

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

1-08: CORRUPTION & GREED

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Work by the missing artist Thal N'Krey is located on Alderaan and Jayk and Brae Udra are sent to retrieve it. But they are faced not only with a collector of Sith artefacts who does not want to be separated from his illicit collection, but also agents of Morton Crayne who have been sent to acquire the art for his client...

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"Can I look now?" the young woman asked as she got up off the couch she had been sat on and put on a robe to cover her nakedness.

"Of course." Thal N'Krey replied, continuing to sweep the tip of the narrow metal pick he was using to shape the clay in front of him across its surface. The sculpture was concealed behind a screen that had prevented the woman from seeing its progress before now.

Hurrying around the screen the woman smiled when she saw the progress of Thal's work so far. The sculpture depicted her in a sitting position, nude but with her limbs positioned so that all of her more intimate areas were shielded from view. As Thal often did he had chosen to depict her as a near human and here and there on the body of the sculpture he had added on protrusions that he would later sculpt into bone spikes or in the case of the two larger ones emerging from the jaw of the sculpture, narrow tentacles that hung down from the face.

"That's amazing." she said. Then she frowned as she noticed a lump set into the centre of the sculpture's chest, "What's that?" she asked.

"The centrepiece." Thal replied, "This is a warrior princess of a proud civilisation and the talisman she will wear is a symbol of her power. It is what makes her subjects bow down and worship at her feet."

The young woman smiled again.

"A warrior queen with legions of adoring subjects." she said, "I like the sound of that." then she glanced up at the wall and gasped, "Stang Thal!" she exclaimed, "Look at the time. I've got an interview for a job at a cantina and I'm supposed to be there in ten minutes." then she ran to where her clothes had been placed and scooped them up before heading into an adjoining room to get dressed. Meanwhile Thal continued to work on the sculpture, turning his attention to the talisman around its neck now and to guide him in the details of this he picked up a nearby object that was wrapped in cloth. Unwrapping this revealed an old fashioned book with hand written pages and Thal turned to a page he had marked with a strip of plastic. The page in question was dominated by an illustration of a talisman labelled in the same alien language as the rest of the book was written in and Thal began to duplicate its design in the clay.

Though Jedi Knight Jayk Udra's primary weapon was not a blaster that did not mean that he did not know how to use one and he checked the charge level of the one he held before adjusting it to a stun setting.

"Okay Brae, are you ready?" he asked, looking up at the young woman who was not only his padawan learner but also his niece. Brae had the potential to be a great jedi but she had trouble controlling her power and the Jedi Order had decided to assign Jayk as her master in the hope that this would give her more of a connection to her family history of serving the Republic as jedi knights.

"Ready master." Brae replied as she held up her lightsaber in front of her and activated it with a 'snap-hiss'.

"Good." Jayk said, "But remember that-" and then he fired the blaster without finishing the sentence, sending a bright blue energy bolt towards Brae. Instinctively she ducked and the blaster bolt passed above her, prompting Jayk to sigh, "No. Use your lightsaber. Hit the targets behind me." and he glanced at the two targets that had been set up either side of him against the wall of the lounge aboard the YT-700 class freighter *Swift Exit*.

"I'll try master." Brae said, nodding.

"No. There is no try. Just do it." Jayk said and he fired again.

This time Brae swung her lightsaber towards the energy bolt only to miss it narrowly before Jayk fire again and on her third attempt she manage to parry the shot. However, rather than blocking it with the centre of her blade so she could control the direction it was deflected in Brae blocked it with the base of her blade and part of the blast caught her thumb, causing her to emit a sudden squeal.

"You aren't giving yourself enough room to move." another voice said as the image of another man in jedi robes materialised, "Try stepping back as you swing."

"Is that the advice you gave your sister Cal?" Jayk asked..

"Oh Lara never needed any help in getting in the way of things." Cal responded, "In fact one of my children was almost not conceived because she-"

"Is it too much to ask that I not have to hear about the sex life of a four thousand year old dead man?" Brae interrupted, "Especially one I'm related to."

"Agreed." Jayk said, "This lesson concerns lightsaber combat, not maintaining a marriage in the face of sibling interference."

"As you wish." Cal said, nodding.

"Well the lesson's going to have to end anyway." another voice said as another man walked into the lounge and leant against a bulkhead, "There's a message coming in for you." he added, looking at Jayk. This was

Tylo Kurrast, the captain and owner of the *Swift Exit*.

"The temple?" Jayk asked.

"No, it's that guy from the Galactic Museum who told you all about that laser brain Thal you're so interested in."

"Ah yes," Jayk said, "Professor Hebro promised to let us know if he found out anything new." and he started to walk towards the cockpit, pausing as he reached Tylo, "Here." he said, handing the blaster to the other man, "Brae needs to learn to deflect blaster fire using her lightsaber. This is set to stun and she is aiming for those two targets."

"You mean I get to shoot her?" Tylo asked and a smile spread across his face.

"You can try." Brae responded, smiling back.

"Just see what you can do." Jayk said before he continued on his way into the *Swift Exit's* cockpit and sat down. In front of him there was a display screen that showed an image of a dark skinned human man with greying hair, "Dahlis." Jayk said, "It's good to speak to you again."

"Likewise. Where are you right now?" Dahlis asked and Jayk glanced at the navigation panel.

"Ah, somewhere along the Corellian Trade Route. In the Mid Rim. Why?"

"I think I've found a lead to Thal N'Krey." Dahlis said, "I was looking at records of recent art transfers and something came up on Alderaan. Not the auction itself but an import record. Alderaanian customs submitted a request with us to confirm that a sculpture wasn't listed as stolen. They gave the artist's name as Thal N'Krey."

"That's excellent news." Jayk said, "Do you have a name and address for where it was shipped to?"

"Not yet, but it won't take long. I'll meet you on Alderaan okay?" Dahlis said. Then he frowned, "Is that blaster fire I hear?" he asked.

"Ah yes. Brae is currently practising her skill with a lightsaber, something she has had cause to rely on more than I would have liked recently."

"Fair enough. I'll see you on Alderaan." Dahlis said before the channel was closed and Jayk got back to his feet to return to the lounge, unaware of the tiny device mounted under the flight console that came to life as soon as the conversation ended.

"We need to change course for Alderaan." he announced when he got to the lounge, just as Tylo fired another shot that Brae barely avoided being hit by.

"Alderaan? Haven't we had enough diversions already?" Tylo asked.

"Hopefully this will be the last." Jayk said.

"Good." Tylo commented and he fired again, "Because I-" but before he could finish Brae deflected the blaster bolt and it came straight back towards him before striking him in the chest and he collapsed in a heap.

"Oh no! I shot Tylo!" Brae exclaimed as she looked down at him.

"Yes. Yes you did." Cal said.

2.

In a room on the world of Protas in Hutt space Morton Crayne was studying the layout of his old base of operations when a woman came hurrying towards him.

"You know Mara," he said, "when we designed the defences of our old place I never imagined that some piece of poodoo vacc head would steal it from me and I'd end up having to try to figure out how to break back in to get it back."

"Still trying to figure out how to deal with Teron?" Mara asked and Morton nodded.

"I thought maybe he'd come out of there and we could deal with him then. But none of the people I've sent to hunt for him have seen any sign of him. Whatever he's doing inside there he's keeping to himself."

"I told you before, go after his people." Mara said, "Take out enough and he'll have to come out to deal with the problem or the rest will just leave."

"His people? You mean my people don't you? Or at least they used to be before they turned on me."

"Don't let it get you down." Mara said, "I've got something here that will cheer you up." and she held out a datapad to him.

"What is it?" Morton asked.

"Remember when I got aboard Tylo's ship?" she said and Morton sighed.

"Tylo Kurrast. Another traitor." he said.

"Well I planted a tap in their communication system. It's not got much of a range on it, but it just managed to get a signal back to me and guess what it's found? A piece of art by Thal N'Krey."

"Mara that's great. Is it aboard the Swift Exit?" Morton exclaimed.

"No. It's somewhere on Alderaan. Tylo and the Jedi are going to meet some art guy there before they go take a look. I figured that maybe we could go along as well and see whether we could find a way of getting the owner to part with it."

Morton smiled.

"It would help get Rylee off my back." he said, "She's not going to forget us losing what she paid for any time soon."

"I'll need to get moving. The Jedi have a head start on me." Mara pointed out and Morton nodded.

"Go." he told her, "Take a couple of men with you but remember this is Alderaan we're talking about. Their cops get twitchy about people carrying blasters around so don't take any with you just in case you get stopped at customs. See what you can pick up off the local black market instead."

Mara smiled.

"Right on it." she replied before she turned around and walked away. Meanwhile Morton got to his feet and headed for a room that had been set up as a private communications hub. There was no-one else in here as he closed the door behind him so Morton had to program in the details of the being he wanted to talk to himself.

The communication address he had been given guaranteed him priority access to the being at the other end and he barely had time to walk from the control console to the holographic transmission pad before a life size image of a human female with dark skin appeared in the projection area.

"Rylee." Morton said in a friendly manner. He had always found his client to be cold and aloof but her physical beauty gave her a desirability that Morton could not shake.

"Mister Crayne." she replied curtly, "Do you have my property yet?"

"Not yet no." Morton said, "But I may have found something else of interest."

"I am interested in what I paid for." Rylee said.

"One of my sources has located another piece by Thal N'Krey." Morton told her and he saw Rylee's eyes widen.

"How?"

"I can't reveal all my secrets." Morton said, "But I can tell you that it's currently located on Alderaan. I've already sent Mara to retrieve it. I'll let you know as soon as she has it and then perhaps you can—"

"I'll send someone to collect it." Rylee said, interrupting before Morton could suggest that she come to him in person, "But I'm warning you Mister Crayne, do not fail me again. Your previous failure has attracted the attention of others and they are not as forgiving as I am." and then all of a sudden Rylee broke the connection and her image disappeared.

"Well that didn't go quite as well as I'd hoped." Morton said to himself.

In another room equipped for long range communication in a star system far away from Protas the woman that Morton Crayne knew only as Rylee sat down in her chair and leant back in it. Her office was far more luxurious than the run down structure Morton now used as his headquarters but the other figure present, a

man who had remained silent and out of the holocamera's viewing angle while Rylee had spoken with Morton was dressed in a battered set of armour that looked as if it was more suited to someone associated with Morton than his high society client.

"So what do you think?" Rylee asked and the man shrugged.

"Do you really think Crayne can be trusted?" he asked in return.

"Of course not but he knows that if he doesn't get me what I paid for then he'll be paying with his life. But I'm asking about this artwork he claims to have uncovered."

"I'm not art expert." the armoured man answered, "But if whatever Crayne's found is on Alderaan then that means either it was imported or Thal visited there without us knowing about it. Possibly that's where he went when he vanished. Either way you need to speak to someone who knows how to find that sort of thing out." Rylee sighed.

"You mean The Assembler?" she said and the man nodded.

"The Assembler." he repeated.

"I had a bad feeling you were going to say that." Rylee said, "I hate having to deal with that thing."

As was to be expected on one of the Republic's core worlds the starport on Alderaan was bustling with activity and Dahlis found himself having to repeatedly step out of the way of other beings not paying as much attention to where they were going as he was. He was not always successful in this and he was occasionally buffeted by someone who carried on without bothering to apologise for colliding with him.

The crowds were worse around the commercial docking ports where liners such as the one that had brought him from Coruscant made planet fall but they thinned out as he neared the smaller private docking bays where he knew that the *Swift Exit* would be landing and he made his way to a data terminal and stood in front of it.

"*Swift Exit*." he said out loud and the terminal instantly brought up the number of the docking bay where the freighter had landed.

"Advisory." the terminal said in a synthesised voice, "This vessel has not yet been cleared by customs." and Dahlis frowned, wondering why a vessel operating under the auspices of the Jedi Order would be refused clearance. Turning away from the terminal he was startled by the sudden appearance of a young woman who despite there being plenty of room to move still managed to collide with him.

"Sorry." she said, "I just zoned out there."

"That's quite alright young lady." Dahlis replied with a smile, "That wasn't the first time I've literally run into someone today but it was the first time that person had the manners to be civil about it." and then he walked away, not noticing that when she had deliberately walked into him Mara had stolen his datapad from the bag over his shoulder.

The docking bay where the *Swift Exit* was berthed was not far away and Dahlis reached it in under five minutes. He knew that he had found the right docking bay before he saw any of the *Swift Exit*'s occupants when he heard the sound of Jayk's voice.

"Captain Kurrast is now under the authority of the Jedi Order." he said, "You have my word that he will not infringe any of your laws while on Alderaan."

"That may be," another voice replied, "but according to the computer he is barred from entering Alderaanian territory." and when Dahlis rounded the corner he saw Jayk trying to negotiate with several Alderaanian customs agents. As was normal for law enforcement on Alderaan none of the agents carried blasters but each one was armed with a stun baton and a canister of irritant spray.

"How about I just wait on the ship?" Tylo suggested.

"I think that might be best. We don't want any trouble." Jayk said and he looked at the customs agent, "That will be acceptable won't it?"

"I'll clear your ship for a two day stay." the official replied, "But after that his ship and he have to leave. No excuses."

"Very well. Hopefully that will be enough time for us to complete our business here." Jayk said and he started to turn back towards the entrance to the docking bay where the *Swift Exit* waited.

"Jayk." Dahlis called out at this point and Jayk looked towards him.

"Dahlis." he replied, "Just in time. Come aboard with us and you can tell us more about this artwork that we're here for."

"Of course." Dahlis said before he accompanied Tylo and the two Jedi back into the *Swift Exit*.

Inside the freighter Dahlis set his bag down on the lounge table and began searching it and his pockets for his datapad.

"So what was all that about with customs?" he asked.

"Ah, it appears that there is a local issue with Tylo's immigration status." Jayk replied and Brae grinned.

"He's been banned from the planet for life." she added.

"But I thought he was operating as a judicial agent." Dahlis said.

"He is. But Alderaan still has the right to refuse entry to those deemed 'undesirable.'" Jayk said.

"Basically I helped some import some goods a while back-" Tylo began.

"Weapons." Brae interrupted.

"I helped import some weapons a while back and the cops seized them. I was safely off planet by that time but my client gave me up for a lighter sentence. Now even though all warrants against me have been cancelled I'm still on the local blacklist."

"Unfortunate." Dahlis said, frowning.

"What's wrong?" Brae asked.

"My datapad. I had it on the flight but I can't find it now. It had all the information on Thal on it."

"Let me help." Brae said, stepping towards him.

"No, it's okay. I must have just dropped it somewhere." Dahlis responded, "Maybe starport lost and found will have it."

"Ha!" Tylo exclaimed, "Trust me, if anyone found it they'll have taken it."

"Not everyone is as selfish as you Tylo." Brae said.

"And not everyone is a goody two shoes like you." he replied.

"How long will it take to get the backup files?" Jayk asked.

"Oh not long. Providing you have a holonet transceiver that is."

"The Jedi Order kindly installed one." Tylo said.

"Along with a display system of far higher quality than was strictly necessary." Jayk said. Then he looked towards Cal's holocron, "Cal can you connect with the Galactic Museum on Coruscant?"

"Of course." Cal said as his hologram appeared in the lounge, "Just tell me who you need to contact."

"I need to access my own files." Dahlis said, "My username is-"

"Got it." Cal said before he could finish, "I take it that the files are those under the 'Thal – Alderaan' heading?"

Dahlis frowned.

"How were you able to do that?" he asked.

"Yeah, I didn't think you were set up for slicing." Tylo added.

"I'm not." Cal answered, "But when we were in the professor's office he was logged on to an unsecured terminal and I recorded his details."

Dahlis glared at Cal.

"I'm not sure what to think of that." he said.

"Don't worry. I didn't see anything that wasn't in active memory." Cal reassured him. Then he smiled, "That's it, the files are now all in the *Swift Exit's* computer."

"I managed to obtain a hologram of the sculpture." Dahlis said, "Can you-" and then before he could finish the lounge's holographic projector came to life and a second three dimensional image appeared in mid air, this one rotating slowly. The image was highly detailed and showed quite clearly that the sculpture was of a nude humanoid female.

"Yeah, that's by N'Krey." Tylo commented as soon as he saw the hologram.

"How can you tell?" Dahlis asked, "It takes great skill to authenticate artwork like this. Especially from a hologram rather than the actual piece itself."

"We've met the model." Brae said.

"Though Jayk's the only one to have seen her with no clothes on." Tylo added and Jayk sighed.

"Really? You spoke with this woman?" Dahlis asked Jayk.

"He did a damned sight more than just talk to her." Tylo said.

"The young woman is called Vallani Mellet. She is a waitress-" Jayk began.

"And prostitute." Tylo added.

"A waitress who modelled for Thal N'Krey over a period of several years." Jayk explained, "She was able to give us an insight into the mental state of the artist prior to his disappearance."

"He was nuts." Brae said.

"He was prescribed medication that he frequently failed to take." Jayk continued, "According to Miss Mellet he believed that some of the artefacts he used for inspiration were capable of communicating with him."

"Which if they were genuine Sith artefacts is quite possible." Cal added.

"Well this piece is called 'Warrior Queen'," Dahlis said, returning to the subject of the sculpture itself, "and as you can see depicts a high ranking member of Sith society."

"Spent a lot of time naked did they?" Tylo asked rhetorically.

"But if this really was made by Thal then what interest do we have in it?" Brae asked, "Aren't we just interested in the actual Sith artefacts being offered as his work?"

"We also need to find the artist himself." Jayk pointed out, "Only he can explain how he obtained the artefacts in the first place. Perhaps the individual who owns this piece can shed some light on where he is."

"There's also something interesting about the piece itself." Cal said, "Look at the chest."

"I think Tylo's been doing little else." Brae said as Cal caused the holographic sculpture to stop rotating.

"The talisman." Dahlis said, "I had noticed it but I didn't have time to study it closely."

"Well take a good look." Cal said, zooming in on the carefully sculpted talisman.

"What are those carvings?" Brae asked when she saw the details.

"Writing." Jayk said.

"Sith writing." Cal added, "I can't read what they say but the original me saw plenty of examples to be able to recognise it when I see it."

"So even though Thal used a living model for his sculpture he still referred to a Sith artefact for part of it." Dahlis said.

"Correct." Jayk responded, "And depending on how accurately he transcribed the writing from whatever he used for inspiration then that sculpture could have forbidden Sith lore recorded on it."

"Or maybe information on where to find more dangerous knowledge." Cal said.

"Then we need to pay a visit to the owner of this sculpture immediately." Jayk said.

"What do you mean 'we'?" Tylo asked, "I have to stay here, remember?"

3.

The hotel had been chosen for its discrete location not far from the starport where Mara and the two men, a pair of klatoonian thugs who had worked for Morton for several years named Kliss and Vex, had arrived on Alderaan as well as its reasonable cost. Mara startled both men when she returned to the hotel and one of them rapidly tossed a coat onto the table they were both sat at.

"Oh very natural." she said as she entered the room and closed the door behind her, "If I was a cop I'm sure I wouldn't be asking to see what's under there. But how about you let me see what you managed to get hold of?"

While Mara had been waiting at the starport for Dahlis to arrive from Coruscant she had trusted both Kliss and Vex to obtain weapons for them to use if it became necessary. Alderaan had very strict laws governing the possession of most ranged weapons and only a handful of locals could own them legally. However, these laws did not prevent the more enterprising elements of the local underworld from either importing them or fashioning their own without official permission and the two klatoonians had been able to make contact with some of these enterprising beings.

"It's not great." Vex said as the coat was lifted off the table to reveal the small collection of weapons underneath it.

There were five guns in total, two of which were modern blaster pistols. Made as sporting guns they were smaller and lighter than military models but lacked the same hitting power. Next came a dart stunner that had the look of being stolen from a police armoury. The pistol used compressed gas to fire toxin laden darts at a target. The police would use only tranquillising darts but it was quite possible that whoever had stolen it would have replaced this with something more lethal. The fourth weapon was a bulky high-calibre smooth bore firearm with two barrels that had been sawn down as well as having the butt removed so that it was the same size as a large pistol. Mara had a passing familiarity with such weapons and knew that at close range they could be devastating.

"Nice." she said as she picked up the shotgun, knowing that the spread pattern of the projectiles it fired meant that a jedi could not hope to block an entire blast with their lightsaber as they could with a blaster bolt or single bullet. Then she saw the final weapon and winced, "What the kriff is that?" she asked.

"It's a pulse wave blaster." Kliss replied.

"Yes I can see that." Mara said, scowling at him. Pulse wave weapons fired compact artificial spatial distortions and had been the pre-eminent personal energy weapon in the Republic prior to the development of blaster technology. But that had been almost four thousand years earlier and since then very few had been manufactured. Part of this was due to their relative inefficiency, but more recently the technology had been developed somewhat to create the ultra deadly disruptors that could literally disintegrate matter and so the Republic had banned the technology altogether, including the older pulse wave weapons. But what mattered to Mara was that the weapon she was looking at had probably been changing hands on the black market for thousands of years.

"Don't worry." Vex said, "We checked the field casing for fractures before we paid for it."

"Good. Because I'm not in the mood to have my hand blown off by an exploding blaster." Mara said, setting down the shotgun and picking up one of the sporting blasters instead, "Though to be on the safe side I think I'll be taking one of these."

"What about you?" Kliss asked, "Did you get what you were looking for?"

"I think so." Mara said as she produced Dahlis's datapad, "Now let's see whether his security is good enough to keep me out." and she took the device over to where her case rested on a bed and sat down beside it.

From the case she took out another datapad that she then connected to the one she had stolen using a wide, flat cable before she started to run a program that was installed on her own datapad. The program was designed to bypass the user interface of a connected device and allow her to access its memory as if the files were stored on her own datapad. Of course the method was not foolproof and there were many anti-slicing countermeasures available to protect against such an attack but Dahlis had not installed any on his datapad and Mara smiled as she found herself navigating through his files.

"Found anything?" Vex asked.

"Not yet – Wait, hang on. Yes, that's it." Mara replied with a smile as she found the files grouped under the heading of 'Thal – Alderaan', "We've got an address." she added.

"So what next?" Vex said.

"What else? We go look at some art. Now which of you knows how to hot wire a speeder?"

Hiring a speeder at the starport, Dahlis drove the two jedi to the address of the owner of Thal's sculpture provided by the Alderaanian customs service. The building was a large private residence surrounded by an

even larger garden that was very well maintained. The mansion grounds were surrounded by a large power fence that allowed passers by to see the house but prevented them from reaching it. Fortunately there was a gateway equipped with a comlink that could be used to communicate directly with the mansion's residents.

"Hello?" a voice said when Jayk pressed the comlink.

"My name is Jayk Udra." Jayk said.

"No Jayk Udra is listed as an approved visitor." the voice replied before Jayk could continue.

"I am a jedi knight. I have business with Mister Biggs Hollen."

"One moment." the voice said before the gate swung open automatically. Then without waiting to be told

Dahlis drove through the now open gateway and towards the mansion.

They were met at the front door by a rakirian. The multi-segmented alien waited as they disembarked from the speeder until he moved forwards to greet them.

"Honoured jedi," he said, his voice the same as the one that had spoken to Jayk over the comlink at the gate, "welcome to the home of Biggs Hollen. I am Mister Hollen's valet and if you would like to accompany me I will escort you to my employer."

"Of course." Jayk replied before letting Dahlis and Brae take the lead as they followed the valet into the mansion.

Excitement.

Biggs Hollen was clearly an avid art collector and almost every wall was covered in paintings and photographs while holograms and solid sculptures were present on shelves and tables. Jayk did not study these as closely as Dahlis obviously was but he could not help but notice that at least one in every room depicted the Sith in some form. However, he sensed no signs of the Dark side coming from them and concluded that none were genuine creations of the Sith.

"See anything by Thal?" Brae whispered.

"Not as far as I can tell off hand." Dahlis replied, "Though it's not like I know what every piece he created looks like."

The valet led them to a large closed doorway where he paused and knocked.

"Enter." a voice said from the other side and the door slid open to reveal an elderly man sat in a repulsor chair near a large window that overlooked the grounds of his home.

"Jayk Udra, jedi knight and party sir." the valet said as he entered the room, "Shall I arrange refreshment?"

"No. I doubt they'll be here long enough for it to be worthwhile." Biggs replied, "Now leave us."

"Of course sir." the valet said, bowing before he left the room.

Disdain.

It was clear to both of the jedi that Biggs Hollen did not want them in his home but unable to sense their host's feelings on the matter Dahlis found himself almost overwhelmed by the range and quality of art on display in this room alone.

"Now how about you tell me what you're doing here?" Biggs asked, glaring at Jayk.

"Mister Hollen, I am Jedi Knight Jayk Udra. This is my padawan Brae and Professor Dahlis Hebro is a professor of art from the Galactic Museum.. We understand that you recently imported a sculpture by-

"Ah," Biggs said without bothering to let Jayk finish, "I should have known that you'd come about the sculpture. Well yes, I did just import a sculpture depicting a Sith noblewoman but there's nothing illegal about that. It's not an original Sith artefact so I don't need a permit and you've no right to come traipsing in here after it."

"On the contrary Mister Hollen, the law regarding Sith knowledge is clear. Both the original artefacts and any direct copies made are subject to inspection and seizure if they are considered to pose a threat. Now we have a record of your importing a sculpture that may feature a direct copy of a genuine Sith artefact and having it delivered to this address. That is enough for me to carry out a search." Jayk said sternly, "Now do you want to show us where it is being kept or would you rather we searched the entire house?"

Anger.

Biggs scowled at the jedi, obviously not happy about the idea of having the jedi wandering around his home.

"Very well." he said and there was a whirring sound as his repulsor chair started to move towards the door.

Biggs led them to a large conservatory that was mainly filled with tropical plants but amongst them were several sculptures, all of which depicted human or near human women who were partially or fully unclothed.

"Remarkable." Dahlis commented as he inspected the nearest statue.

"A lifetimes work." Biggs replied, "Something I don't intend to surrender to anyone without a fight."

Brae smiled at the thought of the elderly man in his repulsor chair putting up a fight against someone come to burgle his home but Jayk glared at her.

"If you could just direct us to the work by Thal N'Krey." he said.

"Over there by the door." Biggs replied, pointing across the conservatory and he sat back in his repulsor chair while Dahlis and the jedi approached the sculpture.

The hologram they had seen was an accurate representation of the sculpture and now that they could see it in real life it was apparent that it was also life sized, with all of Vallani's features recognisable.

"This is weird." Brae said, "Even with her made to look like a Sith it looks just like her."

"Definitely an original Thal N'Krey." Dahlis said as he knelt down and inspected the base of the sculpture, brushing aside some nearby plants so that he could see where Thal had signed it.

"And the talisman bears the text we thought it did." Jayk added before he turned back towards Biggs to address him, "By the authority of the Jedi Order I am impounding this object until the nature of the carvings it bears can be determined."

Anger.

Resentment.

"I don't think so." Biggs hissed, "You may be able to search my home but you can't remove anything from it without a court order. I know my rights. Do you think that this is the first time I've dealt with your sort? You're nothing but narrow minded fools afraid of a different point of view. You killed Thal N'Krey for believing in the Sith and now you think that you can just bully everyone who owns his work into surrendering it. Well I'm telling you you can't. Age may have left me crippled and deformed but by resolve is as strong as ever and I'll fight you in the courts."

Jayk and Brae exchanged glances when they heard the accusation that the Jedi Order was involved in the disappearance of Thal. Then Brae stepped forwards.

"I'll handle this master." she said and she raised her hand and looked at Biggs, "You want to-" she began before Jayk reached out and grabbed her by the wrist.

"No." he said, "Mister Hollen is well within his rights to require us to get a court order and I suggest that we leave him in peace until we can obtain one."

As soon as the Jedi were gone from his home Biggs summoned his valet.

"Sigirat," he said, addressing the rakirian by name, "call my lawyers. Tell them I need their help immediately."

"Of course sir." the valet replied, "I shall call them right away."

4.

From further down the street Mara and Vex both studied Biggs's home through macrobinoculars as Dahlis drove the speeder out of the driveway and turned in the opposite direction.

"Should we get after them?" Vex asked but Mara shook her head.

"No." she replied.

"But they'll get away with-" Vex began.

"They don't have it laser brain." Mara interrupted, "Do you really think that they could have hidden that sculpture under their robes?"

"I-" Vex began before Mara cut him off again.

"Of course they can't." she said, "So that means it's still inside the mansion."

"So what do you want to do about it?" Kliss said and Mara looked around, studying the neighbourhood from inside their stolen speeder.

"Take us around the block." she said, "I want to see all around this place before I decide what the best way to get inside is."

"Take a left here." Jayk said as the speeder approached a junction.

"But the starport is the other way uncle." Brae commented.

"We aren't going to the starport yet." Jayk replied, "I want to get to the courthouse before it closes and according to my map it's that way."

"So you're really going after a court order then?" Dahlis asked and Jayk nodded.

"I am. Not only for the removal of the sculpture but also to allow us to conduct a full search of the premises for any other potential Sith artefacts. There are elements of what Biggs Hollen had to say that make me think he may have more than just a passing interest in the Sith and their culture."

"You mean like when he claimed the Jedi Order killed Thal N'Krey?" Dahlis said.

"Master, would the order do such a thing?" Brae added.

"If someone suspected of possessing illegal Sith artefacts resisted an investigation then it is possible that they could be killed but if that had happened to Thal then the order would have known about the presence of Sith artefacts among his supposed work as well as what had happened to him before we were assigned to locate him. However, the suggestion that he was following Sith practices in secret is disturbing."

"I thought the Sith were extinct." Dahlis said.

"They are. One of their own destroyed all but himself and then he was killed shortly after while trying to create a new Sith order based on the existence of only two at a time. A master to wield power and an apprentice to crave it." Jayk explained, "However, from time to time there are those who gain access to some scrap of knowledge the Jedi Order missed in its purge and attempt to use it to their own benefit."

"You should have just let me use the Force on him." Brae said.

"I didn't want to risk it." Jayk told her, "Your skills are not honed enough to guarantee success and if criminal charges are to be brought then everything must be done legally and above board."

"By trusting the courts?" Brae said.

"Correct. Just because we can manipulate other beings using the Force does not mean we should always do so. Acting within the law keeps us connected with the Republic we are sworn to protect."

Arriving at the courthouse Jayk expected to have to wait to see a judge but was surprised when they were approached by an official who informed them that it would not be possible for them to see one at all.

"Mister Hollen's lawyers are currently arguing for an injunction against you." the official said.

"An injunction? What for?" Dahlis asked.

"To keep us away from him." Jayk answered, "It's a delaying tactic."

"But surely it can't work." Brae said, "The Republic's laws are clear."

"Yes they are my young apprentice. But the time it will take Mister Hollen's lawyers to put forward their case is time that he has to conceal anything else in his collection that could be liable for being impounded. He knows that he's going to lose the sculpture at least for the short term but everything else is hidden, or better yet removed from his home, then he can still keep the rest of it."

"Sounds like we should have left someone to keep an eye on his mansion." Dahlis commented.

"Perhaps." Jayk replied, "But who? You are not a jedi so there is nothing you could do to prevent anything from being removed while Brae is just a padawan."

"You've trusted me to act alone before master."

"Perhaps. But all I was asking you to do then was walk around a space station, not try to stop someone escaping with illegal goods." Jayk said. Then he smiled, "Fortunately there is someone else we can call

upon." he added and Brae frowned.

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

"Wait here." Jayk said as he took his comlink from his pocket, "Come get me if we're called to see a judge but right now I need to contact the *Swift Exit*."

Tylo had found a channel broadcasting sports games live streamed from Corellia and settled down to watch a match involving two teams of bulky droids hurling a ball up and down the gaming arena.

"So did they have this back when you were alive?" he asked, glancing at Cal. The jedi's hologram as positioned to give the appearance of looking at the screen as well, though in a standing position instead of sat down with a drink in his hand.

"Something like it, yes. But the players weren't so advanced back then." Cal answered, "Plus I didn't really have much time to follow major sporting leagues, what with having to train my sister along with all of the other duties expected of the only jedi knight in a sector."

"You must have had some time off though."

"Of course we did. But our favoured past time involved picking holes in the plot of a local soap opera that included a jedi character."

Tylo turned to stare at the hologram.

"Seriously? A soap opera?"

Cal shrugged.

"It was strangely addictive." he said, "Plus it was something we could both enjoy. Useful when having to live in such close proximity."

"Well I think I'll stick to sports thank you very much." Tylo replied as he turned his attention back to the floating image. However, just a few seconds later there was a chiming sound and he groaned.

"It's Jayk." Cal said, "Shall I put him through to you here?"

"Sure. Why not? But pause the game okay?"

"Of course." Jayk said and the image froze in place.

"Go ahead Jayk." Tylo said.

"Tylo I need you to do something for me." Jayk told him, "I want you to keep an eye on the address we went to earlier. We suspect that the owner may try to smuggle Sith related artwork out of his home while we're in court."

"In court? Did you get arrested or something?" Tylo said with a smile.

"No, but the owner doesn't want to give up his sculpture or let us search his home so we're trying to get a court order. The problem is that he's got his lawyers involved to delay things."

"Haven't you forgotten something? I'm not allowed off the ship." Tylo pointed out.

"I'm not asking you to tell the local authorities what you're doing, I'm asking you to do this secretly. Surely you know how to smuggle yourself past customs?" Jayk said.

"Well since you put it like that, how can I refuse?"

"You can't." Cal said, "I'll cover for you while you're away."

Tylo frowned.

"What do you mean 'cover for me'?" he asked.

"I mean I'll pretend to be you and make some calls to the starport offices."

"Oh and how will you pretend to be me?"

Cal smiled.

"Any chance I can be allowed to grace your fair planet with my presence for just an hour or two?" he said but the voice created by the holocron was Tylo's rather than Cal's. Then in his own voice he added, "Duplicating voices I've been exposed well enough to fool most organic ears isn't very hard."

"Okay I'm on it." Tylo said, putting his drink down on the table as he got to his feet, "Just give me a couple of minutes to get my stuff together."

"No blasters." Jayk said sternly, "The Alderaanians don't like people carrying them about and if you do get caught you'll be in enough trouble as it is without adding a weapons violation into the mix."

"Oh I'll be in trouble will I?" Tylo said, "Well consider this, if I go down then I'm taking you down with me." and then he waved his hand across his throat in a gesture that told Cal to close the channel.

5.

Mara made notes and several rapid sketches as the speeder circled the mansion where Biggs Hollen lived, detailing every potential access point as well as security features that could alert someone to their presence if they were triggered. But as the speeder rounded the corner to drive past the front of the mansion once more she happened to glance across to the other side of the street and spotted a lone figure standing in a clump of trees. Casually dressed, he did not look like he was one of the mega-rich locals who made their homes here and Mara stared at him closely.

"Kurrast." she said to herself softly.

"What?" Vex asked, not quite hearing what she said.

"That's Tylo Kurrast lurking in the trees over there." she said and she smiled, "Morton will be grateful if we can take him back alive along with the sculpture. He's got a few questions he wants to ask about why he sold us out to the Jedi."

"Shall we go grab him?" Kliss said.

"No, not yet. Our main objective has to be the sculpture." Mara told him, looking down at the datapad she had made her notes on. Being a skilled thief she had already formulated a way to get past the mansion's exterior security features but knew that she could escape with the sculpture on her own. To manage that she would need to be able to get at least one of the klatoonians in with her and she doubted their ability to get past the security. That meant that she would have to go in alone to begin with and then open a way for them to follow her. Mara had no reservations about acting in this way, in fact she saw it as an opportunity. Being able to snoop around on her own would give her the opportunity to scout out the inside of the mansion without having to worry about either Kliss or Vex triggering an alarm. A home such as this was bound to contain numerous valuable items and just because her orders were to retrieve a piece of artwork for Morton's client did not mean that his gang should not be able to profit from the operation as well, "Take us around the back again." she told Vex, "If I'm going to get over that power fence then I need to be able to get up high." Vex drove the speeder around to the far side of the mansion and grounds. The road here was intended to allow deliveries to be made to the various residences without needing to trouble neighbours with the appearance of the bulky vehicles involved and for additional privacy most of the properties, including that of Biggs Hollen featured trees planted within their grounds that shielded the road from view.

"There's the gate." Vex commented, looking at the delivery access point in the power fence.

"Go past it." Mara replied, "Then pull up and take us to maximum altitude."

"You want me to just fly over the fence?" Vex asked.

"No nerf herder. The repulsorlift field will trigger every alarm in the place when it reacts with the fence. I need to be high enough to get a line over into the trees so I can slide across.

Vex did as he was told, pulling over to the side of the road near to the fence. Then he put as much power into the vehicle's engine as he could to lift up to an altitude that placed it above the top of the power fence. It was then that Mara opened the window and started to climb out onto the roof, taking with her a reel of syntherope. The syntherope was fitted with a compact grappling hook on the end and as she balanced on the roof of the speeder she threw this over the fence into the trees beyond so that it caught in the branches at a level below the fence. Tying off the other end of the syntherope on the speeder then gave Mara a sloping line that she could easily slide down by wrapping her limbs around it and that was exactly what she did, travelling feet first over the fence until she reached the tree and was able to climb down.

Waving to Vex that she had reached the ground safely she watched as he lowered the altitude of the speeder to a more normal one again and as the syntherope line touched the top of the power fence there was a brief flash as it was burned through, disconnecting the speeder from the tree and allowing Vex to drive away. As Mara had guessed the fence was not set to trigger an alarm upon all contacts with physical objects to avoid multiple false alarms when the trees shed their leaves and some of these inevitably fell onto the fence to be incinerated.

Mara made her way through the narrow patch of trees and looked towards the mansion and she noticed a vehicle parked just outside it. Rather than a luxury land or air speeder the vehicle was a far more utilitarian repulsortruck that had been scrubbed of all obvious markings other than the registration that was required by law and she knew from experience that this was a vehicle that was intended to be as forgettable as possible. Several beings were loading objects into the vehicle, all organic rather than labour droids and this was interesting enough for Mara to take out her macrobinoculars and take a closer look at what was going on. Everything that was being loaded into the repulsortruck had been carefully wrapped to protect it and this had the additional benefit of concealing the true nature of the items. But Mara noticed that as each item was being brought out of the main building there was a rakririan that placed a label on the packaging and followed this up with an entry on a datapad before waving the beings carrying the object towards the waiting

repulsortruck where it was loaded aboard. The care with which the packages were being treated suggested that the contents were both fragile and expensive and Mara decided that it was worth further investigation. The problem facing her was how to get close enough to find out what was being loaded onto the truck without being seen and the only way to do this in broad daylight was to circle around the perimeter of the grounds where she was hidden by the same trees intended to block the line of sight from the mansion to the road behind it. Staying within the trees Mara was able to get within about twenty metres of the repulsortruck before she was finally forced to break cover and sprint across open ground to reach the vehicle. Fortunately by this time the bodywork of the repulsortruck itself hid her from view and she reached it without being seen by anyone. From this position she was unable to see what was happening but she could hear the rakirian as he addressed each of the other beings carrying the packages from the mansion in turn and she smiled when she heard what he had to say.

"Item seventy-four. Painting of the Valley of the Dark Lords on Moraband."

Moraband was a name that Mara knew well from Morton's dealings with their client. Once known as Korriban it had been the centre of the ancient Sith Empire and a painting of the Valley of the Dark Lords where the rulers of that ancient civilisation were laid to rest was likely to attract the attention of the Jedi. Given that Jayk and Brae had already been here once it seemed likely to Mara that Biggs now felt them likely to return in the very near future and was taking steps to prevent them from being able to seize more of his property. However, he had no idea that he was also inadvertently making it easier for Mara and her subordinates to steal the entire collection in one go so that Morton could present them to their client.

"Vex, Kliss, are you there?" Mara whispered into her comlink.

"Right here." Kliss responded, his voice low as well in keeping with the way Mara had addressed him.

"We've hit the jackpot." Mara said, "Dozens of pieces all packaged up and ready to ship out. There's even room for us to toss Kurrast in there with them."

"You need us now?" Kliss asked.

"No, not yet. Vex needs to stand by at the gate though. When I shut down the security system he needs to get here as quickly as possible to help me with this lot."

"And what about me?"

"I want you to take care of Kurrast. But remember that we want him alive, understood?"

"Understood. I've got that dart stunner, I'll use that on him."

"Great, now go take care of him and be ready for us to pick you up."

Through his macrobinoculars Tylo had seen evidence of activity in the mansion but was unable to tell exactly what was going on from this distance. Whatever was happening was being done primarily inside and only when someone involved came near a window in his field of view could he see them. What he did know however, was that a number of large items were being moved towards the rear of the mansion where he had seen an unmarked repulsortruck pull in earlier. The vehicle was out of sight at the moment but Tylo guessed that whatever was being removed from the mansion was being loaded into it. He considered trying to position himself for a better view of the other side of the mansion but then rejected the idea. If the repulsortruck departed then he was certain that he would notice regardless of which direction it headed in but would be unable to do anything to prevent it escaping. All he could do was pursue it on the rented speeder bike he had concealed with him among the trees.

Out of the corner of his eye Tylo spotted something move and he was just turning towards it when he heard the sound of something hit him in the chest. Looking down he saw the tail of a tiny metallic dart sticking out of his jacket.

"Oh stang." he said to himself before he collapsed to the ground.

Kliss smiled when he saw this and tucked the dart stunner under his jacket. Then after taking a quick look around to make sure that he had not been observed he sprinted towards Tylo. The smuggler was lying face up and still breathing and Kliss crouched down, producing a reel of tape with which to bind and gag him. But first he decided to remove the dart from Tylo's chest to prevent it from dropping out at an inconvenient time and accidentally jabbing into someone else. However, as he grasped the tail of the dart he felt Tylo's chest shift in an unusual way and he poked at it only to find it far more rigid than it ought to have been and he reached to open up Tylo's jacket.

"Surprise." Tylo said as he suddenly opened his eyes at the same time as Kliss looked down at the armoured vest he had taken from a security guard on a space station and was now wearing beneath his jacket.

Startled, Kliss reached for a weapon but Tylo was faster, reaching up and under the klatoonian's jacket until he felt his hand wrap around the grip of the weapon he had spotted there. Pulling it out from under the jacket Tylo released what he thought was the safety catch, pressed it to Kliss's chest and pulled the trigger.

Rather than a bright flash and wave of heat from a blaster the weapon emitted a dull 'thunk' as it fired and the spatial distortion it projected slammed right into Kliss, smashing his ribs and bursting his organs. The klatoonian's eyes widened for a moment as he died and then he fell forwards, missing landing on top of Tylo only because the smuggler rolled out of the way quickly enough. Only as he got back to his feet and plucked

the dart from his chest did Tylo inspect the weapon he had just taken from his would be kidnapper and he frowned.

"Stang." he said as he looked at the pulse wave blaster, "Where did you get this antique?"

Jayk and the others were still waiting to be taken before a judge when his comlink chirped.

"Tylo?" he asked as he activated the device, reasoning that the smuggler was the only individual on the planet not with him that had access to this channel, "What's your status?"

"Somebody's made me." Tylo responded.

"Hollen?" Jayk said.

"I don't think so. There's something going on over there all right but the guy that just tried to jump me doesn't look like the sort to be working for millionaires. Plus whoever this guy worked for wants me alive. He could have used lethal force but he chose to use a dart gun instead. That's what saved me, the dart couldn't penetrate my vest and I played dead until he was close enough for me to use his other weapon against him. A pulse wave blaster if you'd believe. Oh and thanks for telling me not to bring a blaster of my own by the way. It was really comforting being unarmed while someone's shooting at me."

"Was he alone?" Jayk said.

"I don't know. Maybe. But look, I've got a bad feeling that this guy worked for Morton Crayne."

"But what would his men be doing here on Alderaan?" Brae said, overhearing the conversation.

"Perhaps they are here for same reason we are." Jayk suggested, "We know that someone didn't want Vallani talking to us about Thal. Perhaps they are also tracking his work."

"Well that's a lot better than the thought of them tracking me." Tylo commented, "But if they are after whatever Hollen's got stashed in his mansion then this guy will have friends and I doubt I can take them all down alone."

Jayk sighed and looked at Brae and Dahlis.

"Dahlis I need you to take Brae back to the mansion. I'll stay here and take care of the warrant." he said.

"Of course." Dahlis replied.

"But master, how will you get back without the speeder? Brae asked.

"If Dahlis hasn't got back here by the time the warrant is issued I'll request a ride from the police. They may come in useful if we need further support. I'll signal ahead so that Tylo can make himself scarce in time though. Now go, we may not have much time."

"Yes master."

6.

Penetrating the mansion itself was easy for Mara. With the building occupied most of the internal security systems were deactivated and all she needed to do was wait for a moment where no-one was looking towards the narrow stretch of ground she had to cover to get her from behind the repulsortruck to around the side of the mansion and from there she could climb through almost any open window she wanted.

Inside the mansion was decorated in the luxurious style that Mara had seen on dozens of worlds, with flagrant displays of the owner's wealth on view in almost every room. Mara had entered the mansion in a dining room and although the table was not laid out there was a case of cutlery in the corner of the room ready for when it was needed. Normally Mara would have considered the cutlery as something worth stealing since such things tended to be both valuable and also easy to sell on the black market. But on this occasion she ignored it, focusing on the need to find both the sculpture by Thal N'Krey and the controls to the power fence so that it could be deactivated.

Hearing voices from close by as she exited the dining room she darted down the hallway in the opposite direction and ducked into the conservatory where she spotted the sculpture she had come for and she smiled. It's location right at the back of the mansion in a room made primarily from glass meant that getting it from here to the repulsortruck was simply a matter of smashing through the glass before carrying it the short distance to the vehicle that was conveniently parked just a few metres away.

But before Vex would arrive to help her with this Mara needed to shut off the power fence and that meant locating the security control room. The wealthy owners of such places rarely wanted to bother with the operation of their security systems, leaving this to household staff or droids and so the control stations were generally located out of the way so that the owners could go as long as possible without having to even see them. With this in mind Mara stayed close to the rear of the mansion as she searched for the areas dedicated to the running of the household. She knew that such areas would be decorated to a far more basic standard than the areas occupied by the owner and as soon as the almost decadent decorations gave way to plain walls and an absence of art she knew that she was on the right trail.

At this point Mara drew her blaster and adjusted the setting to 'stun', knowing that such a shot would produce less noise than a full power blast. Cautiously she advanced down the hallways, pausing only to inspect each room she came to. Although they were fitted with doors these were generally kept open so that staff could pass through unimpeded and this allowed Mara to easily determine the function of any such room she came to without having to risk giving her presence away by opening any doors.

However, as it happened the security control room was one of the few where the door was closed and given the lack of a viewport Mara was unable to tell whether anyone was inside without opening it first. Positioning herself beside the doorway she held her blaster ready and pressed the control to open the door. Unlocked, the door slid open immediately and Mara paused, remaining pressed against the wall as she waited to see whether anyone would react.

"Who's out there?" a voice called out from inside the room and then Mara heard the sound of someone getting to their feet.

In an instant Mara leapt through the doorway, firing her blaster at the startled security guard inside and the blast caught him in the stomach. Without even waiting for the guard to hit the floor as he fell she closed the door behind her and tucked her blaster back into her belt before walking over to the control console.

Studying this Mara saw that most of the mansion's security features were already deactivated to prevent the staff from triggering them as they moved around the building and grounds. However, the power fence was indicated to be operating at optimum efficiency and Mara took out her comlink.

"Vex," she signalled, "stand by. The fence is about to come down. Meet me at the rear of the house."

Dahlis pulled the landspeeder over near to the cluster of trees where Tylo was concealed and Brae leapt out.

"Tylo!" she called out and he appeared from behind one of the trees.

"Right here kid," he replied.

"Okay, get back to the courthouse for Uncle Jayk." Brae told Dahlis and he nodded before driving off.

Meanwhile Brae hurried to join Tylo among the trees, "Any developments?" she asked.

"Nothing so far." Tylo answered, shaking his head, "I've not seen anyone approach the mansion and that guy's friends haven't come looking for him."

"Maybe he was alone after all. Could you have been wrong?" Brae suggested. However, before Tylo could answer the power fence surrounding the mansion grounds suddenly shut down.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Tylo said as Brae drew her lightsaber.

"Come on. We need to go and see what's happening." she said, prompting Tylo to frown.

"Oh I knew you were going to say that." he muttered before they both broke into a run and headed for the

mansion.

Mara fired several shots from her blaster into the security control console to make sure that the power fence could not be reactivated before she swapped the power cell for a fresh one and emerged from the room to head back towards the conservatory. Ahead of her she heard the sound of footfalls as a member of staff hurried to find out what had happened to the fence but as soon as she appeared in front of Mara the thief opened fire and shot her dead before just skipping over the body to carry on her way.

"Sigirat, what's happening?" Biggs demanded.

"I'm sorry sir I don't know." his valet replied.

"It's the jedi!" Biggs exclaimed, "They're here already."

"But sir, that is not possible. Your lawyers would have informed you if an court order had been issued."

"Then they obviously aren't waiting for a court order. Quickly, alert the guards to be ready and get my collection out of here as quickly as you can."

"Of course sir." the rakirrian responded before turning around and hurrying from the room.

Vex drove the landspeeder right between two of the now inactive power fence projectors, swerved to avoid the trees just within the perimeter and then headed straight for the mansion itself. As the speeder burst from between the trees a pair of security guards moved to try and intercept the vehicle. However, in accordance with Alderaan's strict weapons laws they were armed with nothing more than telescopic alloy batons that expanded with a flick of the wrist. The two guards tried to dive out of the the path of the speeder with the intention of striking at the windscreen with their batons to impede Vex's view but the klatoonian swerved sharply as he started to pass them and both men were hit before being dragged under the speeder. Then the windows of the conservatory at the rear of the mansion exploded outwards as Mara fired her blaster into it from the inside and Vex brought the stolen speeder to a halt before disembarking as quickly as he could.

"Over here!" Mara shouted at him, "Give me a hand with this damned thing, it's heavy."

Nodding, Vex ran to the conservatory and climbed in through the broken window. Then he and Mara started to drag the sculpture out through the hole and towards the repulsortruck that was laden with other potential treasures.

"Stay right there!" a voice called out from the mansion and another pair of guards with batons rushed to try and apprehend Mara and Vex. But both of the thieves simply aimed their blasters and opened fire, shooting one guard down where he stood while the second retreated back into the mansion. But before they could get back to dragging the sculpture towards the repulsortruck there was another shout only this time from the opposite direction.

"Hey Mara, not going somewhere are you?" Tylo shouted and Mara looked around to see him pointing a pulse wave blaster towards her as he and Brae advanced towards her.

"Mara Tosk!" Brae added, "You are under arrest for trafficking in Sith artefacts. Put your weapon down and surrender."

"Get this thing on the truck." Mara told vex, "I'll handle this." and she turned her blaster towards Brae and Tylo.

As soon as she fired Brae leapt forwards and blocked the blaster bolts, sending each one off in a random direction.

"Stay behind me." she said to Tylo without looking at him.

"Don't worry kid, I'm afraid if I don't you send one of those at me." Tylo replied, his own weapon pointed in Mara's direction but he was unwilling to fire it because of the risk of disturbing Brae's concentration.

However, the blaster's power pack was soon depleted from such use. But rather than reload the weapon Mara just tossed it aside and from behind her back she produced another one.

Tylo gasped when he saw this, recognising the shotgun for what it was and understanding the threat that it posed to Brae.

"Kid get down!" he shouted as he pushed Brae out of the way right at the moment that Mara fired the shotgun, discharging both barrels simultaneously. Brae was out of the path of the projectiles by the time that they would have reached her but Tylo was not and he caught most of the blast to his chest. Fortunately the armoured vest he was wearing was resilient enough that none of them penetrated it and the extent of the damage was a few cuts from pellets that missed the vest and clipped his arms and neck. However, the force of the impact of the double blast threw him to the ground with the wind knocked out of him and he groaned with pain as he landed on his back, dropping the pulse wave blaster in the process.

"Tylo!" Brae called out before quickly crawling to see how badly he had been hurt.

"Come on let's go!" Mara exclaimed as she dropped the now empty shotgun as well and hurried to where Vex almost had the sculpture loaded into the repulsortruck and as Brae looked around helplessly the vehicle's engine roared into life and it sped off towards the now inactive fence towards the rear of the

property.

"There they are!" Biggs's voice called out from inside the conservatory and several more guards and other household staff armed with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on came bursting out of the mansion, followed by Biggs in his repulsor chair and accompanied by his valet, The staff surrounded Brae and Tylo, holding out the assorted batons, blades and clubs in a menacing manner.

"You'll never get away with this." Biggs hissed, "Forcing your way onto my property and attacking my employees. I'll see you rot in jail for the rest of your lives for this."

"Us?" Tylo said, looking up, "We tried to stop them you kriffing nerf herder." and then there was the sound of police sirens as several police speeders drove onto the property and their occupants, including Jayk climbed out.

"Biggs Hollen, I have a court order to search these premises and remove any items suspected to be of Sith origin."

"Master it's too late." Brae replied, "I think they're all gone."

Jayk and Brae stood in the council chamber of the jedi temple, the masters of the council sat around them either in person or in one case as a hologram.

"The government of Alderaan has lodged a formal complaint with the Order about your behaviour." Supreme Grand Master Karadon Ress said and he looked down at a datapad, "They say that you brought a prohibited person onto their planet and that Tylo Kurrast subsequently violated their laws on carrying weapons, killing a man before entering private property without legal authority."

"Tylo was only defending himself." Brae pointed out.

"Why in a cell he is not." Master Yoda responded, "But still, been there he should not."

"I must take responsibility for that masters." Jayk said, "I ordered Tylo to leave the Swift Exit and stand watch over Biggs Hollen's home."

"Ah yes, our alleged collector of Sith artefacts." Grand Master Ress said, "Unfortunate that you were not able to recover a single one of them."

"We did learn something though master." Jayk said.

"Oh really Jedi Udra?"

"That there is a school of thought among some collectors that Thal N'Krey did not simply produce copies of Sith cultural items but that he was a follower of their ways himself. There are allegations that his disappearance is a result of the actions of this order."

"Disturbing this is." Yoda commented, "The return of the Sith dangerous it would be."

"Well I can assure you that we did not have Thal N'Krey arrested or executed Jedi Udra." Grand Master Ress said, "Now I suggest you return to the task of training your padawan and perhaps you can focus on what the Jedi Order has to say about respecting the sovereign rights of the Republic's member worlds."

"Warrior Queen by Thal N'Krey." the strange rasping voice of The Assembler said as a hologram of the sculpture rotated in the air in front of Rylee. Her attention however, was focused on the real thing that had just been delivered to her, "Created less than a year before his disappearance and featuring his most common model. It is not regarded as being one of his more interesting works."

"That doesn't matter." Rylee replied, "What matters is that I have it, along with several other interesting items."

"Ah yes," The Assembler said, "I saw the police reports about the theft from Alderaan. They were remarkably vague about what was taken, however."

"And well they should be. Most were junk as far as I'm concerned but there were a few interesting pieces." Rylee told The Assembler, "Mind you even these are no use to me right away. I need to find Thal N'Krey himself if I'm going to succeed."