

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



II-I: PROTECTION

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ELEVEN FAMILIES.
TWELVE GENERATIONS.
ONE EVIL.

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

PROTECTION

WITH CAL CALLED AWAY IT IS LEFT UP TO LARA TO ACT AS A BODYGUARD TO SENATOR AIRIA TORIN. HOWEVER, WHAT AT FIRST APPEARS TO BE A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT BECOMES MORE COMPLICATED WHEN THE LUXURY LINER ON WHICH THE SENATOR IS TRAVELLING IS TARGETED BY PIRATES...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
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1 .

In the three weeks since her older brother and jedi instructor Cal Udra had been summoned to the enclave on Moldas to report in person to Jedi Master Karas, Lara Udra had been alone. Cal had of course left her with a list of tasks to be carried out in his absence, some to do with the upkeep of the run down apartment they shared but primarily to do with her training and so far she had managed to do exactly none of them. Not when there was ice cream to be eaten and holodramas to be watched.

That was until now, when Lara had finally decided that since there was no more ice cream in the refrigerator and the show she wanted to watch was not on for another three hours yet she would try some meditation. She sat on the floor in the middle of her room, crossed legged and with her eyes closed. She breathed deeply, relaxed and tried to discover what, if anything the force flowing through her was trying to tell her. Unfortunately, though the force was silent for now she did hear the sound of the communicator alerting her to an incoming call.

"Typical!" she snapped as she got to her feet and walked to the communicator, "Three weeks without a call and they have to disturb me now." She took another deep breath as she reached the communicator, not wanting to put across any signs of irritation to whoever it was that was calling and then activated the device, "Lara Udra." She said simply.

"Hi Lara, its Jule."

Agent Jule Raser was the most senior member of the Sector Rangers, the Republic's interstellar law enforcement body, in the Narthis sector. Due to the personnel shortage common to Republic forces in the area she often called upon the jedi for help and in the absence of Cal that left Lara as the only jedi in the sector.

"Oh hi." Lara replied with a smile, "How can I help?"

"Have you heard from Cal?"

"No. Why? What's wrong?"

"I've got Senator Torin arriving tomorrow." Jule replied and Lara froze. Airia Torin was not only the sector's representative to the Senate of the Galactic Republic she was also one of the famous Torin family, one of the Founding Families whose ancestors had been the original surveyors of the sector. So far Cal and Lara had found them to be nothing but trouble, "She needs an escort," Jule then added.

Lara frowned.

"Doesn't she have her own security?" she asked, knowing full well that it was not normally the job of the jedi order to run around watching over senators.

"Yes she does. But she's here for a vacation and doesn't want to spend it surrounded by dozens of armed guards. Especially not when she's planning a trip on a cruise to Teras and would rather the cost of taking all those guards on the liner not show up on her expenses at the next election."

"Isn't shipboard security enough?" Lara asked.

"There's been a threat." Jule replied, "Just some lone fool we think, but the shipping company doesn't want its people liable. They're not anti-terror troops after all. I offered to send an agent, but she asked for jedi protection. I know it's out of the ordinary, but I think it'll be simpler all round if you just agree."

The ship that brought Senator Torin all the way from Coruscant was easy to spot as it entered the main hangar of Aurek Station. Firstly it was painted bright red, the traditional colour of diplomatic craft in the republic and secondly it was obviously very expensive. Rather than make use of one of the senate's own transports, Senator Torin preferred to travel in the style that her family's wealth could afford and that meant only the best would do.

Lara was not the only one waiting to greet the senator. Istel Varr'kay, the bothan administrator of the station had also turned out to meet her in his dress uniform and Lara could sense his unease around her. Bothans were by nature suspicious, sometimes to the point of paranoia and the administrator was a good example of this. He still seemed to believe that the presence on his station of Cal and Lara was because the Jedi Order wished to spy on him.

"I will greet the senator first." The bothan said, without looking away from the bright red vessel as it settled down onto the deck, "I am the senior officer here after all."

"Of course." Lara replied, not caring one bit.

There was a sudden hiss from the senator's ship and the hatchway opened and a set of stairs unfolded.

Down these stairs came Senator Airia Torin, with a hospitality droid only a few steps behind her.

"Senator." Administrator Varr'kay called out to her, "It is such a pleasure to see you again. Welcome to my-"

"Yes, yes." The senator replied impatiently, "Where are the droids to unload my things? I need to be on the liner in under four hours."

Flustered by this sudden interruption, the bothan looked around to try and see where the nearest cargo handling droids were and in that moment Lara took a step forwards.

"Senator." She said clearly, "I am Lara Udra. I was told you required an escort for your trip."

Airia Torin looked Lara up and down.

"Ah yes, a Jedi." She said, sneering, "I had quite forgotten how you all dress like that. I tend not to mix with Jedi on Coruscant"

"What's wrong with how I'm dressed?"

"Nothing from your point of view I suppose. But do remember that the beings aboard the ship will have much higher standards than you're used to."

Lara frowned and watched as both the senator and the droid strolled past her.

"Not hard to see why someone doesn't like you." She muttered to herself.

"Did you speak Jedi?" the senator asked.

"No." Lara lied.

The *Lightning Voyager* was one of the most expensive liners in the Narthis Sector and it had a quality to match the cost of a ticket. Lara looked out of the viewport of the shuttle that carried her and Airia Torin to the vessel and took in the view. She spotted several teams of droids carrying out maintenance work here and there; including one team that looked to be repainting a section of the hull that had become discoloured. The feature of the ship that Lara found most striking was the upper hull that appeared to be almost entirely transparent.

"It's so we can see the lights." Airia commented.

"What?" Lara replied.

Airia sighed.

"Don't you know anything about Teras?" she asked and Lara shook her head.

"I've only been in the sector a few months." She said.

"Teras is a gas giant in the system of the same name." Airia explained, "The reason that people go there on vacation is because the upper atmosphere of the planet is prone to extreme electrical storms that produce the most amazing lights. By having the upper hull made of transparisteel it means that the passengers get a better view. Our rooms are on the top deck of course."

The shuttle entered a compact hangar bay located towards the rear of the *Lightning Voyager* and as its passengers disembarked several men in smart uniforms approached them. There were no other passenger shuttles unloading as of yet. It had been decided that it would be safer for the senator to arrive ahead of everyone else so that Lara could review security first.

"Good day senator." One of the men, a tall member of the duros species said in greeting, "I am Captain An Kett." And he bowed his head slightly, "We are honoured to have you aboard."

"Of course." Airia replied, smiling even though Lara could sense that she seemed to be somewhat impatient at being held up, "Allow me to introduce Jedi Udra. She will be acting as my bodyguard."

Captain An Kett turned towards Lara and nodded.

"My security staff will be on hand to assist you if needed." The captain said, "Though I should caution you that they are not soldiers."

"That's alright captain." Lara said, "But if it's not too much trouble I'd like to see the rooms we'll be staying in. I need to assess their security before we depart."

Airia's smile widened slightly as she realised that Lara had effectively brought the captain's greeting to an end.

Captain An Kett snapped his fingers and a more junior officer stepped forwards.

"Show the ladies to their suite." The captain ordered, "Make sure everything is to the satisfaction of them both."

"Yes captain."

The younger man led both Lara and Airia through the corridors of the liner, all the time moving forwards and upwards until they reached a large circular chamber on what the see-through roof revealed as the uppermost deck in this part of the ship. It was obviously some sort of luxury lounge that included a bar and what looked to Lara like a hot tub. In addition to the doorway the group had entered through there were several doors around the wall.

"There are four bedrooms." The officer explained, "Plus a bathroom, though each bedroom also has its own en-suite facilities."

"I count six doors." Lara said, "What's behind the last two?"

"An escape pod." The officer said, "All of our luxury suites have their own private emergency evacuation vehicle."

"That's good to know." Airia said.

"It most certainly is mistress." Her droid Genie added.

"No kitchen?" Lara asked and Airia snorted.

"No. Few of our guests want to prepare food for themselves." The officer replied, "Though in addition to several restaurants aboard we do have an extensive room service menu."

Lara turned back towards the door that they had entered through.

"Tell me about this." She said, pointing to the door.

"It just one of our standard hatches." The man said.

"Not a blast door then?"

"No. But it locks and is proof against vacuum should the ship suffer decompression."

"So Jedi Udra, does this place meet with your expectations?" Airia asked Lara, "I'm led to believe that this is the best the company can offer."

"It should do fine." Lara replied, "Its certainly nicer than where I was this morning. Now I think I should be getting down to the docking bays. The other passengers should be arriving soon and I want to keep an eye out for our guy."

Lara kept back from the lines of people who got off the shuttles, clutching a datapad linked into the similar devices carried by the crew. Each shuttle was met by a small group of crewmembers who after checking tickets gave directions to cabins and confirmed and special arrangements that the passengers had made for the trip concerning diet or entertainment. As the crew then updated the information in their datapads Lara was able to see it for herself using hers. In one or two cases Lara spotted the crew confiscating weapons for the duration of the voyage, but none of the passengers seemed to offer anything more than loud complaints about their right to protect themselves. Even so Lara made notes of which cabins these individuals were in, just in case one of them was her target in disguise. This procedure was repeated several dozen times without incident until Lara heard a disturbingly familiar voice call out.

"Get your hands off me! Don't you know who I am?"

Lara looked up from her datapad towards the disturbance.

"Oh no. Not them." She said to herself.

Standing at one of the check in points was a trio of young women, the eldest of them about Lara's age. She had met all three at one time or another and generally the meeting had not been favourable. On this occasion all three seemed to have tiny canines in the bags they carried. Taking a deep breath Lara approached them.

"What seems to be the trouble?" she asked one of the flustered looking crewmen attempting to complete the check in procedure.

"Two of the young ladies are carrying weapons." he replied, "It strictly against company policy for passengers to be armed."

"But that jedi's carrying her laser sword thingy!" The youngest of the three women snapped.

Lara looked at the two pistols that the crew had taken. One was a pulse wave weapon that fired compact artificial special distortions while the second was a slug thrower. Lara picked up this second weapon.

"Planning on punching holes in the hull are we Sial?" she asked.

"My father owns this company." Sial Karn replied.

"That's right." The youngest of the trio added. This was Keera Karn, Sial's sister, "We can do what we want."

"Not when there's a senator aboard under my protection you can't." Lara replied sternly. Then she looked at the third young woman in the group. Normally Lara would have expected Sial and Keera to be in the company of their eldest sister Gayal, but for some reason today they were with Nissel Fayl. All were the privileged offspring of two of the Founding Families and the Karn sisters were widely known for believing this gave them to right to do as they pleased, "So how come you're tagging along with these two Nissel?" she asked.

"Gayal was supposed to be coming." Sial replied before Nissel could answer.

"But mom and dad said no at the last minute." Keera added.

Lara smiled, guessing that Gayal had gotten into trouble again and was perhaps sat in a police holding cell while she waited for her lawyer to arrive.

"So they invited you instead?" Lara asked, still looking at Nissel.

"That's right. Is that a problem?"

"Oh no." Lara replied, "In fact I'm relieved."

"How come?"

"Because now I know at least one of you is smarter than your dogs. Now you can either move along peacefully, or I can put in a call to Aurek Station control and have a marine combat team remove you from this ship by force."

Sial and Keera glared at her, open mouthed. Sial then snorted

"Mom and Dad are going to hear about this." she then said.

"Well if we're bringing our parents into things, mine are both jedi." Lara replied, "One's even a master. Perhaps yours would like to take it up with them?"

"Oh take the damn gun!" Sial snapped and she stormed past the check in desk with Keera close behind her.

"I hope you don't-" Nissel began.

"Just go." Lara interrupted, "Oh and Nissel?"

"Yes?"

"Watch yourself around them."

Lara watched the trio as they left the hangar.

"Thanks for the help." one of the crewmen said, "I need this job."

"Don't thank me just yet." Lara replied, "I've got a bad feeling about them being here."

2.

Lara remained in the hangar long enough for all of the passengers to be checked in and then waited longer still while the crew secured the shuttles themselves. The data Lara had on the individual she was hunting was that he could not afford a ticket for the liner, so it was possible that he would instead attempt to stow away on one of the shuttles and remain hidden until they were fully unloaded. Satisfied that all of them were empty she then headed back to Airia's suite. As soon as Genie opened the door to her, she heard voices. "The senator's guests have arrived." The droid explained without Lara having to ask.

"Guests?" Lara replied, "I wasn't told anything about guests." And she had an awful feeling that she was about to encounter the Karn sisters again.

"Well you are being told now." Airia called out and then as Lara entered the suite properly she breathed a sigh of relief that none of the three women sat in the lounge with the senator were from the Karn or Fayl families. She did however recognise two of them, "Allow me to introduce them." Airia went on.

"We've already met." One of the women interrupted. Belle Shill was a senior member of her family firm, Shill Security. This was private military company that operated throughout the sector and as Lara understood it provided most of the security for the Founding Families. Given that Lara was here to guard Airia Torin she was somewhat surprised to find Belle here also.

"I thought I was your only guard." Lara said to Airia.

"What, you think nobody would be covering your back?" Belle asked, "Like in the hangar?"

"Huh?" Lara replied.

"Well Xim the Despot could have marched a droid army past you while you were dealing with the Karn sisters. I was watching to make sure our target didn't slip past you. I left with the last of the passengers."

"Thanks." Lara said, unsure of whether to trust Belle who rather annoyingly seemed able to conceal her true motives from Lara on each occasion they had met.

"I'm Kayza Drud." Another of Airia's guests said to introduce herself. The Druds were another of the Founding Families and she had the dark skin that was characteristic of them, "Like you I'm here to work."

"Why do you need a lawyer on this trip?" Lara asked, knowing that the Druds were well known for their legal firm.

"Actually Kayza is my public relations advisor." Airia said, "It was her idea to ask for a jedi bodyguard."

"The public views the jedi favourably." Kayza replied, "Having the senator seen with you will go down well with the voters."

Lara frowned briefly. The jedi order did not like to involve itself with politics and she disliked the idea of being used to enhance Airia's chances of re-election.

"Well I suppose that just leaves me." The last of the group said, "I'm—"

"Kay Mazat." Lara said, stepping forwards to offer a hand in greeting, "I recognised you from the doorway."

"I won't lie, it's always nice when that happens." Kay said, "I take it you've seen the show?"

Lara nodded. Kay was an actress who had a regular role in an ongoing holodrama. She played a jedi knight who's powers and behaviour in no way matched the reality of the jedi order, but both Cal and Lara had found themselves hooked on the show.

"Well I am here on holiday," Kay said, "I've a cabin a few decks down, but the senator—"

"Call me Airia."

"Sorry, Airia invited me up to see her here."

It was at that point that a chiming sound came from speakers set into the walls.

"Attention all passengers and crew." A calm sounding voice announced, "The ship is about to depart. We have received jump co-ordinate from Aurek Station and we will enter hyperspace in ten minutes. Thank you." And then the speakers were silent.

"Well then ladies," Airia said, "I think we've just enough time to change."

"Change?" Lara asked.

"We thought it would be nice to watch our entry into hyperspace from the tub." Airia said, indicating the hot tub, "Genie, is it prepared?"

"Yes mistress. The temperature is just as you requested."

"I suppose I'll wait on the couch then." Lara said, "I don't have a bathing suit."

"I'm well ahead of you on that." Belle replied, "Go check your room, I brought some things for you to wear so you wouldn't stand out so much."

Lara was relieved to find that the assortment of clothing provided by Belle consisted entirely of garments that she would actually be happy to wear and not excessively revealing. She selected a single piece bathing suit to change into before returning to the lounge, where she found the others already in the hot tub with Genie standing beside the edge of the water. It was as she was approaching the water that a chiming sound came from the suite's main door.

"We ordered room service." Airia said, "Be a dear and let them in would you? The ship will be jumping to hyperspace any minute now."

"Sure." Lara replied and she headed for the door.

Sure enough the man standing in the corridor outside the door had a trolley bearing food and drink. Though he was facing towards the doorway he had his head lowered as if checking something on the trolley.

"Room service miss." he said and Lara stepped aside to let him pass.

Hatred.

Lara felt the sudden jolt of emotion at the same moment as the waiter looked towards the four women in the hot tub and she saw him lift the clean white cloth that covered the trolley.

"Gun!" Lara cried out.

She rushed towards the man who reacted by lashing out at random, the blow striking Lara in the face and knocking her backwards.

Meanwhile Belle had leapt from the water and was charging at the waiter from the opposite direction. However, as Lara looked up she saw that Belle would not reach the man in time to prevent him from opening fire. She saw him raising his weapon and realised that it was a submachine gun. The rapid firing slug thrower would be able to spray dozens of rounds across the room in a matter of seconds unless Lara did something quickly. But she had to be careful, in addition to inflicting potentially lethal injuries the weapon also had the potential to damage the transparisteel ceiling and trigger a decompression that would kill everyone in the room.

She reached out a hand towards the slug thrower just as the man pulled back the bolt and using the force she sent a blast of telekinetic energy towards it. The blow struck the weapon before he could fire it and it was pushed aside. More importantly though the blast put pressure on the entire surface of the weapon facing Lara, including the release switch for the magazine and it dropped to the floor.

There was a single sudden sharp 'crack' as the weapon went off at the same time as the magazine fell free, discharging its last remaining bullet into the floor and leaving the weapon empty of ammunition.

Anger.

Panic.

The man looked around, desperate to find where the magazine had fallen. But just as he crouched down to grab hold of it Belle slammed into him and sent him rolling away. Lara got to her feet and rushed to help her. As it happened Belle needed no help, three blows directed to the man's abdomen, neck and face had caused him to let go of his empty weapon and go limp as he struggled to take in breath.

"Grab him!" Belle snapped, "Before he comes to his senses."

Lara did not need to be told twice and between them she and Belle took hold of the man's arms and held them firmly.

"What the hell is going on?" Kay asked as she recovered from the shock of having a gunman attempt to open fire.

"This guy's been sending threats to the senator." Lara replied, "I thought he'd try to sneak aboard with the passengers, I didn't think that he'd actually be a part of the crew. I guess he'd have left in the escape pod before security could arrive."

At that moment there were rapid footsteps in the corridor and a group of four males of various humanoid species in dark suits appeared.

"Ship security." One of them announced, "We received a panic alert from this room."

"This guy tried to kill the senator." Belle replied.

"And the rest of us too with that thing." Lara added, nodding towards the submachine gun.

"But who alerted security?" Kayza asked as she climbed from the water and took hold of a robe.

"Oh I did that mistress." Genie said, "I took the time to interface with the ship's systems as soon as we arrived. I do hope my behaviour was not out of order."

"Of course not." Airia said as she watched the security guard take custody of the man who had just tried to kill her as well as his weapon.

There was a sudden flash of light and the ship shook slightly, indicating that it had just completed its entry into hyperspace.

"And now we've missed watching the jump as well!" the senator then added.

"So what are you going to do with him?" Lara asked the nearest guard.
"He'll be held in the brig until we can transfer him to the authorities." The guard replied.
Lara looked towards Airia.
"I should go as well." She said, "I want to be sure he's working alone."
"That sounds sensible." Belle added, "Though I think you may want to change first."

The departure of the liner did not go unnoticed. Far from Aurek Station, just beyond the range of its sensors an obsolete vessel waited. In its cramped cockpit two figures watched until the liner vanished in a flash of light.
"Send the signal." One said to his companion, "Let them know the ship's on its way."

Anger.

Shame.

There was no missing that the would-be assassin was taking his failure to kill Airia Torin badly. But as far as Lara could tell it was a strictly personal failure and there was no need for her or Belle to concern themselves with the possibility that there were more potential killers lurking in the depths of the ship. But Lara still had questions she wanted answering.

"So what can you tell me about this guy then?" she asked the *Lightning Voyager's* chief of security, a thin and wiry human who seemed out of place when stood beside his much larger guards.

"He's been on the roster for more than a decade. He works hard enough, but there've been a few incidents between him and other junior crewmen."

"Such as?"

"A few fights. The Karn family owns the ship and I think one of them got him his job. But whatever caused it, he's got this attitude that they're the best thing ever and we should be grateful to them for the opportunities they've given us. He takes any slight against them personally."

"What about the gun? How did he get it aboard?"

"He didn't. The serial number matches one taken from a passenger at check in. It looks like he got into the locker we keep them all in and took it from there."

Lara snorted, considering how the weapon had supposedly been confiscated to make the journey safer and had in fact been delivered into the hands of someone who intended to use it to commit murder.

"But what's he got against the senator?" Lara then asked.

The security chief stared at her.

"Because she beat one of the Karn's to get elected." He replied, "Not one of the major members of the family, some cousin or something, but it looks like it was enough to tip him over the edge."

"Hang on," Lara said as something else suddenly occurred to him, "where's this arms locker?"

"Why?"

"Because I've got this sudden feeling that if you check it again you'll find there are two more guns missing."

Just as Lara suspected a check of the arms locker confirmed that the pistols taken from the Karn sisters had been removed and it was Lara's guess that the obsessed waiter had taken them with the intention of returning them to the young women. After being provided with the location of the suite occupied by the Karns Lara made her way directly there to recover the weapons. Unsurprisingly their suite, like Airia Torin's was on the uppermost deck but when Lara activated the intercom it was Nissel Fayl that answered.

"Open up." Lara said sternly, "Now." And the door slid open.

"What's going on?" Nissel asked as Lara marched past her.

"Okay where are they?"

"Who?"

"You know who. The two delinquents whose family paid for you to be here. Where are they and where are the guns they're not supposed to have?"

Nissel sighed.

"You know about those then?"

"Yes I know."

"But it was a member of the crew that-"

"I know that too. That particular crewmember is now under lock and key for trying to murder a senator. Oh and me too."

"They aren't here." Nissel said, "They said they were going to check out a bar near one of the swimming pools."

"And they left you here?"

"Hyperspace travel makes me queasy. I didn't want to risk mixing that with alcohol."

"Okay then. So where's this bar then? No wait, you can come along and show me."

"Huh?" Nissel replied, confused, "What for?"

"Because I know how you lot work. If I just get directions to the place you'll call ahead and warn them and they and the guns will be gone by the time I get there. Now come on missy, lead the way."

Sure enough, they found Keera and Sial sat at a poolside bar that was otherwise deserted for now. When they spotted Lara approaching behind Nissel both their faces fell.

"Oh why did you have to bring her?" Sial asked.

"She turned up at the cabin and demanded I bring you here. What was I supposed to do?"

"Call and warn us?" Keera replied.

"See." Lara said to Nissel, "Told you." Then she picked up one of the drinks that the sisters had in front of them and sipped it, "So when did either of you two turn twenty-one?" she asked and looking at the barman she added, "Don't you check ID's when serving liquor?"

"Of course I do." The man replied bluntly, "They're twenty-one and twenty-three."

"Oh really?" Lara said, turning back towards Keera and Sial, "hand them over." She said and she held out her hand as the two sisters produced the identity cards they had used to deceive the barman, "Gayal Karn and Nissel Fayl." Lara said, reading the names off the cards and then she picked at the corner of the one that bore Sial's face but her older sister's name and peeled away the thin layer of adhesive plastic that held her picture over Gayal's.

Anger.

"Don't tell me you're here just to stop us enjoying a drink?" Keera said.

"Of course she is." Sial added, "She's probably planning on locking us a closet again."

"If I have to." Lara replied, "But right now I'm just here for the guns you're not supposed to be carrying."

"Well for your information we've got permission to have them." Sial told her.

"That's right," Keera added, "one of the crew returned them and apologised."

"Would that be the same crewman who's currently sat in a detention cell on charges varying from resisting arrest to attempted murder?" Lara asked, looking for one of the sisters to the other and then back again,

"Because he was just a waiter. But if you like we can all go and see the captain about it. I'm guessing the chief of security will have reached him by now to bring him up to date."

Sial grunted and reached into her purse before producing her pistol. Lara took the weapon, made sure it was safe and put in a pocket.

"You too." She then said to Keera and the younger girl handed over her weapon also, "Good." Lara went on, "Now let's get you all back to your cabin until the captain can decide if he wants you mixing with his well behaved passengers." And before either of the Karns could react Lara reached out with both hands, grasped each of them by an ear and pulled them towards her, "Come on," Lara said to Nissel, "you as well." And then she began to walk off in the direction of the suite the young women occupied, the Karn sisters making noises that indicated they found Lara's grip to be somewhat painful.

3.

"Exiting hyperspace now captain."

Captain An Kett looked up just in time to see the shifting lights of hyperspace vanish and the pale blue globe of the gas giant Teras appear in front of his vessel. Even from this distance the electrical storms could be made out with the naked eye and he smiled.

"Looks like our passengers will be enjoying a particularly good show this trip." He said. Then he looked towards the helmsman and added, "Take us in closer. Get co-ordinates from comscan for the regions of greatest disruption." It was then that the captain became aware of the presence of his security chief on the bridge.

"Excuse me sir, may I have a word." The man asked.

"Of course. What is it?"

"There's been an attempt on the senator's life sir."

"What? On my ship?"

"Yes sir. It seems that one of the crew had a significant grudge against her. Don't worry though, the jedi dealt with him and he's in custody now. But there's something more."

Captain An Kett frowned.

"Go on."

"Well it seems that the man stole the weapon he used from our arm locker and we suspect he removed two others as well. Jedi Udra suspects he may have returned them to their owners."

"Who? The rules are quite clear, no passengers are permitted weapons aboard this ship."

"Were you aware that Sial and Keera Karn were aboard? The guns are theirs."

"This is outrageous!" the captain exclaimed, "Fortunately however I was aware of their presence here. I was contacted by their parents before we left Aurek Station informing me that I should treat them the same as any other passengers and I promise you that is exactly what I shall do if I find they have contraband weapons."

Before the security chief could ask for further the comscan operator interrupted instruction the conversation.

"Contact sir – Wait no, its gone."

The captain looked around.

"That's hardly surprising." He told the crewman, "The storms will play havoc with our sensors. It could be a false echo or perhaps there really is another ship out there. We're not the only ones who offer these trips after all. Don't worry, so long as we keep an eye out and make sure we don't collide with them there'll be nothing to worry about at all."

From the cramped cockpit of his vessel the aqualish pirate Lacko Dabb watched as the *Lightning Voyager* moved into a low orbit around Teras and angled itself so that to its occupants the gas giant and its storms would appear to be above the ship.

"Did they see us?" Lacko's co-pilot asked.

"Of course they didn't." he replied, "Do you really think the captain of that ship would stay here with all those self important passengers if he knew we were about? No, the planet's storms are masking us. Though I say we give them a helping hand and jam all transmissions as well. Then signal the others because we're going in."

"Ow, ow, ow!" Sial repeated as Lara continued to drag her and her sister along by the ear.

"Oh shut up." Lara said, "You're just lucky I'm in a good mood. After what you two did to me I should be having you hauled off to the brig naked. See how you like it."

"Oh yeah?" Sial said, "Well that was nothing. Just wait until we get you back for this."

"Oh I doubt you'll fool me again." Lara said as they reached the suite and she looked at Nissel, "Open the door would you? I've got my hands full here."

"Nissel don't." Keera said, "Remember we paid for your ticket."

Before Nissel could decide whether to side with Lara or the Karns a vessel passed low over the *Lightning Voyager* and Lara released her grip as she looked up at it through the transparisteel roof.

"Wasn't that a bit close?" Nissel asked.

"Yes it was." Lara said, "But that's not the worst thing about it."

"Then what is?" Nissel replied.

"That ship was a Koros interceptor." Lara said, "It's a starfighter that hasn't been in service in centuries."

"Then who'd be using one here?" Sial asked as she rubbed her ear.
"I'm not certain." Lara answered, then she added, "But I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Escorted by the starfighters, the pirate shuttles closed on the *Lightning Voyager* and attached themselves to docking ports. It took only seconds to attach breaching charges and blow open the hatches and then the pirates stormed aboard their prize.

Each of the boarding parties had been given a particular target. Lacko Dabb's plan called for his men to seize control of the bridge, engine room and security control section. Once that was achieved the ship could be considered theirs and they could begin to round up the passengers. With their sensors blinded by the storms the first thing the crew of the *Lightning Voyager* knew about the attack was when the pirate ships got close enough to be seen through viewports.

"We're under attack!" Captain an Kett exclaimed and he spun around to look at his security chief, "Well? What are you waiting for? Get your men and defend this ship!"

The security chief nodded and was just heading for the exit when there was the sound of an explosion from not far off. Almost immediately there were screams as the pirate force assigned to take the bridge began their assault. Only a few shots were heard, the unarmed crew were unable to offer any real resistance and the weapons fire was for intimidation value only.

The security chief was another matter however; beneath his immaculate uniform he carried a concealable weapon that he drew as soon as the first pirate appeared on the bridge. His aim was true and the pirate crumpled as the energy blast hit him in the chest.

"Get the captain out of here!" he yelled at the other bridge crew, but as he looked away from the door through which the pirate had just stepped another of the raiders appeared holding a bulky carbine. There was a sudden flash and wave of heat as the pirate fired, sending a barely contained ball of plasma at the security chief.

"Nobody move!" the pirate yelled as the security chief's body fell to the deck, "This ship is ours now!"

Belle was checking the labels on the bottles behind the bar when she saw the fighters swoop over the ship.
"Uh-oh." She said.

"What?" Kay asked from the couch.

"Trouble." Kayza replied, "Trust me, when she says 'uh-oh' it means trouble."

"Where's my PTP link?" Belle said as she rushed to her room. She knew exactly where the communication device was of course; Belle was not the sort of person to misplace anything and as soon as she had hold of it she signalled to Lara.

"Belle? Is that you?" Lara's asked.

"Yes, did you see the ships?" Belle replied.

"I did. Plus I've heard shooting, I think the ship's under attack." Lara told her.

"Associates of the waiter?"

"No, I'm sure he was acting alone. I think these guys are just your run of the mill pirates."

"Well get back here then. There's no telling what they'd do with a senator as their hostage and I don't have a weapon." Belle said.

"Look in my bag." Lara replied, "I always bring along a blaster just in case. Fortunately I wasn't asked to surrender my weapons at check in."

"Copy that. See you soon."

After shutting off the link Belle rushed into Lara's room and found the holdall she had brought aboard with her. Sure enough inside she found a pulse wave blaster and a pair of power cells for it. She was just loading the weapon when a sudden wailing sound came over the ship's public address system.

"Belle!" she heard Kayza call out, "Is that the fire alarm."

"I think so." Belle replied as she returned to the lounge, "Ignore it."

"Ignore it?" Kay repeated, "But if the ship's on fire--"

"It's not on fire." Belle interrupted, "Or least I hope not. But it is under attack. My guess is that the pirates are using it to get everyone to gather together."

"Pirates?" Airia interrupted, "Pirates wouldn't dare attack a republic senator."

"Yes they would." Belle replied, "That's why we should stay here and wait for Lara."

"Well I suppose a jedi knight would be of use." Kay commented.

"She's not a jedi knight, not yet at least." Belle said, "Cal is the knight, she's his padawan."

"You mean my safety has been entrusted to an apprentice?" Airia replied angrily and she looked at her droid, "Genie, when we get back to Aurek Station remind me to lodge a formal complaint with the Jedi Order."

"Oh not now Airia!" Belle snapped, rushing to the suite's main door and pressing her ear up against it. Hearing the sound of running she then said, "Well it seems that the other passengers are heading for the emergency assembly points. Unless they've just abandoned ship that is."

Rather than force an entry through a docking port Lacko Dabb brought his vessel into the Lightning Voyager's main hangar after his men had secured it.

"Report." He barked at the first pirate he spotted.

"The ship is ours. There was some resistance from the crew but it has been dealt with. We used the fire alarm to get the passengers to gather together, but a handful instead panicked and abandoned ship."

"Yes, I saw them. Don't worry; I've got some of ships gathering them up. Who knows what valuables they fled with? Now tell me, are you certain we have caught them all?"

"Stay back." Lara whispered as she ducked back around the corner. She had sensed the presence of several individuals and a quick glimpse at both their style of dress and the weapons they carried told her that they were not part of the crew or passengers.

"If you'd just give us our guns back then maybe we could fight back." Keera said.

"Not likely." Lara replied, "If you two went blundering round there then assuming you don't just get yourself killed those guys would likely be issuing a ransom demand by the end of the day. However, if they feel the same way about you as I do the question remains as to whether they'll be threatening to kill you or send you back. Now watch this." And leaning around the corner she waved her hand at the pirates.

"Over there!" one of them suddenly yelled.

"Oh great," Nissel said, "they saw you." And she turned to run. However, Lara grabbed hold of her collar and pulled her back.

"Oh have a little faith in me and take a look for yourself." Lara told her.

Nissel looked around the corner to see the pirates rushing in the opposite direction.

"I don't understand." She said.

"The force can have a strong influence on the weak minded," Lara explained, "and those guys minds would have to stretch themselves even to qualify as weak. Now get a move on, we're nearly there."

Airia's suite was only two corridors away and they reached it without encountering more pirates. However, when Lara tried to open the door she found it sealed.

"Open up, its us!" she called out and a moment later the door slid open to reveal Belle.

"Well get inside and stop making that racket." She said before she spotted the Karn sisters and Nissel,

"What the hell are they doing here?" she asked.

"I wasn't going to leave them to the pirates." Lara replied and then she looked at the Karns and added, "As much as I'd like to in a couple of cases."

Belle glared at them.

"Okay you lot, you know who I am so you know to do as you're told. Got it?"

"Don't worry," Nissel said, "I'm no hero."

"What about you two?" Belle then asked, staring at the Karns but both just frowned and grunted.

"So what's your plan then?" Kayza suddenly called out to Lara.

"What plan?" Lara asked.

"Your plan to save the day." Kayza replied, "Pull this off and I'll see to it that every news agency in the sector will offering you money for exclusive interviews."

"Don't you every stop thinking about public relations?" Kay asked her.

Kayza shrugged.

"If you don't make PR work for you then someone else might."

"Well I don't have a plan." Lara said.

"That is completely unacceptable!" Airia snapped, "Young lady I am a senator of the Galactic Republic and it is your duty as a member of the Jedi Order to get me to safety."

"There's an escape pod over there." Sial commented, pointing to the doorway that led to the emergency vehicle.

"I wouldn't recommend that." Belle said, "Those pirate ships out there wouldn't have much trouble in picking it off before you got out of range."

"So you two are just suggesting we wait here with only two weapons?" Airia asked, folding her arms and staring at Belle.

"Four." Keera said.

"What was that young lady?" Airia said sternly, "Did you just contradict me?"

"No she just pointed out that you're wrong." Sial said in support of her sister, "That jedi bantha cow won't give us our guns back. We could use them to defend ourselves."

"Is this true?" Airia asked, looking at Lara who responded by taking the confiscated weapons and ammunition from her pocket.

"If you want my opinion let those two have these back would just put us in even more danger." She said.

"I'll take the blaster." Kayza said.

"You know how to use it?" Lara asked.

"My older brother's a general," She pointed out, "he and my dad taught me shoot when I started dating."

Kay then stepped forwards and picked up the slug thrower.

"I know how to use this." She said, "I got taught the basics for a holo I was in."

"This is all very good," Belle said, "but we're going to be doing anything other than just waiting here until those pirates leave then we're going to need a plan."

"Then we need a plan." Lara said, "I may only be a padawan learner, but I'm still obliged to help the other passengers and crew as well," and looking at Keera and Sial she added, "whether I like it or not."

The pirates had gathered all of the passengers and crew together in a large multifunction chamber that at the moment was bare. There had been several loud protests from some of the passengers at first, but after the first one or two were beaten with rifle butts they got the message that the pirates did not care who or how important they supposedly were.

"We may have a problem." One of Lacko's subordinates said to him quietly so that none of their captives could make out what was being said.

"I don't want to hear of problems." Lacko replied.

"Well you need to know about this one. We've come up short in the head count."

"How?" Lacko demanded, "The fire alarm should have brought them all to us. Did one of the crew evade us?"

"No, not one of the crew. The only of them we found out of place was being held in detention and he's still there. We're missing some of the passengers. Eight to be exact, plus a droid according to their manifest."

"Passengers can do us no harm." Lacko said, "So long as we can get at their valuables we have what we want."

"Actually I think some of these passengers could cause us problems." The other pirate replied and he held out a datapad on which he had highlighted the names of everyone unaccounted for, "Lara Udra and Belle Shill. There's a chance that Belle Shill is related Han Shill of Shill Security, in which case she may have combat training and I'm certain that Lara Udra is—"

"A jedi." Lacko replied abruptly and he hurled the datapad against a wall where it smashed, "Find them!" he bellowed, "Take as many men as you need."

"Of course sir." The pirate replied and as he turned to leave he waved several other pirates over to accompany him.

4.

"So how do you intend to take back this ship then?" Airia asked Lara, "You've already told us you don't have a plan."

"Which is why the first thing I intend to do is create one," Lara replied, "and that requires me to go and take a look at where the pirates are and what they're up to. Plus I'll see if I can get us some better weapons."

"The problem is," Belle responded, "that we can't all go. We'll be spotted for sure. That means someone has to stay and protect those left behind, which ought to be me if you're leaving. Do you intend going alone?"

"I could do with a volunteer to watch my back." Lara said.

"I'll go with you." Kay said.

"It could be dangerous." Belle warned her.

"So could staying here." Kay replied, "I'd rather be on the move."

"Then it's settled." Lara said, "Kay comes with me and Kayza stays to help you look out for the others."

"Don't forget your PTP link." Belle said, "If we need to relocate I'll let you know where we're headed."

"Good idea." Lara said before unhooking her lightsaber from her belt and looking at Kay, "So let's get going." She said, "First stop is the security section."

Like many of the *Lightning Voyager's* secondary operations centres, the security section was located towards the bottom of the vessel where passengers were less likely to be. Kay paused when they reached a turbolift shaft, but Lara instead beckoned her towards a nearby emergency stairwell.

"If anyone 's monitoring turbolift usage they may figure out its us." She said, "Plus we don't know who'll be waiting for us when the doors open."

Kay frowned as she headed towards the stairs.

"But can't you read the minds of anyone waiting?" she asked, "My character did it in my show."

"I know." Lara replied, "I saw that episode. But no, I can sense the presence of living beings and pick up on feelings, but I'm not able to identify someone or pull thoughts from their heads. A master may be able to do something as complex as that but its beyond either me or Cal."

"Who's Cal?"

"He's my brother. Someone high up in the order decided it would be funny to station us here together."

Lara led Kay down the empty stairwell until they reached the level she knew to be the location of the security section.

"Now stay behind me and stay quiet." Lara said and when Kay just nodded in response she opened the door and stepped out of the stairwell.

The bodies of two crewmen were in the corridor outside the security section. Their drab uniforms suggested that they were security guards and both had been shot at close range. Lara could sense no life from either of them, but she knelt down to check just in case. After confirming that they were dead she then proceeded to the open doorway leading to the security section.

"Careful." she whispered, "Someone's inside."

Pressing herself up against the wall, Lara risked a quick glance inside and spotted someone sat behind the security chief's desk and from their build she could tell that it wasn't the security chief.

There was another doorway on the opposite side of the room and Lara waved her hand briefly, using the force to trigger its mechanism. The figure in the chair leapt to his feet as the door hissed open, aiming his weapon towards it.

"Who's there?" he demanded as he approached the door cautiously, keeping his weapon trained on it at all times, "I said who's there? You've got until three to identify yourself. One. Two. Three!" and he leapt through the open doorway into the chamber beyond it. Immediately that he was through the door Lara waved her hand again and the door came down behind him.

"Now!" Lara snapped and she raced across the security office towards this other door, reaching it just as the pirate opened it from the other side. There was a 'snap-hiss' as Lara activated her lightsaber and thrust the pale blue blade into his chest while he was still processing the fact that she was standing in front of him, "Okay its clear." Lara then said, shutting of her lightsaber and bending down to pick up the pirate's rifle.

"So what are we looking for here?" Kay asked.

"Well weapons for one thing." Lara replied, "Here, take this." And she handed the weapon to Kay.

"All the way here for just one gun?"

"No. There's a locker through that other door that holds all the weapons taken from the passengers. Or at least it did, I wouldn't put it past the pirates to have emptied it for themselves."

"And what else?" Kay asked.

"This." Lara said and she waved at the wall behind the desk. The wall was filled with video displays that showed images from public areas all over the ship. Luckily the camera feeds were constantly changing from one to another and the pirate now lying dead on the office floor had not been paying enough attention to have noticed Kay and Lara as they made their way here from Airia's suite, "Unfortunately these displays are no good to us here. We need to divert the feeds up to the terminal in our suite."

"Well I studied computing at college." Kay said as she sat behind the desk, "But I doubt the system was written with what you want in mind. We'll need someone who knows something about hacking networks."

Lara smiled and took out her PTP link.

"Belle," she said, "what do you know about computers?"

"Computers?" Belle replied, "They're not exactly my thing. Why, what do you need?"

"I need someone that can divert the feeds from all the security cameras up to you. Can you see if anyone else there knows how to do it?"

"Oh," Lara heard Sial saying in the background, "so now you want our help."

"You know how to do that?" Belle asked.

"Well of course we do." Sial replied, indicating herself and Keera, "this ship belongs to one of our parents' companies. We've been hacking into their computers for years."

"Why am I not surprised at any of this?" Lara said, overhearing the exchange on the link and she sighed, "Look Belle, get those two to tell Kay what she needs to do. I'm going to check the arms locker." And she handed the PTP link to Kay.

Unfortunately Lara had been right about the possibility of the pirates looting the locker and all of the weapons taken from the passengers were gone. A second similar locker next to it had also been opened and emptied and Lara guessed that this one had held the security staff's weapons. Though whether the pirates had stolen them or if the crew had had chance to issue them she could not tell.

"Lara it's done!" Kay called out from the other room.

"What already?" Lara asked.

"Yeah, it looks like those two young ladies are shaping up to be evil super criminals where computers are concerned. Reminds me of a story arc in—"

"Not now." Lara interrupted as she approached the wall of monitors and she activated her lightsaber again.

Then she swung the weapon in a wide arc, back and forth until all of the displays were destroyed, "Do we need this?" she asked Kay, pointing at the desktop computer she had used to transfer the camera feed up to the suite and when Kay shook her head Lara destroyed it with her lightsaber, "Now we're the only one's who can see what's on the cameras." She said.

Like all of the other luxury suites aboard the *Lightning Voyager*, Airia's was quipped with a state of the art holographic projector. So rather than switching between individual camera feeds on the relatively small desktop display Sial patched the images through to the projector and the air in the centre of the lounge was filled with the camera feeds.

"There you go." She said, "Now how about in return I get my gun back? You wouldn't want your star computer expert defenceless now would you?"

"Kay took your gun." Keera pointed out, though it seemed that none of the others was paying any attention to them. Instead they were focused on the projected images.

"Looks like they've gathered everyone in that function room." Kayza said, "Means they need lots of people to cover all the exits."

"How do you know that?" Airia asked.

"I'm in PR." Kayza replied, "I've organised events on this ship before. In fact I did the maiden voyage party four years ago in that very room."

"Right now I'm more interested in them." Belle said suddenly, raising a hand to rest near an image that showed a group of armed beings moving down a corridor, "They're heading this way."

"Eight of them." Kayza said, "That's too many for us to fight isn't it?" and Belle nodded.

"But if we leave here we lose the security feed." Keera pointed out.

"I know." Belle replied, "So we'll just have to make sure that they don't come this way won't we?" and she took out her PTP link, "Lara can you hear me?"

"Go ahead." Lara replied.

"We've got the feed set up but there's a bunch of bad guys headed right for us. Can you do something about that?"

"How many?" Lara asked.

"Eight."

"And where are they?"

"Deck nine, section four. Heading for the turbolift cluster."

"Got it. We'll head them off there."

"Hey Nex what's that sound?" one of the pirates asked and it was only then that the group's leader, Nex, notice a repeating 'ping'.

"Sounds like its coming from the turbolifts." Another pirate added.

"Pipe down." Nex hissed and he led the way around the corner before the turbolift cluster. There the pirates saw that one of the turbolift doors was being held open by a trashcan that had been placed in the path of the door.

"Somebody was here." The first pirate said.

"Yeah well keep quiet then." Nex said, "Because you may just scare them off. Now come on, keep your eyes open and your mouths shut."

The group moved forwards, but even now they held their weapons low, not ready for action and so when Lara suddenly stepped around a corner ahead of them they weren't ready.

"There's one!" Nex snapped, raising his weapon.

But before he could open fire Lara waved a hand and with a great deal of focus she created a massive blast of telekinetic power that sent the pirates flying backwards, where three of them were pushed through the open turbolift door. The trashcan was knocked aside as the pirates were hurled into the turbolift, the door immediately slid shut and the turbolift began its journey to the lowest level it could reach.

Lara ignited her lightsaber again and rushed at the remaining pirates. This was Kay's signal to join the attack and she stepped into the corridor just long enough to fire a short burst of pulse blasts at the pirates who were still recovering from Lara's force blast. Kay's inexperience handling weapons showed and out of the three shots she fired only one hit a pirate in his shoulder and the man who was only just getting to his feet collapsed again, clutching at the injury and screaming.

Nex elected not to bother trying to get up and instead just aimed his beam rod towards Lara. He fired once, but seemingly without any effort Lara put her lightsaber blade in the path of the laser and deflected its path away from her harmlessly. He was about to fire again when Lara reached him and with a single stroke of her lightsaber she sliced off his arm at the elbow. Then on the back swing she finished him off with a strike to the chest.

Another pirate grabbed Lara by the ankle, seeking to pull her off her feet. But without even looking she plunged her lightsaber into him and felt his life suddenly snuffed out. Kay reappeared, aiming towards the pirates. However, she held her fire when she found it impossible to get a clear shot as Lara battled them at point-blank range. Even as Kay watched the man she had injured was finished off as Lara's lightsaber blade was thrust into him. Unwilling to let the young jedi fight alone Kay slung the rifle over her shoulder and plucked the smaller pistol from where she had tucked it into her belt before rushing to help her.

Her charge caught the attention of one of the two remaining pirates and believing that she would make for an easier opponent he took aim at her. But in doing so he took his eyes off Lara who dispatched him with a single stroke of her weapon.

Fear.

Panic.

The final pirate had lost his weapon when Lara's telekinetic blast hit him and he was still scrabbling towards it as Lara finally turned her attention towards him.

"I'll take that." she said and using the force she called the pistol to her grasp.

Anger.

The pirate could have just run away, but his fury towards her got the better of him and drawing his knife he screamed and rushed towards her. The charge was clumsy however and Lara rolled aside at the same time as she swung her lightsaber at waist height, slicing him in two.

Kay reached Lara just as she shut down her lightsaber and looked down at the last pirate she had killed.

"What about the other three?" Kay asked, "The turbolift's coming back up."

"Then grab some of these rifles." Lara snapped, "Spare ammo as well if you can see it and we'll go hide round the corner again."

"Hide round the corner? That's your great idea?" Kay said as she picked up a weapon and plucked a spare magazine from a pirate's body, "But that's exactly what we did before. Surely they'll be expecting it."

"It doesn't matter." Lara replied, "Now move!" and the two women ran off down the corridor and concealed themselves around the same corner they had used for cover before.

"So what's the plan now then?" Kay asked.

"I saw that one of those pirates had a grenade," Lara said, "and I left it on his body."

"Oh no." Kay said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Hey, it's me."

"But you're just a padawan."

There was a 'ding' as the turbolift arrived on their floor and the door slid open. Lara glanced around the corner and focused on the grenade that was tucked into one of the dead pirate's combat jacket. It took just a slight pull through the force to cause the pin to come flying out.

"Cover your ears!" Lara cried out as she ducked back around the corner and mere seconds later an explosion echoed down the corridor. The strength of the shockwave surprised Kay, who had barely had time to cover her ears and she momentarily dazed, "Come on!" Lara shouted, shaking her, "Let's get out of here before more pirates turn up looking for their friends."

5.

"Three rifles, five pistols and a shotgun." Lara said as she and Kay placed the weapons they had seized from the dead pirates on the table, "With an average of two clips each."

"I can't believe you used a grenade." Belle said, staring at Lara with her arms folded.

"It worked didn't it?" Lara replied.

"Yes, but a grenade? What if you'd breached the hull?"

"We were three decks in." Lara pointed out, "It was an incendiary grenade, not a baradium bomb. Now what have you found on the security cameras?"

"Well thanks to our computer skills," Sial said, indicating her sister and herself, "we know where the other passengers and crew are being held."

"The main ballroom it seems." Airia said.

"And what are the pirates up to?" Lara asked as she looked at the collection of floating images for herself.

"At the moment not much." Belle replied, "There was that group that came this way and another smaller one headed for the security office after you left."

"They've noticed we're missing." Lara said.

"My thoughts exactly." Belle agreed.

"How on Coruscant can you determine that?" Airia asked.

"Easy." Kay said, "Of all the passenger accommodation a group of them chose to head directly here, while a second group went to try and use the security cameras to track us down when they failed to contact the man they'd left there."

"I'm impressed." Belle said, "How did you figure that out?"

Kay smiled.

"I saw something similar in a script I was sent once." She replied.

"Another of your straight to home rental roles?" Belle asked sarcastically.

"Well if you've ever had a major acting role I've not noticed." Kay said in response.

"If we could get back to the matter at hand?" Lara said, "We need to get the pirates off this ship. Ideally before they steal everything of value and kill everyone on board."

"Ideally?" Nissel commented, "How many people are you willing to lose?"

"I can think to two off the top of my head." Lara replied and she glanced at Keera and Sial.

"Now who's getting off the subject?" Belle said.

"Okay, sorry." Lara said and she looked back at the floating images, "The big problem is how to convince the pirates that they need to get off the ship and away from it as fast as they can. If we mess things up they may just decide to use their ships to destroy this one."

"Where's the nearest help?" Kayza asked and everyone looked at Belle.

"The mining platforms." She replied.

"Platforms?" Lara asked.

"You really should study the sector you know." Belle told her, "Teras is a gas giant and as well as being a tourist attraction it is orbited by about a dozen mining platforms that suck useful gases out of the atmosphere. Those platforms are well armed and protected by a small number of attack craft. If we can contact them, they can drive off the pirate ships."

"So how do we contact them?" Airia asked, "The brochure for this cruise points out that communications are not possible in close proximity to the storms."

Lara looked back at Keera and Sial.

"How much do you two know about this ship?" she asked.

The two sisters looked at one another and then back at Lara.

"Quite a lot actually." Keera said.

"Does it have a laser comm. array?" Lara then asked.

"Of course it does." Keera replied, "Our family's companies don't scrimp on things like that."

"So there's our way of calling for help." Lara said, "We wait until one of the platforms comes over the horizon and send a signal in a coded laser pulse."

"That should work." Belle said, "Secure too. Unless the pirates are actually looking for a laser signal or happen to get in the way they're unlikely to notice it. Of course if they do-"

"Yeah, I know." Lara said, "They're likely to open fire on the ship right there and then."

"What about the captives?" Kay asked, "If a squadron of fighters turns up won't the pirates just kill them?"

"Yes." Lara said, "Or at least use them as a shield while they strip the ship of everything valuable."

"Well those platforms are unlikely to have assault teams ready to go." Belle said, "So its up to us. We need to secure the hostages at the same time as the Teras Defence Forces attack."

"How many pirates are we talking about?" Lara asked.

"I'd say about forty or fifty in total." Belle said, "With about a third of them watching the captives while the others are holding the engine rooms and bridge."

"Well we have to take the bridge first if we're going to send a distress call." Lara said and then she looked back at the Karns, "Can you divert the security feed to a datapad?" she asked.

"Sure." Sial said, "Why?"

"Because when we attack the bridge the pirates will figure out that their friends didn't find us and come looking again. I think we should all go, but we need to know how to avoid any pirates that may be wandering about. Oh and yes, this does mean you get your guns back, we've enough for everyone now."

"All of them?" Lacko said when he was told that the force sent to track down the missing passengers had been killed. He was sat in the captain's chair on the bridge as he received the report and he was not impressed.

"Yes sir and I'm no expert but I think some of them were killed by a lightsaber. A grenade got the rest I think."

"Fools!" Lacko snapped, "They knew they were hunting a jedi and yet they still just went blundering in. Well they're no loss. It just means we all get bigger shares of the haul."

"But what about the jedi and the Shill woman?" the pirate asked, "They're still loose."

Lacko stood up.

"Not for much longer." He said, "I'm going to deal with them myself. I'll need half our men, but I assure you they won't escape me."

"Oh mistress!" Genie exclaimed, "I'm afraid we can't go that way." Since it's life preservation programming forbade it from using a weapon the droid had been given the datapad to watch the security feeds. All of the others were armed now. Belle, Kay and Kayza carried rifles, Sial the shotgun and the others had pistols. Lara's blaster was holstered at her hip, the young jedi preferring to rely on her lightsaber.

"Why not?" Airia asked.

"There are more pirates that way." Genie replied.

"Another pair with a PTP link?" Belle asked.

"Why yes Miss Shill, that is correct."

It seemed that the pirates had now dedicated a large portion of their men to hunting down the party. But rather than simply search in one large group they had split into many smaller groups, most of them only two strong. But each group appeared to be in constant contact with the others and working together they were steadily surrounding the party. They of course overwhelm any single pair quite easily, but to do so would give away their location and bring the entire force down upon them.

"At this rate they'll have us cut off from the bridge soon." Belle said.

Lara suddenly stopped and smiled.

"What?" Belle asked.

Lara pointed to a sign on the wall ahead. It simply read 'AIRLOCK.'

"Anyone fancy stepping outside for a stroll?" she said.

"You're kidding." Nissel said in amazement, "The pirate ships are out there."

"Yes, but they won't be watching for anyone crawling across the hull will they?" Lara asked.

"Even if they did spot us what could they do?" Belle asked, "If they shoot at us they'll blast holes in their prize. No, Lara's idea is a good one."

The group made their way to the airlock where they quickly located several rows of lockers containing environmental suits and Lara noticed that when Airia selected one she had removed a bulky example.

"No." she told the senator, "Take one of the lighter vacc suits. A full space suit isn't what we need."

"A proper space suit is will be much warmer." Airia pointed out, "I've no intention of freezing to death out there."

"How about decompression sickness?" Lara replied, "Because that's what you could end up getting if you don't spend half an hour or so pre-breathing oxygen. A vacc suit may be colder but there's no need to decompress first." And she took a lightweight vacuum suit from another locker and tossed to Airia. As she looked round she saw that after what she had said to the senator the others were all picking out the lighter suits also. Thankfully a well equipped ship like the Lightning Voyager also included enough sets of magnetic boots for the entire party, meaning that they would be able to walk across the outer hull without worrying about floating off into space. Nevertheless, Belle still made sure that each suit also included a safety line that could be used to tether everyone together, including Genie

Lara was correct about the procedure for putting on a vacuum suit being relatively quick and the party were soon all ready to venture outside. She and Belle performed one last check on everyone's suits and then they entered the airlock.

Belle and Lara were the first ones through the outer door, pulling themselves around the frame to stand on the hull at a right angle to the orientation of the airlock's floor.

"Come on out." Lara said, her transmission slightly distorted by the interference from the storm raging in the atmosphere of nearby Teras, "I bet you didn't expect a view like this when you bought your tickets."

She was right and as each member of the party emerged they could not help but look at the brightly coloured flashes and streaks of lightning visible in all their glory without any of the liner's structure to get in the way of the view.

"I think I'd still rather be inside." Kay said, "I like gravity."

"Have you spent time in zero-gee before?" Belle asked, looking at Kay even as she helped Aria and Genie out of the airlock at the tail end of the group.

"Once or twice." The actress said, "Just when my roles called for it."

"Oh you'll be fine." Belle said, "I'd be more worried if it was your first time."

"It's mine." Nissel commented, looking nervous, "Is that important?"

"Ours too." Sial added as Keera nodded beside her.

Belle and Lara glanced at one another.

"Just keep your eyes fixed on the hull of the ship and try not to look up." Lara said, "Now follow us."

"But why?" Keera asked as Belle and Lara began to lead the way towards the front of the ship.

"I believe they are concerned about the well documented effects of first time weightlessness on many species." Genie said, "Whereby the disorientation can cause nausea and—"

"Just keep looking at the hull." Belle interrupted, "Fix on a single point."

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

Belle and Lara led the others towards another airlock located close to the prow of the Lightning Voyager and as it came into view Lara decided to check on everyone's status.

"Not far now," she said, "how's everyone doing?"

"Fine back here." Kay replied.

"Cold." Airia said, before adding, "But fine as well."

Then Sial spoke.

"I don't feel well." She said.

"You don't look it either." Nissel said, looking through Sial's faceplate.

"That's just the discolouration of the visor's filter." Belle said, throwing a nervous glance at Lara, "Now let's keep moving, just a few metres more and we'll be back inside."

"No really." Sial said, "I don't feel well. Oh no, I think—" and then the rest of the party winced as over their suits' communicators they heard the unmistakable sound of someone throwing up. This was followed rapidly by a scream and Sial reached for her helmet.

"Grab her arms!" Belle snapped, "Don't let her break the seal!"

"I've got her!" Kayza replied, "Taking hold of one of Sial's arms as Keera grabbed the other one before she could open her suit.

"Good, now quickly everyone get inside." Lara said as she waved her hand towards the airlock and a light flashed on the access panel to indicate that the decompression cycle had begun. By the time the group reached the hatch with the struggling Sial held tightly between them it was open and ready for them.

Sial wasted no time in ripping the helmet from her head the moment that the airlock's status light went green and she glared at Lara.

Hatred.

"Hey it's not my fault." Lara said, unable to completely hide the smile on her face at Sial's obvious discomfort.

"Never mind that." Belle said, "Genie, does it look like the pirates know where we are?"

The droid looked at the datapad showing the security feeds.

"Oh no Miss Shill. It seems that they are still operating under the assumption that we are located somewhere around Mistress Airia's suite."

"Then I suggest we head for the bridge. Bring your helmets along, just in case." Belle said, raising her rifle, "Lara on point, those of us with rifles next." Then she looked at Sial, "But you at the back. You stink of sick and it'll give us away it's so strong."

Sial frowned.

"I wasn't going to say anything." Keera said to her.

There were only eight pirates on the bridge now that Lacko had taken the others to search for the missing passengers and with their leader not around to watch them the bored pirates had begun to play cards rather than monitor the ship's systems.

The hatchway had been left open and Lara crawled onto the bridge on her stomach, taking care to remain out of sight of the pirates. Gunfire on the bridge ran the risk of damaging the vital communications equipment, so clearing the room of the pirates was a task that had fallen to Lara. Of course taking on eight armed individuals was no small task, so like during the ambush sprung by the turbolifts Lara wanted some way of reducing their numbers. The opportunity to do this came when Lara's heightened Jedi senses allowed her to notice that one of the card players had several extra cards secreted on his person and she smiled. When the cheating pirate next reached out to place a coin in the centre of the group Lara used the force to give the card up his sleeve a tug. It required very little effort to make the card slide from his sleeve and drop out onto the pile of money.

"What the kriff is this?" another of the pirates demanded, grabbing the card in one hand and the cheat's wrist in the other.

"I never saw it before!" the cheating pirate pleaded in desperation and with another slight pull through the force Lara caused a second card to poke up from the waistband of his trousers.

Rage.

The other pirates set upon the man immediately, delivering kicks and blows as he tried in vain to escape their clutches. In desperation he plucked his knife from its scabbard and lashed out, but this only made the other pirates angrier still and with a weapon having been introduced into the situation the others followed suit. The man screamed as the first knife thrust was aimed at his arm and his own weapon fell from his grasp. Then his former comrades continued their attack upon him as they delivered one knife blow after another until he lay dead on the deck.

Though one of the pirates was now dead Lara was not done and now she reached out through the force and made contact with the mind of each pirate in turn and to all of them she gave the impression that the others were now eyeing up the pile of money. Simultaneously three of the pirates made a grab for the money and this prompted the others to intervene and try and restrain them. Seeing her opportunity, Lara sprang into action.

The distinctive 'snap-hiss' of her lightsaber activating caused the pirates to look her way as she charged, but given that they had until that moment been grappling with one another they were in no position to react and as she raced past she cut down half of them with a single swing of her blade.

"It's the Jedi!" one of the others cried out as he dropped his knife and reached for the blaster at his hip. But in standing still he presented an easy target and Lara thrust her lightsaber into his chest.

Another pirate decided that the bridge was the last place he wanted to be right now and he made a break for the exit. He made it as far as the doorway when Belle appeared and lashed out, delivering a well-placed blow to his throat. Clutching at his neck the pirate staggered backwards, choking and Belle then lifted her leg up high and kicked him in the chest with her heel. There was a 'crunch' as the pirate's ribcage collapsed and he collapsed in a heap.

"Behind you!" Belle called out, noticing the pirate taking aim at Lara from behind her back. Lara dropped and rolled, swinging her lightsaber and cutting his legs out from beneath him before finishing off with an upwards swing.

"I surrender!" the final pirate called out; dropping the knife he had kept hold of throughout the brief battle and raising his hands.

Belle drew the pistol she had tucked into her belt and approached him, smiling.

"I'm sorry." She said, "But we don't have the facilities to take you prisoner." And before Lara could intervene she shot the man in the head.

Lara just glared at Belle as the others came rushing into the bridge and closed the door behind them.

"What?" Belle asked Lara as she took a seat at the comscan console, "Taking prisoners is a luxury we can't afford now."

"She's right Jedi Udra." Airia agreed as she sat herself down in the captain's chair and Lara noticed that none of the others seemed to have a problem with what Belle had just done, including Kay.

"That doesn't make executing him like that right." Lara replied.

"I didn't see you asking them to give up." Keera commented.

"Yeah." Nissel added, "You seemed preoccupied with cutting them into pieces with your sword."

"That's different." Lara replied.

"How?" Kayza asked.

Lara just sighed and shook her head, finding that she actually wished Cal were there with her. He would be able to explain it.

"Look," she said, "can we just get on with sending for help?"

"We just need to wait for one of the mining platforms to come into view." Belle said, "Lasers may be immune to disruption by the storms, but they're line of sight transmitters."

"Also how long will that take?" Kay asked and Belle shrugged.

"I don't know their orbits." She said, "But I'm guessing the pirates made their move when they were all below the horizon."

"Indeed," Airia said, "I doubt they would want anyone to witness their activities."

There were several sets of macrobinoculars in a rack on the bridge, used by the crew when manoeuvring near other vessels in proximity to the storms and Sial picked up a set and stood at the front of the bridge looking out of the main viewport.

"See anything?" Belle asked, getting up from the comscan station and picking up a set for herself.

Sial shook her head.

"Just one of the planet's moons I think." She replied.

Belle directed her macrobinoculars to where Sial was looking and a smile spread across her face.

"That's no moon." She said, "It's a space station." Then she lowered the macrobinoculars and looked at Lara, "You're on." She said.

Lara darted to the comscan station vacated by Belle and sat down. Then she activated the *Lightning Voyager's* laser transmitter and directed it at the mining platform ahead.

"This is Jedi Lara Udra aboard the liner *Lightning Voyager*. A large pirate force has seized the ship and most occupants have been taken hostage. We require urgent assistance, I repeat urgent assistance." Then she waited for a reply.

"Jedi Udra, this is Teras platform three," a voice responded after what seemed like an age, "we have fighters but no assault team. We will relay your message to—"

"Negative Teras three." Lara interrupted, "No assault team needed. I will secure the ship, but I need help to drive off their vessels."

There was another pause.

"Confirmed Jedi Udra. Will co-ordinate with other platforms. Fighter ETA twenty minutes."

Lara smiled and leant back in her seat, spinning it around to face the others.

"So you'll be rescuing everyone alone will you?" Keera asked.

"Yes," Sial added, "does this mean the rest of us can just go back to our rooms?"

"Of course not." Lara replied, "I can't take out all those pirates alone."

"Funny," Kayza said, "because you didn't mention us at all two minutes ago. I didn't think the Jedi Order looked favourably on lying."

"Well considering the truth is that I've got help from a senator, an actress, a PR consultant, a woman who is some sort of special security agent but I can't tell you what sort and three spoiled rich kids I thought lying was the better option."

Keera, Nissel and Sial all looked at Lara and scowled.

"Why Jedi Udra," Kayza said, "maybe there's hope for you yet."

6.

Lacko Dabb looked at the pile of abandoned clothing. One of his search teams had discovered near an airlock that had several vacuum suits missing from its lockers. It was obvious that the missing passengers had been able to avoid his carefully planned search by simply undertaking a space walk, no doubt re-entering the ship at some other location.

"Alert everyone." He said abruptly, "They could be anywhere by now.

"Sir!" one of Lacko's search team said suddenly, "I can't raise the bridge!"

"The jedi can't fly the ship." Lacko said as he tried to figure out what Lara was planning, "We can shut down the drives from the engine room. What is she planning?" then he realised what the answer was, "They're calling for help!" he exclaimed and he began to run towards the bridge.

Belle and Lara edged towards one of the entrances to the ballroom. There was no door to block their path, to make movement into and out of the room easier all of the entrances were clear with emergency doors set into the ceiling that could be dropped shut if the need arose. From the security feed they had determined that this entrance offered them the best view of the room where the hostages were being held. The problem was that there were a pair of pirates just inside this entrance and these would have to be dealt with silently.

One of the pirates was immediately visible, standing with his back to them as he watched the prisoners and Belle held up her hand to signal Lara to stop. Then she looked at the jedi and waited. Lara looked back at Belle, smiled and nodded. Then she reached out her hand and focused on the man. It took a great deal of concentration, but using the force Lara was able to grasp the guard and suddenly dragged him towards her before the shocked guard could cry out and alert his comrades Belle stepped forwards, holding a knife she had taken from one of the pirates on the bridge and she plunged it between two of the armour plates protecting his torso.

"Give me a hand." Belle whispered as she began to remove the dead man's armour.

"Huh?" Lara replied.

"This guy's armour hides his face. By putting on his clothes we can get inside to deal with the other one."

"Aren't you a little short for a pirate?" Lara asked.

"Well you're taller. Would you rather do it?"

Lara looked down at the body. It was true that she was a few centimetres taller than Belle, but the difference would be hard to spot from a distance and was certainly less than the difference between either of their heights and the dead pirate's. She shook her head and crouched down to help Belle strip the body.

Belle was soon walking into the ballroom wearing the pirate's clothing and armour. Despite her disguise she still moved slowly and quietly, the aim was to delay being identified by the pirates should they look happen to look towards her, but not to encourage them to do so by attracting their attention.

The second nearby guard was sat on a table against the wall, cradling his rifle in his lap while he smoked a foul smelling cigarra. Belle approached him cautiously, keeping a hand on her knife. Then when she was within reach she drew the weapon and stabbed him between two of his ribs, pushing the blade into a lung and twisting it to prevent him from crying out. She held him tightly as he quivered briefly and then leant him up against the wall.

"Coast's clear." She said softly and Lara appeared in the doorway, looking around the room. She took two deep breaths and then, wrapping herself in the force as if it were a blanket she calmly walked into the room. Each time she neared one of the other pirates, or one seemed to be about to look in her direction she diverted their attention elsewhere before they could look straight at her and penetrate the shroud of force energy.

Meanwhile Belle activated her PTP link just long enough to send a single 'ping', alerting the rest of the party to approach. Putting the communications device away again, Belle lifted her rifle to her shoulder. Then, when she heard the sound of footsteps from behind her she took aim at a cluster of three pirates and opened fire. Believing that the pirates were firing on them indiscriminately several of the captives screamed in terror, but the burst of energy blasts instead tore through the trio of pirates. At the same time Lara sprang into action, activating her lightsaber and charging the nearest pirate.

Stunned by the sudden attack coming from two different locations the remaining pirates were unsure of how to react and as they delayed Belle shot another.

"Captain!" Lara yelled as she dived out of the way of a shotgun blast, "Get everyone out of here. That way!" and she waved towards Belle who had paused shooting just long enough to pull the helmet from her head.

"You heard the jedi!" Captain An Kett snapped as he got to his feet, everyone move that way."

One of the pirates turned his attention towards the row of beings who had until then been sitting peacefully under their guard and pointed his rifle into the midst of them. But before he could fire he noticed a flash of light as Lara brought her lightsaber blade down and cut the weapon in two, taking one of his hands off in the process. He clutched at the cauterised stump and stared at her in disbelief. Spinning around, Lara kicked him to the floor and then moved on to her next target.

When the newly liberated prisoners, led by Captain An Kett reached the doorway the rest of the group had arrived and Airia stepped forward and handed the duros one of the weapons taken from the pirates.

"Take this captain." She said, "We have a few more for your men, but right now we just need you to get everyone to a safer part of the ship."

"But senator, what will we do if the pirate ships start attacking?" the captain asked.

As if waiting for the question to be asked there was a sudden pulse of light through the transparisteel ceiling. But this was not the pale flash of an electrical discharge in the atmosphere of Teras, it was the brilliant red of blaster fire and those who looked up right then were just in time to see a pair of Teras Defence Force fighters streak overhead.

"I think they've got that covered captain." Airia said.

"No!" Lacko exclaimed from the *Lightning Voyager's* bridge as he watched one of his ships explode. The sudden appearance of the local military was something he had not planned for, even after he had realised that the passengers who had escaped being captured were attempting to raise the alarm. He had expected any potential rescue to have to wait for Republic forces to be mustered from Aurek Station, several hours away, "Signal them!" he snapped, "Tell them we have hostages and-"

"Sir!" one of the other pirates interrupted, "The men in the ballroom are under attack! The hostages are free." The pirates looked at one another in panic. Outside the *Lightning Voyager*, their fleet was being destroyed by the Teras Defence Forces, whilst on board they no longer had any hostages to use as bargaining chips.

"Get to your ships." Lacko announced, "We're leaving."

No one questioned the order and the pirates began to run through the corridors of the liner, splitting up to head towards the assortment of shuttles still docked with it. Lacko himself headed to the hangar with half a dozen of his men, but as they entered it there was a shout from the far side.

"Security! Halt and lay down your weapons!"

Lacko looked across the hangar to see a group of men in ship's security uniforms, all armed and aiming their weapons towards his men.

"It's a trap!" he called out as he opened fire on the guards.

Both the pirates and the security men dived for cover as they all began shooting at one another. Lacko quickly realised that their numbers were too evenly matched for his men to defeat the guards quick enough to make a getaway. However, he had one last trick up his sleeve.

"Cover me." He said to his men, "I'm going to make a run for the ship. I'll turn its guns on them." And without waiting he leapt up and dashed across the hangar towards the open access ramp of his ship.

As soon as he was inside Lacko slammed a fist down on the control to seal the ramp behind him, leaving his fellow pirates looking on in shock as they realised that he was about abandon them. Quickly he ran to the cockpit and sat down, jabbing at the controls to bring the ship's systems on line.

"Leaving so soon?" Lara asked from the shadows at the side of the cockpit.

Lacko could not believe that he had been able to miss her standing there and he reached for the blaster at his waist

"I wouldn't." Lara said, holding out her lightsaber. The weapon was not active, but from its position Lacko could tell that the blade would cut right through him if she were to turn it on.

Accepting the inevitable, Lacko leaned back in his seat and raised his hands.

"This isn't over jedi." He said.

"There she is, the hero of the hour." Kayza said loudly as Lara descended the access ramp of Lacko's ship with the pirate in tow. Around the woman were several members of the ship's crew and a handful of passengers, all of whom clutched recording devices of one form or another.

"Where did you find reporters? And why isn't Belle here to share the limelight?" Lara said to Kayza as a pair of security guards took Lacko from her.

Kayza smiled.

"The ship has a few of it's own, plus there's always some who book passage to see what the rich and famous amongst the passengers are up to." She replied, "As for Belle, she'd rather remain out of the public eye. Trust me, this is going to be very good for you."