

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-II: DIVERSION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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...

DIVERSION

WHEN PIRATES START INTERFERING WITH NAVIGATIONAL DATA TO LURE VESSELS OFF COURSE IT IS UP TO JEDI KNIGHT CAL UDRA AND HIS APPRENTICE LARA TO CAPTURE THEM...

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

Jedi Knight Cal Udra looked around the room.

"I'd say its seen better days." He said.

"Yeah, about three hundred years ago." The woman standing beside added. This was Lara, his younger sister and padawan learner, "Who lived here last?"

Cal and Lara both looked around to where a wheeled droid waited in the doorway.

"The previous resident was a cha'a arrested on charges of unlawful spice dealing." The machine spoke.

"I get the feeling that the spice was the most sanitary thing about this place." Lara said.

"I think you're right." Cal agreed, "But its all our allowance will stretch to right now."

"Only because we had to pay for that speeder you lost."

"I didn't lose it. It was stolen."

"Well the army still said you lost it. What was with charging us for three of them?"

"It's the way the military does things." Cal explained, "If a serviceman loses something they get charged for the item they lost, the one taken from stores to replace it and the one bought to replace the one in stores. It teaches people not to take stupid risks with their equipment."

"Like leaving a speeder in a street in the middle of a crime hotspot?"

"Look," Cal said, doing his best to control his anger, "can we not talk about that any more. We need a place to stay and this is all we can get. It has two bedrooms, a lounge, a kitchen and a bathroom. It'll do fine.

We're jedi, we should be used to sacrifice. Unless you'd rather we lived aboard the *Bright Hope*?"

"No. I want a real home. And at least it has a nice view." Lara replied and she indicated the large transparent wall through which several of Aurek Station's docking towers could be seen hanging down from beneath the upper disk of the facility's structure.

Cal turned to the droid.

"We'll take it." He said and he handed over a credit stick. The droid took the device and inserted it into a socket on its torso. After processing the payment it returned the credit stick to Cal.

"Enjoy your new home sir and madam." The droid said before turning on the spot and rolling away.

"So which room do you want?" Lara asked.

"I'm you're master." Cal replied, "So I'll take the bigger one."

"Fine by me." Lara said to Cal's surprise, "Fewer places for the rats to be hiding."

The freighter *Capstall* dropped out of hyperspace unexpectedly, causing the duty officer to swing his feet down from the console in front of him and sit up straight suddenly.

"What the kriff happened?" he yelled at the pair of crewmen stationed on the bridge to monitor the ship's functions during what was supposed to be a trip of three days, "Are we damaged?"

"No sir," One of the confused crewmen replied, studying a screen filled with systems data, "and there are no gravity wells to have pulled us out either. The nav system says we have reached our destination."

"Sir I have another vessel in sector three seven!" the second crewman exclaimed, "Its closing."

The duty officer looked at his own console and called up the sensor readouts. Sure enough there was a vessel approaching the *Capstall*. Then there were several drive flashes from the mystery vessel and the single ship became four as the larger launched a trio of smaller craft.

"Pirates!" the duty officer yelled, "Red alert! We're under attack!"

Cal opened the front door of his and his sister's new home to see a duros standing there wearing the uniform of a naval captain. Kuwar De Kuun was the highest ranking officer of the Republic Navy in the Narthis Sector and he, like the Udra's had chosen Aurek Station as the most logical base of operations.

"Ah, Captain De Kuun." He said, smiling, "Welcome to our home. Please do come in" and he stood aside for the captain to enter.

"I am here on official business." The duros replied, but he entered the apartment anyway.

"Of course." Cal said, then after closing the front door he called out, "Lara! Captain De Kuun is here, you'd better sit in on this." Cal then led Captain De Kuun across the lounge and indicated for him to take a seat. Captain De Kuun frowned briefly before he gave one of the padded seats a quick wipe with his hand and sat down.

"I'm sorry about the mess." Cal said, "We've not really finished moving in yet."

"The bigger problem is that the last guy to live here never properly moved out." Lara added as she emerged from her bedroom and joined her brother in sitting opposite Captain De Kuun.

"I did not come here to discuss your living arrangements." The captain said and both Cal and Lara sensed his irritation.

"Of course captain. Do please tell us why you are here." Cal said.

"Just over an hour ago a subspace signal was received from the freighter *Capstall*. They reported that they had been forced out of hyperspace and were under attack by pirates. You must—"

"Must?" Cal interrupted. It was a well-known fact that Captain De Kuun resented the fact that despite being in charge of the Republic's naval forces in the sector, he had no authority over local jedi at all. This however, was the first time that he had demonstrated it to the Udra's.

"I require the services of your vessel for an assignment." Captain De Kuun said angrily.

"Don't you have ships of your own captain? I thought I saw rather a lot of them down in the hangar." Lara asked.

"My vessels are unsuitable for search and rescue missions and the shuttles assigned to this station lack the speed to be able to respond quickly. Your vessel on the other hand—"

"Is fast and has passenger carrying capability." Cal said, finishing the duros' sentence.

"Indeed." Captain de Kuun said and he stood up, "I will provide you with a unit of marines and a squadron of fighters for support. Lieutenant Shill will have command of the mission."

"We'd be delighted to help." Lara said, pointing out that the captain had not bothered to formally ask for the jedi's help, "You can tell the lieutenant that we'll be tagging along."

Captain De Kuun frowned, clearly displeased by Lara's response. Lara expected Cal to scold her for her attitude but he remained silent, apparently just as annoyed by the captain's attitude as she was.

"We'll just gather our things and prep the ship." Cal said, "Have your people meet us in the hangar in fifteen minutes."

When Cal and Lara stepped from the turbolift onto the hangar deck they found Captain De Kuun's people waiting for them. The group was about two dozen strong and split roughly equally between fighter pilots and a marine combat team.

"Good morning." Cal said loudly as the two jedi approached the Republic military personnel, "I believe you're waiting for us."

The marines immediately snapped to attention, while the pilots remained in more casual stances. One of the pilots, a human woman who appeared like Cal to be in her late twenties stepped forwards.

"Hi, I'm Lieutenant Shill." She said, extending her hand, "I'm in charge of the military contingent for this mission. You can call me Erin if you want."

"So you realise we don't come under your authority then?" Lara asked as Cal accepted the woman's hand.

"Oh I know all about the captain's attitude." Erin replied, "But I've a sister that works with you lot."

"You're related to a jedi?" Cal enquired.

"Freedom warrior. My family isn't blessed with your abilities." Erin answered, referring to the non-force sensitive soldiers who served the jedi order as combat troops, "Now how about we get the marines aboard your ship and get a move on?"

"Agreed." Cal replied and entering a code into his point-to-point communications link he unsealed the hatch to the *Bright Hope*.

The *Bright Hope* and the accompanying squadron of fighters dropped from hyperspace in rapid succession.

"What do you see?" Cal said to Lara. The older jedi was sat in the *Bright Hope*'s pilot seat while his younger sister studied the ship's sensor display carefully. Behind them a marine sergeant whose uniform bore the name 'Keltan' sat observing them and waiting for instructions.

"One large contact ahead, two hundred and fifty kilometres. Looks like the freighter, but its not moving under power." Lara replied.

"Lieutenant Shill." Cal said, activating the ship's communications, "We've picked up what we think to be the freighter two hundred and fifty kilometres ahead. We're heading in."

"Copy that *Bright Hope*." Erin responded, "We see it too. Aside from that the skies are clear, we'll be right on your tail."

Cal adjusted the ship's heading slightly to better intercept the freighter before increasing the power to the ship's drives. The *Bright Hope* accelerated briefly before Cal let the ship coast towards the freighter, not wanting to overshoot the stranded vessel. As soon as the freighter came into view through the canopy all three people in the cockpit leant forwards slightly to take a look.

"I don't like the look of that." Sergeant Keltan commented, breaking the silence he had held for most of the trip.

Cal and Lara glanced at one another. They too did not like what they saw. The freighter was adrift in space, one of its engines had been blown off the structure while the others were clearly shut down. Here and there the hull showed signs of scoring from energy weapon hits and as the *Bright Hope* got closer the extent of the damage became clearer.

"She's holed." Lara said, staring at the massive fracture in the freighter's hull.

Cal slowed the *Bright Hope*, matching the speed of the drifting vessel and looked at the hole for himself. It was a neat circle cut through the ship's hull about half way along its length. Inside the ship was dark and Cal could not make anything out, but a small cloud of debris that looked to be made up of storage boxes and personal equipment drifted just outside the hole.

"That doesn't look like normal combat damage to me." Sergeant Keltan commented, "Too regular. More like a breaching point."

"I agree." Cal said, "The pirates probably cut through the hull there and then when they moved their ship away the freighter decompressed."

"So the crew will be dead then?" the marine asked.

"Lara?" Cal said, looking back at his sister.

"No." Lara replied, "Somebody's still alive on that ship."

"How do you know? You never even checked your sensors." The sergeant asked.

"I don't need to." Lara said, "I'm a jedi, I can feel them. They're still alive."

"And scared." Cal added. Then he looked at the sergeant, "Tell your men to suit up. I'll get you as close as I can to that hole and you can go in the same way the pirates did." Then he looked at Lara, "You too."

"Me?" Lara asked.

"Yes you. I want you to take command of the rescue operation. I'll wait here and move the ship to one of the freighter's docking ports when you and the marines can get then ready for me. Understood?"

Lara smiled, realising that her brother was handing her real responsibility.

"Understood." She said to him.

Sergeant Keltan looked less happy.

Lara let out a yelp as she bounced off he hull of the freighter. Her leap from the *Bright Hope's* airlock had been slightly off target and she narrowly missed the gaping hole. A hand reached out from the hole as one of the marines that had gone before her grabbed hold of her leg and pulled her inside before she could float off into space.

"Thanks." She said to the marine in his more heavily armoured version of the vacuum suit she wore.

"Not a problem ma'am." The marine responded, "Would hate to lose you. Nice suit by the way." He added, noticing the bright pink colouration of Lara's suit.

Lara noticed that the freighter's artificial gravity was still operational and objects that had not been blown into space when the section was decompressed were now scattered about the floor. Reaching down to her belt, Lara removed her lightsaber and ignited it. Immediately the marines reacted by raising their weapons and looking for targets.

"Don't worry." Lara said to them, sensing their heightened state of alert, "I just wanted to be able to see properly."

The marines relaxed and went back to making sure that the remainder of their force made it through the hull breach safely, one or two of them glaring at her briefly. Meanwhile Lara stood still and let the force flow through her.

"This way." She said when the last of the marines was aboard, "The survivors are in this direction."

"You heard the jedi!" the marine sergeant yelled despite his suit's built in communications being able to pick up a whisper, "Now let's move out!" then he turned towards Lara, "After you ma'am." He added.

Lara smiled and still holding her lightsaber up in front of her she began to make her way deeper into the freighter.

As was typical of starship design, airtight hatches that could be used to isolate a damaged section and limit the effects of decompression separated sections of the freighter. But each of the hatches that Lara encountered had been forced open. Presumably the pirates who had attacked the ship had done this, suggesting that the crew had sealed them all before being boarded in a desperate attempt to halt their advance.

Lara stopped suddenly.

"What's wrong?" the marine sergeant asked.

"They're close." Lara replied, "Very close."

"I don't see anything." One of the marines said, sweeping his rifle around using the flashlight mounted beneath its muzzle to illuminate as large an area as possible.

"Not in the room." Lara said, moving slowly towards a wall, "They're just beyond this bulkhead I think. What's there?"

"I'm not sure." The sergeant replied, "I'm not familiar with this class of ship. But I'd say we're in the living area, the flight deck should be close."

Lara looked around the compartment the boarding party was in. She saw that there were numerous bunks set into some of the walls, while lockers were lined up against others. Meanwhile several tables and chairs were scattered about the room, some now knocked over by the rush of air escaping when the room was decompressed.

"We best keep going then." Lara said and she head towards the hatchway nearest to where she could sense the crew.

The hatchway led into the flight deck and as soon as the marine squad followed Lara through it the sergeant waved at two of his men. Immediately they slung their rifles across their chests and rushed towards two of the flight stations.

"Drive systems functional." One of the marines said, "Reduced power because of the damage suffered, but the ship is flyable."

"Secondary systems ready as well." The second marine reported, "Provided we can fix that hole in the hull, we can pressurise the ship."

"That's good." The sergeant said to Lara.

"Yes," she replied, "I got that. Now what about the crew?"

"Are they still close?"

"Yes. Just beyond the wall again. But I don't see a door."

"A safe room." The sergeant suggested.

"A what?" Lara asked.

"A safe room." The sergeant repeated, "An isolated compartment with a dedicated life support system to keep the crew alive. The entrance will be concealed to make it harder to find and the whole thing will be heavily armoured just in case an intruder figures out where it is." Then he stepped towards the bare bulkhead at the rear of the flight deck and held his rifle up above his head. He swung the rifle downwards and slammed its butt into the bulkhead. Lara felt the vibrations and 'clang' of the impact through her feet. The marine sergeant then pressed his helmet against the bulkhead and over the boarding party's communications net Lara heard the sound of banging from the other side. The sergeant smiled.

"See, they're hidden behind here. My guess is that the crew all hid when they were boarded."

"Smart." Lara said, "No point in getting killed for the sake of a cargo."

"Too bad we can't get them out. If they open up the door all their air will rush out."

"Your men said the ship was flyable." Lara said, "So we'll just have to fly it back to Aurek Station ourselves. The tech guys there can fix the hole and let the crew out."

"My men aren't pilots." The sergeant said, "Do you know how to fly a freighter?"

"As a matter of fact, yes I do." Lara replied with a smile and she adjusted her communications for a longer ranged broadcast, "Oh brother dear." She transmitted.

"Go ahead my young padawan." Cal replied.

"The crew are safe." Lara said, "For the time being anyway. They're in a safe room that we can't get them out of until the ship can be pressurised again."

"I take it you're planning to fly the freighter back to Aurek Station yourself then?" Cal asked.

"That's the idea. I'll need jump co-ordinates from you."

"I'll have them ready for you. Let me know when you've got the ship online. Oh and Lara-

"Yes?"

"Good work."

Lara smiled again.

"They'll all be just fine." Agent Jule Raser of the Sector Rangers said to Cal and Lara. The chief of the Republic's interstellar police force had joined the two jedi in the loading bay where the freighter was docked as medical personnel were helping out the crew. None of them had been seriously injured during the pirate attack, but they were all being taken for a proper medical examination just in case, "It's good you found them as quickly as you did."

"Thank Lara." Cal replied, "She led the marines straight to them."

"It was nothing." Lara said.

"So do we know what happened yet?" Cal asked.

"I've not been able to question the crew yet." Jule said, "But I'll have the medics let me know as soon they've been given the all clear."

"Well I'd be grateful if you let me know as well." Cal said, "We're involved in this now and I'd like to see it out."

"Of course."

"In the mean time, what's happening with the freighter?"

"I doubt there's much physical evidence left after the decompression." Jule said, "But Captain De Kuun has offered some of his people to search the ship anyway."

"I'd like to take a look as well." Cal said.

"Just the two of us?" Lara asked, "I don't know if you noticed, but that ship's huge."

"I don't want to search the whole ship." Cal said, "I just want to check out the ship's flight recorder. I doubt that ship was supposed to exit hyperspace where it did and I'd like to know how the pirates manage to be there when it did."

"Be my guest." Jule said, "Just try not to make a mess in there okay?"

"I've been aboard already. Its already a mess." Lara commented.

2.

"Found anything interesting?" Lara asked as she set a warm drink down beside Cal then sat down in the nearest vacant chair. Before replying Cal took a sip of the drink. He winced and stared at Lara, "It's not my fault." She said, "The machines on this ship are rubbish."

"Fortunately," Cal said as he set the drink down again, "the ship's flight recorder is of much better quality. The pirates left it intact as well, that's a plus point."

"So what does it tell us?"

"It tells us that the freighter dropped out of hyperspace right on schedule. There was no error."

"But they were in interstellar space. No-one intends to drop out of hyperspace out there."

"We did when we launched the rescue mission."

"Yes, but we'd set our nav computers to take us there – Ah, I see what you're getting at. Someone set the computer to bring them out of hyperspace at those co-ordinates."

"Exactly. But the ship was supposed to be heading for Coruscant. Its next point of call wasn't for another thirty parsecs. Their course was off as well."

"Were the co-ordinates input manually?" Lara asked.

"You're considering an inside job?"

"It wouldn't be the first time a cargo hauler decided he could make more money by stealing the cargo he was paid to move."

"No it wouldn't, but this time none of the crew had anything to do with setting the jump co-ordinates. They were downloaded directly from a remote device database."

"Which should have been Aurek Station's database right?"

"Exactly. Which means that we're looking for someone with access to the database, which narrows it down somewhat." Cal said and then he stood up.

"Where are you going?" Lara asked.

"Not I, we. We're going to see the station administrator and get his permission to take a look at the navigational database." Then, after a slight pause he added, "Oh and afterwards we're heading for a decent vending machine."

The administrator of Aurek Station was a bothan by the name of Ishtel Varr'kay. The alien was significantly less than a metre and a half in height while standing and sat behind his desk he appeared far too small for it.

"Jedi Udra, the system you are requesting access to is one of the most secure on this station." Ishtel said, glaring at the two jedi, "I pride myself that its security has never been breached."

"We're not saying that it has been breached sir-" Lara began.

"Yes, yes. Your fabulous tale of one of my staff selling their services to pirates." Ishtel interrupted.

"That's the most likely solution." Cal said, "I'm sorry, but it's true."

"Well I don't see it that way. In fact you've not presented a shred of evidence and until you do I'm not giving you access to my database." Then Ishtel waved his hands at the numerous stacks of datapads and hardcopy documents spread across his desk, "Now in case you haven't noticed I am rather busy."

"As you wish." Cal said.

"Yeah, we'll come back when you're not so busy." Lara added.

"I'm always busy." Ishtel replied, "It comes with the job."

Cal led the way from Ishtel's office and into the operations centre.

"First Captain De Kuun and now Administrator Varr'kay," Lara said from behind him as soon as the office door dropped shut, "I'm starting to think people don't want us here."

"I've seen that before." Cal told her, "Some people don't want us putting a stop to their plans while others like De Kuun and Varr'kay are worried we'll overshadow them. Especially the administrator, did you notice his desk?"

"It was a mess. Worse than our apartment."

"Exactly, he doesn't trust his subordinates to do anything for him so he tries to do everything himself. Its not uncommon amongst bothans."

"So why not let us see the database. Surely he'd want to know if one of the subordinates he doesn't trust had sabotaged it?"

"But he probably doesn't want us to be the ones finding out what's wrong with the system he's responsible for. However, on the bright side we may have just prompted him to take a look for himself."

"Which saves us a job." Lara replied with a grin and Cal just shook his head.

"Excuse me." A voice said from beside the Jedi and both Cal and Lara looked in its direction to see a man in a Republic uniform standing there, "I'm sorry to interrupt," he went on, "but we've had a message routed through here for you."

"A message for us? But who knows we're here?" Lara said.

"I believe that the gentleman had tried your apartment several times before asking if we knew where you were." The Republic officer said.

"Who is it and what do they want?" Cal asked.

The officer looked at his datapad.

"The message is from a Mister Hugo Callan and he would like to meet with you."

"Who's Hugo Callan?" Cal said, he glanced at Lara and she shrugged.

"I believe that Mister Callan is the owner of the freighter that was attacked." The officer said, "He is currently in a suite on deck four. Number four zero one. He asked for you go there as soon as was convenient."

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"Deck four." Cal commented.

"The luxury rooms." Lara said, "Looks like someone important does like having us around after all."

Two uniformed security guards stood outside the entrance to Hugo Callan's suite. They did not wear the uniform of the Republic personnel who handled the station's day-to-day security, but instead that of a private security firm. When they saw the Jedi approach one of them reached for his PTP link and spoke into it.

"Your guests have arrived sir." He said.

"Good," a voice replied, "send them in."

The guard let go of the link and opened the door he was protecting.

"Do go in. You are expected." He said.

Hugo Callan was a middle-aged human with olive coloured skin. He sat on a couch that looked to be worth more than all of the furniture that the Udra's apartment had included. As soon as they entered the two Jedi saw that he was not alone, also sat on the couch was a darker skinned human male that they had met before.

"Mister Drud," Cal said, "we meet again."

"Ah yes, Heddren said that he was acquainted with you." Hugo Callan said, "That is why he recommended that we contact you."

"He recommended us?" Lara said in amazement.

"Indeed I did." Heddren said, getting to his feet and offering his hand in greeting. Cal shook it out of politeness, but he never let Heddren out of eye contact.

"Heddren represents my company's interests in the sector when I am absent." Hugo said as he too shook hands with Cal then Lara.

"You're not a local then?" Lara asked.

"No." Hugo replied, "I live on Coruscant, but I have many dealings here and like to visit personally from time to time."

Without waiting to be asked, both Cal and Lara sat down on another couch. On the table between them there was a pot of caf and several cups.

"Do you mind?" Cal asked, indicating the pot, "The caf on your freighter was awful."

"Be my guest." Hugo said and Cal poured a cup for himself and one for his sister.

"I believe you have been looking into the theft of my property." Hugo went on.

"We have." Lara replied as she picked up her drink.

"But I'm afraid we haven't had much success so far." Cal admitted.

"Then it is fortunate that you are here." Heddren said, "We may have a lead for you."

Cal and Lara just stared back at him.

"A lead?" Cal asked.

"Indeed." Heddren replied, "But first we will require certain guarantees."

"What sort of guarantees?" Cal asked.

"The information we have comes from a source that must remain anonymous." Heddren explained.

"Yes, the man carries out certain tasks that are of use to us." Hugo added, "If we are to put you in touch with him then we must know that he will not face charges himself."

"Your source is a crook." Lara said, "That's how come he knows a flash lawyer like you." and she nodded at Heddren.

"The services he provides require a certain discretion." Hugo said.

Lara leant closer to Cal.

"So what do we do?" she whispered, "Isn't this sort of deception what we're supposed to clamp down on?"

"We're peacekeepers." Cal replied, also whispering, "So if we can put a stop to pirate raids then we should, even if we need help from an unorthodox source." Then he addressed Heddren and Hugo, "I'm willing to proceed on the basis that your man will remain anonymous, but like you I will also need certain guarantees. I need to know that he's not just another pirate that we'll be helping out by getting rid of his competition."

"Of course you will and we are willing to offer them." Heddren said, "Though not in writing. I'm sure you understand."

"We do." Cal said flatly.

Heddren looked at Hugo and nodded.

"The man you need to speak with is called Ren Distler." Hugo said, "He is a courier whose vessel is currently docked at this station. Its called *Distler's Luck*. If he's not aboard his ship, then you'll likely find him in the cantina on deck twenty-four."

"Thank you." Cal said and he gulped down what was left of the caf before setting the mug down on the table, "Come on Lara, we should leave these good people to their, err, business."

Likewise, Lara gulped down her drink before standing up and following her brother from the room. She waited until the guards on the door were out of sight before she spoke.

"Cal, I've got a bad feeling about this." She said.

"Don't worry my padawan." He replied, "Sure the man we're about to meet with is most likely a criminal, but right now he's all we've got."

"But those two basically admitted to us that they're dealing with criminals."

"Yes they did and maybe later on we, or someone else will fin out exactly what laws they're breaking and do something about it. But for now we're after pirates. Now come, I'll buy you a real drink."

"I'm old enough to buy my own remember." Lara said.

"Then you can buy me one."

3.

The cantina on Aurek Station's twenty-fourth deck was poorly lit. Most of the illumination came from flickering images on the walls that advertised various beverages available from the bar where a massive video screen dominated the wall above it.

When Cal and Lara entered the cantina a handful of the patrons took note of the lightsabers hanging at their waists and headed for the nearest exit as rapidly as they could. Keeping a wary eye on the beings still in the cantina, most of whom were now watching them as well the Jedi pair made their way directly towards the bar.

"We're looking for a man." Lara said to the barman, a blue skinned near-human wroonian.

"Well I'm right here for you honey, but your friend's not to my taste." He said with a wink.

"Did you pay to learn that line?" Lara replied, "Because if you did then you should ask for your money back." And Cal cracked a smile, impressed at his sister's put down.

"The man we're looking for is called Ren Distler." Cal said.

"Never heard of him." The barman said, frowning now that Lara had embarrassed him.

Deception.

Cal and Lara both felt the lie, but neither said anything.

"We were told to look for him here." Lara said.

"Then whoever told you that was wrong." The barman said, "Now are you going to order something or just scare of all my customers?"

"Two beers." Cal said and he glanced at Lara. She sighed and produced a credit stick.

"I'm not exactly flush with money you know." She said to him softly.

"Neither am I, remember?" Cal replied.

The barman swiped Lara's credit stick through his till before returning it and placing two small bottles on the bar.

"Come on," Cal said as he picked up one of the bottles, "let's find somewhere to sit." And selecting an empty booth that offered a good view of the room he walked towards it with Lara following close behind.

"Have you considered the possibility that the men who sent us here did so just to get us out of the way for a while?" she asked as she sat down.

"I didn't sense any deception from them." Cal said, sipping his beer.

"I did from the barman."

"Yes I did too, though quite how well he knows Distler is another thing."

"You can call me Ren." A voice said suddenly and a male human sat down at the table with Cal and Lara. Both of the Jedi realised that this man had been at the bar when they had announced their wish to speak with him, though he had said nothing at that time.

"Cal Udra," Cal said, extending a hand, "and this is my padawan Lara."

Ren shook Cal's hand then took the hand offered by Lara and kissed it.

"Ah, some people's beauty truly belongs out here among the stars." He said.

"She's also my sister." Cal added and Ren swiftly let go of Lara.

"We hear you may be able to help us." Lara said.

"I think I can." Ren replied, "You're both new to the sector aren't you? Do you know about the brenary?"

"They're an alien species aren't they?" Lara said, "Their homeworld was destroyed and now they live in fleets of starships."

"That's right." Ren said, "Most of them still live in their own system, but a few groups use ships bought from the Republic to travel further abroad. They're traders and you can pick up pretty much anything."

"Contraband?" Lara asked.

"Are we here to discuss what I buy from them, or how I can help you?" Ren replied.

"We'd appreciate your help." Cal said, "Please do go on."

"Well I was on one of their fleets late last night and I saw a ship come through with a whole load of containers marked with Callan Shipping labels. When I heard about the attack I put two and two together."

"But the brenary aren't technically part of the Republic." Lara pointed out, "We don't have the authority to carry out an investigation aboard any of their ships."

"No," Ren said, "but the brenary didn't buy everything that the pirates were selling and I overheard one of them saying that they were going to come here to try and get rid of it."

"Makes sense." Cal said, "Aurek Station is the primary trading post in the sector. I'm sure that not everything bought and sold here is one hundred percent legal."

"Believe me its not." Ren said.

"So where do you suggest we start looking then?" Cal asked.

"Contraband tends to be moved through docking ports on the lower levels." Ren said, "Deck two hundred or below."

"Why down there?" Lara asked.

"I'm guessing because the station is administered from the top twenty levels or so." Cal said to her.

"Exactly." Ren said, "There are lookouts near the customs and sector ranger offices that can alert people to their movements. But since you won't be coming from either of those places—"

"We can get down there unnoticed." Cal finished, "Thank you Mister Distler, you've done us a great service."

"Don't worry about it." Ren said, "Mister Callan has promised me a percentage of anything you recover."

The atmosphere in the lower levels of Aurek Station was cool and damp. Here and there small pools of water had even collected where deck plates had become dented and not repaired, a clear sign that Administrator Varr'kay was failing to keep on top of maintenance schedules this far down.

"So where do we start?" Lara said as she pulled her cloak tighter around her.

"I'm guessing that if the pirates are moving goods through here then they'll be using a loading bay big enough for two ships. Their own and whoever they're selling to."

"So they don't need to move it between bays?"

"Precisely. That would be too risky. By keeping their dealings in a single bay they can just undock if there's a sudden problem."

"A problem like us?"

"Yes. So we need try and take them by surprise."

"You know my instructors at the temple had something to say about 'try'."

"Yes, I'm sure they did. Now let's start checking loading bays."

Cal and Lara made their way to the outer edge of the deck where the loading bays and observation galleries were located. Using their abilities with the force they bypassed the bays where they sensed no life and continued on to the next. When they sensed life they paused to try and determine its intent.

"Cal." Lara whispered as he stood with one hand placed against a heavy door and the other to his head.

"Shush." He replied, "I'm concentrating."

"Cal." Lara repeated.

"What?" he snapped, opening his eyes and glaring at her.

"Why is one of the station's command crew down here?"

Cal drew in breath to reply, then realised that he had no answer.

"I don't know." He then said, "Are you sure?"

"I just saw the guy walk past the end of the corridor. I recognised the uniform from when Administrator Varr'kay threw us out of his office."

"He didn't exactly throw us out."

"Anyway, I don't see any reason why he should be skulking about down here."

"Skulking?"

"Oh yeah, he did not want to be seen. I could feel his fear. I'm surprised you didn't sense it."

"That's a drawback with focusing too hard on something," Cal explained, "it can blind you to something that should be obvious elsewhere. Now which way did he go?"

"This way." Lara said, walking down the corridor and beckoning for her brother to follow.

The pair of them crept through the corridors of the deck after the crewman. Neither of them was surprised when he approached a loading bay and went inside.

"Cray." A gruff voice called out as soon as the crewman entered the loading bay, "What the kriff are you doing here?"

"Making sure you don't get any ideas about cutting me out of the deal." The crewman replied.

"Looks like we've found the one responsible for altering the navigational database." Cal whispered, "Nice work."

"Thanks." Lara replied, "But what do we do now?"

"Well he left the door open, so we may as well take a look inside."

Cal and Lara crept closer and pressed themselves up against the bulkhead beside the open doorway.

Inside they could hear several voices negotiated the price of the goods that were being sold. Cal took a quick glance around the doorframe then pulled his head back again.

"Okay," he said, "there's a massive stack of crates already in the loading bay right by the door. I figure we can get behind them without anyone noticing. Follow me as soon as I go, quick and quiet. Got it?"

Lara nodded and Cal looked into the room and waved a hand, sending out the mental suggestion that something had just moved in a far corner.

"What was that?" one of the beings in the room said, looking away from the door and when the others looked in the same direction Cal sprinted for the crates. As instructed Lara followed and by the time the other beings in the room determined that there was nothing to see in the corner the two Jedi were concealed behind the crates.

As they listened to the ongoing negotiations, Lara spotted that one of the crates they were hiding behind had a label attached to it.

"Look," she whispered, "Callan shipping lines. This is part of the stolen cargo."

"Just like Ren said." Cal replied, "Looks like our deal was a good one."

It was then that Lara felt her hair move. She assumed that it was nothing but a draft, but as she brushed her hair with her hand she saw that she had just dislodged a multi-legged creature about the size of her thumb and she let out a yell, shaking the creature from her hand.

"It's a set up!" a voice suddenly called out from the other side of the crates.

"A bug? Really?" Cal said.

"I was surprised." Lara replied.

"Well no sense staying down here." Cal said and, drawing his lightsaber he leapt out from behind the crates, "Jedi!" he yelled, "Surrender now! Everyone here is under arrest!"

Lara stood up behind him and activated her own lightsaber. The two Jedi stood in front of the stack of crates and stared at the assembled group of pirates who were now all aiming weapons towards them. Only their agent Cray was unarmed.

"You heard him!" Lara snapped, "Drop your weapons."

"Don't be ridiculous little girl." One of the pirates said, "Take a look around, there are a dozen of us and only two of you."

"That's one more than we need." Lara replied.

"Ordinarily maybe." Cray responded and he produced a datapad, "But I wanted an edge just in case my business partners here tried to cheat me." And he jabbed a finger at the touch screen of the device.

Suddenly the gravitational pull from the side of the loading bay increased dramatically, dragging both Cal and Lara to the deck and sending their weapons falling from their grasp.

"Cal," Lara gasped, "I can't move."

"Me either." Cal replied, straining to form the words as his chest was compressed.

The increased gravitational pull ended as suddenly as it had begun and the two Jedi groaned as they let air fill their lungs again. Before they could recover, the pirates rushed towards them and stood over them, their assorted weapons aimed at them.

"So what do we do with them now?" one of the pirates asked.

"We'll figure that out later." another responded, "In the mean time just tie them both up."

"But I've only one set of binders." The other pirate complained.

"Then bind them together idiot."

Cal and Lara watched helplessly as money was exchanged and the pirates transferred the stolen cargo from the loading bay to their buyer's vessel. They were made to kneel in the centre of the bay with their hands raised above their heads, a set of binders securing Cal's right wrist to Lara's left. When the transfer was complete the pirates' buyers withdrew to their ship and after the docking hatch sealed there was the dull mechanical sounds of the ship's departure from outside the station.

"What about them?" one of the pirates who had been standing watch over the Jedi asked.

The leader of the pirate group looked at Cray.

"Leave me one of your men. I'll hide him until you come back." Cray said.

"You heard the man." The pirate leader said and he looked at the pirate that had just spoken, "You stay here and do as our friend says. The rest of you with me."

The pirates withdrew to their ship, leaving just Cray and one pirate to guard the Jedi. Again there was the sound of a ship disengaging from a docking port signifying the pirate's departure.

"Give me ten minutes to get back up to the operations centre." Cray said, "Then kill them and leave them here. I'll decompress the bay and flush them into space from ops." Then after the pirate nodded in agreement Cray left the loading bay the way he had come in.

Now alone with two Jedi, the pirate stared at his captives intently.

"Got any ideas?" Lara whispered to Cal.

"Shut up!" the pirate snapped.

"No need to nasty." Lara said.

"Do you mind if we stand up?" Cal said, staring the pirate in the face.

"What for?" the pirate said.

"It would be easier for you watch us." Cal said, channelling the force into the pirate's mind.

"Stand up!" the pirate barked, "It'll make it easier for me to watch you."

Slowly the Udras got to their feet.

"That was your bright idea?" Lara said, "Now what are we supposed to do?"

"Shut up!" the pirate yelled and he stepped within reach.

"Swing!" Cal yelled and the two jedi simultaneously formed their bound hands into fists and sent them into their guard's face. The force of the double blow sent him tumbling backwards. As he fell there was a sharp 'crack' of a projectile as he accidentally discharged his weapon. The bullet struck the wall just beside one of the docking hatches and there was a sudden whistling sound accompanied by the sudden blaring of an alarm.

"Its hit the hatch hydraulics!" Cal yelled, "The room's decompressing!"

The jedi rushed for the exit and dived through just as the heavy door came sliding down to seal off the room. From behind the door, they could hear the pirate hammering against it to be let out.

"What do we do?" Lara asked.

"Forget him." Cal said, "Get after Cray!" and still bound together, they set off down the corridor after the pirate agent.

The corridor ended in a junction and as they neared it both of the Udras pointed with their free hands at the passageway on their own side.

"This way!" they yelled simultaneously and upon reached the junction they each tried to go in a separate direction. When their arms were stretched to their limit, the pair were brought crashing back together and collapsed in a heap.

"What do you think you're doing?" Cal demanded.

"Following Cray." Lara replied.

"Well he went this way."

"No he didn't, he went this way."

Just then there was a faint 'ding' that signified the opening of a turbolift door coming from a side passage that they had run right past to reach this point.

"That way!" Cal snapped and getting back to their feet the pair rushed off after the sound.

They ran down the side passage and around a corner just in time to see the turbolift door closing, an arrow above it indicating that it was going up.

"The stairs!" Cal shouted, pointing to a doorway beside the turbolift, "If we're quick enough we can cut him off."

The jedi ran up the stairs, skipping over steps in order to get to the next deck up as quickly as they could. But as they burst through the door to the next level they saw that the turbolift display showed that they had just missed it.

"Nearly!" Cal exclaimed as he dragged Lara back towards the stairs, "We'll go up three floors and see if we can beat him!"

Three!" Lara exclaimed, gasping for breath.

"Quit complaining." Cal said, "Whoever said being a jedi was easy?"

"You did, every time I made a mistake and you wanted to make me feel like an idiot."

"Never mind that now."

The two jedi rushed up the next three flights of stairs before they burst out to the turbolift pint again. Both gasping for breath they saw that they had fallen even further behind.

"What... now?" Lara asked between gasps.

"Back... to... our... apartment." Cal replied, "Then... we... check... in... with... Agent... Raser."

Lara nodded. Then she noticed the doors opposite to the turbolift. There were two of them, each marked as public refresher stations.

"I need to go." She said, waving towards the one marked 'Female'.

"Can't you wait?" Cal asked.

"I've had two cups of caf, one beer and done a lot of running about without a break." Lara pointed out, "So no I can't. I need to go now."

"Don't look." Lara called out under the door of the refresher cubicle. Outside the cubicle Cal was crouched down, the arm bound to his sister reaching beneath the door.

"You're my sister." Cal said, "Why would I look?"

"Well don't listen."

"Don't listen? How am I not supposed to listen?"

"I don't know. Put your fingers in your ears or something."

Cal frowned.

"What a good idea." He said and he pulled his arm back under the door suddenly. There was a sudden 'thump' as Lara was pulled into the other side of the door and Lara cried out.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snapped.

"I can't hear you." Cal said, "I've got my fingers in my ears."

"Oh ha ha. Very funny."

It was then that the door to the corridor opened and Cal noticed a pair of feet standing in the doorway. Looking upwards, he found himself looking into the face of a startled looking twi'lek female.

"Jedi business ma'am." He said, "No need to—"

Then the twi'lek woman screamed loudly.

4.

"Gross public indecency?" Cal said in amazement.

"That's how the officer has written it up." Jule replied as she studied the report on her computer, "It says here that the two of you were caught in a public refresher station indulging in an act of—"

"We were not!" Lara snapped, "That woman wouldn't even let us explain before the security guards came storming in. Oh, and it would have been nice if those guards had been on hand a few minutes earlier on deck two hundred."

"Ah yes, the transfer of stolen goods." Jule said.

"And the spy." Lara added, "Just run a check for that Cray person."

"I already have. There is no member of the station's crew with either the first or last name of Cray."

"Well obviously he's using a false name then." Lara said and she leant back in her chair.

"Oh I agree." Jule said, "But I'm afraid I'll need you to identify the man involved before I make an arrest.

There are over two hundred crewmen who wear uniforms like the one you described. Perhaps if you asked Administrator Varr'kay—"

"I don't think that's going to help much." Cal interrupted, then he changed the subject, "Have you checked the report of the decompression?"

"Yes I have," Jule said, "and just like you asked I've amended it to say that there were three bodies found in the room but not listed any identities."

"What good is that supposed to do?" Lara asked.

"Now the pirates' agent thinks that we died along with the man left to kill us." Cal explained, "So we can hunt him down without him expecting us."

"Ahh." Lara replied.

"Is there anything else you want from me?" Jule asked.

"Yes, there is one thing." Cal said.

"What?"

"How about a key to these?" Cal said and he lifted his arm in the air, dragging Lara's with it.

"Of course." Jule said with a smile and she passed a key to Cal. While he released the binders from his and Lara's wrists he looked at his sister.

"We'll need to head back to our place and pick up our blasters." He said.

"Blasters?" Jule said curiously, "What about your lightsabers?"

"Somebody stole them." Lara replied.

Cal stepped from the turbolift car and into the operations centre, pausing to look around and studying the faces of everyone he saw. Most of the crewmen he could see were hunched over control stations, with a handful standing near or even within holographic displays indicating the positions of spacecraft around the station.

Cautiously he began to make his way around the room, circling it in a way that allowed him to observe every control station and see if he could identify his target. Then he caught sight of a familiar face and he stepped back to observe the man from behind a column of video monitors. Staring at the man, a smile spread across Cal's face as he realised that it was the man referred to by the pirates as 'Cray'. Sure enough the man was sat at one of the consoles that handled traffic control and navigational data requests.

"Hey buddy!" a voice called out from behind Cal, "How about letting us see what's on those displays you're blocking?" and Cal realised that he was indeed blocking several of the operations staff from viewing the displays he was standing in front of. The problem was that he was not the only one to have heard the outburst and there were other people now looking at him instead of at their consoles.

"Shush." Cal said to the man who had called out to him.

"Never mind 'shush', we've all got jobs to do. Who the hell are you anyway?"

"This is Jedi business." Cal said softly as more people looked in his direction.

"Jedi my ass. Where's your lightsaber?"

As soon as the man called out 'Jedi' loud enough for everyone in the entire operations centre to hear him Cal turned his head towards Cray and saw that the pirate agent had now looked up also and was staring him in the face.

"Stay there!" Cal yelled, pointing at Cray. But the man leapt up from his seat and began to run towards the nearest exit, dodging around several very surprised crewmen who failed to get out of his way. Cal set off after him, but rather than run around the rows and clusters of control consoles he used the force to assist

him in leaping up onto the top of the nearest console and began to bound from one to another as astonished crewmen watched him, several crying out in alarm as he knocked over items placed near where he landed.

But even though Cal had the advantage of moving in a direct line, Cray had begun much closer to his selected exit and the man reached the doorway well ahead of the Jedi knight. He slammed his hand on the door's control panel and threw a glance over his shoulder to check on Cal's position as it opened. Seeing that Cal was still some way off he turned again to leave, only to find himself face to face with Lara.

"Going somewhere?" she asked sarcastically.

Reacting quickly, Cray reached out to where another crewman was standing with a tray of hot drinks and he knocked the tray and its contents towards Lara. Lara reacted just as quickly and before the burning hot liquids could scald her she reached out through the force and knocked the tray aside, sending the drinks tumbling over the deck. Then she leapt over the puddle of spilt drinks and set off after Cray.

Ishtel Varr'kay heard the commotion from his office. At first he thought nothing of it, there were all manner of events that could cause the operations staff to make more noise than usual and few of them required his attention. If they needed him they would use the intercom to request he go to them and so he continued with his work. But then the noise increased and Ishtel sighed. He set down the datapad he had been reviewing and headed for his office door. Opening it, he stepped out into the operations centre. Where Cray ran right into him.

"Out of my way!" Cray bellowed as he tried to disentangle himself from the short bothan.

"What is going on here?" Ishtel demanded loudly, dragging himself out from under Cray, but the human just set off running once more.

But his collision with the station administrator had slowed Cray down enough for Cal to catch up with him and the Jedi knight leapt from on top of a console directly towards him with his arms outstretched. He caught Cray around his waist and sent him tumbling back to the deck, this time with Cal on top of him. Cray swung out an arm and sent his elbow directly into Cal's face before he could anticipate and evade the attack. Stunned momentarily, Cal relaxed his grip and Cray dragged himself clear. But at that moment Lara caught up with them. Aided by the force she somersaulted over the bewildered Ishtel and drawing her blaster as she flew, she landed with her legs split apart.

"Freeze!" she shouted, aiming the weapon at Cray.

The pirate agent halted and turned to face Lara, raising his hands above his head.

"Nice work." Cal said as he picked himself up and grabbed hold of Cray.

"Thanks." Lara said, "Now could you help me up? This really hurts."

Cal dragged Cray towards Lara and held out his free hand for her to take.

"Thanks." She said again as her brother pulled her to her feet.

"Just what do you think you are doing?" Ishtel demanded, "How dare you disrupt my operations centre?"

"Administrator." Cal said sternly, "Allow me to present you with the pirate spy. The man who we believe has been subverting your navigational database."

As a pair of sector rangers led Cray out of the operations centre in binders, Cal and Lara retreated to Ishtel's office with the bothan.

"This is outrageous!" Ishtel yelled before the door had even had chance to close behind them, then he returned to his seat and slumped down in it, "I had no reason to suspect anything. What led you to him?" Lara was about to speak when Cal got in first.

"Pure chance actually." He said and Lara frowned at him, "It occurred to us that the pirates may attempt to dispose of some of their stolen goods here, so we went down to the lower decks to take a look around. Fortunately for us they didn't bother to shut the loading bay door after your man out there had joined his accomplices and so we were able to overhear them talking with a buyer."

Lara's frown disappeared as she realised what Cal had just done. By leaving out Ren Distler's involvement he had kept his word to Hugo Callan and made sure that their testimony would be admissible in court. Of course he had also just reminded the administrator that the man just taken into custody had worked in one of the most sensitive locations on Aurek Station, something that was unlikely to go down well with a member of the notoriously paranoid bothan species.

"I think..." Ishtel said slowly before pausing briefly, "I think that you should take a look at his work station. There should be a log of his activity there. If he has interfered with my database any further I want to know about."

"Of course." Cal said, "That's an excellent suggestion. We'll get right on it."

"Yeah." Lara muttered, "Wish we'd thought of that earlier." And Ishtel scowled at her.

"Follow me my padawan." Cal said, not bothering to admonish her for her statement.

Cal strode confidently to the control console where the man he knew as Cray had been sat and took the seat that the agent had occupied. With no seats to spare, Lara stood behind him, leaning over his shoulder. He tapped at the keyboard and called up a list of every command issued by the console for the last week, along with the username of the operator at the time. A few key presses later and the list radically shortened as Cal filtered out everything not done by the current user, Cray.

"That's odd." Lara said as she looked at the list, "According to this he's never used this terminal before this shift."

"Not at all." Cal said, "It just means that he knows how to delete his command history from the log. I know it's just circumstantial, but it suggests he was up to no good. We can pull a duty roster later to prove he was here. In the mean time we can still have a look at what he's been up to today."

"What's that?" Lara asked, placing her finger over an entry simply named 'Navdat' that was less than an hour old.

"He accessed the navigational database." Cal said as he watched the screen change in response to Lara's touch and provide full details of what was done, "It seems that he altered the listed co-ordinates of the beacon out at Korstes. It looks like he replaced them with a location in deep space."

"The site of the last attack?"

"No, that would be risky. If the pirates kept hitting freighters at the same location then the Navy could just stake it out and wait for them. He must be sending them to wherever he knows the pirates will be. Then after the targeted ship leaves he can change the database back to how it's supposed to be. Only this time the pirates aren't going to find an unsuspecting freighter dropping out of hyperspace."

"It's going to be us right?" Lara said expectantly.

"Oh we'll be there all right." Cal said, "But I don't intend on going up against an unknown number of pirates alone. I think that this time I'm going to tell Captain De Kuun that having earlier requested our help, he is now required to provide us with backup."

"He'll hate that." Lara said.

"I know." Cal replied.

"Hate leads to suffering you know."

"Well so long as he suffers in silence I'm sure we'll be fine."

5.

"They're here captain." The comscan operator said as soon as his instruments detected the vessel exiting hyperspace, "Wait, there's something else."

The vessel's captain leant forwards in his seat.

"What is it?" he asked, "Two transports?"

"I don't think so, the other vessel is much smaller. I think it's a Delaya-class ship."

"So," the captain said as he leant back again, "our prize has hired some mercenaries to protect them. Well we'll just have to show them that it will take more than one puny gunship to defeat us won't we?" and he pressed a button mounted on the arm of his chair, activating his ship's intercom, "*Ando's Revenge* this is *Steel Heart*. Lacko Dabb, are you there?"

"This is *Ando's Revenge*, I'm here captain." An inhuman voice replied.

"Lacko, have you seen what our prize has brought with it?"

"You mean the second ship?"

"Exactly. Comscan says it's a Delaya-class, so I'm guessing that these traders have hired themselves an escort of mercenaries. A ship like that would be a useful addition to our little band Lacko. Bring it to me and you and your crew will get a double share from this job."

"You'll have your trophy." Lacko replied and then the channel went dead.

Aboard the *Ando's Revenge* its aqualish commanding officer, Lacko Dabb looked at his own sensor display.

"I hope they're corellians." He hissed, then there was the sound of docking clamps being released as his ship moved free of the *Steel Heart* and Lacko powered up its engines.

"Here they come." Lara said, "One mothership, plus three smaller raiders. One of whom looks to have taken an interest in us." Then she paused, "Err Cal, it looks like it's a crescent-class."

"Ahh." Cal replied. Crescent-class ships were considerably smaller than delaya-class vessels like the *Bright Hope*, but they carried a much heavier armament, which left the jedi's ship badly outmatched in a one-on-one engagement, "I think we'd better let Captain De Kuun know."

Lara activated the *Bright Hope's* ship-to-ship communications.

"Contact incoming." She said simply before breaking the link.

Moments after the massive cargo bay doors of the freighter that had been requisitioned for the mission opened and from out of the vessel's spacious hold the Republic Naval group emerged. First came the squadron of fighters led by Lieutenant Shill and after them Captain De Kuun's own squadron of six gunships emerged.

"This is Captain Kuwar De Kuun of the Galactic Republic Navy," the duros officer transmitted over an open channel as soon as his own vessel was clear of the interference of the freighter's thick hull, "all vessels engaged in hostile actions are to stand down immediately and surrender."

"Does he really think that will work?" Lara said to Cal.

"Can't hurt to try." Cal replied.

"It's a trap!"

"I can see that." the pirate captain aboard the *Steel Heart* said, "Can we jump?"

"I don't have a hyperspace jump programmed yet sir." His navigator replied.

"How long?" the captain asked.

"Err, ten minutes at least. I think."

"Don't think. Do it!" the captain snapped, then he turned to the rest of his bridge crew, "Target their gunships first." He said.

As the two forces closed on each other the first flashes of weapons fire came from three of the four pirate ships, with the *Ando's Revenge* holding its fire as it continued race towards the *Bright Hope*.

"Break!" Lieutenant Shill ordered her squadron and the fighters split apart into pairs, each following a slightly different course towards the pirates.

Meanwhile, aboard the *Bright Hope* Lara was watching the approach of the pirate gunship.

"Cal, they're getting nearer." She said nervously.

"Stand by on the laser cannons." Cal replied, "Our weapons outrange theirs slightly. If you can make the first shot count then we'll have an easier time of it."

“Okay then.” Lara replied and she looked to the *Bright Hope*’s targeting system. She waited while the pirate vessel came closer, concentrating on its path and trying to discern where it would be when it entered range. The targeting display suddenly changed to indicate that the enemy ship was in range and Lara wasted no time in opening fire. Twin streams of energy blasts from the *Bright Hope*’s wing mounted lasers flashed across the gap between the two ships and slammed into the *Ando’s Revenge*.

“Cal I got him!” Lara exclaimed as she saw lightning dancing across the pirate ship, her attack having overloaded its electronics.

“Great.” Cal said, “Still three more to go though.” And he banked the ship towards the remaining pirate vessel, allowing the stricken *Ando’s Revenge* to tumble beneath it.

Captain De Kuun felt his gunship rock as a blast from the pirates’ mothership struck its shields.

“They appear to be concentrating their fire on our gunships captain.” His co-pilot said.

“Use it.” The captain replied, “Have our gunships fly an evasive pattern and have Lieutenant Shill’s fighters engage them directly.”

“Yes sir. But what about the jedi?”

Captain De Kuun paused.

“This is a naval engagement.” He said, “Leave them to their own devices.”

Cal banked the *Bright Hope* to evade a second pirate attack ship.

“Could you have cut that a bit closer?” Lara asked as she grasped the console in front of her, “So what’s your plan brother?”

“Well since Captain De Kuun seems to be content with dealing with the gunships I thought we’d pay a little visit to their mothership.”

Aboard the *Steel Heart* the captain watched as the battle unfolded. Much slower than the gunships, the *Steel Heart* was for the time being relegated to firing the occasional volley from extreme range. But although his vessel’s heavy guns had forced one of the Republic gunships to withdraw to the freighter that had carried them here, so far the battle was going in the Republic’s favour.

“What are they doing?” he said as he noticed the *Bright Hope* break off from the engagement and head towards his own vessel.

“They appear to be moving into an attack position captain.” The comscan operator said.

“I can see that!” the captain snapped, “But why? We’re far more powerful than them.”

“They’re entering weapons range.” The comscan operator said.

“Open fire.” The captain said.

The *Bright Hope* shook as the first turbolaser shot struck it.

“I take it back.” Lara said, “That last pass wasn’t so close compared to that one.”

“Yeah well we can’t afford many more like that.” Cal replied and he began to pilot the ship in a more erratic fashion, “See if you can get us a torpedo lock.” He added.

Lara reached up above her head and lowered the proton torpedoes’ dedicated targeting computer. With the pirate mothership looming in space ahead the mechanism rapidly acquired it and began the calculations necessary to achieve a lock.

“This would be easier if you’d hold steady.” Lara said to Cal.

“I bet the gunner aboard that ship is thinking the exact same thing.” Cal replied, “Concentrate. You can do this.”

Anticipating another volley of fire from the pirate vessel Cal yanked the control column back towards him sharply and Lara lurched forwards in her chair, her finger falling on the torpedo trigger.

“Oops.” She said as there was a brief flash of light through the canopy and the brilliant white globe of a proton torpedo streaked ahead of the ship, “That wasn’t my fault.” She added.

Without a proper lock on the pirate ship, the torpedo flew aimlessly through space in a path that was clearly taking it away from the pirate ship. From his position on the bridge the pirate captain watched its progress for a moment, confused.

“What the hell did they do that for?” he said out loud.

“What do you want to do about it?” his weapons officer asked.

“Its harmless.” The captain replied, “Ignore it.”

Lara watched the torpedo's progress while Cal concentrated on evading the continuing fire from the pirate ship.

"What are you waiting for?" Cal asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well there's a torpedo out there, so use it."

"Huh?"

"It's not moving towards the pirate ship right now is it? Move it closer."

"How? Oh wait. I get it."

Lara breathed in deeply and closed her eyes. In her mind she pictured both the torpedo and the pirate ship. Then she opened her eyes again and stared at the torpedo. Through the force she gave the weapon a brief shove, taking care not to interfere with its triggering circuitry. The torpedo lurched widely, turning towards the pirate ship. Even with Lara's push the torpedo had already flown past much of the ship and the best she could do was direct it across the ship's path at a point it had just flown through. Where the energy from the ship's drives detonated the warhead.

The *Steel Heart* shook violently.

"What happened?" the captain demanded as the lights went dim.

"Torpedo hit to the stern!" a crewman called out, "Our engines are down."

"What about hyperdrive?"

"I still don't have a jump calculated." The navigator replied, "We're stuck here."

"Sir!" the comscan operator yelled, "Enemy vessel closing."

6.

The burning pirate ship now filled the *Bright Hope's* viewport

"Nice work sister." Cal said, "Now let's go see if they need help."

"Good idea." Lara replied, "Maybe we can get our lightsabers back."

"There." Cal said, pointing at a spot on the pirate vessel about a quarter of the way from its prow, "Does that look like a docking port to you?"

"Why I think it is my dear brother." Lara said back to him and she pulled her blaster from its holster, checking it.

Cal spun the *Bright Hope* around, aligning the ship with the docking port before firing the thrusters to take it in closer. There was a heavy 'clang' as the two ships made contact and the *Bright Hope* shuddered from the impact.

"Okay," Cal said as he released his harness and climbed out of his seat, "let's go knock."

"I think we should change first. You know, just in case."

"Good idea my padawan. Suit up."

Fortunately, the vacuum suits that Cal and Lara kept on board the ship maintained internal pressure by using an inner layer that tightly gripped its wearer rather than behaving like a human shaped balloon that had to be kept at low pressure to allow the user to move. This enabled the two jedi to put their suits on in a much shorter time by eliminating the need for them to decompress beforehand. Though they were standing beside the hatchway of the *Bright Hope* in less than five minutes they knew that the pirates would already be waiting for them.

Cal opened the *Bright Hope's* hatch to expose the hatch of the pirate mothership and knelt down. As he opened up a toolkit and began to pry open the hatch's control panel he spoke to Lara.

"Okay then my padawan," he said, "time for a test. How many?"

Lara stepped forwards and placed a hand against the sealed hatchway. Then she opened up her mind to the force.

Fear.

"Between six and eight." She said, "They're afraid. I can feel their fear."

"Good." Cal replied, "Their fear will cloud their judgement. We can use that. Now stand back."

Lara stepped away from the hatch just as Cal exposed the control circuitry. With his blaster in one hand he took a tiny screwdriver from the toolkit in the other he stood beside the hatch and pressed the screwdriver's tip against the circuit. There was a brief flash the metal tool shorted out the control and with a sudden hiss the hatchway rolled open.

Almost immediately there were cries of alarm and weapons fire erupted from inside the pirate ship. After a short time the gunfire ceased as the pirates realised that there were no targets in sight. Then Cal hurled the screwdriver through the door and searched for the minds of the pirates in the force.

The tool landed in front of the pirates. One of them looked down and saw it lying on the deck, but although his eyes told him that it was nothing but a screwdriver his mind told him something different.

"Grenade!"

The pirates began to scatter and as soon as they left their positions the jedi emerged from cover, firing. Though the hand held energy weapons the jedi wielded were not their primary weapon of choice, the pair were adequately familiar with them to lay down a deadly field of fire at the short range they were currently at. No longer protected by the bulkheads and other obstacles they had initially been using for cover, the pirates were cut down in moments.

"Cease fire." Cal said when he saw that the pirates were now all lying on the deck and cautiously he advanced into their vessel. Lara followed him and the pair picked their way through the bodies strewn where they had fallen.

"Well, well." Cal said, "Look who we have here." And he knelt down beside one of the bodies and rolled it over.

"Hey isn't that the guy from Aurek Station? The one that took our lightsabers?"

"I believe it is." Cal said and he began to rifle through the dead man's pockets and pouches, "Here we go."

He said, opening up the dead man's jacket and exposing the two jedi weapons he had clipped inside, "Looks like he didn't want any of his fellow crewmen taking them." And Cal removed the lightsabers and tossed one to Lara.

"A man on a pirate ship afraid of being robbed?" Lara commented as she holstered her blaster, "Who would have thought it?"

"This could come in handy too." Cal said, removing a PTP link from the pirate's belt, "Here, take this and hook it into your suit's comms. Let me know if you overhear anything interesting."

"What's our status?" the pirate captain demanded as he leant over the shoulder of the comscan operator. "The navy has destroyed another gunship captain," The comscan operator replied nervously, "and I don't think the other one will last much longer. We've hardly done any damage to them at all."

"What about us?" the captain then asked, looking around the other bridge crew.

"I still don't have a jump ready." The navigator said, "'Even if I did, I doubt that we'd be able to enter hyperspace anyway, there's not enough power."

"Doesn't anyone have any good news?" the captain said, returning to his own chair and he activated the intercom, "Kyman, what's the status on the ship that's trying to board us? We may need it to evacuate in." then, when there was no reply he added, "Kyman, do you read me?"

Still there was no answer and the captain slammed his fist down on the arm of his chair.

"Damn it!" he yelled, "We've been boarded!"

"Cal, I think they know we're here." Lara said as they made their way towards the front of the ship.

"It had to happen sooner or later." Cal replied, "Let's just hope we can reach the bridge." Then, before either Cal or Lara could react there was a rumbling and a thick armoured door slid shut between them, "Lara!" Cal called out, banging on the door, "Are you alright?" but there was no reply, "You better be standing away from the door little sister." He said to himself and then he plunged the blade of his lightsaber into the blast door.

Despite being armoured to resist attack, the door offered little resistance to the lightsaber blade and in less than a minute Cal had cut a circular hole a metre across in the barrier. He withdrew the blade and then delivered a sharp kick to the circle of metal that he had just cut around and it fell back with a loud 'clang' as it landed.

"Mind what you're doing!" Lara shouted as she looked through the hole, "That nearly landed on my foot." Cal exhaled.

"Thank the force you're fine." He said.

"Yeah I'm fine, now give me a hand through this hole." And Lara reached an arm through the hole.

"Do we have full control over the life support?" the pirate captain demanded. Other crewmen reporting two intruders believed to be Jedi knights heading their way had sent several panicked reports to the bridge. But before the reports could be clarified the transmissions had been cut off abruptly.

"We can shut off the air supply to any part of the ship." A crewman replied, "But we've nothing beyond that. Gravity and temperature controls are both gone."

"Cutting off the air supply is useless." The captain said, "The reports said that the Jedi were wearing space suits."

"There are still several blast doors between us and them." A crewman suggested.

"Idiot!" the captain bellowed, "The Jedi have lightsabers. Blast doors will only slow them down they won't stop them. No. They're coming for us, so we'll have to beat them here. Everyone check your blasters and remember that the Jedi may try and trick you." Then he looked at the crewman he had just berated, "And you can stand nearest the door." He added.

"This should be it." Cal said as he stared at the bridge door, "We'll have to cut through, but be careful the pirates on the other side will be expecting us."

"Then let's do this together." Lara suggested.

Cal nodded and the pair plunged their lightsabers into the armour door and began to pull them away from each other, each cutting half of the circle needed to provide a breach in the door."

"Here they come." One of the pirates said, watching the growing cuts in the blast door begin to form a rough circle.

The captain said nothing; instead he aimed his blaster towards the centre point of the circle. Then, just as the two lightsaber blades met up again he fired. Unlike the latest energy weapons beginning to see service with military forces, the pirate captain carried an example of the more common pulse wave blasters that had been around for many centuries. These weapons projected a tiny spatial disruption that imparted a significant 'kick' to its target. So when the captain's shot struck the damaged door it knocked the circular segment cut from it backwards.

"Look out!" Cal shouted as the lump of metal began to move and as he leapt backwards he reached out through the force to try and slow down the lump. Effortlessly, Lara spun out of the way of the moving chunk of door and pressed her self against the bulkhead beside it. Satisfied that they were both clear, Cal released the lump. But instead of continuing to move it instead halted, protruding only part way through the door.

"What happened?" Lara asked.

"The metal cooled." Cal replied and he pointed to the edge of the circle they had just cut, "Look, the two edges had time to fuse back together."

"Oh great." Lara said, "How do we get inside now?"

Cal looked around.

"The air's still circulating." He said.

"So?"

"So that means that the vents must be open. We'll go through the ventilation shafts. If we ditch our helmets and air packs we'll easily fit through."

"Oh great, I bet they'll never expect that."

With a single swing of his lightsaber, Cal cut the cover from the ventilation shaft and it clattered to the floor.

"Ladies first." Cal said and he shut off his lightsaber as he knelt down to help his sister in climbing up to the vent.

Lara also shut off her lightsaber and removed her suit's helmet and life support backpack. Then, placing a foot in Cal's offered hands she pulled herself up into the vent. Then she held out a hand and helped Cal up behind her after he too had removed the bulkier parts of his suit. In the closeness of the vent the Udras had reason to be grateful for the close fitting nature of the vacuum suits they wore. Even normal jedi robes would have been likely to snag here, but in their vacuum suits they were able to make their way to the next ventilation grill easily.

"This one." Lara whispered as she looked down into the bridge.

Squeezing alongside his sister, Cal looked for himself and he saw the pirates still concentrating on the damaged doorway.

"As soon as the grill drops they'll know we're here." Lara said softly.

"Over there." Cal replied just as quietly and he indicated a second grill on the far side of the bridge, "You think you can shift that from here?"

Lara nodded.

"Okay," Cal said, "move back. On three you rip that thing free. When the pirates are distracted I'll kick this one loose and jump down. You follow when it's safe. Agreed?"

"Agreed. On three."

"Right then." Cal said and the pair changed places so that Cal was crouched by the grill with his feet pressed against it. Then he counted, "One. Two. Three."

Lara reached out through the force and pulled the grill opposite towards her. It flew from the wall and span as it travelled through the air before clattering to the deck below.

"They're in the ventilation ducts!" a pirate yelled and almost as one the entire bridge crew swung towards the now open vent. When the first man fired his weapon Cal kicked the grill in front of him and pushed himself out of the vent shaft. There was a 'snap-hiss' as he ignited his lightsaber once more and by the time he landed it was held out in front of him.

The nearest pirate whirled around and reached out with a blaster. But he had strayed too close and with a single swing Cal sliced the screaming man's arm from him. The remaining pirates were shocked by Cal's sudden entrance and they dived away from him. Taking advantage of the pause, Lara leapt down from the vent and rolled across the floor. She came to a halt beside a console that had a pirate cowering behind it. Igniting her own lightsaber, she thrust the weapon through the console and impaled his chest on the blade.

"Shoot them!" the pirate captain yelled and he opened fire on Cal.

Cal turned and held his lightsaber between him and the captain. As the pirate fired Cal adjusted the position of the blade so that it blocked the path of the spatial distortions. As each one hit the energy blade the containment field surrounding it dispersed them harmlessly and Cal remained unhurt by the attack. Then he sensed another presence closing on him and with a quick glance he spotted another pirate crawling around behind him. Knowing that he could not block attacks from two sides at once Cal reached out an arm towards the second man and flung him backwards into a bulkhead.

Lara shut off her lightsaber again as she jumped up onto the console beside her. Then she leapt upwards and grabbed hold a duct running across the ceiling above her. Using this she swung herself across the bridge and let go. The pirate in front of her had just enough time to turn towards her before she landed on top of him. The pirate fell backwards uncontrolled. But Lara was unfazed and using the pommel of her

deactivated lightsaber she delivered a blow to the side of his head that rendered him senseless. Then she tuned her attention to the captain himself, now the only remaining pirate. The man was still aiming his blaster towards Cal and she focused on the weapon itself. Just as she had done with the ventilation grill, Lara pulled on the blaster with the force. She was not strong enough to rip it from the captain's grip, but she did spoil his aim.

Cal saw his opportunity and reacted immediately. He lunged towards the captain and held out his lightsaber in front of him. The tip of the blade pierced the captain's chest just beneath his ribcage and the man's eye's opened wide as it passed right the way through him. Cal shut off the weapon and the captain slumped forwards, dead before he hit the deck.

Igniting her lightsaber again, Lara rushed to her brother's side and the pair then stood back to back, slowly turning around as they surveyed the bridge.

"Looks like that's the last of them." Lara said.

"Agreed." Cal said and he shut off his weapon. Then he rushed to what looked like the comscan position and sat down. Then he activated the ship's communications and spoke, "Captain De Kuun, this is Cal Udra on the pirate mothership what is your situation?"

"This is Captain De Kuun," the duros replied immediately, "we have destroyed the final gunship. What is your status?"

Cal looked around.

"We're both fine here." Cal replied, "We have secured the bridge, the mothership is ours. If you can bring the freighter alongside then we can have Sergeant Keltan and his men round up what's left of the crew."

"Confirmed Jedi Udra. Await further instructions. The navy thanks you for your help." And then the channel went silent.

"You know," Cal said, leaning back in the chair, "I think that the captain is going to take all the credit for our little operation here."

"I think you're right." Lara said, "Still at least we won."

Aboard the *Ando's Revenge* Lacko Dabb had been forced to watch helplessly as the Republic task force destroyed and captured the rest of the pirate fleet. Its electronics overloaded, his own ship had drifted away from the battle zone and had been ignored by the Republic ships. Now though his systems were back on line and his crew awaiting orders.

"Wait here." Lacko said, "Do nothing so long as the navy make no effort to approach us."

"What about the rest of the fleet?" his co-pilot asked.

"They're gone." Lacko said, "I'm in command now."

Ren Distler sat down opposite Hugo Callan and Heddren Drud.

"From what I heard the jedi dealt with those pirates." He said, "Now what about my money?"

"None of the cargo was recovered." Hugo pointed out, "You get nothing."

"Our agreement was very precise." Heddren added.

"I'm not talking about the cargo." Ren said, "I'm talking about this." And reaching inside his jacket he produced a tiny wooden box that he set down on the table and slid towards Hugo.

Hugo remained motionless and instead Heddren picked up the box and opened it.

"Is this genuine?" he asked, holding the box out to Hugo.

"Came straight from the dig site." Ren said, "Your little ploy to use the pirates to get the Republic's forces out of the way worked like a charm. I just flew straight there and back without anyone monitoring me."