

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

1-02: CRIME & PUNISHMENT

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Returning to Coruscant with their prisoner, Jayk and Brae Udra are ordered to track down the organisers of the break in at the museum. They are not alone in this task however, as Tylo Kurrast is offered a deal to keep him out of prison...

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1.

The *Swift Exit* was an ordinary looking Corellian Engineering Corporation YT-700 light transport. Just over ten years old it was showing some signs of wear and tear but was generally in excellent condition as Jedi Knight Jayk Udra examined its exterior. The only feature that stood out from the drab external paintwork was a mural painted on the side of the cockpit module that depicted a half naked human female wielding a blaster but Jayk knew that beneath its hull the ship had undergone several modifications to improve its performance. The ship had brought him and his padawan, his niece Brae Udra, back from a mission to the mid rim where they had arrested its owner for his role as an accessory in the theft of art inspired by Sith works from a gallery. Under most circumstances burglary was not something that the Jedi Order sent its members half way across the galaxy to investigate. However, any crime that could be connected to the Sith, no matter how tenuous the link earned the attention of the Jedi just in case it heralded a resurgence of that order of Dark Side Force users who had been extinct for the past seven hundred and fifty years. Now it was hoped that either the owner, a human named Tylo Kurrast or some physical evidence aboard the ship itself would be able to lead the Jedi Order to those responsible for the theft itself.

While Jayk stood back and just examined the appearance of the outside of the vessel numerous droids as well as more technically inclined Jedi were at work inside, going over every system that could yield some clue about where the ship had been and what it had done in those places. In addition to a technical study of the vessel Jayk had also brought in a Jedi knight who was skilled in psychometry to study it. The Jedi knight in question was a slender female miraluka. The entire near-human species was Force sensitive to some degree and as such they were a common sight in the Jedi Order. For others their Force sensitivity just manifested itself as the ability to see through the Force, this replacing the eyes that their species had lost so long ago and in the case of this particular Jedi knight her Force sight sometimes also allowed her to see the history of an object by touching it. Jayk's hope was that by examining the *Swift Exit* the miraluka Jedi would be able to tell him about the beings who had been aboard it recently. But he was totally unprepared for the sudden shriek that came from inside it.

Jayk rushed aboard the freighter and into the ship's lounge where he found the miraluka woman on her knees and steadying her against the table.

"Jedi Myli." he exclaimed, "What's wrong?"

"Pain." she replied as she apparently struggled to breathe, "Agony, fear and torment." and then she pointed at a spot on the floor close by where part of it had been removed to expose the hidden storage compartment that had been discovered beneath it by one of the droids.

Two other Jedi arrived behind Jayk as he started to cautiously advance towards the open compartment and peered inside.

"It's empty." he said, looking over his shoulder at the miraluka, "Are you sure of what you felt."

"Quite sure Jedi Udra." she said, still gasping for breath, "I felt the presence of the Sith."

Jayk frowned.

"This ship was transporting stolen works of art." he said but the miraluka shook her head.

"No." she said, "At least one of the objects it carried was real."

Jayk's eyes widened and he stood motionless and silent for a few seconds as he tried to take this in. For centuries the Jedi Order had swept the galaxy to purge it of everything to with the teachings of the Sith. Some cultural artefacts were allowed to remain but anything associated directly with the Dark Side was either seized or destroyed before it could fall into the wrong hands. This task had been so thorough that few Jedi ever encountered anything to do with the Sith any more other than under the strictly controlled conditions of the Jedi Temple and Jayk himself never had until now.

"Brae." he said into his comlink, "Meet me at the council chambers as soon as possible. We've got a big problem."

Jayk was stood outside the council chambers waiting to be called in when he sensed the approach of his niece and he turned to see her hurrying down the corridor. Brae had an unusually strong presence in the Force and after even just a short time together as master and padawan Jayk had learned to recognise it.

"Sorry I took so long master." she said, "I-"

"Never mind that now Brae. A matter of the up most importance has arisen regarding our mission to Corris." Jayk interrupted.

"What's wrong master?" Brae asked before the doors to the council chambers opened.

"Jedi Udra, you may enter." Karadon Ress, supreme grand master of the Jedi Order called out and Jayk proceeded through the doorway with Brae close behind him.

Fear.

Jayk sensed Brae's reaction to being surrounded by the twelve most powerful jedi in the galaxy and he knew that the council members will have sensed it as well. It had been said by some that one day Brae would be on the council, such was her power but for now the council had been close to having Brae expelled from the Jedi Order for her inability to control her power without relying on her more negative feelings and her fear was among these. It was hoped that Jayk would be able to set an example to her and show her that she was capable of controlling her power without risking being corrupted by the Dark Side but for now at least this was still an issue for her.

"Interested we are to hear why you demanded to see us so quickly." Jedi Master Yoda said. Though the diminutive alien did not lead the council yet he was tipped as a future leader and all of the other members respected his views even when they did not agree with them.

"It concerns my mission to Corris." Jayk replied.

"We had little doubt that it would." Grand Master Ress said, "An art theft. I understand you have a suspect in custody."

"Yes, a smuggler named Tylo Kurrast." Jayk said, "But there is more at stake here than a mundane art theft. A search of the smuggler's vessel has uncovered evidence that at least one of the supposed works of art was in fact a item of genuine Sith manufacture."

The members of the council exchanged concerned glances and Jayk was sure that he felt a minor tremor of discomfort through the Force as they took in this news.

"Sure are you of this?" Yoda asked.

"I am." Jayk answered, "I requested Jedi Myli to assist in the search. She is skilled in psychometry and she sensed that objects connected to the Sith had been aboard the ship recently. I think that someone discovered their true origin and stole them from the gallery to sell on the black market."

"This is a disturbing matter Jedi Udra." the grand master said.

"An opportunity Jedi Udra thinks this is though." Yoda added, "Correct I am?"

"Yes master." Jayk replied, "I have reviewed the criminal record of this Tylo Kurrast and I think that we may be able to use him to get to those responsible for the theft and their black market contacts."

"You think that there is a larger scheme at work?" another of the council said.

"Only in that I think the thieves already had a way of disposing of what they stole. That means either a collector of such items or access to a market." Jayk explained.

"So you wish to question Mister Kurrast?" Grand Master Ress asked and Jayk smiled.

"Not quite grand master." he replied, "I have an alternative suggestion that may prove more reliable." Brae winced.

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

Two temple guardians brought Tylo before the council. One of the highly skilled fighters would have been more than enough to guard him but procedure called for two guards for a prisoner and they stood either side of him as he scowled at Brae. Much of the physical damage she had inflicted on him when he resisted arrest had been repaired by the temple's healers but there was still some bruising around his nose and the memory of the beating he took at the hands of a seventeen year old girl was still fresh in his mind.

"Tylo Kurrast." Grand Master Ress announced, "You have been brought before this council to answer serious charges."

"Oh yeah?" Tylo responded, "Going to break out the mind probe?"

"No, no not the mind probe." Jayk said, "We have alternative ways of securing your co-operation." and he lifted his datapad and started to read from it, "Tylo Kurrast you stand accused of crimes including petty theft, evasion of Republic duties, operating a starship without proper documentation, fleeing from lawful pursuit, possession of unlawful armaments, assault and criminal damage." Jayk then paused before he added the final charge, "You are also charged with transporting contraband Sith artefacts. This is a class one infraction and may be punishable by life imprisonment."

Surprise.

Fear.

"Hey that's poodoo!" Tylo exclaimed and the jedi in the room exchanged glances, all of them noticing that they had sensed no deception in the smuggler. Clearly he had had no knowledge of the origins of the cargo he had been carrying.

"The beings you transported off Corris had just stolen the artefacts from a gallery." Jayk told him, "You then transported them off world to the shadow port where you were apprehended."

"Stang." Tylo hissed, "I should have never trusted that bitch. I knew she was too good to be true."

"So you deny being an active participant in this plot?" Jayk asked.

"You bet I do. Look, I may bend the odd rule here and there but I make a rule of never touching anything that's a class one crime. I've got things to do with my life. Women mainly."

Jayk looked around at Grand Master Ress and nodded.

"Tylo Kurrast there is a clear case against you for all of the charges listed and I am authorised to have you turned over to the Republic Judicial department for trial." the grand master told him, "However, it is within the

authority of this council to decline to present evidence in the case of transporting Sith artefacts and the other charges may be stricken along with your existing criminal record if you agree to certain conditions.”

“Are you offering me a deal?” Tylo asked.

“We're more interested in the people who carried out the theft and whoever they were transporting them to.”

Jayk explained, “If you agree to assist us in tracking down and apprehending them then you will be a free man. Released without a stain on your character.”

“Just maybe the odd bruise huh?” Tylo commented and he looked at Brae.

“This offer will not remain open indefinitely.” Jayk said, “If you'd rather-”

“No wait!” Tylo snapped. Then he paused and added, “So all I have to do is help you catch the people I transported off Corris and we're all square.”

“You will be free to go.” Jayk replied and Tylo smiled.

“Then I think we have a deal.” he said.

2.

"Hey be careful up there!" Tylo yelled at one of the droids in the temple hangar that was conducting last minute maintenance work on the *Swift Exit*. The search of the vessel had been so thorough that several key components had been removed and left it unworthy of flight. Now these had been replaced and the ship would soon be ready for take off, "I just got this thing back together again." he added.

"Mister Kurrast, you are ready to depart?" Jayk asked from behind Tylo and he turned around to see the jedi knight along with Brae standing right there with bulky holdalls over their shoulders. Briefly he frowned at Brae before looking at Jayk.

"Look let's just get one thing straight okay?" he said, "My name's Tylo. Calling me 'Mister Kurrast' just feels creepy."

"Very well Tylo, as you wish." Jayk replied, "Now are you ready to depart?"

"Sure. We can leave whenever you're ready to."

"Then I suggest we get going. The sooner we can apprehend your previous associates the sooner we can part ways. Though you may want this first." Jayk said and he held out the blaster Tylo had been armed with when arrested.

"You're giving me a weapon?" he asked with a confused look on his face.

"I am returning your weapon to you." Jayk answered, "We cannot be sure that you will not need it so you may as well have it back."

"It's not like it did you much good against me." Brae added as Tylo took the weapon, checked its power cell and slid it into the holster on his thigh.

"Sounds perfect to me." Tylo said and the trio headed up the access ramp and into the *Swift Exit*. Once inside the two jedi deposited their bags on the lounge floor and followed Tylo into the cockpit. Tylo sat in the pilot's seat while Jayk sat beside him and Brae behind them. Most of the preflight checks had already been carried out and so it took only a few seconds for Tylo to confirm that everything was set for launch. Meanwhile Jayk activated the communication system.

"Control this is Jedi Udra aboard the *Swift Exit* requesting clearance for launch." he said.

"Confirmed *Swift Exit*. You are cleared for departure. May the Force be with you Jedi Udra."

Jayk was about to tell Tylo to take off but the smuggler had been listening in and before the jedi could speak he pulled back on the controls and the freighter lifted off the hangar deck and rotated towards the external hangar door. The *Swift Exit*'s repulsorlifts roared as Tylo then accelerated out of the hangar and pulled up steeply into the sky so that it avoided the well ordered designated air traffic routes. Outside the ship the sky darkened rapidly from pale blue to black and clouds were replaced by stars. At this point Tylo switched from the *Swift Exit*'s repulsorlifts to its sublight ion drive and the freighter raced away from Coruscant.

"Okay now that we're in flight let's just remember that this is my ship and what I say goes alright?" Tylo said, "So when I tell you to do something you do it."

"I am in command of this mission." Jayk replied, "And when I am not present my padawan represents me. If you fail to follow our instructions it will be considered a violation of our agreement and you will be turned over to the Republic's judicial authorities for trial."

"Every time I say something you're going to rub that agreement in my face aren't you?" Tylo replied and Jayk just smiled. Then Tylo turned to look at Brae, "What about you little girl? Do you have anything to add?"

"Did it hurt when I kicked you in the-" Brae began before Jayk interrupted.

"We will leave Tylo to plot a course through hyperspace while we continue your training." he said, getting out of his seat, "Now come with me." and Brae got up to follow him.

Tylo ignored the jedi as they left, relieved to be on his own again as he programmed a set of jump coordinates into the *Swift Exit*'s navigational computer. As soon as the ship was clear of Coruscant's gravity well Tylo engaged the hyperdrive, propelling the *Swift Exit* into hyperspace and only then did he relax. The ship was now locked on a direct course to its destination in the Outer Rim and it would require no input from him until it reached it. He briefly considered remaining in the cockpit deliberately to stay away from his unwelcome jedi guests but then curiosity got the better of him and he got up and headed to see what they were doing aboard his ship.

As he walked towards the lounge he heard the hum of lightsabers as well as voices. At first he heard just Jayk and Brae as he told her the moves he wanted her to perform before he launched his mock assaults in what was obviously a sparring session. But then he heard a third voice.

"My sister had the same problem at first. Always waiting to see what her opponent would do and trying to catch up. Fortunately she didn't have to face anyone armed with a lightsaber for some time."

Tylo rushed forwards, wondering whether another jedi had managed to board his ship without him noticing. But as he ran into the lounge he found himself almost face to face with what looked like a ghost.

"Holy kriff!" he exclaimed and he grabbed hold of a nearby bulkhead to prevent himself from falling over, "What the hell is this?"

"Ah," Jayk replied, "Tylo Kurrast meet Cal Udra. A very distant relative of mine."

Tylo stared at the hologram of Cal and then waved his arm through it.

"How do you like it when I do that?" Cal responded and his hologram waved an arm through Tylo, causing the smuggler to leap back instinctively.

"What the hell is this?" he asked.

"Cal Udra was a jedi knight who lived more than three and a half thousand years ago." Jayk explained,

"During his life he created a holocron that includes the simulation of his personality that you see here."

"So he's a computer program?" Tylo asked.

"Much more than that." Brae answered, "The guardian of a holocron is a near perfect recreation of the jedi that created it. For all intents and purposes this is Cal Udra. With all of his memories and knowledge."

"Right up until the point of my creator's final entry at any rate." Cal added, "Some extra information has been added by others who thought it relevant and I have a record of events that occurred when this holocron has been activated in the mean time."

"And he's here why exactly?" Tylo said, edging around the hologram to a nearby chair where he sat down.

"I'm here to help Jayk train Brae." Cal replied, "My first padawan was my sister so I have some experience in working with a close family member that most jedi don't."

Tylo frowned.

"I meant to ask about that." he said, "I didn't think jedi had families."

"We do not marry and only on rare occasions do we have children. All attachment is forbidden." Jayk told him.

"It wasn't that way when I was a jedi though." Cal added, "For some reason someone thought it would be a good idea to have the jedi cease to be a part of the societies they are supposed to protect. I on the other hand did get married and my wife and I had a family together that I wouldn't have given up for anything."

"Not even the Jedi Order?" Brae asked and Cal shook his head.

"No." he replied, "I was loyal to the order but I loved my wife and my children. Asking me to choose would have been no choice at all."

"Who'd have thought it." Tylo said with a smile, "A jedi that actually thinks like a real person."

"Indeed." Jayk added with a frown, "When do we reach Corris?"

"We don't." Tylo replied, "I've not set a course for Corris. We're heading for Kantellia. We'll be there in about fourteen hours."

"I'm not familiar with that system." Brae said.

"It's near hutt space." Jayk told her before glaring at Tylo, "Our deal was-"

"Our deal was for me to help you catch the individuals that hired me to move them and their cargo," Tylo interrupted, "and we're not going to be able to do that on Corris. They're already gone from there. But I was hired on Kantellia and it wasn't the first time I'd met the beings that hired me. They were regulars there."

"Very well Tylo." Jayk said, "I will defer to your knowledge in this case. Fourteen hours gives us chance to be rested before our arrival and also to get in some more practice." and he looked at Brae, "Defend yourself." he told her.

Morten Crane was not having a good week. Not only had one of his gang members decided to stage a mutiny but the young upstart had somehow managed to gain enough support within the gang to drive Morten and a handful of loyalists from his headquarters. Barely escaping with their lives, Morten and the others had fled to hutt space where Morten planned to regroup and rebuild his gang before dealing with his usurper Teron Sharr. But before he could do this there was another matter that he needed to tend to. He had been contracted to steal several items from the art gallery on Corris and all of these had been lost during the mutiny so now Morten had to call the client who had paid him up front for these that she would not be getting her merchandise any time soon.

The image of a dark skinned human woman appeared in front of Morten when the connection was made and he smiled at her. Looking several years younger than Morten, he was hoping that the opportunity would arise for them to meet in person and if his charm was as successful, as he regarded it as being, then he would get to find out if the business he did with her was all she was passionate about.

"Morten." she said sternly, "Where is my merchandise?"

"I don't have it on me Rylee." he replied.

"But you did manage to remove it from the gallery didn't you?" the woman said.

"Of course. My people were in and out before the cops turned up just like I promised."

"So where is my merchandise?" Rylee demanded, "The merchandise you were well paid for in advance I might add. So what went wrong?"

"I'll get it for you, don't worry. But that stupid sleemo Teron somehow managed to get enough of my men to turn on me that he took over. I'm on Protas now but it shouldn't take long for me to get your merchandise

back.”

“Well as far as I'm concerned until you manage it you owe me what I paid and for the lost time. That means I don't expect to be charged for what you've failed to deliver to me and I'm in credit with you. Do you understand me Morten?”

“Hey look Rylee-” he began.

“Or perhaps I could contact the hutts and have them get me my money back from you. I'm sure that if they sell off enough of your organs you'll be able to pay me back.”

“Okay, okay, there's no need to be unreasonable. Like I say, I'll get you your property.”

“There's another matter needs attending to as well.” Rylee said and Morten groaned.

“What?” he asked.

“That smuggler you hired to get your people off Corris.” Rylee said.

“Yes, I remember him. Tylo Kurrast. He came highly recommended.”

“He was arrested by the jedi and cut a deal.” Rylee replied and Morten's jaw dropped.

“What sort of deal?” he asked.

“The sort where my contacts in the judicials say that the department has been told to be ready to purge his record and drop any outstanding charges against him.” Rylee said, “His ship has already left Coruscant and I'm guessing that he's leading them to you. Make sure you do something about it because I swear to you Morten, you won't be making any deals with the jedi.” and then Rylee's hologram flickered and vanished leaving Morten all alone.

3.

There was little law and order near hutt space and this made it a magnet for those who wished to conduct business that was regulated or outright banned by the Republic. This was not to say that every world existed in a state of anarchy in this region of space, but those who maintained the peace did so at the muzzle of a blaster and they could be convinced to ignore almost anything providing the price offered to them was right. Kantellia was just such a world. Only sparsely populated its inhabitants were concentrated in numerous equatorial settlements, each one governed by its own ruler who was simply the being with enough money to pay for a private army of thugs to make sure that no-one else became as powerful as they were. There were no traffic controls on Kantellia and all Tylo had to do in order to land was descend from orbit and look out for a vacant spot on any of the dozen or so landing fields that surrounded the settlement that he headed for and if that had failed there were indications that even more ships had set down outside the settlement in the desert that surrounded it.

"Watch your backs here." Tylo warned the two jedi as he joined them at the top of the access ramp, "The locals may act friendly but most of them will knife you in the back for a credit. The rest will look you in the eye while they do it."

"I think we can handle ourselves." Jayk replied and he held up his lightsaber.

"So you're just going to walk about with those things on display then?" Tylo asked.

"Why not?" Brae asked, "If this place is as dangerous as you say-"

"Because you're announcing to everyone that you're jedi. That's why not." Tylo said before she could finish.

"Brae, keep your lightsaber covered." Jayk told his niece and both jedi made sure that their robes were properly fastened. If they did need to use their weapons then this would slow them down but Jayk hoped that the reduced chance of conflict would be worth the risk.

"How do I look?" Brae asked, looking at Tylo and he sighed.

"Like victims." he replied, "You need to keep those lightsabers out of view but it's not common to see anyone walking around here unarmed.

"We'll be careful." Jayk said.

"You'll be dead if this goes wrong." Tylo responded, "And me with you most likely. I've got a bad feeling about bringing you two here."

"Then why do it?" Brae said.

"Because he wants to get rid of us as quickly as he can." Jayk pointed out and Tylo smiled.

"Just follow my lead." he said before reaching out to open the *Swift Exit's* access ramp.

An odd assortment of beings was already clustered around the *Swift Exit* when its occupants disembarked and these moved closer before they even stepped foot on the ground at the bottom of the ramp. The first of them was a muscular humanoid that had no visible flesh to identify his species who met the trio with a pair of bulky droids at his back.

"Landing fee fifty credits." he said, "Mynock check one hundred."

"Here." Tylo replied, taking the cash from his pocket. He had already known what the fee would be before landing and so had made sure to have just enough credits in cash in the pocket he reached into, thus preventing the landing field operator from seeing exactly how much other cash he had and the humanoid being grunted as he took the cash. Of course there were no mynocks on the *Swift Exit* and Tylo knew this. But he also knew that the operator of the landing field probably had some captive samples stashed away that he would place on the hull if he was not paid to conduct an inspection so he paid the money anyway. Leaving the man and his two droids to conduct a phantom search of the *Swift Exit's* hull for mynocks its occupants he started to walk away and were immediately accosted by the other beings who were nearby.

"A guide? A guide?"

"Do you want to buy some death sticks?"

"Looking for a female?"

"Sell me your female."

Anger.

Brae was startled when she felt the brief reaction from Jayk at this offer, though he soon regained control. Since she had first met her new master she had not once sensed anything remotely connected with the Dark Side.

"If any part of your body comes within a metre of my niece I will cut it off." Jayk warned the man who had made this last offer sternly, grabbing hold of his collar and Brae could not tell if he was lying or not. Then Jayk spoke to Tylo, "Where are we going and how much longer until we reach there?" he asked.

"There's a cantina about a quarter of a kilometre from here that's frequented by people with ships for hire."

Tylo replied, "That's where I kept seeing the guy who hired me. It should only take us a few minutes to get

there but watch your pocketbook unless you want it to end up in someone else's pocket." then he glanced at Brae, "Oh and watch her as well. Unless you want her to end up stripped naked and being offered as a door prize." and Brae looked around herself nervously at the crowd.

The three humans were watched by many in the crowd as they continued to head away from their ship, most trying to figure out how they could make money from them but there were two with a different agenda all altogether. One of the two men was human while the other was duros. After watching Tylo and the two jedi disembark from the *Swift Exit* they hurried back to their own ship. They were well known enough by the denizens of the landing field that none of them bothered the pair and they soon made it to their ship and once there they wasted no time in activating their long range communications.

"I can't get a lock." the duros said as he tried to establish a link with their employer.

"Well try something because he's going to want to know about this." the human replied.

"Wait, I think I've got it." the duros said. Then he frowned, "He's on Protas."

"Protas?" the human commented, "Never mind. Just put me through." and moments later an image of Morten appeared on the main communication display, "Mister Crayne," the man said, "I've got news for you."

"Well it had better be good." Morten responded, "Because I've just about had my fill of bad news for today."

"Do you remember that guy Kurrast?" the man said and Morten's eyes widened.

"What do you know about that low life nerf herder?" he asked.

"He's just turned up here again. I thought he was supposed to be working for you now."

"That was just a one off job." Morten said, "But look, this is very important. Was he alone?"

"No. There were two others with him. Both human. A young woman and an older man."

"Could they have been jedi?"

"I suppose so. They were wearing robes that could have been jedi ones but I didn't see any lightsabers."

"Keep an eye on them. I'm sending Mara and some more guys to help deal with them. But make sure you stay out of sight. Tylo can recognise you and my source says that he's cut a deal with the jedi. If he's there then he's probably trying to lead them to you." and then the display went blank.

On Protas Morten hurried to find his agent Mara Tosk. The woman was a professional thief by trade but she was resourceful enough to undertake any assignment that called for covert action and loyal enough that he was willing to trust almost any mission to her leadership without worrying about her deciding to follow the example of Teron and stage a mutiny. He found the woman eating a meal that looked to be made up of some sort of pulped insects and Morten made a mental note to obtain a supply of food that was more palatable than what the hutt's typically had to offer.

"Mara," he said, "I've got a job for you."

"Will it involve going somewhere that I can get a meal that doesn't consist mainly of invertebrates?" Mara asked.

"I need you to go to Kantellia." Morten told her, "Tylo Kurrast has just surfaced there and I need you to make certain that he can't lead the jedi to us."

"I take it that you don't just mean ask him nicely?" Mara replied and Morten smiled.

"Mettern and Prok have seen him and he's there with the jedi already. I've told them to watch from a distance until you can get there. Take as many of the men with you as you think you need, none of the new recruits though you'll need to be able to rely on them. Then kill Tylo. The jedi as well if you can but Tylo is the primary target. Without him the jedi have nothing."

Mara smiled as she got to her feet.

"Consider it done." she said and as she was walking away she paused to look over her shoulder and added, "I take it you need proof of death?"

"A picture will do fine Mara." Morten told her, "Don't go bringing back a severed head the drips blood all over this floor. We've got enough cleaning up to do without that."

"Tylo, haven't seen you around in a while." the four-armed besalisk bartender said when he saw Tylo, "I heard you'd taken a steady job."

"That job turned out to not be quite as steady as was promised." Tylo replied as he placed some coins down on the bar, "I'll have my usual and one for each of my friends as well."

"Brae will have water." Jayk said before Tylo leant in close to him.

"Look, I get that she's seventeen and your niece but you may want to consider the conditions around here. Frankly any water you haven't distilled yourself should be avoided. The alcohol content in what I'm ordering kills all the bugs that are in the water that was used in its manufacture."

"Very well then." Jayk said, "Brae may have the same as us. But only one."

"Sure. Just one." Tylo said and he nodded at the bartender who responded by placing three glasses on the counter in front of him and then poured out drinks from a bottle that had a hand written label that simply had a number '48' written on it.

The trio took a glass each and Tylo guided them towards a table at the back of the cantina from where they

could keep watch over the whole establishment and in particular the entrance. Sitting down at the table Tylo was the first to take a sip from his drink while the two Jedi watched him.

"What?" he asked, looking at them each in turn, "Don't worry, it's not poison."

"Technically alcohol is a poison." Brae pointed out.

"Then consider this your first test in dealing with such a toxin." Jayk said, "Focus on the content of the fluid as it enters your body and break it down before it can be absorbed."

"Seriously, you can drink without getting drunk?" Tylo asked and Jayk responded by simply lifting his own glass to his mouth and drinking from it. Then he lowered the glass and smiled.

"That's got a kick to it." he commented.

The Brae lifted her glass.

"Just focus on it huh?" she muttered before gulping down her first mouthful. The moment the liquid entered her mouth Brae's eyes widened and she gasped as she swallowed it, "Stang!" she hissed, "It burns."

"Yeah it will." Tylo replied, "I've heard that there's something about women's anatomy that means it burns coming out the other end as well." and Brae glared at him.

"Why would you do that to me?" she asked.

"Because it will pass much quicker than the explosive diarrhoea you'd have ended up with if you'd done as your uncle said and had a glass of water from this place. Even with modern medicine that takes about a month to clear up and as far as I'm concerned any mess you make on the floor of my ship you can clean up yourself."

"You paint such a wonderful picture." Jayk said.

"I just tell it like I see it." Tylo replied, "Besides, I consider this payback for getting kicked in the—"

"Diarrhoea and drinks that burn you mouth and — and — and other parts?" Brae said before he could finish his sentence and she pushed her glass away from her. Then she looked around, "So who are we waiting for and how long is it going to take for them to get here?"

"We're looking for the pair of fixers that offered me the Corris job. It was supposed to be the first of a steady stream of work for a good price but you two showed up and put an end to that revenue stream." Tylo explained, "I've seen them around before looking for people to move goods from one place to another without attracting any attention but they're just front men for someone else."

"Who?" Jayk asked.

"Some guy called Crayne. That's all I know. I overheard some of his minions talking about him on the way back from Corris but I never met him myself. But since my arrest means that he'll be down a ship and a pilot that his men will be looking to replace."

"Why not ask the bartender?" Brae suggested.

"Because he might tell them about us rather than tell us about them." Jayk said.

"Exactly." Tylo replied, "Like I told you, people here will stab you in the back if it suits them. That's just the sort of place this is."

"Why hasn't the Republic done anything about it then?" Brae said.

"The Republic's resources are limited Brae." Jayk pointed out, "And what would sending a judicial task force here achieve? Another such place would spring up to replace it in a matter of weeks. Now have patience Brae. I have faith that the individuals Tylo met here will return eventually."

4.

To avoid being noticed Mara's shuttle touched down outside of the settlement and its cargo bay opened to allow a speeder to rush out and head towards it.

"Mettern, Prok, can either of you read me?" she transmitted using the speeder's built in comlink, "It's Mara."

"Right here." Mettern's voice responded.

"Do you have eyes on Tylo and the jedi?" Mara asked.

"Not exactly. But we know where they are."

"Where?"

"They ducked inside a cantina. The same one we recruited Tylo from in the first place."

"Okay keep your comlink open so my team can find you. But I need to know where their ship is." Mara said.

"It's in the north field. It's a YT seven hundred."

"Yes I know that." Mara interrupted, "I've been aboard it. Now stay put and wait for back up." Mara then put the comlink down and looked at the driver of the speeder, "Drop me at the north field." she told him, "Then take everyone to meet up with Mettern and Prok to deal with Tylo."

"You're not coming with us?" the driver replied and Mara looked forwards.

"No." she told him, "We need to find out just how much Tylo's told the jedi and the answer to that question ought to be inside their ship."

It took only a few minutes for the speeder to reach the landing fields that surrounded the settlement and as the river circled around Mara kept an eye out for the *Swift Exit*.

"There." she said, pointing to the ship when she saw the familiar decoration on its hull, "Drop me here." and the driver brought the speeder to a halt. Then as soon as Mara had leapt out he accelerated again and the speeder drove off, tracking the signal from Mettern's comlink.

Meanwhile Mara checked to make sure that there were no sentries placed around the *Swift Exit* before heading towards the vessel. Just as when the *Swift Exit* had landed, Mara found herself being approached by numerous locals, all of them looking to make a profit out of her. Though she carried a blaster she knew that using it would attract too much unwanted attention. Fortunately she was also well skilled in unarmed combat and when the first of them started to speak she lashed out with a hand and delivered a sharp blow to his throat. The strike was not serious enough to cause any permanent damage but it did convince all of the other locals that she was not to be approached and they withdrew, allowing her to continue to approach the *Swift Exit*.

Though she had been a passenger aboard the transport twice, Mara had not had the opportunity to inspect any of its systems and so rather than begin by attacking the access ramp's locking mechanism directly she first inspected it to see what sort of modifications may have been made to it. The probe Mara used to investigate the locking mechanism detected a higher than expected magnetic field emanating from within it, suggesting that it was drawing more current than it ought to be and there were two likely explanations for this. The first was the installation of a micro shield generator to protect the electronics against a physical attack while the second was the addition of a defensive system designed to deliver that current into anyone attempting to force the lock. A properly integrated system of this type would draw no current until it was needed, but such things were only available on the black market and their makers tended to cut corners where they could to boost their profits.

In either case Mara knew that the modification that was supposed to keep her out of the *Swift Exit* would in fact make it easier for her to gain access. She had with her a pair of insulated gloves that she pulled on. Combined with the bodyglove she wore this meant that she was almost totally protected against energy discharges and she used a small cutting torch to open up the housing of the locking mechanism, leaving just enough in place to support the loose segment while she stood back and averted her gaze. Then holding the torch at arm's length she cut through what remained so that the housing dropped free. As soon as this happened there was a sudden 'Hiss!' as a compact dispenser released a liquid that had been held under high pressure while the housing was sealed and there was a flash of light as the additional energy being run through the mechanism passed through the conductive cloud. Had Mara been stood right underneath then even her lack of head protection would have resulted in that energy flowing into her as well. But caught on the edges of the cloud and having only her arm and part of her torso splashed by the liquid meant that there was no conductive path through her and she was safe.

"Oh Tylo." she said to herself, shaking her head, "You amateur." and then she cautiously moved back towards the now exposed locking mechanism. Inside she could see the now emptied fluid dispenser as well as the electrical contacts used to send the power into it. Next to this was the locking circuit itself and Mara smiled as she reached up and using her thumb and forefinger she plucked one of the wires leading to the contacts for the added on security system away from its mounting. Then once she had enough length pulled

free she touched the exposed contact against the lock controller itself and produced another sudden flash of light as the excessive current passed into the controller and burnt it out. The sudden surge of power before the device was destroyed triggered the opening sequence of the *Swift Exit's* access ramp and Mara stepped back as it lowered. Then leaving the loose wire dangling she hurried inside the vessel. Having already been inside the *Swift Exit* on the journeys to and from Corris Mara was familiar with its internal layout and she hurried towards the cockpit, passing through the intervening sections of the ship without bothering to inspect them closely. Had she done so then she would probably have discovered Cal's holocron on the table in the lounge and as soon as she entered the short corridor that led to the cockpit the hologram of the guardian materialised. "I've got a bad feeling about this." he said to himself.

The speeder came to a halt where Mettern and Prok had positioned themselves to be able to keep an eye on the entrance to the cantina.

"They in there still?" the driver asked as he and his passengers disembarked from the speeder and readied their weapons.

"All three." Mettern replied with a nod.

"And that's the only way in or out?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Then we've got them trapped. Roll in a grenade and follow it up with some full auto fire. We can pick through the corpses afterwards." the driver said.

"Are you insane?" Prok suddenly exclaimed, "The local boss may not mind people walking around with grenades but if anyone other than his own goons are actually stupid enough to start hurling them about then he's going to be down on them like an asteroid being knocked out of orbit."

"Prok's right." Mettern added, "We can't just go shooting up a cantina full of people. Especially not people who may have friends who'll come looking for revenge before we can get off world."

"Then we need to bring them out here." the driver said, "And by 'we' I mean 'you'."

"Us?" Mettern responded, "Why us?"

"Because Tylo knows you, you vacc head. He came here looking for you. So you go inside and make sure that he sees you. Then come back out here and we'll deal with him. His jedi friends as well. Now go."

"Another round?" Tylo asked as he got to his feet.

"No, I'm fine." Jayk replied.

"I didn't even finish the first." Brae added.

"Just me then." Tylo said and he was just about to head to the bar when Jayk's comlink chirped, "Who do you know around here?" Tylo asked as the jedi took out the device.

"Go ahead." he said.

"Jayk it's Cal." Cal's voice said.

"Cal? How the hell is he able to call you?" Tylo said.

"I'm tapping into the *Swift Exit's* communication system." Cal answered.

Anger.

"You mean that thing is controlling my ship?" Tylo said, snarling and leaning on the table but Jayk ignored him.

"What's wrong Cal?" he said into the comlink.

"Did any of you invite a young woman aboard the ship?" Cal replied.

"Young woman? What young woman?" Tylo said.

"The young woman who came aboard a few minutes ago. She walked right through the lounge and headed for the cockpit."

"Sounds like someone's trying to steal the ship." Brae said but Tylo shook his head.

"No-one steals my ship kiddo." he said, "I had all the locks modified to keep unwanted guests out. Present company excepted of course." and he smirked. Then his face fell, "Hang on." he added and he reached out and grabbed hold of Jayk's comlink, "Describe this woman."

"Human. Athletic build. Long hair and wearing a bodyglove." Cal told him.

"Stang. It's Mara." Tylo hissed.

"Who's Mara?" Brae asked, "Old girlfriend?"

"She's one of the team that broke into that art gallery and stole your precious Sith artefacts." Tylo said,

"Crayne must know I'm working with you and sent her to deal with me."

"Then we should leave now." Jayk said as he stood up, "This woman is more likely to lead us to Crayne than the fixers who recruited you." and then he took back his comlink and held it to his own mouth, "Cal make sure she stays aboard but don't let her do any damage to the ship. We're on our way back now."

"And how exactly am I supposed to do that?" Cal said.

"You're the one with more than three thousand years of experience, think of something." Jayk replied.

5.

In the lounge of the *Swift Exit* the hologram of Cal materialised and gave the appearance of looking down at itself.

"Too blue." he muttered in reference to the bluish tinge of his appearance, "But it will just have to do." and then he looked in the direction of the cockpit.

Mara meanwhile was lying on the floor of the cockpit so that she could see underneath the control console. Her primary purpose for being aboard the *Swift Exit* was to uncover the extent of the information that Tylo had given to the Jedi Order but she also wanted to put in place a contingency plan that would allow her to find out what the Jedi intended to do next. She fully expected the men she had brought with her to Kantellia to be capable of killing Tylo but the Jedi were another matter. The Republic's famed protectors had a reputation for being unbeatable in battle and although Mara knew this to be untrue she also knew that they had a nasty knack of surviving where others would be killed and it was quite possible that they would make it back here to their ship and report in to their superiors. To make sure that nothing would be said that Mara would not be aware of she had brought along a device that she was connecting to the subspace communication system. Even without having to physically tap into the communication system this would detect the signals being sent to the main transmission antenna and duplicate them, using the hull of the *Swift Exit* as an improvised antenna. This arrangement would have a range of only a few parsecs but given that she intended to be listening in from the same planet she did not see this as being an issue. She had just finished putting the cover of the communication system back in place when she heard a voice.

"I know you're in there." it called out and Mara froze, "Come on out young lady because the last thing you want is for me to come in there after you."

At first Mara wondered whether there had been a fourth occupant aboard the *Swift Exit* that Mettern and Prok had been unaware of but then she remembered that the access ramp was now unlocked and anyone could just walk up to it and gain access to the ship. Slowly she drew her blaster and crept out of the cockpit, ready to shoot whoever it was that had made the mistake of thinking they could intimidate her.

"Ah, there you are." Cal said as soon as Mara appeared in the lounge and instinctively she whirled around and fired her blaster at him. However, existing as a hologram meant that Cal's form was insubstantial and although the magnetic containment field of the blaster bolt created a brief flicker in his appearance it passed right through without harming him in the slightest and struck the bulkhead behind him. Cal turned to look at the newly formed scorch mark and then back at Mara.

"Well that was rude." he said.

"Who the hell are you?" Mara demanded, still pointing the blaster at Cal.

"I'm Cal Udra, Jedi knight and you are under arrest so if you'd like to place your weapon on the floor and kick it over towards me then you can lie face down and we'll get started with reading you your rights."

"You're just a hologram." Mara said, "You're not even aboard. How are you planning on arresting me?"

"Reinforcements are en route as we speak. You're outnumbered and out classed. Now just be a good girl and hand over your weapon."

"I don't think so." Mara said, "You're still at the cantina with Tylo and that younger girl. You can't do a thing to stop me leaving." and Cal realised that she was under the impression that he was Jayk and was transmitting his image from the cantina rather than being present here in the *Swift Exit* with her. But the fact that she knew that the *Swift Exit*'s crew were in a cantina was worrying and Cal suspected a trap.

"You really think your friends can stop me?" Cal asked, guessing that Mara would have to have allies keeping watch on either the cantina or Tylo and the Jedi.

Still keeping her blaster trained on Cal's hologram Mara reached for her comlink and activated it.

"You've been made." she transmitted, "Go now!"

Mettern and Prok were both walking towards the cantina when all of a sudden Tylo emerged with Jayk and Brae. It took a few moments for Tylo and the two thugs to recognise one another but their reactions were the same.

Surprise.

Sensing this and rapidly identifying the other two men from their reaction both Jayk and Brae reached under their robes and drew their lightsabers, igniting them almost simultaneously.

The rest of Morten's men had not been prepared for this yet and most of them were still out in the open. However, this did not prevent them from taking aim at Tylo and the Jedi.

Danger.

"Look out!" Brae yelled as she sensed the threat and she hurled herself towards Tylo, knocking him off his

feet just as the first blaster bolt came hurtling towards him. Brae angled her lightsaber to block the shot but was unable to send it back at the man who had fired it, instead the energy bolt was sent straight up into the air. Then she extended an arm out towards the man who fired the shot and unleashed a sudden telekinetic blast that hurled him backwards through the air.

"Brae focus!" Jayk yelled as he sensed the uncontrolled nature of her actions, knowing that it would not take much for her to start drawing on the Dark Side. Then he twisted his own lightsaber to deflect two blaster shots aimed towards him, sending each one back at the other shooter, "Cover!" he added quickly as he ducked around a corner. Morten's men continued to fire, ignoring the fact that both Mettern and Prok were in their line of fire and both men were struck repeatedly by their own side before they collapsed.

"He would have shot me." Tylo gasped as he crawled behind a derelict speeder that was rusting outside the cantina and drew his blaster as Brae crouched beside him. Then he stared at her and added, "You saved me."

"I'm a jedi." she replied, "I protect those who need protecting."

"Well thanks but I think I can look after myself now." and he bobbed up over the speeder and fired back, putting a shot into another of Morten's men before he could reach cover.

At the same time Jayk shut off his lightsaber and took out his comlink.

"Brae," he signalled, "can you hold your position?"

"I think so master." she replied, "I can protect us and Tylo appears able to provide covering fire. What about you?"

"I'm going to try and get around behind them. I'll be as quick as I can but be careful and trust in the Force."

"I will. May the Force be with you as well master." Brae said before Jayk headed around the cantina.

"Too late! Both jedi have engaged us."

"Both?" Mara said as she looked at Cal and in return the hologram smiled at her.

"Things not going as planned?" he asked, "Now let me see, if you came here expecting two jedi and your minions are currently fighting against two jedi then how do you explain me? I really do think that you ought to just put down that weapon and surrender. I can assure you that you'll be well treated."

"Not likely." Mara hissed and she suddenly turned and ran for the access ramp.

"You could at least close the door behind you." Cal called out after her, "Were you born in a barn?" then he sighed, shook his head and shut off the hologram.

Outside the *Swift Exit* Mara continued to run, continually checking her surroundings for any signs of more jedi closing in on her. For all she knew there could be a dozen jedi here waiting for her to make an appearance and she had no intention of walking into a trap set for her because she failed to take even the most basic of precautions.

As soon as she had emerged from the *Swift Exit* she had heard the sound of blaster fire in the distance and from this she knew which way to head to join up with the men she had brought with her. But she was not the only one to have observed the fighting and before she was even half way to the cantina she was forced to dive out of the way of two bulky speeders filled with armoured mercenaries rushing past her. Obviously the local crime lord had decided that the fighting was not good for business and sent in his enforcers to put a stop to it.

Picking herself up off the ground Mara looked around again. There were no signs of any jedi moving against her and now that there were more troops heading for the cantina she guessed that the jedi would be more concerned with rescuing their own than in hunting her. Therefore, rather than continue to head the same way she started to make her way back towards her shuttle, now focused more on ensuring that she was able to escape instead of making sure Tylo was killed.

6.

Brae was becoming increasingly impatient as more and more blaster bolts flew overhead or struck the speeder. Every so often she would reach up with her lightsaber and try to send one of the blasts back the way it had come but apart from that first instance when she had acted more on instinct than by design she was finding that her actions were too slow and by the time she was able to get her lightsaber blade in position the shot she was hoping to deflect had already gone past.

She snarled as she swung her lightsaber again and then screamed as she missed.

"Hey kid!" Tylo shouted at her, "How about you calm down before you take your own head off with that laser sword? Or worse yet take mine off." and his sudden intervention brought Brae back to her senses and she ducked back down again, breathing heavily, "Are you okay?" Tylo asked.

"I'll be fine." she said, "Thank you." then she looked around, "Where is uncle Jayk?" she muttered.

"If he's got any sense then he's run for the hills and abandoned us here." Tylo replied, glancing over the speeder. Morten's men had managed to form an arc with Brae and Tylo at its centre and were pouring fire towards the pair from behind cover of their own.

"He wouldn't do that." Brae protested.

"Why not? I would in his position." Tylo said and at the same time he leaned over the speeder and fired again, narrowly missing another of Morten's men.

But then there was a scream and a flash from close by as another of Morten's men fell dead with a long scorch mark across his chest and Jayk appeared from around the corner of another building to engage the arc from one end while their attention was focused on Brae and Tylo. Startled by this sudden turn of events, Morten's men ceased firing at Brae and Tylo and turned to face Jayk as he moved on to the next man along, decapitating him with a single swing of his lightsaber before he could get off a shot.

Tylo grinned as he watched the veteran jedi dealing with Morten's men almost without effort but his elation was short lived as he heard the sound of approaching repulsorlifts and two vehicles filled with armed men appeared on the far side of Jayk.

"Who are they?" Brae asked.

"They're trouble." Tylo replied, "They work for the guy who runs this settlement. Unless you or your uncle has a few thousand credits handy to bribe them with things are going to get somewhat unpleasant."

"Uncle!" Brae exclaimed before leaping up on top of the speeder and then launching herself into the air, using the Force to give her a boost she could not have achieved ordinarily. Somersaulting as she flew towards Jayk she guided herself back down to the ground beside him and adopted a fighting stance as soon as she touched the ground.

"Brae what are you doing here?" he demanded as he faced off against another of Morten's men, "You're supposed to be protecting Tylo."

"Tylo is fine. I'm here to protect you." Brae replied as she stared at the armoured troops now disembarking from the two vehicles.

Being caught between two jedi and the armoured troops that had just arrived proved to be too much for what remained of Morten's men and one of them got up to run, soon followed by the others. Some of the armoured troops ran after them, shooting at them from behind without bothering to issue any warnings for them to surrender or to get anyone not involved in the shooting out of the way. But the majority of the armoured troops instead took aim at the two jedi.

"Stand down and surrender your weapons." an amplified voice called out.

"We are jedi knights here on Republic business." Jayk replied as he and Brae stood side by side with their lightsabers raised in front of them.

"Ha! The Republic doesn't exist out here. Now put down your weapons before we're forced to put you down." the voice called told them but both jedi stood firm. Meanwhile Tylo was still hidden behind the wrecked speeder, peering out around it and he sighed.

"It must be contagious." he said to himself and then while none of the armoured mercenaries were looking in his direction he quickly darted out of hiding and headed for the cover of a nearby building instead. As Tylo made his way towards the nearest of the two troop transports the stand off between the jedi and the mercenaries continued. Jayk and Brae knew that they were outnumbered and at a disadvantage but whoever was in charge of the mercenaries was intimidated enough by the thought of going into battle against jedi that he held back from ordering his men to open fire, hoping that he would instead be somehow able to trick or intimidate the jedi into surrendering. This allowed Tylo to make it to the hatch of the driver's compartment of the nearest transport to him and he reached up and pulled it open. The startled driver looked around down at Tylo and reached for his weapon just as Tylo reached up and dragged him out of the vehicle, slamming his head against its side as hard as he could before dropping the unconscious man to the ground.

Climbing up into the vehicle Tylo took the driver's place and grabbed hold of the controls. Pressing down on the accelerator he sent the transport lurching forwards suddenly and it crashed through the armoured mercenaries as it hurtled towards the Jedi as well.

Fortunately both Jayk and Brae saw the approaching vehicle and at the moment that the mercenaries took their eyes off them they both leapt straight up into the air and came back down in the open passenger section at the back of the vehicle as Tylo continued to drive it forwards. Behind the vehicle the mercenaries opened fire but with Jayk standing in the back of the transport any shots that would have struck either the Jedi or the compartment where Tylo now sat were deflected away.

"Brae get forward." Jayk ordered and Brae shut off her lightsaber before climbing up onto the roof of the driver's compartment. From here she reached over the side to open the same door Tylo had used before pulling herself down from the roof and into the compartment. This of course meant moving over Tylo and he gasped as she slid under his arms and pulled herself across his lap.

"Hey there!" he exclaimed as he struggled to keep his attention on the road ahead, "No need to get excited down there."

"Sorry to disappoint you but dragging myself out of the line of fire isn't quite enough to get me excited." Brae replied.

"Well I'm sorry but we don't have time for anything else kid." Tylo said and Brae snarled at the thought of what he seemed to be suggesting.

Just then the other door was pulled open and Jayk swung himself into the driver's compartment, sitting beside Brae.

"They have got the other vehicle moving." he said, "They're coming after us."

"Do you think you can outrun them?" Brae asked, looking at Tylo.

"Kid, this is my first time driving one of these things and those guys chasing us have an identical vehicle."

Tylo pointed out, "I'll be lucky if I can just keep us ahead of them."

"Try and circle round to the landing field." Jayk said as he took his comlink from his belt.

"We're leaving?" Brae replied in surprise, "But our mission—"

"Has failed." Jayk interrupted, "I'm guessing that the two men we came here looking for are the pair that were shot by their own side and since the beings now chasing after us killed those ones that we didn't they cannot lead us to their employer. Our only hope now is this Mara." and he activated his comlink, "Cal do you read me?"

"Right here Jayk." Cal replied.

"Do you still have that woman there with you?" Jayk asked.

"No. She made a swift exit from the *Swift Exit* when she heard that you were attacking her men. Did she not turn up there?" Cal responded.

"No she didn't. What we got was a bunch of mercenaries that work for the local crime boss that rules this settlement. We're on our way back to the ship now, can you prepare it for take off?"

"Me? No. I'm only able to interface with the communication system because it's designed for wireless connection. Flight systems require a physical interface I can't make."

"It's not my fault." Tylo said suddenly, "I didn't know we'd end in this situation."

"It was your idea to come here." Brae commented.

"Never mind that now." Jayk told her, "We just need to get back to the ship and get out of here as quickly as we can."

"Then hang on." Tylo said, "Because we're about to find out just how well this thing handles." and he suddenly turned the steering controls as far as they would go, sending the vehicle ploughing through a row of parked speeder bikes outside another cantina that appeared to be frequented by the riders of such lightweight vehicles. Ignoring his inexperience in operating this class of vehicle Tylo increased the power to its repulsorlifts as rapidly as he could to build up not only its speed but also its altitude. Though obviously not designed as an aircraft, the transport was still able to travel at a height sufficient to keep it above the pedestrians in the streets as well as the majority of the other vehicles in use on its streets. However, the strain on the engines was obvious from the sound they began to produce that suggested continuing to push them as hard as this would soon lead to some sort of failure. What it did achieve however, was to increase the distance between them and their pursuers. Obviously the mercenaries were more concerned about wrecking their vehicle than with capturing Tylo and the Jedi at any cost.

Reaching the landing zone well ahead of the other vehicle, Tylo braked at the last possible moment and the vehicle lurched as the power to its engines was cut off suddenly. This proved to be the final straw for one of the propulsion units and it burst into flames and started billowing smoke from under its casing.

"Out!" Tylo snapped as he opened the door beside him before the vehicle had even come to a proper halt and he leapt out, rolling across the landing field as he landed. Jayk and Brae were right behind him and all three rushed towards the access ramp of the *Swift Exit* that was still wide open.

"Seal that up!" Tylo said as he reached the top of the access ramp, "I'm going to get us out of here."

"Is your turret charged?" Jayk asked from behind him.

"Not yet, but I'll get it working." Tylo responded and Jayk headed in the other direction, making for the *Swift Exit's* turret mounted laser cannon.

"But what should I do?" Brae called out.

"Seal the ramp." Jayk replied, "Then find somewhere to sit down out of the way." and Brae groaned as she slammed her hand down on the controls to close the access ramp.

Tylo sat down in the pilot's seat and immediately started work on bringing the *Swift Exit's* flight systems on line as well as powering up the weapon system. Tylo had had the laser cannon modified to give it more hitting power but the drawback to this was that the weapon now required longer to bring online than it would have done otherwise. Somewhat unexpectedly Brae appeared and sat down next to him.

"How long will this take?" she asked.

"Longer if you keep bugging me." Tylo replied, "Didn't your master tell you to keep out of the way anyway?"

"He said sit down and I am sat down." Brae said then she pointed through the cockpit canopy to where the other mercenary vehicle was approaching, "Tylo." she said.

"I see it." he responded before activating the intercom, "Jayk your cannon is good to go. Target dead ahead"

"Understood." Jayk replied from the turret and he swung the laser cannon around to face the mercenaries.

Looking at the vehicle through his targeting scanner Jayk saw it come to a halt and start to disgorge its passengers and while they started firing their hand held blasters at the *Swift Exit* he held his fire until this was complete. Then he fired a single powerful blast into the now empty transport, knowing that the resulting explosion would be enough to ward off the mercenaries while they sought somewhere that was safe from the laser cannon.

Before he had the chance to fire a second shot the *Swift Exit* rocked as Tylo took off and it rose into the air.

Jayk turned the turret around fully as the ship continued to gain altitude, watching for any sign of pursuit. But all he saw was empty sky that turned from blue to black.

All alone, Mara walked through the desert outside the settlement as she made her way back towards her shuttle. Then a roar overhead made her look up and she saw the *Swift Exit* heading rapidly into space.

"Run while you can Tylo Kurrast." she hissed, snarling, "Those jedi won't be able to protect you forever."

Aboard the *Swift Exit*, Jayk entered the cockpit just as Tylo made the jump into hyperspace.

"I'll have you back on Coruscant within a day." Tylo told him, "And then we can go our separate ways."

"I think not Tylo." Jayk replied, "Our deal was quite clear. You will continue to assist us until we have apprehended those responsible for the break in and theft at the gallery on Corris. So until then Brae and I will be availing ourselves of you and your vessel to take us where we need to go."

Anger.

"You've got to be kidding me." Tylo exclaimed.

"I am quite serious." Jayk said.

"Besides," Brae added, "from what happened back there I'd say that your former employers seem to want you dead. I would think that having us around would be safer for you. I've already saved your life once."

"Yeah, and I saved yours from those mercenaries when I ought to have just run and left you back there." Tylo pointed out.

"So I guess we're even so far then." Brae said, smiling at him and Tylo smiled back.

"Not quite yet," he replied and right at that moment Brae's eyes widened.

Pain.

"Brae what's wrong?" Jayk asked as she suddenly clamped both her hands to her abdomen.

"Oh no." she said, "Oh no. I think that drink is finally making its way through me." and she suddenly leapt up and pushed past Jayk, "Out of the way!" she screamed as Tylo watched her leave and laughed as she ran for the refresher.

"Now we're even kid." he called out after her. Then a few seconds later there was another scream that was accompanied by a yell.

"I hate you Tylo Kurrast! I hate you so much!"