

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



I-V: SOLO

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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...

SOLO

WHAT DID THE PREVIOUS OCCUPIER OF GAL AND LARA UDRA'S APARTMENT LEAVE HIDDEN THERE? WHATEVER IT WAS SOMEONE WANTS IT BACK AND LARA HAS TO HANDLE THIS WITHOUT HER OLDER BROTHER...

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1 .

"Ren Distler? So what questionable scheme are you plotting today?" Cal Udra asked.

Ren had been talking softly with another man as Cal approached him, but as soon as Cal spoke they ceased talking to one another.

"Actually Jedi Udra," Ren replied, "my friend Corran and I were just discussing a young lady."

"Really?" Cal asked, sitting down next to Ren, "So how about you tell me too. I'm rather fond of them myself."

"Well this one's better than the usual visitors here." Corran told him, "Tall, slender and blonde."

Cal waved at the bartender, then pointed at Ren's drink to indicate that he wanted one of the same.

"Sounds good." He said to Corran, "So where is she?"

"Not here yet." Ren said, "Of course knowing Corran she may not actually exist anywhere other than at the bottom of a glass."

"Ah yes." Cal said as his drink arrived and he took hold of it, "Beer goggles. The original vision enhancing optics." And he took a sip of his drink while Ren grinned.

"Well I'm about to show you both." Corran said with a smile, "Cause she's just walked in now."

"Okay, where?" Ren asked and he began to look around.

"Over there." Corran said, pointing towards one of the cantina's doorways, "Just look at her."

Cal looked around to see who it was that Corran was pointing at. Whereupon he found himself looking at his younger sister and padawan learner, Lara.

"I mean just look at her." Corran said, "With a body like that wouldn't you just like to—"

Rage.

The barred door slammed shut, locking Cal in the cell.

"You're kidding me." He said.

"I'm afraid not." Agent Jule Raser of the sector rangers replied. As the most senior member of the Republic's interstellar police force in the sector, Jule doubled as the head of security for Aurek Station. A task she did not appreciate given her limited resources, "Administrator Varr'kay believes that your violent behaviour is contrary to the good running of his station."

"Violent?"

"You broke a man's nose." Jule pointed out.

"Not so much broke as smushed." Lara said from the far side of the detention section, where she was leaning against a bulkhead and she held her hands up to her face and spread them apart to represent what she had seen of Corran's nose after Cal's encounter with the man.

"So no bail?" Cal asked.

"You have access to a starship and few ties here. He considers you a flight risk."

"Oh that's just poodo. He's just annoyed because we exposed a pirate spy amongst his own people and chased him all over the control centre."

"That's probably true." Jule said, "But he's pulled rank and unless you can post a sizeable surety you're here until we get this sorted out."

Cal looked at Lara.

"Lara, call Master Karas-" he began.

"That may not help." Jule said, "Administrator Varr'kay has already been in touch with your superiors."

"Oh great." Cal said.

"It's your own fault." Lara said, standing up straight and approaching the cell.

"Are you saying I shouldn't stick up for my baby sister?"

"I'm not a baby Cal!" Lara snapped, "I can look after myself."

"Well you're going to have to for a while." Jule said, "Until further notice you're the only jedi active in the sector."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Cal said, shaking his head.

Lara returned to the apartment she shared with Cal alone. Though Aurek Station featured lodgings of outstanding quality, the resources of the two jedi had compelled them to seek more reasonably priced accommodation. Or to be more exact, the cheapest they could find. The end result was that they lived in a section that was somewhat run down. Thus it was all the more surprising when she discovered who was sat on the floor outside the door to her apartment, resting her back on the door itself.

"Gayal?" Lara said.

"Hi there." Gayal Karn replied, getting to her feet, "I was waiting for you. Well actually I was waiting for your brother. The station directory told me you lived here, though why I can't think."

"Because my brother can't keep hold of things that are leant to him." Lara said.

"Where is he anyway?"

"Prison."

"No seriously, where is he?"

"Seriously, prison. He punched some guy in the face for insulting me."

"Ever the hero hey? That was kind of why I came here. To thank him for rescuing me."

"Well right now I've no idea when he'll be available."

"Then I should thank you instead." Gayal said with a smile, "I tell you what, how about you join me for dinner? I've got a table booked at the Utopia Club."

Lara paused. The Utopia Club was located in the most expensive section of the station. Not surprising really, after all Gayal Karn was one of the famous Karn family. Her ancestors had been on the original survey mission that charted this sector for the Republic. Now her family, as well as the rest of the so-called Founding Families were fabulously wealthy.

"Sounds expensive." Lara replied.

"Of course it is. But you're not paying. I am." Gayal pointed out to her.

Lara smiled.

"Lead the way." She said.

The serving droid glided ahead of Gayal and Lara, leading them to their table.

"Your other guests are already seated madam." The droid said.

"Other guests?" Lara asked.

"Yeah." Gayal replied, "My sisters are aboard as well."

"Your sisters?" Lara asked, "Err, I don't know if this is such a good idea. I don't think they like me."

"What? Because you left them locked in a closet for hours on end? I don't care about that."

It was then that the table came into view and from the looks on Keera and Sial Karn faces it seemed that they were not happy to see Lara either.

Anger.

"What's she doing here?" Sial asked.

"Yeah," Keera agreed, "I thought you were bringing the other one. The guy."

"He's in jail." Gayal replied as she sat down at the table, "So I asked Lara instead. After all she helped rescue me as well while you two just tried to go out partying." Then she looked at Lara, "Sit." She said, "Don't mind these two."

"Well okay." Lara replied as she made her way to an empty chair, "I suppose we can start over." Then she looked at the menu, "Why aren't there any prices?" she asked when she noticed that none of the entries were priced.

"Because if you have to ask then you can't afford to eat here." Sial said.

"Not every where's as cheap as your outfit." Keera added. Then she suddenly reached under the table and grabbed her shin, "Ouch!" she exclaimed.

"Be nice to my friend." Gayal said as she returned her foot to its original position.

"So what happened to your master?" Sial asked.

"My master?" Lara replied, "Oh, you mean Cal?"

"He punched someone." Gayal said and both Keera and Sial stared at Lara.

"Really?" Keera said.

"Yeah. He broke the guy's nose and now he's locked up until the magistrate decides what to do with him."

"Is he allowed visitors?" Gayal asked.

"I don't know." Lara answered.

"I know the sort of visit you want to make." Sial said, smiling at Gayal.

"Just act like you normally do and maybe they'll lock you in the same cell." Keera added.

"Oh shut up the pair of you and decide what you want to eat." Gayal replied sternly.

Lara paused for a moment and braced herself on the wall in the corridor outside her apartment. At twenty-one years old and fresh from the Jedi temple on Coruscant she had not had much experience with drinking alcohol. She knew that Cal could use his abilities with the Force to maintain his concentration even after consuming a great deal, but she had yet to learn the technique from him. The Karn sisters on the other hand seemed to be able to tolerate drinking much more, even though in theory Gayal was the only one old

enough to drink either here on Aurek Station or their homeworld of Crassis Major. It seemed to Lara that when you were as rich as the Karns certain rules could be avoided.

She fumbled in her robes for the key to her apartment and was about to open the door when she sensed a presence inside.

"Let you out then did they Cal?" she muttered to herself, but then she stopped. There was something off about the presence in the force. Lara was used to her brother's presence and this was not as strong. For a moment she considered that the alcohol was distorting her feelings, but then reconsidered. Whoever was inside was a stranger.

Immediately, Lara reached for her lightsaber. She kept the weapon deactivated and opened the apartment door. Inside the apartment was dark and she could hear a hammering sound coming from the lounge.

Carefully she crept inside and raised her lightsaber, still keeping the weapon deactivated. One wall of the lounge was a transparisteel window and enough light from outside was entering the room for Lara to make out the silhouette of a figure crouch down in the far corner even without her Jedi senses.

There was a snap-hiss as Lara activated her lightsaber, the blue glow now illuminating the room.

"Okay mister!" she snapped, "Hold it right there!"

The figure spun around and looked straight at Lara.

"Corran?" she gasped as she saw the face of the man that Cal had struck. Now though a 'T' shaped piece of plastic that was held in place over his forehead and nose by medical tape obscured much of his face, "What the kriff are you doing here?"

"Hey look babe, " he said as he stood up and slowly edged across the room, "its really easy to explain if you'd just shut that sword off for a moment."

Lara just stared back at him and Corran continued to slowly make his way towards her.

"Stay back." She warned.

"Come on babe-"

"I said stay back."

Then Lara spotted Corran's hand reaching for his waist and the light from her lightsaber reflecting off the pistol tucked in the top of his trousers. She reached out her hand and through the force she pulled the weapon towards her before Corran could get hold of it. Corran himself lunged forwards, attempting to reclaim the gun. But instead Lara was the one who took hold of the gun first and as Corran closed she lashed out and slammed the butt of gun into his face. Howling with pain and clutching at his already broken nose Corran collapsed to the deck.

Lara stepped back from the groaning Corran and after tucking his gun into a pocket in her cloak she turned on the lights and looked at where he had been crouched. There she saw that two of the wall panels had been prised loose and he had made a start on a third. In the space behind the panels Lara could see that there were numerous packages that did not look like the ducts and wiring that were typically concealed behind the station's walls.

"So are you going to let Cal go now?" Lara asked.

"Sorry but no." Jule responded as she looked at the items hidden behind the panels Corran had removed.

"Why not?"

"Because nothing about what he did has changed so until I'm informed that charges have been dropped or the administrator decides he can be released he's got to stay where he is. None of this stuff changes that."

"What is it anyway?" Lara asked, peering around Jule at the items she had lined up on the floor.

"Well," Jule replied, standing up, "we've got what looks like two kilograms of ryll spice, twenty or thirty death sticks, a beam rod and ammunition and whatever these are." And Jule picked up one of several transparent plastic boxes that held small electronic circuits.

"Well I suppose its up to me to find out then isn't it?" Lara said as she too inspected one of the containers and the circuit it held.

"You?" Jule replied.

"Yes, me." Lara said.

"How come?"

"Well I'm the one that caught that Corran guy trying to take this from behind my wall and since the Jedi order pays for this place, that makes it a Jedi issue. Plus, as you said yourself I'm the only Jedi in the sector."

"I agree with your brother." Jule said, folding her arms.

"Why?"

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

Lara just frowned.

2.

Lara let Jule take the ryll and death sticks. She had no interest in following up what was a relatively minor seizure. Besides the cha'a who had lived in the apartment until his arrest on spice smuggling charges had probably already been interrogated by the sector rangers about his activities in that field. But the circuits were another matter. There were many controlled technologies in the Republic and just as many beings keen to obtain those technologies if for no other reason than they were not supposed to have them. A common method for transporting them was to break them down into component parts and move these inside other more mundane devices.

The fact that these circuits had been placed in dedicated containers that allowed for inspection suggested to Lara that the cha'a had been about to deliver them to their end customer. She guessed that Corran knew exactly what they were and who they were destined for, but before she questioned him Lara wanted to try and discover some of the information for herself. If she could demonstrate some knowledge, then maybe she could fool Corran into believing that she knew more than she did.

Lara took the circuits to the ship that she and Cal had been provided with by the Jedi Order, the *Bright Hope*. This relatively spacious vessel contained a workshop that included equipment for running circuit diagnostics and it was this that Lara wanted to use.

Like many pieces of modern technology the majority of the components used on the circuits were so small that even with her Jedi abilities, Lara was unable to make out any markings on them. But with the assistance of the *Bright Hope's* equipment she hoped to at least be able to identify the components even if she could not determine the devices' purpose.

Unfortunately, the makers of the devices had taken steps to prevent this and the top surface of each of the major components had been ground away just enough to remove all traces of manufacturers markings.

"What the hell are you?" she said to herself, holding up the circuit she had just placed in the workshop scanner.

Clearly her attempts to identify the components were not going to yield results, so that only left the way that the circuit was arranged. Lara knew enough to realise that the placement of the components could give clues as to how they interacted, but she did not know how to determine this for herself. But she knew where she could find someone that did.

The temperature of Aurek Station's power plant was significantly higher than other areas. The fusion core generated a significant amount of excess heat that it would require too much effort to remove. The uniforms of the crewmen who worked here were designed with this in mind of course, but Lara's Jedi robes were intended for more temperate climates and she found herself breaking into a sweat almost as soon as she entered the area.

"Can I help you miss?" an engineer asked, noticing that Lara did not belong here and curious as to how and why she had got into the power plant. Lara noticed his hand resting on a point-to-point communications link, ready to summon assistance.

"My name's Lara Udra, Jedi." Lara replied, "I need assistance in an investigation."

The engineer relaxed.

"Of course Miss Udra. What do you need?"

Lara pulled one of the circuits from her robes.

"I need to identify this circuit." she said, "Specifically I need to know what sort of device it comes from."

The man took the circuit and looked at it, and then he frowned.

"I'm not familiar with this layout." The engineer said eventually, "But I may know someone who does." Then he reached for the PTP link and activated it.

"Growanda, could you meet me on gantry six? There's a young lady here who needs your assistance."

Then he looked back at Lara, "Growanda should be with us momentarily." He said, "If anyone can help you it's him."

Growanda did indeed arrive promptly. The Wookiee towered over both Lara and the engineer and from the look of him he did not find the temperature in the power plant any more comfortable than Lara did. The Wookiee growled a greeting.

"The young lady would like this device identifying." The engineer said, handing the circuit to Growanda who pulled a magnifier from his tool harness and began to inspect it.

After a few moments Growanda growled again, while still looking carefully at the circuit.

"An oven?" Lara asked. She had a passing knowledge of the wookie language, but she was by no means fluent. Both the engineer and Growanda stared at her. Growanda growled again.

"He said that it a magnetron controller." The engineer said, "Like what you'd find in a microwave oven. Not that it's an oven." Then Growanda continued his inspection.

"So what else are those things used in?" Lara asked, "I doubt anyone would bother smuggling cooking equipment."

"Lots of things." The engineer replied, "Communications devices, sensors, weapons—"

"Weapons? What sort of weapons?"

"Well, wave weapons are the most common. I use the word common in a relative way of course. Wave weapons are prohibited just about everywhere; even the military doesn't use them. But there are others. I've heard of something called a charric that's made by some alien civilisation off the unknown regions. A handful find their way into our space through intermediaries."

Growanda handed the circuit back to Lara and growled.

"Okay, I got either 'power' or 'aftershave' from that." She said to the engineer.

"He said that because of the tracking of the circuit he thinks that it's designed to channel a great deal of power through it. That indicates that its intended for a directed energy weapon. There's no provision for adjusting the power levels so it looks like a wave rifle control circuit. I'd be careful if I were you, anyone with access to weapons like that is dangerous, even to a jedi."

"I know." Lara replied, "Well, thank you both. You've both been of great help." And she shook the engineer's hand. Then she reached out for Growanda's hand, but the wookiee instead wrapped his arms around Lara and growled as he pulled her in close and hugged her.

"Whoa!" Lara croaked as her face was filled with fur, "That's nice but I need to go. And breathe."

"Well it's nice to have a visitor." Cal said, looking through the bars of his cell at Lara.

"Actually I'm not here to see you." She replied, "I'm in the middle of an investigation."

"An investigation? Lara, I've been locked up for less than twenty four hours and already you're getting delusions of grandeur."

"No, I'm serious Cal." Lara said and she held out the circuit that Growanda had just identified for her.

"What's that?" Cal asked.

"It was hidden in our apartment, behind a false panel in the wall. That Corran guy broke in to steal it."

"He broke in?" Cal said, scowling, "Are you okay?"

"Of course I am." Lara told him, "I can look after myself. Mind you, his nose is a bit flatter than you left it." Then both Cal and Lara smiled, "So I thought I'd come here and question him."

"I never noticed him being brought in." Cal commented.

"Well he must have—" Lara began before a sector ranger approached her.

"I'm sorry Miss Udra," he said, "but we've no record of that being having been brought here."

"Told you." Cal said.

"But he must have." Lara said, "I saw the sector ranger take him from our apartment. He was a vultan."

"I know who you mean." The sector ranger said and he checked his datapad, "It says here that he last checked in at twenty three hundred hours last night when he was ordered to report to a break in. His shift ended shortly after that."

"But he didn't check in at the end?" Lara asked.

"No." the sector ranger replied, "But there were no reports of trouble from the other sector rangers who attended the scene so I thought—"

"Well I'd say the trouble came afterwards." Cal interrupted, "Officer you've got a man missing and an escaped prisoner too."

Lara waited in the security office just long enough for Jule to arrive, furious about being dragged away from dinner with her husband because her subordinates failed to follow proper procedure. Then she headed back to her apartment, where she was surprised to find all three of the Karn sisters waiting for her.

"You're a hard person to reach." Gayal said, "We've been calling all day. We thought you might like to join us for dinner again."

Lara looked at them. She could sense a certain tension from Sial and Keera, while Gayal was a complete blank.

"Our treat." Sial said.

"I wish I could." Lara said, "But I'm working."

"Working?" Keera said, "What, is it some secret plot against the Republic?"

"I hope not if she's the only one investigating." Sial said and both Gayal and Lara glared at her.

"No, just a smuggling operation." Lara said, "But I'm really busy with it so-"

"That's fine." Gayal said, "You have to work. We'll catch you later." And the three sisters began to walk away as Lara watched them leave.

Standing alone at her door, she looked around. She had seen the direction the agent had taken Corran and she walked in that direction, taking her time and studying the bulkheads carefully for signs of foul play.

Her route took her to a turbolift cluster and it seemed sensible that the agent would have used one of them to take Corran to the detention level. The problem was that there were six turbolifts and the agent could have taken any of them.

There was a single call panel for all of the lifts and Lara pressed the button indicating she wanted to go up towards the detention level. She waited as the turbolift cars moved between decks, knowing that there was no way to tell how long the agent would have had to wait. It was when the next available car arrived and its door slid open that Lara heard something. It was a soft rattle and it came from beside her.

Inside the turbolift car a small group of beings looked at her, expecting her to get in.

"I forgot something." She said, "I'll get another one." And the being nearest to the turbolift's control panel shut the door. Meanwhile Lara walked in the direction of the noise. It lead towards an air vent set at floor level and Lara placed a hand against it. Then she frowned as she realised that there was no flow of air through the vent. She took a compact flashlight from her pocket and shone it through the vent. As soon as she activated the light it reflected off the badge of a sector ranger.

Keeping the flashlight trained on the body, Lara produced her PTP link and activate it.

"Agent Raser," she signalled, "you need to send someone to the turbolift cluster coreward of my apartment. I've found your missing agent."

Lara waited until Jule arrive with a pair of sector rangers.

"In here." Lara said, crouching back down to the vent and shining her flashlight into it.

"Okay boys," Jule said to the other two sector rangers, "let's get that grill off."

Lara stood back and watched as the men first removed the vent cover and then slid the body out onto the floor. Jule crouched down beside the body and placed her hand on its chest.

"Feels too soft." She said, pressing down gently.

"A pulse wave weapon?" Lara asked.

"I think so." Jule replied. Though hybrid stabilised plasma and particle beam weapons were becoming more common in the galaxy, pulse wave weapons remained the most common personal energy weapon. These projected a compact spatial distortion that imparted significant impact force on a target. Against a humanoid such as a vultan a blast at close range to the chest would shatter ribs and pulverise internal organs.

Jule shook her head slowly.

"Take him away." She said to the other sector rangers. Then as they carefully wrapped their former colleague in a body bag she turned to Lara, "So what now?" she asked.

Lara thought for a moment.

"Ren." She said.

"Who?"

"Ren Distler. He was with Corran last night. He may just know who else he hangs around with."

3.

"Control this is *Distler's Luck*, where's my clearance?" Ren transmitted.

"Please hold." The traffic controller responded.

"Hold? I've been holding for over ten minutes and I've seen ships behind me in the queue leave already."

"*Distler's Luck*, power down and prepare for inspection." the controller said.

"Inspection?" Ren said to himself, "Oh that's just great."

Ren shut down his ship's engines and lowered the access ramp. He guessed that the authorities hoped to catch him with contraband, but on this occasion his entire cargo was legitimate and he smiled as he thought about the looks on their faces when they found this out for themselves. But as he strode down the access ramp he found Lara waiting for him instead of the customs agents he expected.

"Lara!" he called out, holding his arms out wide, "How are you doing?"

"I'm looking for Corran." She answered.

Ren grinned.

"What is he suddenly playing hard to get now your brother hit him?"

"He's wanted."

"Sooner or later we all are."

"For burglary, illegal arms dealing and murder."

Ren's face fell.

"Murder?" he asked.

"Of a sector ranger. He didn't pull the trigger, but he escaped lawful custody when the man was killed. Who are his friends Ren?"

"Hey look," Ren replied, "I hope you don't think that I had anything to do with—"

"No, I don't suspect you. Yet. But if you get in my way I'll see you standing next to him in court."

"Come with me." Ren said, looking around the docking bay, "I don't want people to see me talking to you. Nothing personal." Then he turned around and walked back up the ramp. Lara also looked around, then realised that she did not care if she was being watched.

"Wait for me then." She called after Ren and ran up the ramp.

The *Distler's Luck* was not as spacious as the *Bright Hope* and Lara found herself having to duck beneath cables left hanging where Ren had jury rigged repairs in narrow areas of the ship.

"Drink?" Ren asked as he sat down and pulled a beer bottle from a cooler mounted beside his seat.

"Yes please." Lara replied and she accepted the bottle.

"I've an opener here." Ren said as he took another bottle from the cooler for himself. But before he could pick up the opener Lara waved her hand and the top flew from the bottle he held with a 'pop'. Then she repeated the action with her own drink and took a swig.

"So have I." She replied and she sat down opposite Ren.

"Handy." Ren said.

"Yes, but don't tell Cal I did it. So what do you know about Corran?"

"He first appeared on the station about the same time you did." Ren said, "He was looking for a cha'a that your friend Raser sent down for his business dealings."

"You mean ryll?"

"That's what she got him for, but he was involved in more."

Lara reached into her pocket and produced the circuit she had shown to the engineers.

"Like this?" she asked, "Apparently its from a wave weapon."

"That's a nasty piece of hardware for such a nice young lady to be carrying around." Ren said and he reached out for the circuit, but Lara pulled it away.

"The cha'a lived in my apartment before me and Cal." She said, "Corran broke in and tried to take a bunch of these. Then a sector ranger was killed to break him free."

"I don't know anything about that." Ren rapidly replied, "Killing cops is bad for business. It attracts too much attention from the wrong people. People like you."

"Thanks." Lara said and she lifted the bottle to her lips again.

"Hey look," Ren protested, "I'm in a line of work where people that can pull thoughts from your heads aren't good for business."

"So what sort of people does Corran hang around with? Aside from you of course?"

"Well he was taking a shine to you." Ren said and Lara glared at him. Ren sipped at his beer then went on, "Look I didn't know him that well, but I know he was a crewman on a starship."

"How?"

"Because he checked in with it once while I was there. I never saw any of the other crew though, so I can't tell you what any of them look like or even how many there are."

"So how did you meet him?" Lara asked.

"He was in my usual bar one night last week." Ren replied.

"The place where he met me?"

"That's the one. Come to think of it, it's the only place I've ever seen him. He spent more time in there than I did."

"So he's a heavy drinker?"

"No. In fact he hardly drank. He made a couple of drinks last all night. I figure he was tight with his cash."

"He wasn't being frugal." Lara said, "He was staking the place out. He was looking for me and Cal. His people must have found out we moved into the cha'a's place. By staking out places we might go to relax they could tell that the apartment would be empty. Corran probably expected me to be busy with Cal in the detention section all night."

"Well he found you. I doubt he'll be looking for you again."

"No he won't." Lara agreed, "But his friends might still be after me, after all they probably know I've got their stuff now. So I need to find them first."

"How are you going to manage that?" Ren asked.

Lara smiled and returned the circuit to her robes before pulling out her PTP link.

"I know someone who knows something about hanging around in bars." She replied and she set the PTP link to contact Gayal.

"I can't afford this place." Lara said as she looked at the price tags on the clothes in the store window, "I told you I have three hundred and two credits to spend."

"You said you wanted me to help you find an outfit to make you look like something other than a boring jedi nerd." Gayal replied and Lara frowned at the description, "I spend more than three hundred and two credits on underwear. Now come on inside. I'll pay. Well, mom and dad will pay." And Gayal took hold of Lara's sleeve and pulled her inside the store.

Immediately the pair were approached by one of the staff.

"Good day madam." The woman said to Gayal, ignoring Lara entirely, "How may I help you?"

"By leaving me alone to sort out my friend." Gayal snapped back at her and looking somewhat embarrassed the woman went away.

"Was that really necessary?" Lara asked, "She was only trying to help."

"She works on commission, she'd just direct us to what she wants us to buy." Gayal said as she began to pull dresses from racks and hand them to Lara.

"Hey, I only need one." Lara said.

"Yeah, but you're shopping. Which means you try on twenty. Ooh I do like these sunglasses. Here put them in your robes while no-ones looking."

"I will not!" Lara hissed, "Jedi don't steal. Put them back."

"Okay." Gayal replied, "Spoilsport. Okay, now go try all of these on and we'll figure out which looks best."

As it happened, Gayal was not the only one waiting when Lara emerged from the dressing room. She had heard whispering while she changed but had not recognised the voices of Keera and Sial.

"If I wasn't seeing it with my own two eyes I wouldn't believe it." Sial said, looking at Keera.

"Yeah, she actually looks normal." Keera replied, "As normal as you can look wearing something off the peg anyway."

"Well?" Lara asked, looking at Gayal.

"Crimson? No. I don't know why I picked that one. What was wrong with the black?" Gayal replied.

"It doesn't cover my stomach or my shoulders, my underwear would show."

"You're kidding me." Gayal replied.

"No she's not." Keera said, "She wears this horrid one piece number."

"I do change it daily you know." Lara said.

"For more of the same?" Sial said, "Do you write the day in the back as well?"

"Leave her alone." Gayal said to her sisters, then she looked at Lara, "Go try on the black, I'll get you what you need. Then we can all go."

"Where?" Keera asked.

"She needs to go to some bars." Gayal said, "We may as well go too."

"Oh no." Lara said, "I can't take you. I'm looking for some dangerous men. I can't be worrying about protecting you too."

Gayal smiled.

"We can look after ourselves." She said and from her pocket she slipped a compact semi-automatic pistol, "After the kidnapping daddy decided it would be best if we could all defend ourselves properly." And both Sial and Keera discretely produced compact side arms also before they all put them away again.

"So how do we handle this?" Gayal asked.

"We don't handle it at all." Lara replied, "All I need is to go in there and figure out if there's anyone in there specifically looking for me."

"But if they know who you are then won't they recognise you?" Keera asked.

"They would if they could see me." Lara told her, "I can blend in and dull people's senses. That's the point in the dress. In a crowded place like this I can't block everyone from seeing me so I'll just make it difficult for them to notice my face. That'd be a waste of time if they could still see my usual robes."

"So what do we do?" Sial asked.

"Just act normal." Lara replied, "But try to keep out of trouble."

"That's not normal for her." Keera said, looking at Gayal.

"Yeah, well just remember what happens if I tell the bartender droids to ask for your ID."

Keera and Sial both frowned briefly.

"Enough of this." Lara said and she walked into the bar.

A few of the patrons threw glances in her direction, but thanks to Lara's manipulation of the force they failed to notice her properly and turned away again. It was only when the Karn sisters entered behind her that more eyes turned towards her. If not for her using the force to conceal herself, Lara would have been offended.

The bar itself was a mid range establishment. Rather than possessing an actual bar that customers would approach to purchase drinks from, it utilised a number of roaming droids that stored a supply of beverages within their bodies, while returning to a central point for either refills or more exotic orders.

Keera and Sial headed towards one of the many tables in the bar while Gayal and Lara headed for the nearest droid to purchase drinks.

"The minimum age for the purchase and consumption of alcohol by humans in the sector is twenty-one standard years." The droid stated flatly, "I will require proof of age."

Smiling, both Gayal and Lara produced identification. Fortunately for Lara, her masking of her facial features had no effect on the droid and it accepted their identification.

"Your appearances have been stored for future reference." The droid said as it handed over drinks, "You will not be asked for identification again."

Then, drinks in hand the pair joined Keera and Sial at the table.

"So who is it then?" Sial asked Lara.

"Give me a chance. I haven't figured it out yet." Lara answered as she looked around the bar. There were plenty of male humans and near humans looking towards the table, but Lara was having trouble picking up on the feelings of any of them, there were too many different minds here for her to focus on any particular one. In fact the only deception she could sense was coming from her own table.

"So what's really going on here?" she asked, looking at each of the Karn sisters in turn, "Why are you pretending to be so friendly?"

Fear.

It was just a brief flash, but enough for Lara to pick up on.

The Karns looked at one another nervously.

"We don't know what you're talking about." Sial said.

Deception.

"Oh yeah?" Lara said, "Well let's just look at this logically shall we? When we first met you and Keera tied me up and left me alone in your apartment."

"Well you locked us in the closet afterwards." Keera replied.

"So we're even." Lara said, "But I get the feeling being even isn't good enough for either of you. So what's the story?"

"Its me." Gayal said, "I've told them to be nice to you."

"Why?"

"Because I like your brother." Gayal said.

Lara just stared at her. Once again she found that reading Gayal was beyond her.

"Oh." She said eventually.

"So what can we do to prove we're willing to be friends?" Gayal asked, "Can't we do anything to help you out here?"

"I don't think so." Lara said, "I can't focus on anyone in here. What I need is a distraction, something everyone will focus on. That way I can watch for anyone that keeps looking around for me."

"I think we can handle that." Gayal said, "Can't we Sial?"

"I think so." Sial replied, smiling.

"But we'll need you to put in a good word for us afterwards." Gayal said.

"Good word? Why?" Lara asked.

"Watch and learn." Gayal said and both she and Sial got up from the table.

"What are they doing?" Lara said.

"Just watch." Keera replied, "Gayal knows what she's doing. Of course she's not done it with Sial before."

"Done what?" Lara asked, looking at Keera. Then she heard a sudden yell from behind her.

"Nerf herding bitch!" Gayal bellowed and Lara looked around just in time to see her land a blow across Sial's face. In response Sial grabbed a jug from the nearest table and poured its contents over her older sister. Gayal shrieked and lunged at Sial, causing both to fall to the floor.

The effect was immediate as bar patrons concentrated on the fight, some of them cheering. On the other hand, the serving droids reacted by approaching them directly.

"Cease!" they called out one after another, "Your custom is no longer required. Station security will be summoned." But Gayal and Sial continued to fight.

Lara looked around. Throughout the bar beings were watching the fight, cheering it on and booing the droids attempting to bring it to a halt. Then she spotted someone who was not focused on the fight.

He was a white-eyed arkanian, a near human species and he was sat where he could keep tabs on all of the bar's entrances. Even as the sound of tearing cloth and a scream provoked a massive cheer he kept looking back towards the doorways. Then, just as a pair of sector rangers entered he got up and headed for a different door.

"Got him." Lara said and she head from the bar after him, leaving Gayal and Sial to be dragged off one another by the sector rangers. Meanwhile Keera poured the remains of all three young women's drinks into her own glass and watched her sisters get arrested.

4.

With only one person to focus on now, Lara could maximise the effect of her abilities to dim the arkanian's senses. Right now she was certain that he could look directly at her and still not notice that he was being followed. A theory she put to the test when he got into a turbolift.

Lara crept around him as he entered and then turned towards the control panel and selected deck one hundred and ninety. This made sense, being one of the lower levels it was further away from Aurek Station's command and security sectors. The underworld was well aware that this far down they would have plenty of warning about movement by the sector rangers and they could be gone before being caught. Aware that the arkanian's cohorts could be waiting when the turbolift reached deck one hundred and ninety, Lara knew she had to get out one deck sooner than continue using the stairs. So with a flick of her wrist, Lara reached out through the force and the button for level one hundred and eighty-nine also lit up. Then she waited.

The turbolift came to a halt at deck one hundred and eighty nine, just as Lara had planned. The arkanian was about to step from the turbolift when the doors opened but then realised that this was not the floor he wanted and he looked down at the control panel. Seeing her chance, Lara slipped past him and out of the turbolift while he muttered about buttons sticking together. Behind her the door slid shut.

Lara paused in the deserted corridor and removed her shoes. Though they were incredibly expensive, she knew their design would be unsuitable for either sneaking around or pursuit. Hopefully, she thought to herself, she would be able to recover them later and not have to explain to Gayal that she had lost them. Next she slid one hand up her dress to where her lightsaber was taped to the inside of her leg, wincing as she pulled it free and the tape pulled at her skin. Picking the tape off the weapon she tossed it into a nearby trash chute. Then she inserted her free hand through the hole in the dress over her stomach upwards to where she had hidden her PTP link and removed it also. Now properly equipped, she headed for the nearby stairs and crept down to the next deck where the arkanian had been headed.

She stopped when she reached the door she wanted and concentrated. If anyone was just beyond the door then there was no way she open it without being detected. She needed to know if the coast was clear.

Letting the force flow through her, Lara felt the presence of several sentient lifeforms. But they were all some distance away and she decided to take the chance in opening the door.

"Did you hear something?" a voice said as Lara waited just inside the stairwell.

"It's nothing." Another replied and Lara crept through the open doorway.

Deck one hundred and ninety was poorly lit, most of the lighting panels having failed but not been replaced. The black colour of her dress actually helped her blend in, Lara thought. She could hear the sound of talking from the same direction she had sensed the nearby lifeforms and Lara moved closer.

"We should just bust in there and take the stuff back." A gruff voice said.

"Are you brain dead?" came the reply, a voice that Lara recognised as Corran's, "We've no idea where the jedi's got the stuff stashed now. We need to find her and let her lead us to it."

"Why wait?" the original voice asked, "We can handle her. Grab her and make her talk."

"So you are brain dead." Corran said.

Lara halted as the beings ahead continued to argue. She had been in this sort of situation before and it had not worked out well. This time however, she was going to take more care.

The corridor opened out into a large loading area along which were several large hatchways that allowed access to numerous hangar bays each designed to hold a single small vessel. This had been designed as a place where cargoes could easily be traded but as this part of the station gained a reputation for attracting criminals most of the more law-abiding vessels went to the better monitored, if more expensive docking bays instead. There were four figures standing beside a stack of brightly patterned boxes that a droid was transferring into the ship in the adjacent hangar. Pressing herself against a bulkhead, Lara raised her PTP link and hoped that the repeater system down here was functional.

"Agent Raiser," She whispered, "can you read me?" Lara then waited, but all she heard from the compact device was static. Evidently Lara was on her own. She clipped her PTP link to her dress and extended her arm towards the large doorway of the hangar.

With a flick of her wrist, Lara triggered the mechanism controlling the door and it slammed shut. The loading droid was just walking through the doorway when this happened and the force of the heavy door dropping down crushed the machine beneath it.

"What the hell?" one of the figures called out as all four rushed to see what had happened to their droid.

Seeing her chance, Lara rushed towards them. She was almost upon them when Corran looked around.

"It's the jedi!" He yelled and he produced his own PTP link, "Get the ship out of here!" he shouted. With only a single bulkhead separating him from his ship, the lack of the repeater system was no obstacle.

"Down on the floor!" Lara shouted as she ignited her lightsaber, "You're all under arrest!"

All four men reacted by drawing weapons and the arkanian fired. Lara swung her lightsaber and deflected the energy bolt into the stack of boxes, blasting several apart and setting fire to the rest.

"Scatter!" Corran shouted, "She can't follow us all."

Corran was right, Lara could follow only one of the men so she decided that it might as well be Corran himself. After all he was the only one who she knew could explain the death of the sector ranger. As she ran towards him, Corran fled down one of the corridors leading from the loading bay and Lara headed after him. The compartments on this deck were mostly sealed up after they fell into disuse. This left a mazelike layout of corridors with either poor or no lighting at all and Corran did his best to evade Lara by making sudden change in direction or using a parallel corridor to try and slip behind her. But he had reasoned without Lara's jedi senses and she was able to continuously sense his exact location. Being barefoot she could move both quickly and quietly and she shut off her lightsaber and made her way down a side passage.

Moments later she sensed Corran's approach ahead of her and heard his footsteps on the deck. Then she reactivated her lightsaber.

"Hi there." She said as Corran ground to a halt in front of her, "Now just give up."

"Not this time babe." He replied and he began to raise the blaster he held.

Lara reacted quickly and she held out her lightsaber in front of her, positioning its blade above Corran's gun arm. Corran's expression changed to one of horror as he failed to react in time to this move and he lifted his arm into the path of the blade. He screamed in pain as the limb was severed and dropped to the floor between them. Clutching at the cauterised stump, Corran staggered backwards into a bulkhead and slid to the floor, still screaming in pain.

"Get me a kriffing doctor." Corran spat, still cradling what was left of his right arm.

"My man's looked you over." Jule replied, "He says there's no sign of infection and you're fit to be interrogated."

"Yeah? Well I don't know anything."

Deception.

The lie was so blatant that even Jule saw through it without the need for Lara to tell her.

"You knew about the stash in my apartment though." Lara said, "How?"

"Lucky guess." Corran replied, "I broke in looking for valuables and noticed the false panel. Everyone knows jedi keep stashes of valuable antiques hoarded away."

Deception.

Desperation.

Once again Corran was lying and doing it badly.

"You know," Lara said, turning towards Jule, "I think that I damaged his brain when I hit him in the face. Or maybe it was when Cal did it. He just doesn't get how transparent he is."

Anger.

"You're going to pay for that you know?" Corran snapped at Lara, "I'll take you to the kriffing cleaners. I'll own the whole jedi temple by the time I've finished suing you and your rancor faced brother."

Just then the door to the interrogation room slid open and another sector ranger entered clutching a datapad.

"Is that the evidence log?" Jule asked.

"Yeas ma'am." The man replied, "We've been over what was left of the suspect cargo and logged it all."

Jule took the device and began to read the list of items found in the burnt out remains of the boxes that Corran and his associates had been loading onto their ship.

"Repulsor toys?" Lara said as she read the list over Jule's shoulder.

"See." Corran said, "We weren't doing anything illegal."

"You're wanted for murder. Harboring a fugitive is a serious offence." Jule replied without looking up.

"What about the rest of the weapons?" Lara asked.

"There's no sign of any weapon components in this list." Jule said to her, "Its just these toys."

Corran smiled.

"What's the matter?" he asked, "Realised you're just wasting your time?"

"I doubt it." Jule said, "After all there's not much call for expensive toys like that on Tepillos."

"Tepillos?" Lara asked.

"The ship this guy and his mates were loading up has been back and forth between here and there three times in the last two months. Now when it undocked this time it just jumped without requesting nav data from flight control."

"So they probably went to somewhere they had jumped to frequently." Lara responded.

"Exactly." Jule said, "The exit vector matches as well. Their data will be a bit out of date, but if they take their time they should make it there all right."

"More importantly," Lara said, "if I leave now with up to date information, then I bet the *Bright Hope* can get me there before them."

The Republic's Green Zone was a haven of law and order on the failed world of Tepillos. From here the Republic Army sent patrols out beyond the perimeter fence to try and control the rival factions that paid little if any attention to the local government or its ineffectual police force.

This was not Lara's first visit here though it was the first time she been here alone. In fact it was the first time she had taken the *Bright Hope* anywhere without her brother sat beside her in the cockpit. However, she was familiar with the approach and was unsurprised to find Colonel Arion Jeck, the commanding officer of the army forces deployed to Tepillos waiting for her as she disembarked her ship.

"Miss Udra," the colonel said, "it's a pleasure to see you again. Is your brother not with you?"

"Err, no." Lara replied unwilling to say exactly why Cal was absent, "He's otherwise engaged back at Aurek Station."

"Yes, I heard." Colonel Jeck said, "Agent Raser filled me in when she informed me you'd be visiting."

"So she told you why I'm here?"

"She did. The transport you're hunting has not entered our sensor range yet, as limited as it is. Flight control has been instructed not to provide them with nav data when they do."

"Good. Now do you have any ideas why someone would be shipping repulsor toys here?"

"Repulsor toys?" Colonel Jeck repeated, frowning, "You don't mean wirelessly controlled flying model speeders do you?"

"Yes, those are them. We seized over a hundred, or at least what was left of them. We've no idea how many our suspects actually managed to get loaded up."

"Oh stang." Colonel Jeck said, rubbing his face, "Oh this is just kriffing brilliant."

Fear.

The colonel was obviously concerned about, but Lara could not see what was so serious.

"What's the matter?" she asked, "They're just toys aren't they?"

"Toys?" Colonel Jeck replied, "They're light enough to be carried by an individual or you can get twenty or so in the back of a speeder. The controllers generally have a maximum range of about two or three kilometres and if you rip out some of the useless stuff you can stuff a cargo of about a kilo in them. They're not toys Miss Udra, they're guided missiles."

"Oh stang." Lara said, "The loading droid was carrying pallets of twenty at a time. I saw it carry four myself and it had started before I got there. I've got a very bad feeling about this."

5.

Colonel Jeck moved rapidly. When Lara had touched down most of the beings moving about the space port were unarmoured, but now everyone she saw in a Republic uniform had at least an armoured vest and helmet with them as the army prepared to come under attack.

While all this went on Lara waited with the *Bright Hope*. The best hope for dealing with the crisis was to be able to intercept the shipment before they could be converted from toys to weapons. Additionally, it was hoped that if a strike was properly timed then it would also result in the destruction of one of the many locations where contraband explosives were being manufactured for the local gangs.

She waited in what was meant to be a cargo hold, but the Jedi Order had kitted it out as a training area instead and with her lightsaber lit she moved as gracefully as if she were dancing to the music she had selected from the onboard library. Engrossed in her practice she did not sense the presence of anyone else until they were standing in the hatchway. As Lara span, she extended her lightsaber out towards the newcomer and halted with the tip of the weapon mere centimetres from his chest, staring him in the eyes. "Sergeant Green commander." The soldier said, standing at attention even as the deadly energy blade hovered so close to him, "The colonel instructed my squad to report to you."

Lara shut off the lightsaber and returned it to her belt.

"Thank you sergeant." She said, "How many men do you have?"

"Eleven including myself." He replied, "My normal unit plus two engineers to make safe anything we find."

Lara smiled. She knew that by 'make safe' Sergeant Green meant destroy in a controlled explosion. The army took no chances when it came to homemade explosives.

A chiming sound interrupted Lara and Sergeant Green.

"That's the comm." Lara said and she hurried past the sergeant and towards the cockpit. As she made her way there the other soldiers under the sergeant's command stepped out of her way. Without even sitting down, Lara leant over the flight console and activated the communications system.

"*Bright Hope*." She said simply.

"Miss Udra," Colonel Jeck's voice said, "we've detected the target vessel entering the atmosphere. It headed for an area about twenty kilometres east of here. I'm patching our sensor feed over to you."

"Got it." Lara replied as she looked at the sensor display. There an incoming object was highlighted. Lara sat in the pilot's seat and began to fasten her harness, "Your men have arrived, we'll be off immediately." She added.

"Excellent." Colonel Jeck said, "You've a priority clearance." Then the channel went dead.

"Okay everybody!" Lara shouted out as she powered up the *Bright Hope*'s engines, "We're moving out, find a seat."

With the data fed from the Republic's ground based sensor array being continuously fed to the *Bright Hope*'s systems Lara had no problems in tracking the suspect vessel as it descended through the atmosphere. But she was surprised when it suddenly altered its heading and began to gain altitude rapidly.

"What the hell was that?" a voice said from behind her and Lara looked around briefly to where Sergeant Green had just entered the cockpit before taking the seat beside her, "Did they spot us?"

"Perhaps." Lara replied, "But I've kept our course at an oblique angle to theirs. I was planning to swing around at the last minute after they'd set down. It's not like we're the only thing in the air either."

"A-ha." The sergeant said as he continued to watch the sensor display, "Did you spot that?"

"What?"

"There's a brief energy pulse from the location where the ship pulled up. Well several flashes actually."

"So what does that mean?" Lara asked.

"What? You've never seen a repulsorchute deploy before?"

"Can't say I have." Lara said.

"Well I think that that what we're after isn't leaving with the ship. It's been air dropped."

"Then we stay after it." Lara said, adjusting the *Bright Hope*'s course, "Stopping the shipment is more important than catching the ship."

"You plan to land where they made the drop?" Sergeant Green asked.

"Not exactly." Lara replied, "Get those engineers up here."

The sergeant leant around his seat to look out of the cockpit.

"Corporal Delar!" he yelled, "Get you and your assistant up here on the double!"

Almost immediately the two engineers appeared in the cockpit hatchway.

"Reporting as ordered sergeant." Corporal Delar said. The corporal was a muun and was tall even for a member of his species resulting in his having to bend over to get through the hatchway.

"The commander has instructions for you." Sergeant Green said, turning back to face the front of the cockpit and thus not looking at the engineer as he spoke.

"Ma'am." Corporal Delar said, now looking at Lara.

"Can you fly a ship?" Lara asked.

"I have basic flight training commander." Corporal Delar answered, "Just enough for surface to orbit shuttle hops."

"That's good enough." Lara replied, "I need you to take over the controls and fly air cover for us."

"Yes commander. And my assistant?"

"He can man the co-pilot's station." Lara said, "If we need fire support you can use the *Bright Hope's* weapons. Laser cannons only though please. No torpedoes."

"Of course commander."

Right then, take over and fly us to this location." Lara said and she tapped the navigational display where their target had dropped off its cargo.

The cargo had been dropped over an area of wasteland. Before the general collapse of the Tepillos government this place had been a public park, but now the plant beds were un-maintained and the benches had been stolen long ago.

Corporal Delar brought the *Bright Hope* in low and hovered about ten metres over an overgrown patch of grass. Lara was the first to emerge from the ship, leaping from the ventral cargo loading hatch and using her ability with the force to let her land uninjured. Crouching where she landed, Lara ignited her lightsaber and waited for Sergeant Green and his men. The soldiers dropped lines from the hatch and in pairs they slid down to the ground and deployed in a ring.

"*Bright Hope* we're down." Lara signalled, "Retract the lines and circle."

"Copy that commander." Corporal Delar replied and there was a roar as the *Bright Hope* moved off.

"They went in that direction." Sergeant Green said, pointing. Lara looked and saw not only numerous footprints, but also a fresh set of tracks from a cargo crawler. The tracks appeared from nowhere, proving that it had been deployed here from the air.

"I'll lead." Lara said.

"Okay men! You heard the commander, she has point so form up behind her."

Holding her lightsaber at the ready Lara fled the small Republic force towards their quarry. The beings that had brought the shipment of repulsortoys had made no effort to conceal their path, so following them was easy and progress was fast. Lara concentrated on the ground ahead, searching the force for any signs of sentient life just in case their opponents had left someone behind to hold off pursuit.

But there was no one left to slow Lara down and she followed the tracks all the way to the edge of the derelict park. Here the tracks of the beings on foot vanished, but the cargo crawler had torn up enough dirt in its tracks that when it moved onto the permacrete roadway it left behind it a trail of mud that fell away behind it. A trail that headed to a large building about a hundred metres away.

Like the park the building had clearly seen better days, as had all of the others in this neighbourhood. Lara pointed towards the building and looked at Sergeant Green. The sergeant nodded and then waved his men on.

Lara ran directly to the door that the tracks vanished beneath and halted beside it. All around her the soldiers deployed, some watching the door while others kept watch on the street and nearby rooftops.

"I can't feel anyone inside the door." Lara said, keeping her voice low.

"Trooper," Sergeant Green said to the nearest of his men, "get the door for the jedi."

The soldier slung his rifle, rushed to the door and knelt down. Placing his hands beneath the lightweight shutter door he gave it a tug and it rolled upwards instantly. Lara spun around and stepped through the now open doorway, ready just in case there was anything she could not detect through the force waiting for her. Like the route here, the door was unguarded and Lara advanced into the building. The power to the building had been cut off long ago and the inside was unlit. Only the light that was able to seep in through door, windows and the holes in the structure gave any illumination.

Lara could sense a cluster of beings somewhere inside the building and she moved towards them, shutting off her lightsaber so that its distinctive sound and glow would not give her away. The tracks of the crawler soon became invisible, but Lara could still sense the presence of the beings ahead and she let this determine her route.

She halted suddenly when she heard voices ahead of her. They were too far away to tell what they were saying, but she could tell that they belonged to more than one person. She held up her hand for the soldiers following her to halt.

"Wait here." She whispered and she crept forwards.

The amount of light in the corridor increased as Lara approached an open doorway. She checked her grip on her lightsaber but did not ignite it. All she wanted to do for now was assess the opposition, not reveal her presence just yet.

Sure enough there was a cluster of beings standing around a cargo crawler laden with repulsortoys identical to those destroyed aboard Aurek Station. From her location Lara could see that there were several other exits from the large room that the discussion was taking place in. If she rushed out into the open now, then most of those present would inevitably escape through them. Lara withdrew into the darkened corridor to where Sergeant Green and his men waited.

"They're right up ahead." She said softly, "I'd say there's about a dozen of them, all armed but nothing heavy. I need you and your men to spread out and block as many of the exits from that room as you can."

"Where will you be?" Sergeant Green asked.

"There's a walkway running overhead." Lara said, "I'll head up to that and jump down in the middle of them."

Split into pairs, Sergeant Green's men were able to cover four of the exits. The sergeant himself joined the pair that took the doorway Lara had crept up to. Lara herself was the last to get into position, it taking some time for her to locate a set of stairs and then follow the presence in the force to the main room they were surrounding.

Lara assessed the situation, studying the positions of the beings below. From up here she could just about make out some of what they were saying.

"...only half of what I've paid for..."

"...unexpected interference from the jedi..."

"...perhaps if I spoke directly with the hutt..."

"...idiot, no one talks directly to the hutt..."

Clearly the purchaser of the repulsortoys was not pleased with what had happened and Lara got the feeling that he was about to be even less happy when she made her presence known.

She backed up and judged the distance carefully. Then she took a deep breath and sprinted forwards and let the force flow through her. At the right moment she leapt into the air and over the safety railing. Tucking her knees up into her chest Lara rolled in midair before straightening out again. As she did so, she saw the purchaser of the repulsortoys look up at her. He was a near human with an oversized hairless head, a stennes.

"The jedi!" he yelled.

Lara braced herself for her landing, aiming to land right in the middle of the group below, but at the last moment her connection with the force fluttered for some reason and she instead landed on top of the stack of repulsortoys on the back of the carrier.

As she struggled to pick herself up from amongst the stack of boxes that had collapsed round her, Lara heard shouting.

"Halt! Army!" Sergeant Green yelled as he and his men emerged.

Almost immediately there were panicked cries from the beings stood around Lara and gunfire as some of them decided to try and fight off the army troopers. But the troopers had the advantage of already having their weapons at the ready and more weapons fire came from them than went towards them.

Lara untangled herself from the boxes just in time to see a man aiming a pulse wave weapon towards a soldier. She held her lightsaber out in front of her and thrust it into the man's back. Then she looked around. "Sergeant! Where's the stennes?" she shouted as she realised that the purchaser of the repulsortoys was missing. Then she heard a crashing sound from an adjacent room and she ran towards it, "Sergeant, take charge here!" she shouted, "I'm going after him."

Rushing into the next room Lara found that a window had been broken outwards, allowing the stennes to escape through it. The hole was surrounded by jagged broken glass so with several strokes of her lightsaber Lara widened and smoothed out the hole before she too exited the building through it. Across the street she spotted the stennes just as he ran around a corner and Lara set off after him, but as soon as she rounded the corner she discovered that she had lost him.

There were a large number of beings in the street before Lara and although they were not particularly densely packed she could not pick out the stennes amongst them. She was about to try and use the force to locate him when a thought hit her. She had used the force during her failed leap from the walkway, yet somehow she had failed and now the stennes she was chasing had vanished into the crowd.

The two were clearly related and Lara knew why. There was a subspecies of the stennes known as shifters. These beings could not actually alter their physical shape but they could blend into a crowd by means of a telepathic broadcast. More significantly they could feed off the force itself through those around them, just as this one had done when Lara had jumped from the walkway. If she tried to use her abilities now, she risked just making him stronger.

“Stang!” Lara yelled as she realised that the stennes had escaped.

6.

"They mentioned a hutt." Lara said to Jule, "I think that's who we should be looking for."

"Yes, we've been hearing about a hutt in the sector for a while now." Jule replied, "But it's always been hearsay, like your report I'm afraid. We've no idea who the hutt may be or even if they really exist. For now I'm more worried about this stennes."

"I don't blame you." Lara said, "The order tried to wipe out the stennes shifters a thousand years ago. If there's one on Tepillos there's no telling how much damage he could do."

Jule leant back in her chair.

"Congratulations on stopping that shipment though." She said, "We'll be keeping an eye out for any similar movement of repulsortoys on the station just in case. So do you have any plans to celebrate your first solo investigation?"

Before she could answer, Lara's PTP link buzzed to indicate it had just received a message and she glanced at its display.

'Lara – Heard about you on the news. Meet us in apartment 7-32 and we'll celebrate. Gayal.'

Lara smiled.

"I do now." She said to Jule.

What Lara did not expect was for Gayal to answer the door dripping wet and wearing a towel.

"Come on in." Gayal said to Lara and she stepped aside.

"I'm sorry." Lara said, looking at the towel Gayal was clutching around her, "You're obviously busy."

"Oh come on in, we're all in here." Gayal replied and she pulled Lara into the apartment before sealing the door behind her. Then she began to walk away, "Come on." She said over her shoulder and Lara followed her.

Gayal led Lara from the hallway into a room that was dominated by a massive bubbling pool of water in its centre. Sat in the pool were Keera and Sial, both with their backs to the door as they watched the large screen mounted on the far wall that was showing a holodrama.

"Come on in." Gayal said as she tossed her towel to where the girls had left their clothing and got into the pool. Lara briefly averted her gaze when she saw that Gayal had nothing beneath it.

"Err, I-" Lara began.

"Oh come on." Sial said, "The water's lovely. You have to try it." And all three of the Karn sisters looked round at her.

"How do I know this isn't some sort of trick?" Lara asked, "As soon as I undress you'll throw me out into the corridor or something?"

"Are you still obsessed with the thought that we're plotting revenge for locking us in the closet?" Sial asked, "I thought we were past that."

"I tell you what," Gayal said, "how about I promise we really want you to join us in here and we're not planning to throw you into the corridor? You're a jedi, can't you tell when you're being lied to?"

Being just a padawan Lara was not always able to sense when she was being tricked and for some reason she still found Gayal especially difficult to read. But the Karns did not know this so Lara decided to trust them.

"I'm sorry." She said and she began to undress.

Lara had to admit that the temperature of the water was indeed comforting as she sat in the pool and she happily accepted the glass of wine that Keera passed to her.

"So how come you have a hot tub in your lounge?" she asked, sipping the drink.

"We don't." Gayal said, "This place belongs to the Runns. They're nautolan so they like water features. But since they're not here they're letting us use it instead."

"That's kind of them." Lara replied and she took another sip.

It was after Lara had been in the water for about ten minutes that a communicator sounded.

"That's mine." Sial said and she reached for where her PTP link lay beside the pool, "The Adlats have arrived." She said.

"You two had best go then." Gayal said, looking at her sisters, "I'll join you later."

"Who are the Adlats?" Lara asked as Keera and Sial climbed out of the water and began to dress.

"Friends of our parents." Gayal replied, "They've been family friends since before I was born." Then she waved at her sisters as they left the room. Moments later there the sound of the front door opening then sliding shut again.

“Stang.” Gayal said, “This bottles empty.” And she held up an empty wine bottle. Then she set it down beside the pool and climbed out.

Lara paid no attention at first, instead looking back to the holodrama she was starting to get into. But then she spotted Gayal’s reflection in the screen and turned to look at her.

“What are you doing?” Lara asked as she saw Gayal putting on the cloak from her own jedi robes.

“Your cloak’s easier to put on in a hurry.” Gayal replied, fastening it around her then bundling up not only her own but Lara’s clothes also, along with her equipment belt and lightsaber. Then she looked back at Lara, “Give my regards to the Adlats by the way.”

“What?”

“Well they own this place and they should be here soon.” Gayal said, “Good luck explaining how you got in and why you’re naked. Oh and think about this, when it comes to us we’ll never be even.” Then before Lara could react Gayal ran from the apartment.

“Oh crap.” Lara said.

Cal had a puzzled look on his face.

“What the hell are you doing here like that?” he asked as Lara was led into his cell with a blanket wrapped around her,

“Would you believe burglary?” she replied, sitting down on the bed next to her brother.

“And where are your clothes?”

“I’m not sure. But I’m guessing they’re in the trash.” Lara replied, “Along with my lightsaber probably.” Then she looked at Cal, “Could I ask you a favour?” she asked.

“Go on.”

“Can I borrow your cloak? This blanket itches.”

Cal smiled as he began to take off his cloak.

“Anything for my baby sister.”