeuvring himself to the position of Grand Moff, needed to implement a program of re-armament to counter the populist strengths of the Pan-Alliance. Since his Remnant had been compelled to the table to negotiate territory and trade this needed to be done in secret so as not to arouse suspicion. Whilst the humiliating compromises took place, Tagge's strategic mind led him to clusters of pirates, and to one band in particular : the *Troig Gang* appeared to be not only very lucky in their successes against Imperial convoys, Alliance-loyal, and Neutrals alike, but he had been impressed with the tight running of their organisation. It was almost military, and even worthy of an Imperial Award ! Further investigations resulted in an ambush on the Troig's outpost, and although it cost him heavy losses, the prize was more than worth it. Now Yuide's Troig Gang worked for him, and with their winning abilities, solely for him ; the fact that the sister was his hostage also gave him great leverage in his control over them. She served him too : Tagge recognised the brilliant tactical mind behind the gang, and enslaved it with a mental inhibitor, ensuring that it was now *Imperial strategy* that was proposed and analysed.

In fact, Robbiee-Luiee sat next to him, here at this long conference table. Her long dark brown hair was bound tightly by the wrap-around headset that circled across her forehead. Her face was inanimate, but the eyes shone brightly as her sparkling mind, enhanced by the secondary processor, spun at lightspeed through the ramifications of what was being discussed today. *Am I not merciful ?* Tagge often thought. *Enslavement ?!* he scoffed. *No, the Troig Gang were masters of the stellar seas thanks to his Velocirrestor gift, and the strategic mind of Robbiee-Luiee, the beautiful Robbiee-Luiee, knew no bounds.*

Regarding the lithe figure beside him brought Tagge back to the present, and the latest negotiations with the Pan-Alliance. His most senior Imperial advisor, Bors Sunjon, sat on the other side of him, and was the one currently talking. At the far end of the table sat the revered Mon Mothma, the political and moral leader of the old rebel alliance. Her face was still the chiselled beauty it was when she used to speak out in Palpatine's Senate, but her hair was white now unsurprisingly. It couldn't have been easy keeping the ragtag rebels together, and for the last five years or so her *theatre of war* had been on a much larger social scale, dealing with the likes of economic investment and refugee relocation. Behind Mon Mothma stood the ubiquitous Jedi bodyguard, a presence ever since the assassination attempt at the climax of the *Bogan War*. The Jedi was a blue female *Twi'lek*, and stood with hands clasped over the long brown robes that apparently represented simplicity.

To the left of Mothma sat the venerable Admiral Ackbar, an orange-skinned bug-eyed *Mon Calamari*, and Sandar Lightbridge, a military general, as well as a representative of the Senate. On Mothma's right sat Leia Solo, erstwhile Princess of *Alderaan* but now representing the Jedi Council, and beside Leia was a *Muun* banker and a Commerce Guild droid. Tagge was quietly content that his Imperial interests *aligned* with those of the Galactic Banking Syndicates and the commercial networks ; the military were always a known quantity and predictable, as were the sycophantic politicians. Leia and the Jedi Order, though, were a different matter, and it was she who interested him the most.

Tagge's eyes narrowed as he regarded the lady across to his left. Leia was now in her early thirties, married to the infamous Captain-General Han Solo, and mother of two young Jedi students. Her dark brown hair was greying slightly at the temples, and, from this distance, he felt she looked tired. But she appeared calm and focused as she listened to what had been discussed, not once uttering any

comment. He had heard rumours about her life and skill as a Jedi, and he wanted to goad her into speaking, hoping that would provide him with insight.

Bors was discussing the impact of trade deals on the Imperial territories. Tagge's adviser was a short wiry human, very precise and considered in his actions and posture, and equally exact in his words.

"But, ma'am, I'm sure you understand the difficulties inherent with our colonies in Far Golia, colonies that the Pan-Alliance stipulated," Bors smiled. "The current agri-deals mean that by the time the produce reaches the settlements, much of it is rancid. From simply a humanitarian point of view, we must seek a better solution."

As Mon Mothma turned to her right to address the banker and the droid, Cassius Tagge lifted his chin, and called out. "Master Solo, what say you? Surely this is a classic situation that in the past would have called for wise words from the Jedi Order..." Tagge smiled benignly as he dipped his head towards her in deference.

Leia's dark brown eyes met his gaze solidly.

"I think the agri-deals are not at fault here. They were negotiated at length, some say deliberately so. The Alliance and the Jedi Order sympathise with the plight of your people, and we are happy, I'm sure," Leia turned her head briefly to Mon Mothma, "to provide any humanitarian assistance we can once we have reviewed the situation on the ground for ourselves."

Admiral Ackbar nodded in consent, and in his gravelly voice said, "But without permission for our ships to enter Imperial Remnant Space, we sadly cannot help at this time." He raised his wide flipper-like hands in acknowledgement and gently rested them back down upon the table.

"You are correct, Admiral," replied Tagge smoothly, "that we vigorously maintain our boundaries. There is the matter of borderland piracy, of course, not to mention protecting the mental and emotional fortitude of our people in those far colonies. We must think of their safety first... and their nourishment. If the Alliance wishes to seek a more fuller galactic peace, then ensuring a more satisfying meal in their bellies will undoubtedly keep the people of the galaxy satiated."

The humanoid droid representing the interests of the Commerce Guild began to speak. "Currently we are unable to justify faster vessels for such *ootmian* regions. Therefore..."

"No-one in my governance is an *outlander*, droid, and I would have your memory circuits remember that! Their astro-location is as unquestionable as their allegiance to the Imperial cause."

"Governor Tagge," replied Mothma smoothly, "No-one is casting aspersions on class or economic status..."

"I think," interjected Leia, "that the Commerce Guild is simply reminding us that speed is of the essence in delivering refrigerated food supplies, confounded further by the distances involved. We both know, Governor, that only vessels of war would have hyperdrives powerful enough to transport such goods efficiently, and until the Imperial Remnant allows the arrival of such ships we do not want to find ourselves in a position of unintentional war-mongering."

The Muun banker leaned in. "Perhaps it's simply a case of identifying a mutually convenient location and time where Alliance ships could rendezvous near your borders ? I can assure you, Governor, that I speak for everyone here when I say we do not want to descend into war again."

"The banking syndicate speaks wisely," offered Leia. "The Alliance vessels could be escorted by an oversight body to ensure there is no need for tensions."

"They would have to be neutral to the Alliance, though, not Ellies or Jedi," Bors put in quickly.

"Then can I suggest members of the Senate or the Judiciary, perhaps ?" said Senator Aouil. "By definition they would be unarmed and pose no threat."

Tagge nodded, and he gestured slightly with his right hand commanding Robbiee-Luiee. The woman's slender fingers swiftly tapped calculations into the datapad that rested on the table in front of her. After a moment, she turned the pad slightly towards Tagge who glanced down at the screen, and then smiled broadly.

A small stellar holo-display of astro-navigational charts appeared in separate clusters above a projector in the centre of the table.

"We propose any of these locations...." began Tagge.

"As an old sailor, that one," pointed Ackbar, "is too close for comfort to the Treevorrow supernova..."

Leia squinted at the charts. "And I believe that one has suffered much piracy in recent times. I propose the Fane Divoni or Javrow systems would be more suitable."

Tagge smiled broadly, and spread his hands. "Then let's work towards setting this up as soon as possible ! Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure our teams can hammer out the details. I'm glad we've found a mutually agreeable solution to this, and I look forward to updating my colonies."

"Governor," the Pan-Alliance General piped up. "Before we leave, may we bring up the matter of *Winsha* in the *Buckham* sector ?"

Tagge turned his attention to the General. His tunic bore a long line of rank flags and service medals. General Sandar Lightbridge was well known and well respected among all the divisions of the military, and had risen rapidly as a strategist through the rebellion following the destruction of the first Death Star.

"Winsha, General Lightbridge ?" asked Tagge pleasantly. "What of it ?"

"As you know, the Buckham sector lies close to the disputed territories bordering the space assigned to your Remnant. It has come to our attention that recent sovereign changes are promoting a new constitutional policy, one that is more outward-looking and liberal than before."

Tagge knew of the sector and the world, of course. Imperial intentions were to invade and suppress the Winsha system and its neighbourhood whilst in the disarray of its transitional period, and exploit its resources.

“Sovereign changes ?” reflected Tagge lightly. Initial reports had come to him verifying the populist royal family was to re-take the seat of power, but whilst he was here in the Galactic Capital any new and non-urgent developments would have to wait ; besides he was in the heartland of his enemy, and he could never be sure that his private communications were as secure as he would like. Imperial sensors and probes would have detected any Alliance vessels entering Imperial space or the so-called disputed borderlands, and nothing had been reported before he had embarked for the latest negotiations here.

He noticed Mothma subtly turn her head to the right, and of Leia’s eyes flickering to acknowledge the motion.

“We have it on very good authority, Governor,” announced Mothma, lifting her chin high, “that the Coronation has taken place. The Pan-Alliance would like to see that its world and its sector remain independent to allow them to make their own decisions regarding their Galactic policy.”

Lightbridge nodded. “Any Imperial intimidation will not be tolerated, Governor. Our allied forces are keen to promote peace and for each civilisation to find their own path as we all move forward.”

Mothma raised her hands in an all-encompassing gesture. “Let the new monarchy of Winsha rebuild itself, just as your Imperial Remnant needs to rebuild itself, and let it be a metaphor for the Galaxy as a whole as it too rebuilds. We have already assured ourselves that no-one wishes to see the ravages of the Bogan War again, nor the tyrannical suppression of a Palpatine Empire.”

Tagge leaned back in his chair, and regarded the assortment across the table. He nodded. “Well said, President Mothma. Let *rebuilding* be our motto ! I am sure we can all find a mutually beneficial way forward.”

He paused.

“Now, you’ll have to excuse us, but until the next scheduled meetings, we must take our leave. Thank you again !”

Everyone rose to their feet, and bade formal farewells. As Mon Mothma and her entourage left, Tagge watched Leia Solo closely.

She certainly is a sharp one, thought Tagge. No wonder she won her position in the old Imperial Senate, and has ascended to the Jedi Order’s High Council. She mentioned piracy several times, I wonder what she suspects.

And what of these rumours of a special ability that no other Jedi has been known to possess ? Something so unique and powerful for someone so apparently meek ?! How did they know about the Winsha Coronation ?! Mothma caught Leia’s eye at its mention. There’s something there that’s the key, I’m sure of it. I will have to make further enquiries....

“That’s what they’re sayin’, General,” nodded Han. “A grav-well ambush followed up with an attack ship.”

“That would make sense... but that kind of technology, even if it still exists, was Imperial-level, funded in the Palpatine Era.” General Fajama added, “And only prototype, at that.”

They were stood, with two others, in the corner of a dimly lit room. Star-chart boards, flickering consoles, and ship deployment holograms crowded their surroundings, while officers diligently carried out their work as the higher ranks spoke in hushed voices.

The Director of Military Intelligence crossed his arms and exhaled. “So the question is, was it looted or loaned ?” The DMI was an *Ishi Tib*, a green-hued humanoid with a four-point star-shaped face, with hooded eyes on the upper star points, and a nasally beak for a mouth.

His counterpart in Security leaned in. “More pressing for me, gentlemen, is whether these transports are being deliberately targeted, and if so, how and where...” The Security Chief was a tall slim human lady, with short cropped black hair and a stern face.

“Well, the effort these guys are going to,” answered Han grimly, “tells me they do know who they’re goin’ for...”

The Bayakov system was one of the newer locations chosen for refugees, and as such did not have as much infrastructure or policing in place as yet. The system sat on the edge of a local cluster of mid disc civilisations, and away from primary hyperlane routes. There were two host stars, a bright yellow primary, and a smaller red star that swung the other around on a wide elliptic ; any tidal and climate effects were felt on the Bayakova star roughly every thousand years, and lasted a few centuries at a time. Bayakov Two was a large temperate world with forests and oceans, while its smaller sister planets were a mix of habitable worlds and desolate infertile balls of rock. The Pan-Alliance had chosen to settle new colonies on Bayakov Two first, and allow the settlers to explore the nearest promising worlds for themselves. Convoys of refugees and resources from the Galactic Interior were falling into regular patterns now, and so any defence measures were based planet-side and made up of keen local volunteers.

The pirates who had attacked the mining shipment that was travelling between the local moons were experienced enough to swiftly and mercilessly counter the pitiful wing of defence flyers that rose from Bayakov Two. The partners and families of the young men and women who contributed to *Bayaverdrill*, the name they had chosen for the host star’s second planet, were discovering that colonial life was not only hard but made grim when subjected to piracy.

But piracy is often mercurial and unpredictable. Just as the pirates, all leathery-skinned *Weequays*, were mopping up the last of the resistance on the transport, the *Troig Gang* blazed in with cannon bright and tractor beam targeted. As Chekkel’s ship held the transport fast in pincer beams, and the *Smash* intercepted the Weeq’s gunboats, Yuide led his soldiers through the imprisoned ship.

After the meeting with that trumped-up Imperial Officer had left a sour taste in his mouth, Yuide could feel the rush of bloodlust coursing through his veins. While he was bound by a contract of blackmail to Tagge, he was impotent in releasing his frustration and anger on the Governor's subordinates. But other victims, even fellow pirates, were another matter. He wallowed in his anger, he allowed the blind fury to be stoked, he let the dark energy build up inside him.... but all the while *he* held the key to the floodgates that would release the storm, *he* could and would control how and when this *buzzing* power at his fingertips would be released.

These pirates were *Weequayan*, typically on the payroll of the Hutt clans, and often opportunistic. No matter that the Hutts were a formidable force in the underworld. While they were currently preoccupied with a turf war with the *Pykes*, Yuide figured that such territorial disputes would distract them. Not that he feared the Hutts, far from it ; he was keen to take the war to them, and slice their slimy bellies wide open. But he acknowledged Chekkel's words of caution against being too hasty, especially while Robbiee-Luiee was unable to guide them strategically as she used to.

Yuide strode through the central corridor of the large transporter, his feet aflame with rage. Two of his most trusted warriors were a step behind. He turned into the crew's canteen hall, now a mess of overturned tables and chairs and vending machines, and came to a stop, planting his hands on his hips. He regarded the groups before him : to his left stood those who survived of the meagre crew, and to the right were the pirates that had attacked them ; all around stood his own soldiers, men and women, on guard.

The Chief scanned the crew. Mostly human, though one perched upright on a tail, and all scared now that they realised they had jumped from the pan to the fire. Yuide luxuriated in the dark eddies of the *buzz* racing around him and the group, and he was certain that, even though many here could not explicitly feel that mysterious energy, the sense of power emanating from the fear and the suspense was palpable to all.

He turned his attention to his right and to the pirates. Some held their chins high and were defiantly cocky in that devil-may-care way of mercenaries ; some, perhaps less seasoned, averted his gaze and awaited their fate. Three visibly shook with the adrenaline of fear, and one of them looked like an adolescent, perhaps out on his first adventure and hoping to make an easy credit to send home to his beloved mother.

Yuide, still controlling his rage on a knife-edge, motioned with his fingers for his escort to remain where they were, and stepped towards the middle of the line of crew members.

He smiled broadly illustrating that all will be well. But his eyes remained cold and distant. As he stepped up close to the first crew member, his right hand yanked at the lightwhip handle that hung at his belt, his thumb flicking the activation switch two notches forward : several strands of red light burst from the end of the handle, and, as he flicked the handle upward, the trails flared up high, crackling and sizzling. The crew immediately cowered and threw their hands in the air, cries of mercy intermingled with screams of frantic expectation.

Yuide slashed the lightwhip from right to left, striking two crew across their chests. As he spun on the ball of his foot, he raised his arm high, and smashed the tendrils of red energy down onto a third crewman. Without pause or acknowledging the three prisoners who had fallen to the deck, he swept

his arm up high again, catching two more, including the serpentine crew member. If there had been a Grand Master of the Sith Lords they would have seen a darkness *shine* forth from Yuide's person ; as it was, a majestic presence of *energy* could be discerned by all those who remained standing. It appeared as if time had slowed, for the Pirate Chief was moving slowly and balletically, yet the crew members hardly had time to evade his strikes. Yuide stepped over the serpentine's thick body, moving behind the last two and lashing their backs with the whip tails. As they crumpled to the floor, Yuide paused to calm his heavy breathing. He turned and regarded the fallen crew, moaning and clutching at their injuries. His thumb drew the activator switch on the whip's handle down one notch, and the many red tendrils coalesced into a slightly thicker but deadlier one. With a tightly controlled frenzy, Yuide strode over the crew members, slashing the lightwhip up and down, back and forth, across their bodies, the single strand of scarlet slicing clean through the flesh several times. He worked his way to the far end of the now inert line and stopped.

He de-activated the lightwhip, and returned it to his belt.

He looked up at the leader of the pirates who had attacked the transport in the first place. The Weeq's face was a patchwork of scars criss-crossing the natural crease-lines in his leathery visage. Yuide could tell instantly that this one wasn't afraid to die, and predicted he would want to speak out. He revelled in the prospect of the theatre that any protestation would bring.

The Weequay pirate scowled and jerked his chin up.

"The Hutts won't sit still for this !" The pirate was livid. The veins on his neck were almost popping out. "They will hear of this. They will hunt you d--"

The *buzz* fuelled Yuide's bravado. For a brief moment he regarded his counterpart quizzically. When he spoke, the words were spat out with fury and venom. "The Hutts are pathetic. I'm not afraid of them, or their hired goons."

He nodded back over his shoulder at the seven bodies on the deck. "If I want to do the dirty work, then I do it." Yuide leaned in close to the pirate leader. "And none of my crew are hired," he hissed.

His left arm snapped out wide, the fingers of his left hand splayed open. Immediately, the Weeq was lifted off the floor by an invisible hoist, thrown to the left, and suspended in mid-air. He struggled but nothing he could do would break him free. There were gasps from the remaining pirates.

With a languid movement, Yuide stretched his right hand across his waist to the 'T' shaped lightsabre configuration that hung on the left hand side of his belt. His fist settled around the midpoint of the intersecting bars that made up the *light-tekken*.

Yuide stepped up close to the first pirate in the line. Their leader followed the *Troig's* Captain, still hovering in the air and held fast by the invisible grip. Yuide leaned in close to the face of the Weequay pirate, and met him eye to eye. Both men glowered at each other. The *buzz* held Yuide taut like a stretched elastic at snapping point.

Suddenly, as the light-tekken burst into crackling life revealing three short red blades, Yuide's right arm slashed out and across the pirate's belly. As an explosion of noise-less movement, Yuide pivoted to the right with the momentum of his arm, and stepped to the next pirate in line. This time,

the tri-sabre whipped across the prisoner's face. As the pirate fell back, Yuide brought the deadly tekken up high over his head and smashed it down across the next pirate's face and chest. Crooking his right arm tight in to his side, he strode up to the next pirate, and jabbed hard into the Weeq's abdomen and twisted the handle.

Snapping the sizzling blades out from the pirate's centre, Yuide made a full spin to the left, his right hand swinging out wide to connect with the next prisoner. Without pausing, he continued to pivot and the tekken made a similar landing on the next Weeq.

As the ochre-brown skinned mercenary fell to the floor, Yuide stepped past him and rolled up behind the young adolescent. The kid's captain gently hovered along in front until they were face to face. Yuide's left fist tightened to knuckle-white, and the pirate, looking like some perverse angelic prophet, opened his mouth wide. No proclamation was uttered, just the gurgle of a slow choke. The head of the kid's team leader lolled to one side and the body went visibly limp. Holding the light-tekken low Yuide leaned in behind the Weeq's head, and hissed into the vertical slit that performed as an ear.

"A bright lad like you earning some creds out here will know how to fly a simple ship, yes?"

The boy nodded in quick jerks.

"Good. When you get to *Nal Hutta*, make sure you don't leave out any details."

The dead angel that still floated in front of the boy slumped to the deck with a flat thud. A wet patch blossomed at the front of the teenager's loose trousers.

Yuide straightened, and stepped over to his escort that had entered with him. "Make sure our friend has a ship that will get him to his destination. And give him some food. The poor boy is white."

On *The Grab*, Chekkel was overseeing the transfer of the looted cargo. Although the Velocirrestor's purpose was primarily to generate the grav-well, the ship had several small hangars dotted around its perimeter. Most were launch stations holding one-man fighters and the odd shuttle, but there were a handful that were large enough to stow freight. A crewmember, a female *Rodian*, was holding a datapad and was checking off the new manifest. Her snub snout moved as she clarified in her own guttural language what they had confiscated.

"Geo-surveying kit?" Chekkel queried. "I guess that figures out here. Deep-scan seismic sensors? Pneumatic power-drills? Hydraulic pumps?"

The Rodian nodded, and her short mane of hair that sprung from the crown of her head and dropped to the small of her back jiggled softly.

"Well, if they were Weeqs they were probably working for a Hutt clan. If the Hutts are after this material, then we might get a good price for it."

Chekkel lifted his arm, and flicked a switch on his wrist comm. "Bridge, this is Chekkel, get me my brother, I'm on way up."

As Chekkel stepped out of the central elevator and on to the bridge, the comms officer glanced over his shoulder, nodded, and activated the holo controls.

Above the holo display dais the flickering pale blue image of Yuide appeared.

"Good call, brother," affirmed Chekkel. "We've got a lot of ground kit, scanners, drills, that sort of thing." Although they were on different ships, their proximity meant he could sense the darkness swirling around his twin. The fact it was dissipating told him it had peaked not too long ago. "All okay with you?" His question was a gentle probe, for even sibling love and respect didn't guarantee protection from the other's ire.

"Yeah," the drawl came back. "That Imperial Officer had me like a cornered nexu. Still, the two crews helped alleviate me of any stress." The hologram clapped his hands together and rubbed them fiercely, the lure of profit never far from his mind. "So, ground kit, eh? The Weeqs were out for the Hutts. I'd say they targeted Bayakov for it, so they're up to something."

"Yeah, my take on it too," agreed Chekkel. "Do we take it to the Pykes, then? They'd enjoy rubbing the Hutts' flat noses in it! Or do we sell it to Black Sun or the Kanjees?"

"I hate those stinking Hutts," Yuide grimaced. "Let's stir it up a bit, and take it to the Pykes first."

Chekkel nodded. "Sure, I can do that. Then meet you back at base, yeah?"

Yuide paused. "We're not far from Serreillia and we could do with more food supplies. I'll swing by there on my way in..."

The *buzz* pricked at Chekkel. "Serreillia you say?"

"Uh-huh. Why?"

Chekkel paused, and closed his eyes, his mind frantically trying to untangle the thoughts and images flickering enigmatically before him.

"I don't know... I've just got a feeling, you know? Not good..." Chekkel guessed that the dark energy still surrounding his brother might have empowered him, but it had its drawbacks. "Leave it, Yuide, don't bother with Serreillia, we've got enough provisions for the time being, we can always send out a small transport to re-stock in a few days time."

But Yuide snapped back. "It's not far! We need more supplies, and after the fun here, we could do with a feast to celebrate."

He cocked his head to one side, and his tone softened. "Hey, I'm hungry!"

“That red mist might give you power, but it can cloud your judgement. Remember what our sister used to say...”

“Enough ! I know my own mind. Besides, last I heard, Serreillia was a mess of tribal fights. They won’t even know we’ve been and gone !”

Chekkel didn’t need the *buzz* to see the darkness was enveloping his brother again. *What could be the problem if he stopped by there on his return ?* He’d had enough experience of the sly *buzz* to know that it never had the clear answers everyone wished it had. You made the future, not it !

Chekkel backed off. “Okay, get us some more provisions. But be quick, don’t dawdle, alright ?”

Yuide laughed, and nodded. “Alright little brother, I’ll do that, just for you...”

The hologram flickered away, and Chekkel was left with his jumbled thoughts of the tantalising images he had seen.

The MP Consular ship sliced through the pinkish wispy top clouds and dived into the fluffy white cumulus below. The blocky vessel arced neatly onto the new trajectory that had been auto-relayed to it by Serreillea’s Air Traffic Control, and slipped out from below the condensation line that marked the pressure-dependant point where clear visibility from the ground became hampered by the cloud base.

Luke Skywalker stood behind the twin seats of the cockpit, his arms folded across his midriff and hands tucked serenely in to the loose-fitting sleeves of his over-cloak. As the ship gently tilted this way and that, Luke swayed with the motion, his wide-spaced feet providing a solid centre of balance. As the last of the cloud cleared from view, even from this height he could regard the agricultural landscape more accurately : the patchwork of crop enclosures ahead of them, the green canopies of fruit orchards over there, the terraced pescatarian ponds and irrigation channels glistening in the sunlight in the distance. Huge blocky vehicles sat randomly across many of the fields. Metallic conveyor lines sparkled amongst the trees. But then the Force tickled at his observations, and he realised that something was amiss. Ever a teacher, he broke the silence with a leading question for his pilots.

“Do you see how quiet it is down there ? Those heavy-duty crop harvesters aren’t moving. Nothing is agitating the orchards. Our prep team advised us we would be arriving at the start of their harvesting...”

“But there’s no actual harvesting going on...” mumbled the co-pilot.

Luke nodded. “There’s more here than meets the eye.”

The pilot, a grizzled two-horned Devaronian with bushy white whiskers, glanced over his shoulder. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this...” he growled.

But Luke simply shook his head and smiled. “It’ll be alright, the Force will guide us,” he replied softly.

The Devaronian, accustomed as he was now to the quirks of Jedi, nodded curtly, and returned his attention to the console before him and the start of his approach procedure.

At that moment Alana entered the cockpit, Ben asleep in her arms. Luke glanced over his shoulder and smiled.

“We’re on approach, love ?” she asked.

Luke nodded.

“I’ll get Benji settled with the nursery droid, then.”

The consular ship touched down lightly on one of the aerial landing pads that splayed out concentrically from the primary city. Angled slender but re-enforced support arms housed passenger and cargo elevators that dropped to the metropolis below. The bright sunshine belied the chill in the altitudinal wind, and the various jet streams high above brought disparate cumulus and cirrus movement to the scene. As Luke and Alana led their students out on to the platform, the youngsters gasped as the full life force around them buffeted their minds. As murmurings of incredulity and recognition bubbled, Alana raised her voice to catch everyone’s attention.

“Yes, this is the Force in almost its purest form. Although we’re not wholly immune to the effects of civilisation and mechanisation here, such industrial farming has intensified the *Life Energy* about us, and carried it in concentration on these atmospheric winds.” She opened her mouth wide with a deep breath, then snapped it shut with a grin. “Taste the moisture in the air that gives life to the crops below.”

Jannee shuddered audibly in the chill, and pulled her cloak tighter around her tall body. “Well let’s get out of these *atmospheric winds* and appreciate the Force in the warmth below !” She smirked mischievously, offsetting the apparent but unintended disrespect to her masters.

Everyone laughed, and Luke nodded with a grin. “I can’t argue with that !”

The Force nudged him, and he glanced away towards a cluster of buildings at the far end of the pad above the support stalk. A set of doors on one of the smaller buildings opened, and a retinue of dignitaries and escort guards stepped out. He nodded towards the newcomers. “Our hosts have arrived.”

As the Jedi students fanned out behind their masters in a presentation assembly, the executive of Serreillia strode up to them. The escort, armed with laser rifles hung on their shoulders, arced out in a V shape, bracketing their leaders in the funnel point.

“Greetings, Jedi,” announced the lead figure, a swarthy human with a characteristically stocky build. “I am Lord Grocereen, the Chief Administrator of Arabellus, the primary ranch of the northern continent. Thank you for coming to our aid to help resolve the situation we find ourselves in.”

Luke stepped forward. "Don't mention it," he said smiling, "that is the role of the New Jedi Order. I am Luke Skywalker, Grand Master of the Jedi Council and envoy of Mon Mothma, president of the Galactic Pan-Alliance. This is my wife, Alana, and our students."

Lord Grocereen cast any eye over the group. "B-but they are mere children..." he began.

Luke smiled, and gestured to the youngsters beside him. "We felt this would be an invaluable opportunity for them to experience the insights that our mysterious Force might offer us to help you. Besides, a child's mind bring its own unique clarity to a situation."

"Our Elders know of the Force and the Jedi of Old, but our generation lived through the Bogan War, and can also attest to the actions of the few Jedi who supported us in our fight against those infernal creatures." Grocereen nodded sombrely. "May the Force be with us all."

He then swept his arm behind him, indicating the elevator entrance. "Come, let us descend below. We will show you the guest quarters where there is food waiting, and then a service droid will bring you to the Chambers of Commerce where we are to hold the negotiations."

Luke nodded, and beckoned to his group. The Serreillian escort snapped to attention, turned sharply, and accompanied their executive. The Jedi followed in thoughtful silence.

Part of the entente cordiale that had been reached in the ongoing negotiations between the Imperial Remnant and the Pan-Alliance was to seek out forgotten decommissioned weapons research stations. These had been in operation during the time of Palpatine's reign, and although the Second Emperor, Amedda, had access to most of them, some had been kept secret even from him. Once the Second Empire had dissolved following their spectacular defeat at the Battle of Kashyyyk, Mon Mothma and her military moved quickly to identify those that were known, and secure them. Some were deep space facilities, some were hidden on remote worlds. Often this meant ensuring that Alliance scientists were posted there to exploit the work that had been most recently undertaken ; some were simply training and storage establishments, and could be emptied and closed down. But suspicions remained, based partly on anecdote and partly on fragmented cross-references in other inventories, that certain sites still remained. Whether they were in operation or whether they had been quietly deactivated, no-one knew for sure, and Mon Mothma keenly recognised the importance of accounting for every resource.

The Alliance-Imperial survey vessel dropped out of hyperspace, a short hop from the *Mimban* system. Its star, *Circarpous*, was now a faint blue, slightly brighter than the rest of the ubiquitous starfield, but still its luminescence confirmed that no other living thing was within several parsecs. The starship turned onto a new vector, and ahead of it a dull mask could be discerned obscuring the pinpricks of starlight beyond. A handful of red lights blinked slowly marking the edges of the stencil.

As the vessel approached, the crew on the observation deck above the command bridge could make out blocky shapes to the mask, and the red proximity warning beacons aided the object's reveal.

Surrounding a central cylindrical core, various interlocking arms splayed out ending in boxy forms. A handful of tubes also jutted outward, and these were a variety of docking corridors.

Alliance-Captain Affeemack turned to regard his companion on the bridge, and smiled.

“Well done, Captain Risuv. We’ve snagged another one.”

Captain Risuv was dressed in the olive-green uniform of an Imperial officer. “Yes,” he nodded, “the list I have seems to be reliable.”

“Well, let’s check this off against that list you have, so we can see what we’ve got here before we search it.”

Risuv nodded politely. He was genuinely torn between serving his ordered well-disciplined Empire, and revelling in the comfort and serenity that peacetime now gave them. But, like many officers of high rank, his family had been loyal to the Old Empire, and he himself had been awarded handsomely with promotions and recognition. He bore no great animosity towards his Alliance counter-part – though he recognised they were technically enemies – but he was fully mindful of his own unwavering loyalty and duty to the Imperial executive.

He glanced down at the datapad in his hand, and scrolled through several listings. He was aware that Captain Affeemack had stepped over to the viewing window to study the space station more closely. As the astro-nav co-ordinates synchronised with the data provided, his eyes widened at the red colour-coding that accompanied the listed target : this was it, this was the one he had been assigned in secret to re-locate ! This was Research Station *XHT-8311* !

A quick glance at Affeemack confirmed that the Captain appeared still engrossed. Risuv cursed his trembling fingers, but he couldn’t help it that they were shaking. He entered a code, and the Station’s identifier changed to another string, that then labelled it as a munitions and fuel dump.

Risuv looked up at his commanding officer, and called out the description. “I-it’s a-another munitions and fuel, Sir,” he fought to control the tension in his voice. “I-i’m patching it through to the ship’s archival database as we speak, Sir,” he added.

Affeemack turned around and sighed. “Ah, well, no matter that it’s not something a little more exciting. Still, it’s good to tick off these things.”

Risuv nodded. “If you’ll excuse me, Sir, I’ll just get ready before we board her. There are a few things I need to check...”

“Yes, yes,” Captain Affeemack good-naturedly waved his colleague away.

Retired to his private quarters, Captain Risuv opened a secure comms request to Governor Tagge. He was aware that the sensitivity of the situation meant that he might have to wait until the Governor was able to make excuses to ensure he was alone. But this was too important and urgent to rely on a delayed holo-recording. After a few minutes, a hologram of a scaled down Tagge flickered into view. The image noise was red instead of blue, signifying the encryption.

“Your Governorship, this is Captain Risuv, on mission *Alpha-Jogan* , “ he began. He appreciated the irony of the popular fruit for the mission name. “The gold lode has been struck. XHT-8311 has been found.”

Even through the distortion of the hologram Risuv could see Tagge’s eyes widen in delight. The Governor smiled hungrily. “Excellent ! Send me the co-ordinates immediately, then make sure our friends do not sample the fruit just yet. Stall them, and await my next instructions.”

The scarlet-hued hologram dissolved from view. Risuv quickly reached over to another comms switch and flicked it on. “Captain Affeemack, this is Risuv. I have an historical record here that mentions radiation leaks. I’ve run an initial molecular spectro-analysis and it’s detected fluctuating levels of dioxsis. Let me run some further tests...”

“Very well,” replied Affeemack. “Better safe than sorry. We can hold.”

On Coruscant, Governor Tagge digested the news. There were a handful of special outposts known only to Palpatine and a few meagre others. These were said to hold the highly classified weapons projects in varying degrees of development, and interlinked as an isolated network : locate one, and the other two would be traceable. He smiled ruefully at the identity of his source, one of the very few that Emperor Palpatine had trusted with such precious knowledge : the head of the Banking Syndicate always made it a requirement that certain loans were under-written with his privy consent. Tagge was fortunate to have the Munn’s ear... and everything else for that matter. Blackmail simply ensured that the banker’s politically neutral stance in favour of fiscal profitability would always lean towards the Imperial Remnant. Munns, like Imperials, much preferred the security of control and discipline that martial law offered.

Tagge was in the private office of his opulent apartment in one of the dignitary residential districts overlooking the old Senate. He could hear the chatter through the closed door of the party that he had been hosting that evening. Now that an *XHT* station had been found, how best to proceed ?

He opened the door and glanced around the audience room. Service and protocol droids busied around his friends, underlings, and sycophants. He spotted Robbiee-Luiee standing to one side, and called out to her, motioning for her to join him.

Once she was inside and the door closed, he updated her on the news. “The co-ordinates will have arrived by now,” he added. “Retrieve them and store them under level sigma encryption.”

She nodded, and wordlessly moved to the comms console at his desk. As she began keying for the data, Tagge gave a final instruction.

“Contact Admiral Tyne of the Star Destroyer *Rake*. Have him move immediately to those co-ordinates, and destroy the vessel that is there. Then he is to secure the space station and await my personal orders.”

“Yes, Sir,” confirmed Robbiee-Luiee obediently.

The towering brown-furred Wookiee growled and purred with pride. Chewbacca tousled the hair on the head of Reggi Stapplicator, who glanced up from under the huge furry paw and grinned.

See-Threepio obediently interposed with a translation. "Master Chewbacca would like to remind you of your school work, and not to forget your daily exercises."

"Yeah, I'll do my homework, and go through my meditations every day."

Chewie growled, and tugged pointedly at the emblazoned poncho on his wide shoulders.

"And remember your duty of care to your family and the people around you here on your home world." Threepio straightened his metal body with emphasis. "You are an ambassador of the Jedi Order !"

Reggi nodded solemnly, but no sooner than he had, two rascal children grabbed him around the middle and giggled.

"But don't forget an ambassador has to have fun as well !" whispered Corsa.

Her brother Gana added, "And call us at least once every day and tell us what you've been getting up to !"

All sense of decorum now vanished as Reggi broke into laughter and grappled with the Solo Twins, the play fighting spilling around the golden-plated droid and the tall Wookiee.

"Children !" exclaimed Threepio, his arms flapping. "You were told to wait on the shuttle !"

A sharp bark that needed no translation and two huge paws that lifted Gana and Corsa bodily into the air by the scruff of their necks brought an end to the frivolity. *Uncle Chewie* sighed. Coruscant couldn't come soon enough ! The twins, now stilled, were lowered gently to the ground.

The student's luggage strapped to a repulsor sled floated past, prompting the group to break apart and give a final farewell wave.

"See ya soon !" called Gana, speaking for all of them.

Reggi turned and followed the luggage towards the passenger entrance of the customs port that sat across the landing field. The decorative spires and threaded domes of the local architecture stabbed upwards piercing the orange sky. Green and purple aurora flickered languidly across the flecks of high cloud. The natural wonders of Chukksberry Alpha were a fitting companion to the richly sophisticated culture of its people.

Chewie sighed and harrumphed, then turned to make his way back to the Kashyyykian shuttle and the remaining student.

"Come on Master Gana, Mistress Corsa," trilled Threepio, flapping his right arm expressively. "We shouldn't dally here any longer, we must be on our way ! We have one more world to visit before we can finally return home for the holidays."

“Yippee !” squealed Corsa, eager to see her mother and father.

The orange-pink hues of sunset sparkled across the metal and glass towers that strode across the Coruscant skyline. The last rays that flickered off the ever-present sky traffic were like the flashing beacons of olden times offering maritime vessels a safe passage home.

It's times like these, thought Leia, as she gazed out of the apartment's wide floor-to-ceiling window, that one could forget about the noise and soot pollution that was inseparable from the immense Galactic metropolis. She sighed somewhat contentedly, a new ally at her side. The Force has shown me the heartbeat of life all around. That's something I definitely wouldn't have considered during my vocation here as a Senator.

Here, in the political and judicial *capital* district, the sun's descent marked the end of another busy day, while, on the far side of the same city-wide planet, other key infrastructure sub-districts were only just waking up to the agendas and challenges of the day ahead.

From the Solo's apartment window she could see the dome-shaped Senate, a *fungoid* pedestal that, like it's metaphor, created life and broke it down. Much traffic skittled back and forth from its multiple landing hangars that straddled its wide belly. Glancing across the skyline to the opposite end of her view sat the grand five-towered Jedi Temple. As anecdotal in its history as the Senate, it not only served as the primary training establishment for her brother's new Jedi Order, it also provided a reminder of the darkness at the heart of the Order : evil was always only ever a knife-edge away from good, for both the Imperial Era Emperors had supplanted their thrones there, and the man who had helped put them there in the first place was Leia's father, the Jedi war hero *Anakin Skywalker*.

That last fact may not be common knowledge outside of the Jedi Order and the highest tier of the Alliance executive, but it was a fact that still sat uneasily with Leia. She may have personally reconciled the spirits of her father and her mother and retrieved them from *Hell*, and in doing so lifted the curse her father's youngling massacre had imposed upon the Galaxy, but one couldn't shrug off history ; in fact, it was beholden of her to proactively acknowledge it. The darkness in *her* may have subsided, but she was acutely aware it would never *completely* go away.

The whirl of servo-motors behind Leia called her from her reverie. She turned her head to acknowledge the kitchen droid, a solidly built bipedal server whose stocky upper body housed all sorts of gadgets and compartments. Two-Bee-8-10 was one of the latest Fulfilling Ordinary Occupational Dining droids, catering for domestic duties.

“Mistress Solo, the stew is nearly ready, and Master Solo is just parking his speeder now.” The droid's voice was distinctly matronly. Leia turned fully to face the droid.

“Thankyou, Two-Bee,” smiled Leia. “Please make sure the bret rolls aren't too hot. Were you able to wash the twins' clothes today whilst I was out ?”

“Yes, ma'am. Their day wear has been laid out on their beds, and fresh night wear is in their closet.”

The upgrade on the droid meant that house-keeping duties were accounted for too.

“Thankyou, I appreciate your help,” smiled Leia. “One less thing for us to do when they arrive tomorrow.”

“Ma’am,” affirmed Two-Bee, doffing a slight nod.

With a low whirring, the droid turned around and returned to the kitchen. Leia pivoted about and took one last look at the darkening sky. A single, almost futile, stab of golden flame lit up the horizon clouds, and then, before her eyes, it faded away.

With a sigh, she turned away from the window and let her gaze sweep across the soft furnishings and colour scheme of the main living room. During the *Bogan War* it made sense for her and Han to have their living quarters within the secure confines of the Jedi Temple ; also, it served her well whilst she was training and improving her skills with the Force. Han hadn’t objected and he could come and go as he wished. Now, however, with a relatively more peaceful galaxy and two young children – all be it, *Jedi* students - it felt right for her family to be living independently of the Temple. And her brother had voiced no qualms about the prospect. In fact both he and Alana had been keen to promote a new philosophy for the Jedi Order, one which was borne from the recognition and need for a strong, stable, and positive emotional foundation, not excluding families. Thus, Grand Master Skywalker’s training semesters were broken up with periods of family time, where the students would return home to be re-invigorated emotionally.

She sensed movement near the entrance to the apartment, and moved towards the doorway that led to the steps for the outer hallway.

Soft thuds marked boots advancing down the carpeted steps, and then her husband appeared. Han’s eyes lit up when he saw Leia, and he grinned boyishly.

“Sweetheart !” he exclaimed. “You’re a sight for sore eyes !”

With a re-kindled air, he strode across the lounge, arms wide, and wrapped his wife in an all-encompassing Ardennian-like hug. Leia reciprocated, squeezing him tight.

“Ow...ow,” Han mumbled, but when Leia moved to release him, he held her tighter, and whispered into her hair to not let go.

“But I don’t want to hurt you...”

Han shook his head slightly.

“It’s fine. Old age.... ahhh, a few bruises, nuthin’ to worry about, I’ll heal.”

Leia broke the embrace enough to lift her chin and kiss him on the lips.

“After your scrape on Corellia, flyboy, you’re in no position to take a few bruises...” she admonished.

“But that’s why ya love me...” Han grinned, and then returned her soft kiss with passion, for which she was eternally grateful.

The moment lasted as long as a starburst, and then the couple broke apart.

“Dinner’s ready,” said Leia. “Wash, and then join me.”

Han was hungrily wiping the last of the stew from his plate with the savoury bret. Dimmed lights added to the ambience of peaceful contentment. Leia regarded him lovingly from across the top of her wine glass. Two-Bee-8-10 waited patiently to one side, ready to attend to any command.

Without breaking her gaze, Leia said, “Two-Bee, can you clear the plates please ? We’ll call you if we’d like anything else.” Although they both knew the droid’s duties were specifically proscribed, there was the danger of some sort of hidden recording device.

“Certainly, ma’am,” said the droid, and moved to smoothly and efficiently remove the empty dinner plates. Once the droid had disappeared towards the kitchen, Leia prompted her husband.

“You were saying about your bruises earlier...?”

Han nodded, swallowing the last of the roll.

“One of my field agents had put me in touch with a pirate outfit who had got a message through to this gang that’s apparently building a reputation. Two sideliners from this gang felt they could do with some more credit, so were happy to talk to me.”

Leia raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Han nodded once more, and said, “This gang uses a pincer attack, and one of the ships is a grav-well type...”

Leia’s eyes widened in shock and comprehension.

“That’s Imperial Era, but only ever to prototype level, I think...”

“Yeah,” agreed Han, “that’s what the top generals were saying...”

“But do we go back to Tagge with this ? He *had* said his military was demobilising....”

Han rolled his eyes at that. “And tip him to what we know...?” he countered, “and how we know it...?”

Leia knew Han was right, and fell silent, sensing that Han had more to say.

“The top brass are wondering if hitting the convoys is a coincidence, or if they’re being targeted...”

Leia slowly nodded. “Inside knowledge of the flightplans...”

“Well time is of the essence, so they’re looking into that now, but they fear it must be such a deep encrypt it’ll take time. The outbound transmissions are checked at several data gates after all.” Han

paused, shifting uncomfortably. "So I told them I might be able to get hold of a top code slicer in case the breach here means there's a spy..."

Leia allowed herself a moment of bemusement. "You ?" she smiled. "Who did you have in mind ?"

"I don't. But I know someone who has her ear to the ground..."

Leia's eyes lit up. "Maz ! Maz Kanata ! Does she still run that watering hole that seems to catch all the gossip ??"

"Mm-hmm, the Takodana Tavern. On the edge of Hutt Space. She'll know a good hacker, I'm sure. What with all the convoys being lost, I don't want to risk a holocom intercept, so I thought I could shoot out there and get a lead..."

Leia began to nod in agreement, then started. "But the kids are due home tomorrow, Han !"

"Yeah, I know, but this is *important*. You know it is." Leia nodded. "Besides, I'll be back soon after, hun'," countered her husband. "And then I've got a whole vacation term with the little porgs !"

"Aww, Han, don't call them that !!" chuckled Leia.

"Well, they're small an' noisy an' annoyin' like porgs..."

"Yeah," conceded Leia, nodding. "They are..."

They both chuckled, fond memories skipping through their minds.

"Good times, huh ?" mumbled Han.

"Mmmm," she agreed.

"Hey," said Han after a moment. "How's it been with you lately ?"

His wife looked at him. They both knew what he was referring to. Leia dropped her attention to the table top.

"The headaches are easing. The voyaging is getting easier, clearer, more tactile... but I still can't seem to enter a built structure."

"Still only Luke and the High Council who know about this ?"

Leia nodded.

"If they want you to be this 'Jedi Seer' thing, then keeping it to yourselves is for the best." Han pointed a finger at his wife. It wasn't accusing or aggressive, just emphasising the fact. "What you can do, sweetheart, could become very dangerous in the wrong hands..."

Leia moved to object, but Han continued. "I know you wouldn't put it to bad use, an' I'm sure you could defend yourself, but if someone like Tagge forced you to use it for other means... well, after what you've told me about Palpatine, and even your own father, I don't want to think what..."

"It'll be alright, love," interrupted his wife. "I'll be fine..."

They sat silently regarding each other.

“Hey, come here...” said Leia, rising from her seat.

Han rose too, and quickly moved around the table to again take her in his arms.

As he gently rocked her, her muffled voice drifted up to him. “Han... there’s something else...”

He eased her to arm’s length, and looked at her with characteristically pursed lips and a readiness on his questioning face.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispered, smiling.

Han’s face exploded with joy, and his mouth dropped open as he comprehended all the ramifications that came with his wife’s remark.

“More porgs, huh ?”

Leia nodded, and her eyes sparkled with her smile. “More porgs.”

On the far outskirts of the Mimban system, the Alliance-Imperial survey vessel sat idling before the deserted Imperial munitions station. Captain Affeemack’s experienced eyes once again skimmed over the architecture of the station, searching for the tell-tale signs of fuel feed lines. He had spotted one or two, but for an outpost with such functionality he would have expected far more.

He glanced down at the hazards scope : it was still showing high levels of dioxsis. Captain Risuv had alerted them to this, and had relayed his findings to the bridge. The Imperial Captain had remained in his quarters to further review the historical records.

Something’s not right. Although he was more than happy to wait for a safer environment before boarding, his gut instinct from years of naval experience told him things weren’t adding up.

A thought came to him, and he called over to the science control deck.

“Science Officer. Scan for known dioxsis by-products on the station. We can confirm the scale of the toxin down there by the reactants emitted.”

The officer nodded, and set to work.

Chewbacca threaded the Kashyyykian shuttle through the rock stacks with ease. The dark imposing towers stabbed up and out of the churning ocean surf like the fingers of giants rising from the depths. The shuttle’s varied hues of browns - a timber mimic that adorned the metal hull of the spaceship – brought a warmth to the basalt around them and to the grey waters below. Seabirds squawked in protest as the invader’s engines roared past the nesting sites. In the mid distance a line

of cliff could be discerned, with a faint line of green crowning above that. A 'v' shape cut into the top border, and the silvery line of a waterfall dropped to the surf below.

The shuttle resembled a short branch with buds erupting along the sides. The thickest section was at the rear, presenting three engines stacked in a triangle arrangement, each with cowls sheathing the upper part of the exhausts ; the most forward point ended with three organically shaped antennae beacons akin to searching tendrils, while just above and behind them sat the last 'bud', namely the cockpit.

Inside sat Chewbacca, concentrating on piloting the shuttle into the prescribed landing approach. In the co-pilot's chair sat a spindly multi-armed astro-nav droid that monitored the ship's diagnostics. In the two chairs just behind them sat an *Ithorian* youngster and See Threepio. The golden droid did not appreciate the path they were taking.

"Oh ! Oh !" he wailed, his right arm jerking about in agitation. "Why *do* we have to take this approach ?! Surely, we could have arrived from above and landed in a more civilised fashion ?!"

Chewie remained silent, focusing on keeping the pilot yoke level against the buffeting of the micro-winds coming off the top of the waves.

The young student beside Threepio shook its large head and leaned in. Its soft yellow-pink skin tones marked her as a female. The translator device hung around her neck hummed into action as it vocalised the creature's clicks and barks and grunts.

"No. We have strong cross-winds above the land masses. It's easier to enter the atmosphere above one of the many oceans, and then skim across the sea to the continents."

"Ooooh..." came a voice from behind them.

Gana and Corsa Solo had crept up to the cockpit to marvel at their friend's homeworld. The twins settled themselves behind the two rear seats, and stared out of the cockpit.

"Oh, my," shuddered Threepio. "Your world sounds dangerous..."

The Ithorian chuckled. "*Voc Kadow* may be one of our colony domiciles," the translator answered, "but it's no more dangerous than any other world."

"Aww, Klo Garra, you make it sound boring now," whined Gana.

"Look at that...!" announced Corsa, pointing.

The other three returned their gazes to the fast approaching cliff face.

The *Skywalker* blood flowed strongly through the veins of the Solo Twins. So much so that, despite their young age, their midichlorians were the first of those *organics* in the cockpit to whisper an alarm of things to come. Both Gana and Corsa glanced simultaneously towards the righthand wall of the cabin, and muttered as one.

"What - ?"

A moment later Chewie and Klo Garra sensed it too, and the Wookiee pulled sharply on the controls. Even though he had been so intent on piloting the ship through the micro-atmospherics, he still probably wouldn't have registered the danger in time.

A swarm of *wing-fish* burst from the breaking waves just below them and to their right, surprised in turn by the pair of *anatodontus*, huge aquatic cetacean with toothed beaks, that had shot up hungrily from the dark depths. As it crested on its arc, one of the *anatos* snapped wildly at the Kashyyykian shuttle passing overhead, glancing its sharp teeth against the hull.

Inside the cockpit, the passengers were momentarily thrown sharply to the right, and then Chewie righted the ship, and accelerated towards the shoreline. A higher pitched whine than normal suggested the engines were struggling.

The pilot-droid was immediately carrying out diagnostics.

"Damage to the starboard hull. Fuel line leaking. Local attitudinal thrusters not responding. Engine pitch suggests bird-strike in the starboard air feed."

"Oh no, we're doomed !" added Threepio constructively.

Chewie growled at both droids. The shuttle was beginning to list to the right, but the Wookiee's strength held the yoke as level as possible, enough to ensure the shuttle reached the breaking surf ahead of the pebble beach. He pulled back on the yoke, and the shuttle angled sharply up and climbed the natural buttress of cliff face, skimming out low over the forest canopy, the waterfall and river not too far off to their left.

Klo Garra pointed a thickset leathery paw to the right.

"Follow the river, Master Chewbacca, and then you'll see a beacon on a weather vane. Head towards that."

Chewie grunted an affirmation, and gently turned the shuttle onto a new vector. Below them, the deciduous foliage swayed as the ship sped across the canopy. The passengers were granted a view of the wider terrain : the blanket of forest green lapped up against towering pinnacles of rock, the squat shoulders and crowns matching the dark basalt they had flown between when they were over the sea. Below them and to the left snaked the river in a tightly cut gorge.

The Wookiee mumbled something, and the pilot-droid turned its head in response.

"Yes, not as deep as the Kashyyyk jungles....." The droid's pitch jumped in alarm. "But we still don't want to strike those branches !"

One of Chewie's hairy paws flicked some switches whilst he leaned back on the yoke and took the still-listing ship a little higher. Then he spotted the flash of the beacon, and tilted the shuttle onto its new heading.

"There's a landing clearing just beyond the beacon," proffered Klo Garra helpfully. "Do you see it, just there ?" she added, pointing ahead.

Chewie circled the shuttle around the wide clearing to give him time to review the space, and then brought the ship in to land. From out of an array of smaller ventral bud protrusions landing gear extended. As the ship descended reverse thrusters fired at the last moment and a soft landing was ensured. Inside the cockpit, as the pilot-droid began to click through the shutdown process, the last of the passengers stood to disembark the ship.

Outside, three Ithorians huddled close, two adults and one dark coloured youth who stood a little shorter than the parents. Klo Garra's mother gave a squeak when she saw her daughter appear at the shuttle's ramp, and the brother barked and grunted in joy as he waved his arms in excitement. The heavy-set father strode towards the disembarking passengers on thick stumpy legs. Chewie let the Ithorian youngster move ahead, whilst Gana and Corsa waited nervously beside the Wookiee.

Chewie took the moment to look around and apprise himself of the surroundings. This was clearly a shuttling point, with old scorch marks on the earth. Around them on three sides began forestation, but just beyond the Ithorians was a thin line of trees separating the crude landing space from the residences and farm buildings. The Wookiee could hear the splash of water, and could see past the trees a sliver of a small waterfall opposite the dwellings, all of the location being nestled in a natural cutting in the hillside. Chewie guessed that the stream would flow to the larger river that they had followed in the shuttle.

As Klo Garra ran up and embraced her father, the patriarch jerked his big wide head and sounded deep guttural noises from his forward-thrusting neck.

Threepio shuffled forward and called out from just behind the new arrivals.

"Klo Garra's father bids us welcome to his fruit farm, and invites us to sample some of the crop."

Chewbacca growled and harrumphed, and gestured a hairy arm back towards the ship's hull.

"Master Chewbacca says thankyou. He says our shuttle took some damage from the local fauna on its final approach. We will need to review it and make repairs."

The Ithorian clicked and grunted, and Klo Garra's translator sang out as she spoke for her father.

"You are welcome to whatever you find that might help, but we live only a simple life here."

Chewie nodded and barked in reply.

"Our pilot-droid is adaptable for such situations," answered Threepio. "We don't think the damage is too great, but we might be here for a few hours..."

The old Ithorian grunted a reply, and Klo Garra translated.

"That won't be a problem," and then she added, "you can stay as long as you like !"

The Ithorian mother stepped up to stand beside them. She clicked and barked and grunted, gesturing with her thick-set arms back towards the huts that constituted their farming ranch.

“Mama says you’re welcome to join us for a meal too !”

Chewie gave a breathy chuckle, rolled his shoulders under the poncho, and nodded.

“Always thinkin’ with yer stomach, eh, Chewie ?” grinned Gana Solo.

“We’d love to join you,” added Corsa.

About half an hour’s trek away, several figures moved furtively through the forest. The group comprised of eight *Rodians*, one *Aqualish*, and one *Snivvian*. Although they were all dressed in casual attire, each wore a black and white chequered bandana about their heads. This was the *Yana-Yurak* pirate gang. The mercenaries sported two holstered blasters each, while three of them also carried rifles slung across their backs. From the belt of their leader, a tall Rodian, swung a short cylindrical tube, about two palms in length, the metal dulled and even scorched in places. They were following one of the dirt tracks shared by the forest animals and the local farmers, the Rodian up front relying on a palm-sized electro-tracker that was guiding them towards the largest source of electro-mag signals. The idyllic bird-song filtering through the deciduous trees belied their nefarious intentions.

After a while, the leader glanced at the tracker, and then paused, raising his hand signalling silence. He gestured for his companions to stay sharp and pick up on wider observations ; blasters were drawn and cocked ready to respond. As the group continued, the pirates became more focused on the woods around them, alert for any movement.

The path angled down and started following the rim of a large wooded hollow in a shallow descent. Shortly after, the lead paused once more, waving his hand low indicating they were to re-group.

As the others caught up with him, he jabbed a long green finger towards the centre of the hollow, His long snout quivered as he whispered in *Huttese*. Ahead of them, through the trees and low foliage, could be seen a ranch of several timber buildings, including a separate power generator at the base of a tower that supported a beacon, various antennae, and a weathervane. A long cylindrical starship, out-gassing as it cooled, sat a little further away in a wide clearing. A multi-armed service droid was scuttling around it near the underside. From inside the ranch came muffled chatter and laughter, and from a chimney stack trailed wisps of fresh blue-white smoke. The Hutts would pay handsomely for any slaves, and if the pirates could commandeer the ship as well then they’d have a bargaining chip with which to negotiate a better deal.

He then gestured with three fingers at his comrades before sweeping his arm to the trees on his left. He did the same for another three and off to the right. Two fingers identified one more Rodian and the Snivvian and sent them along the path that continued descending to their right. A final gesture ordered the Aqualish to follow him, as he worked his way through the undergrowth directly towards the target. The pirates would attack from as many sides as possible, and this raid would be over swiftly.

Grand Master Jedi Luke Skywalker glanced around the large circular conference room. He and Alana were sat at the inner most ring of desks and chairs that formed concentric broken circles radiating outwards. To either side of them and in evenly spaced clusters, the conference attendees faced them : their hosts, and then the regional leaders or representatives of the other communities within this dispute. In the seats behind the two Jedi masters were their students, silently digesting the woes and grievances that were being aired. Behind the local dignitaries sat their aides and support staff. The decor of the room reminded Luke a little of the Kashyyykian style, with exquisite timber architecture punctuating the Serreillian tiling and tapestry, though Serreille tastes and styles ensured a uniqueness of its own. A domed glass roof with auto-tinted shading supplemented the low lighters stationed around the walls and desks.

A weaselly-faced man with eyes that flitted around the groups was speaking. This was Verment Skuttle, who was the workers' union leader associated with the ocean-islands consortium. His region's president, a squat rotund man, sat beside him, a thin smile on his chubby face.

"But the locality of the wetlands fall within our jurisdiction. We have papers here" – he grabbed at the documents and half raised them into the air – "that verify our territorial ownership."

Grocereen, the Chief Administrator of the hosting ranch, shook his head. "The Southern Wetlands are a part of our continental landmass..." he waved his hand dismissively.

"Seasonally and tidally, there is very little *landmass* connecting that peninsula to your country !" countered Verment.

"Be that as it may, it is the Northern's infrastructure that supports it and farms it."

"And where were both of you when the bogan swept through, eh ?!" This from Sayakara, representing the eastern continent closest to the peninsula in question. "Our people were the ones who came to the aid of its farmers, not you ! We spent blood, minds, and lives defending those small-grain fields."

"You know full well where we were, Sayakara !" countered Grocereen sharply. "You weren't the only ones fighting the bogan !"

"It wasn't charity or honour, Sayakara !" added Verment Skuttle. "Opportunistic, more like ! Much the same way you stole our fisheries to the south !"

The darkness of anger and greed flowed suddenly and quickly through the room, and Luke, lifting his chin to project his voice, spoke out. "Gentlemen ! Let us keep this civil, if you please." He smiled benignly. "We will get nowhere, if we descend to bickering. I would like to hear your concerns with the *Wetlands*, but calmly, so I can understand them and help you see a way through your predicament. If you wish to discuss *fishing* rights, then perhaps we can broach that afterwards ?"

As the tension all around dissipated, his wife sensed the Force had emanated out from him and touched all the aggrieved parties. An outsider would have marvelled at Luke's control of his voice and pitch, and that was indeed part of it ; but Alana would have also recognised the mastery over, and the affiliation with, the Force in soothing the escalation. Alana allowed herself a private smile :

this wasn't the infamous – and accursed – “Jedi Mind Trick” as such, more that the *Whill of the Now* required stillness and serenity.

Sayakara was the first to speak once more. “Master Jedi, forgive me, I was merely pointing out that, in time of war, my people defended that land. If it had been a time of *civil war* and not one waged against a fearsome and tireless *outlander*, then traditionally we might not have stepped back from our hard-won spoils... But we were honourable, and surely such honour merits a reward... ?”

Skuttle was quick to retort. “Like rewarding yourself with our fish ??”

Before Luke could intervene once more, Grocereen spread his palms wide. “Union Leader Skuttle, President Lanboozle, we are here to discuss the fate of the wetlands. We have farmed that land for generations.” He turned to Luke and smiled broadly. “We would like to continue farming that land for many more generations.”

“And our fore-bears were working that land when you northerners were still ploughing the great plains,” added President Lanboozle. “It is ours, by rights.”

“Worked ?!” scoffed Grocereen. “The land was in a mess, there was no-“

The Force nudged Luke and whispered images to him. He saw early generations of settlers working the small-grain wet-fields. He saw fishing boats nearby and trading their catches for the land produce. While still in thrall to the vista afforded by the Force, Luke half turned to regard his students sat in the rows behind. He could sense that they too were privy to these revelatory apparitions, the Force using him as a conduit through which it telegraphed its message, an *inconcerto* of the Whill's making, not his own. The vision shifted and now there were marauders pillaging the land... marauders who became farmers and traders...

Luke nodded, and returned his superficial attention to the front. Images still swirled before his eyes, images of fire and destruction, of peace and prosperity, of possible futures. Of nominees in foreign lands, trusting out of distrust.

Yes ! came Alana's voice inside his head, and only his head. *Their distrust is a part of their heritage, and only a sweeping away of the old ways will ever clear that. In time, perhaps. So exploit their distrust now...*

Luke glanced to his wife and nodded, and the imagery dissipated as quickly as it had come. The hosts and the guests were getting red in the face.

“Patrayonne the Great instigated the first irrigation channels...”

“The Great ?! Thief and tyrant, more like !”

Luke suddenly stood, his arms sweeping his white overcloak behind him as he planted his hands on his hips. The room fell silent almost immediately.

“Gentlemen. My Jedi and I have listened to your grievances. And acute and long they are, and no less significant for that. Your heritage, your history, your land, have made you who you are, your

trials and triumphs have chiselled you like the Scarree Wind here re-shapes the High North Plains as it blows from the glaciers.”

Luke paused and looked each group in the eye.

“Continue as you are, and such petty territorial fighting will implode and Serreillia will collapse. And your precious trade, domestic and outland, will follow it down too. There *will* be no winners, no victors, no supreme over-lord farming magnate.”

Luke raised his right hand, the hand taken by his father in anger many years ago on *Cloud City*, now bionic and fully synth-fleshed, and he pointed at each of the leaders of the consortiums.

“We propose that you all form a selection of candidates. Then, our suggestion is that the Arabellus Ranch of the Northern Continent will nominate a representative from the Ocean-Islands, that the Ocean-Islands select one from the Eastern Continent, and that the Eastern Continent choose from the North’s candidates.”

Luke slid his hands into the wide sleeves of his ivory tunic.

“Our recommendation is that these three individuals will parley shared knowledge and co-supervise the efficient and disciplined farming of the wetland small-grain, and by doing so, will ensure consecutive successful harvests that will benefit your people of Serreillia and the Galaxy at large.”

The disparate groups glanced around and regarded each other.

Luke went on. “This is entirely your choice, but believe me when I say that if these grievances continue, harvests *will* fail and trade *will* collapse. The Force gives me this Sight, and the Force resides all around us and in all living things.”

Grocereen was the first to stir. He glanced at his colleagues and advisors sat beside him, who all nodded imperceptibly. He cleared his throat. “I think your proposal, Master Jedi, is something that we could accept and work towards. We value the insight your Force gives us.”

The President and Union Leader of the Ocean-Islands glanced at each other and conferred in brief whispers. “Yes, yes, we will investigate this for a mutually beneficial outcome.”

The Prime Minister of the East also nodded. “My people will stand candidates for nomination. Now is the time to look to the future prosperity of our world !”

The tension evaporated, and Luke sighed.

“May I suggest we take a break, and then we would be happy to lend our services to concerns over fishing rights, or to any other disquiet there may be...”

Grocereen, as host, also stood, and began to call out his thanks to Luke and his Jedi, but suddenly the ambient lighting switched to a dull red, and alarms began to sound, echoing throughout the City-Ranch.

A hologram burst into view from the floor at the centre of the ringed seating. The square-shouldered man who had appeared turned to Grocereen.

“My Lord, there is a raider incursion to the north-west. Satellites had picked up a fast approaching ship and sensors scanned small multiple unknowns vectoring inbound. Initial analysis surmised a meteor shower or that the vessel had catastrophically broken up, but shortly after, cont-scan confirmed a large mass had grounded and several vehicles moving fast towards the Number 17 stores.”

The various groups around the conference chamber stood and began to chatter. Luke and Alana focused their attention on the holo-com and Grocereen.

“Planet-side Ellies have been dispatched, and we have put out a broadcast to the nearest systems for additional enforcement aid.”

Grocereen nodded. “Thankyou, Bakersson. Keep me updated.”

He turned to the assembled dignitaries. “I’m sure this is just a small raid, but perhaps for your own safety you ought to retire to your apartments ?”

Luke and Alana moved along the desks and stepped through one of the breaks. They strode up to the Chief Administrator.

“Lord Grocereen, allow us to help you,” said Luke. “We have a fast ship and could support the Ellies already out there. I have a feeling that they are in great danger...”

“Thankyou, Master Jedi, that would be good of you.”

“Can we access the roof from here ?” asked Luke.

“Yes. Go through that service door there,” he pointed, “turn right and you’ll find an elevator.”

Luke looked to his wife, who nodded, and then he returned to the waiting students. Alana slipped a small comlink from her belt, held it close to her mouth and spoke into it.

“Alana Skywalker, calling Jedi Consular ship. Spikey, do you hear me ?”

“I hear you, Master Skywalker,” came the pilot’s reply.

“Locate this comlink’s tracer, and meet us on the roof with the ship. Standby on Code Red. Oh, and warm up the hyperdrive...”

“Powering up now.” The Devaronian chuckled. “I dunno, you and your husband... didn’t I say I had a bad feeling about this place... ?”

She smiled. “Oh, you did, did you ?”

Alana flicked the comlink and, returning it to her belt, strode over to Luke and the students, where her husband was speaking.

“...danger, but if you stay focused in the Force and be ready to join all together *inconcerto*, we will prevail.” Luke pointed to an unobtrusive service door in the wall behind them. “Let’s go !”

The group of thirty students and their mentors shuffled into the tight confines of the maintenance room that arced around nearly one quarter of the circular chamber. They congregated at a set of wide elevator service doors.

Jannee glanced around her friends and comrades, some of whom nodded back to her. She licked her lips anxiously.

“Masters,” she began. “I... I mean, we... we’re all quite scared...”

Alana looked to her husband for his lead.

“Being scared at the prospect of battle, Jannee, is perfectly understandable,” answered Luke. “Fear *alone* isn’t a direct path to darkness. Fear of something can give you a healthy respect for it. It can make you rightly cautious. But your lessons in emotional *control* will have helped you build up self-discipline. Manage the dark energy of fear, channel it, use it positively, and let the Force guide your next actions.”

Alana nodded. “Remember what we have said about sensing right from wrong, selflessness from selfishness. Don’t be guided by a sense of *justice* – that can too easily be skewed by agendas.”

As the elevator doors opened, Luke indicated that Alana and her students should go first, and wait for the Consular ship to arrive at the roof. “The youngest pupils will stick with Alana, the others are to stay in pairs and follow my lead. Be ready to use *inconcerto* and act in unison. May the Force be with us.”

Although the Takodana system was a little off the primary hyper-routes, since it was near a nexus of several corridors, the famous Kanata Tavern was a favourite watering hole for pilots and traders commuting between Hutt Space, the Interior, and the Rim Territories. The inn offered refreshments and lodgings in an old abandoned castle situated next to one of the many lakes on a forested world once exploited for its carbon mining. Opinions and gossip moved as freely as the beverages, and the small innkeeper with the huge ears and the cheerful friendly disposition heard it all. Maz Kanata would scurry and jump around on her four legs, her disproportionately large elephantine ears gently swaying this way and that as her brain picked up on the various auditory wavelengths about her. Her soft white fur matched her large dark eyes, the cuteness contradicting the ever-present silent surveillance.

“And Leia and the kids ?” Maz enquired. She was perched on the table in front of Han, sat back on her haunches, two small hands, six digits and two thumbs each, holding a lidded pitcher and cup. A thick amber liquid slopped from one to the other. Artoo Detoo sat to one side, quiet save for his domed head rotating back and forth, taking in the clientele all about them.

Han smiled. “They’re all fine, thanks.” He took the proffered cup, drank, and gave a satisfied sigh. “Damn, that’s good, Maz !”

The innkeeper grinned delightedly. "Gana and Corsa's training going well? I think your brother-in-law will soon be in need of them, from what I hear." Her large ears twitched, and she said, "Uh oh, that's Jiggola the Hutt's secret out," and raucous laughter suddenly exploded on the far side of the room. Artoo beeped as his head turned to fix his monocular on the entertainment.

Han glanced towards the commotion and smiled. He returned his attention to the small creature in front of him and shook his head admiringly. "Your ears, Maz, how do you hear it all over this hubbub??" He shifted in his seat, and dropped his voice. "Actually, that's why I'm here...."

"Well, of course, dear Han, why else would you be here?" smiled Maz. "How can I help you?"

Han leaned in. "I'm looking for an ace code slicer. Any ideas?"

Maz turned her furry head to one side, and crinkled her mouth in thought.

"Hmm. Ace code slicer, you say?" She paused deep in thought. The back of one paw rubbed at her soft muzzle. "There's Del-toro, but he's got a reputation for switching sides. I imagine you want someone you can rely on for their integrity, yes?"

"Well it sure would help..."

"Ah-ha!" She clicked her fingers, and the double thumbs gave a pleasant echo. "You need Harker. She can usually be found on the Pyke casino station, *The High Stakes*. Long black hair, long hair. Pretty, except for her eyes."

"*The Stakes*, huh? I'm pretty much square with the Hutts, now, it'll be interesting to see how far the Pykes' memories go back..." Han sighed, but clapped a hand on Maz's shoulder. "Thanks, hun, I owe you..."

"Gimme a moment, my boy, I'll get you a holo of her..." Maz flicked the pitcher lid shut, then turned and sprang from the table to the floor. She scampered between tables and past booths, then leapt up on to the bar counter, the centrepiece of the tavern. Maz passed the pitcher to a serving droid, and then tapped furiously into a computer input pad. A moment later, a holo-data card popped out of a side slot. She tucked it into a small flapped pocket attached to her belt, then retraced her steps back to Han and Artoo. Maz leapt up on to the droid's domed head, and slid the datacard into the slot for his holo-emitter. She tapped the droid on his head with a claw. Artoo beeped, and directed a narrow blue light onto the table top in front of them. The small figure of a slim human lady appeared, late adolescent in age, with dark hair down to her hips.

"She was with a crowd who came through here once," explained Maz. "As you can see, my cameras are nearly as good as my ears...."

The Mon Calamari survey vessel continued to circle the Imperial station. Its captain, Affeemack, had just received an update from his chief science officer, and was puzzled.

"That's correct, Sir. Scanning is not picking up evidence of the dioxsis reactants, so...."

“So presumably there is no dioxsis ?”

Affeemack drew his hand across his chin thoughtfully. He glanced across the bridge to the far monitor that showed the dangerously high dioxsis levels, data that was being supplied remotely by the Imperial captain from his private quarters.

“But what’s the data Risuv is relaying to us, then ?”

Affeemack’s deputy, a blue female Twi-lek called Sagoo, stepped over to him, her head tentacles twitching in agitation.

“Or feeding us ?” she suggested.

The Alliance captain returned his attention to the Science Officer. “Break the feed from Risuv’s quarters, and run our own scan for dioxsis,” he instructed.

Affeemack glanced back to his deputy. “But why would he ---?”

Suddenly, proximity alarms blared through the bridge, and an Imperial Star Destroyer smashed into the space behind them !

The commscan desk officer called out.

“Their weapons are powering up !”

“Shields up !” Captain Affeemack responded. “Maximum power to the rear deflectors !”

“It’s too late !” cried out Sagoo.

The forward turbo-lasers of the Star Destroyer *Rake* flared green, and a barrage of fire rained down on the smaller Mon Cal vessel. It exploded immediately, several fireballs roiling in on themselves, until only flecks of burning particles remained tumbling away into space.

The Star Destroyer slowed its advance and paused. From its dorsal hangar dropped two troop transports, and as they rocketed towards the station, a three winged lambda-style command shuttle appeared from the smaller forward hangar and followed on the same vector.

A blaster-shot explosion sparkled orange-white and a pile of canisters went tumbling. Another bright flash and noise-burst, and a wooden door on a shed blew apart. Chewie peeked out from inside the Ithorian’s main residence, and spotted a Rodian scurry through the undergrowth on the far side of the clearing. The Wookiee was crouched down low beside one of the open windows, peering out from the corner. His shoulders were bare, for he had removed his poncho when they had entered the residence. He looked further, through the thin stand of trees and saw their shuttle. It was unscathed, but he could sense movement near it : the marauders clearly saw it as a prize worth taking. The pilot-droid had commed him to say the boarding ramp was up and the ship locked tight, but the Wookiee knew that a persistent thief would eventually break in.

Chewie growled quietly to himself. Although he held his deactivated lightsabre in his paw, his bowcaster was in the shuttle ; Gana and Corsa Solo and Klo Garra were unarmed, for their short training swords, as was the policy for all vacationing students, were secured at the Training Temple on Kashyyyk ; and Garra's family, the Tegwuls, and some of their ground staff that had managed to retreat to the main ranch, were used to farming not fighting. Still, Chewie had had the presence of mind to send the locals off to search for anything that could be used for defence. And loyal, predictable, anxious, *jumpy* Threepio was helpfully providing a running commentary.

He glanced over to the three younglings who were huddled on the other side of the entrance, crouched under another open window. He harrumphed and purred, and Corsa nodded.

At that moment, there was a commotion at the back of the room, and the Ithorians bustled in barking and clicking in their guttural tongue. They carried simple agricultural implements and domestic items : scythes, staves, rakes, hammers, hooks, blades ; handled pans, rolling pins, multi-tined forks, ladles.

Threepio perked up, automatically slipping into the role of interpreter he was so comfortable with. "These are all the implements they could find in the house and the connected out-buildings, Master Chewbacca. They do hope it will be enough," and his neck motors whirred as he paused to regard the items. "Oh my," he added, as he realised that no-one had had the fortune to arrive with a blaster or portable laser cannon.

Another explosion outside snapped their attention to the matter in hand. Chewie barked and pointed at the windows and doors.

"Master Chewbacca thanks you for bringing these tools," Threepio interpreted, "and asks you to stand by the windows and doors at the back of the house." Chewie harrumphed and finished with a roar. "Don't forget, they are not expecting much of a defence, so give them something to remember !"

As the Ithorians quickly left the room, Chewie turned to his three Jedi pupils and growled and barked.

"Use the Force to line up cups and plates and other small items on the window sills," continued the gold-plated droid. "Quickly now. We can use them as projectiles..." Again Threepio paused to consider Chewbacca's words. "Oh no," he said, "This is madness ! I'm not ready to die. I would be more than happy to broker a parley with these new arrivals and sugg-"

A cup whizzed past his face and fastened itself on the sill above Gana's head. The Han Solo lookalike grinned mischievously at Threepio.

Klo Garra's voculator clicked into life as she said, "Corsa, I'm scared."

Corsa, crouched next to her, and placed a hand on her friend's shoulder. She nodded. "So are we," she said, jerking her chin towards her brother. "But the Force *will* be with us. Clear your mind," she smiled, "and focus on me."

Several yells and shrieks from different corners of the open clearing heralded the pirates' attack en masse. The children snapped their attention to the front. Two Rodians, the Aqualish, and the

Snivvian, broke their cover from the undergrowth, and ran full pelt towards the timber building, blasters firing.

They were met with a fusillade of domestic objects that fired out at high speed from the open windows. Under the sudden and unexpected rain of detritus, some cups and plates found their marks, bruising and cutting the attackers. Surprised, the pirates veered left and right and dived for cover. Another round of well-aimed items followed them into the bushes, resulting in indignant yelps.

At the same time, those inside could hear shouts and screams from the back and sides of the ranch. Threepio flailed his arms around and paced back and forth, uncertain as to the safest direction to turn.

Chewie threw a quick glance outside, turned his attention to the children, and harrumphed at them, gesturing towards the forest outside. Gana and Corsa nodded, and then tensed, ready to fire another round of home-made ballistics.

Chewie lumbered to his feet, and ran to the door that led deeper into the house. Shouts and yells came from all directions, so he let the Force guide him to the nearest struggle. He turned a corner and came into a bedroom of soft furnishings and muted tones. At the window an Ithorian struggled hand to hand with one of the attackers over the sill. Chewie threw up his arm, pointing his finger at the Rodian outside : the power of the Force was channelled on a tight vector past the farmhand, and the Rodian was sent tumbling back into the undergrowth. The Wookiee didn't pause to acknowledge the gratitude, instead he moved quickly to the next room where Klo Garra's mother and another ground staff member were fighting off another Rodian with the kitchen utensils. This time, Chewie simply threw himself into the fight, batting their adversary to the floor with his deceptively strong arm. The Wookiee holstered his sword, grabbed the long-snouted pirate, lifted him bodily into the air, and hurled him through the open door. A scream of shock and pain from the far side of the dwelling prompted Chewie to vacate the utility room, and go in search of the other breach.

He arrived at a large storeroom and saw one Ithorian on the floor clutching at his bleeding arm, and two others stabbing scythe and bladed stave at a Rodian who was flicking a blue lightsabre back and forth ! Although the marauder was holding the defenders at bay, Chewie could sense there was no finesse or *Jedi control* emanating from him. Still, even a trophy lightsabre taken long ago from a battlefield and wielded in a clumsy hand was a sword with an energy blade that could cut through virtually anything.

Chewie gave a roar – an old Kashyyykian noise of bravado – and snatched his own lightsabre from the bandolier that hung across his furry chest. As the green blade marked its activation, the Ithorians dropped back, eyes wide in shock and wonder. The pirate, too, paused and stepped back, and then his do-or-die resolve snapped back, and he gripped his own lightsabre handle with purpose.

The Rodian snarled and leapt forward to meet the towering Wookiee. He brought his blue blade up and over and down, and Chewie's green blade swung up to meet it. The swords clashed and slid off each other, and Chewie quickly pivoted his lightsabre on a tight arc to catch the Rodian. By luck more than skill, the Rodian skipped backward and narrowly missed the green blade. The blue blade came up once more and the green came crashing down. The pirate let his sword drop back, and with

his left hand he whipped a blaster from its holster and fired at the Wookiee. Chewie twisted his body, and flicked his laser sword across himself to parry the bolt of deadly energy. As the blast ricocheted off to the wall, the Rodian fired again, wildly into the room, then dived out through the open service door.

The aftermath of the fight was deafened suddenly by the silence. Chewie sighed, de-activated his sword, and moved to the wounded Ithorian. It was Klo's father, and Chewie mewed a question towards him. Although the Ithorian didn't understand the words, the sentiment was clear. The right-angled wide head of Tegwul nodded to say he was okay, and then he jerked his head towards his son and the farmhand. Chewie nodded in turn, barked, and then left the storeroom. He quickly made his way through the lodge and back to the front room where he had left the children and Threepio.

"Chewie !" the twins both cried when he entered, and Threepio also expressed his relief at seeing his friend.

"It worked !" said Gana delightedly.

"We think they've backed off," added his sister.

Klo Garra's voculator clicked, and, wide-eyed, she stuttered, "D-do you think it's over ? H-have they g-gone ?"

Chewie growled and shook his head. He didn't need the Force to know the bandits hadn't gone far. They would simply re-group and take a breather whilst they formulated a better strategy. The shuttle was a prize too great to lose, and his sense of resolution from who he assumed was the gang leader was too strong, too *stubborn*, meant that they could expect a re-match soon enough.

Chewie gave a few barks, and Threepio said, "Oh, no ! Klo, your father was injured, not seriously, but go to him. We need to discuss what to do next, so can you send everyone in ?"

Klo Garra nodded and climbed to her feet. She gave a quick wild-eyed glance at her friends, then left the room quickly.

Leia Solo was fluidly and effortlessly moving through specific poses, pausing briefly as she completed each execution. Her long hair flowed loose about her. Her eyes were shut in concentration, but also to help focus her meditation. Her activated lightsabre hovered ahead and away from her, its remote alignment matching that of her right hand, the blue blade's distinctive *hum* rising and dropping as it moved through the air.

The room she was in was one of the large practice chambers within the Jedi Temple, cool and airy, with angled mechanised slats at the windows auto-adjusting the sunlight for optimum ambience. She had hoped such a space might have helped quiet her restless mind, but it was not to be. She opened her eyes, and her sword returned to her hand. She powered down the weapon and clipped it to her belt, diametrically opposite it's sibling that would produce the unique black and white blade.

With a sigh, she dropped to the floor cross-legged.

Han had left Takodana for The High Stakes ; she could sense his focus on the job at hand, a simple locate and retrieve. Gana and Corsa were with Chewie, their excitement bubbling through clearly even at this distance. There was a sensation of tenseness and alertness about them that was more than she expected which puzzled her. Her brother Luke and his wife, Alana, were similarly alert, but in a patriarchal manner, guardians as they were to their young students.

Leia turned her thoughts to the political arena here on Coruscant. *Mon Mothma had pressed her once more for clarification on how she knew about the new events at Winsha, and again she had vaguely alluded to scouts and spies reporting directly to the Jedi Order. She could tell it wasn't enough for her old friend, and she would demand a clearer answer. She had even reminded Leia that her private knowledge of Padme, known only to her and to Bail Organa, held secret for over twenty years, must surely be proof enough of a binding contract of confidence. But Leia was also aware of certain military voices that were pushing for a pre-emptive strike against the Imperial Remnant, arguing that their very nature and existence showed they were ultimately untrustworthy.*

But Leia had seer-voyaged to Imperium and some of the other worlds in the Remnant, and detected nothing out of the ordinary. Still unable to enter buildings, she would lightly quiz the locals and observe the general goings-on. Other than the expected grievances of the over-crowded enclave and its new colonies, there was little to suggest different..... except, perhaps, for the frequent air traffic that seemed to have increased in recent years. And until her unique ability would grant her surveillance inside a synthetic construct she would remain none the wiser.

She allowed her chin to drop down towards her chest, and, relaxing, focused on her breathing, letting the slowing rhythm clear her mind, and allow her to channel her reality to a singularity deep inside her. As she descended, she passed the fluttery life that resided in her womb, and gave it a maternal cuddle. With a longing known only to those gestating, she grudgingly broke contact and dived deeper, enveloped by a darkness that was not evil but more organic and primordial. A darkness darker than dark. Eventually, pinpoints of light pierced the obscurity, the shroud becoming finely torn by starlight and distance. Time passed. It ebbed and flowed. Other than solar cycles it had no meaning.

And then time and distance found a blue-green dot. It grew closer and larger and resolved itself as a planet under the auspices of its parent star. Leia voyaged closer still.

The air rippled and shimmered as in a heatwave, and, with a high-altitude sonic boom, the Multi-Purpose Consular Jedi ship suddenly tore itself into view. The scarcity of cumulus clouds and the curved blue-white horizon verified the altimeter's confirmation of their height. The ship immediately angled down, and dived for the industrial warehouses and storage silos past the outer suburbs of the north-west quarter.

"That micro-jump bought us extra time," commented Spikey, the pilot, nodding in admiration. "Shoulda warned the city-folk of the sonic boom though..."

Luke and Alana stood behind the pilots' chairs, alert and tense. The Force tingled, and they both glanced out to the left.

"I see gunfire !" called the Devaronian, gesturing port-side.

Luke spotted an open space between the large sheds. He pointed. "Bump us down, and then lift clear. Look for the invaders' hover-sleds, and cycle the cannons on automatic. Make sure their transports are put out of action."

"Quickly now," urged Alana. "The local Ellies are losing ground."

They could see the last skirmishes taking place, but the uniformed bodies and the burning speeder wrecks told them all they needed to know about the fate of the initial defence.

As Spikey brought the MPC ship down, Luke and Alana exited the cockpit, and returned to the mid-section corridors, descending to the lowest deck where their students stood waiting, unbuckled lightsabres and lightwhips held tightly at their sides. A sense of focus blanketed them, but the two Master Jedi were aware of the ripples of anxiety that existed, primarily towards the back of the crowd ; the leading padawans exuded confidence and determination. Alana joined the students, and gently slid through towards the rear, pausing in the middle of the group.

"Follow my lead," announced Luke, "and when we land fan out from me in pairs. Those ten or so at the back and near Alana are to stay with her and protect our backs. The rest of us, we're to seek and engage. Control your focus, let the Force guide you, be ready if either of us call for *inconcerto*." He gave a lop-sided grin. "Don't get cocky."

At that, the boarding doors slid open, and the ramp was lowering as the ground rushed up to meet it.

"Now !" Luke yelled, and he ran down the ramp and leapt lightly off the end. The first wave of students followed him, pairing off as they jumped left and right, and igniting their weapons.

"With me !" Alana called, and led her group down the ramp and onto the dusty ground. She could see that her husband led a trailing 'V' shape of students, blue and green blades flashing as they ran towards the firefight.

As Alana and her students ignited their weapons and picked up the pace, the MPC ship climbed sharply back into the air. A handful of ventral hatches opened with clicks and whirs and small cannon emplacements slid out from blisters, swivelling down to auto-lock on targets.

Luke led his charge past the last security guards, hunkered down behind a stack of containers, and into the oncoming blaster fire. Flicking his green sword left and right he parried and diverted the laser bolts, and the padawans followed his lead and did the same. Suddenly, new fire opened up from a building entrance to their right, and the students nimbly turned their blades to meet the attack.

Spotting the new attack, Alana angled her charge towards the storage building, and ran up its side. They careened around the corner and swept towards the bandits who had been leading their sleds

outside. There were four mercenaries, one on the hover-sled controlling it, while the others stationed around it.

“*Inconcerto !*” called out Alana, and the prompt engaged the students to mentally switch to a singular collective mind directed by their mentor. As if one Jedi Knight now had twenty or so limbs, the padawans moved as one, fluidly and intuitively, seeing the target as an all-encompassing whole, recognising threats and identifying weaknesses omniscientally. Their lunges and strikes were each considered, always aiming to maim and incapacitate, and only to kill if the moment demanded it.

Unsurprisingly, they faced lightsabres and hand blasters. It was no secret that many pirates had rewarded themselves with trophy weapons lost on the battlefields of the Bogan War. But what *was* surprising was the level of dexterity, skill, and pre-awareness these bandits exuded. Many initial attack moves that would have quickly disabled an enemy were being blocked and counter-parried. Their duelling technique was crude and rough, but the reflexes were quick and saving. They clearly exhibited no training or finesse, but the presence of the Force in them was undisputed : the sheer *power* of the mysterious energy pushed through.

Two padawans lunged and cut at the pirate bringing up the rear ; he swept a green lightsabre back and forth, and was holding them at bay. Four padawans found themselves pitted against a four armed brute who sported two hand blasters and two lightsabres. The third pirate who had been escorting the sled was faced by two more students, while Alana and the final two had managed to leap up on to the cart, and were parrying laser blasts that the driver was sending their way.

As Alana strode forward deflecting the gunfire she was aware of injuries being sustained by both sides all around her. She and Luke needed to resolve this battle quickly if their apprentices were to survive relatively unscathed.

With a high parry, the Jedi Master followed her blue sword in a sweeping arc that smashed into one of the hand blasters. As the pirate was knocked sideways by the blow, he tried to bring his other blaster to bear on the woman, but she flicked out her palm, and he was sent somersaulting into the air.

Alana noted with amazement how well he landed on his feet. The bandit fired off several rounds that she and her compatriots easily deflected, and then he turned and ran for the open space. Alana let him go and glanced down at the melee beside her.

Unsurprisingly, the sense of *inconcerto* was weakening. Several padawans had dropped back, nursing arm and leg cuts. The four-armed brute was gaining the higher ground against his three adversaries. Alana jumped to the ground, and sliced her sword across his back and then his legs. The creature roared, and crumpled to his knees.

The remaining two pirates saw the big man go down. They glanced at each other, nodded, and then turned sharply to retreat.

Some of her students began to cheer, but Alana cut them off, pointing across the open space at two more heavily loaded skiffs leaving storage silos. Luke and his padawans, she saw, had dispersed wider and were engaging the mercenaries in individual pockets of action.

“Over there ! Come on !” she cried, and began to run across to the next building. Her students, those able-bodied and not too injured, picked themselves up, and followed her.

Chekkel stopped in his tracks and his eyes glazed over as the mysterious energy they knew as the *buzz* brought him a sudden vision of his brother and his gang in trouble. He saw a sea of lightsabres, flashes of light and crackles of contact energy, and heard cries of pain. He chilled at the cold fear and desperation that he could feel emanating from hardened warriors.

He blinked several times to clear the images, then swung around to face the crew on the bridge. The blue-white marbling of hyperspace flickered all around, afforded by the wide observation windows.

“Stop the ship !” he shouted. “Drop us out now !”

“B-but Captain, we don’t know-“

“Do it !” he roared.

There was a lurch as *The Grab’s* hyper-drive was cut.

“Turn us around !” he ordered. “Get us to Serreillia, now !”

“Y-Yes, sir,” stammered a helmsman.

The pirate at the nav-station piped up. “Re-calculating now, sir...”

On the agri-planet of Serreillea, Luke was fighting two pirates who wielded a lightsabre and a lightwhip. The Master Jedi had ensured that the lightwhip and its appropriate duelling had been re-forged and studied since the end of the Bogan War. He effortlessly spun back and forth between them, his green blade parrying another green while at the same time flitting across the multi-tendrils of red hued energy. Suddenly, the whip’s lashes melded into one thicker body, a state, Luke knew, would now be able to cut through solid objects like its counterpart lightsabre, and be deadly too. He Force-pushed at the whip-bearing mercenary to give himself more space, and was shocked to see his foe was able to regain his footing quickly. In that moment, his other assailant lunged towards his back, but Luke swept his green sword behind him, and batted the other blade away. He pivoted on his foot to face the attacker, thrust his left hand out in a grabbing motion, and then threw his arm – and the pirate – across and into the whip-holder. The two bandits crashed to the ground in a heap. Luke raised his left hand again, and this time his foes’ weapons were thrown a distance away.

He glanced around and saw several more sleds and speeder bikes accelerating away from the sheds and silos. Some skiffs had been grounded, with a handful of pirates lying injured nearby. He noted some of his wards had been injured too, but many others were bravely engaging the thieves. Alana

was leading a smaller contingent towards one of the last of the hover-sleds to depart, and registered that she and her padawans had managed to disable one group of mercenaries already.

A whine above informed him that their MPC ship was diving low and providing strafing runs against the sleds too.

Across the way, he saw the students Jannee and Amar fighting against two bandits, the three lightsabres and one lightwhip flicking back and forth, flashes of white and yellow every time their weapons connected. He stretched out with the Force and could sense their steady focus. Determining the young girls needed no immediate help, he allowed himself a moment of pride, impressed as he was to see their skill and maturity.

The Force nudged Luke and his attention was then drawn to the rodian Benito and his twi'lek friend, Cerdy Tona. Together, they had managed to down one bandit, who was writhing on the ground, clutching at his leg. But another mercenary was skilfully holding the two students at bay with a green hued lightsabre and an electro-stave. The stave was held at its mid-section, and as it was swept and spun, the crackling blue-purple at either end lashed viciously towards the youngsters. As Benito lunged forward, Cerdy pushed out his palm at the bandit. The mercenary was clearly thrown off-balance by the effect of the Force, but he kept his footing, and used the momentum to power a counter-strike. His green sabre flashed down and sliced across Benito's shoulder ! The rodian howled and tumbled to the ground, his blue sword de-activating as it fell. Cerdy, momentarily distracted and guilt-stricken, paused, unsure whether to help his friend or to press the fight.

Suddenly, Luke was there, the Jedi Master's own green sword slicing the air in rapid figures of eight loops and pushing the bandit back. The mercenary jabbed with the stave, but Luke, continuing his forward march, stepped to the side and flicked his blade up, cutting the shaft just below the crackling energy. Without breaking his pace, his foe switched what remained of the electro-stave around with a flick of his wrist, and lashed out with it in a wide sweep. Luke arced his shoulders forward as he nimbly leapt back and the deadly purple energy sizzled past his abdomen. As his feet connected with the earth, his left hand pushed forward and down, and the bandit was suddenly brought to his knees.

The Jedi Master stepped forward, his sword arm describing an arc that concluded with the pirate's lightsabre handle. The end of the weapon shattered in an explosion of light and sparks. Luke rested his left palm on the bandit's head, and a jolt from the Force sent him into a catatonic state.

Cerdy stood with eyes wide and mouth open.

"M-master, that was... that was... amazing !"

Luke smiled. "Thankyou. Learn well. Act decisively when you have to resolve. But first we must check on your friend..."

"Oh !" cried Cerdy. "I'm sorry, Master, I – I didn't know what to do..."

Luke gently shook his head. "It's fine, Cerdy, perfectly understandable." The Master Jedi gave him a stern look. "It wasn't your fault."

They knelt beside the rodian, who was sat slouched over, his long-fingered hand clutching at the wound on his shoulder.

“Benito, let me see...” said Luke softly, and the youngster withdrew his hand with a whimper. The cauterised injury looked deep and nasty. This skirmish had proved more than he had been expecting. Luke glanced over to the twi’lek.

“Stay with Benito. Get those Ellies over there to give him a medi-pack.”

Luke stood and looked around. His gaze turned in the direction of the retreating bandits. A large blocky starship, incongruous to the resident architecture and vehicles, sat heavily some distance away on a slight rise. This was clearly the ship they had arrived in. He broadcast the image and direction into the minds of the Jedi around him.

Then he glanced about until he spotted a handful of utility service hover bikes parked up against a power generator building. He projected their image too, and then called upon the Force once more to boost his speed as he ran over to them. He leapt on to the saddle of the nearest swoop bike, flicked the activator switches, grabbed the steering handles as it whined into life, and then held fast against the recoil as the bike accelerated away.

He gave a quick look over his shoulder and saw several Jedi, including Alana, run to the utility bikes and landspeeders. He focused his attention ahead, and noted that all the remaining bandits were similarly high-tailing it towards their ship. He accelerated at full max, and began to catch up with the pirates.

The Grab flashed into view above Serreillea.

On the bridge, Chekkel wasted no time. He sensed his brother was in grave danger.

“Jump again ! North-west of the Arabellus city-ranch ! And begin the power cycle of the grav-well !”

Captain Yuide was hunched over the handle bars of his swoop bike. He snatched a look left and right and saw sleds and bikes either side of him and making a bee-line for *The Smash*. As soon as the Jedi and their gunship had turned up, he knew they couldn’t hang around. *It was a right acklay nest that Jedi had turned up too, he thought, just typical. And even though they were just children, they couldn’t be underestimated !* They had only just finished loading what provisions they could onto their sleds, and now they had to get the loot off world. *I should have listened to my brother, damn him to hell !*

He braked hard, yanked to the left, and skidded to a halt. He took stock as to how many were still racing to their ship. The sleds were slower than the bikes, but most of the crew were reaching his position. He squinted through the dust trails kicked up by the speeders’ turbo engines, and saw a

handful of Serreillian utility bikes bearing down upon them ; brown and cream coloured cloaks flapped in the velocity, and Yuide recognised the pursuers as the Jedi. He knew his men needed more time to get to *The Smash* and get inside.

He flicked the central comm switch on the bike's saddle console, and called for two pirates to join him. Then, with a snarl, he gunned the bike into life, and roared back towards the Jedi.

Within seconds he had identified the lead biker, a Jedi in a white overcloak that billowed out behind him like an avenging angel. *Well*, thought Yuide, *your god has forsaken you, your time is up.*

The bikes and sleds used by the pirates were their own property, handy runners for a job such as this one on the myriad of worlds they found themselves on. Each one was custom outfitted with at least one light cannon, swivel mounted on the sleds. The bikes' typical function of escort allowed for further aggressive modifications, a second cannon perhaps, or a pocket for a hand blaster, a rifle mount, knives.

Yuide gripped the pommel tightly between his knees, and, with one hand, unclipped the rifle, and hoisted it up to his shoulder. Keeping a steady hand on the left handle bar, he squinted down the scope, and lined up on the space below the billowing white cloak. Even with the dust clouds, he could see the Jedi's bike getting ever larger. The stinking pile of poodoo would be upon him any moment ! So focused as he was on the target, he was barely aware of a 'red fog' creeping into his periphery. The silky-voiced *buzz* whispered to him and nudged his trigger finger, and suddenly there was an explosion beneath the white cloak, an explosion whose fireball was rapidly ballooning towards him !

Yuide instinctively ducked as the remains of the blast and the wreckage blew past him. As his companions sped by, he braked hard and turned sharply to get a better look at the aftermath, to make certain his foe was gone.

As he squinted into the settling dust, there was a whoosh and a thump behind him, and a tell-tale *snap-hiss* of a lightsabre being ignited ! Yuide whipped his head around, dropping the rifle, and snatching at the lightwhip handle at his belt. The cursed Jedi had leapt high of the bike just in time ! He barely got the single tendril ignited when the green blade smacked it away ! Yuide rolled off the bike's saddle and the lightsabre came slicing down. Landing in a crouch, he leapt back away from the sword and sparking swoop bike, and flicked the lightwhip right to left in defence.

The Jedi, a human in his thirties, came at him with fast tight left-right flicks, and Yuide could barely connect his red with the green. He thumbed the activator switch further, and the single energy tendril split to many. More confident now, he lashed angrily back at the Jedi, who ducked from the flails, and when he arced his sword wide and low towards his legs, Yuide neatly leapt tucking his feet under him.

Luke could sense the anger and the aggression bursting from the pirate. He pushed out his palm and the Force with all his might, and his opponent somersaulted backwards. He wasn't overly surprised to see him land crouched but levelly, though he could tell the pirate was a little shaken and winded. In that pause, Luke could hear and sense the noise of lightsabres clashing and laser bolts ricocheting nearby. He sensed his wife and two other Jedi duelling the remaining pirates. There was a blur as

several students raced past him, their running speed augmented by the power of the Force : they were heading to intercept a handful of pirates who were returning to help their comrades.

As Luke advanced on the whip-wielding pirate, his green lightsabre held vertically to one side, he was startled with the impression of a deep blackness coalescing around his foe. Sith Lords, once discerned and identified, would exhibit such a darkness. The red hue, impassioned uncontrolled emotion, still burned brightly at the man's centre, but now there was a halo of sinister shadow that hugged him tightly too. The noise around him became muted and the ambient light became greyer. He was reminded of the paralysing effect of the *Bogan's Despair*, though this was no Sith creature or Sith Lord. This was a *vergence* of the darkside.

Luke saw the pirate move his left hand to his belt, and his fingers curled around three short bars of a tri-handle. His opponent snapped the lightwhip angrily, and withdrew the device from his belt. Three short flares of red sabre energy cracked into view. Luke's eyes opened wide. This was custom-made ingenuity ! He twirled his green sword in a wide arc, ending it pointing directly at the pirate.

He brought the Force into his command. "In the name of the Pan-Alliance, surrender now, or forfeit your life !"

"Never," snarled Yuide. The darkness flowed all around him, it blocked out all but the Jedi before him, it stoked the fire inside.

Yuide leapt forward, low, closing the space suddenly, and slashed to the right with the light-tekken. At the same time he brought his right arm around wide, the arc extended by the whipping tendrils, seeking an injurious embrace.

Luke twisted his sword down to meet the tekken, and at the same time leapt high over the stinging tendrils as they whipped around to encircle his back. He somersaulted over the pirate, twisted in the air, and landed nimbly facing his enemy. The pirate spun around, but his snarl turned to a grin.

Just then, there was a deafening roar as the sky above and behind Luke shimmered, and an enormous spherical mass appeared. Flashes of green light erupted along a flat triangular plane that wrapped around the globe's equator, and clods of dirt exploded all around the Jedi and the remaining pirates. A low whine began to emanate from the new arrival.

Yuide laughed and turned, running for his ship, now dwarfed, parked on the shallow hill. A swoop bike raced in towards him, swerving to a stop to allow him to jump on. More explosions from the cannons above shattered the earth.

As the bike raced back towards the grounded ship, and the whine from the grav-well increased in pitch, Luke sensed a darkness similar to what he had just felt, radiate angrily and with fear from the command tower at the front of the triangle above him.

Luke ! came his wife's thought.

"Incon--" they both shouted at once.

The blast was like nothing they had ever experienced before. It wasn't a gale. It wasn't a Force-push. Suddenly they were all sprawling through the air, some smashing into the storage sheds and silos,

others zipping past them. And a moment later the Jedi were landing in broken heaps. In an instant they had been translocated several hundred metres like ragdolls.

Yuide, his hand on the door controls to the ground hatch, watched as the foe were sent flying. He grinned. The last of his crew clambered past him up the boarding ramp, and he heard the cargo bay doors at the back of the ship seal with a clang. The engine crew were already powering up the convertors.

He had always wondered what would happen if the grav-well was used planet-side aggressively. Now he knew. Chekk had gauged the power rating and targeted at an angle just beyond *The Smash*. The resulting force, reversed and tightly aimed and with Yuide's ship just outside the penumbra of the cone, had blown away anything not fixed firmly to the ground.

Yuide turned his back on the devastation, slapped the controls, and climbed into his ship as the ramp ascended.

The boarding ramp of the Millennium Falcon lowered with the mechanical hiss of hydraulic out-gassing. Han, with one hand on the upper frame of the hatch, leaned down and glanced around the hangar bay. *It may be that old habits die hard*, he thought grimly, *but if they keep me alive just one moment longer, then I'm all in favour of it*. Squat service droids for all requirements trundled and hobbled around the deck. Two other private space yachts filled the remaining space of Bay 5-14.

Satisfied that no untoward activity presented any immediate danger, he straightened, and stepped down the ramp. Artoo beeped, and followed behind.

"Stay tight beside me, okay?" he muttered to the little droid. "I have no history with the Pykes, but this place is popular with all sorts..."

Artoo responded with a plaintive whistle that clearly meant he was dubious at Han's confidence.

"Welcome to the *High Stakes*," came a clipped, mechanised voice. The owner wore a rebreather and translator combination that covered most of its head. The narrow elongated eyes were partly hidden behind goggles, but even with all the apparatus it was obvious that the face was small in proportion to its over-sized head, the skull of which swept back into a taper. The figure was humanoid but about 8 foot tall, slim in torso and limb. It wore a formal dress robe of gold and white, cinched at the waist, and in its three-fingered hands it carried a datapad.

"Please provide your name, purpose of visit, and vehicle registration. Any weapons need to be handed in," added the figure, indicating the squat box droid beside it, with an open tray on its top.

Without breaking a beat, Han answered. "Rahbatt, cards, a YT-1300, the *Lady Luck*."

He slipped the cheap low-power *N13* blaster from his belt holster and placed it in the tray. Just as well that he carried a small range of hand guns on the *Falcon* partly for this very purpose. His trusty *blastech DL44* was hidden under a wall panel at the top of the boarding ramp.

The Pyke concierge rapidly typed the information into the pad. "Thankyou, Mr Rahbatt. May I suggest making your way to Deck 17 for those new here, and ascending if you wish to test your skill a little more.... excitingly ?"

"Thankyou, I will."

"Your droid, however... "

Han reached into his jacket, and pulled out a small flimsy card. He held it up in front of the Pyke's facemask.

"Authorised medical support. Just happens to be a re-jigged astro-mech, that's all. Useful on my ship too, see ?"

The tall Pyke nodded. "Very well, but make sure you show it to the Proprietaire of the Floor as soon as you enter."

Han nodded, and not wanting to linger any longer, stepped across to the passenger elevator, with Artoo close behind him.

The elevator door slid open and Deck 17 was announced. Waiting nearby was another Pyke, similarly dressed, who looked as if he was expecting Han. The Proprietaire held out a hand.

"Welcome Mr Rahbatt. Let me make a note of your medical card, and then our guests won't have any unfortunate concerns regarding your droid here."

As the Pyke took the card and passed it to a silver protocol droid to process, the host continued.

"To the left of you are the *Sabacc* tables and their aficionados, to the right are the participants of the *Black Aces*, and over there you will find purveyors of *Jubilee*." He returned the medi-card to Han. "Enjoy."

The myriad denizens of the galaxy stood, sat, perched, coiled, or squatted. Human, Rodian, Ishi Tib, Aqualish, Twi-lek, Zabrak, Bith, Chagrian, Lannik, Besalisk, Clawdite, Munn, and many many more.

Han gave a bob of his head in acknowledgement, and the two of them made their way through the crowd towards the sabacc tables.

The erstwhile smuggler and gambler cast an experienced eye of the players at the first table, nodded in sympathy, and then weaved his way towards the bar which was wrapped around three of the walls.

At the counter, he eyed a small decanter filled with amber liquid. He caught the Togrutan bartender's attention and gestured towards it. "A small *squiffian* with ice," he ordered, placing a coin down on the wood veneer with a click. He turned around and leaned back against the bar, reviewing the patrons before him. A handful of droids moved among the crowd, but Han could see these were

merely Pyke-owned transla-droids or server bots. He guessed that clients' droids might be allowed, under strict supervision, on the higher decks where the more *serious* players would be found. As the crowds flowed and merged and broke, he could see that the different gaming venues were delineated by raised flooring, separated by two or three shallow carpeted steps.

As the bartender placed the glass of liquor down, Han twisted around and called his attention.

"Hey, one more thing," he drawled. "It's my friend's birthday. We're throwin' a surprise party for her later. I was supposed to meet her friend first, you know, the one who's plannin' it all? Young girl, human, long dark hair down to here," he motioned with his hand low at his hip. "Don't suppose—"

The Togrutan's two chunky top horns jiggled as he nodded. "Yeah, I think I know who you mean. Pretty kid. Lives here in one of the apartments. Often wanders through the gaming halls. Only plays down here on the lower decks, never higher up where the big money is."

"Oh, that's great!" Han beamed vacantly. "Gotta find her, the party, y'know..."

"Sure. Well, yer luck's in, pal. She was here earlier, said she was going up to the Trigolds, wanted her snack to be sent up. 'Bout half an hour ago," he added.

"Trigold, yeah? Thanks, thanks a lot!" grinned Han. He downed his drink, and headed back in the direction of the elevators. Artoo beeped and whistled, spun around, and followed him.

"Hope it's a good party!" the Togrutan called after them.

Artoo gave a chirpy whistle in reply.

As soon as the elevator doors swished shut, Han leant down towards the squat droid. "Okay Artoo, keep yer eyes peeled. The sooner we can find Harker the sooner we can be home. Interesting that she lives here. Could be useful as a base to hunker down in whilst she checks the logs."

The elevator pinged, and the doors opened once more. Han noticed that the Proprietaire on this floor didn't bother to stop him for the droid. As they stepped in to the gaming hall, Han immediately saw it was busier here than on the deck below. They'd need to stay sharp and hope she was still playing if they were to have any chance of finding her before she retired to her rooms.

Han carefully made his way through the crowds, Artoo close at his heels, the droid's head rotating back and forth scanning the patrons. He didn't want to draw undue attention to himself, so he made sure he was polite as he eased between the crowds bustling around the tables. He grabbed every opportunity to glance down and review each player at the green baize.

He was just about to move across to the next table when a low growling snarl came from close behind.

"Solo."

Han turned, and found himself face to face with a medium-sized Hutt. The slug-like creature with short stubby arms had a purple-green hue to its rough and wrinkled leathery skin. Its yellow eyes narrowed.

Han was just quick enough to drop his face into an air of puzzlement.

“I’m sorry, do I know—” he began.

The Hutt turned to two finely dressed Twi-lek ladies beside him. It drawled in *huttese* and gestured in stabbing motions towards Han.

A dark-skinned human on the other side of the Hutt leaned towards the ladies and then, as he spoke, turned his attention to Han. “The Prodigious Chedda once had the misfortune to play Trigold against this Corellian cheat. He had said he didn’t want to see you ever again...”

“I think you have the wrong Corelli—” replied Han, with a smile and an expansive sweep of his hands.

Chedda the Hutt rocked on his fat belly angrily, and balled his chubby three-fingered hand into a fist, which he shook at Han. More *huttese* was growled.

Han realised there was no point trying to bluff his way out of this one.

“Ah, yes, I remember now...”

Han smiled at the Twi-leks and gave a small bow. He rested his fingers on his chest. “Ladies, it was simply a case of beginner’s luck on my part. It was a fair game. Absolutely nothing tricky about it at all.”

Chedda spluttered in disbelief and roared rich expletives at Han. The ladies gasped and their slender hands flew to their mouths.

Now the gaming onlookers’ interest was piqued and they were turning around to study this fracas being played out beside them. The nearest trigold players were laying down their cards in exasperation and craning to see what was so important as to disturb them all.

Han raised his hands in submission. *This is not going at all well*, he thought. He took a step back and opened his mouth to speak.

Chedda rumbled in *huttese*, and Han nodded in recall as the male companion spoke up. “The Great Chedda asks what happened to his five slaves you won ?”

“Slaves ? I... uhh... I dropped them off at my next stop. What do I need—”

The Hutt roared again, and, without warning, he flicked his thick tail around and high and into the side of Han’s chest, sending him sprawling. Artoo squealed, and rotated a full circle in alarm.

The Hutt shifted his bulk, and angled towards Han.

“Hold it right there, all of you !”

Two Pyke guards, helmeted and each carrying a riot stun-baton, pushed through and stood between the Hutt and the Corellian. Artoo scooted over to Han’s side, who was nursing his ribs and cradling the medi-kit hidden under his shirt.

“Don’t move Chedda !” warned one guard, pointing his baton towards the Hutt, pulsing purple energy sparking at the end.

The other guard shook his head, and his translator module on the helmet flashed green as he spoke. “Always your temper, Chedda... What happened this time ?”

Two more guards pushed their way through the crowd and stood nearby. They bore heavy-duty blaster-rifles, boxier and bulkier in design than a standard hand blaster, but shorter than a long rifle.

Chedda barked and spat in Huttese. The Pyke guards did not need the Hutt’s companion to translate the words.

“So you lost some slaves,” continued the guard. “When did this happen exactly ?”

The next rumble of Huttese sounded meeker than the first.

“Over ten years ago ??!” blurted the second guard incredulously. “Oh, c’mon on, Chedda !”

“If it didn’t happen here, then we don’t need to know about it,” added the first guard. “Come on, get out of here, off this deck.... now !”

Chedda set his face in a scowl, but knew better than to push it with the Pyke guards. As he shuffled his bulk past Han, the Hutt hawked and spat a globule of green mucus at him. It landed squarely in Han’s lap, who threw his hands in the air and rolled his eyes in disgust and resignation.

The second guard with the baton and the two carrying the blasters escorted Chedda and his companions towards the elevator. The first guard deactivated his baton, holstered it, and leant down next to Han.

“You okay there, pal ?” he asked perfunctorily. Han could tell this was as close to genuine concern the Pyke’s procedure would stretch.

Han, still sitting on the deck and nursing his side, nodded. Artoo had already extended a utility arm, and Han lifted the side of his shirt for Artoo to check the cardi-monitor.

“I wouldn’t go spoiling for trouble with Hutts, lad,” he jerked his chin, “especially if you’re wearing one of those...”

“Thanks,” mumbled Han. “I’ll bear that in mind...”

The guard straightened, and regarded the onlookers. “Nothing left to see here, get back to your games...”

As the crowd dispersed and the guard withdrew, one spectator a few tables away remained motionless, her exceptionally fast mind racing with possibilities. Harker was suddenly formulating a plan of her own.

As Artoo completed his diagnostics, his visual sensors picked up an alert, and he swivelled his head with a cacophony of beeps. He bounced his monocular eye piece back and forth in the direction of

the young lady with long dark hair who was observing them. Han looked up and followed Artoo's indicated direction.

"Harker !" he muttered.

With a groan he got to his feet, and faced the woman, their eyes connecting. Han nodded an acknowledgement, and started towards her.

Harker, eyes bright and alert, cocked her chin and gave a tight polite smile.

As he approached, she made the first contact.

"Wrestling Hutts is an unusual hobby," she said.

"Yeah, and I always come out worse for it," Han gave his most charming lopsided grin that he could muster given that his ribs still ached.

"Excuse me," he continued, eyes narrowing, "you're Harker, aren't you?"

The woman's eyes widened briefly. "Who wants to know ?"

"You were recommended to me for your specific skills..." Han dropped his voice. "Your, uhh, *writing*... and your *sewing*... Is there somewhere quieter we can talk ?"

Harker smiled. "Never heard it described quite like that before..." She gave a brief nod, and glanced around. "Follow me...."

The *Yana-Yurak* pirate gang sat tight in the cramped hold of their modified *Hunter*-class starship, the *Shado Nawee* or *Fast Eye*. The body of the ship was long and narrow, a lower belly that was the cargo hold and the simple crew quarters, a raised cockpit section, and a needle tail that ended with a rotating ball gun turret. Externally, two short angled wings rose slightly to a hinged 'shoulder', then swept back and down, while just under them sat two heavy cannons that led back towards two corresponding engine thrusters. A single port-side hatch was outlined on the hull under the cannon.

While the Aqualish was up front piloting the ship, the others, some sporting basic field bandages, were listening to their group leader recap their plan of counter-attack. His snout bobbed up and down as he spoke in hutttese.

"As soon as we land, you two get the *skyjack* kit out and slapped on to that shuttle !" Long suckered green fingers stabbed at another Rodian and the short Snivvian. "You two with me, that blasted Jedi Wookiee is the problem, and we need to take him down. " He patted the contraption strapped to his left fore-arm ; the other two Rodians wore similar devices. "These plasma shields will give us some protection from his laser sword !"

The leader turned to the remaining Rodian crew members. "And you four sweep through the farm killing anything that moves !"

They grinned and shook their heavy military-grade rifles in bravado ; one of them carried the crew's flame-thrower.

"Boss !" the Aqualish called from the cockpit. "We're coming up on the farm now..."

"Okay !" he shouted back. "Get ready lads..."

As soon as the *Fast Eye* appeared above the clearings outside the farmstead, the Aqualish was already calling the leader's attention.

The Rodian clambered up to the cockpit, and, as the ship banked sharply about the farm causing him to grip the pilot's seat tightly, he immediately saw what had caught the other's attention.

The farm workers hadn't been idle. *Curse that damned Jedi !* the Rodian thought to himself.

Crudely fashioned timber stakes had been driven into the ground all around the open spaces, including next to the prized shuttle. Near the stream's course, the fishing nets had been stretched away from the water, and across the wide embankment that led back to the farmstead. Smaller stakes held it in position about two feet off the ground, also to act as a deterrent to landing, or to entangle anyone running alongside the course. The inhabitants were nowhere to be seen.

A red laser blast smashed against the side of the hull near the cockpit windows, and the two occupants whipped their attention to the shuttle on the ground : the Wookiee was standing brazenly, his furry arms raised high to his head and cradling a... a bowcaster !

Another heavy-mass lance of crimson energy blasted its way up from the shuttle to crash against the glazing. The ship's nose shuddered with the blow and the buffeting shook all the occupants.

"Get us down !" the pirate leader screamed. "That bowcaster will take us if we're not careful !"

He craned over his shoulder and shouted back down into the hold. "Dakko ! Get to the tail gun, and blast us a landing space !"

As one of the Rodians leapt to his feet and raced to the far end of the ship, another Rodian slapped the egress controls and the main hatch on the side opened. The hull panel hissed and slid to the side, and the Rodian raised his left hand into the cargo webbing above his head, and with the other he hoisted his rapid-pulse rifle into the crook of his elbow.

As the ship circled the farmstead, the Rodian at the hatch sprayed the buildings and surrounding ground with blaster-fire. Explosions tore through the timber walls, and great turfs of soil and ground vegetation blew into the air. Only some of the sharpened stakes in the surrounding area, however, were loosened and tilted drunkenly.

From the tail of the *Fast Eye*, Dakko was powering up the gun bubble. The gunner's chair spun around and down, and the twin cannon on the external hydraulic arm followed suit. As soon as the displays lit up in green, Dakko thumbed the yoke triggers and fired indiscriminately at the ground.

This time, more of the targeted stakes exploded leaving stumps of timber and large pits of blasted earth.

Over his headset came the command to focus his fire near the line of trees that separated the landing clearing from the farmstead.

Dakko dutifully swivelled the gunner's chair, and made repeated blasts within the area indicated. Soon the stakes had been blown away, and the earth churned up. The ground wasn't level, but it was good enough to land the ship even at a slant.

As the Rodian and the Snivvian readied their hovering crate of skyjack kit at the hatch, the other Rodian with the military-grade rifle spotted a spinning flash of green strike a branch and then arc back towards the shuttle. Seconds later, the sliced branch smashed into the open hatch ! The three pirates were momentarily thrown backwards and to the side, but the two with the kit leapt out and ran low towards the line of trees and the shuttle beyond. Their comrades inside the *Fast Eye* sprayed covering fire over their heads.

"You two, with me !" snapped the pirate leader as he clambered down the short ladder from the cockpit. He slapped the activation stud on his arm band and a soft blue-purple circular glow of about half a metre in diameter spread outwards. With his right hand he took the trophy laser sword from his belt. The other two Rodians activated their personal shields, and raised their hand blasters.

The three pirates ran down the now extended boarding ramp and followed the others through the bushes and trees towards the Kashyyykian shuttle.

The remaining pirates, including Dakko, hoisted their weapons, and exited the ship. The pilot ran from the cockpit and headed for the tail gun.

As the four outside rounded the shuttle, they were met with an open fishing net spiralling towards them ! One dived to one side, and another hit the ground, but the remaining two became entangled in the netting that seemed to have a life of its own.

Across the way, near the stream, two dark haired human heads popped up from the undergrowth. Gana and Corsa Solo giggled, their arms outstretched. They rotated their hands, and the net caught the Rodians even more. Closing their eyes, and strain clearly showing on their little faces, they raised their arms and those captured were lifted a few feet off the ground. As the Rodians struggled to free themselves, they were oblivious to their transport towards the stream. The netting floated over the children's heads and past the undergrowth on the bank. Once the entangled mesh was above the middle of the stream, the two Jedi students jerked their hands downward, and the Rodians, still ensnared, splashed into the cold water.

The children gave a squeal of delight, but then their expressions froze and they both looked at each other and muttered "Chewie" in unison. Without a second thought, they scrambled to their feet and darted off towards their shuttle.

Of the two pirates who had managed to dodge the net, one was blown across the clearing and into the far bushes by a Force empowered push from Klo Garra, who was hidden in the river bank foliage a little further downstream. Gleefully, she rose, and ran to help the others near the buildings. The

other Rodian, who carried the flamethrower on his back, ran towards the outlying buildings of the farmstead. As he did so, several Ithorian farm workers carrying pitchforks and crudely sharpened staves rushed out from the foliage near the base of the waterfall, and ran to intercept him. With one shed starting to ignite, the Rodian spun around and blew a burst of flame towards the defenders.

At one of the larger barns, Klo Garra's father was swinging open the doors and barking loudly. From inside the shed there came a lowing and a honking, and suddenly a small herd of *hynax* ran out, stampeding their way past the stakes. They were short round creatures on four squat legs, but with a long prehensile neck adapted for grazing tree foliage. Other farmhands ran with them, using them as cover.

Meanwhile, at the Kashyyykian shuttle the three shield-bearing pirates had engaged Chewbacca. The leader was trading sword blows with the Wookiee, who was also defending himself from laser blasts fired by the other two Rodians ! The three pirates were arrayed in an arc, and Chewbacca, who already sported a nasty looking blaster burn to his left shoulder, was valiantly trying to ensure they didn't circle around behind him. The shuttle towered above them all, and the Wookiee was aware of two more pirates with lock-picking kit setting up at the entrance hatch towards the rear of the ship.

Chewie swung out with his own sword batting the other lightsabre away, and then a quick flick of his wrist deflected another incoming laser bolt. All three Rodians raised their arm shields, and the right most Rodian's purple disc crackled white as the blaster bolt glanced off it. The middle Rodian with the blue lightsabre, the leader, slashed his sword left and right, and then jabbed with his shield, before swinging the lightsabre over-arm. Chewie's green sword met the blue with a scintillating flash, but then had to slip away to block another laser blast ! The Rodians were emboldened by their greater number and pressed forward. Chewie swept his sword out wide, the green tip glancing off all three violet shields with an angry *snap*, and then the lightsabre was whipped back close to his body to deflect yet another blast from the hand guns.

Above the fight, flashes of gold reflecting off the cockpit canopy indicated the near-hysterical state See-Threepio was in. The protocol droid was flapping his arms in agitation, and his head was turning back and forth to regard the commotion outside and the intercom conversation inside.

"Yes, yes ! Pirates !" wailed Threepio. "At least ten of them, possibly more !"

"Sensors indicate a power surge at the boarding hatch," informed the pilot-droid from his seat. "This indicates a high probability of an attempted forced access."

Threepio turned to his companion. "Oh my ! We're doomed ! They will pull us apart to make new droids with evil intent ! Whatever shall we do ?"

"Update the Ellies !" snapped the pilot.

"Oh, oh, yes, of course, sorry K2-P8," stammered Threepio. "Err... did you hear that ? The scoundrels are trying to break in ! Oh !"

"Law Enforcement has been dispatched, droid," came the voice over the intercom. "Sit tight, they will be with you soon. Ellie out."

Threepio let his arms drop in relief, and he looked out of the cockpit window once more. He saw a flash of movement amongst the bushes and foliage at the base of the trees. Recognising the new arrivals, he wailed in despair again.

“Oh, Mistress Solo will never forgive me !” he moaned.

Below the shuttle, Gana and Corsa burst through the undergrowth at the line of trees. They took one look at the three pirates and threw out their hands. The two blaster-toting Rodians at either side stumbled, but did not fall over. The run and the recent exertion with the netted pirates had sapped their young physical and mental strength.

The two Rodians spun around and hunched down defensively. One barked a command to the other, who pivoted back round to maintain firing potshots at the Wookiee, forcing him to continue deflecting not only the laser sword but also the blaster fire !

The remaining Rodian raised his handgun and fired towards the children. They dived to either side, rolled, and sprang to their feet, panting heavily. The Rodian turned with the girl, and fired again, and great clods of earth blew into the air as she somersaulted backwards to safety.

“Hey !” shouted Gana angrily, and he pushed out both his hands, and a great dust cloud blew up from the soil and into the Rodian’s face, who fell to the ground, his long fingers clawing at his round eyes. The distraction bought them precious seconds to catch their breath and start to re-focus.

They heard Chewie bark out commands, and the two of them glanced towards the tail of the shuttle. They saw a Snivvian and another Rodian working feverishly at the controls on a crate that was connected up to the entrance hatch with cables that ended with sucker shapes against the hull. Another cable terminated with a box clamped over the external activation controls. They were trying to boot it open ! Without a clear plan, the twins ran towards the brigands. The Rodian glanced up, saw the threat, grabbed his handgun, and fired towards the children. The noise broke the Snivvian’s focus, who spotted the boy racing towards him first. The short hog creature snarled, raised his arms, and leapt to meet the human child, the two crashing together and falling to the ground in a scrap, leaves and soil scattering around them.

Corsa ran past her brother intending to similarly engage the Rodian, but he was able to wildly fire another shot that glanced off the girl’s shoulder. She shrieked in pain and tumbled to the ground, clutching her shoulder. The Rodian grinned evilly, and calmly aimed directly at the girl. A long green finger curled around the trigger and pulled. A single red blast shot out from the end of the barrel... and smashed into a blue lightsabre that in that moment had flashed into view !

Startled, the Rodian glanced around and stepped back. In front of him was a human woman, middle-aged, with grey-flecked dark brown hair loosely flowing over her shoulders and down her back. She wore a snug-fitting cream tunic and narrow skirt panels over grey under-garments, and her light brown boots were widely and firmly planted amongst the leaves. Her eyes flashed with a fierce determination that said, *Do not harm these children.*

The Rodian’s eyes widened in shock. *Where the blazes had she come from ??!*

The woman flicked her lightsabre up high, she stepped in front of the blaster, and then she arced her sword down and through the barrel of the gun. The flash of sparks stunned the Rodian even more and he dropped what remained of the grip and stock. Before he could move, the woman flicked out her palm, and he was sent sailing high into the sky, over the line of trees and into the flames of an out-building.

The Snivvian had punched Gana black and blue and was getting to his feet, his stubby hand drawing his gun from its holster. His back was to the commotion caused by Leia's interception. As he lifted his blaster to kill the boy in cold blood, a searing heat and pain in his chest prompted him to look down. A sizzling blade of blue energy stuck outwards and in the last few seconds of his life, the Snivvian realised that the new appendage was wholly unnatural. As Gana heaved himself to roll out of the way, the pirate toppled forward, and smacked face down in the dirt and leaves.

Leia took one look at her son and acknowledged the bruises and the bleeding nose. She glanced over her shoulder at Corsa who was kneeling and rubbing at her wound. Both children were wide-eyed at the sight of their mother, their mouths agape. She smiled, deactivated her sword, and with her other hand raised a finger to her lips, turning to face both of them. This was their secret. She leant down and laid her hand on Gana's cheek. The blood eased to a trickle. She stood, and returned to Corsa. She rested her hand on her daughter's shoulder and the angry burning welt of scorched flesh calmed to a pink.

On the far side of the shuttle they heard Chewbaaca roar in pain and frustration. A loud dull *double thud* came from the farmstead clearing, followed by an explosion.

"My darlings, you'll be fine," she whispered, and smiled again. "Let me help Chewie, and the others, but please don't tell them you saw me."

With that, Leia faded from view. Gana looked over to Corsa, and his sister regarded him back. Their dark eyes were as wide as saucers.

Chewie had managed to drag himself to the nearest landing strut, and sat with his back against it. In addition to the blaster burn on his shoulder, he now endured a similar burn to the side of his head and a cauterised slash to his right thigh. The Rodian with the handgun was slumped on the ground with his right arm a short distance from his body. But the gang leader had continued to expertly gain the upper hand with his one-two attack utilising his own laser sword and the round shield. Battle-scarred experience matched the Wookiee's strength, drained by the initial multiple attack, and the giant's Jedi skills ; adrenaline powered the Rodian, and desire for the shuttle.

To his credit, Chewie was matching each lightsabre strike, parrying and blocking, but the Rodian was light on his feet, and followed each jab of his sword with a swipe of his shield. Chewie could barely introduce an attacking move, and the pain from his injuries was distracting him from regaining focus.

The Rodian sensed the end game now, and, gripping his sword handle with both hands, raised his lightsabre high above his head, ready to crash down on the Wookiee. *This Jedi will die and the shuttle would be theirs !*

The blue shimmer beyond the Wookiee and the landing strut caught his attention. The flicker coalesced into the form of a human woman who held out her right hand towards him, fingers splayed open.

The Rodian was dimly aware that his muscles were frozen and his arms, still above his head, had not yet dropped for the killing blow. Before he could even wriggle and break free of this bizarre paralysis, the woman closed her fingers into a fist, and the pirate leader felt his body be slowly dragged towards the Wookiee, his inert boots scraping the leaves and soil.

In his fog of pain and exhaustion, Chewie recognised that his foe had paused in his attack. With a roar, he jabbed upwards at the unprotected torso, and his humming green sword sizzled as it pierced the Rodian.

As the pirate slumped backwards, Chewie let his right arm drop like a dead weight to the side of him, the lightsabre deactivating. The Wookiee gave a great sigh, and closed his eyes. Behind him the figure disappeared.

Across the way at the Tegwul farmstead, another out-house was burning, and the cannon bubble at the tail of the *Fast Eye* fired another *double thud* towards the farmhands who were running back and forth.

The Rodian who had been thrown by Klo Garra had exploited his landing place, and had set up a sniper nest to target the Ithorians, while the two who had found themselves in the stream had untangled themselves from the netting, and had waded onto the bank. Hoisting their rifles to their shoulders, they advanced determinedly towards the farmstead, swinging their aim back and forth and firing pot shots at anything that moved. Smoke from the burning outhouses and dust from the disturbed soil created tendrils of fog that had begun to drift across the scene, thickening in patches as it drifted.

Klo Garra's brother was sat on a hovering tree-shaker, the arms of which extended to jiggle the arbors for fruit. Now he was using it as a deterrent, spinning the hover-cart around and back and forth, pistoning the arms, gliding it between the remaining timber stakes. Blaster fire ricocheted off the simple plating, affording him some meagre protection. He spotted a flash of gunfire from foliage at the far end of the main clearing, and realised that this was the sniper. He swung the UV around and accelerated towards the trees, the fruit bagging sack between the shaker-mandibles swinging ponderously.

Below the gun bubble of the *Fast Eye*, Leia appeared like a ghost solidifying from the wisps of the creeping smoke. She was hidden from view of the Aqualish pilot above her, and from the Ithorians and the remaining pirates by the wafting smoke. Leia glanced up and sensed the Aqualish's thumbs tensing on the yoke's trigger studs as he got ready to fire off another blind round into the smog settling around them. In a flash, her blue lightsabre ignited and swept up just as the gun's activator converted its electrical pulse into deadly energy surges to be directed down the twin cannon. A blinding flash of now-impotent and directionless power crackled and sparkled all over the emplacement window and arced throughout the interior. The Aqualish was afforded a moment to throw his arms out in surprise, and then his electrified body slid off the gunner's seat and slumped to the floor of the bubble.

Leia returned her pose to calm and centred and held her sword vertically, the blue blade sizzling beside her temple. She closed her eyes and swept her head left and right, letting the Force inform her what her visual sense was unable to discern. And then her chin lifted, and a low whine could faintly be heard. Leia dropped her chin back down, her lightabre deactivated with its familiar *shhh-zupp*, and she faded away.

As the low whine became louder and imperceptibly separated into four starship engines, Master Tegwul, the patriarch of the ranch, had commandeered a shovel-lift utility vehicle, and had scooped up a huge pile of Hynax manure from outside a barn. Without a care for his own safety, thinking only of his family and his workers and his farm, he accelerated it towards the flame-thrower pirate. Intent as he was on destroying the habitats, the Rodian was unaware until it was too late that the UV was bearing down upon him ! By the time he had registered, and was hoisting the flaming spitting barrel around to counter the vehicle, the dung was raining down upon him and dousing the flame ! The remaining farmhands cheered, and ran forward, their pitchforks trained on their assailant.

Klo Garra, meanwhile, had bravely intercepted the two Rodians from the stream. She was frantically making wide scooping motions with her arms and hands and Force-throwing dirt and leaves and twigs and branches at the riflemen. Their longer weapons encumbered them from easily retaliating, and they found they had to protect their large eyes with their free arms. They dropped their guns, and scrambled for their hand blasters. With a twirl of her fingers Klo was able to disarm one of the Rodians, and then she continued her fusillade of detritus.

Behind Klo, her brother had rushed the sniper, scooping him up in the shaker-arms and pinning him tight. A deft twist of the joystick controls in the open cabin, and the gather-bag was underneath the pirate. The mandibles opened, and the Rodian fell unceremoniously into the leather sack. Quick and precise adjustments on the controls, and the neck of the bag was gathered tight.

Above them, now, the galactic-wide familiar two-tone wail of police sirens were singing out. Two Ellie starfighters were settling to the ground above the fallen stakes, their engines whistling in a descending descant. A third starfighter circled the farmstead above, with a slightly larger detainment wagon hovering above the scene, its floodlights illuminating the chaos. Hoses attached to hover-droids were dropping from the transport, from which foam was already being sprayed over the flames.

The Law Enforcement Captain was sliding down off the hull of his starfighter, and barking orders.

“Mackee ! Go check on the droid’s shuttle ! Good job it raised the alarm.” He fingered a lapel comm, and spoke into his shoulder. “Jonty, get down here, looks like the locals have done all our work and caught the perps....”

The silence was what marked the devastation more than the debris. No birds sang, no animals scurried. No pollinators flitted, no insects crawled.

Anything only loosely fixed to the ground or free-standing had been blown nearly a *klom* back towards the city's suburbs. Even the solidly built more robust buildings of the storage silos and the warehouses now showed signs of stripped cladding and torn roofs.

This industrial quarter was deserted. Everything susceptible to the unnatural gale of wind that had gusted through the canyons of commerce had been blown away. Crates, tools, equipment, vehicles. Temporary buildings, utility and maintenance equipment. Dust. Leaves. People. Jedi.

Luke Skywalker lay sprawled over rubble heaped up against the side of a building, a sheet metal panel resting over his legs. A little distance away, Alana Skywalker laid face-up spread-eagled amongst timber and bricks and piping. Further across, the Jedi students were similarly strewn over and amongst the piles of debris. Jannee, Jared, Kerrule, Benito, Cerdy, and all the others. Among them, the security guards who had first responded to the attack, the innocent workers, even the droids, always unseen, lay scattered like disregarded children's toys.

Now the slip of grit and smaller stones sliced through the stillness. The swish of a floor-length thread-bare skirt dragged over the rubble. The frayed woollen cardigan was held tight. The figure was hunched in a stoop, and beneath a thin head scarf, a glimpse of a face could be seen : wrinkles on wrinkles, a sharp chin and nose, sunken cheeks ; a small tight mouth that had seen it all before. If there had been a spectator, puzzled for sure by the sight, they would recognise this figure as a great-grandmother, and in a sense they would not have been wrong.

Although the old crone shuffled back and forth finding a safe and stable path over the rubble, she was steadily making her way towards the inert body of the Grand Master Jedi.

After what seemed like an interminable age, the figure had arrived beside Luke. Tremulously, the grandmother bent at the knees, her left hand, a walnut-hued gnarl of a hand, reached out to a broken slab to support herself, and she gingerly squatted down. Her right hand briefly took the man's wrist and squeezed for a pulse. Satisfied, she stretched forward and laid it gently over his forehead. Her own head, still obscured by the scarf, bowed as she focused. A lock of silvered hair fell forward.

A moment later, the head was raised, and her eyes were glimpsed : completely white, chalky cataracts eclipsing her sight. The right hand broke contact from Luke's head and withdrew into the cardigan. The old woman glanced around her and regarded the motionless bodies that had been caught in the tsunami of gravitational physics....

.... moans began to emanate from those regaining consciousness....

....and then she faded away.

"B-Ben ?"

Luke groaned, and blinked slowly several times, allowing his eyes to adjust to the daylight. This wasn't Tatoonine, it was Serreillea. He could feel dust matted in his hair and his eyelashes, clogging

his nostrils, and drying his lips. His body ached, and he could tell his left arm was broken. He tried to move and found his legs held fast by the sheet that lay on top of him. He closed his eyes and his face tightened in mental exertion as, calling on the Force, he slowly but gradually lifted the panel off his legs. It hung in the air as he readjusted his grip on it, and then it slid sideways and down to crash into the rubble beside him.

Again drawing strength from the Force, though still wincing from the pain, he caused himself to sit up. He noted that his white over-cloak had been lost in the explosion. He looked around and reviewed the devastation around him.

His heart jolted as he recognised his wife lying amidst the wreckage. And like a cliff-top wind taking his breath away, emotion was torn from him as his eye settled on his padawans nearest to him.

Leaning against his right arm, he closed his eyes and let the Force explore the debris for him. He felt the rhythm of life emanating from his wife, and he gently probed and prodded it into response. Alana moaned, and began to blink, bringing her mind to the fore and centering on the moment. Luke sent a tendril of inquisitive Force to the closest motionless student, and was relieved to also feel a pulse. He pushed on, exploring the vital statistics of another padawan – life ! – and another..... but Luke's breath and sense of hope caught in his throat as he divined that this next student – *Tobyn* - had sadly passed on to the *Nether*.

The Force tugged at his attention, and in his mind's eye he became vaguely aware of a bright and pure light, pulsing with life and strength, out of sight a little distance away behind the nearby buildings. He recognised it as a *locus* of energy, benign and positive. Masters of Old would have identified it as a *Force vergence* , and Luke was puzzled to sense that this vergence seemed awfully familiar.

"L-Luke ?"

The Jedi Master turned his head and gazed upon his wife.

"I'm here, my love," he whispered, his mouth and throat dry with dust. "Take it easy, don't rush."

Alana gave a slight smile, moved a little, and winced.

"My leg.... it's my ankle... I think it's broken..."

"Let me lift some of the debris off you..."

Luke closed his eyes in concentration. As if he was compartmentalising the Force – the audacity of such an idea ! – he silently asked his *midichlorians* to continue to support his broken arm, while calling upon the *Unifying Force* to explore and grasp the rubble that lay over his wife. As the *Living Force* was shared equally between the two of them, nourishing and cradling them, the abstract majesty of the wider cosmic energy, requested by Luke, slipped probing tendrils of inquisitiveness around the bricks, the timber, the metal.... the shards, the grit, the dust....

The debris slowly and smoothly and silently lifted, the items held in stasis as if a great all-encompassing hand of sticky gel had swept it all up in one go.

The *gloop* of wreckage gently drifted to one side, and then lightly settled, away from the padawans.

Alana eased herself on to her elbows, and looked down at her leg : her right ankle was twisted unnaturally. This time it was Alana who called for the mystical energy that created all living things and to which she had pledged to serve. The Life Energy wrapped itself around her ankle and leg like a thick bandage. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The Force lifted her bodily upright, allowing her to float in levitation just above the uneven rubble. Alana opened her eyes and steadied herself, then glanced back to her husband.

Luke had bent his knees and drawn his feet underneath him. Pivoting on his right hand, he rolled himself to standing.

“The children...” Alana began.

Luke nodded. “I know. We need to help them, need to find out who—”

The words choked in his throat. “--who... survived.”

Luke carefully stepped over the debris towards the nearest student, and Alana, still floating and with her right leg slightly bent, followed him. Suddenly, she gasped.

“Benji ?!”

At the same moment she uttered her son’s name, the Force revealed to her the bright vergence that Luke had sensed a little earlier. Unseeing, she turned her head to the left in the direction of the positive energy.

Her husband nodded. “Yes, that vergence in the Force. I think he’s fine... but you’d better check... all I can sense is the bright white glow...”

As Alana drifted away in the direction of the locus of energy, Luke returned his attention to the first student. Wattsrob, the long-snouted Kubaz, was stirring, his protective goggles askew. Luke leant down and gently affixed the eyewear more comfortably across the padawan’s face. He laid his hand on the bald pate, and then nodded to himself, satisfied that the Kubaz was robust.

Luke straightened and made his way to the next student.

A few streets away, several low buildings bordered a wide plaza. In the midst of it, resting close to the furthest office block, the Jedi MP ship hung upside down in mid air. Some of the locals had appeared and were goggling in awe at the sight.

Alana appeared, still levitating off the ground slightly, and sent a wash of goodwill and peace over the residents, calming their shock and distress.

“Good people of Arabellus, do not be afraid,” she announced, opening her arms wide. “I am Jedi Master Alana Skywalker. Let me deal with this. Stand back.”

She brought her hands closer together, and shut her eyes. Her fingers gesticulated as she and the Force took hold of the spaceship, its mass and its weight and its ungainly shape. A vice-like grip held it above the ground.

Alana sent a probing thought into the ship. It passed over the two pilots, slumped unconscious in their seats, and worked its way towards the golden-white brightness in the cramped cabin that served as the Skywalkers' private quarters. The nanny-droid hung upside down, magnetically affixed to the decking. It's anthropomorphic face was frozen in shock, caught in the moment that its emergency shut-down had over-ridden its operating controls. There, at the centre of the vergence, lying in his cot, was her son, Benji Skywalker.

"Benji," she whispered. "It's Mama. Everything's fine, you're safe. It's Mama," she repeated soothingly. "Let go, let me take it now."

Outside, Alana could see that Benji was blinking open his eyes. There was a brief moment of shock as the boy recalled what had happened and how he had reacted, and then, recognising his mother's voice and face, his blue irises relaxed and he gladly relinquished his hold on the vessel.

Alana gently prised the ship free of Benji's grasp, and then poised as she fought Serreillea's gravity.

The residents watched open-mouthed as the spaceship dipped and bobbed, unaware of the transference of grip. They gasped and stepped backward a few paces as the huge ship rotated right side up.

Alana, straining a little with the weight, quickly sent a tendril of enquiring Force energy back into the cockpit. Although the engines had been cut, basic power and systems support was still running. She danced an experienced eye over the dashboard and spotted the landing cycle controls near the co-pilot. A series of buttons were pressed, corresponding lights activated, and a small lever was rolled forward.

From under the ship, five ventral hatches swung open, and landing struts descended. Once she was satisfied that they had fully deployed, Alana slowly lowered her arms, and the ship gently settled to the ground. The Master Jedi opened her eyes and exhaled with the strain.

Her audience couldn't help but applaud, and Alana couldn't help but grin.

As people started to press forward, she floated over to the ship, and called out requesting emergency services be summoned.

"There are two pilots inside," she explained. "They're in induced comas, but stable."

She reached the boarding hatch, and her fingers jabbed at the control panel. The hull panel slid upwards with a clunk, and a short ramp descended. She glided inside, and turned right, moving aft towards the quarters.

She opened the cabin door, and gazed down upon her son. The vergence had disappeared now, and Benji was sat coolly regarding her back. Her face broke into a beaming smile, matched by Benji's, and she threw open her arms and moved towards him, scooping her boy up into her arms and hugging him tightly.

A few blocks away, Luke had paused in his survey, and had tilted his chin in the direction his wife had gone. Birdsong had returned, and wildlife critters scampered with curiosity.

"Hmm," he muttered, and nodded in relief.

He returned his attention to the devastation around him. Some students had regained consciousness and had grouped together, but others still lay amongst the rubble. Luke had the grim task of identifying those who had not survived the maelstrom. Tobyn, Kerule, Karr-Gartzzy. Sadly, Luke knew there would be more.

Jannee, leant up against some rubble, with her left arm limp across her lap and resting on the folds of her cloak, called out.

"Master Skywalker... What hit us ??"

"Yes, what was it ?" added Kazan-Jan, who sat next to her. "Do you have any idea ?"

Luke paused in his survey, and turned to face them. He nodded softly, and he crinkled his mouth sombrely.

"I think it was some sort of manufactured gravity well...but targeted outwards.... used offensively..."

"Th-there was... something else, Master," stammered Jannee. "We were all surprised and shocked to see it, but I felt anger, hatred.... the ship seemed... dark...?"

Luke glanced back in the direction of where the ship had appeared from. The Force informed his memory.

"Yes..." he agreed, after a moment. "Yes... something in the ship was strong with the Dark Side.... and tied in some way to the gang leader too.... we fought darkness just now."

Just then, sirens broke through the background noise, and a broadcast announced the arrival of the local law enforcement and emergency services. Above, yellow and white skiffs and air-ships were circling.

"This is Arabellus Emergency Services, please stand back as we descend."

"... and the other half on completion," confirmed Han.

Harker chuckled dryly. "Is that all, Mr Rabahht ? You want me to go through data logs that have already been swept clean by the best of the P.A.'s decrypters, and find that one *needalla* in the hay pile ?"

"Well, you come highly recommended. Can you do it ?"

Harker shrugged and swept her hand dismissively. "It's bread and butter."

Han wasn't expecting quite such a hard-nosed almost aloof personality. He wondered why the kid was so cold, or if it was simply a patronising act.

He clapped his hands together, and looked around her quarters again. "Great ! Let's get started ! The droid here has all the data you need."

Artoo beeped delightedly and spun his head.

Han had acknowledged that the private rooms were modestly furnished, but he had spotted a locked door, and assumed that someone with Harker's skills would keep her expensive resources safe.

"Why bother with investigating these refugee convoys, anyway ? They're one less valuable resource consumed for your Pan-Alliance to worry about, surely ?"

Han regarded her. Although her pretty face and youthfulness belied her lack of worldly experience, he could tell she wasn't naive. Cold she may be, but stupid she wasn't. He wondered where she was leading with such a question. But it felt right to give her a straight answer, and not placate her with a vacuous or political statement.

"Everyone deserves a second chance. Believe me, it was everyone for themselves when the Bogan swept through. They didn't bring that on themselves, they didn't ask for it, and all they want to do is get back home. They're just the simple guy trying to find a living."

The girl nodded.

Perhaps she did have first-hand experience, after all, mused Han, or at least a grain of empathy.

Harker frowned in thought. "You say that the ambushes appear random, but they're still occurring even with late-change flightplans ?

"Uh huh."

"And if time is of the essence, it might not be enough to just identify the source..."

"What do you mean ?"

"What if I could trace-route the data out to its recipient ?"

"You could do that ?"

Harker slowly nodded. "In a way... it would be a challenge, but... yes..."

Han met her eyes. She seemed on the cusp of a decision.

"If it's a question of more money...?" he began.

To his surprise, she briefly shook her head and again waved her hand dismissively. She suddenly gave a disarming grin.

"Let's see what we can find first, shall we ?" She cocked her head at Artoo. "Come on, you..."

She pivoted, and stepped towards the locked door. Artoo squealed in response, and Han gestured at the droid to follow her. Harker's fingers danced over the encrypt pad, and the door slid open. She threw a glance over her shoulder.

"Make yourself at home, there are drinks in that cabinet," she said, jutting her chin.

As Han wandered to the liquor stand, Artoo followed Harker into what appeared to be a techie's paradise. Several mainframe computing units encircled a desk with keyboards and monitors.

The girl indicated a jack port for Artoo to plug into, and then she slid in to her padded seat. Immediately, her fingers swept over two keyboards, and the equipment, idling to itself, hummed to life.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Han begin to make his way across the lounge towards her. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder and breezily called out to him.

"Hey, that looks good - can you make me one too?"

Han grunted, and swung back around to the drinks cabinet.

On one of the smaller monitor screens, a wire-frame diagrammatic of an artoo unit flashed up. Moments later, the screen darkened, and code began to scroll through.

"Are you hungry?" called Harker. "I'm peckish. You'll find some snacks in the kitchenette. Second cupboard on the right."

At the cabinet, Han cursed under his breath.

"Yeah, yeah, sure...." he called back to her. A deep sigh escaped, and he grumbled, "General to the Intelligence Services and here I am fixin' snacks for a kid..."

He left the drinks on the cabinet, and made his way to the small kitchen.

At her work station, Harker was scanning the monitors. The darkened one with scrolling code highlighted every now and again. Another was flickering through astro-nav maps in sync with another screen that had further code that to a trained eye would be recognised as flightplans. The screen that currently held her attention was an ID profile on the gentleman with whom she had invited in to her apartment.

"General Han Solo..." she mused. "Owner-captain of the *Millennium Falcon*... married, two kids..."

A full body schematic flashed up and a mechanical unit was highlighted that sat across the man's chest, with a line that connected to a small panel on his left forearm.

"Oooh, I thought so.... that's interesting... *very interesting* indeed..."

She heard Han leave the kitchenette and then the clank of glassware. She switched the ID schematic to another view of the flightlogs.

"How's it goin'?" Han asked casually.

The girl nodded enthusiastically. "Good ! Your droid has several data logs over a long timeframe. That'll help determine any patterns. I can already see where the watcher-bots would have infiltrated.... "

"Oh ?" Han tried to present some informed interest.

"... and here's the telltale signs of a scribe-bot... coding an encrypted packet ready to be sent out..."

Harker's fingers sliced the monitor screen into four, and three more sets of flightlogs scrolled through in tandem with the first.

"So now I should be able to identify their scri--- " she paused. "Hmmm..."

"What is it ?"

"Whoever it is was clever... they're using a different spy-bot each time to hide their tracks.... I was hoping for an obvious similarity... oh well, it's a pain, but it's not impossible..." She flashed him a bright smile.

Gana and Corsa Solo gazed upon the slumbering Wookiee. Soft snores emanated from Chewie's open muzzle. Bacta medi-packs were strapped to his shoulder and thigh, emergency field kit provided by the local Ellie service. A bandage was wrapped tightly around his head. They were in one of the Ithorian bedrooms in the main ranch ; in the distance came the sounds of the hustle and bustle of repairs.

"Poor Uncle Chewie," remarked Corsa wistfully.

"Oh, he'll be alright," her brother assured her. "You know how indestructible Wookiees are !"

Corsa nodded. "He did brilliantly, though, didn't he ? Kept his cool, made sure we were safe..."

"Nearly didn't turn out that way, though, did it ?" said Gana sharply. "Lucky mum came along..."

"Yeahhh..." his sister admitted. They both fell silent, thinking about their mother's appearance, and how the situation could have played out if she hadn't have appeared.

"Corssy..." Gana began. "What do you think happened back there ? That really was mum, wasn't it ??"

"It must have been..."

"So... the rumours were true.... she *can* travel in the Force and materialise elsewhere..."

Corsa nodded slowly as the magnitude of what her brother was saying sank in. "But she wants to keep it secret... she told us not to tell anyone..."

"But why keep it to herself ?!" her brother went on. "Why not tell everyone, and teach us how to do it ??"

"I don't know... I imagine it takes great effort... a precise focus.... "

"But imagine what we could do with such a power !" Gana's eyes were ablaze with excitement. "We could jump around the galaxy, not tied to any old hyperdrive, waving our swords around, and making sure there were no bad guys scaring anyone... like the Tegwuls, here."

"Yeah..." his sister grudgingly admitted. "What I wouldn't give to put these nasty pirates in their place !"

Gana flashed a cheeky grin. "And those pesky Imperials ! Mum is always going on about what Moff Tagge may or may not be up to !"

Corsa laughed. "Listen to yourself !"

"What do you mean ??"

"The history vids tell us how the rebel alliance – the rebellion that mum fought in, remember – were always chipping away at the Imperial machine, who regarded the Alliance as.... as *terrorists* ! And before you start... yes, the Empire was tyrannical and oppressive, and the rebels truly were freedom fighters but from their point of view, they were the establishment, and the rebels were the pesky ones, as you call it."

Gana regarded his sister coolly, then flashed a disarming grin that had clearly hailed from their father.

"Yeah, you're right," he chuckled. "It's interesting, isn't it, how the tables can be turned... ?"

"Always in motion is the present, as Master Luke would say," said Corsa astutely. "And that's what history is for... to remind us of..."

"... the patterns," finished Gana, nodding.

They fell silent, and returned their attention to their hirsute friend. Chewie snuffled in his sleep, and tried to turn to his left, but the shoulder wound caused him to wince, and he settled back as he was.

"Poor Chewie..." whispered Corsa.

Gana seemed to have a spark of energy, for he gritted his teeth, and growled, "Mum ought to teach us, you know, sis ! Surely she can be allowed to tell even her own kids !"

A thought struck him. "Hey... perhaps it's uncle Luke... perhaps the Grand Master has forbidden her..."

"Garny ! No !" Corsa could sense her brother's rising ire. "If Master Luke knows, then there'll be a very good reason why it's being kept secret."

"And now it's our secret too..." He flashed his dark eyes at his sister, a new thought in his head. "But if more people knew, then perhaps..."

"Gana, we can't even tell Klo... !" pleaded Corsa. "We've been asked to keep it to ourselves, so that's what we must do..."

Gana sighed. "Alright," he said grudgingly. "Yeah... you're right..."

Chewie rocked his head back and forth, no doubt re-living the battle in his dreamscape.

"Though, if she hadn't have come," Gana went on quietly, staring at the Wookiee, "we'd be dead, sis..."

Corsa regarded her brother somberly.

"I know," she whispered.

At that moment, there came a flurry of movement in the corridor behind them, and they turned to see Klo Garra bustle at the doorway.

The Ithorian's voculator clicked. "Hey, you two !" She bobbed her large head. "K2-P8 says the ship is nearly finished. You'll be able to head home soon !" She swung her attention to their Master. "How is Chewie ?" she asked.

"He's good," Corsa nodded. "Just sleeping off the bacta and the meds..."

"Thank you my friends," said Luke to the shimmering pale blue circle of Jedi Masters at the Temple on Coruscant. "And, Leia, update us as soon as you are sure of your findings." His sister nodded. "May the Force be with you all."

"And with you," came the replies, and the holograms faded from view.

Luke leaned back in his chair, and rubbed his chin with his right hand, deep in thought. His left arm was held across his chest in an osteo-bacta sling, He was alone in a small meeting forum, a holo-emitter at the centre of the table. The decor was typical of the North Sereillian fashion, a soft blend of panelling and tapestry in warm colours and intricate patterns.

A soft *swish* behind him marked the door opening, followed by the low hum of an anti-grav medi-chair : his wife, her right leg in a similar cast to Luke's arm. The chair floated around and came to a gentle stop adjacent to Luke's left.

"My love, " Alana began. "How did it go with the Council ?"

Luke smiled. "They will make the necessary arrangements." He sounded hollow. "And Leia has offered to investigate the wrecks at the Accident Investigation Bureau. We need to re-check them now that we've encountered this pirate gang."

Alana nodded, and looked into her husband's eyes. "And you ? How are you feeling ?"

Luke briefly met her eyes, then glanced away towards the window and the view of the sunset beyond. He took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly.

"They were our wards, Alana, *my* wards.... I failed them, and they paid the dearest price."

Alana opened her mouth to counter with words of comfort, but Luke shook his head, and went on. "They should not have died ! They did not deserve to die ! They were too young... too..."

His voice broke and he stifled a sob. He dropped his gaze to the floor, still unable to look at his wife.

"Luke..." she answered softly. "They were Jedi. They may not have been Knights, but they were Jedi. They volunteered willingly, no one forced them to start down this path. It's not like the Old Order, from what we've heard, the early separations, forsaking all for duty. Every student knows they can come or go, they can visit their families, undertaking expeditions as part of their training..."

He turned to face her.

"Alana, my love, this new generation.... it's different, they are all younger than us, we are responsible for them, I am responsible for them ! The Jedi we lost during the Bogan War, they were all adults who accepted the dangers fully. But this time, it's different...."

"Yes, it *is* different, Luke," countered Alana supportively. "It's different precisely because they are the next generation of Jedi. Those who safeguard the *Galaxy*. Yes, it seems like an adventure to them, but it comes with the greatest of responsibility, and they know that. All of them."

Luke shook his head gently. "I don't know. Master Yoda once said to me, the path of a Jedi requires the utmost commitment... Alana, children surely don't know what that means.... what an undertaking... And their teacher, isn't it unfair to put such a sole responsibility on them, too ?"

"Yes. It is. But the role of a teacher is not to hold the child's hand, it is to guide the child's hand to the door, and encourage them to open it..."

Luke regarded his wife and smiled softly. "You're right.... But few teachers are faced with such tragedy. How are they to cope then ? How do those students who survived, when their friends didn't, face the awful truth of seeing a new day ?"

He gestured towards the sunset as if emphasising his point.

Alana rested her hands on her lap, and shared her husband's pain. She shook her head. "We find our own way, each and every one of us, to deal with death and mortality... The Force is Life, and Life is the Force, and as Jedi we recognise its embrace."

"Remember, I do, with a heavy heart," a distinctively gravelly and familiar voice came from the corner of the room. "When, on the Temple, your father led the attack."

Both Luke and Alana glanced in the direction of the voice, and the blue-green translucent ghost of Yoda appeared.

"A heavy burden is Guilt, a heavy burden." Yoda shook his head sadly. "For eight hundred years would I say, 'mourn do not, but rejoice in the transcendence of the Force'. Meant it, I did, yes, meant it. And children, to me, they all were. But when purged the Jedi were, into exile went I and my guilt. Lost faith in the Force I feared. A beacon of light to cling to, there was," Yoda lifted his gimer cane towards Luke, "a hope in the Force, had I."

The diminutive Master Jedi shuffled on his feet and settled his shoulders.

“Yes, a new day, did I see, in exile, and another, and another after that, each one in memoriam to each friend I had lost. As those new days passed by, a new resolve they gave, less my guilt became.”

“I’m sorry, Master,” Luke began, “I hadn’t realised...”

But Yoda shook his head and waved his tiny hand. “No, no, done it is, and learnt from it I did. As must you. For a teacher learns just as much as he teaches. And taught me you have, Master Luke,” he added with a chuckle. “Your Temple, grows it does, with warmth and family support. To your wife, you must listen. Opening the door, just for the child, it is not.”

Luke nodded. “I am due to speak with the parents soon...”

“Trust in the Force,” answered his old master, “strengthen you and guide you it will....”

Yoda smiled benignly, and faded away.

Alana turned from the apparition and regarded her husband. “The Force will be with you, my love....”

Luke nodded. He drew a deep breath and gloried in the eddies of the Force invigorating him.

“Would you like me to stay ?”

“Yes, thank you, that would be good.”

A comm pinged, and a droid’s voice sounded over the intercom.

“Master Skywalker, we have the parents of Padawan Kerule on the line. Are you ready to speak to them ?”

Luke cleared his throat. “Yes, I am, put them through, please.”

The holo-base at the centre of the table hummed into life and two squat snivvians, one grey haired and the other with a tuft of black hair, appeared.

“Thankyou for your time. I am Luke Skywalker, Grand Master Jedi, and this is Master Alana Skywalker,” he gestured to his left. “I am so sorry to bring you this news, but I am sad to say that Kerule died today on Serreillia. He and other students were with us defending this city from pillaging bandits.”

The grey-haired female snivvian moaned, and her partner took her into his arms.

“Kerule died as a Jedi, serving the Order and the Galaxy, defending its morals of justice and fairness. I promise you, his death was not in vain.....”

Luke’s eyes watered, and as he blinked in response, a tear broke free from his right eyelid, and trickled down his cheek.

In Harker's private quarters on the *High Stakes* there came a jubilant cry of success and relief. Han glanced up from a fashion holo he had been idly watching in the living quarters, and wandered over to Harker's office to enquire.

"Now, my friend," the young woman purred. "Let's see what you've got..."

She took two cables from a side desk, plugged one end each into her suite of computers, and connected the other ends into Artoo. The droid chirped happily, seemingly proud to be of service.

"I'm giving you a trace map to build. The vector lines will show the path the encrypted packets have taken, and will hopefully resolve at their destination..."

Artoo turned his domed head and his holo-emitter whirred into life with a pale blue light. An initial pinpoint of light became the source of a purple line that zig-zagged its way upwards into the air between them. The various lines appeared to snap back and forth in all directions, steadily rising to a point about two and half metres high and displaced off to the left of where Han stood, whose arms were crossed and a wryly sceptical look sat on his face.

"Uh huh," he remarked. "So the fancy lines show us what exactly?"

Harker looked up at him and grinned.

"I'm guessing your astro-mech has a few navi-charts stored in there somewhere?" Having surreptitiously scored a full specification inventory from the droid without it realising, Harker knew full well its capabilities.

"Yup... Artoo, can you match any of this with an astro-map?"

The little droid was in his element, and chirruped away happily to itself.

"Yes or No will do, Artoo," Han replied drily. "I hope to hell I don't need Threepio here to translate anything important..." he muttered.

Artoo blew a mechanical raspberry at the general's insolence, but began to overlay star system coordinates. The numbers, in green, appeared in scrolling type.

Han leaned in to peer closer and squinted his eyes in concentration.

"That's Coruscant, and that'd be Chandrilla, but the others..." He shook his head in ignorance.

As Han complained, Artoo helpfully added white star dots along-side common system names now accompanying the stellar IDs.

A tree of galactic locations sprouted upwards. Many were named as identifiable planetary star systems, some remained numbers, presumably interstellar waypoints and no doubt deep space relay drones.

Their eyes followed the names as they appeared, tracking the vertical progress. To Han's initial overview, there seemed to be no obvious pattern to the identified locations: the stolen data was being passed through a multitude of points with no discernible political loyalty or economic stance.

Han's eyes hungrily flicked to the final vector and its end point. He didn't have long to wait. Artoo provided an interstellar coordinate, but not only was there no accompanying name, the numbers were in red.

Han sighed in frustration.

"Red doesn't look good. Usually means something bad. Artoo, can you zoom in on that end point? Can you give us anything else on it? Or near it?"

Artoo trilled obediently, and 99% of the tree faded from view, replaced by the final vector.

Several white pinpoints of stars appeared near the end of the vector, and a short yellow and black chequered bar. But still no further information.

"How... uhh... comprehensive is the droid's memory cache?" asked Harker. "If I can hook him into the secure vaults of the Coruscant Cartographers...."

She swivelled on her chair back to her consoles, and began typing furiously. Several authorisation logos flashed past on her screen.

"Back doors are my speciality," she grinned.

"Yeah, I know what you mean, I thought I used to have that angle covered too...." Han remarked wistfully, and looked past her shoulder to her screen.

Finally, a red emblem switched to green, and a load of binary data scrolled up the screen. Harker turned around to look expectantly at the holo projection.

At the far end of the vector a name appeared, in red script, clearly warning of danger: a prohibited region of space.

Han stepped closer. "Gensys – Socal," he read. Three brown dots appeared about a central white dot.

"Gensys?" asked the woman.

"I think it means a birthing star. Am I right, Artoo? Are those proto-planets?"

Artoo chirped affirmatively.

"And that's why the charts have it prohibited," added Han. "Too dangerous for vessels to navigate...."

Leia swayed gently with the motion of the air-speeder, the ubiquitous Coruscanti transporter. The residential sprawl of sector T-23 zone seven-A flickered below her. As the landscape blurred past below, her eyelids drooped with the weight of fatigue. After the seer-journey to Voc Kadow and engaging the bandits who had threatened her children and their 'uncle Chewie', she was mentally and physically drained. She had returned to her private quarters hoping for a respite, but the Council Masters had been urgently convened at the request of her brother and Grand Master, Luke

Skywalker. When he had asked for a volunteer to review the wrecks of some of the early piracy, the Force had nudged her to offer her services. Only some Master Jedi were able to practice the art of Force-psychometry, a difficult skill of divination through touch, but more accurate than simply visionary insight, and Luke knew that his sister had become particularly adept at it.

Only the Masters of the High Council were privy to Leia's unique ability to seer-journey. When Leia had spoken of her encounter with the bandits, the nonagenarian Master Depa Billaba, one of the Jedi Elders who had re-surfaced following Emperor Palpatine's demise, had noted Leia's more direct and aggressive engagement and had advised rest and meditation. But she had acquiesced to Master Skywalker's insistence that his sister would divine the truth quickly and effectively.

The almost imperceptible rocking of the air-speeder, the breeze against her face, and her exhaustion all combined to encourage her to close her eyes. She did not doze, as such, but fell into an involuntary meditative state.

Her last mental image was of the multi-hued multi-textured tapestry that was the urban sprawl of Coruscant blurring past her. Then, it dissolved to the rushing of whites and greens and blues, and a bird's eye view of a not unfamiliar landscape. Wispy clouds parted to reveal forest canopy and open grass plains, cut through with sparkling streams and meandering rivers ; road and air traffic connected villages and farms to towns and cities. Leia could tell that the terrain was steadily rising, outcrops of mountain rock punched through the pastures. And then, in the distance, against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains, a pristine marble-white city of slender elongated towers could be seen. Leia could not help but gasp in recognition, for this was Aldera, her city of childhood. But, as if held fast in the grip of a mighty eagle or helplessly caught at the crest of a wave, Leia's journey did not pause, and instead she was carried over the Royal Palace and beyond the city perimeter and on towards the distant mountains. Now the blacks and whites of mountain and tundra gave way to the brilliant unspoiled white of arctic. Onward, she sped, flitting over the heads of wolves and bears and basking seals, and yet more frozen expanse. And then, bewildered and unable to conceive of what might be next, she felt her body be gently settled upon the ice, the snow crunching under her boots. She was aware of the wind and the cold, but felt neither. She looked around. The horizon, mostly flat, but broken to one side with a low jagged line, was an empty white expanse ; the oceanic blue sky graded to pinks and mauves close to its shoreline on one side, marking the nocturnal side of the planet.

Why was she here ??

Aware of a disturbance in the air to her right, she turned slightly and perceived the open space begin to flicker and scintillate like sunlight on a summer stream. The mirage loosely formed itself into a humanoid shape, and a female-pitched voice welcomed her.

"Hello Leia."

She did not feel alarm or confusion, and sensed no threat from this figure ; her demeanour was more of curiosity.

"Hello," she smiled wryly.

"You are wondering why you are here. And who I am."

The words were not questions.

“Your brother has entrusted you to divine the veracity of past events.”

Leia nodded.

“He was impressed how clearly you saw the attack on your husband on Tatooine.”

Leia’s eyes narrowed at this stranger’s apparent insight : shortly before she successfully entered the Netherworld and ultimately reunited her parents and defeated the Sith phantoms, she was able to discern her husband’s plight simply from touching the scorch marks on the hull of the *Falcon*. She had shared this knowledge only with her brother.

“How... ?” she began.

“You are a powerful Jedi, Leia Skywalker. To see past events and possible futures is a Jedi skill. And you alone among the mortals have journeyed to the Nether and returned. You pushed through and you made it so. That is a privilege granted to very few. Hubris rides alongside privilege. You have honed your journeying and used it for the greater good.

“That, at least, is what you tell yourself.”

Leia’s skin now chilled, but from the polar air she wasn’t entirely sure.

“Time is relative.”

It was as if the ethereal voice had suddenly changed tack, and was broaching a new subject, perhaps having considered the former now a closed matter.

“It is what you make of it. It is your perception, and yours alone. “

The sparkling spectre raised the outline of a limb, as if gesturing with their arm, and pointed towards the blue-red spectrum tinting the horizon.

“Over there is midnight. Opposite is midday. This planet, Alderaan, rotates about its star. Take a step this way,” the limb gestured again, “and you exist in someone’s tomorrow. Stand there, and you participate in another’s yesterday.”

Leia pondered the words. She was aware that her relatively new-found ability that she and the other Jedi Masters were calling seer-journeying occurred only in the present, and required her physical body to remain in a safe and secure place. The Force might have granted *visions* of the past and the futures to countless generations of Jedi – and Sith – but they were just that, visions.

Before she could begin to quiz the figure further, she was aware that the luminescence was fading.

Involuntarily, she reached out quickly with her hand, as if to grab and hold on to this fount of wisdom.

“Wait ! Who are-- ?”

There was no answer, but for a brief moment - a flicker of an eyelid - Leia swore she was looking at the old crone with whom she had meditated in the aquifer cave under Tatooine's baked desert. Back then, she had journeyed to the Netherworld, and to *Hell*, and had reunited ghosts and battled phantoms. This figure was clearly significant to her in some way.

As the old lady disappeared, so too did the polar white-out dissolve from view, replaced by wisps of low cloud and the grey blur of urban sprawl.

"Coming up on the Bureau...." growled the hirsute Tarnabian pilot in a gruff voice.

The comment broke Leia's reverie and prevented her from reviewing what had just happened. Instead, she focused on the matter at hand. From the rear bench seat of the air-speeder, Leia regarded the view ahead : having sped across one of the industrial plateaus, a blocky profile punctuated by cranes and anti-grav load-lifters became apparent. A high wall surrounding the perimeter provided privacy and security for the Interstellar Maritime Accident Investigation Bureau.

As the speeder drew closer, the broken shapes of wrecked hulks could be seen poking over the wall. The pilot tapped an entry authorisation request on a keypad in front of him, and, in response, up ahead they could see two small sections of upper wall slide apart, revealing a hangar bay. Their craft glided inside and settled beside the red and blue liveried fleet of personnel shuttles. A protocol droid in matching colours stepped up to the speeder.

"Welcome, Master Jedi Solo," the droid announced primly. "Please follow me and I will take you to the officer in charge of pirated vessels, sub-section seven-nine-nine-seven-slash-three-slash-four-two."

Leia nodded, drew her cream over-robe about her, and duly followed the droid across the hangar and towards an elevator.

"But the trace can't just stop there, surely ???" demanded Han. "There'd be meteor storms galore but since the ambushes are still going on, there must be some sort of relay still in place."

Harker sighed. She recognised the problem. On the face of it any relay-drone in the vicinity would indeed have been pulverised by now, and likewise for a base of operations. A proto-planet is *definitely* not a good place to hang around in !

"I'll scan around again, but as far as I can tell, the vector terminates there."

Artoo chirped and beeped, and they both glanced at one of the monitor screens for his words.

"Yes," acknowledged Harker, "that could work. The nearest hyperlane is there," she pointed to a spot near a star on the projected map, "so a passing vessel's APS would auto-ping to it in recognition."

Han nodded. "Like a lifeline in the depths of space."

Harker swung back around to her screens. "Let me search for any records of greeting squawks."

Chewie peered closely at the shuttle's hatch and frame. He growled softly to himself.

"Yes," agreed the droid-pilot. "I've repaired it as best I could, but I've selected a few reputable repair garages on the nearest trajectories, taking into account the fuel line leak. My recommendation would be Yota-Two or Voksvarg, both within two parsecs of here, depending on how well all the field repairs hold." K2-P8 added helpfully, "I've already inventorised several workshops for your perusal."

Chewie chuckled at the droid's efficiency, and harrumphed his thanks. The sound of chatter and footsteps prompted him to turn and he saw his two young wards and the Tegwuls approach. Threepio tottered along behind, his akimbo arms jerking in rhythm to his gait and his anxiety.

"Oh, I do hope you won't suffer such a horrible attack again any time soon, Master Tegwul," proclaimed the gold-hued droid, now shining once again following a recent clean-up..

The Ithorian farmer clicked and grunted, and shook his heavy head.

"Allying with the neighbouring farms?" replied Threepio. "Well, that is a very good idea, indeed!"

"Yep!" Gana added gaily. "Word is spreading about the bandit raid, and how well we all worked to beat'em back!"

"And that will encourage everyone to come together as a defence-collective," explained Corsa.

Klo-Garra's voculator clicked, and she added, "If we can put out there the idea that Voc Kadow is not a soft target, it might help keep other bandits off our door."

The group had reached the Kashyyykian shuttle, and K2-P8 had scuttled inside to prepare the ship for take-off.

Chewie loped over to meet them, and stretched out a long furry arm to ruffle Corsa's brown hair. His huge paw covered nearly all of her head, and she grinned up at him contentedly.

Klo's father spoke, and Threepio translated. "Thankyou for your help here, Master Jedi, we wouldn't have survived without you."

Chewie growled and shook his head deprecatingly.

"Maybe," Threepio translated for the Wook. "But this has inspired you. Next time you *will* do it, and all the farms will come together to help."

Klo's brother stepped forward, and Threepio now turned to him in deference. "I've already arranged meetings to see how we can improve our local comms," translated the droid, "as well as set up proximity sensors that the Ellies can see."

Gana and Corsa each held Klo's large hands.

“Hope you have a great holiday,” smiled Corsa.

“Aw, it’ll be boring now after all that’s happened here !” teased Gana.

Klo’s angled neck swung her head from side to side and she chuckled with deep chesty baying laughs. She hugged both of them in turn, her own head incongruously pushed beyond her friends’.

“Can’t wait for next semester !” she clicked.

She stepped back to her parents, who each placed a large hand across her shoulders.

The Solo Twins waved goodbye, and then made their way to the boarding ramp of the shuttle. Threepio followed them. Chewie raised a furry paw in salute and roared a farewell, then he turned and retreated to the shuttle. They all waved once more from the ramp, then disappeared inside.

The ship began to whine as the ramp was raised and the hatch closed.

The Ithorians stepped back towards the line of trees as a breeze picked up marking the anti-grav repulsors starting up. Green lights strobed to mark its ascent, and the whine increased in pitch as the ship lifted skywards.

Luke looked down at the datapad in his hand, a grim expression on his face. The last of the opaque caskets floated on to the Jedi MPC ship. There were eight in all, eight young students who had lost their lives on a supposedly quiet diplomatic mission, caught up in a fire-fight with bandits and marauders who demonstrated a worryingly astute skill with the Force. If the thieves had merely been opportunistic vagabonds, then he was certain all would have been in custody or killed, and all of his students would have lived to tell the tale and to learn from the experience.

Luke’s broken left arm was nearly healed now and was simply wrapped tight in a bandage with a small monitor attached to it, allowing freer movement. He wore his cream-coloured tunic for his white overcloak had been lost in the rubble.

Alana and the more able-bodied padawans were to one side helping the remaining students who were restricted by their bacta- and medi-wraps. Those in hover-chairs began to follow the final casket on board.

They were located upon one of the many elevated landing pads high amongst the spires of Arabellus.

Lord Grocereen stood quietly beside the Grand Jedi Master. As Luke lowered the datapad to his side, the Chief Administrator politely cleared his throat.

“Master Jedi, once again, please accept our sincere condolences for the loss of life. We are in immeasurable gratitude to you and your students for their aid in defending Arabellus, and forcing the pirates to retreat.”

Luke tipped his head in acknowledgement. "Thankyou, Lord Grocereen. Your kind words sustain us in this difficult time. I would advise you, though, to consider bolstering your defences here against further attacks, and to strongly consider putting aside regional differences and come together in providing a more cohesive defence. These pirates may have been repelled, but they – and others – will surely visit again."

"I will. You have my word that I will do all I can to unite Serreillea against such a common enemy."

Luke saw his wife was helping the last of the padawans on board. It was time to return to Coruscant.

He turned and faced Grocereen, and held out his hand.

"That's good to hear, my Lord. Now I bid you farewell."

The Chief Administrator clasped the offered hand and shook it warmly.

"Clear skies, Master Jedi, and a safe journey home."

Luke nodded once more, then turned to climb aboard the ship. Lord Grocereen retreated away from the primary blast pad, and stood near the elevator. He watched the boarding ramp slide shut and heard the engine primers whine into life. A flock of birds roosting on a nearby gantry squawked in surprise and took to the wing as the main engines fired. The repulsor lifts sounded, and the Jedi ship rose gracefully into the sky.

Leia regarded the view before her : great hulks of space ships, and even partial chunks of hull and decking, sat forlornly on depressed anti-grav load lifters. Scorch marks encircled blast holes. Girders and hull plating lay twisted against the natural flow of the aesthetic line of the design. Though there was nothing sentient about space-faring vessels, there was something sad and tragic about their final plight. Leia now more fully understood how Han felt towards his beloved ship, and how choked he might feel if he was standing with her now.

A quad of Olfrews scurried past. Mammalian, squat and round and furry, they had long prehensile snouts pushing out from above their eyeline. Famous for their ability to sniff out the pheromones of recent events, the creatures' larger craniums held the near-magical brain cortexes that processed the multitudinous smells.

A Bureau aide was stood beside her. He turned to face her.

"These are a selection of the vessels brought in to us following piracy that fall within the dates you had asked. We've hooked them up to some of our auxiliary power generators so you should have no trouble in making your way through them."

The human added somewhat testily, and Leia had the impression he felt she was wasting both her time and his. "You can see from the datapad that our investigative teams have already been through the wrecks with a fine tooth-comb. Even our Olfrews sniffing about only corroborated what he had surmised."

In her hands were a datapad and an illumi-stick.

Leia acknowledged his words with a tilt of her head. "Thankyou, officer. I'm sure your teams have carried out a sterling job. We would not want to suggest otherwise. I merely wish to review what's left of these ships myself, and satisfy my own curiosity."

She didn't want to delay her investigations any longer than necessary.

Leia turned and looked him squarely in the eye.

"You are diligent in your work and my presence here is not a threat. Your supervisor is very impressed with you," she said in a tightly controlled voice.

"I am diligent in my work, and have nothing to fear," the aide responded. "My supervisor is very impressed with me."

"You can return to your office now."

"I'll return to my office now," and he bowed formally, and left her alone in the vast yard.

Leia turned once again to regard the wrecks laid out in front of her. These were a selection of vessels of varying industrial designs that were notable for having no survivors – killed or captured, no-one knew – and stripped of any obviously valuable resources. These refugee transports fell within the criteria she had asked for, a random selection of ships across a wide range of astronomical locations since about five years ago. She knew there were other wrecks here brought in under similar circumstances, as well as others that were victims of piracy but whose passengers had been able to escape or were reprieved of a darker fate ; and then there were the rare but occasional instances of accidents, such as meteor strikes or gravitic anomalies or sheer bad piloting. But she was certain these would be sufficient.

She stepped towards the first hulk to her left, and, calling on the Force to aid her, leapt high into one of the gaping holes in the vessel's hull. As Leia moved deeper in to the transport, away from the breached hull, the ambient glow powered by the Bureau's generator revealed the ship's interior. The design was of shallow hexagonal corridors, with doorways that followed the two halves of a wall section, resulting in two-part doors that would have opened vertically. All the access points had been locked open, but as she went past elevators she noted their control consoles offered a green lit call switch.

Soon, she came to a corridor that had seen blaster-fire. Scorch marks and blast pits were scattered all across the walls, floor, and ceiling.

Leia stepped up to one burn-hole, angled into the wall as expected, and laid her right palm across it. She closed her eyes, and called upon the Force to aid her.

She was suddenly aware of the scorching impact of the blaster bolt, the heat and the noise. She instinctively wanted to break away, but she held the contact and persisted. Her closed eyes squeezed tighter as she concentrated : as if a holo-recording was playing in reverse, the red bolt seeped out of the wall, and, joined by two others, flicked back towards the blast barrel of an assault rifle. Leia briefly discerned the hazy visage of a *Weequay* before it faded away.

She opened her eyes, glanced around the corridor, and her gaze settled on another blast mark. She stepped over to it, and flattened her hand against it. She jolted slightly as she sensed the impact of the phantom blaster bolt, and then relaxed as she traced the path of the gunfire back in space and time to.... a blue lightsabre !

Leia involuntarily gasped, but, keeping her eyes tightly shut, she retained her focus. She observed the red bolt of energy recoil off the blue blade and back to its source. As if she were standing there in the midst of a fierce battle, she now saw the transport guard fire again, and then she witnessed him speak in to his helmet's comlink. Now, the tableau moved forward, the blaster bolts raced out of his gun and one of them smashed into the blue lightsabre blade, before being ricocheted into the wall. Leia's eyes moved from the damage back to the guard, just in time to see the pirate, a horned *Nikto* in appearance, take a stride forward and swing his sabre across the chest of the guard. The melee moved forward and past Leia, and the noise of battle faded away.

Setting her face with a look of determination, Leia re-traced her steps to the breach. She stood in the breeze and regarded the next ship along. A cargo hatch stood open at a similar height to her position now. She leapt to the ground, bending at the knees to cushion the impact, then jumped high to the next vessel, and slipped through the open hatch to land inside. Torn straps and uncoupled webbing lay strewn across the cargo hold. Leia strode past the debris and through an open doorway into a corridor.

Although a transport put to similar use, the cultural design ethic favoured curving lines resulting in more of a vertically elliptical corridor. Again, Leia wasted no time in searching out a location of battle, and soon came across the evidence of a fire-fight.

Placing her hand upon the burn marks, Leia was transported to the chaos and confusion as service droids zipped about ahead of the advancing pirates. Several armoured droids appeared – presumably the refugees' only line of defence - but they were blasted away. Leia once again watched the scenario unfold from her detached perspective. Although many pirates sported hand guns and rifles, several carried lightsabres. This wasn't unexpected as it was fairly common knowledge that such 'trophy' weapons had been looted from the Bogan War. But, as with the first vessel, Leia now witnessed many pirates wielding their laser swords with ease and skill, and controlling the parries of the blade to deflect blaster-fire. She could discern a certain rawness to their actions, and deduced they had had no formal training. But still, they exhibited a naturalness that would give them the edge over other pirates similarly armed. The Force was with them, even if it hadn't been honed to the calibre of a Jedi Knight.

Leia broke away from the battle, and returned to the present. She made her way to a nearby elevator, and selected one of the passenger canteen and recreation decks. Three levels away, Leia found the now-empty relaxation space disconcerting : normally bustling with some sort of service activity even without passengers, this now felt like a morgue or catacomb but without any occupants.

There was no obvious sign of battle or damage, but there was a boarding egress point on the far side of the space. Leia strode over to it, and placed her hand on the frame of the hatch, and closed her eyes in concentration. Immediately she was buffeted by the volume of people being herded through

the doorway and into the airlock tube and away to their unknown fate. Men, women, children, all races, all refugees.

Leia pulled her hand away from the hatch, and choked back a sob. A tear broke free from her eye, and trickled down her cheek. *These were innocents aspiring to a new life of opportunity and security, and they were once again plunged into fear and confusion. Failed by the Pan-Alliance, the government that Leia herself promoted.*

In Harker's private rooms on the *High Stakes*, the two humans were transfixed on Artoo's projected map. This now displayed the last three vectors of the original encrypted data trace route ; spread around and bisecting some of the star coordinates were new lines coloured blue showing official hyperlane routes. At points adjacent to the blue lines and to some of the nearest stars flickered lines of code in small blocks, too small to comfortably read.

"Those are a combination of vessel Idents and interstellar coordinates," explained Harker. "Before you ask, they're historical, not real-time, and on a loop."

Han peered closely at the star in question, still labelled in red. The absence of any blue hyperlane lines was conspicuous.

"But as far as I can see there is nothing corresponding to Gensys-Sucal..."

Harker shook her head in confirmation. "Besides, there're no lines running nearby. I'm not surprised. I imagine the radiation and random out-bound asteroid activity would make it too hazardous for passing craft. Nobody would be crazy enough to go anywhere near it for good reason !"

Han glanced at her and considered her words. "Artoo, you've got a copy of the ship's charts in there haven't you ?"

Artoo beeped affirmatively.

"Can you overlay any known smuggling routes that are nearby ?"

Harker smiled to herself : *of course !*

Artoo whirred to himself, and after a moment, two black lines appeared, one on the edge of the projection, and one passing relatively close to Sucal. Although the bogan had been obliterated and the Imperial-Sith threat had been stopped in its tracks, Barrola the Hutt had dutifully released a certain amount of secret routes to the Alliance ; and Han had made sure he had obtained a copy as insurance.

Sure enough, a few blocks of tiny code appeared. The loop was short, telling them that hardly any traffic passed through the vicinity.

Han sighed, and placed his hands on his hips.

“Well, something’s down there...”

Harker had returned to her trace investigations. Her fingers flickered across the keypad in front of her.

After a while she shook her head, and swung back around to face Han and Artoo.

“Well, even shift-filtering to compensate for the radiation, as far as I can tell, there’s nothing more that’s outbound...”

Han sighed, but set his face with a determined look.

“Okay, so this is the best we’ve got.” He ran his hand through his hair. “We gotta get this back to the Alliance. Harker, get Artoo jacked into a comms port and we...”

“Hold it right there, Rabahht,” interrupted the woman. “No can do. Not from here anyway.”

Han shot her a puzzled look.

“The Pykes have one of the strongest holo-walls in place. They don’t want *any* unauthorised outbound comms leaving their casino. And definitely not to an official PA receiver.”

Han was surprised. “Yeah ? Not even for you ??”

Harker grinned. “Yep, not even me. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Han rubbed his chin in thought.

“But what about from my ship ?”

“Yes.... But they’ve put down a pretty wide radial lock... We’d have to go out quite far.... “

“We ?”

Harker nodded matter-of-factly. “You’ll need my tools to re-produce this map...”

Han nodded slowly. “Okay....”

She gestured towards the map. “And who’s to say the bad guys don’t pick up on our transmission ? Wouldn’t it be safer just to get straight back to Coruscant ?”

Artoo beeped and warbled in agreement.

Han gave it a final thought, then nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s pack up here, and head out...”

“Sure, let me sort out some things....”

Harker flicked some switches at her console and the holo-map powered down. She reached over and pulled the cables from Artoo’s interface, coiled them up, and placed them on the counter top. She swiped up an arm-band with flat buttons and a readout on it that sat to one side, and then leaned over to another keyboard and console, the loose arm-band held close to her body. Her fingers

tapped out an activation sequence, and a green light responded on the hidden device. She cleared the commands on the screen and then continued to type.

“What are you-?” began Han

“Just securing my interests....” She flashed him a smile.

The other consoles began powering down, clearly slaved to the one she was working from. Finally, this, too, whined to silence as it deactivated.

“Ready now ?”

She not-unkindly pushed past him, strode into the living area, and through the open doorway of her dorm.

“You wouldn’t expect a lady to go anywhere without a change of clothes, would you ?” she called over her shoulder.

Han raised his hands defensively. “Okay, okay.”

He gestured to Artoo.

“Come on, Artoo, let’s go wait over at the door...”

Inside her bedroom, Harker held out the arm-band and tapped a pairing code into it. A second green light lit up. Grinning to herself, she pushed the left sleeve of her blouse up, and strapped the device to her fore-arm. Shaking the sleeve back down, she swiped up a padded fur-lined jacket and slipped her arms through it. Then she grabbed a rucksack, and, pulling open drawers from a cabinet, stuffed some loose clothes into it.

“Okay !” she called out after a few moments. “All ready !”

She strode out of the bedroom, past Han and Artoo, and tapped the entrance door open. She turned to face them, a mock indignant look across her face.

“Come on, what are you guys waiting for ?!”

Tagge, flanked by aides and an escort of four stormtroopers, strode through the newly-discovered weapons research facility, the deep space station *XHT-8311*. He revelled in the sight of the *classic Imperial era* architectural design that was on display all around him. The shiny blacks, the bright white pill lighting, the hexagonal bulkheads. This was the environment of his formative adolescent years, as he transferred between Academies gaining a wide experience of the whole Imperial machine, being knowingly groomed to succeed his father one day.

The lead aide carried a datapad, and was giving a running commentary of what the team of scientists had already found.

It appeared that the upper decks were all but a museum dedicated to the historical development of the war machine, while the lower decks and core sections held the laboratories and the machining rooms. They had already passed through a grand hall displaying every developmental and practical style of stormtrooper armour borne on mannequins, and amongst them the trooper's ground vehicles were on show, from the boxy speederbikes to the bipedal AT-STs. Beside each exhibit was a small pedestal displaying rotating technical holo schematics. Beyond, Tagge had seen holograms of the larger assault vehicles such as the multi-wheeled HCVs and the multi-legged AT-AT lines.

Now, having descended a level, Tagge was in the presence of waist-height naval holograms, vessels ranging from the troop transport and TIE fighter to the Diplomatic Command Cruisers – the kind he currently travelled in – to the menacing Star Destroyers. Sadly, these latter were mostly lost from the Imperial Remnant : one functional ship existed and did so in secret, and this was Admiral Tyne's cruiser that was now stationed outside in a primary defensive role, while another was under construction and almost completed.

Still, the technical data held here was a treasure trove ! The multitudes of hijacked refugees and refurbished droid units now swelling the workforce meant that the labour could finally match the demands of his military architects !

These huge display halls not only re-energised Tagge's appetite to lead the Imperial Remnant, the ability to return the battle to the Pan-Alliance and emerge victorious brought fire to his eyes ! The sheer *power* and resulting *order* that such an arsenal brought to his fingertips meant, without a doubt, peace and stability would reign once more. Individualism and independence only brought about chaos, Tagge was certain of that, whereas a strong singular leadership provided *clarity*.

Tagge turned to his aides.

"This, my friends, is what brings peace and stability to the Galaxy. Not divisive re-colonisation and never-ending trade deals."

The Governor allowed himself to be led to the far end of the hall and to Palpatine's masterpiece, the *Death Star*. Even in the form of a greatly scaled holographic model it was awe-inspiring and truly humbling.

"Amazing," he muttered to himself, "Truly amazing,"

Tagge took a moment to reflect on the battle-station's legacy and its huge potential ; and the sheer bad luck of it, and its successor, falling foul of the wretched rebel scum. And instead of feeling sad that its demise had also taken his father, he instead bore a raging pride that a Tagge had strode across its decks.

The aide with the datapad cleared his throat and broke the reverie.

"Governor, sir," he spoke in an obsequious tone. "If you would just come this way, I'm sure you'll be delighted by what is on the decks below."

Tagge and his trooper escort followed the aides into a large elevator, which smoothly descended to the next level.

“Below us, Sir,” said the aide by way of preamble, “you will find the laboratories and testing chambers where the latest research had been taking place.”

Disembarking, the group stepped out into a smaller collection of hallways and glass-walled cubicle rooms that radiated from the elevator atrium.

To their left was an open space that led off to its own sub-section of separate rooms. In the middle, as an exhibit similar to the ones above, was a physical scaled version of the infamous Death Star super-laser. From where he stood, Tagge could see one of the rooms held a similar scaled model, but pared down to its working components and accompanied by trailing cables. A firing chamber projected beyond it, finishing at a heavily worn and blasted target shield. The adjacent rooms to either side held mechanical apparatus elements, such as the firing mechanism and the power reactor ; one room held green crystals and refraction mirrors.

“The Death Star super-laser was always being refined and improved upon, apparently, sir,” explained the lead aide. “In fact, the second battle-station’s primary weapon had been made more efficient in its power-drain to recharge ratio.”

The aide gestured to a nearby hallway and its set of chambers.

“But if you step this way, you will find what might have been the successor to the Death Star.”

The group moved into the indicated hall, and Tagge glanced into the first set of opened rooms.

Again, scaled models dominated the chamber, but they were all contained inside a set of vacuum tubes. Several discharge points were directed at corresponding mirrors, that all appeared to angle towards two vertically mounted pedestals one above the other with a gap in between.

Tagge turned to the aide with a quizzical look.

“From what we can surmise, sir, this was to have had the ability to pre-nova a star. To destroy the host star of a planetary system.”

The aide indicated the pedestals and Tagge could see that their facing edges narrowed into cones. “Between those cones, the scientists would have blended the chemical elements to create a star. As yet, we don’t know if the star would have exploded or been drained away, but either way it would have meant total annihilation for any planet reliant on its light and warmth.”

The aide turned to Tagge, and said, “Interestingly, we have found other super weapons here, but from a slightly different paradigm. If you’d like to come this way...”

The aide led the group to another hallway and to its rooms. Here, Tagge could see more vacuum chambers, this time containing organic material : one chamber presented soil and rock strata superimposed with ground and tree vegetation ; another, similarly occupied with geological strata, but all the vegetation had been reduced to brown stains ; another bore rock and soil only ; and another, similar to the first, but with obvious skeletons of small mammalian and reptilian critters. Piping connected these rooms to a variety of pumps and gas tanks.

"These appear to show experiments that would have targeted certain aspects of a planet's flora and fauna," the aide explained. "We believe there was research into the remote exploitation of valuable minerals and ores."

The aide pointed to the far end of this hallway, and some rooms to the right.

"At the far end are examples of the aura gas drones that the Second Emperor had commissioned."

Tagge couldn't help but snort in derision. It was the premature disclosure of this project to the galaxy at large that had forced Amedda to swiftly retreat from the Imperial Palace on Coruscant.

The aide gestured to another hallway, where vertical tubes could be seen penetrating through the floor and ceiling. "Here we have hyperspatial experiments. These range from supra-light-speed velocities, to a hyperspace-transferrable plasma bomb, to hyperspace-compatible laser cannons. The tubes allowed for scaled displacement tests between way-stations."

Tagge looked around him. He couldn't believe his eyes. This really was a treasure lode! Even right up to his untimely demise, Palpatine had been pushing the boundaries of weapons technology and mass subjugation. With such examples and technical specifications, he could bring the Imperial Remnant out of the shadows, and return it to the glory of Galactic dominance that it had enjoyed for so long.

He spotted a double door to one side, black and sealed closed. Power cables trailed out from the activation mechanism to a cluster of small boxes and generators on the floor nearby. Having been witness to the now-opened vaults, Tagge's curiosity was piqued. He nodded towards it with his chin.

"What's through there?"

The aide stepped over to the boxes, leant down, and flicked a switch. The double doors slid open.

"This was an area kept off-limits except to only a few." The aide gestured to the boxes and cables. "We've been able to crack open the lock."

He glanced at Tagge, and the Governor saw even in the dim light, that the aide's face was pale and ashen.

"There were... rumours... that Emperor Palpatine shared the dark arts that his deputy, Lord Vader, visibly demonstrated. Furthermore, the Second Emperor, his Highness Amedda, overtly declared his... preference... for such measures. Through here we have examples of, shall we say, less militaristic resources and projects..." The aide began to stumble in his previously clear diction. "But there's something about the... the chamber that..."

"Show me!" commanded Tagge.

The aide nodded submissively, and led the way into a corridor of subdued dark red lighting. The group followed, and soon found themselves in a dimly-lit dodecagonal chamber.

Tagge shivered involuntarily. He wondered why, for the ambient temperature, automatically controlled throughout the station, had not changed. But he was very aware that a chill had just run down his spine.

Even in the dim light, he could discern that most of the twelve walls held singular cubicles, and many of those contained objects. Small rotating holograms on looping sequences hovered in the bottom right corner of these cubicles, and the flickering soft blue light only added to the eerie atmosphere.

Tagge could not help but gasp, for in one he could clearly see the ever-imposing figure of Darth Vader himself – but thankfully he soon realised it was simply a copy of the black leather and metal armoured life support suit.

As his eyes adjusted, he could make out, in another cubicle, a tall shape slightly bent over and partly encased in a shroud. Already suspecting the identity of the vile creature within, Tagge stepped forward and peered closer. The inert body of a bogan, partially wrapped in its leathery wings, appeared to be in a permanent slumber, floating in a thick fluid. He couldn't help himself, but, steeling himself for the worst, he tapped a fingernail on the glass. He audibly breathed out a sigh of relief when the creature remained undisturbed.

“So Amedda definitely knew about this station, then,” muttered the Governor.

At the foot of the case, beside the corresponding mini hologram, was a cylindrical tube, about the length of a human forearm, with activation and adjustment buttons and an open emitter at one end.

He looked to his left, and another enclosed exhibit displayed a human figure, child-sized, naked, and curled in a foetal position, and suspended in a similar gloopy fluid.

Tagge looked beyond Lord Vader's suit to another cubicle. In contrast to the other items, this one appeared quite discrete and mundane. He stepped over to take a closer look.

Short cylindrical metallic handles were displayed, one prominently on a central pedestal, while others were sat on plinths radiating around. Tagge was not so uneducated that he did not recognise these as variants of lightsabres, but all were markedly shorter than the one in the bogan's case. The centrepiece was a little longer than the others near it, and at the opposite end to its blade emitter appeared to be a glass sphere. He glanced enquiringly at the small hologram in the corner. As he watched the short loop, he surmised that the opponent's blade seemed to drain of its colour, and be transferred to the bauble. He cast his eye over the other lightsabre hilts : they were all of standard length, except for one, which was about half the size, with clean lines making up two black collars. Another was distinct in that it added gold fin styling to the black collars and metal tube ; another was a little longer, more stream-lined, and had only minimal black ring styling and no distinct collars ; there was a similar slim design, with less black styling, but the emitter end and activator collar were a little larger ; and another, plainer in colour and chunkier in design, with a pinched neck below the emitter.

Tagge had no idea who these swords belonged to, but had the impression they were trophies, won in duels long past.

Tagge straightened from his perusal and glanced around. One other cubicle held a sharp-pointed polygon, a stylised star-shape, the size of which could be comfortably held between two hands, its small facets made of a glass material bound by thick black lines. For an inert object it exuded what could only be described as *malice*. Some other gadgets, less evil looking, similar in size and more mechanical in appearance, were displayed about it.

The aide quietly moved to the Governor's shoulder, and, his voice hushed in what appeared to be a fear-fuelled deference, said, "As yet, we have no idea what these objects are, but our investigations continue. They clearly are significant for their presence to be here."

The Pykes ran a very tight ship on *The High Stakes*. Not only was there a standard control centre overseeing the mundane routines of daily life, like life support and artificial gravity and regulating power drawn from the central reactor, but there was a security office that monitored all the *trading* that took place on the various gambling decks. In addition, since the security agency answered directly to the Pyke overlords, the office could not only affix tracking beacons on visiting craft, it was not unknown for them to put certain guests under house arrest in one of the many residential suites, ranging in comfort from self-sufficient chalets through to penthouse apartments with full wait-droid attendant service at their disposal. While these guests would be fully aware of their incarceration, they would equally be appeased by the comfortable life they were allowed to live so long as they remained upon *The High Stakes*. At first they would be asked politely, but painfully, to remain on board indefinitely, their registered vehicle impounded; any further regrettable confusion as to their fate would result in a tracker chip being embedded bodily, often without their knowledge, tagging the individual's every movement.

Harker was one such individual. She had cost the Pykes dearly, and in retaliation, they had seen fit to intern her on the casino. They had recognised her unique abilities, and were more than happy to exploit those skills to their advantage.

But Harker's brilliant mind of encryption and decoding placed her one step ahead.

"Sir," rasped one young Pyke security officer from his rebreather mask. "Inmate Harker has disappeared from the watch list."

He pointed a thick gloved finger at the monitor in front of him, while his Chief of Staff stepped over to take a closer look.

"Switch scanning frequencies, and review the security cams timed to her last logged location," the senior officer responded.

The younger officer nodded, and turned a dial with one hand, while he stretched across and flicked switches on another console activating the cam-feeds archive. Images flickered across the screen as the integral records droid zipped through hours of footage across hundreds of live cameras.

"I'm scanning through the frequencies, Sir... nothing on gamma.... or sigma.... tau seems clear, too..."

The Chief of Staff was staring intently at the screen. Suddenly, the persistent stream of images stopped hard on the grainy view of two figures and an astromech droid entering the suspect's private apartment. No further images were forthcoming.

Cursing his frustration to himself, the Chief stabbed at the keypad with his three fingers, and the recorded images rolled on in time. Spotting movement, he jabbed at the key to pause the taping : one of the figures – a bulky male human by the looks of it – and the droid had departed the domicile.

He looked up and addressed a deputy who, like the other staff, was looking expectantly at him.

“Send two guards to Harker’s chalet,” he ordered. He glanced back down at the young officer scanning across the watch list. “Keep searching for her ID chip !”

Yuide stood with his arms crossed, his right hand clasped about his chin, deep in thought. His gaze out beyond the viewing bubble of *The Nest*, the Troig gang’s base of operations, took in the view of languidly tumbling asteroids and spasmodically flitting meteors befitting of the hazardous environment of a proto-planet, but his sight went further and deeper.

He had fought a Jedi. The first time he had ever come into close combat with one before. He was aware of the Jedi, of course. After the Bogan War, who hadn’t ? Magicians who fought and eventually defeated the equally paranormal bogan creatures. He knew they were inspired by the Jedi of old, the traitors who had turned against the Republic. His mother had talked about seeing these super-human marvels when he and his brother and sister were mere toddlers. Battle droids and explosions, occupation and freedom, death and destruction. That’s what the Jedi had brought, she had told them.

Yuide pondered the history lesson. He matched it to the first-hand experience he had now witnessed. This Jedi could move, could jump, could react quicker than most other sentient beings. Except for him. He too could move and strike like a serpent, when angered, when that red mist was closing down his vision. Sometimes, he knew, he wasn’t even aware of his actions until after the deed.

That tingle, that buzz, that *energy*, was his closest, most constant companion. It would course through him, he knew, and would fuel him.

And something else had happened during his duel on Serreillea. That tingle had been at its most potent ever. It hadn’t been more powerful, as such, but more.... focused. It was as if it had whispered guidance to him. But there was more to it as well.... some sense of connection.... or neediness... to the Jedi he had fought.

He and his twin brother and sister shared this tingle, this energy. As children, and later, as teenagers, they had discussed it amongst themselves. They had compared stories of shared images, abstract flashes that only made sense much later. They had challenged each other comparing their quick reflexes, their ability to lift things without touching them.

But they had not divulged anything to their mother before she had died. They knew they were different. They didn’t want to be called *freaks* by the other children, and so embarrass her. It was their secret, kept guarded between them.

There was a soft whoosh, and one of the doors to the assembly room opened. Yuide had no need to turn and identify the newcomer. He had asked for his brother to join him, and now he could sense his brother's presence too.

"Yuide ? You asked for me ?" Chekkel sauntered up to his brother, and stood beside him. He wryly noted the subject of his brother's gaze, and regarded the rocks tumbling and colliding outside.

"Only now enjoying the property's view ?" he chuckled.

"Mmm. Well as long as the shields hold up," his twin answered sardonically with a grin. Yuide turned to his brother, and Chekkel was not blind to the sombre set to his face.

"What's up ?"

"You said you knew we were in danger back there on Serreillea," he began, without preamble. "You saw images, you said."

Chekkel nodded.

"With the *buzz* ?" he asked, identifying that tingling energy that the three of them had named and called their own.

"Yes," affirmed Chekkel. "Every time, as always."

"I've never been as good as you with seeing things..." Yuide trailed off, deep in thought.

"But you can control things with your mind more finely."

Yuide nodded.

"And when I'm angry I can *hurt* people without touching them..."

Chekkel nodded. His brother's temper was legendary, and they knew the ability to push and pull and lift and squeeze with the power of the mind alone came more easily to him. Chekkel could do these things, but he had to focus and do so for longer. And although he wasn't squeamish or unduly merciful, he preferred not to resort to *torture* if he could help it.

"Robbiee could sense how we were feeling, she could read others' minds," Yuide went on. "She could always see the bigger picture."

At the mention of their sister, Chekkel looked deep into his brother's eyes, and Yuide looked back, an unspoken vow repeated once more between them.

An eternity passed as they each re-affirmed their revenge on Tagge.

Yuide broke the hold, and returned his attention to the maelstrom that was the proto-planet forming outside.

"Our laser swords and whips," Yuide continued. "The weapons of the warrior wizards and the goblin sprites."

"The Jedi and the bogans," confirmed his brother.

"The Jedi who can run faster and jump higher, who can lift things without touching them, who have lightning reflexes." Yuide turned and looked once more at his brother. "Like us".

Chekk nodded, and crossing his arms, leaned back on his heels.

"It's fairly obvious that we share their tricks. Most of our crew do too. That's why they're here with us and why we have them."

Yuide leaned in, an idea intent upon his face.

"But not trained," he pressed, "not to as high a degree !"

"What you sayin', Yuide ?" his brother smirked. "That we need to rock up to one of their academies, pound on the door, and demand to be let in ?"

"Yes !" Yuide spat back. He glanced away. "I don't know !"

"You're serious ?"

"Back there, on Serreillea, when I was fighting that Jedi, the *buzz* was there, but it was clearer, more powerful, at my fingertips," he lifted his right hand and waved his fingers, "than it had ever been. Chekk, I could hear whispers.... it was whispering to me... the *buzz* was telling me what to do...."

Chekkel narrowed his eyes, but remained silent, inviting his brother to continue.

"It was as if me and this Jedi were... were *connecting* ! It only happened then, and I haven't heard it or felt it like that since."

"These whispers.... could you.... ?"

Yuide shook his head. "No, it was just the feeling that someone was just behind me, whispering..."

Chekkel exhaled, and swung his arms to his side. "Well, sounds to me like you need to get yerself a teacher, when all this is done !"

"Chekk !" retorted the other, quickening to anger. "Don't joke !"

Chekkel held up his palms, backing off. "Okay, okay.... But seriously, this sounds important, like something you should look into..."

Yuide, calming, nodded.

"Yeah... If only Robbiee was with us, she would know...."

"Hey," offered his brother, "I'll put out some feelers. We'll look into it.... together, like we always have...."

"Thanks, Chekk," the other answered. Then he added, almost to himself, "I feel as if something's linked me to that Jedi.... as if he has the answer...."

The Jedi MPV streaked through hyperspace at lightspeed. Inside, the atmosphere was quiet and reflective. Most of the injured students were healing well, but everyone was acutely aware of the loss of life that had occurred during the course of what should have been simply an exercise in psychologically nuanced negotiations.

Luke and Alana were sat in the compact conference room, the holo-projector on the table delivering a shimmering pale blue reflection of the Jedi Council, live from Coruscant. The decor of the room was a cool gun-metal blue, with dark blue cushioning on the chairs. The two Jedi still wore the heavy bandages upon which was fixed a small panel of buttons and lights that pulsed green with a slow-flash.

The primary tower of the Jedi Temple held, as it did in Republic times, the Council, consisting of twelve wide chairs arrayed in a near complete circle. The cream mosaic floor flowed between a single break in the ring out to a set of doors which in turn led to an atrium and an elevator. Most of the chairs were occupied, and those that were not either marked Master Jedi absent on field missions and unable to easily convene for the meeting, or the two chairs that were yet to be filled by Jedi deemed worthy of such a promotion. The discrete holo-cameras in the chamber provided a wide coverage of the Council, and were intelligent enough to focus in on whoever was the primary speaker. Likewise, Luke knew that the holo-projector on the table in front of him would pick up on subtle signals, like his breathing or his body posture, to activate and direct its recording device.

Luke regarded his sister, Leia, who was currently speaking. Through their sibling connection in the Force, he could sense her disquiet, but, as ever, she retained an outwardly calm composure.

“Yes, there was no doubt about it.... the pirates rounded up all the passengers, and escorted them off their vessel.”

Old Master Billaba gestured with her hand. “Are you certain that your Sight was clear, Leia ?

Luke’s sister nodded. “I am fully confident in my ability to discern the past events, Masters,” she added emphatically. Leia was aware that some of the Masters doubted the veracity of her uncommon skill in divination, or feared that it would lead her down the Dark Path.

“So,” summarised Master Depa Billaba, “we have pirates who wield lightsabres and pirates who are methodical in abducting passengers.”

Luke imperceptibly leaned in towards the group. “The bandits we encountered on Serreillia were definitely strong in the Force. Untrained, certainly to our standards, but they were channelling their raw power.”

He paused a moment, recalling the pirate he had duelled. “And especially the leader.”

“The Force tells me these pirates were the same ones that Leia discerned at the shipyards,” added Alana.

Luke nodded, and Master Etoille said he concurred with the verdict.

Master Billaba glanced around the chamber, and then returned her attention to Luke and Alana. "We agree. The Force is pointing us in this direction, and there is no doubt the two are not separate groups."

"And we must discover the purpose of this trafficking, too," added Master Flo-Ra.

"Yes," agreed Etoile. "I suspect there is a humanitarian crisis unfolding right before our eyes."

"Master Billaba, can you speak to Mon Mothma and the generals for us, please?" instructed Luke. "We must all put our maximum efforts into locating this gang, and bring them to justice."

The veteran Master Jedi nodded her head.

"Before you go, Master Skywalker," she added. "Most of the families of the padawans who lost their lives have arrived for the Remembrance Service. They are staying in the guest residences in the east quad."

Luke nodded in acknowledgement. "Thankyou, Master Billaba. We're about three parsecs from Coruscant, we will see you soon."

Han, Harker, and Artoo had made their way down through the *High Stakes* without any untoward encounter. The elevator door had opened onto bay 14, and they could see the *Falcon* parked across the way. The two private yachts had gone, and a dart-like ship supported by curved slender landing gear and sporting several gun emplacements had arrived to replace them ; it looked insectile and vicious.

"Nice ship," muttered Harker at Han's elbow, nodding her chin and raising her eyebrows.

Han waved his hand dismissively. He'd heard it all before.

"Nah, it's the saucer-shaped one," he gestured, "with the two mandibles out front."

"Yeah," replied the girl, a little confused by Han's answer,"that's the one I meant ??!"

"Nice," he grinned. "Artoo, as soon as you're buckled in, power up the lifters, and route as much power into the rear thru---"

"One moment, please," came the clipped mechanised voice of a Pyke concierge. The tall robed figure was striding towards them, and another, a few paces behind, was carrying an anti-riot electro-stave, and a stun-baton at his waist. The dumpy box droid from earlier trotted obediently behind.

The lead Pyke lifted his datapad, and began to type onto its surface.

"You will need authorisation to depart," explained the concierge. His companion planted his feet and held the two metre long stave tightly.

Han immediately went into bluffer's mode. He opened his arms expansively.

“Well, of course, guys... but I was speaking to one of your Proprietaires upstairs only just this minute, and *he* said he was pre-authorising us to...”

The Pyke shook his head sharply. “No-one leaves without a concierge docket, and besides, we have an anomaly on one of our customers that we’re checking...”

“Well, I can’t help th---“, began Han.

At that moment, Artoo suddenly darted forward on his tiny wheels, beeping loudly. From the top of his blue dome, a small panel popped open, and a tubular device began to rise. At the same time, a narrow vertical panel on his barrel torso opened revealing a similar cylindrical feature on a mechanical arm. The one being ejected from his head gave a pop and a snap and the tube was sent flying up into the air. Everyone’s attention was caught by the obvious malfunction and their eyes followed what remained of the device as it sailed high into the air. The second cylinder remained attached to its extension arm and gave a distinctive *snap-hiss* sound, and a blue glowing energy blade of about half a metre in length was projected forward. Its tip nicked the concierge in the side of the leg, and he cried out in pain, clutching his thigh and collapsing to the floor.

The guard was quick to react, activating the stave and flicking it downward against the droid’s blade-emitting cylinder. The crackling purple energy apex reserved for rioters smashed into the cylinder, slicing it in half in a shower of sparks. Artoo’s beeps of bravado quickly switched to a wailing squeal of alarm.

But Han saw his opportunity too. He stepped forward and threw an uppercut punch to the Pyke’s shoulder, who was still bent over the downward stave, which spun the guard around. Han kicked out at the Pyke’s back, and he was sent sprawling.

As the concierge tried to get to his feet, Han glanced around, saw a stack of containers nearby, and grabbed one by the handle. He swung with his spinning momentum, and smacked the concierge in the rebreather helmet, flooring him. He noted that the guard was also getting to his feet, so he stepped over to the Pyke, swinging the container in his outstretched arm. The resulting *clonk* on the guard’s helmet was loud and satisfying, as was the *thud* of the body hitting the deck.

“Come on !” snapped Han to Harker and Artoo. “Time to go !”

Chewbacca sat cross-legged on the beach, his eyes shut, and his huge furry paws hanging loosely over his knees. Gana and Corsa Solo were similarly posed, while Threepio stood respectfully still to one side. The sibilant lullaby of the surf slipping against the shallows only aided their meditation further. In one hand, Threepio clasped a standard cylindrical comlink, awaiting an update from K2-P8, the pilot-droid, who was liaising with the local workshop. Their shuttle had only barely made it one parsec before they had to land for repairs : the patch on the fuel line had torn, and pressure alarms for the seal around the boarding hatch had begun to sound.

The second planet of the Yota system was a warm oceanic world with atolls and island chains ; its two moons playfully tugged at the tides, doubling the number of daily swells, with the smaller moon

even 'hiccupping' the wave crests with an additional mini-pull. The pale blue-green sky above was reflected in the shallows below, darkening in hue as the waters stretched out to the depths. Green palm trees gently swayed on the higher ground behind the group.

Chewie, with his eyes still shut, murmured a soft growl.

Without disturbing his poise, Gana responded with a question. "What do I see?"

The young boy, eyelids closed, tilted his head a degree in consideration.

"I see numbers.... a vertical pillar of numbers...."

Chewie nodded slightly, and purred an explanation.

"Co-ordinates?"

"I see the Falcon!" whispered Corsa.

"Yeah, the main ho—"

Chewie growled a query just as Gana continued with the same question.

"Who's that girl...?"

Corsa began to fidget uneasily.

"She's hazy... I can't see her clearly enough..... her features keep... shifting...."

"And there's a bright light now behind her..." Gana put in.

Corsa squirmed and screwed her closed eyes tighter.

"Eurgh... it's getting brighter..."

The servomotors in Threepio's neck whirred loudly as the droid glanced back and forth between the two youngsters.

Gana was clearly stressed too, his shoulders jerking this way and that as if he was trying to see around the glare.

Threepio threw up his arms in agitation.

"Oh my!" the golden droid wailed. "What is going on??"

Chewie roared and opened his eyes, and as he did so, the Solo twins likewise opened their eyes, and they jerked backwards. The children threw out their hands to regain their balance, and the fine white sand slipped across their little fingers. Chewie harrumphed a question at the twins.

"Yes, children, are you alright?" enquired Threepio, his arms spasming in concern. The Wookiee growled an explanation as to the outcome of their meditation.

"A vision, you say, Master Chewbacca?"

"Yeah," drawled Gana. "Relax, Threepio, it was just images passed to us in the Force."

"Well, not *just images*," retorted his sister indignantly. "It was quite scary, especially since we could see the main hold of the Falcon." Corsa turned to Threepio and went on, "There was a jumble of images, you see, and then the vision settled inside the Falcon – dad's ship – and there was a young lady standing there..."

"Who we didn't recognise," added Gana.

"But that was because her image was blurry," explained Corsa, "and then she moved closer..."

"But then there was this bright light growing behind her..."

"... and getting bigger and bigger until it..."

"... filled the entire hold, and swamped us completely !" finished Gana.

"Oh my, how dreadful !" exclaimed Threepio. "Well, at least it was just a dream, or possibly a nightmare..."

Chewie chuckled, and rumbled at the droid.

"Oh ? it wasn't a dream ? It was a vision from the past or the future ?" Threepio paused to ponder the words. "So which one ? The past or the future ? And how can you tell ?"

Chewie growled sombrely.

"You can't tell ?" clarified Threepio. "Oh dear. That is definitely *not* good news, is it ?"

"No..." agreed Corsa, getting to her feet and brushing her hands of the sand. "But right at the end I had the impression of calmness and peace...."

"Yeah," her brother agreed. "As if any danger had passed, and now there was a clearer path..."

Chewie growled at Threepio.

"Yes, that would be a good idea. I will contact K2 immediately and see if the ship is ready..."

The Millennium Falcon blasted out of the *Stakes'* hangar bay, rotated, and rocketed off as fast as her captain and droid co-pilot could take her.

Inside the cockpit, Harker sat in one of the rear seats, gripping the end of the arm-rests tightly. Artoo was to her right, behind the other rear seat and plugged into the back wall.

The young woman leaned forward and spoke tensely to Han in front of her.

"Try and avoid those asteroids."

Han nodded. He didn't need to hear her justification.

The Falcon banked slightly on to a new vector. Surrounding the casino station were about a dozen medium-sized asteroids. Only the Pykes knew if the dark interstellar rocks had locked themselves in a singular self-spiralling orbit, or if the giant boulders had been transported here. But all of them held launch stations for small multi-pronged one-man fighter craft, one of the defence mechanisms employed by the Pykes to protect their gambling interests.

Suddenly, three lines of blue tracer fire converged across the Falcon's hull, followed by a salvo of red laser bolts.

Han dipped the Falcon and swerved away from the line of fire.

"Pyke pursuit enforcers ! They're coming in from all directions !" he shouted. He shot a quick glance over his shoulder at the woman in the seat behind him. "Are you any good with guns ?"

Harker looked blankly at him. "No !" came the brutally honest answer.

"Okay, I can dodge 'em and outrun 'em, but the odds are fast disappearing !"

The Pyke fighter craft bore a likeness to a small wedge shape, a squared pyramid on its side, with four cannons at each tip and a single thruster engine at its rear. The ball-cockpit was nestled just ahead of the centre point where the apex of the pyramid closed the shape. Inside, wrapped in a fog of pale yellow-green mist, sat an unmasked Pyke, its angular head and large black eyes following its quarry intently.

The Falcon dived and turned sharply on itself, but the Pyke pursuit craft were equally nimble. Staying in tight trio formations, the fighters looped and cut across one another. Several shots glanced across the Falcon's hull.

Inside the cockpit, alarms were blaring, and a red hue lit the interior. As his hands flicked across the controls, Han barked orders to Artoo.

"Increase the rear deflector shields, re-route the power from the cannons !"

Artoo squealed, and his words scrolled across the small readout screen on the Falcon's dashboard. Han shot a quick glance at it.

"Well stabilise the lateral dampeners, then ! I don't know, you're the astro-mech !"

The two humans lurched to one side as Han put the ship into a corkscrew roll, and then Harker found herself being thrown back into her seat as Han pulled the Falcon into a steep climb. The glare from an explosion below them briefly illuminated the cockpit as two Pyke craft misjudged a triangulation and crashed into each other.

As the ship continued its climb, a flash of light in the mid distance, followed by another, caught Han's attention, and then disappeared.

"What was that ?" he muttered.

He pulled sharply on the flying yoke, and the Falcon broke its climb to loop back around towards the *High Stakes*. As the ship levelled out, still with its pursuers on its tail, Han threw a glance towards the

casino in the distance. He saw the flicker of green pulse lights marking out admittance to a hangar bay and two white dots on approach, and a little further out to the right, the brief blue glow of a hyperdrive engaging. A volley of red cannon fire from behind scattered above the cockpit.

Han sharply braked with the mini reverse thrusters positioned around the midsection 'wall' of the Falcon's circumference, and the closest Pyke craft overshot. Han's fingers flashed over the console before him, and the ship began to rotate.

"What's going on ???" cried Harker, bewildered.

"Artoo, set the Falcon's rotation about a relative point fifty metres from us. And then track the vectors of those new arrivals and departures ! Tell me when you've got 'em !"

He clambered out of the pilot's seat, and roughly pushed past the girl. As he cleared the stubby droid he added, "And power up the top cannon again !"

Artoo squealed indignantly at the tasks he had been set, but then settled into a series of beeps that would pass as contentment for a labour of love.

Han ran down the cockpit access tunnel and crossed the ring corridor, hand outstretched for the first rung of the gunwell ladder. He raced up the tube, ignoring the offset centrifugal force of Artoo's new rotation displacement. Slipping into the gunner's padded chair, he wrestled the headset around his ears, and flicked the targeting computer on. It whirred and glowed as it powered up.... and then faded. He thumped the edge of it, and it spluttered back into life.

Han shook his head. "Not now, baby," he pleaded.

He dismissed the casino station repeatedly flashing into view as the ship rotated, and focused on spotting the Pyke fighters as they darted about. His thumbs depressed the yoke triggers and the dorsal quad cannon roared into life, angry orange-red laser bolts chasing a trio of craft. The trailing fighter was caught, and it was engulfed in a billowing explosion.

He flicked the comms switch on the yoke.

"Keep the shields at maximum, Artoo," he instructed. "Where's Chewie when I need him," he muttered.

The shrill of the targeting computer took his attention, and his chair swung around to follow another Pyke fighter craft. The gun emplacement above him gave another *double-whump* and the enemy ship was sent spinning.

The Falcon shook as a repeated salvo of blaster fire rained down on the hull.

As the Falcon continued on its spin, Han swung about in his chair, his eyes peeled for more pursuers. One zipped past above him, but then another trio rolled into view on an attack run, and he swung the gun yoke around to face them, the targeting computer rapidly compensating the closing distance. Han squinted against the glare of the red cannon fire splintering towards him, and depressed the trigger. As the three Pyke enforcers banked to roll past, the Falcon's return fire caught two of them, and a huge fireball billowed across the hull.

Han's targeting computer display shrank by a quarter, and a message from Artoo scrolled across the lower section : *Shield strength dropping, but the rotations are balancing the fail.*

Han nodded, and pressed the comm button on his microphone. "That's what I hoped. But we don't have long. As soon as you have those vectors, get us on to the closest one as fast as you can !"

The ship shuddered from below, and two Pyke craft rolled into view.

"Not so fast..." spat Han, and he tagged one of them with his cannon before they went out of range.

Han heard Artoo's high-pitched squeal from the cockpit, and again a message scrolled across his targeting screen : *Vector calculated, will fire main thrusters in 3 – 2 – 1.*

Han was already whipping the headset off, and clambering out of the gunner's seat.

The ship lurched as the main engines fired, and Han was momentarily thrown against the padding of the gunwell.

The Falcon raced away from the circling Pyke fighters, the boost to its main engines leaving a white afterglow. It arced around to line up with one of the hyperlane approach vectors.

Han ran through the tunnel and back into the cockpit. A quick glance at Harker's pale face told him she hadn't coped well with the rotations.

"Prepare for a micro-jump, Artoo," he called out as he climbed over the central console and into his pilot's seat. He reached forward, flicking switches, and grasped the four levers that would facilitate their escape.

Harker gasped. Eyes wide, she leaned forward, and grabbed Han's shoulder. "Wait ! You can't do that ?! Even I know you can't just go blindly jumping around at lightspeed !"

Han had time to shoot her a quick grin, and remark drily, "That's why we call it a micro-jump, sweetheart !"

Just then, by sheer serendipity, a large cruiser popped into view ahead of them ! Having just arrived from hyperspace it was now rapidly decelerating, but it was still looming large and filling the cockpit view. Harker gave out a strangled cry of alarm, but Han, undeterred, focused straight ahead at a patch of inky black space just below the lower hull of the incoming vessel.

"Clear skies," he muttered to himself, and, wincing, pushed the hyperdrive actuators forward.

As the remaining Pyke pursuers peeled away to avoid the cruiser, the Falcon's engines glowed with the boost of lightspeed, and it burst forward, narrowly missing the ventral hull.

In the Falcon, Han immediately leaned back on the levers, and the brief swirl of blue marbling dissolved to star streaks which reformed to pin points.

Han leaned on the yoke, and swung the ship around to face the ingress point, in case any of the Pyke ships had been sneaky enough to try and repeat what he had done. Although it would have been highly unlikely that a pursuer would have remained in hyperspace for the same amount of time as

him and therefore re-appear in the exact same quadrant of deep space, Han still didn't want to trust those odds. He looked over his shoulder, winked at Harker, and addressed the droid at the back of the cabin.

"Artoo ! Get the navi-computer to calculate the fastest route back to Coruscant ! Let's get outta here !"

Tagge sat in the sparse private quarters allocated to the station overseer of Research Station *XHT-8311*. He had just come away from a meeting with the scientists who had combed through the space station's treasures, where they had been discussing the military options now available to the Imperial Remnant. As Governor, he had authorised the production of one *wraith-class* Star Destroyer based on the technical blueprints recovered, and several battalions of ground attack vehicles. He had also approved the continued research into the pre-nova stellar weapon that they had now termed *The Starkiller*, as well as the hyperspatial bomb and the troposphere-stripper. Inspired by the Jedi weapons, he had also commissioned a squad of modified attack droids to be re-programmed to perform counter sword fencing skills ; and he had ordered scientists to investigate the singular lightsabre with the bauble that appeared to absorb the energy from an opponent's blade.

He felt pleased with the discovery of the station, and flushed with the prospect that this knowledge will help turn around the misfortune of what remained of the Imperial Empire, and which will ultimately return the regime to its former grandeur. But even he, as a mere Governor rather than Galactic Emperor, needed to oil the munitions process. He was in no position to dictate terms to organisations outside of his control. Abduction and blackmail could only go so far, and best kept for the more discrete situations such as dealing with pirates. But bartering and leverage was something he was accustomed to and more than comfortable to apply.

The simple console on the desk before him pinged, and the holo-plate began to glow. Above it, a pale blue elongated face of an elderly Muun shimmered into view.

"Tagge," announced the Muun somewhat perfunctorily. "You have it ?"

"Yes, Lord Chancel," answered the Governor. "In return for the blueprints of the DS2, you will ensure there is no interruption to the flow of capital ?"

The Munn gave a slight scowl.

"That was our agreement, was it not ?" Chancel's eyes narrowed. "Are you doubting a Munn's integrity ?"

Tagge was not intimidated or flustered by the brusque response. "No my Lord. I was simply confirming our mutual understanding."

"Then the matter is settled," announced the Muun, and with that the hologram faded from view.

Tagge leaned back in his chair, and smiled grimly. *From this moment forward, the Imperial acciptrid would take to its wings and ascend majestically once more !*

Tagge moved to rise from the chair, but the comm pinged and lit up. He leant forward and flicked the return switch.

“Tagge here, what is it ?”

“Governor, this is the captain of the *Spearhead*,” came the disembodied voice.

The *Spearhead* was the name of his diplomatic cruiser docked outside the station.

“Go ahead,” answered Tagge, settling back into his chair once more.

“We’ve received a diplomatic communiqué from President Mothma’s office on Coruscant. You have been invited to a Remembrance Service at the Jedi Temple *Principalle* later today standard local time. Apparently there has been a tragedy involving several students on a field expedition to Serreillea. We could make it back in time if you wish to attend ?”

Tagge opened his mouth to suggest some polite excuse, but a thought struck him. *Although this sounded like any other interminable but necessary diplomatic nicety that his status as Governor meant he had to endure, this was an opportunity to see the Jedi, and possibly Leia Solo, in closer scrutiny.*

He leaned forward and confirmed his attendance. “Thank the President’s office for the invitation, and relay my condolences. I will be aboard shortly.”

The Falcon slipped through hyperspace like clear oil re-hydrating a broken-down droid. Han was in the forward hold checking data on the auxiliary console, while Artoo remained plugged into the main deck in the cockpit. Harker lounged at the dejarik holo-chess table watching him call out test verifications back to the droid. The background noise hummed and whirred with motors, and there was an underlying whine coming from the engines running at lightspeed.

“And what about the flow-line into Transmission B ?” he enquired into the open comm.

A moment later, several positive beeps and a scrolling update on the monitor allayed Han’s concern.

“Okay, so let’s check...”

He fell into silence as he reviewed the data, and tapped a sequence into the keyboard on the console.

“... let’s check the pump regulator on the sub engines...”

Distant beeps confirmed his request, and Han waited patiently for an answer.

“You were saying about the coaxium ?” offered Harker, conversationally.

“Yeah... there was an incident, way back, where I had the crazy idea of putting raw unrefined Coax straight into the hyperdrive feed. Only a small drop, mind.” He grinned at the memory. “Did the trick. Got us out of a tight jam.”

“But I thought starships could only run on processed fuel ? What’ll happen if...?”

“Boom !” grinned Han.

He shrugged. “I guess I was lucky. But it got me thinking, see, and I knew my way around a ship’s engines and fuel lines well enough to figure out how I could set up a safe drip-feed into the hyperdrive. It worked, and I could start pushing her past point four. I can even get her to point six on a good wind.”

“I guess that’s fast ?”

“Sure is, sweetheart. Still, the hull takes a battering at those higher ranges, and the engines need to be flushed every now and again. Can’t have any dirt clogging ‘em up at point five past lightspeed !”

“So we’ll be at Coruscant pretty soon then, huh ?”

“Yep. Within a standard hour, I’d say.”

Just then, Artoo squealed an alarm from the cockpit. Han snapped his attention back to the console, just as the ship began to violently shake. The interior lights switched to red and pulsed in alarm mode.

“What’s going on ?!” cried Harker, gripping the table.

“Spoke too soon !” muttered Han. “Artoo ! Drop us back to point three !”

As Han’s eyes raced across the various readouts, the engine whine lowered a little in pitch and the Falcon stopped shaking. The drop in drive thrust had addressed the problem for the moment and bought them more time.

Artoo chattered his initial diagnostics, and Han glanced away to read them.

“Thermal build up, eh ? Check the radiation sink. I thought we bypassed the damaged vent ?”

Artoo whistled out an indignant confirmation, and Han smirked at the scrolling text. His fingers flickered over the keyboard and swiped several pull switches.

“Looks like that vent is leaking. I guess we’ll have to shut down the whole starboard side, and re-route.”

He spared a quick glance around the hold. “Good girl, keep with it...” he muttered.

He returned his attention to the monitors. “That’s responding now, Artoo, well done. But we’ll need to patch up that vent... “ The little droid beeped, and Han glanced across to the text readout. “Yeah, look at the expansion drain too. Better take us back down to point one on the drive, though, ease the strain on her.”

He turned to face Harker. "It'll be a little longer now, sorry. "

"That's okay, I'm in no rush," she replied, her face as pale as it had been during the dogfight earlier. "So long as we stay in one piece."

"Oh, my darlings !"

Leia swept up the twins in a loving hug. Gana and Corsa buried their faces into her shoulders, muffling their greetings. Corsa began to softly sob with delight and relief. Gana twisted his face up, and whispered in to his mother's ear.

"Mom, was that really you back there on Voc Kadow ?"

"Shh, shh," cooed Leia. "Hm-mm, shhh."

Turning her head, she nuzzled into their hair. Then she gently pushed them back, and fixed them in the eye.

"We'll speak later, yeah ?"

The twins nodded eagerly, Corsa scrubbing a hand over her cheek.

As the shuttle outgassed with a hiss, Leia heard the heavy tread of footsteps on the boarding ramp, and glanced up past the twins. Chewbacca was striding down to the platform, with Threepio shuffling along just behind him. The ship had been directed to the Jedi Temple, since Leia was present getting ready for the Remembrance Service.

The Wookiee saw Leia and let out a happy roar. She rose and stepped towards him. Chewbacca leant down and wrapped his long furry arms around Leia in a tight embrace, and purred contentedly. From under the straggly hair, Leia beamed and squeezed back. The embrace broke, and Leia glanced down at the bandage on Chewie's right thigh.

"Injured ?" asked Leia with concern. "How are you doing ?"

The Wook gave a soft rumble and nodded.

Leia recognised only a few nuanced barks, but, enhanced by her Force senses, she understood the sentiment.

She smiled, and squeezed his arm affectionately.

"Good !"

"Oh, Mistress Leia, how lovely to see you again !" See Threepio's arms jerked in excited recognition.

"And you, Threepio," smiled Leia.

"I can report that Master Gana and Mistress Corsa have only slightly misbehaved on the journey home," informed Threepio impartially, "but I think it's fair to say that it was offset by their bravery against the pirates we encountered."

The twins sidled up to their mother, and each took a handful of skirt. Leia rested her hands on their heads, and gently tousled their hair.

"Pirates ?!" she answered with surprise. Although she was fully aware of what had transpired on the Ithorian colony-world, she still wanted to preserve the secrecy of her unique ability.

She looked past Threepio and spoke to Chewie. "Luke's just arrived too. They had a run-in with pirates on Serreillea, and tragically some of his students lost their lives."

Chewie gave a soft moan, and tipped his head to one side.

"The Grand Council has arranged a Remembrance Service which will begin soon. Many of the families have arrived for it."

Gana tugged at Leia's skirt. She glanced down.

"Yes, dear ?"

"Mum, we all saw dad in a vision..."

"Yes !" interjected Corsa. "There seemed to be some danger... but then everything went calm again..." The little girl scowled in confusion.

"Oh ?" Leia was worried, but also a little confused that she hadn't sensed anything to give her cause for concern. She trusted the Force enough to guide her. "I'm sure all is well, then, if the vision didn't alarm you, but I'll meditate on it after the memoriam."

Leia took the golden droid by the arm and steered him towards the elevator on the far side of the hangar bay. The twins followed beside her, still holding on to their mother's grey skirt.

"You must tell me what happened with the pirates, Threepio..."

"Well, I'm surprised I didn't fry my poor circuits. I fear it would have been a lot worse if I hadn't been able to alert the local authorities..." he began sagely.

Luke gazed around the Chapel Hall in the eastern quadrant of the *Principalle* Jedi Temple on Coruscant. The cool cream and ochre stone work that had borne witness to countless centuries and suffered weathering and damage in its time, nevertheless exuded a calming reflective ambience that was appropriate for the event. Although its *religious* use may have been lost in its origins when the Jedi pioneers first built a temple upon the pinnacle of this ancient mountain, the Chapel still attracted those who particularly sought the *Cosmic Force* when they meditated. A currently open colonnade ran down the outer wall, and shafts of sunlight slanted in and fell on the small grove of

green trees that grew at the far end of the hall. A water course trickled through it, circling via a discrete fountain.

A five-headed choir of *trumpet-florettes* murmured a humming lament, a hive-sentient creature that moved on a bed of slime but from its pillars produced a sound of such sweetness. The choir was positioned between the arboretum and the seated congregation, with the latter made up of Jedi Knights and padawans, political dignitaries, and the families of those students who died on Serreillea. The High Council was seated on a raised dais behind Luke, who stood beside a lectern. Eight plain metal caskets hovered a few feet off the ground between the Jedi and the congregation.

The keening lament came to an end, dwindling away to silence. All present reflected on the emotions that had been brought to the surface.

Luke listened to the Force drift and penetrate, meander and bind. It whispered to him. He focused his attention upon those seated before him, and took a breath.

“My friends, we meet on the saddest of days.

“Tobyn, Kerule, Kinji, Karr-Gartzy, Quivance, Francer, Sheel-Yung, and Rose paid the highest price of service to the Jedi Order and to the citizens of the Galaxy.”

Snuffles and a sob could be heard from the rows.

“These padawans’ deaths were not in vain. They died absolutely focused on attempting to apprehend the bandits who came to steal from Serreillea. In retaliating the marauders, their actions ensured that only a minimal amount of supplies were taken, and the people there could eat and drink once more.”

“These students came to the Jedi Order willingly and with enthusiasm. Their eyes would light up with pride and confidence each time they mastered a task. In feeling the touch of the Force upon them, they would take another step into a larger world.”

The Falcon was bathed in the ever-changing blue and white marble of hyperspace. In the main hold, Han was standing in the doorway of the central core maintenance room that stretched around the gun well. In his hands he held two power cables that he had just rigged up to the cortex, and he was paying them out back to the auxiliary console next to the captain’s chair. Harker had remained at the holo-table, engaging in small-talk.

Han reached the desk, leant across and flicked the comms switch.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” he called, and Artoo beeped happily in response. Han returned to the job at hand at the desk.

Harker glanced up, and casually asked Han if he was finished at the forward station.

“Nearly,” he answered, with a quick glance to the young woman. “A couple more things to check off here, and then back up to the cockpit to compare the results with Artoo.”

As Han grappled with the ends of the power cables, Harker pursed her lips together, her eyes narrowing as she thought through her options. She glanced around and spotted the captain's open toolbox on the floor grating near the portside corridor, and a hefty hydrosponder poking out. She gave a quick nod to herself, and then carefully slid out from behind the round pedestal table.

As she strode across to the toolbox, she pointed to the spanner and called out.

"Hey, will this help...?" she asked, reaching down, and swiping it up.

Han spared a glance.

"Thanks, I think I got this, but bring it over anyway, ya never know, I might need it..."

Harker gripped the spanner tightly and stepped over to Han.

At the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, Luke had moved on to the subject of grief and memory.

"The loss of a child must surely be the cruellest blow to a parent.

"Grief is like an ocean : the waves ebb and flow. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim in that ocean.

Although it's difficult today to see beyond the sorrow, let us remind ourselves of their spirit, their kindness, and their laughter."

Leia was sat next to Alana in the line of seats reserved for the High Council on the dais behind Luke. Suddenly, Alana felt and sensed her friend stiffen, and, turning her head slightly, she glanced out of the corner of her eye. She could see Leia had shut her eyes, and a frown had creased her forehead. Her hands clasped the arms of the chair tightly, and her knuckles were white. Alana sent a querying thought of concern towards her friend's mind, and was surprised to find a dark wall blocking her way.

"Leia," she whispered. "Are you alright?"

When her friend did not respond, Alana discretely slid her hand across and over Leia's, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Governor Tagge was near the front row, just behind the grieving relatives. He and his aides were not far from President Mon Mothma and other senior politicians. A handful of Pan-Alliance military generals sat behind, some of whom he recognised.

Since his interest was specifically upon Leia Solo, he was the only other person to recognise the slight change in Leia's composure. He registered the Jedi Master to Leia's right subtly shift her hand, and place it over Leia's. From where he sat, he thought that Leia had her eyes shut as well, and the other lady had slightly inclined her head as if in concern. *Was Leia suddenly ill ?*

"I tell you this, they have not left us," announced Luke. "Truly, their spirit and your memory of them, lives on, and those memories will give you comfort and peace. Death is a natural part of life. Do not mourn for them. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force."

In the forward hold of the *Millennium Falcon* Han was muttering to himself.

"Well, the power flux coupling is holding, so...."

Behind him, Harker raised the hydrosponder high above her head. She rocked gently on her feet, adjusting her balance, steeled herself, and then whipped the tool down and across the back of Han's head with a *thunk* !

Han toppled forward, knocking the front of his head against the auxiliary console and briefly sprawling across the desk, before slowly sliding down to slump on the decking.

Harker wasted no time. She leapt back to the holo-table and grabbed her travel backpack from underneath. She dived a hand inside, rummaged around, and pulled out a small vari-screwdriver. Still clutching the bag, she returned to the prone captain.

She pulled him over on to his back, and ripped open his white shirt. The vital statistics panel monitoring his cardiac performance blinked back at her, with one amber light flickering indignantly. Her fingers nimble, she deftly flicked open an access compartment, and poked inside with the end of the screwdriver.

"Sorry Rabahht, or General Solo, or whoever you are," she muttered. "I really do need this chip to give me a new identity out there..."

Behind her, a white glow began to form in mid-air in the far corner of the hold. Harker remained oblivious, intent as she was on releasing the chip. She continued to work feverishly, and hissed in triumph as she finally extracted the module. She barely registered the life support panel flash red.

A humanoid figure, feminine, was now discernible against the white glow. Leia's face appeared and she spoke firmly.

"Stop what you are doing !"

Harker spun around, frantic at the unexpected intrusion. Leia stood in her grey and white robes, the white glow reduced to a more discrete halo effect.

"Who the blazes - - ?" She gasped. "Where the hell did you come from ?!"

Leia spoke again, her voice steel. "Step away from him," she glowered. "Step away now !"

Harker found a germ of courage and bravado. She needed this chip, this guarantee, after all.

"I don't think so, lady !"

She gripped the chip tightly in her hand, and the screwdriver, her only weapon, just as tight in the other. She slowly rose to her feet, tensing, ready to strike at the woman.

Leia swiftly raised her right hand towards Harker, who involuntarily jerked in reaction. But then she found herself held fast and couldn't move a muscle !

Leia stepped up to her and laid her hand upon the girl's left shoulder. Harker, unable to move, swivelled her eyes in panic as she followed the woman's gesture. She could feel a warm tingling sensation under the weight of the hand, and then...

Harker blacked out, and slumped to the floor next to Han's body.

Leia quickly knelt beside her husband, and placed one hand on his forehead and the other over his upper chest, just above the cardio-panel. She closed her eyes and concentrated, willing the Whill of the Force to negate her greatest fear. Across from the unconscious body of Harker, the old woman who had appeared in Leia's vision materialised. She was kneeling as well, and leaned in over the young girl.

"What gives you the right to demand from the Whills ?" she demanded of Leia in a croaky whisper. "Who do you think you are ?! There will be a reckoning," she added gravely.

"I am Leia Skywalker," came the answer, through gritted teeth, eyes still shut. "Sister to Luke, daughter of Anakin and Padme, grand-daughter of Shmi."

"And I will not let my husband die. Not like this."

The old woman nodded, as if accepting the words, and then faded away.

Leia relaxed, and opened her eyes.

Han moaned softly and blinked his eyes open.

"L-Leia..." he gasped.

"My love," she smiled. "You're okay now, you're safe."

Han pushed his chin down and looked at the edge of the cardio-panel on his chest. Then he twisted his head a little to his right and saw Harker lying beside him.

"What --?"

"The girl wanted your cardio chip ID. I wasn't going to let her kill you just for that. But I don't think you'll need it now anyway," she gave a small wry smile.

"Rest. We're nearly at Coruscant. I'll get Artoo to bring her in."

She rose to her feet.

"Wait," whispered Han. "Are you... ?"

Leia shook her head. "No. I've seer-journeyed here. *Into* the Falcon !" She looked around. "I guess it's familiar... and besides, there was a pressing need..." She smiled again. "Rest now."

Han lowered his head and closed his eyes.

Leia quickly made her way through the access corridor to the cockpit, and patted Artoo on the dome.

"Don't ask," she began. "Han's resting for a moment. Can you fly him in?"

Artoo chirped affirmatively.

"Go straight to the Temple. We'll meet you there."

As Artoo beeped and whistled and his interface arm rotated in the comp-jack, Leia faded from the cockpit.

Leia slowly opened her eyes, and, realising that Alana's hand was gripping hers, she gave a quick tense of her own fingers to acknowledge her friend. She could sense her looking sidelong at her.

She smiled, and whispered her thanks.

"I'm fine. All's fine now."

Alana relaxed her hand, and slid it back to her lap. They returned their attention to Luke.

"Under the Jedi Code of Old, attachment used to be forbidden, possession used to be forbidden," Luke was saying. "Under my direction, this Jedi Order promotes compassion and family, and gains nourishment from the Force through the love we hold for one another. Life creates the Force and love scintillates that life. Compassion is unconditional love.

"There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no anger, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is, truly, the Force."

He paused, sweeping his gaze across the congregation before him.

"The Force will be with us... always."

Alana accompanied Leia through the corridors of the Temple. Her friend had been alerted to the Falcon's arrival at the end of the Remembrance Service, and they had made their discrete leave-taking to Luke. Although Leia had assured her she was fine, Alana was still concerned for her friend's wellbeing following what Leia had said was a moment of seer-journeying. As far as she was aware, this ability would normally be brought about by Leia herself, and through a period of deep meditation. But she had been witness to a sudden and apparently uncontrolled voyaging.

As if reading her thoughts, Leia smiled and broke the silence as they walked.

"I went to the Falcon, Alana. *Inside* the ship !"

"But --?"

"I know. I've never been able to seer-journey inside a man-made space before."

The answer came to Alana. "It's familiar, and safe," she said.

Leia nodded. "That's what I think too."

"But, Leia, it was so sudden, I thought that..."

"Yes, normally I have to settle myself into a meditation, and seek out the destination," the other confirmed. "But it turned out that Han was in grave danger, and presumably the Force needed me to be there for him."

"How is Han now ? Is he bringing the Falcon in ?"

Leia shook her head. "No, I asked Artoo to steer her in. Han's fine, now, I left him resting."

"And you were gone for mere seconds..."

"Was I ?" she replied. "It felt much longer. Still, I get the impression that Time is not exactly a problem when I voyage..."

Leia paused, stopping Alana, and turned to regard her friend.

"Alana, I feel as if a door has been opened to me.... or at least is being opened.... It's feels just beyond my reach..."

"Your seer-journeying ?"

Leia nodded again. "Yes. And it doesn't feel wrong, either. I feel as if... " she paused, thoughtful. "As if I'm being guided... guided by an old woman..."

"Do you recognise her ?" asked Alana.

"No," replied Leia firmly. "But there's something awfully familiar about her..."

"The Force will tell you in good time, I'm sure."

With a sigh, Leia resumed the pace and soon they reached an elevator.

Referring to the protocol droid at the Remembrance Service, she said, "Let's hope 5PO got hold of Chewie and the kids to let them know that Han was on his way in. Did you request a security detail to meet us there ?"

"Yes, as we were saying goodbye to the families."

They entered the elevator, which took them swiftly up several floors to the start of the hangar decks.

"I think the Service went well. Luke was quite anxious about it," remarked Alana conversationally, as they stepped out into a hangar deck service corridor.

“Yes, it did,” agreed Leia. “But I think Master Billaba has more to say on the matter...”

“Yes, balancing the ways of the Elders to what Luke is promoting is difficult. And this tragedy on Serreillea will bring things to a head, I feel,” remarked Alana sadly.

“But we have all felt the change in the Force from a few years ago. When I returned from the Netherworld, we felt it re-awaken as new life breathed a new symbiosis. Even we are learning it anew !”

“You’re right, the mystery that is the Force has deepened even more.”

“Mom ! Aunt Alana !” The cry cut through their thoughts, and they looked up, smiling. Gana and Corsa were loping towards them, with Chewie and Threepio behind them.

“My darlings !” cried Leia.

“Hey guys !” called out Alana easily.

Chewie harrumphed, and rocked his head side to side.

Threepio raised his arm for attention. “I say, Master Chewbacca says the Millennium Falcon landed a few moments ago. It was allocated to this hangar just here...”

Leia, hugging her children, mumbled her thanks to the golden-plated droid. The heavy door swished open with an hydraulic whoosh, and the group entered. Ahead they could see the Millennium Falcon resting on its seven landing struts, plumes of whistling steam expressing from the hull. The open hangar doors were slowly closing. Two Jedi Sentinels in gold and cream robes were just reaching the lowered boarding ramp, and turned to face the new arrivals. The Temple Guards held ceremonial staves with emitter cups at each end that resembled lightsabres. At their wide belts hung restraint binders and utility pouches.

“Master Solo, Master Skywalker,” they both intoned from beneath open crested helmets, and bowed. “What is your command ?”

Alana looked to Leia in expectation.

“Come with me into the main hold. There will be a young lady who needs to be escorted to the Temple's security unit.” Leia turned to Alana. “We will need to question her, I think, before we hand her over to the authorities.”

Alana nodded, and, with Chewie, the twins, and Threepio behind her, she followed the Sentinels and Leia up the boarding ramp.

A high-pitched merry whistle caught Threepio’s attention, and the golden droid turned at the cockpit access corridor to greet his old friend.

“Oh, Artoo, how good it is to see you again !” cried the protocol droid, shuffling forward towards the cockpit.

The others continued into the main hold. On the decking Harker still lay, her long dark hair fanned around her head. Han sat at the holo-table, leaning back into the upholstery, a thoughtful expression on his face turning to delight. The twins bounded forward, and jumped up beside him, giving him a hug.

“Hey kids !” he smiled.

He glanced up at Leia. “Long time no see, love...” he grinned, and winked. “How ya doin’, Alana,” he nodded at his sister-in-law.

Chewie laughed, and roared happily.

“Hey, ya big furry oaf, of course I’ve missed ya !”

The Wookiee pushed forward, and, leaning over, stretched a furry paw out to muss Han’s hair.

Leia knelt down beside Harker, and placed her hand on the girl’s forehead. The two Sentinels stood either side of her, and one activated their stave : two short blue energy blades appeared, no more than a quarter of a metre each. Resting his stave to one side, the other released a pair of deactivated binders from his belt.

Harker moaned, and blinked her eyes open.

“Ohhh, what hit me... ?” she began.

“You are in the custody of the Jedi Temple, Miss...” responded Leia.

“Harker...” offered Han.

“... Harker, and these two Sentinels will escort you to a secure unit for questioning.”

Harker focused on the lady speaking.

“Hey... you’re the one who...”

One Sentinel leant down, and took Harker under the arm, lifting her to her feet. The other Sentinel snapped the binders around the woman’s wrists, and activated the purple energy to crackle between them.

Han waved his hand, and rose to his feet. “Go easy with her, guys. She’s given us a location, but she says we need her to map it out again.”

Holding each arm, the Sentinels escorted Harker out of the hold, and off the ship.

Leia turned to her husband, and embraced him warmly.

“I’m okay, love, I’m okay...” he whispered as he softly rubbed her back. “But thanks for coming to get me...”

“Master Skywalker !” came a voice. “A moment of your time, if you please.”

Luke turned, and saw Master Billaba just behind him. They were in a wide colonnaded corridor, having just left the Chapel Hall. The informal gathering following the Remembrance Service had come to a close, and the families and the dignitaries were departing. Having sensed Lela’s recent impromptu Seer-Journeying, as well as the return of the Falcon, Luke was keen to catch up with his sister and brother-in-law. Elder Billaba’s request, however, did not come as a surprise, and he sensed an aura of stormy debate within the aged lady.

“Master Billaba,” Luke bowed his head, and gestured with an open palm. “Of course. How can I help you ?”

“That was a lovely service, you gave, Luke,” Master Billaba opened. “But I fear this illustrates my concerns with the direction you want to take the Jedi Code.”

Luke nodded his understanding and respect.

Billaba went on. “Luke, there was a reason why the Jedi of Old took Younglings at an infant age. Yes, it might have been controversial, though it was a practice that was hundreds of years old. Under the care of their Masters, a Padawan would grow and learn surrounded by their new family of like-minded individuals. They knew no other life. This helped focus their commitment to learning the ways of the Force, to ensuring they developed their skill in control and ability. They would suffer no distraction that could sway them from this most difficult, but ultimately rewarding, path.”

The Jedi Elder paused, and then she added, quietly, “Your father did not experience this upbringing.”

“My father went from being the most gifted Jedi to the most feared dark tyrant,” Luke acknowledged. He gestured his arm wide, encompassing the walls of the Jedi Temple about them and the teeming life within. “And yet, through his children, he produced this *New Dawn*.”

The Grand Master sighed, but not unkindly.

“We have discussed the histories,” Luke went on, “and even Master Yoda has appeared before all of us to give his thoughts on the matter.” Billaba nodded. “Yoda admits he was fallible. He acknowledged that a fresh approach might be timely. Was it circumstance that Leia and I were born, or was it the Will of the Force ? The Council has deliberated on this at length, and though we may never find a clear answer, it is enough for me to know that we were allowed to come into being, that Leia and Han were granted the twins, that Alana and I have Benji.”

Depa Billaba gestured behind her, in the direction of the Chapel Hall. “But look at the consequences ! Those poor families have to deal with the loss of their children ! And, in turn, we must deal with that loss. Grief is a powerful emotion, Luke, and it’s a dark emotion.”

“Yes, it can be, but loss and grief is a part of Life, and Life is a part of the Force, and by deliberately shying away from the prospect of grief, we surely cut ourselves off from Life and from the Force.” Luke paused a moment to let the idea sink in. “Grief is indeed a powerful emotion, but it can cleanse and it can heal. Channelled skillfully, it can energise you in upholding the memory and the love you had for that person. Acknowledging that anger and hatred can lead to a desire for revenge, but

focusing your energy instead on the passive centre and the spiritual strength and nourishment that can bring, must surely be more beneficial and productive.”

The two Masters reflected on the words.

Luke broke the silence. “My heart cries for those youngsters and their families. But I can *feel* the Force encouraging me to persevere with the new policy, and to continue letting the padawans be inclusive. Neither I nor they can ignore they have families, and those families can offer them such a deep well of strength.”

Elder Billaba sighed, and lowered her gaze. “I hope you’re right, Luke, or I fear this new Order of Jedi might implode.”

“The Force will be with us, and it will guide us.”

Billaba looked up and smiled. “Yes. Yes, it will.”

The medi-room deep within the Jedi Temple gave the impression of being a sterile white, but the decor was a deceptively warm soft ochre. Machines hummed and clicked, and lights blinked slowly. Han lay on the bunk, with Leia at his side, and three of the ‘New Kaminoans’ beside them. These re-spawned new generation scientists, rescued from the destruction of the last of the Imperial Academies on Kamino years previously, had grown with accelerated DNA modification, and were now young adults, standing at about the height of Leia. A 21-E medical droid fussed in the background.

“So, what’s the verdict, guys ?” asked Han casually.

“From what we can tell,” answered the lead scientist, “the cardio-support is now completely unnecessary. The fact that you didn’t die when the primary actuator chip was removed, and that you were able to walk unaided from your ship to this medi-centre, is evidence enough. ”

Another Kaminoan leaned in. “But we cannot determine the exact reason for this apparent revitalisation.”

Han glanced at his wife, and then back to the scientists. “Well, that’s good enough for me. Didn’t want to be lugging that kit around for the rest of my life, anyway !”

Leia turned to the Kaminoans. “Thank you for checking him over. Could you give us a moment, please ?”

“Of course,” answered the lead scientist, and bowed. The three slender aliens glided from the room. The 21-E droid remained in the corner monitoring the outputs.

As the door softly swished shut, Leia regarded her husband. “It was the Force, my love. I don’t know what I did, and I don’t know why I couldn’t do it before, but the Force acted through me...”

“Sweetheart, you said it yourself, I was in danger. Harker was about to pull my plug. Literally. As you say, the Force acted,” he added with sincerity. His face broke into his lop-sided grin. “Hey, it thinks I’m important enough to keep around ! That’s gotta be a good thing, right ?”

Leia chuckled. “Absolutely !” She leaned in and kissed him. “I don’t want you to go anywhere. But I’d love to know what happened back there....”

“You saved my life, sweetheart,” he whispered. “Again.”

“Mmm, I hope so...”

“Hey, what about Harker ?” he asked, breaking the moment. “What have they done with her ?”

“Well, although Artoo had made a copy of the astro-nav chart she had produced, the generals think she’ll be useful in drilling down deeper into the location. And besides,” she added, “if the pirates are going to all this trouble to hide their operation, something tells me we’re going to need her services a little longer.”

“Gensys-Sucal...” Han mumbled. “A gen-system isn’t going to be easy...”

“No,” agreed Leia, “The Jedi Order will need to be called upon...”

Just then, the medi-room doors swished open and an explosion of manic noise burst through.

“Dad ! Dad !” cried Gana and Corsa as the twins ran to the side of the bed. Threepio tottered in behind.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, General Solo,” the droid exclaimed, “But they were so eager to see you as soon as possible. I must say, their argument was indeed most persua—”

“It’s okay, Threepio,” answered Han. He flung his arms open, inviting the kids up on the bunk. “Hey porgs, how ya doin’ ?”

“Screech !” sang out Corsa happily, and she and her brother clambered up on to the bed.

Deep inside the Military Intelligence complex on Coruscant coding technicians were fine-tuning the calibrations provided by Harker’s astro-nav map. This was the dimly lit domain of Flemmy Jerring, the Ishi Tib Director, and his blinking stalk eyes supervised all the activity that went on in the software laboratory. The map that Harker had generated on the *High Stakes* had been recreated from Artoo’s memory banks, and now stood as a hologram in the middle of the room. The little blue and white droid, in fact, was jacked in to a computer port to one side, and standing almost protectively beside him was See-Threepio. The golden droid had felt compelled to offer his services in translating the astro-mech’s binary whistles and beeps, conveniently forgetting that the technicians would have auto-translator software available. Around the far perimeter were computer banks that hummed and whirred, and closer in the technicians were seated at desks, peering intently at their consoles. While Jerring circled around behind the coding engineers, several military

personnel , including General Fajama and Security Chief Sturjala Onick, were waiting patiently as they gazed at the apex of the shimmering image.

The map coordinates had been re-validated and its accuracy improved. The resolution was sharper and provided more interstellar detail : an asteroid field and a pulsar near the targeted gensys revealed uncharted astro-nav obstacles that might affect an approach. Military field cartographers stood next to the hologram generating proposed inbound hyper-routes using handheld datapads that cast coloured wire-frame lines into the hologram.

General Fajama turned to the Chief of Security. "I understand that all available wavescan instruments have been re-aligned towards Gensys-Sucal," he explained.

Onick nodded, and her black bob of cropped hair swung with the movement. "Yes, I imagine gamma and photon scans will reveal a clearer picture of what's going on in that maelstrom."

Jerring heard their observations, and strode over to them. "An update is due any moment now, but we've arranged for the Harker woman to join us and see if she can punch through the radiation cloud."

An aide glanced up from behind a console where two technicians were sat busily typing and called out. "Director, we have the latest wavescan data now. They're just inputting the overlay as I speak..."

The officers paused their muted conversations and all gazed at the shimmering vertical display in front of them. The image changed and slowly revealed a bright star surrounded on a relatively flat orbital plane by a multitude of spheres of different sizes, representing the asteroids and planetoids. Some were clearly larger, and, in real-time, the animated display showed that to these the surrounding rocky debris was gravitating. A solitary sphere on the outer edge of the orbital elliptic implied a gas giant that had stabilised and acted as a counter-weight to the proto-star's inner system material.

"Can we tell where the encrypted signals are going ?" asked General Fajama grumpily.

"Not yet," answered the aide, who was stepping forward to join Jerring and the others. "But the trajectory provided by Harker suggests it's *not* the gas giant."

"So they're definitely hiding in the asteroid storm..." muttered Onick.

Leia regarded Harker coolly. Her voice might have been soft and warm, inviting even, but her eyes were steely cold. She stood, arms crossed, in the small interrogation room across from Harker who was sat on a chair towards the back of the room. Luke stood impassively beside the door, with a Temple Sentinel flanked on the other side.

"What was going on back there in the ship ? Why did you ransack the cardio-unit ?"

Harker glowered back, her mouth a tight line.

“Tell us why you needed that chip,” persisted Leia.

“Harker, you’re young, you’re bright. You know where you are and you know who we are.” Leia's voice hardened, and she spoke slowly for emphasis. “Don’t make us drag the information out of you.”

When Harker remained silent, Luke spoke up. “We don’t want to hurt you, Harker, but you might get hurt if you force us to break in to your mind. You know that the map you made is significant. We don’t have much time left, and we have to act soon.”

Harker glanced at Luke and then returned her glower at Leia.

“Tell us,” said Leia, and then her request slipped into a command. “Tell us *now*.”

The woman’s eyes widened as she felt something tug at her mind. She involuntarily leant forward with the pull, and then the mental claw retracted a little, and she relaxed back.

“Don’t make me do it again,” warned Leia.

Harker knew her odds if she resisted. Her skills were her brain, and she needed it intact. “Okay, okay,” she said, and glanced off to the side. “I was a prisoner of the Pykes, under house arrest, if you will, but with perks. I could play all day on the *Stakes*, and I could work for them, I just couldn’t leave. Your guy showed up. There was a scuffle with a Hutt, and I spotted the kit on his arm and chest. I had already been investigating my options for escaping. I figured that if I could utilise his cardio-chip, I could pass as him in his shadow. Then, surprise, surprise, he actually wanted to speak with me, so I played along. I was happy to give him what he wanted while I knew he was my ticket off the station. “

Luke nodded in comprehension.

“And then once you’d made the jump to hyperspace you acted,” Lela resumed. “You would have known the chip would have cost him his life.”

Harker glanced back and shrugged. “Yeah, so what ?”

Leia took a sharp breath, and Luke stepped forward, putting a hand out to calm her, but she exhaled and relaxed, and gestured behind her, waving him back.

Harker scrutinised the older woman in front of her, and her brain whirred. “I needed to get off the *Stakes*. This was my chance. I’m sorry if he meant something to you, lady, but I had to think about number one.”

Leia took a step back. “And the map ? It’s reliable ?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “It’s all there.”

Leia recalled Han’s words on the Falcon. “Do you need to create it again ?”

Harker shook her head. “His droid has it.”

“So, just part of the ploy to get you off the casino, yes ?”

Just then, the Sentinel Guard tapped his earpiece on his helmet. After a moment, he stepped over to Luke, and whispered in his ear. The Jedi Master nodded, and took a pace towards Leia and Harker.

“Thankyou, Harker, for your honesty. Your words were sincere. If you continue with this new found truthfulness, this might be your lucky day.”

Leia turned to regard her brother with a quizzical look.

“You’re needed at the Intelligence Division for more of your decoding. You are to accompany this Sentinel,” he explained, gesturing at the guard.

Harker looked around the room.

“Where’s my bag ?” she asked. “I’ll need it.”

“It’ll still be on the Falcon,” said Leia. “I’ll arrange for it to be sent to you.”

Harker nodded, and rose to her feet.

“Okay, I guess I don’t have much of a choice in this.” She gestured to the guard. “Lead the way, my good man !”

The Troig’s command centre was a ramshackle affair, but it served its purpose of adjusting the shield deflectors and monitoring comms traffic. Although the base on Sucas was by no means a temporary set-up, there was never any desire to get too comfortable. Along with the command centre, there were simple residential quarters providing food and sleep, a training hall, and a workshop for running repairs. Below the main decks were storage bays, power infrastructure, and the highly customised super-computer that not only decoded the long-range encrypted comms, but also calculated in real-time the flow of the asteroids and meteors that in turn prompted the hyper-relay beacons that sat above and below the orbital elliptic. Not too far away a landing plaza on the surface of the planetoid led to a handful of hangars that held a variety of gunships and small one-man hyper-drive capable star fighters. The largest hangar bay was home to several small and medium sized transports, used for shuttling to the two primary vessels utilised by the gang, the gravity-well ship *The Grab* and the attack-ship *The Smash*. These were far too large to safely stow on the planetoid, and so were parked separately near the beacons above and below the orbital plane of the asteroid field.

Chekkel had left his brother to his troubled thoughts, and had returned to the command hub. Since the raid on Serreillea had been interrupted, the provisions were getting low. He needed to plot suitable targets to authorise quick snatch raids, but they were also waiting on the next encrypted comm detailing a suitable convoy run. Tagge’s requirements were pre-selected in the spider code, so unless the Imperial Governor intervened directly, they simply continued to pick up the chosen flightplans and plot ambush points, delivering the goods at a deep space rendezvous. It was a well-oiled operation that was clearly profitable to both sides.

Chekkel was looking intently at a vertical nav-chart board. One finger traced a route between two relatively local star systems, whilst his other hand rested on the clear surface near a binary system. He mouthed some calculations, and then slid his finger across to meet his hand. He nodded to himself and turned to a helmsman sat at a nearby console.

“Jenna, can you calculate fuel for these three jumps ?” he asked, pointing at the three chosen points.

The dark haired woman glanced at the board, and then returned to her computer station. “Yes, Captain, on it now...” she answered dutifully.

“Captain Chekkel,” the base’s comms officer on shift called out.

“Yes, what is it ?”

“We’ve received word from Adelly. She’s secured a shipment of volunteers for us,” the snivvian reported, his tusks producing a slight lisp to the Galactic Basic. “She says we should expect her in a few hours.”

“Excellent !” replied Chekkel. “That Umbaran always comes up trumps !”

“Best recruiter we’ve ever had !” agreed the snivvian with a grin.

The *buzz* pricked at Chekkel and he turned, and strode over to a window that afforded the entrancing view of the ever-tumbling asteroids. His gaze de-focused into the darkness of space. Not allowing himself to be distracted by the constant danger outside, his mind drifted to the whisper that he had just heard. A sense of threat was building, and a darkness blacker than space was getting ready to envelope all of them. Darkness was power, he knew that. But darkness and shadows hid clarity, and he knew that too. He narrowed his eyes in concentration, chasing the elusive wisps of vision, the hints of futures and of suggested paths to follow. Suddenly, flashes of bright white light streaked across his view, and he jerked back involuntarily, his eyes opening wide and re-focusing. Several burning meteors spat past, and harmlessly shattered across the shield dome. He gave a thoughtful sigh, and then turned from the view, forcing his mind to be clear of the disturbing thoughts.

Jenna was calling for his attention, and he returned to her desk.

“Captain, I have the fuel costs for you, compensating for the wider routes avoiding novas and asteroids. If you look here...”

Escorted by the Jedi Sentinel, and trailed by Jedi Masters Luke Skywalker and Leia Solo, Harker entered the laboratory, her rucksack over one shoulder. She had to blink a few times to allow her eyes to adjust to the half-light. She immediately recognised the Artoo unit plugged in to one side, and then her attention was drawn to the hologram in the middle of the room. Her interest was already piqued : animated illustrations of rocky asteroids spiralled around a larger mis-shapen proto-planet.

"Oh, Master Luke and Mistress Leia..." announced Threepio, more to himself than to anyone else.

Director Jerring glanced up as the new arrivals stepped past the perimeter of computing consoles.

"Ah, Harker, I presume ? Thankyou for coming," the director said amiably.

"My pleasure, anything to help the great Pan-Alliance," the young woman replied smoothly. She glanced over her shoulder at the Jedi, and drily added, "Besides, it wasn't as if I was busy or anything..."

Jerring gave a tight smile, then gestured at the hologram.

"Gensys-Sucal," he introduced. "We're creating a real-time display of the orbiting material, but the local radiation is causing too much interference. We thought you might be able to provide some clarity perhaps....?"

"Well, I don't mind saying that I'm amazed you've got this much going," she pointed to the animation. She had already spotted that the relatively short loop was automatically getting longer in duration as more data came in. "It's updating quickly."

"Yes, we have all our resources on this job. But we thought the flair you showed in obtaining the map in the first place might be put to good use again ?"

"I don't suppose I have a choice, do I ?"

"No," replied the Ishi Tib directly and frankly.

"Very well," she sighed. "Where do you want me ?"

Director Jerring pointed to a desk, where a technician sat next to an empty chair. "Over here, if you will."

Harker nodded, and obediently made her way to the desk. Luke and Leia and the Sentinel followed her, and stood discreetly to one side. A glance at the monitor screen told Harker she was seeing live data. Her enthusiasm automatically sparking into life, she slung her bag on to the desk and quickly settled herself in front of the console.

"Good, the algorithm's already hot," she muttered to herself.

The technician pointed at the scrolling data. "This column shows the astro-nav data, while these are the current gamma and photon readings. They're fluctuating due to the background planetary isotopes, this one here."

Already Harker's fingers were flying over the keyboard in front of her. She nodded her comprehension back to the technician.

"So we need to find a way of stabilising those," he continued, "while offsetting for the..."

"... for the gravity well affecting the rocks," she finished, "to look closer at the destination of the transmission..."

With one hand still flickering over the keys, Harker reached into her bag and grabbed a small data card. She reached in again, and this time withdrew a hand-sized half-spherical device that had a horizontal receiving slot in the side of the dome.

The technician glanced up at Director Jerring, who nodded his chin towards a second smaller console to the side of the main one. The technician turned to the auxiliary kit and produced a copy on his screen.

“Don’t mind us tagging along, do you ?” Jerring asked aimably.

“Wouldn’t expect otherwise,” Harker smiled mirthlessly. “What else would you do with that oversight kit ?”

She slipped the card into the slot, and within moments a hologram appeared above the dome, showing the data on the screen, but with an overlay too that visualised the ever-updating view of the asteroid storm. A faint blur of static noise obscured like a thin veil.

Harker continued to type commands into the main console, every now and again flicking a glance at the hologram beside her.

“If I parse this with that one....” she muttered to herself, “and then re-input the new calculations... but the planetoid isotopes... allow for those... if I equalise with the same from the solar rade and...”

Suddenly, the image sharpened, and the simplistic spheres representing the rocky material began to re-form into their unique shapes. An involuntary gasp rippled through the crowd of onlookers.

Harker allowed herself a triumphant grin. “Now to pick up on the transmission vector again...”

Once more the young woman’s fingers played the keyboard, and a red line appeared in the holo-display above the dome.

The director immediately gestured to the main display in the centre of the room. “Fondon,” he instructed to the technician sat beside Harker. “Patch it through to the main display so everyone can see it.”

The technician nodded, and focused on the auxiliary console in front of him. The other military generals, the Jedi, and the waiting coders turned their attention back to the centre of the room.

The red line of the encrypted flightplan signals arrowed in towards a quadrant on the orbital plane. As the new vector resolved itself, Fondon adjusted the view on the main display to spotlight that section of the asteroid maelstrom. The red line paused before it could complete its route.

Harker continued to type.

Suddenly, two white spots appeared above and below the orbital plane. They didn’t go unnoticed.

“What are those ?” demanded Jerring.

Luke and Leia glanced at each other quizzically, then turned their attention back to the small hologram at Harker’s desk. They closed their eyes and concentrated.

The Security Chief spoke up.

"Harker, can you tell what kind of pulses are going through them?" asked Sturjala Onick.

"I should be able to..." the woman responded, "gimme a mo.... let's see... there's a tricky jammer going on here..."

The two Jedi Master's foreheads creased in concentration.

"I sense a great amount of electro-voltage..." murmured Leia.

"They're relay beacons..." divined Luke, also in a quiet voice.

After a moment, the red communication line resolved itself to reach the white dot on the underside of the stellar plane.

"There we go!" exclaimed Harker. "They're certainly comms beacons, but I can see there's something else going on there, there's a lot of energy being cleverly routed in there..."

Just at that moment, a side door opened and Mon Mothma flanked by two guards entered. The President's care-worn face crinkled as she smiled and lifted her hand in acknowledgement.

"Generals, Master Jedi," she said in her soft voice. "I'd heard that we had a break-through."

"Yes, President Mothma," confirmed Jerring. "If you see, here," he explained, pointing to the central hologram. Mon Mothma moved in to join him. "The encryption definitely points to this gen-system, and to these asteroids in particular. We're in the process of investigating closer..."

"Ah ha!" announced Harker.

Green lines now appeared on both holograms. The onlookers could see that they described a vertical line that travelled from the relay beacons to meet at a large asteroid within the maelstrom.

"The lines correspond with hyperspace anchor-points," announced Harker triumphantly. She made some final keystrokes and a blue hemi-sphere appeared on the target asteroid. "And there's the high-density shield. Probably military, and customised."

"Hyper-points? Within an asteroid field??" exclaimed General Fajama. "That's not possible!"

"Clearly not impossible," the Ishi Tib Director of Military Intelligence remarked drily through his beak.

"So they must presumably make a micro-jump through the rocks when it's safe," ventured Onick, the Head of Security.

"That would require some sort of super-computer..." Fajama began to elaborate.

Harker nodded. "Yep, all those calculations needed to plot the astro-coordinates of each moving rock, and their occlusions in parrallax with the diameter to the relays... to then propose a clear line of sight and then jump... Makes for an ideal base of operations, doesn't it?" she grinned.

"It does," grumbled the General.

“Are we all wondering the same as I ?” suggested Director Jerring. “Imperial involvement ?”

He turned to Harker.

“Thankyou for your work, Harker. Can I ask you to continue investigating those relays, please, find a way in....”

Luke stepped forward to speak to the main group, and as he did so he leant towards Harker. “Yes, the Jedi thank you, too,” he said softly.

The Jedi Master stepped past the consoles arrayed around the room, and joined Mon Mothma and the military personnel.

“President Mothma, Generals, we believe these pirates are not only the ones behind the attacks on the refugee convoys, but also that they are skilled in the ways of the Force. They are dangerous. You can count on the Jedi to be at your disposal.”

“Thankyou, Luke,” answered Mon Mothma, but General Fajama was less quick to accept the words.

“Do you have any evidence, Master Jedi ?” he asked sternly.

Luke spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “No, but I trust what the Force has told us... and you can trust us.”

As the General opened his mouth to retort, Mon Mothma raised her hand between them. “General, I trust Luke. I believe him when he says there’s more to this than simply pirates ambushing convoys.”

“The bandits we encountered on Serreillea put up a good fight,” Luke acknowledged, and then he gestured towards the holo-display. “I know I’m right when I say these pirates are the same ones.”

“Very well,” replied General Fajama. Then he turned to the other military personnel around him and to Mon Mothma. “I think we need to determine a suitable plan of attack, President.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” interjected Director Jerring. He pointed to a recessed conference room. “Shall we just step inside there for a moment ? It’s a little more secure than out here....”

“But the spy-bots appear to only be associated with the flightplan centre’s database. Surely this room is secure...” started Onick, the Chief of Security.

The beaked Ishi Tib cocked his head to one side in lieu of a smile. “It is, but one can’t be too careful, can we ?” He turned to Luke and Leia. “Master Jedi, would you care to join us ?”

Leia turned to the Sentinel hovering near Harker. “Keep her under watch,” she instructed.

Leia joined her brother, and the two Jedi entered the side room. A blue light illuminated around the full threshold of the entrance, the glowing line marking an auditory and sensor surveillance seal.

“I feel we need to secure that super-computer,” announced the Director. “It would be useful to learn its provenance, but also something of that capability ought to be investigated here !”

“Yes, you’re right,” the General grudgingly agreed. “I had hoped we could simply blast it to hell with a barrage of turbo-lasers. Especially in such a Rancor’s den like that asteroid storm !”

“Does anyone have a plan of approach ?” asked Onick. “That maelstrom certainly works to their advantage.”

“We need to punch in, and secure the base,” announced the General. “I propose several fusillades to destroy the surrounding asteroids, and launch ground assault ships in between.”

But Naval Admiral Merityme shook his head at the General’s suggestion. “That would only make the storm worse. Instead of many large rocks to contend with, there’d be thousands of smaller ones. Shields can deflect the small showers, but won’t last long against the larger masses. We’ll need to slip an insertion team through that asteroid field. We have good pilots, but I fear we’d need several flights and be willing to lose them.”

“And are you ?” asked Fajama, pointedly.

The Admiral paused, then nodded.

“But if the pirates are alerted they will scramble to flee or intercept,” countered Onick.

“We can deploy a perimeter of ships,” proposed Fajama, looking at the Admiral for confirmation, “to blockade the gen-system.”

“Yes, leave that to us,” grinned the Admiral.

“If the Harker girl and my team can exploit the hyper-relay,” suggested Director Jennings, “we could jump right in...”

“What say you, Master Jedi ?” asked the General, turning to Luke.

Luke glanced at his sister, then spoke to the group. “These are good proposals, but potentially a great waste of life for the navy pilots. We could fly through the asteroids and get your insertion teams on to the ground, while a Jedi flight squadron can meet anyone launching.”

“Even if your team can crack the hyper-point relay drones,” added Leia, “a group of Jedi acting in concert might be able to hold back some asteroids long enough to open a path. Presumably one of your naval frigates could get a battalion of troops planet-side ?”

“Yes, a smaller frigate might be able to survive in there long enough to land,” Admiral Merityme piped up.

Luke concurred. “The Jedi can fly a team in, another group can briefly open a path in the asteroid storm, and those coders out there,” he nodded his chin back towards the laboratory, “might be able to utilise the pirates’ own kit and go in through the front door.”

“Three lines in,” the General remarked. “That should get them !”

"Let's hope so, General," responded Leia. "We can't let any of those pirates escape. If they are strong with the Force, then even if one of them escapes that could spell certain trouble further down the line."

"I'm sure we can neutralise them," the General answered brusquely.

"Or arrest them," Luke reminded him.

Mon Mothma paused, as a thought came to her. "PA protocols require us to inform the Imperials of any concern that might affect the intergalactic community. We ought to tell them of this development."

General Fajama raised a hand to object, but the Security Chief stepped forward and gestured. "That could be useful to us," pondered Onick. "If they are behind this in any way, this development might force their hand, and reveal their intentions."

"And the old nerf-herder gathered up the cubs, and laid them gently in the trough amongst the hay, where they fell fast asleep," Leia said with a softening voice, as she finished the bedtime story. Corsa whispered her thanks to her mother, who was perched on the edge of her bed, took a quick glance across the room to her brother who was laying on his side with his eyes shut, and then nestled down under the blanket. Leia reached across to the lamp that stood on a cabinet between the two small beds and lowered the soft light further. Han stood leaning in the doorway, his arms crossed, an easy half-smile on his face as he regarded the domestic scene.

Leia stroked her daughter's hair, and whispered, "Mum and dad love you both. We've got to pop out later, back tomorrow, but *Nanna-droid* will look after you and Two-Bee will have breakfast ready in the morning."

Corsa gave a sleepy nod. "Love you too," she mumbled.

Leia got to her feet, and, sliding her hand around her husband's waist, the parents retired into the main lounge. The children's bedroom door slid to a three-quarter close. Inside, the twins sat up, wide awake, and listened intently.

Han made his way to a drinks cabinet, where he poured two tumblers from a decanter of amber liquid. He passed one to Leia, and sipped at his own.

"Mmmm, that's warming," cooed Leia, gratefully.

"So the latest is that I take Harker and some of the other techs in the Falcon, then ? Darling, I still don't trust that girl..."

"I know, but Chewie and I will be with you," replied Leia. "I want to take the opportunity to see if I can seer-journey from the Falcon."

"Now that you've travelled into her..." continued Han.

Leia nodded. "I'm thinking that sensing you in danger allowed me to journey into a familiar setting even though it's artificial. Perhaps that will help me use it as my excursion point..."

"Meanwhile, a team of Jedi on board will try and open a clear path for Luke's squadron of pilots to get the General's commandoes base-side."

Leia nodded. "Supported by Jedi straffing runs, and then the navy blockade will arrive," she finished.

"Sounds simple !" smirked her husband.

"Isn't it always ?" smiled Leia.

In the bedroom, the twins glanced at each other.

"You know what I'm thinking, right, Corssy ?" whispered Gana.

"Yep !" came Corsa's excited reply, sitting up. "There's no way we're missing out on this one !"

"We can use the BB2 toy to fool *Nanna-droid* again..." agreed Gana, and he swung his feet off the edge of the bed. "Pass it here, will you ?"

As Gana dropped to the floor and burrowed under his bed, Corsa fished out the small spherical droid from the end of her bed. Her brother backed out from under the bed clutching a mini assorted tool set. Corsa leaned across and passed him *Bee-Bee*.

Snuggling it into him to drown out the activation beeps, Gana switched on the droid, and flicked open its diagnostic panel. He took a screwdriver, and applied it to one of the sub-panels inside.

"Don't forget the correct body temperature setting," reminded Corsa with a grin, "as well as your snoring."

"I know, I know," muttered her brother. "You get the pillows, let me deal with this..."

In the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon* the atmosphere was tense. Han and Leia regarded the bright view ahead of them : a glowing red star with a shining dot in the distance – the gas giant – and, closer, a frenzied disc of tumbling rocky matter on its orbital plane. The *Falcon* perched on the edge of the proto-system of *Gensys-Sucal*.

The cockpit door slid open and Chewie entered. The Wookiee growled an observation as he shuffled past and slipped into the co-pilot's seat.

"Yeah, no wonder the readouts are off, what with all the radiation out here," Han murmured.

"Thanks for trying pal, but I don't think they'll ever come online any time soon."

He glanced at another schematics screen. "Ship ID and status mask is still holding."

Looking over his shoulder, he flashed a grin to his wife sat behind him. "They'll just see us as a broken down freighter drifting in space..."

Leia glanced at the chrono on her wrist.

"The vanguard ship will be here in 30 minutes," she noted. "Harker and the MI scan team need to pierce the pirates' shields before they arrive. How are they doing, Chewie?" she asked.

The girl and four coders from Jerring's MI department were in the forward hold of the Falcon, surrounded by specialist kit to try to remotely infiltrate the shield, the hyper-relays, the comms channel, and initially hijack the super-computer. A small cadre of commandoes were stationed with them, patiently waiting for the mission to seize the super-computer to commence.

Chewie harrumphed and barked.

"They're making progress..." translated Han. Leia raised her eyebrows. "The question is, what with all that's going on out there, can they see us and can we see them?"

"I'll take the opportunity to see if I can seer-voyage to the base," announced Leia, rising from the navigator's seat behind her husband. "I'll be in the bunks cabin if anyone needs me."

She stood and, tapping the door controls, exited the cockpit.

Within the Troig command centre, Jenna stationed at the scan desk noticed an in-system proximity alert appear on her screen. She queried the survey and ran some diagnostics : a YT freighter was sitting outside the asteroid orbit. She glanced around for Captain Chekkel but he had left the bridge a little while ago. She spotted Zaavu, who was acting as deputy-in-command, and called him over.

"Hey, we have a visitor in sector three. An old freighter, just sitting there," she nodded with her head, then turned to face her colleague. "What do you think?"

The burly Devaronian, with one of his two head horns broken, a legacy of his violent life, leaned over and growled. "Why would they be all the way out here ? Have they sent out any distress calls?" She shook her head. "I know it's noisy out there, but try and scan for any power anomaly or fuel leak.... and, Jenna, stay silent, remember."

In the forward hold of the *Falcon*, a trill of beeps sounded the alarm that the ship was being scanned. The warning emanated from a cluster of high-tech hardware in the middle of the hold, around which circled a bank of monitors, with a primary server at the hub, and sat facing each were Harker, Fondon, and three other MI technicians. Artoo-Detoo was nestled into the suite of computers, his head pointing out towards the far corner of the hold towards the front of the ship : a pale blue hologram projected into the space above the floor grilles, presenting a continuously

updated feed of the tumbling asteroids on a vector from the Falcon to the pirates' base. His golden android counterpart, See-Threepio, stood near the far wall, facing the projection, and ready to provide a verbal commentary to Artoo's binary chirps, whistles, and beeps, which the little droid was currently sounding. Four commandoes sat in the corner at the holo-table quietly inspecting and cleaning their weapons.

"The scan is indeed coming from the target base, my good sirs," announced Threepio helpfully and politely. "Artoo says it's running an initial health diagnostic on the Falcon's core power levels and vital support systems."

"Good job the General says he has an ID mask on her..." muttered Fondon.

"Hey...." Harker mumbled to herself, "I might be able to use their probe to gain access back in..."

Leia made her way aft along the ring corridor past the medi-bunk alcove and into the rear hold. Even with the souped-up engine apparatus and the hyper-drive modifications reducing the compartment space, the rear hold was still a decent size, sufficient for the needs of a trader and smuggler that her husband had once been. She recalled she had even squeezed a dead bogan into here !

Sat cross-legged on the decking of the freight elevator were ten Jedi, including Master Alana and Master Etoile. They had their eyes shut and were in deep *inconcerto* meditation. Their primary job was to draw on the Force to nudge the asteroids off their natural course of trajectory to create a safe corridor to the base for both the Falcon and the inbound inception ships.

Leia sent out a soft mental probe quizzing how well they were doing. She didn't want to disturb her friends, but would be able to discreetly see the images in the shared mind.

The Force revealed to her a nagging tension to the natural path of the asteroids as they were being gently nudged by infinitesimal degree onto a new trajectory that would gradually open up a wider and safer corridor. The rocky material, if it was sentient, would have recognised that their organic tumbling was becoming ever-so-slightly less organic and a little more synthetic.

Satisfied, Leia withdrew her mental enquiry, and quietly made her way past them and into the aft corridor that accessed the bunks cabin. The worn and weathered grey veneer covered what Han had assured her was once a sparkling white patina, and though she would dearly love to arrange for a deep-clean of the sleeping quarters, she acknowledged that the comfy decor and familiar fusty smell of Human and Wook had meant *home* to her husband and first-mate for many years.

Within two of the three walls were embedded bunks. She stepped over to Han's, leant down with a pivot, and swung her legs up on to the bedding. Laying down, she stretched out, rested her palms across her belly, and closed her eyes.

I haven't been able to journey to a man-made structure until I felt Han in danger and I was able to come here. Obviously he needed me, and the Falcon is a familiar and safe place, a home from home

almost. So can I use this as a 'stepping stone' and journey to an indoor location ? Was it the impetus I needed ?

Inside the Millennium Falcon, the mind's gateway it was, you wonder ? came the gravelly voice of old Master Yoda. *Only your mind limits what the Cosmic Force can offer.*

With her eyes still closed, Leia became aware of another figure beside her as if kneeling next to the bunk.... the old lady of her visions....

Unshackle your mind... let go.... you are not constrained.... let the vessel carry you... bright and brilliant are we, glowing and incandescent... eternal and timeless and celestial.... You are the Force and the Force is you....

Leia listened to the old lady's words and followed her last breath....

In a deserted side corridor on the Troig base a ghostly figure began to materialise. Leia's brow was furrowed in concentration, and her lips moved slightly as she soundlessly recited *I am the Force and the Force is me*. The figure remained ethereal, unsubstantial, wispy.

A door swished open and two figures turned into the corridor. They were both human and dressed gaudily. A lightsabre hilt swung from each man's belt, opposite holstered blasters.

"I hear Adelly will arrive soon," said one.

"Good. That skirmish on Serreillea cost us some first-rate men," his companion noted.

They made no response to the apparition and walked straight past the spot where Leia was still trying to materialise. The pirates continued on their way and exited the corridor.

Like a glitching and unreliable hologram, the faint wisps of ghostly appearance faded away.

Elsewhere in the pirate base, Jenna had completed her diagnostic scans. Although the ship's internal power systems appeared to be running at a low spectrum – presumably the emergency life support ratings – there was no fuel leak as far as she could tell, and no radiation leak from the central core.

The large Devaronian standing behind her crossed his arms and his eyes creased in thought.

"I suppose I could send one of the lads out to do a visual," he muttered finally.

Jenna nodded, but reached over to another console and flicked a switch. The latest flight stats of an in-bound ship scrolled across a second screen.

"Adelly will be here soon. We could get a message to her to swing by when she arrives..."

“Good idea,” agreed Zaavu.

“Sir !” called out another helmsman from across the command centre.

Zaavu turned to face Ssirisko who was stationed at the desk monitoring the super-computer. Although the machine was generally left to itself to constantly track the path of the asteroids and activate the hyper-relay beacon when safe to do so, a technician was always present on rotating shifts to supervise any reports it flagged up.

Zaavu strode over to the young rodian.

“What is it, Ssirisko ?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” the rodian began and his long snout quivered anxiously. “But it seems some of the asteroids near here are breaking free from their projected paths...”

“Are we in any danger ?” Zaavu responded sharply. Like many other pirates here, he didn’t much care for the choice of their location, and felt the odds were too fluid to make an educated cast.

“No, no,” replied the rodian quickly. “They’re not on any collision course, and besides the shield would take the brunt. But the computer is having to re-calculate for their new paths which it had not foreseen.”

Zaavu narrowed his eyes in thought. He could sense an insistant prickling on the edge of his consciousness, like an annoying but ethereal fly.

“Zavvy !” called out Jenna. “I can’t hail Adelly. It’s on her tight frequency, but there’s no response.”

Zaavu turned his attention from the girl back to the rodian.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” he growled. “Better call in the Captains...”

“Yes sir,” confirmed Ssirisko. “Right away !”

Chekkel had gone looking for his brother, and the two of them met in one of the connecting corridors : Yuide, too, had had the urge to seek out his twin. The environment was a sterile purpose-built poly-tunnel, glazed overhead, linking the modular units that made up their base.

“You sense it too ?” Chekk asked his brother, but he knew the question, let alone the answer, was irrelevant.

Yuide nodded. “The *buzz*, it seems to be getting faster, more intense... angrier... darker.”

“I was in the hangar,” added Chekkel, “and I felt it envelop me. It was all around... suffocating...”

“Threatening ?”

Chekkel nodded. “It’s odd. Usually it gives purpose and energy.”

“Now it’s.... warning ?” asked his brother.

Chekk regarded him for a moment, and then nodded.

Just then, a ping sounded on the tannoy, and a general message was broadcast : “*Captains Yuide and Chekkel to the command centre, command centre now please.*”

They looked at each other, alarmed and quizzical flashing across their faces. They turned as one, and ran down the corridor.

Inside the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon*, Han flicked a comms switch.

“Hey, Fondon, T-minus 5, how’s it going over there ?”

“We’ve got a lock on their comms, and we’re nearly there with the hyper-relay beacon, General,” came the reply from the lead technician, “so long as your ship ID mask holds.... they’ve been prodding us...”

Han absently glanced at his Wookiee co-pilot out of habit and raised his eyebrows. Chewie gave a soft growl.

“Trust me, it’ll hold... it’ll hold...”

“Good to hear it,” replied Fondon wryly. “ ‘Cause if it doesn’t, they’ll be out here quicker than a *Madali’s* bite !”

“Well, I’d like to re-assure you, General Solo,” Threepio’s voice offered, “that Artoo is confident they identified the phantom emergency power levels...”

“Well, Threepio, you can tell Artoo that’s *very* re-assuring,” answered Han sarcastically.

He flicked the comms switch, and turned to Chewie.

“Can you tell how Alana and the others are doing ?”

Chewie cocked his head to one side and harrumphed and barked.

“You *think* they’re making headway ?” he almost spluttered. “Let’s hope it’s more than that ! What with Fondon’s vote of confidence, and your’s, these odds are falling fast...”

Chekkel and Yuide stood side by side listening to the report. Zaavu had invited Jenna and Ssirisko to outline their findings.

“So the asteroids are moving slightly off course, you can’t raise Adelly, and there’s a dead freighter outside,” summarised Yuide, his voice tight with rising anger. Chekkel could sense the darkness whipping around both of them, its tendrils stretching out to encompass all the pirates on the base.

He took a quick glance around the command centre. Everyone present seemed more focused and alert than usual.

Yuide glanced at his brother, who gave a quick nod. The *buzz* of energy that had been confusing and murky only a little while before was bringing everything into sharp focus. Feeding, they both knew, on the pervasive fear that had inexplicably crept in to the base.

He turned to face the nearest three and barked : “Standby for boarding ! Scramble the fighter crew ! Alpha team, start down-loading the comp’s memory banks and hub !”

Chekkel lifted his chin and called out. “Delta team, get the shuttles ready !” he added.

The command centre was suddenly a flurry of activity as helmsmen turned to their allotted tasks and relayed the instructions through the base.

The two Jedi MPVs flashed into view as they dropped out of lightspeed. The elongated bulbous craft arced around and faced the tumbling maelstrom of Gensys-Sucal. A glint of light to their starboard indicated the stationary *Millennium Falcon*.

Luke was in the cockpit of the lead gunship, while Spikey, the Devaronian, accompanied him from the co-pilot’s seat.

The Jedi Master had his eyes shut as his hands held the yoke, allowing for the full benefit of the Force to guide him on his path.

“*Naga-One to Naga-Two,*” chimed Spikey. “Stay tight on our tail, we’re going in !”

The two gunships held a cadre of PA commandoes and Jedi Knights. Relying on Alana’s team to open a corridor within the asteroids, their task was to enter the pirate base and neutralise the foe.

The MPVs accelerated towards the asteroid field and vectored in on an almost imperceptible gap in the tumbling rocks.

Leia had only just entered a store-room off a deserted corridor as the klaxon alarms had begun to sound. She had focused her trans-proxy reality, persevered, and had pushed through ! She could still feel an odd sensation all over her body, a tickling as if half-submerged in water, and sensed the weight and presence of the man-made structure all around her. It had felt a little claustrophobic initially, but she was quickly getting used to it.

Once the alarm had sounded she had sensed movement and heard footsteps running towards her. Thankfully, the store-room was only a few paces down the corridor, and she had been able to make her way across to it, operate the door controls successfully, and step inside. Even the push buttons

to open the door was an interesting challenge ! Since this was the first time she had managed to seer-journey *into* a man-made structure, she wasn't sure how well she would be able to relate with her surroundings. She had previously discovered through trial and error that a verdant and fecund natural environment had augmented her ability to interact with the world about her ; the midichlorians all around would sing in concert with her own, and provide positive energy. Here, the only life energies came from the sentient beings who were racing through their hidden base, potentially unaware of the insidious dark side that provided succour.

Habit had meant she had pressed the button with her fingers... but since she was essentially an illusory apparition – though generated and projected by the Force – the absence of any *haptic feedback* resulted in a stubbornly unmoving door. Quickly and naturally, the Force came to her aid, and she acknowledged the telekinesis borne from the Cosmic energy all around her that ultimately depressed the activator and caused the door to slide open. Still, she had made it inside in time. Since her intention was to reconnoitre the base, she didn't want to cause any premature concern or confusion.

She peered out through the small window in the door, and saw several multi-species inhabitants run past, all clutching hand blasters and lightsabre handles.

There goes our surprise, she thought to herself, let's hope Han and Luke and the others are in place.

Just as she she had done at Winsha, and other worlds, she drew inspiration from the local attire, and called upon the Force to wrap an illusory costume about her. Akin to the colloquial *Jedi Mind Trick*, she had found that with her burgeoning power of seer-journeying she had developed the ability to deceive the other person's perception : whether her newly conjured costume was in fact real and wrapped about her person, or whether it was simply a projected image in the viewer's mind, was a moot point, and, in fact, she truly did not know. It served its purpose of allowing Leia to blend in to the environment around her and continue her silent observation.

In her mind's eye, she recalled the pirates who had just run past the storeroom and scrutinised them for clothing ideas. She fashioned loose trousers from *that* bandit, and a shirt and short jacket from *that* brigand, and boots and belt from *that* pirate. She glanced down at her outfit and smiled in satisfaction. She passed her right palm over her face, and several scars appeared. She briefly considered a cybernetic eye patch, but dismissed it, fearing it might draw attention to her... as well as confuse her friends and family when they rendezvous !

"There !" Jenna pointed at the screen. "Give me a moment for the resolution filters, but the speed they're coming in at..."

Yuide nodded. The two newcomers were also coincidentally in the same quadrant as the crippled freighter. Chekkel had gone to the hangars to supervise the launches and to coordinate repelling any attacks within the base.

“No-one in their right mind would accelerate into an asteroid field... except they’re heading straight for where the asteroids *aren’t*...” he mused out loud. “Update the fighter pilots, and get them out there,” he announced.

He glanced out of a window at the coruscating view outside.

“Big Bertha will sniff ‘em out...” he smiled wryly.

In the cockpit of the lead MPV ship, Luke deftly tweaked the yoke and, as Spikey’s red-hued eyes opened wide in alarm, the vessel slipped under the first tumbling asteroid.

“That was close !” he moaned. He shot a quick glance sideways at Luke, but the Jedi Master remained with his eyes shut and impassive. The Devaronian patted the dashboard affectionately. “There, there, girl, he’ll get us through this in one piece....”

He grimaced and tensed as the view outside the cockpit was almost filled with craters and ravines... and then it disappeared below, and the path ahead became clearer, save for a handful of smaller rocks spinning past. Spikey swayed a little in his seat as the ship jinked past the rocks and settled on its course again.

Like raindrops smearing across a windshield, the asteroid field stretched above and below them forming an unnatural tunnel shape. Clusters of smaller rocks would periodically break free of the curtain and Luke and his fellow Jedi pilot would weave around and slip past. But the larger asteroids were all being successfully deflected.

The Grand Master was dimly aware of the nexus of concentration emanating from his wife and the other Jedi stationed on the *Falcon*, and was grateful for their efforts. He sensed a small rock below and port-side and pulled back a little on the yoke, and, having lifted the ship’s attitude, settled it down again.

In *Naga-Two*, the other MPV ship, Master Flo-Ra was accompanied by a female Twi-lek co-pilot by the name of Biv Radian. Like Master Skywalker, Flo-Ra had her eyes shut in concentration, her long lithe fingers resting lightly but positively on the control yoke. Every now and again she would adjust the ship’s path compensating for the rogue chunks of carbon and silicate and iron that would break free of the shield being held by Master Seren and the others on the *Falcon*.

Radian flicked her eyes over the ship’s status monitors, and angled the deflector shields as needed. Although she trusted the Jedi pilot beside her, it was prudent to be ready and responsive to the smaller rocks about them. She spared a glance ahead at the sister ship’s blue-white engine glow, and saw what appeared to be a line of asteroids stretch out towards the leader from the left of the view. She was about to open the comms channel and give a warning, when a second line of cratered rocks seemed to push out almost inquisitively. Her purple lekku head tentacles quivered with anxiety and her yellow eyes narrowed in puzzlement : *what was going on ?!*

At that moment she saw *Naga-One* bank hard to starboard, and noticed the Master Jedi beside her open her eyes in alarm.

“Break ! Break !” Spikey’s panicked command exploded over the intercom.

In the cockpit of *Naga-One*, Luke was leaning into the yoke, putting the ship into a steep dive. Small rocks and meteors splattered across the hull, and the interior lighting flickered as the shields took the brunt of the battering. The Jedi Master sensed alarm and confusion from his wife on the *Falcon*, and felt the mental shield holding back the asteroids weaken with the distraction.

Outside, more rocky tentacles – for that’s what they were – stretched out and grasped for the intruders. Like strings of dark brown mud-packs, one set searched about, while another set were propelling out from the larger asteroids ; in their centre-point was a massive soft-skin organism with a hungry orifice that was opening wide.

The behemoth bore down on the two ships, quickly encompassing the lead vessel, while the second craft was able to flit and weave between several out-stretched tentacles.

Its ‘mouth’ gaped wide, surrounding *Naga-One*, and slowly and inexorably closed.

Spikey screamed as the darkness – a different kind of entombing darkness than the black of space – closed around their rapidly diminishing view.

With one hand on the yoke, Luke lifted his right hand and pushed it palm-out towards the cockpit window and the inside of the creature’s cavernous mouth. His eyes still tightly closed in concentration, his face creased in the mental exertion as he drew on the Force to encourage the interstellar organism to open its maw and release them.

When the behemoth appeared, Master Flo-Ra had opened her eyes wide in shock. Recognising that it was futile to try and help the Grand Master – the mouth had yawned and lurched around the lead ship in an inescapable encompassing but slow-motion speed – she had leaned heavily on the piloting yoke and dived the ship to starboard. Her co-pilot, Biv Radian, having overcome her own shock, was frantically bolstering the deflector shields, the instruments tracking a huge rock encrusted tentacle coming their way !

Inspired by the Force, Flo-Ra suddenly pulled sharply back on the steering mechanism, and the ship climbed tightly, and then tilted to starboard once more : the tentacle swept below the MPV gunship, blindly searching.

Push on ! came Luke’s voice in her mind. *Trust in the Force !*

Flo-Ra banked the ship to port, and then to starboard, before accelerating towards the mission target.

All around the ship, smaller meteors and carbonaceous rocks flashed past. Like a huge tidal surf at the point of breaking, the unnatural arch of deflected asteroids that towered above them had begun to let slip the more diminutive constituents.

An alarm sounded in the cockpit, and Biv identified it immediately : “Vessel proximity alarm ! Three marks, coming in fast at point seven below !”

In the command centre of the pirate base, Zaavu turned to Captain Yuide.

“Captain, Flight Two is engaging the remaining invader now,” updated the burly Devaronian.

“Good. Are we still certain that the other ship’s trace disappeared ?”

Zaavu glanced over to Jenna, who nodded. “Sensors say that Bertha was nearby, so either a collision or the old girl will have got them.”

Yuide frowned. He wasn’t entirely convinced.

Alana had tensed when she sensed the monster suddenly envelop Luke’s ship. *Why hadn’t either of them detected its approach ?* The Jedi Master was astute enough to appreciate that one’s connection to the Force wasn’t always ever-present and all-knowing. *You’d have to be a midichlorian, or a fabled Whill, to be like that !* she mused wryly. Nevertheless, she recognised that this strange interstellar creature was an organic that lived among and presumably consumed symbiotically the rocky asteroids, and was thus in effect camouflaged ; plus it lived in a particularly frenetic maelstrom environment too ; and one couldn’t forget the unusual nexus of the Dark Side of the Force emanating from the pirates’ base. *Perhaps it was no wonder the Jedi had been oblivious to its presence,* she conceded.

From where she sat in the rear hold of the *Falcon*, Alana remained with her eyes tightly shut, but now her hands were stretched out in front of her, turning and twisting, her fingers reaching and grasping.

“Stay in Concert !” she called out to the other Jedi around her. “Etoile, bolster the shield ! Don’t let it weaken !”

Master Etoile and the other Jedi called out their affirmation, and then their hands too grappled with imaginary asteroids and meteors before them.

Push on ! came Luke’s voice in their minds. *Trust in the Force !*

“Hold firm, my love !” she whispered. “I’m coming...”

Leia, dressed in pirate garb, moved confidently through the corridors of the base. Several armed crew members raced past her but did not pause to question her. She came to a junction with a window adjacent to it, and saw to her right not too far away the large blocky open structure of a ship hangar. She dipped her head and pursed her lips noting its relative location. Footsteps, and a growling voice came from behind her. She glanced over her shoulder.

“You two go back to the command centre, you come with me to the armoury,” a tall trandoshan was instructing three other brigands. Two of them nodded, and moved past Leia to her left.

Leia noted the direction the two re-assigned had gone, and went to follow them.

“Hey, you,” said the Trando gruffly, and not surprisingly, thought Leia. She had paused too long for her own good.

“If ya not stationed anywhere, ya can come with us.”

Leia looked the reptilian squarely in its eyes, and said flatly, “I can join the other two at the command centre.”

The Trando blinked, confused, and glanced in the direction he had sent the others. Then he looked back at her and scowled. Leia felt the dark side of the Force swirl around him.

“Nah, come with us,” he instructed.

Leia regarded him coolly, and nodded. Satisfied, the Trando turned on his heel, and marched down the opposite corridor, the other pirate trailing him

With their backs on her, Leia turned swiftly and headed in the direction of the command centre, feeling with the Force where the other two had gone.

As she hurried to catch up with them, she sensed Alana’s cry of support and encouragement : *Hold firm my love, I’m coming !*

Splitting her attention from tracking the pirates’ path to the command centre, she cast her mind out further and into the asteroid plane outside : she gave an involuntary gasp as she realised the predicament her brother was in !

Flo-Ra pulled back sharply on the steering yoke, and barrel-rolled the ship. Two of the attacking mercenaries shot past, whilst the third turned with her, and stayed on target. The other two crossed paths, and arced back around to vector in once again on the Jedi vessel. With the artificially created cavern hollowing out the asteroid field, both combatants had enough safe space to manoeuvre... all be it inside a steadily dwindling area.

Green laser fire lanced across the cockpit view.

“Increase rear deflector shields, Biv !” she cried to her Twi’lek co-pilot.

“Yes, ma’am ! Drawing from the front...” came the response.

The ship bucked as the hull took a battering from their pursuers.

“Hold on !”

Jedi Master Flo-Ra leaned the yoke to starboard, thumbing open the cover concealing the firing switches, and at the same time glanced at the thrusters control. It remotely descended a few notches, killing their speed. First, one bandit shot past, and then the other two, but these pilots recognised their target’s intention, and banked to either side. That still left the lead bandit ahead and centre ! Flo-Ra thumbed the cannon trigger on the yoke, and the MPV opened fire on the luckless pirate. Green lasers caught the fighter craft on its port-side and the small ship exploded.

“They’re coming around....” noted Biv, a tense edge to her voice. “They’ll be ready for that again !”

“Uh huh,” replied the Jedi. “Bet they won’t expect this then !”

Accelerating once more, she banked sharply, and dived towards the wall of asteroids.

Biv yelled in terror, and shot a glance at her Jedi pilot.

“I trust you !” she wailed, eyes wide, and long-fingered hands gripping the arm-rests tightly.

The MPV sped across the surface of one asteroid and jinked between two smaller ones. The pirates kept up their pursuit, matching her moves.

“Sapro to Troig Base, do you read me ? This is Sapro, come in Troig.”

Adelly sighed once more, and flicked the comms switch. The blue-white of hyperspace swirled ahead of her. The yellow-skinned bald Umbaran had been trying to contact the pirates’ base for the last ten minutes, and now her shuttle was barely sixty seconds from reverting to sublight at Gensys-Sucal.

She had become quite concerned as to why there was no response from them. There could have been a technical breakdown with the comms feed, or equally there could have been a massive integral failure within the super-structure – cool and dispassionate tech-speak for a shield-fail resulting in the base being pummelled by asteroids !

She had recently enlisted four new comrades to their cause, and they were currently sat quietly in the closed cabin behind her. She tapped the internal comms and leaned into the microphone stick that projected out from the dashboard beside her.

“Cabin, we’re coming up on our destination soon,” Adelly announced. “Reversion from hyperspace in twenty seconds.”

Her long slender fingers reached forward and curled around the hyperdrive actuator handle. She glanced ahead through the cockpit window, all the while reviewing the discreet countdown display on a small screen to her right.

As the counter hit its mark, she pushed the handle forward and the swirling marble effect ahead of her collapsed into bright pin points of stars... and the tumbling asteroid plane of Gensys-Sucal to starboard... and several large PA capital-class starships also flitting into view all about her !

On board the *PACS Judiciary*, Admiral Merityme surveyed the deployment of the blockade. His capital ships - in a variety of designs but all possessing humbling firepower – were now appearing from hyperspace and moving into their stations above and below the orbital plane adjacent to this quadrant of the carbonaceous genesis system of Sucal where the pirates' base had been identified.

“Sir !” one of the comscan helmsmen called out. “We have an unauthorised and unidentified visitor in sector seven !”

“Attack shuttle class,” confirmed another helmsman. “Reverted from hyperspace, and turning on a vector towards the foe’s dorsal hyper relay beacon.”

“The shuttle is not responding to our hails, admiral,” updated an officer from the communications station.

Merityme turned to his aide. “Which ships are closest ?”

The aide checked his datapad that was updating in real-time.

“Sir, the *Guardian* and the *Liberty* are moving in to sector seven.”

The admiral nodded curtly. “Instruct them to have tractor beams on standby, move to intercept, fire to shepherd the newcomer.”

The aide nodded, and began tapping into the datapad.

Jedi Master Flo-Ra accelerated her ship across one cratered surface after another. She kept the vessel low, avoiding any of the ‘tumblers’ out there at a higher altitude, but still needing to adjust for the change in height of not only the rugged landscape but also the subtle movement of the rock below them. Her eyes were tight shut now, one less distraction from the Force. The energy field guided her evasive actions and directed her towards the pirate base and updated her as to where her two pursuers were.

They were close. They had ceased firing, no doubt to allow them to focus on the tight pursuit. They surely knew where she was headed, but were relying on her to provide a safe path.

The Force tingled and her brow furrowed in concentration as she focused on the new information : two additional starfighters were racing towards her from the base. *Unsurprisingly, her pursuers had messaged ahead.*

Beyond the fighters she could see the lights of the pirate base on the next large asteroid ahead. And the faint purple glow of the energy shield protecting it.

Oh yes, she thought grimly. The energy shield to protect it from its environment. Still, there's a chance it might not seal to the landscape around it, and so they could possibly fly in under it ?

Once again, the magical mystery of the Cosmic Force whispered to her, and she had the unaccountable sensation that the shield would soon not be a problem.

“Can you boost our speed any more, Biv ?” she asked through gritted teeth.

The co-pilot muttered that she'd try and turned her attention to the engineering and auxiliary power controls.

Just then, Flo-Ra sensed a small meteor above them on a collision course with the large asteroid she was skimming across. Its fate would be to add to the innumerable pock-marks scattered over the grey landscape.

“I can get you another point four, Master, but it'd be off the forward shields,” Biv updated her.

“Do it !”

Biv nodded, and her fingers flicked switches and adjusted dials.

As the additional power was re-routed, they were both pushed back into their seats.

Flo-Ra tilted the steering yoke, and the ship angled a few degrees off course. She sensed the two behind them change their course too.

She held the new course a few seconds longer, and then leaned the yoke the other way to correct her path and return to the vector that would lead them to the hidden base.

There was a sudden flash behind them, and she was aware that one pirate had been blind-sided by the falling meteor !

The second pirate had swerved to avoid the explosion, but was now holding to their tail once more.

As soon as she recognised the Pan-Alliance flotilla moving into a classic blockade formation, Adelly accelerated hard and fast for the dorsal hyper-relay beacon. The fingers of her left hand were tapping out a coded sequence to activate the drone to request a jump-time from the super-computer deep inside the Troig base.

She spared a quick glance out of the cockpit window and saw two of the capital ships turning towards her on an intercept vector. She knew that they'd be powering up their tractor beams as per standard procedure. There would be no casual greeting here.

With her right hand she opened the internal comms.

“Cabin, strap yourselves in, we’ve got company out here, I’m going to try and make it to the hyper drone !”

The shuttle was heavily modified, as expected, but favoured boosted speed over armament. It carried two hidden sub-hull canon, which had now appeared, but Adelly was relying on the engine thrust to reach the drone. She was acutely aware that the sheer size and number of the capital ships’ engines meant that she was unlikely to out-run them, but her smaller ship could at least out-manoeuvre them. She just hoped she wouldn’t get caught up in a dogfight out here. Completely unaware as to the nature of the PA’s blockade, she had the choice of trying to jump off-system or in to the asteroid storm and the relative safety of the base ; she opted for the latter, which the besiegers might not be expecting.

She glanced again at the screen that was presenting a status report ahead of the micro-jump into the base : still on standby. *Damn it ! The soop-comp was still calculating a clear path between the tumbling asteroids ! It didn’t normally take this long ?!*

Green turbolasers flashed across the cockpit.

Adelly glanced across to where they originated, and saw the capital ship’s hull in too much detail for her liking.

She banked the shuttle hard towards the PA ship, narrowly missing another barrage of canon fire. Suddenly she was racing across the huge vessel’s nose, then dipped over its far edge and arced away from the ship and back towards the beacon.

The capital ship pursued with its green turbolasers and shifted its attitude to angle the tractor beam generator more accurately. Lights surrounding the tractor control tower began to flash as the beam was activated.

Inside the cockpit of the shuttle several alarms were sounding : from the proximity to the tractor beam, to the insistent ping of the hyperspace relay beacon coming online.

“Now ya calling !” Adelly cried out triumphantly, and she reached for the hyperdrive actuator stick. She smoothly drew back on the control, and the inkiness of space and the blur of perpetual rocky motion stretched into starlines.

Inside the forward hold of the *Millennium Falcon*, Harker let out an equally triumphant roar.

“Yes !” she yelled, punching the air with her right hand. “I’ve got the code !”

Fondon and the others looked at her in expectation.

“When that shuttle jumped...?” he asked her.

“Yep ! I was watching the comp do its thing, calculating for the rocks and a safe path,” Harker clarified. Her fingers were already flashing across her keyboard. “Gimme a mo, I can replicate her call signal and force the comp to give us a micro-jump, too !” She glanced towards Artoo. “You ready to do your thing, little guy ?”

The droid beeped and spun his head, and began coordinating the hyper-jump calculations with Harker's computing set-up and the Falcon's own navi-comp.

“Oh ! That’s wonderful !” agreed Threepio, caught up in the drama. “Yes, Artoo, General Solo needs to be warned that we’re about to make a jump.... oh, wait,” Threepio trailed off, realising the implication of the discovery, “that means...”

Artoo squealed in obvious excitement.

Harker had already grabbed a comlink from the desk beside her, and thumbed it on.

“Solo ! Get the ship ready for the micro-jump ! Coordinates are about to come through...”

“I hear ya, kid,” came Han’s tinny voice. “Engines are coming up !”

In the cockpit of the *Falcon*, Han signalled to Chewie to be ready to pull the hyperdrive handles, and then flicked the comms channel to hail the lead PA cruiser.

“Admiral, we’ve got a fix on their beacon, we’re going in.”

“Understood, General,” came Merityme’s voice. “Clear skies !”

Han nodded to the Wook, and, with a bark, Chewie activated the hyperdrive. The stars and asteroids ahead of them blurred... and then, barely a second later, the astro-nav decelerated the ship, and the all-enveloping view before them was of brown and grey craters and ridges, and, in the distance, a cluster of hexagonal and cuboid modular pop-up buildings in a triangular arrangement anchored to the surface. An array of three large rectangular buildings at one of the far corners of the triangle presented several openings of various sizes, with landing control guide lights arrayed around and within. At the top of their view through the cockpit, they could see the purple shimmer of a high-grade energy shield appear, with smaller asteroids and meteors flaring against it in bright flashes. The pirates’ computer had brought them in under the briefly de-activated shield and close to the terrain, clearly a holding point for arrivals.

“Get us down low,” instructed Han, and Chewie growled in agreement as he leaned in on the yoke.

Master Flo-Ra was jinking the ship left and right, keeping off a clear targeting line for her pursuer.

Ahead, the two other fighters were closing fast. Green laser fire splashed across the ship, announcing they were in range. An alarm began to sound heralding the failing forward deflector shield. Flo-Ra responded in kind, but with fire directed at the carbonaceous landscape. Splinters of rock and dust exploded ahead of her, facing the pirate ships. They both peeled off to either side, and the Jedi ship zipped through the dispersing cloud, followed hard by the original pursuer.

Aware that the two were coming back around but dismissing them because of the distance, Flo-Ra cleared the last asteroid and throttled the ship towards the final rock and the open hangar of the pirate base !

She reached the next asteroid and pushed the ship lower and lower towards the brown and grey cratered terrain. The wall of purple began to fill the view of the cockpit.

Biv leaned forward in her seat, scanning the base of the shield.

"I can't see a gap ?!!" she wailed. "We've got to pull up !"

"Trust me," said Flo-Ra through gritted teeth. "I'm a Jedi."

The purple shimmer of the energy shield suddenly disappeared, and at that exact moment, just as two flashes of light appeared above them in quick succession, Flo-Ra raced across the perimeter line. She let out a sigh of relief, and then re-focused on the job at hand : they were bearing down on the pirate base rapidly !

"We're coming in too fast !" cried Biv. The co-pilot flicked the internal comms, and announced to their passengers to hold tight !

Flo-Ra cut the engines and spun the MPV one-eighty degrees, relying on the momentum to throw the ship inside the hangar. With the Force, she activated the landing cycle. She slapped the braking thrusters, and the craft crashed to the deck, careening through crates and small one-man fighters, with pirate crew leaping out of the way, and sliding to a hefty bump against the far wall.

"Adelly's in !" Zaavu called out. "Hangar Bay Three," he identified.

Yuide turned to the Devaronian. "Warn her that we expect company, and get her new crew-mates standing by ready to earn their crust ! She can liaise with Chekk," he added.

Zaavu nodded, and returned his attention to the internal comms.

Just then Ssirisko called out in confusion and alarm.

"Cap'n ! I don't know what's just happened," said the rodian all a-fluster, "but the Comp has just been activated to request a hyper-jump... but we didn't make the call ?!"

"Did anything come in ?!" demanded Yuide.

Ssirisko turned back to the diagnostics. He tapped a command sequence, and reviewed the response. His green snout furrowed in concentration, then he called over to Jenna.

“Jen, pass me a copy of that dead freighter’s profile, will ya ?”

“Will do !” she called back, and her fingers flashed over the console keyboard. “Done !”

She paused. “That’s funny. The perimeter sensor has lost it...”

Yuide strode over to the young rodian. “You’ve got it there, haven’t you ?”

“Yes, I’m pretty certain that’s what hopped in on the back of Adelly’s shuttle.”

“Zavvy !” Yuide called out. “Get Chekk to assign a ship to do a perimeter sweep. We can check on the maintenance monitors here...”

“Might have to wait, Cap’n !” announced Zaavu. “That last invader is coming in fast !”

Han slid the Falcon over the rocky terrain, slowly closing in on the modular base that lay ahead of them on a slight ridge. Overhead, the energy shield sparkled with a purple iridescence, its colour highlighted by the flashes from the meteor impacts. They were within a relatively deep crater that also provided cover from any further surveillance from the pirates.

As soon as they had arrived, he had seen the rogue ship that had preceded them make a direct line to one of the hangar bays.

Now, several bright dots also raced overhead, and Han was able to make out the profile of one of the Jedi MPVs. He glanced quizzically at his furry co-pilot.

“Can you tell... ?”

Chewie closed his eyes in concentration, then gave a small bark.

“Master Flo-Ra, huh ? Where’s Luke then ?” he wondered out loud.

Chewie responded with a shrug.

Han stretched over to activate the internal comms.

“Fondon ! Have you got a clear line on to the pirate base yet ?”

“Yes, General, we’re interrogating it right now...”

Han looked ahead and squinted. He watched as Flo-Ra’s ship was spun around, and careened through the open door of one of the other hangars !

Inside the utter darkness of the carbon-feeding behemoth, Luke was ignoring the frightened panting of the Devaronian co-pilot, and was instead focused solely on grappling with the mind of the semi-sentient creature. With his eyes tightly shut, the Jedi Master had never come across a mind quite like this : old and primitive, but powered by a simple survival trait, an enormous mental fortitude borne from its size and its harsh environment, partly symbiotic with the rocks it devours. *If a rock could think*, mused Luke, *then this was what it would feel like. Incredibly dense and heavy, yet slippery at the same time.*

Luke prodded and cajoled, he teased and beckoned, but the creature would not respond.

I'm here, my love, came his wife's voice inside his mind.

Alana ! I can't seem to fasten on to its mind. It's too.... ancient ?

Inconcerto, came his wife's command and he could feel her mind slip in and around his, bolstering and doubling his efforts, quickly and efficiently teasing at the sub-cortexes of the mind to encourage the creature to open its maw. They could sense simple synaptic connections sparking in response to their efforts, but still the ligaments all around the ship remained tightly closed.

Push it again, directed Luke, *just there !*

They tickled the neural nodes once more, and although the same connections flashed with electricity, additional charges leapt across the web-like network.

Luke felt something nudge the outside of the ship, and the Force illuminated to him the creature's gastric villi prodding against the metal hull.

Luke's thought echoed one of Han's grim but wry remarks : *Ah, we may have started dinner a little too early.*

I don't intend to begin starters, let alone a main course, darling ! his wife replied drily.

Alana mentally scanned around what passed for the creature's brain. She recognised the source of the new activity.

If we push it just there could we make it regurgitate the ship ?

The two Jedi focused their efforts and targeted the new section of the cerebral matter that had lit up when the digestive digits had extended towards the ship.

The Force painted a picture of several villi spasming and pulling away from *Naga-One*, but then, with apparent aggression, they slammed back against the hull.

If only we knew how to fool it into reacting to more food outside, bemoaned Alana.

Flo-Ra had drawn on the Force to cushion the blow as the ship careened into the hangar wall, and had wrapped Biv in its safe embrace too. She glanced across to her twi'lek co-pilot, who was shaking her tentacled head to clear the dizziness.

"You okay ?"

Biv nodded, and rubbed her forehead.

"Yeah... next time, let *me* do the landings, okay ?"

"Nice !" grinned the Jedi.

Flo-Ra spotted movement outside as the pirates began picking themselves up off the deck. Some were already shouldering rifles. She leaned over to the comms board and opened the hold channel.

"Everyone okay in the hold ?" she asked. Muffled and indistinct, but affirmative, noises came back. "Get ready to evac, we've got company outside !"

Within the pirate base, Leia had physically followed the two pirates re-deployed to the command centre, while mentally reviewing the massive interstellar creature that called the planetary-creation plane *home* and was currently digesting her brother and his military strike team.

She paused at a diagnostics unit just outside the entrance to the command centre, and busied herself monitoring the screen. Several crew moved past her to and from the centre, but no one interrogated her.

She closed her eyes and stretched out with her mind. She identified the tentacled behemoth as an interstellar carbonaceous consumer living among the asteroids ; on a cosmic scale, its home would be a temporary one, and once the rocky dust had coalesced into a planet or two, and it could feed no longer, it would launch itself from the fledgling worlds and push itself deep into space, seeking out a similar rocky harvest.

"If it had an eye and it could blink, this moment would be lost in a thousand years," came the now-familiar voice of the old lady.

Leia turned, unstartled, and regarded the aged crone who stood meekly beside her. More pirates moved briskly past, and no one paused to wonder why an old human lady wrapped up in comfortable layers was quietly conversing with a fellow pirate.

"It was born in a carbo-chemical soup millions of years ago, to accompany planetoids in an ecosystem of waste disposal," the old lady smiled.

"It's intrinsic to the star systems' creation," recognised Leia. "It's part of the Cosmic Energy".

The old lady smiled, acknowledging Leia's intuition, and confirming her sought-after answer.

"You could leave your brother to his fate, or you could feed the creature's hunger..."

Luke, I can help you.

Leia's voice reassured Luke, who, along with his wife, was still struggling to encourage the creature to open its mouth.

It's part of the Cosmic Force, she explained, it's a part of the galaxy itself. Its purpose is to break down the asteroids and recycle their components back into the interstellar space.

I will distract it with a rock, and persuade it to open up.

Luke gave his heartfelt thanks to his sister, and responded that they were ready.

Outside, the creature, having consumed one gunship and lost the other, was resting against several asteroids, slowly rotating with the momentum of the rocks. A smaller chunk of carbon bounced up against its feeding orifice, tickling its interest with a persistent scrape. The behemoth's simple brain registered the arrival, and it activated the ligaments to open its maw.

Inside the high gut of the behemoth, Luke, with Alana still present in his mind, sensed the neural pathways light up with the activation of the tendons that surrounded the mouth.

There, Alana ! And there ! he called out to his wife, and they both pushed and jabbed with the Force to further prompt the creature.

The maw began to open, and the scintillating starlight reflecting off the tumbling asteroids outside began to pierce the gloom. The sinews of the orifice stretched out to envelop the smaller rock that had irritated its attention.

Within the cockpit of *Naga-One*, Luke opened his eyes, took one glance at the unconscious co-pilot – comatose from fear – and rested his hands on the controls, one on the yoke and one on the engine thrusters.

You're clear to go, my love, came Alana's voice, *see you down there.*

They both focused their attention on to Leia : *thankyou !*

Luke pushed forward on the primary thrusters handle, and leaned in on the yoke. Through the cockpit window, the new morsel of food whipped past as the MPV raced out of the behemoth and into the swirling cavern of asteroids. The radar screen before him identified the trajectory for the pirates' base, and he arrowed the gunship onto its vector.

Thankyou !

Leia breathed a sigh of relief, and smiled. She opened her eyes, and glanced around. There was more activity now, with crew running to and fro, and alarms going off. Beyond the doorway she could clearly see the base's command centre, a not unexpected bustle of activity.

She returned her attention to the monitor screen in front of her. With the aid of the Force, she tapped the command to display a floorplan. A simple representation of a triangle appeared with a circle at two points and three rectangles at the other, and a circle in the centre ; arrayed within the space remaining was a network of squares and lines representing the nondescript modular units that comprised the mundanity of living : the dorms, the canteen and relaxation, storerooms and a training hall. Labels and colour-coding identified one of the far circles as the command centre, and Leia surmised that the two remaining points were hangars and the super-computer. Life on countless makeshift bases allowed her to identify the central point as the power-core.

The Force tingled and she recognised that the Falcon was close by. She needed to return to her meditating body soon.

Several pirates ran past her, departing the command centre and down the corridor that led to the hangars. Leia stretched out with the Force and mentally followed them : some broke off into the sub-sections, but four continued on to the far point. Bulkhead doors automatically opened and closed on their approach. She probed their minds and the mystical energy painted a picture of adrenaline and excitement and warrior-aggression, and Leia realised that the PA teams had surely begun arriving at the hangars.

She took a final glance around, and then trailed them. As soon as she was out of direct sight, she took a breath and faded away.

In the hangar bay the Jedi MPV opened its boarding hatch and lowered its ramp. The waiting pirates tensed and then rained gunfire into the yawning space. Corresponding flashes erupted and sparked, and some laser bolts ricocheted randomly back out towards the defenders. A pause as the pirates instinctively ducked in response, and then a responding volley of gunfire from the ramp as the Pan-Alliance marines stepped forward. A team of Jedi Knights, including Master Flo-Ra, were among them, holding their lightsabres at the ready to deflect the next round of fire. Some soldiers and knights jumped off the edges of the ramp on either side, and began to fan out.

Seeing the glowing laser swords, some of the pirates grabbed their own trophy sword handles from their belts, and lit their blades. Though they were untrained, the dark side of fear and anger swept through them all, energising and empowering them.

With a yell, the pirates swung and spun their swords and light-whips, and leapt at the invaders, their comrades behind supporting them with fresh gunfire.

The *Falcon* smoothly glided in low towards the pirate base that sat atop the plateau within the vast crater. From his pilot's seat, Han craned his neck to look up at the array of hangars. One was presenting flashes of blaster fire – the hangar that Flo-Ra had entered. Chewie read his friend's mind and harrumphed and barked.

"Well, if you're sure she's holding her own..." muttered Han. He gestured with his hand. "We've lost the element of surprise now.... I think I saw the command centre at one end of the base, and if these hangars are at this end, then I'm guessing the super-computer must be at the other point. The structure looks like pretty standard industrial modules, so there ought to be some service hatches dotted around."

Chewie barked in agreement as he realised what Han was intending.

"Yeah, rather than go in via the hangars and fight our way up, no one will expect us to walk straight in..."

Chewie chuckled with a harrumph and a growl.

Han grinned. "Yeah, back door again..."

He combed the forward hold once more. "Fondon, do you have a floorplan yet? I'm going to dock us to a service hatch close to the comp."

"Calling it up now, General," confirmed Fondon. "You should have it... now..."

Han glanced at a second readout monitor, and grinned when he saw his assumption was correct. He pointed to the left.

"Okay, Chewie, keep us low and take us around to that far corner. I'll start the docking cycle." He flicked the comm switch. "Fondon, get your team to the port-side corridor." He jabbed another switch, this time patching the comms through to the Jedi team in the rear hold. "Alana, we're going in on the port docking ring."

De-activating the comm, he commenced the docking procedure from the board beside him.

"I'll go wake up Leia, and finish this at the hatch," he confirmed to the Wookiee.

He lifted himself out of the pilot's seat and past the centre console, and then made his way through to the rear of the cockpit and out into the corridor.

"There's the shield !" confirmed Spikey, the Devaronian co-pilot in Luke's MPV.

"Re-route power for maximum gunfire," instructed the Jedi Master, his eyes already searching the ground for any natural dips and depressions under the shimmering purple wall.

"There !" he announced, pointing at a broken ridge that ran along the edge of the large crater.

"Target that gap, repeater fire !"

Spikey nodded, and, locking the targeting computer, held the gun trigger.

Green canon fire lanced out from the MPV and pounded the edge of the crater. As the wall disintegrated, the continued laserfire reduced the debris into smaller and smaller pieces.

"Increasing forward shields," confirmed Luke as he dived the ship lower.

"It's going to be tight !" cried Spikey, bracing himself.

The Jedi ship slid through the new opening and dropped smoothly towards the crater floor.

Luke flashed a grin at the Devaronian, who was laughing with relief.

The MPV accelerated across the pock-marked terrain towards the rocky promontory ahead.

As it approached the pirate base, Luke spotted the *Falcon* nestle into position beside one large structure.

"Han's going in with the docking ring... Something's happened to prevent him from landing in a hangar," Luke mused to himself. "We need to regain the advantage..."

The Force came to him with an idea. He quickly ran a planetoid diagnostic at his console, and scanned the read-out.

"Spikey, get us in close to the corridor section over there," he pointed again. "There's enough atmosphere and gravity on this rock to hold us down, and we have breathing masks on board : let's cut our way in !"

The Devaronian co-pilot nodded. "Those modular units will have auto airlocks on the bulkheads that will re-pressurise once you've moved beyond the breach point. You can exploit their safety feature."

"Exactly !" confirmed Luke.

"Third invader, Cap'n !" announced Jenna, staring intently at the scopes. "Looks like another gunship type similar to the one that's in Hangar Two."

Yuide pointed to Zaavu. "Track it !" he ordered. "Where are they headed ?"

Zaavu glanced across a cluster of screens now showing the external views from the maintenance cameras.

“Staying low.... *not* going for the hangars...” he reported. “Looks like they’re setting down near the dorm section.”

He tapped a command call, and some of the screens changed their views.

“Oh, and I see the other guy : he’s using a docking ring against a maintenance hatch on the super-comp module !”

Yuide’s eyes narrowed in anger and frustration. “They know of the comp and they’re going for it ! Over my dead body !” he hissed. “I ain’t lettin’ anyone take that ! It’s our doorkey in an’ out o’ this place !”

He whipped the light-tekken from his belt and thumbed it alight. Three angry short stabs of red energy crackled into life.

“Monitor what’s going on and co-ordinate with Chekk and the others,” he ordered the command crew on duty. He directed his attention to the remaining pirates who had arrived and were assembled around the room waiting expectantly for their commands. “You three, come with me ! Zaavu, get the canons in the stores mobilised. The rest of you : one half go and intercept them at the hangars, the other half sweep through the base !”

He strode out of the command centre, and the last of his soldiers followed in his wake.

Han entered the wedge-shaped crew cabin where the bunks were held, and stepped over to his wife’s sleeping form that lay on his bed. Her eyes were shut, but her face looked peaceful and at rest, there was no tension or alarm in her features. She looked as beautiful and enchanting as when he had first met her all those years ago in the Death Star detention centre. He stretched out and laid his hand on her shoulder, and gave a gentle squeeze. Leia’s brow furrowed slightly, and then she smiled. Her eyes slowly opened and focused on her husband leaning over.

“Han,” she murmured warmly.

He mirrored her smile, and then his face became serious.

“We’re docking next to the module holding their super-computer,” he explained. “Are you okay to join us ? We could do with your help.”

Leia nodded, and eased herself up, swinging her legs over the edge of the recessed bunk.

“They’ve deployed their men to the hangars to repel the Jedi team,” she announced, “but expect some down here too.”

“It’s what I’d do in their place,” agreed Han. “I’m just hoping that they’re not expecting us to come in through the back door ! Come on !”

He turned and exited the room, Leia close on his heels. As they turned left, Alana and her team joined them from the rear hold behind them. Fondon, Harker and the three other technicians were waiting ahead of them, as were Threepio and Artoo. The little blue droid beeped happily, and Threepio waved his arm in clarification.

“Oh, General Solo, here we are, ready and waiting for your next instructions !” the golden protocol droid announced. “Oh-ohh !” he added, unable to hide his trepidation.

Han pushed through the crowded space and tapped a sequence on the docking port control, completing the command he had initiated in the cockpit. A flashing red light settled to amber, and, with an audible hiss beyond, the light then steadied to green. He jabbed a finger at the activation stud, and the airlock door slid open.

He drew his DL-44 hand blaster and raised it high, and then stepped into the docking chamber. Crossing the ribbed tube he glanced back at Leia, who briefly closed her eyes and then shook her head.

“There’s someone in there... focused on the comp... a technician I’d say... and a droid...” Leia glanced at Alana and raised her eyebrows.

Her sister-in-law nodded, and the two Jedi closed their eyes.

Inside the cylindrical chamber holding the super-computer, the solitary pirate monitoring the diagnostics glanced up with a quizzical air. Her eyelids fluttered, and her eyes rolled upwards. She swayed, and then collapsed to the floor. The yellow R5 droid chirped a stream of enquiring beeps, then disengaged from the computer interface, spun around, and trundled over to her sleeping body.

Within the Falcon’s cramped docking chamber, Leia and Alana opened their eyes.

“She’s down,” announced Leia. “Unconscious.”

“And the droid’s disengaged in order to check her over,” Alana added.

“Good, that means it can’t raise an alarm,” Han noted. He returned his attention to the generic activation controls to open the module’s service hatch, keyed a sequence, and the door irised open.

The wall cavity of the cylindrical chamber was revealed. A dimly crimson lit narrow maintenance corridor arced either side, and the corresponding access hatch was ahead of them. Han reached across and pressed the door controls. Light from the comp chamber flooded in blanching out the red dim as the door slid open.

He stepped through with his blaster raised, and Leia and Alana, lightsabre hilts at the ready, followed behind. As they fanned out into the module’s chamber, the rest of the Jedi team, the four commandoes, and the PA technicians entered behind them.

In the centre, surrounded by a cluster of power cables and data relays, sat the huge super-computer. One side presented an interface, while the remaining three sides were a smooth dark glass, and flickering within were faint and distorted glows of coloured lights.

The weequay pirate lay motionless on the floor. The attending R5 registered the new arrivals, and spun around in alarm, beeping wildly.

“Shut it down,” ordered Han to a commando near him.

The soldier nodded, and pushed past, reaching out to the side of the trapezoidal head to flick its master switch. The droid fell silent with a deactivation whine.

Alana stepped over to the pirate and crouched down, resting her hand on the side of the Weeq’s scaly head.

“Deep sleep,” she confirmed.

Han glanced at Fondon and jabbed with his thumb over his shoulder.

“Fondon, get to work ! We don’t have much time !”

Fondon nodded, and he and Harker hurried over to the interface, while his colleagues began to set up a remote device to the side.

Chewie appeared at the access hatch, scrunched over as he angled his tall body through the small space. He stood up and growled.

“Yeah, they may be universal modules, but they ain’t designed for everyone,” agreed Han, wryly. His petite wife smiled and rubbed Chewie’s arm affectionately. The Wook looked down at Leia and purred.

Han turned to the four commandoes. “Secure those two corridors,” he instructed, pointing to the access points.

“We’ll split up and push ahead to help Luke and Flo-Ra,” confirmed Alana, and she gestured to Master Etoile to take four Jedi out via the south corridor.

“May the Force be with you,” said Leia softly to her friend.

Alana smiled. “You too !”

The Jedi teams moved past the commandoes and departed the chamber.

“We’re going to get company,” predicted Leia. “Chewie and I will help hold this point.”

Meanwhile, on the far side of the complex near the command centre, Luke’s ship had settled on the rocky terrain. The boarding ramp was open, and Luke and his Jedi team, wearing breathing masks, were assembling next to the outer wall of a corridor section. Three Jedi stood close by, while the remaining seven waited next to the commando team.

His voice muffled and electronically distorted, he indicated the part of the wall that would be cut. The three Jedi next to him nodded, and ignited their blue and green swords. Luke thumbed his own lightsabre handle, and its green energy blade thrummed into life. Raising his sword high, he plunged

it into the exterior of the module. The other Jedi did likewise, stabbing into the wall at different points. Slowly and steadily they drew a connecting circle, the cut edges glowing a fiery orange.

Within moments the incision was complete, and they stepped back. As one, the four Jedi raised their palms and the weakened wall crumpled and, with interior gas escaping in a dusty white cloud, the metal blew inward. Alarms could be heard, and the bulkhead doors slid shut to seal the compartment.

Luke stepped inside and the remaining Jedi followed, the commandoes making up the rear.

The Jedi Master orientated himself and stepped over to the bulkhead controls. He tapped a sequence on the emergency panel, and a re-pressurisation diagram for the next corridor unit along was displayed. He remotely closed the blast door in the corridor beyond, and the atmospheric levels were reduced. He cycled the blast door next to him and the hatch slid open.

“Inside, quickly now !” he instructed, and the teams stepped swiftly into the next corridor. Luke slipped in behind them, and, closing the blast door, re-commenced the re-pressurisation. As soon as the section’s levels showed a green light on the display, he pulled the face mask off and took a deep breath.

“Okay,” he announced, as the others all removed their re-breathers too. “The command centre is ahead of us. Expect resistance !” He took a small comlink from his belt and flicked it on. “Spikey ! We’re in. Take the ship around to the hangars and try and get in !”

“Will do, Master Skywalker !” came the co-pilot’s reply.

Luke returned the comlink to his belt, and then stretched his arm out towards the far blast door and gestured with his fingers. The heavy door slid open, and, there in the next corridor beyond, were five pirates running towards them, brandishing hand blasters and lightsabres ! Another three brought up the rear. With a yell, the defenders ran full pelt towards the invaders, angry red blaster bolts ricocheting off the walls.

Luke and the other Jedi ignited their own swords and took up defensive stances to parry the incoming fire. The commandoes fanned out behind them and shouldered their assault rifles.

Luke could sense the fiery emotion of fear and anger rage around the attackers. As he had suspected, what they lacked in formal training and nuanced skill, the raw power of the dark side of the Force propelled them forward. In seconds, the lead pirates had engaged the Jedi, and some of the commandoes had swapped their rifles for energy-batons to support the defence.

Like an enraged rathtar blindly barrelling down the corridor, Yuide hardly paused as he strode through the empty dorms, his attention focused single-mindedly on reaching the chamber holding the super-comp. The light-tekken glowered in his right fist, held low at his side ; the handles of a lightsabre and a light-whip swung from his belt. His three crew hurried to keep up, though they were unfazed by their leader’s drive. They were seasoned fighters, and skilled with the laser swords too. Their blood raced as impending battle loomed upon them.

Master Etoile led his four companions through the complex. They had met no-one from the base, but had encountered a red-lit bulkhead door on the south corridor barring their way. Diagnostics at the corresponding control panel confirmed what the red lighting implied : a vacuum breach on the far side, which meant they would have to find an alternative route to the far apex of the triangular base. They doubled-back and soon turned left into the heart of the base, where the utility design revealed these modules to be the dorms, with washing and canteen facilities. As with the main corridor, the rooms remained empty. Clearly the pirates were preoccupied elsewhere resisting the invaders.

The Force pricked at them, and the five Jedi paused. They were halfway through the deserted canteen. A faint rhythmic whirring from behind a closed unit suggested washing up was being done. The Jedi could sense movement, but a cloak of darkness obscured any detail. They spared a glance at each other, and to Master Etoile, who nodded his chin towards two comrades, and then jerked it towards the far side of the canteen. Seconds later they heard boots clattering towards them. In quick succession, three blue blades and two green blades *snap-hissed* into view and were raised high and to the side. Fanning out, the Jedi had a clear view and were ready for whatever the approaching darkness brought them.

Yuide moved briskly past the last of the north dorms and strode into the canteen. The sight of five Jedi momentarily startled him, but invaders were whom he sought, and invaders were whom he would repel.

With a guttural roar, and without breaking his stride, he marched right up to the nearest Jedi. His opponent raised his sword high and began to swing down and across, but, as if in slow-motion, the blue blade moved ponderously. Yuide's right fist shot out and up across the man's chest, the light-tekken ripping open the tunic and the flesh underneath. As the Jedi warrior fell back in astonishment, Yuide was already pivoting and lashing out at the next enemy.

Master Etoile was taken aback to see the lead pirate move so quickly and swiftly. The man was just a blur culminating in the flash of three short red blades ripping across Arvon's chest. As he watched his friend collapse to the deck and the foe turn to attack Stev-Nia, three more pirates had appeared and were advancing upon himself and his remaining two comrades. Fear whipped through his mind, but Master Etoile called upon the Force to help him re-focus. At the same time, he could sense a similar chill cut through his friends.

"Inconcer-" he called out.

But the three pirates had engaged the Jedi, and, although they weren't as super-naturally agile as their leader, Etoile could see they were skilled with the sword and the five combatants were locked in a fierce duel. His friends were too distracted now to focus *in concert*.

He returned his attention to the lead pirate, who now held Stev-Nia at bay with a single stranded but deadly light-whip. Etoile leapt across the space and swung his green sword at the pirate, who flicked the whip in his direction. The red strand connected with the lightsabre with a sparkling crash, and as the whip rebounded high and away, Stev-Nia lunged forward with her blue sword. In a blur the red tekken flashed past and batted the sword to one side. Etoile then watched the scarlet glows zip back and cut across Stev's inner arm. She cried out in pain and involuntarily her palm opened and her sword clattered away. The pirate swung his left arm around and the whip sliced through her torso.

"No !" cried Etoile, aghast, his anger boiling now.

The pirate spun around with the momentum of the killing blow, and the whip lashed out at Etoile. He ducked and raised his sword, and the red tendril hissed as it slid off the blade. But the pirate blurred once more and he was now towering over him. Etoile was faintly aware of the three red blades of the light-tekken barrelling towards him. He raised his lightsabre, but once again, he was aware that time had slowed down, for the red talons had slashed across his right shoulder. He cried out in pain, and tumbled with the motion. As he rolled across the deck he sensed the pirate following him, raising his arm to deliver a killing blow.

"Master ! Go ! Warn the--" But Jedi Remda's words were cut short as he too fell to his knees.

The blue chill of fear met with the golden brightness of the Force and Etoile, crouching, pushed out with his feet, and he somersaulted backwards towards the far door. He landed badly, but, desperately drawing upon the Force once more, he leapt again and sprawled into the corridor. He got to his feet, and ran full pelt back towards the comp chamber.

Yuide roared a triumphant yell, the *buzz* palpable now, and all around him, enveloping him in strength and security, comfort and invulnerability. Without pausing to check on his three crewmen, he raced after the Jedi.

Master Flo-Ra swung her blade and parried the incoming blow. She rotated her sword and flicked it up high, lifting her opponent's lightsabre in to the air. She spun on her heel, crouching low at the same time, her tunic skirts flaring out, and sliced the pirate through the abdomen. As he collapsed, she straightened, took a breath, and allowed herself the opportunity to glance around.

Most of the pirates had been killed or knocked unconscious. They had been prepping the small starfighters that lined one side of the hangar. One Jedi Knight lay dead, and though the commandoes had moved to the sides to avoid the intense duelling, some had been caught up in the skirmish, and been injured or killed. One Knight remained locked in combat, and another was moving in to offer support.

Master Skywalker had urged the Jedi to only kill as a last resort, and instead look to render them unconscious or to capture them. But he had also warned them, from his experience on Serreillea, that the dark side of the Force would compel the pirates to fight to the death, and in that rage they

would be formidable foes. The Grand Master Jedi's insight, Flo-Ra, now concluded, had been correct. Although she herself had never faced a Sith Lord before, she had fought against the *Bogan*, the ancient creatures resurrected by the most recent Sith Master, Lord Monstross. While these pirates were untrained in the ways of the Force, and did not have the ingrained strength of legacy power that those Sith monsters had had, the vitality from anger and fear energised her foe like only the insidious Dark Side of the Force could ever do.

Flo-Ra heard running, the sound growing louder, and she looked over to the entrance at the back of the hangar. Yet more pirates were arriving. She sighed in resignation, and then mentally re-focused. The Force illuminated to her once more and she discerned the fire of the Dark Side burning even more brightly about several of the newcomers : an Umbaran woman, a Rodian male, a four-armed Besalisk, and a human male, dressed in a short cape and colourful tunic with loose fitting trousers, who was gesturing with his arms and seemed to be giving orders.

Chekkel had not only heard the commotion from Hangar Two, he had sensed it as well. The turbulence in the *buzz* had unsettled him. And then word came down from the command centre that the invaders were taking the upper hand, and that there were even more breaches in action. Yuide was making for the comp room, and Zaavu was looking to meet the incursion near the dorms.

As soon as Adelly had landed, he had updated her, and assigned her and her new volunteers to join him and his soldiers in repelling the newcomers in Hangar Two. He led them to the doorway of the hangar, took in the scene with one glance, and began directing his crew to either side to intercept the attackers. Seeing their fellow crew-mates lying dead or injured stoked the hatred inside them all, and Chekk palpably felt the *buzz* slip and slide slickly around him. As he glanced left and right, he could sense that the other pirates, though ignorant perhaps of the energy itself, were equally enflamed. A vital strength emanated from them all.

The Alliance commandoes, ranged along the sides, opened fire with a salvo of red laser bolts. Chekkel and Adelly and two others snapped their lightsabres into life and deflected some of the blasts. Chekk bore two swords and twirled both with skill. The remaining pirates, with an attack yell, ran headlong towards the pockets of Jedi, who leapt back defensively and took up blocking stances.

Chekk nodded to Adelly and the handful of pirates alongside her, and they moved to engage the commandoes, who drew forth and activated energy-batons. The Captain jutted with his chin to two pirates flanking him, and then he led them into the fray too. The three of them smashed their way into one Jedi, and soon over-powered him. But a female human Jedi leapt over to them, and skilfully sliced off the arm of one pirate, and then traded blows between Chekkel and his remaining companion, a Weequay.

As skilled as the Jedi was, she was no match for the brutality of the sheer power of the Dark Side that swirled around the two pirates, and she was forced to retreat. She took a slice to the leg and cried out in pain.

Master Flo-Ra heard her companion nearby, and saw her stumble. She herself flicked her sword and disarmed her opponent, and then pushed out with her left hand sending the pirate hard into the hull of a starfighter. She looked again at her friend over whom the Weequay towered with his sword

raised high and about to deliver a killing blow. The caped pirate, buoyed with triumph, had turned to engage a cluster of three Jedi. Flo-Ra hurled her sword, and the blue blade spun through the air and sliced off the Weeq's hands ! He howled in pain and shock, and the Jedi lying on the deck pushed out with both her hands and the pirate was sent flying into the roof. As the Weeq crashed to the floor, Flo-Ra's blue blade arced back around to her outstretched hand. The dark-blue Rodian whom she had recognised as being strong in the Dark Side now stepped up to her, and she turned to face him, blue blade against blue blade.

Chekk was startled by the sudden turn of events, but the anger erupted once more, and he sliced and stabbed with his swords. One of the Jedi took a cut to his chest and fell, and the other two Jedi stepped back to increase a defensive space. One of the Knights pushed out with his hand to throw Chekkel off his feet, but the *buzz* swirled and bolstered the Captain, and he simply turned his shoulder into the buffeting and swayed on his feet. Surprised by the reaction, the Jedi was not quick enough to dodge the pirate's wide arcing sword, and he lost his hand. Chekk stamped forward a step and swung his second sword up high across the remaining Jedi, instantly following with a down-cut against the amputated Jedi with his other sword. The two Jedi crumpled to the deck.

Flo-Ra could feel the heat of the anger emanating off the Rodian, and knew that the only way to deflect his empowered strength was to exploit it as a distraction. She lunged to the right and then fainted to the left and then stepped back as the Rodian parried and stabbed countering her moves. The raw power of the Dark Side made his fear-fuelled reactions quick, which meant she needed to draw him into making a mistake. She took another step back and then began a sweep low to the right, but switched it at the last minute to flick up. The blade cut across his scaly cheek, startling him and briefly pausing his response. Anticipating his enragement, she blocked two quick blows, and leapt back, drawing the Rodian towards her. As he stepped forward, Flo-Ra crouched and spun on her heel, keeping her sword close to her body hiding her intent. As she came about she flicked the sword down and up across her foe's chest. He valiantly tried to parry the attack, but it unbalanced him, and as he twisted to the side, Flo-Ra followed the line with a side cut that caught his lower back and hip. He howled in pain, but spun about lashing out with his sword. Flo-Ra jerked back, but the sword tip cut her shoulder. The Rodian collapsed to his knees, and shot her a look of hatred. He stabbed forward, but Flo-Ra danced to the side, and sliced off his arm. Unperturbed, anger and hatred fuelling him, he grabbed at the blaster at his belt with his left hand, raised it, and shot wildly towards the Jedi. A tight quick move by her blue blade returned the blaster bolt back into the Rodian, throwing him backwards to the deck.

Chekkel watched his friend go down. Hatred surged like an ocean all around him, and he raised his swords high. The Jedi woman would die.

But then the pounding seas of blood-red hatred and fear suddenly calmed like the eye of a storm. Almost as if all sound and motion was drained from the Hangar Bay, the *buzz* demanded his attention with a vision : he saw Yuide surrounded by the black fire as he and the other pirates were, but this fire burned cold and icy, and stretched out across the star-lit cosmos. His brother was in mortal danger !

Chekkel glanced towards the doorway leading back into the base. Near the entrance, a pirate fought two commandoes brandishing their lit batons. He turned and ran full pelt at them. He batted the soldiers away with his swords, and disappeared into the complex.

Night-time on Coruscant was rarely still and peaceful. The air traffic continued relentlessly, as did the population going about its business on the many-layered streets below. One location where quietude was expected, however, was in the children's bedroom of the Solo family apartment.

The *Nanna-Droid* rolled through the carpeted passageway, and paused outside one of the doors. She extended an analysis arm, and the display on her busty torso soon presented a single heat image coming from one of the beds. The droid clicked to herself in puzzlement, and the infra-red image was enlarged on the screen. The fuzzy heat source resolved itself into a spherical shape corresponding in size to two human children's hearts.

Previously *Nanna* would have been satisfied that the Twins had curled up together, but experience had taught her not to trust the Solo Twins.

She beeped a command at the door control, and the entrance slid open. The droid wheeled in and went up close to the bed in question. Lumpy covers were pushed up over the slumbering forms, and the faint sound of Gana's snoring came from underneath.

The analysis arm remained outstretched and the display on *Nanna's* torso clarified once more. No heads or arms or legs were discerned, and the spherical heat source was resolved as the toy droid *Bee-Bee*.

Another arm was extended and lifted the covers high : the audio-out of the gently warming BB2 unit was snoring away happily to itself !

Nanna's computer circuits whirred in frustration and indignation.

Oh, those Solo Twins ! Not again !!

The Millennium Falcon was silent, save for some random *plinks* and *bleeps* as the empty ship ran through automatic diagnostic routines. Chewie hadn't entirely powered down the vessel for it remained at the ready on auxiliary power for when they were to depart.

From within the starboard side ring corridor, near the boarding ramp hatch, there came the soft scrape of smooth metal against metal, and a portion of the floor decking lifted slightly. Two pairs of juvenile eyes peered out through the narrow gap, blinking against the bright lights of the ship's interior.

"I *told* you there was no-one about !" whispered Gana furiously. "Trust the Force, sis !"

"I *do*," stressed the reply, "But what if there was something out there that we couldn't sense ?!"

"Oh, Corssy !" sighed the brother.

“Uncle Luke does say that the Force isn’t infallible,” Corsa pointed out.

“Okay, okay.” Gana wasn’t in the mood to argue. He lifted off the decking hatch, and slid it to the side. He glanced around at the old smuggling compartment and grinned at his sister. “Sure glad Dad and Mum told us how they first met !”

Corsa smiled, and then frowned a little as she focused her attention on the Force. She took one look at the sealed boarding ramp hatch, then turned her small head towards the centre of the ship. “The boarding ramp is still up. We heard people move through, but they didn’t go that way. The top hatch is closed too..... But the docking ring is open.... Gana, Dad’s parked her up against an airlock !” she exclaimed.

“I see it,” agreed her brother. “Let’s go !”

He scrambled out of the under-floor compartment, with his sister following behind them. Both were keyed up with excitement. Corsa helped him slide the decking piece back into place, and the hatch dropped down with a soft plop.

The twins quickly made their way through the rear hold and into the port-side corridor. Ahead of them the open docking ring hatch revealed the airlock and cavity utilities, and brighter light beyond of the chamber. They could see figures dressed in technician overalls moving about, and then they spotted their father pass by, speaking earnestly to the team. Artoo rolled in beside the technicians, and Threepio followed close behind.

“This is exciting !” whispered Corsa, and Gana nodded eagerly.

“Let’s get closer...” he suggested.

“Not too close, don’t let them spot us,” answered Corsa. “Let’s hunker down just in there,” she suggested, pointing at the start of the service area that nestled within the cavity of the walls.

Gana nodded in agreement. “The Force will hide us.”

But even so, he, like his sister, still crouched down, and they carefully stepped through the docking port and slipped across into the cavity. They pressed themselves up against the piping and wiring panels in the dim red light, and peered out at the chamber that held a vast super-computer.

Alana was making her way towards the hangars, accompanied by two Jedi Knights, when she suddenly paused and stiffened. *Etoille !* There had been a burst of fear from him and his companions, and then a blazing fire of emotion had overcome them. Moments later, she sensed the consuming darkness pierced by the golden light of the Force at its strongest and most encouraging.

Her companions waited beside her, a quizzical look on their faces.

“What is it, Master ?” asked one of them, a triangular-headed Arconan. “Are you alright ?”

“It’s Etoile and his team,” she answered. “Something’s happened to them.”

Alana took a glance up the corridor towards their destination, and then back over her shoulder towards the comp chamber they had only recently left. The Force whispered once more.

“We need to go back !” she said decisively.

Eight pirates had attacked them. Now there were only four. *But, thought Master Skywalker grimly, these four were tenacious, and the surge of the Dark Side of the Force made them blind to danger and as crazy as a cornered nexu.*

Luke blocked one strike, then swung his green blade low to block another. No sooner had he done that than the pirate – a tentacle-faced Quarren – was already stabbing and slashing once more. There was no finesse, but with such over-amplified ferocity it didn’t really matter. The green and blue blades crashed together and crackled.

A young equine Yakora was fighting nearby, skillfully holding back several Jedi with an old Bogan lightwhip, its tendrils open and flailing everywhere. Even Luke had to step to one side every now and again to avoid being burnt by a flick of a whip. While the lightwhip presented multiple tendrils, it remained a relatively harmless but injurious weapon ; but once the sum of the energy lashes came together into a single whip, a burning slash could kill.

A burly Devaronian with a chipped horn was also wielding a lightwhip, but reduced to a single strand, as well as slashing and stabbing with a green lightsabre. He was towards the rear, holding off Jedi and baton-wielding commandoes, and preventing anyone from advancing past towards the command centre. Finally, a human bandit completed the last of the defenders, and he wielded a hand blaster and a blue lightsabre. The corridor was fairly wide, but the tightly-packed combat with swords, whips, and batons made for little room to manoeuvre. A commando sat slumped against the wall, motionless, with several burn marks and cuts across his chest.

With a flick of his wrist, Luke sliced off the Quarren’s sword hand, and the lightsabre hilt clattered to the deck. His opponent howled in pain, but, expecting the pirate to retreat, Luke was surprised to find he instead pulled a curved dagger from his belt with his left hand. The close quarters combat meant that the Quarren was already slicing back and forth within deadly range. Luke stepped back as best he could, but ran up against a fellow Jedi facing the Yakora. The knife landed a cut across his arm. With no alternative, Luke swept his sword across the knife and the pirate’s chest. As the knife splintered and his green blade cut deep into his opponent, the Quarren jerked back and crashed into the wall.

Luke immediately turned and supported the other Jedi facing the whip-wielding Yakora. He noticed that many had received cuts across their faces and arms and legs, and some were flagging. One Jedi lay dead on the decking behind him, along with a commando.

He drew upon the Force for sustenance, and engaged the tall pirate. His green sword swept across the multiple tendrils, yellow-orange flashes exploding whenever they connected. As the three Jedi

beside him darted in to make quick stabs with their swords, the pirate's whip lashed back and forth. But faced with four opponents the Yakora was forced to step back, his reverse-jointed legs prancing lightly to keep him out of reach of the blue and green swords. The tendrils were snapped back and forth in defence, flashes of colour on each sword contact obscuring the pirate.

The Devaronian suddenly barked out a command, and took a few steps back, as did the human pirate. The equine Yakora abruptly pivoted fully around on his left hoof, kicking out with his right : one of the Jedi was sent sprawling, and knocked a second Jedi to one side. Luke arced his lightsabre around vertically and managed to catch a glancing blow across the pirate's back, but then he too had to skip back to avoid the next flick of the whip. Growling with pain, the Yakora's powerful legs bent and propelled him back in a jump, his hooves landing with a thump on the decking. His lightwhip coalesced into one deadly strand and he slashed out at the invaders who had been facing against his crew mates. A Jedi was struck with the full force of the now-deadly weapon, and he lost his sword arm. As he staggered in pain, the whip returned across his shoulders and he lost his life.

Before the remaining Jedi and commandoes could engage with the Yakora, the pirate leapt past them and joined his comrades at a round glazed intersection. The bandits yelled and goaded and retreated a few more steps.

The Jedi and the support soldiers, incensed by the brazen opponents and the rush of the deadly battle, and with a determined look in their eye, gripped their weapons and advanced.

The Force tugged at Luke and he sensed movement from the right hand corridor ahead of them. The swirling fog of the Dark Side obscured detail and threat, but he understood it to require caution. He began to call out to his team, but just then red cannon fire lanced out from a hidden vantage point in the right hand corridor, straffing across the observation chamber.

Some of the Jedi were able to turn and deflect the deadly barrage, but three commandoes took the full force and collapsed. A Jedi took a blast in the shoulder, and was spun to the floor in pain. A second wave of fire blasted another Jedi who wasn't quick enough to block the bolts. The others dived to the side.

Luke called upon the Force and raced ahead, his green sword pirouetting against another raking of cannon fire. The remaining Jedi joined him in parrying the heavy gunfire.

The Master Jedi nimbly leapt to the side and then he somersaulted forward, closing the space in a blink of an eye, and landed between the two hover-sleds that each carried cannon. One slash right, one slash left, and both cannon were rendered useless. Their operators drew lightsabres, and jumped off the back of the carts to engage the Jedi.

As Luke clashed blades with a Snivvian bandit, one of his team arrived to connect with the accompanying human pirate.

Behind them, Luke was aware of the dark side swirling, and, even as he fought the pirate, in his mind's eye he discerned the corridor leading back to the intersection, and a dark oily insidious fog closing in from the periphery.

In the observation chamber, the injured Jedi and the able, and one commando, afire with anger and revenge, pressed the close-quarters attack against the Devaronian, the Yakora, and the human. Although skilled with the sword and highly trained in the Force, the Jedi Knights, untrained from childhood, were still susceptible to emotion, and their duelling blows were driven to kill rather than injure.

Deeper in the corridor, Luke circled and flicked his lightsabre against his opponent's, and the Snivvian's sword arm was cut. The precise and surgical riposte caused the pirate to jerk his hand open, and his sword clattered to the deck. Luke pushed out with his palm, and the pirate thudded hard into the wall and slid to the floor.

The Force pricked at his mind, and he turned to face his team at the intersection.

"No ! Wait !" he called out.

But his warning came too late. From afar, he watched as his team cut down first the human pirate, and then the Yakora. The Devaronian found himself being double amputated, and as he staggered back, several swords ran him through. Luke was shocked and aghast at the sudden darkness teasing and directing and corrupting his students, and the thought came to him that perhaps the raw chaotic ferocity of their surroundings was partly to blame. The kinetic forces outside may be slowly and eternally creative, but in doing so, they were wholly destructive too.

Beside him, the Jedi who had taken on the other gunner, was still engaged in a ferocious lightsabre duel. He sensed the Jedi was losing his discipline and was keen to bring the duel to a permanent end, so Luke raised his hand, and the pirate was also thrown hard against the wall.

"Come on," urged Luke. "Let's get back to the others," he said, nodding with his chin.

They ran back up the corridor and intercepted the remainder of the team. Darkness swirled maniacally about them.

Luke summoned the Force to his voice. "Focus, my friends. Quieten your minds and be calm. Let the Good Side of the Force guide you, not the Dark." He paused. "Breathe."

The Jedi and the remaining commando nodded in obedience, and glanced down at the decking to de-focus and control their breathing.

One of the Jedi looked up, his eyes searching for answers.

"Master Skywalker... there's something about this place... there's a racing energy... it quickens my blood..."

Luke nodded. "Yes, Monts, you're right. I think it's the maelstrom out there," he gestured with his hand towards the observation windows, "It's Gensys-Sucal, the proto system, all that chaotic kinetic energy. It's being *destructive* all the while it's being *constructive*."

"And we expected the Dark Side to feel cold and deathly," added Monts with comprehension. "Not this wild and effervescent vitality."

“Yes, the Dark Side is sly and insidious,” noted the Jedi Master. “Quickly and easily it joins you, and not always when there’s an obvious threat.”

The Force spoke to Luke with further insight. The Jedi Master swept his gaze across his erstwhile Jedi students. All were older than him, for he and his sister were the last of the Jedi prior to the lifting of Anakin’s Curse by Leia.

“Until recently, your opponents were the bogan, Sith-created monsters regenerated from archaic DNA. They were the embodiment of evil and darkness. But now we are being faced with fellow living breathing sentient species who have been seduced by the sly trickery of the Dark Side of the Force. But more to it than that, you are recognising the weaknesses and fallibilities of your foe.... precisely because these failings reside in each and every one of you.”

He shook his head, saying with sombre realisation, “You seek revenge against your own flaws.”

“Then we must be better than that !” replied Monts with feeling.

“No,” the Grand Master responded quietly. “That is just as worse ; that way leads to arrogance. All I ask you to do is recognise it for what it is, and guard against it.”

Monts lowered his gaze and nodded. The other Jedi nodded their affirmation too.

Once Luke was satisfied that his team had become calmer and had re-focused, he pointed up the corridor.

“We still have a job to do. The command centre is that way,” he indicated. “We need to secure it. Come on.”

“How’s it goin’ ?” asked Han, pacing back and forth between Harker and Fondon and the other techies.

“Same as it was when you last asked,” responded Fondon grimly.

“About five seconds ago,” added Harker wryly.

The tech team had set up portable consoles in an array around the super-computer’s primary access interface. Artoo was plugged in at one of the consoles, whirring away to himself, while Threepio stooped over him, quietly providing a running commentary.

The Force pricked at Leia, and she announced, “We have incoming.”

There came the sound of gunfire from further up the south corridor, then the grunts of a brief skirmish, followed by screams of pain, then silence.

Leia shot a glance to her husband. “The two commandoes are down,” she reported.

She moved to face the corridor and gripped the handle of her lightsabre in readiness. Chewie growled and stepped past her, and then took up station a few metres beyond. He too raised his lightsabre, the handle fashioned from wood and metal.

A blur smashed into view and, as lightsabres ignited, it came to an abrupt stop, revealing itself to be Etoile.

“Masters !” the Jedi gasped. “We were attacked... They’re right behind me... one of them is....”

The pirate’s roar of anger and frustration heralded his arrival, and the mass of dark energy that was Yuide exploded into view.

The pirate recognised the Jedi he had pursued, who was now stooped panting. He flicked the light-whip high into the air, and brought the single red tendril down across the man. The Jedi twisted away, but the whip caught his arm and sliced it clean off. The Jedi howled in pain and slumped to the floor.

Chewie matched the newcomer’s roar with his own bellow, and swung his sword in a wide arc.

Without pausing, Yuide flicked his right arm out and to the side and the light-whip batted away the green blade.

Leia leapt forward to engage the pirate and snapped her blue sword back and forth to parry the returning whip tendril.

A salvo of red blaster bolts rained past the two combatants as Han tried to provide cover for his wife, but the pirate simply danced from foot to foot, turning his shoulders this way and that.

Two new pirates now barged in. They regarded the situation, then fanned out either side of their leader. One raised his lightsabre above his head in a two-handed grip, and advanced upon the Wookiee. The other stepped to the left of Yuide and provided a wider angle of attack against the Jedi woman before them. Two remaining Jedi had positioned themselves just behind and either side of the woman. A middle-aged man in a military tunic touting a blaster at his hip seemed to be providing a laughable defence for a handful of nerdy techies trying to hack their way into the pirates’ super-computer.

Yuide snarled, and leapt forward to engage the woman, punching out at her with his three-bladed tekken in his left fist. His opponent side-stepped swiftly and swung her blue blade, but Yuide, with super-human speed, twisted and blocked the blow with the tekken. He immediately followed with the whip, slashing down and across to catch her legs. The Jedi nimbly leapt vertically, and Yuide noticed that her lower left leg was cybernetic. He crouched and hit out with the tekken once more, but the blue blade arced down and blocked the red. An un-lady-like kick caught him in the head, and he was momentarily thrown back, tottering but not falling. He angrily flailed out at her with the whip, which kept her from advancing.

The pirate beside Yuide ran forward to meet with the Jedi on his side, and the two engaged with their swords. The remaining Jedi circled around the woman and moved forward to support her against Yuide.

Several bright clashes between the Wookiee and his opponent forced the pirate to retreat, who was unable to cope under the physically heavy blows meted out by the towering beast. The pirate saw the second Jedi move around the woman to get into a better position to attack his chief, and he swung a blow against him. The Jedi sensed the ambush, and twisted to block the blade. At the same time the Wookiee swung his green blade once more, and the pirate was forced to back away.

Yuide lashed out with his whip, and the single tendril caught the Jedi across the shoulder, slicing off the arm. Emboldened, the pirate leader flicked the whip again at the woman, and she was forced to twist and parry the blazing red tendril with her sword. A brief hiss, and the whip leapt high into the air once more, whirled in an arc, and came down once again.

Leia deftly rotated her blade as the whip came down a second time, and the blue and red became entangled. She tugged at the energy arc, felt resistance, and then tightly rotated her blade again. The two combatants were brought closer. The pirate growled in frustration, and Leia saw his thumb de-activate the whip. As the fizzling red disappeared, and the weapons became separated, she flicked her sword in a wide arc. In a blur, the pirate punched again with the tekken, while his right hand now sported the re-activated light-whip, this time with many tendrils flailing wildly as if it had almost a mind of its own.

The multi-stranded whip zipped back around and Leia was forced to adjust her attack to defend against the tendrils and the close-quarters tekken. Twisting her blade to the vertical she rebuffed the red blades, but several tips of the whip stung her left arm and back. Without giving in to the searing pain, she pushed out her palm, and the pirate was thrown across the chamber where he thudded high in to the wall. To his credit, although winded, he slid to the floor and landed on his feet.

The sole Jedi left duelling fiercely with the other pirate near the comp station had landed several injurious blows, and his foe was bleeding across his arms and legs. The pirate was only barely keeping up a defence, and would soon succumb.

Chewbacca had pounded his opponent with heavy blows, and the pirate had retreated back towards the doorway they had entered.

Yuide saw his injured crewman near the comp station collapse to his knees and then slump over. Movement just beyond showed the military man aim and fire across the room, hitting the pirate at the doorway squarely in the chest. Behind the shooter, Yuide could also see lights on the computer interface flicker in a rapid rhythm, and he correctly guessed that they had broken through its defences. The woman and the Wookiee were cautiously advancing towards him.

A clatter of boots prompted him to turn his gaze to the north corridor and he saw three Jedi run in, closely followed by two more commandoes.

A wild thought came to Yuide's mind. *If the comp is lost to them, then I'll make sure no one gets out with it alive !*

It was as if the *buzz* was re-energised by this idea, and to Yuide it felt almost as if the dark energy had even been waiting expectantly for this realisation and turn of events.

The black fire swept up and through him once more, and without sparing a glance back, he moved as a blur and departed the chamber.

Leia looked at Chewie, who glanced down at her with his head cocked to the side, and then to Han and to Alana, who had moved to Etoille's side to check on her friend. Alana was satisfied that the injury wasn't life-threatening, and was helping him sit up.

"We need to get after him," announced Leia, pointing in the direction the pirate had gone.

They all nodded in agreement, and began to move towards the south corridor.

Han shot a glance over his shoulder as he went.

"Fondon, wrap it up here, and get everyone on board the Falcon."

From the airlock at the side of the chamber, eyes wide from what they had just witnessed, Gana and Corsa surreptitiously peeked out. They watched their parents, Chewie, auntie Alana, the Jedi, and the two commandoes race away down one of the two corridors. The five technicians were busy closing down their application consoles, with Artoo and Threepio fussing around them. Etoille had shuffled to the group, clutching his cauterised arm. The twins looked at each other, and nodded. They focused their attention on the doorway leading to the corridor that everyone had just used, and then called upon the Force to whisk them across the chamber and into the passage, out of sight of the others.

Master Flo-Ra surveyed the devastation around the Hangar Bay. Many pirates lay dead or injured. A handful of Jedi had also sadly lost their lives, and several were injured ; most of the commandoes had been killed. The surviving pirates had been rounded up and were sat to the side, under the watchful eye of two Jedi and a commando. Their PA gunship was unusable, as were the pirates' small one- and two- man starfighters that were now pockmarked from blasterfire.

A handful of pirates had escaped into the corridors, including the caped one who she sensed was their leader.

She touched the comlink wrapped around her ear, and called out to the Jedi Masters. Leia Solo answered.

"We're in pursuit, Flo," updated Leia breathlessly. "We think it's the leader. We're moving in to the centre of the complex. Can you join us ?"

In the near-empty command centre, Jenna was frantically trying to raise her deputy, Zaavu.

"Zaavu, do you read me ?! Zavvy, are you there ??!"

She clicked the comms switch several times, and dialled the frequency fine-tuner. The Rodian Ssirisko leaned over her, his snout quivering in anxious contemplation. A handful of crew remained at their stations, monitoring the system diagnostics.

“If he’s not responding it can only mean one thing.”

Jenna set her mouth in a tight line and nodded.

“I’ll try the captains...” she said, and began tapping an ID sequence on her keyboard.

Just then, from across the room, one of the crew called out in alarm.

“Jenna ! I have a proximity alert on *The Grab*. The service droids onboard have detected a hyperspace reversion !”

“Patch through the ship’s visual scanners, Corky,” she instructed, and her colleague quickly relayed the remote view.

On one of the screens before her, Jenna and Ssirisko saw the new arrival : the flat arrow-head shape at the front accurately put one in mind of the Imperial Star Destroyer, though this ship was far smaller and, aft of the arrow-head, was a lot more skeletal in framework, culminating in a blocky hyperdrive at the rear. From the ribbed mid-section hung several squadrons of stowed TIE fighters of varying classes.

“An Imperial Fighter Carrier ?!” gasped Ssirisko in shock. “Are they here to support us...?!”

“Tagge wouldn’t show his hand, surely ?!” Jenna shared the Rodian’s bewilderment.

But just as the carrier vectored in towards *The Grab* they immediately understood its purpose : lines of TIE fighters and TIE bombers were unleashed, and raced towards their screen.

Knowing that the maintenance droids could do very little in such a short time, the crew in the command centre watched impotently as green laserfire and orange-red proton torpedoes lanced out at the ship !

The Grab was a sitting duck. Deliberately stowed in a complete shut-down status so as to hide from any scanners, the cold dark vessel was maintained internally by a phalanx of old menial droids. No running lights and no radiating energy or heat meant that it could sit against the inky backdrop of space, not too far away from the North Hyper Beacon, completely invisible to any passing traffic.

With a vested interest, Tagge knew about the pirates’ arsenal, and was aware of the holding pattern for the giant gravity-vessel.

The barrage of fire rained down on *The Grab*. As the first wave of TIEs peeled away from the initial explosions, a second and a third wave swept through, incrementing the fireballs mushrooming out of the starship.

In the pirate command centre, Jenna slumped back in her seat, her mouth hanging open in shock.

Ssirisko’s snout curled in distaste.

“Those stinkin’ double-crossin’ womprats... !” he exclaimed.

Another crew member had activated a system-wide scan and triangular icons now detailed the Imperials’ next move.

“The TIEs are turning onto a vector to intercept the North Beacon,” he reported to his colleagues.

Moments later, the confirmation came through that the Hyper Beacon had been destroyed.

“They’re cutting our ropes !” snarled Ssrisko.

Jenna was jolted out of her stupefied state.

“I need to update the Captains,” she said.

On board the *PACS Judiciary*, Admiral Merityme was arguing with his Imperial counterpart.

“But what was the target ?!” demanded the Admiral of the pale blue hologram that stood before him.

“From a sensitivity point of view I am sure you appreciate we are not at liberty to say,” replied the Imperial captain smoothly, “but rest assured we acted swiftly to defend our friends and allies.”

“The Pan-Alliance gratefully acknowledges the Imperial Remnant’s offer of help,” a purple-faced Merityme blustered patiently, “but we would expect candour and honesty from our friend and ally in addressing this common obstacle.”

The Imperial captain smiled and bowed. “Always, Admiral, and to the best of our ability.”

Merityme shifted his stance and placed his hands on his hips. He leaned in towards the hologram.

“Then I would cordially ask you to hold your position to the north of the gen-sys plane, and be ready to respond when I call on you.”

“As you wish, Admiral,” came the response smoothly. “I thank you for your time.” And the hologram faded away.

An aide moved across the open bridge of the star cruiser, and stepped up to the Admiral. He held a datapad in his hand, and was tapping an entry in to it.

“Sir, we believe the north hyper beacon has gone offline. We believe it has also now been destroyed.”

The Admiral placed his hand on his forehead and sighed.

“What are they playing at ? That might jeopardise the extraction of our teams.”

The *buzz* moved Yuide in a blur, opening and closing bulkhead doors in quick succession, and he soon found himself in the centre of the base complex where the power core was located.

The observation windows on the sides of the octagonal reactor revealed a faint blue glow, which cast the rest of the chamber in the ghostly hue. The room was large, with three maintenance gantries wrapped around the core, each with gangways radiating out to corresponding service consoles arrayed around the walls. Power cables hung like drapes from the gangways, connecting the constant stream of energy from the Core to the convertors on the walls and on to the rest of the base. Several doorways gave access out from this central location.

Four bipedal protocol droids busied themselves at various heights around the chamber, while an astromech R4 unit trundled about on the lower deck.

Yuide started towards the primary interface console and its over-ride controls when he heard the clatter of running boots. The darkness of the *buzz* that had swirled around him like a personal fog now briefly cleared on the side of the noise to provide some illumination and clarity : it was a familiar presence and not a threat. Yuide relaxed, and his brother ran through one of the open doorways.

“Brother !” gasped Chekkel in relief. “I thought you had been injured.... or worse.”

Although he shared his brother’s relief in seeing a welcome face and not another accursed Jedi, Yuide’s anger and rage did not dissipate.

“They’ve got the comp, Chekk !” he snarled. “If we can’t get off this rock, then I ain’t letting them get off it either !”

“No, see sense, we need to evacuate !” pleaded his brother. “Evacuate and fight another day.”

“No ! I fight now !” growled Yuide. Anger and darkness and fire swirled all about him.

A soft ping sounded, and Chekkel lifted his right hand to his ear. He touched a discreet comlink and hailed the caller.

“Captain, it’s Jenna.” Her voice was tinny and distant. “An Imperial fighter carrier has just taken out *The Grab* and the North Beacon ! We’re sitting ducks... what are your orders ?”

The brothers looked at each other. Yuide slowly shook his head, his rage bubbling to eruption.

“They will all pay for this !” he hissed.

“Not yet,” pleaded Chekk, but he was faced with a stoney expression. He shook his head briefly, and tapped the earpiece.

“Jenna, send the evac signal, and get to Hangar One. We’ll try and get out on a shuttle.”

Chekk shot his brother a final look. He knew what Yuide intended, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to change his mind.

For his part, Yuide – the last part of him that now wasn't so consumed by the Dark Side – gazed back into his brother's eyes. He clapped his twin on the shoulder.

"Find Robbiee-Luiee," he whispered. "Save our sister."

Chekkel nodded.

The clatter of approaching footfall broke the moment, and caught their attention.

"Now.... go !" Yuide croaked hoarsely.

Chekk turned on his heel, and ran from the chamber.

Luke and his Jedi team moved quickly through the deserted corridors of the pirates' base. The Force spoke to the Grand Master Jedi, and as he trusted so he followed. Five Jedi and one commando ran just behind him.

In the command centre, Jenna was keying the last of the message instructing the remaining pirates to retreat to Hangar Three. She tapped the transmit button, and then reached over to a bank of covered switches. She flicked open one guard, and, without any hesitation, stabbed a red button. A muffled klaxon began to whine, and the internal lighting switched to amber.

There were two entrances to the command centre, being at one of the apexes of the triangular plan. As the command crew began to leave their stations and make for the corridor that stretched out to the hangars, the thump of running boots from the opposite corridor drew their attention.

"We've got company !" called out Corky in alarm, and he drew his blaster from his belt with one hand, and a lightsabre hilt with the other.

Ssirisko leapt around the consoles and ran to the doorway. He slapped the blast door over-ride, and as the heavy double doors slid shut, an invisible gale blew him halfway across the room !

"Ssris !" shouted Jenna, and moved to help him.

The Rodian rolled on to his knees and clambered to his feet. "What was that ??!" he muttered, shaking his head.

Before anyone could answer, the tips of blue and green lines of crackling energy burst through the sealed blast doors. They began to draw several arcs that were connecting to form a crude circle. Melting glowing metal spat in their wake.

"Let's get out of here !" shouted Jenna, grabbing her own lightsabre from her belt.

The last of the pirates hurried to the second corridor, and just as they disappeared through the doorway, Jenna and Ssirisko saw the sliced blast door opposite burst forward and hover in mid air ! Several Jedi leapt around the makeshift shield, spinning their lightsabres in readiness.

Ssirisko pulled his blaster from his belt and sprayed a quick-fire salvo at the intruders. Some of the red laser bolts were repelled by the floating door panel, while the remainder were met by the arcing blue and green blades. Jenna, with her lightsabre in her left hand, also drew her hand gun, and aimed at the lead Jedi. Luke and Monts twisted their swords and skilfully deflected the laser blasts back at the pirates. The bolts smashed into the doorway above the pirates' heads, and as they ducked in response and were hidden under a cascade of sparks, they dashed out into the corridor.

Luke glimpsed the woman and the Rodian as they slipped out of sight on the far side of the command centre. He glanced around to make sure there were no other pirates waiting to ambush them. The machines hummed and their lights flashed in diligent labour, but the amber lighting of an evac signal told him all he needed to know. The Force pricked at his thoughts, and he sensed darkness and danger swirling and coalescing frenetically towards the centre of the pirates' base.

With his green blade still bright and humming, he gestured with his left hand, and the door panel clattered to the floor.

He pointed to the commando and a Jedi. "Stay here, and monitor their systems ! Update me if there's a problem."

His glance took in the other three Jedi. He pointed to two of the Jedi.

"You two, go after those pirates. Monts, come with me !"

Master Flo-Ra led a group of Jedi through the deserted corridors. The Force guided her towards the darkness that now congealed thickly at the centre of the complex.

In the central chamber housing the power core, Yuide moved quickly to raise the control levels and remove the safety bars. He roughly pushed the protesting R4 astromech to the side, and the separated remains of one of the protocol droids illustrated what he was prepared to do if he wasn't allowed to ignore safety procedures and endanger life. A red alarm glow infused the chamber, and a rapid beeping had already begun. In such a fevered daze as he was, he didn't register the new arrivals.

"Hold it right there !" a woman's voice called out.

Yuide spun on his heel and saw the woman he had just fought staring at him with her palm raised. Other Jedi fanned out either side of her. The Wookiee was there, as was the sharp-shooting general. Yet more Jedi ran in from another corridor, and joined the others in a larger arc.

Leia coolly regarded the pirate. He looked like a cornered animal, and she had no doubt he would be just as dangerous. The Force painted a charred fiery halo all about the man. He was a verger of the Dark Side. A glance at the control console beyond him told her that he had begun to manually release and overload the power core.

Alana, she called to her friend in her mind, *the energy controls...*

Alana glanced across to Leia, and then past the pirate. She summoned the Force. *Inconcerto*, she silently commanded to the remaining Jedi in the room, *reduce the power rating !*

As Leia took a step towards the pirate, the Jedi matched Alana as she raised her arm and gestured with her fingers.

With a whine the multitude of control levers and dials began to descend as one.

Yuide spared a glance over his shoulder, and then growled in protest. He flicked his light-whip into action, lassoing the angry red tails about his head.

Jenna, Ssirisko, Corky, and two other pirates ran full pelt through the corridors leading towards the hangars. They could hear the swish of blast doors opening and closing behind them, but they weren't hanging around to meet their pursuers. A wise pirate knew when to retreat and live a little longer.

As she ran, Jenna imagined she could feel a thick oily sensation flowing languidly about her, encouraging her and guiding her and propelling her towards their destination. She hazarded that this inky syrup seemed to pool next to a closed blast door coming up on their right, and as she glanced towards the door, she noticed Ssirisko move his scaly head in the same direction. *Can he sense what I'm sensing ?* she wondered in that moment. The other three just ahead of them had passed the door.

They both slowed their steps and, as they came up to the doorway, they raised their weapons. The blast door swished open and Chekkel appeared, one hand raised to pause them, his other hand tightly gripping a sword hilt.

"Captain !" gasped Jenna breathlessly.

"Where's your brother ?" asked Ssirisko.

But before Chekkel could reply, a blast door beyond the pirates opened, and the two Jedi who had pursued them from the command centre appeared. Blue and green swords already aglow, they leapt as one at the three pirates, lightsabres held high.

Chekkel pushed his left hand out and the air shimmered dome-like about the pirates. The two Jedi crashed impotently against the near-invisible shield, and slid to the deck. The other three pirates from the command centre, having heard the commotion behind them, returned to support the captain and their colleagues.

“Wha-what did you just do ?!” stammered Jenna in shock and bewilderment. The Jedi lay moaning on the floor, nursing their heads and their arms.

Chekkel shook his head. “I don’t know,” he answered grimly and with candour. “But I don’t want to hang around to find out. Come on !”

Leaving the stunned Jedi on the floor, the pirates turned and continued their flight.

Gana and Corsa pushed deeper into the corridor’s shallow maintenance alcove, pressing themselves up against the switches and levers that allowed for remote diagnostics. With their eyes and through the Force they could see beyond the doorway and into the central power chamber. Many Jedi were fanned out and facing the fearsome warlord who held them back with his light-whip. As the figures moved to avoid the whip tendrils, they caught glimpses of the pirate and of their mother, who was at the front of the group. Closer to them was their father, gun held ready looking for a clear shot. Chewie and Aunt Alana were in the midst of the arc trying to contain the pirate.

The darkness of the Force pushed in about the twins, and the blue, green, and red glows from the weapons blurred to create a misty impression. Fear and excitement clouded their view. The red hot thrill of the adventure pushed and pulled against the icy blue of fear and the serene azure of Jedi control and focus. Though strong in the Force, they were less skilled in managing the passions of the cosmic energy, and they stared wide-eyed at the setting before them as it slowly reduced down to the abstract push and pull of the eternal battle within the Force.

By snapping the light-whip back and forth, Yuide was keeping the Jedi at bay. He had registered the power controls reverting back to their safety margins, and knew the Jedi had done so with their sorcerous magic. He had briefly grabbed at the air in mimicry, but his own gestures were futile. Now he needed to hold back these wizards, long enough to take down as many of them as he could, and give Chekk and the others more time to escape.

The Jedi were arrayed in two alternating rings facing him, a sea of blue and green swords pointing at him in readiness. With each pass, the light-whip crackled as it caught the ends of some of the swords. The woman was speaking again, some rubbish about surrendering to the Pan Alliance, but he could hardly hear her for the rushing in his ears was so loud. It hurt him, but at the same time it focused him and gave him clarity. To his eyes the chamber was in darkness save for the sticks of two-tone colours before him.

There came the thud of boots from behind him, and two more Jedi arrived from the direction of the command centre. They slowed to a stop and spaced themselves out to cover him. Yuide recognised the white-robed one as the man he had fought on Serreillea.

Yuide snapped the lightwhip over his head at one of the Jedi behind him, who immediately parried at the multitude, and then, stepping forward to his right and switching the light-whip to a single deadly blade, he flicked it forward and wide with a twist of his wrist. Sparks flashed brightly as the swords connected with the tendril. By closing the distance, he had brought the whip into a duelling range, and, with one tail concentrating the power of the weapon, even merely a grazing with its tip would burn incredibly fiercely ; any contact more forceful and it could kill.

The *buzz* rushed through him, and he felt energised and empowered. He instinctively knew that once again he would be able to move in the blink of an eye. He stepped closer and raised his arm, and noted that the nearest foe seemed to still be looking at his last position.

As a blur, he snapped the whip to and fro skilfully, and several Jedi stumbled back into the outer ring of fellow warriors ; a second lancing of the whip caught the same Jedi once more, and two of them crumpled to the floor dead.

But now the Jedi in the remainder of the arcs pressed in, as did the two behind him. He pivoted, and slashed out with the whip, catching one with a deadly sting, and forcing the others to back off. The woman's blue blade glanced off the tendril, and then she boldly stepped forward and engaged the tail on its return pass, the red whipping about the blue.

Real-time shuddered into focus again.

"No," commanded the woman.

She tugged at the tendril with her blade, but he thumbed the activation switch off and on and the red briefly disappeared. She caught her balance as he stepped towards her, snapping the whip horizontally out and back in.

Where she was the whip now took her place, for she had instantly somersaulted over his head and landed with the other two behind him. Unperturbed, he spun around to face them, flicking the whip as he did so, and met the white-robed's green sword with the tendril. Once again the red wrapped itself around the green, and as Yuide moved his thumb to oscillate the power, his opponent gestured with his left hand and Yuide found his thumb was frozen !

He glanced up and saw the three raise their palms towards him. An invisible wind smashed into him, but, as before, the darkness provided a pool of tar that held his feet fast, and he simply swayed in resistance. He briefly noted the shock on their faces – and his thumb was released - and he exulted as the *buzz* screamed its defiance. The familiar presence snapped its tone from triumph to caution as it whispered danger at his rear.

The Jedi behind him rushed towards him, their swords stabbing and slashing. In a flash, Yuide deactivated the whip releasing it from the green sword and spun on his heel, the re-ignited weapon now a many-tailed beast once more, and the glowing blades were batted away.

But the Jedi were relentless. Even as the nearest wave of Jedi were steadying themselves, the second arc pressed forward.

A spray of red laser bolts flashed towards him. That damned general ! Yuide was aware of one of the whip tails catching a bolt, and then it was if the *buzz* itself nudged his left shoulder enough to twist his upper torso, and the next two bolts sang past him. The *buzz* adulated at its own success.

He had no time for a respite though. Blue and green swords harried at the whip tails, and he knew he would only be able to hold them all at bay for so long.

Intuitively, he threw out his left hand and the air shimmered dome-like pushing outward and shielding him. The nearest Jedi fell against it, and stumbled to the side ; the second wave of Jedi stopped short and eyed it warily. One or two tapped the shimmer with their swords, and yellow-orange energy flashed brightly.

Yuide grinned maniacally and then shot a glance over his shoulder. He perceived the shimmer was forming all about him now. The white-tunic Jedi also tapped his green sword against the thickened air, and he narrowed his eyes as he considered this defence.

Yuide recognised the advantage that this now gave him. He deactivated his lightwhip, and then took a step towards the power core. The shimmer moved with him.

Another Jedi woman and the Wookiee Jedi from the main group stepped forward in unison, and stabbed their blades precisely and surgically at one point. The air-shield crackled and glowed, and from Yuide's perspective he could see the yellow-orange burn to a white heat.

Inspired, the white-robed and the woman and the other Jedi behind him also stabbed their swords into a single precise point, and the air seared white.

Yuide could feel the tingle of the *buzz* coalesce at his fingertips and burn. Did he hear the *buzz* laughing at him now ?? It was its own master, not Yuide's to do as he bid. He screwed up his face with the effort to bolster the air-shield, and sweat broke out on his brow. His fingertips were blistering and beginning to bleed. He took a step back towards the power core, and the Jedi moved with him, retaining the connection to his shield.

The remaining Jedi still standing now stepped forward and arrayed themselves next to their comrades. They too lunged their sword tips into the shield at various points. That cocky general, gun held high, prowled around behind them, looking for a clear shot.

The shimmering air was thickening and becoming opaque as white veins began to criss-cross over the shield.

Inside the shield, Yuide could see the white marbling combining adjacent to his left hand. The Jedi were now faint ghosts to him. Suddenly, like an inquisitive tentacle, the streaks broke free of the shield and pushed forward towards him as one, languidly searching, seeking to connect with his hand. Mesmerised, Yuide's eyes followed the white tip as it slowly made contact with his scorched and charred fingers.

There was a flash, and the shield dissipated. White lightning sparked out from his fingers and blazed across the Jedi. Some were attuned enough to quickly parry the blasts with their swords, while others caught the force of it across their chests and they were blown back.

Luke and Leia and Alana and Flo-Ra were some of the few who had been able to block the lightning and remained standing. Monts and Chewie had not been so lucky, and nor had Han who had been standing towards the back, impotent in the face of the duelling Force.

The lightning splashed around the room, uncontrolled, but then arced towards its sibling, attracted to the other source of raw power in the room.

Yuide laughed now, for the *buzz* was showing him the way. Still with lightning trickling from his fingertips, he turned to face the power core and pointed his left hand towards it. He concentrated with his mind, and the lightning spat from his fingers straight into the windows of the core. The thickened glass smashed and splintered, and the lightning leapt into the power source. The nearby consoles flashed red and alarms began to sound once more !

Two blue swords and one green sword sliced into the lightning between Yuide and the power core, and Luke and Leia and Alana began to channel the energy away from the reactor. As one, they turned and faced Yuide, and where their three swords united, the lightning crackled and bubbled and sparks cascaded to the floor.

Yuide focused his concentration and pressed back against the Jedi. The line, bisected by the glowing swords, pushed through to meet the core. He was aware that the rest of the foe were getting to their feet and assembling once more, raising their swords at his back.

He let the lightwhip clatter to the deck, and, half-turning, he raised his right hand at them. With lightning splurting from one hand, it now spat out from his other hand and splashed across the Jedi once more.

But this time the Jedi were ready, and they angled their swords to block and subsume the white fire. Several lines of sizzling purity connected Yuide to all the Jedi.

Near-blinded as he was by the sparking white light from the lightning and the Jedi swords, Han saw that the pirate chief seemed totally preoccupied holding all the Jedi at bay with the blue-white electricity. The ivory-hued shield that had magically appeared was gone now, and the light-whip handle lay on the decking. He had a clear view of the target ! Han carefully aimed his blaster and fired a single shot at the man's chest.

Faster than the blink of an eye, yet another stab of lightning shot out from the pirate's outstretched hand and slapped the laser bolt out of the way ! Immediately, a second burst, as if it was following the path taken by the red blast moments before, snatched at Han's gun hand and seared it ! Han gasped in pain, and dropped his blaster.

Even as he held back the Jedi, Yuide saw the flash of white light in front of the general, and the man stumble clutching his hand. The *buzz* continued to bond with and be nourished by the energy freed from the reactor core, and Yuide, arms fully outstretched, felt even more raw power surge through him !

As if increasing the amplitude of a dial, Yuide's fingers on both hands appeared to reach out even more. The lightning from his left hand directed at the three Jedi blocking the power core increased in intensity, and even more crackled past their heads to re-connect with the reactor. The starburst fire

emanating from his right hand intensified its onslaught against the remaining Jedi, and while they continued to contain it with their swords, he could see they were slowly giving ground.

On the bridge of the *PACS Judiciary*, Admiral Merityme was reviewing the astro-scan reports that constantly surveyed the maelstrom of spinning asteroids orbiting the Socal star. A crude hologram showed simple spheres passing in and out of sight, where the fleet's powerful scanners were all triangulated on one section of the proto-system. A stationary sphere central to the view marked the pirates' base. An alarm sounded nearby, and an aide called out just as a flashing red overlay appeared above the image of the base.

"Admiral, we are reading an energy overload at the target's power core !"

Merityme turned to the comms station.

"Alert the fleet to withdraw, and be ready to make a jump to our arrival coordinates. Try and call the teams down there and warn them."

"Sir, the Imperial carrier on the north plane has just left," announced a helmsman at the air traffic station.

"Monitor the energy levels, stand by to jump !" instructed the Admiral.

Chekkel led the command crew towards the hangars. A handful of Jedi appeared in their path, but the captain once again pushed out with his palm and the newly-formed shield of shimmering air violently knocked them to the side. The five pirates trailing him lashed out with their swords at the fallen Jedi as they passed, injuring some and killing one.

They entered the vestibule that connected the three hangars, and glanced into Hangar Two where the Jedi had arrived. Two of the sword-wielding foe and one commando guarded the injured pirates. The outnumbered Jedi, to their credit, turned to face the new arrivals. With a yell, Chekkel led his crew against them, and as they raced across the deck with swords raised, the prisoners leapt to their feet and overpowered the commando.

The Jedi spun into a back-to-back formation, but the dark side swirled with murderous intent, and the two knights fell under the rain of blows.

Chekkel pointed towards Hangar One.

"Everyone to the shuttles ! We need to get out of here now !"

Yuide burned bright.

An image of his brother flashed through his mind, he could sense Chekk fighting off his own cluster of Jedi. And then he thought of their sister, Robbiee-Louiee, hostage to the Imperial Governor, and how entrapped and impotent they had both felt that they couldn't free her of his clutches, and break his hold over them all.

He mouthed her name, lips barely parting.

His thoughts turned red. The anger and the hatred and the darkness, bubbling inside him, now exploded. The whites of his eyes became yellow tinged with scarlet.

This way, came a seductive whisper.

Yuide looked. He saw two innocent children. Not so innocent. Mischievous rascals of course. Not surprising, considering they were Jedi in the making.

No, corrected the whisper. *Not them. It's too late for them. Look here.*

Yuide looked at the woman who had challenged him. The mother. He looked again. Deeper. An opportunity. But not for *him*, no, he was gone now. An opportunity for that tenacious spark that he and his brother naively, but inspiringly accurately, called *the buzz*.

In the central reactor chamber, Jedi Master Luke Skywalker could hardly fail to acknowledge the impasse in which they now found themselves. He and his wife and his sister were deflecting only some of the raw power of the lightning being thrown past them into the core, and his remaining army of Jedi Knights, skilled but admittedly lesser in attunement with the Force than they, were slowly retreating step by step under the assault from the same white fire. In between, was a blazing conduit, what remained of the pirate chief, now a bubbling pent-up volcano, a collapsed star about to go nova. The Force painted a picture of a self-immolated crucifixion.

Leia ! Alana ! Luke called out with his mind. *We can't hold this forever !*

His wife acknowledged. *The others are weakening, they are about to fall !*

I sense he's about to make a final push at the core ! Leia observed.

The others must flee, Luke urged. *We must boost our inconcerto long enough to contain the explosion...*

Leia's mind was tentative, unsure, cautious but hopeful. *Luke... if I were to Seer-Journey here, now.... lead the inconcerto from here to allow all of us to escape... ?*

But can you... ??

In their mind's eye, Leia smiled wryly. *I can but try...*

Luke nodded, and instructed his wife, the original architect of inconcerto, to direct the support. They sensed the lightning against the remaining Jedi lessen and the vitality directed at them increase.

He and Alana closed their eyes, and deactivated their swords. Although the full force of the lightning now only passed through Leia's lightsabre, their presence in the Force remained to bolster her. They took a single step away from the white fire that lanced between the pirate and the reactor.

Leia, in turn, closed her eyes, and then she too stepped back. As she did so, an exact image of her separated from the warrior figure still poised with her sword gripped in both hands.

Luke and Leia ducked under the fire and joined Alana. The three moved towards the surviving Jedi who were visibly exhausted. The nearest could make out the second figure of Master Leia Solo locked against the lightning assault, and they started to gesture in bewilderment at the double apparition.

Luke raised his arms, and said with his mind and his voice, "We must leave, now. Everyone to the Falcon !"

Han, still nursing his burnt hand, nodded and gestured. "This way ! To the Comp Tower ! Hurry !"

The Jedi pressed forward, and streamed through the corridor. As he went with them, Chewbacca sniffed the air, and turned to face a darkened maintenance alcove just inside the passage way. The Wookiee roared and lunged forward with both paws. He stood up to his full height clutching Gana and Corsa Solo by their collars. Luke and Leia were just behind him. Their eyes were tightly shut as, along with Alana who was further ahead, they remained focused on holding back the pirate chief's blasting of the power core. They trusted fully in the Force to guide them unseeing through the base. Chewie roughly hooked them under his arms, and bounded after the other Jedi, their mother and uncle close on his heels.

In the reactor chamber, Leia Solo remained locked in heroic poise, her sword angled against the brunt of the lightning.

In the remaining hangar bay sat the Jedi gunship that Spikey had landed. The Devaronian had a monitor on the local enviro-stats, an old habit of caution inspired by numerous times he'd had to lift off quickly.

He too had been watching the fluctuating central power levels steadily increasing, but he was prepared to hold back as long as possible for his Jedi friends.

Suddenly, he heard Master Skywalker's authoritative voice in his head.

We must leave, now. Everyone to the Falcon !

He allowed himself only a moment to be startled by the telepathic intrusion, and then, just as he began the start-up sequence and the engines whirred into life, the comlink on his headset blurted into life as Master Flo-Ra's voice came through.

"All PA personnel immediately evacuate to the Comp Tower ! All PA to the Falcon !"

"Okay, okay, I'm gettin' outta here !" he snapped. "But with no Jedi here, how am I gonna get past those rocks out there ??!"

With fear in their hearts, the Jedi had Force-run through the corridors and were already back at the tower holding the Super-Computer. Other Jedi who had been stationed elsewhere in the base were also arriving and congregating at the access hatch.

The hangar held several cylindrical shuttles that the pirates used to ferry themselves between the base and the two larger attack ships. The ships would normally be moored above and below the orbital plane, but the fleeing pirates knew that at least one ship, *The Grab*, had been destroyed by the Imperial air-raid. There was a chance they could get to *The Smash* on the south plane if they could slip past the asteroids. Like the *velocirrestor* that had unfortunately been targeted by the Imperials, in theory a powered-down ship would be essentially invisible to the eye and to sensors unless you were facing it.

Most of the shuttles bore scorch marks from the fire-fight with the Jedi, but they all looked space-worthy by and large. The remnants of the *Troig* crew ran to the nearest shuttle, and raced aboard the open ramp.

The *buzz* swirled thickly and blindly around the captain, but in his mind's eye it also provided an arrow-straight line of black obsidian through the gensys for him to follow.

Jenna was the last and paused on the ramp.

"Captain, we've lost the north beacon and the computer," she protested. "How can we reach *The Smash* ?!"

Chekkel looked at her.

"I can get us out. Trust me."

With the Force at their heels, Luke, Leia, and Chewie flashed through the final corridors. Held tight within great furry arms, the Solo twins were wide-eyed with a mixture of fear and exhilaration. The group arrived at the Computer chamber just as the last of the team were slipping through the hatch. Chewie growled and pushed in behind them. Luke opened his eyes and glanced at his sister. Leia had become translucent and ghostly. His eyes widened in alarm.

“Leia !” he exclaimed. “Are you with us here, now ?! Or Seer-Journeying ?”

Leia blinked as she re-focused. She glanced down at her body and raised her hand. She could see the walls of the chamber through it.

“I... I don't know...”

Luke laid his left hand on her shoulder and gently squeezed it. It seemed firm enough, but it was more than disconcerting that he could still see through it !

Leia shook her head sharply, taking control of the situation as she always did. “Never mind ! We don't have time for that now. We can't hold him back much longer, we need to get out of here !”

The Force whispered reassurance to Luke.

Her brother nodded his agreement, and the two slipped through the maintenance cavity and into the Falcon.

In the central reactor chamber, the apparition that was Leia faded away. With nothing to dissipate it, the full blast of the lightning smashed into the power core.

And what was left of Yuide, a glowing humanoid shape of fiery red-orange anger, imploded.

Luke raced down the portside ring corridor of the Falcon, through the crowded main forward hold and into the cockpit access tunnel. Han stood just inside the cockpit clutching his burnt hand. Chewie was settling his huge form into the co-pilot seat and slapping the ignition sequence into life. Han glanced at his friend, and jutted his chin towards the pilot's seat.

“You take it, Luke,” he offered.

The Master Jedi slipped past and into the chair. Leia appeared at the doorway, and she slid her arms around her husband's waist, nestling her head into his chest. Han's eyes narrowed in confusion at the sight and sensation of his translucent wife.

“W-wait...” muttered Han.

“Release !” Luke instructed Chewie, and as the Wook drew down on a lever, the Jedi leaned into the yoke, and the Falcon pulled away.

And then the pirates’ base exploded.

The cockpit was flooded with blinding light. The Falcon bucked on the first tectonic wave. Luke used his own physical strength and that of Chewie’s, as well as the might of the Force, to keep the ship as steady as he could.

They were one with the Force and the Force was with them.

To Luke’s eye an image of his youthful father appeared to him just ahead of the cockpit, smiling benignly. The eyes sparkled with a confidence and an assurance that came from the knowledge that he was the best starpilot in the galaxy simply because he knew he was.

Ride the wave, my son, let it carry you, don’t fight it, said the Force Ghost.

“Chewie,” whispered Luke to his co-pilot. “Boost the inertia dampeners, and just keep her level as best you can.”

The Force prompted Luke to spare a quick glance over his shoulder at his sister in her husband’s embrace. She was fully opaque and solid once more, and she smiled back at him. Luke exhaled with relief, and then returned his attention to controlling the ship.

There came a chirpy whistle and Artoo trundled in past Han and Leia, who moved to strap themselves into the two rear seats. The little droid extended a utility arm and inserted it into a socket in the central console between the front seats.

The last Yuide saw was a flash of light, and then a sense of tumbling, and darkness, the deepest darkest black he had ever known.

Falling.

Ink black.

Disappearing.

Black-hole black.

Nothingness.

Then.

Then, a mechanical inhalation, cold, stoney. The corresponding exhalation.

“Yuide”.

The voice was a deep bass, black, commanding.

Then the warm, comforting, charismatic fine tones of a civilised educated gentleman.

“Your sister...”

Then a soft sibilant whisper.

“Your brother...”

Then, from what sounded afar in distance and time, a faint but strong voice, stern and disciplinarian.

“This way, boy,” said Darth Draconus.

Chekkel was oblivious to the dull thuds as the smaller carbonites glanced off the hull. He grappled with the steering yoke and the controls, as did Jenna who sat next to him in the co-pilot’s chair. Ssirisko and Adelly sat in the two rear seats of the cockpit, frantically balancing the shields. The remaining pirates could be seen through the open doorway sat packed in the passenger section. Their fear was palpable. The *buzz* burned even brighter and stronger for it.

And then white light flashed all around the periphery of the view as the outpost they had called home exploded, and the shockwave bucked the ship forward.

“Hold her steady !” he roared, as he called upon the *buzz* to cushion the vessel and carry it along. He threw a glance over his shoulder, directing his request to all on board.

“All of you ! Focus your minds on me !”

Spikey was screaming. He had survived the first few asteroids, and the shields had deflected the smaller meteorites. But now the ship and the rocks all around it were rolling and spinning as the ejection wave pushed outwards.

The saucer-shaped *Millennium Falcon* spun on its flat axis, just one of the many composite parts of the carbonaceous flotsam and jetsam.

When the power core exploded, all its energy was flung outwards, gathering the asteroids and the starships in its centrifugal embrace. Everything radiated out, a wild ride to be sure, but fortunately all on one axis. But the greater authority of the Sugal star held firm to the larger asteroids that remained on their incessant orbits beyond, and these proto-planetoids were buffeting the outbound force. While the smaller rocks continued to slip past, the larger asteroids were crashing into one

another, splintering and adding even more to the chaotic maelstrom, and initially sending chunks in different directions and against the general flow.

The three vessels spun and tumbled, their shields barely defending against the new battering.

Inside the main hold of the *Falcon* everyone was gripping on to something for dear life. Threepio, magnetised to the deck but leaning with the spin of the ship, summed it up for everyone.

“We’re doomed !”

Admiral Merityme did not need to be told that the pirate base had exploded. He had seen the flash of light and discerned the ripple build through the surrounding asteroids.

No-one can survive that, he thought.

He turned to the crew.

“All ships jump now,” he announced.

The scattered blockade streaked away.

Luke stared at the image of his father’s face just beyond the cockpit. The rocks and the pinpoints of starlight were simply a blur.

Hold firm, Anakin assured him, *it’s losing its energy*.

The spin slowed and settled, and the *Millennium Falcon* rotated to a gentle stop.

In the cockpit, Luke and the others were slumped in their seats, moaning as they surfaced from unconsciousness. Elsewhere in the forward and rear holds it was a similar scene as the passengers slowly came to.

Unaffected, Artoo beeped and whistled, and a small monitor flickered into life. The screen showed a single line that swept around a central dot, revealing another single dot some distance away. Data flickered quickly beside the offset dot, and then the image cleared to show a simple wireframe

image of a Jedi gunship, and power level stats began scrolling beneath it. Artoo beeped, and the inter-ship comms lit up on the Falcon's dashboard, and the little droid gave an ear-splitting whistle.

Luke moaned, and blinked his eyes. Chewie gave a deep chesty growl, and then he too blinked.

"Ow !" answered Spikey's voice. "Not so loud ! I can hear ya !"

Luke glanced at Artoo with a smile, and then leaned across to the comm switch.

"Hear you back, Spikey," he answered. "You can relax now. We made it out of there."

The Imperial Galactic Survey vessel *Nubian Herald* was surrounded by the misty nebula. Lightning flashed and crackled all about the ship, adding an ominous tone to the red and purple hues of the star cloud.

The Droid-Captain Four-Dee Sixkay was not alarmed. Such an emotion wasn't enabled in his programming. He was simply diligently noting the analytical diagnostics that were coming in from all the available sensors. His mechanical crew-mates were doing likewise. Several space-faring probes deeper in the cloud were relaying data too.

For one such probe, a lightning fork seemed to arc out from within the denser interior and connect squarely with the surveyor. The probe flashed brightly in a web of blue and white, and its proximity sensors queried how and why there now appeared to be a sentient creature sat atop of it.

As the probe began to transmit its initial findings back to the mother-ship, there came another bright flash, and a new lightning strike carved out a new path back towards the *Herald*.

On the bridge of the larger ship a corresponding tail of lightning and bright white flash heralded the arrival of the *hitch-hiker*.

The creature was bulbous and dark grey in tones. It had ten thin jointed legs radiating out from its body, atop of which was another spherical mass with a multitude of red eyes dotted around it surmounting a protrusion of short writhing suckered tentacles. The curved claws at the end of each leg clattered and chattered as it made sense of the alien metal decking. Gill-shapes about the top of its head quivered and a shrieking sound burst forth from them.

The communication protocols within Four-Dee Sixkay analysed the noise, and then replayed them with a slight variant. The creature shrieked again and advanced on the droid.

"Greetings. This is an Imperial Galactic Survey vessel..." Sixkay began.

The creature lashed out with one leg, and a claw sliced across the droid's body. As Sixkay collapsed to the deck, the creature let out another ear-splitting shriek.