

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

2-11: BAIT & TRAP

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A reported break in where Sith artefacts are stolen brings the crew of the *Swift Exit* to the homeworld of the miraluka, humanoids who see through the Force. Not all is as it seems though and the Udras find themselves facing an old foe...

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1.

Returning home late from work Ashra Poul had no need to activate the lights in her home. Like the vast majority of the inhabitants of the moon Mareal she was a miraluka, a near human species notable for two main reasons. The first of these was their total lack of eyes but more significantly for the Force sight that they possessed in place of ordinary vision. This meant that Ashra had no need of the lighting that she retained in her home just in case she entertained guests from other species. The sensitivity to the Force that enabled the miraluka to perceive their surroundings also gave most members of the species a limited ability to be aware of the nearby presence of other living beings, especially sentient ones even if they were not within an ordinary field of vision and so she rapidly became aware that she was not alone when she walked through the door.

Ashra's initial instinct was to call out and tell the intruder that she was contacting the authorities but she had no guarantee that the police would arrive soon enough to protect her if the intruder was violent. Therefore she decided the wisest course of action was to arm herself before taking any other action. Fortunately for Ashra she kept a blaster in a secure locker not far from her front door and she quickly moved towards it, using her thumb print to release the lock and allow her access to the weapon. Taking the weapon from inside she was just reaching for a power cell when all of a sudden the intruder came rushing towards her and slammed right into her.

"Kind of dark here isn't it?" Tylo Kurrast, captain of the YT-700 class light freighter *Swift Exit* said as he brought his ship in to land at the starport in Mareal's capital. Sat with him in the cockpit were two Jedi, Jayk Udra was a fully fledged Jedi knight while behind him sat the teenage Brae Udra, Jayk's niece as well as his padawan.

"The miraluka-" Jayk began.

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Tylo interrupted, "The miraluka are blind."

"They see using the Force." Jayk replied, "They are not technically blind."

"They've no eyes, they are in my book." Tylo commented.

"Looks like we've got a welcoming committee." Brae said from behind the two men and she pointed to where a pair of uniformed miraluka were walking into the area outside the *Swift Exit* that was illuminated by the ship's landing lights. Both of these miraluka wore dark blue clothing that made them difficult to pick out in the darkness. As part of this uniform both also wore a skull cap that came down over their vestigial eye sockets and concealed them from view.

"Presumably local law enforcement." Jayk replied, "Perhaps we should go and greet them."

Exiting the ship, the *Swift Exit's* crew were approached by the two law enforcement agents who came to a halt close in front of them.

"Jedi Udra," one of the miraluka said, "I am Senior Marshal Tull and this is Marshal Veleer, it was I that requested your presence."

"The information we were given was limited marshal." Jayk replied, "Could you enlighten us some more?"
If you'd like to accompany me I'll explain everything."

"Wherever we're going, I don't suppose it has lights does it?" Tylo commented and Tull smiled.

"I'm sorry, it's easy for us to forget about your limited vision." he said, "But yes, the brief room does possess visual illumination."

"How long will it remain dark here for?" Brae asked.

"Our orbit keeps us in the planet's shadow for about sixty hours at a time. We'll be out of eclipse in about another eight. After that you've got about eighty or ninety hours of daylight before we're back in eclipse again." Veleer explained as they neared a cluster of low buildings. Entering one of these it was revealed to be a customs post staffed by about half a dozen miraluka working in almost total darkness. Only the light given off by the computer equipment that was of standard Republic technology provided any illumination at all. As they walked through this room Brae glanced at Tylo and smiled, sensing the former smuggler tense up in the presence of armed customs agents.

The two miraluka led the three new arrivals into a room adjacent to the customs office and as soon as they entered it Tull activated the lights to reveal the table and chairs that were the only furnishings in the room and the portable computer and holographic projector that had been left on the table.

"Do sit down." Tull said as he sat down in front of the computer, "Can I offer you some refreshment?"

"Got any beer?" Tylo asked as he took a seat, smiling.

"We'll be fine." Jayk added sternly, "Now if you could tell us why we are needed we can get to work."

"We've had a string of suspicious break ins in the city." Tull said and he used the holo projector to display images of several buildings that looked like private dwellings.

"Burglary isn't really our thing." Brae commented, "What makes these so special?"

"So far nothing has been taken." Veleer responded, "But locks have been tampered with and on one occasion the security system of the house was deactivated fully."

"That was the most recent incident." Tull added, "On that occasion an intruder was reported at the scene and the householder assaulted as they made their escape. Fortunately she was not badly hurt."

"Yeah, the thing is nobody just tests security systems." Tylo said, putting his feet up on the table, "I'll wager my ship that someone entered every one of these places and then set things back to how they were as they left. Your last victim just got unlucky enough to be at home when the break in occurred."

"This still doesn't explain why we were summoned." Brae pointed out.

"As I'm sure you are aware Padawan Udra, as a species the miraluka are particularly sensitive to the Force, therefore certain things that may be of little consequence to many species can present us with problems. For example, contact with the Dark Side." Tull explained, "To limit the potential for our people to be seduced by the Dark Side our law limits access to anything related to the Sith to those who have passed a rigorous psychological test to prove that they are not in danger of being corrupted."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tylo said, "You're about to tell us that someone who passed that test lives at every one of those houses aren't you?"

"Correct." Veleer said, "Every individual concerned owns at least one item of Sith origin. In accordance with Republic law none of them relate directly to Sith sorcery but nevertheless, they were produced by agents of the Dark Side."

"But why not just take them?" Brae asked.

"It could be that whoever is responsible for these break ins is searching for something very specific." Jayk suggested. Then he looked across the table at the two miraluka, "I suppose the penalty for possessing Sith artefacts without the necessary permission is severe?" he asked.

"Up to ten years imprisonment plus an unlimited fine for items otherwise allowed under Republic law." Veleer answered, "Or life imprisonment for items banned by the Republic."

"This doesn't sound like our usual friends Crayne or Teron." Tylo commented, "I'd expect them to steal everything to do with the Sith that wasn't nailed down. If it was nailed down I'd expect them to steal the nails as well."

"Does your government maintain a register of the items owned by citizens who pass the psychological tests?" Jayk said but Tull shook his head.

"No. As long as a licence has been issued they can own whatever the Republic permits." he said.

"A list of what each potential victim owns would be useful." Jayk said.

"I can get that." Veleer replied, "I can contact them individually."

"Are you trying to build up a profile of what the burglar may be after master?" Brae asked.

"I am." Jayk answered, "We'll also need to speak to the woman who was assaulted. She's the nearest thing we have to a witness. We'll also need to inspect each of the locations believed to have been targeted by this individual or group."

"You think that there is more than one being involved?" Tull asked.

"It's something that can't be ruled out. But perhaps our witness can shed some more light on this matter." Jayk replied and Tylo frowned.

"Are we allowed to say that?" he said to Brae softly, "Shed light I mean. The locals won't think it's racist will they?" and Jayk scowled at him.

2.

While his subordinate went to obtain the information Jayk had requested the miraluka senior marshal drove the crew of the *Swift Exit* to the home of Ashra Poul. Bizarrely for the three humans the city was in almost total darkness with only the occasional light source indicating the presence of a member of a species other than a miraluka. Ashra lived in a well to do area of the city and it as difficult to make out any of the homes that lay behind the walls and hedges lining the roads there. Tull turned the speeder towards Ashra's home and brought it to a halt in front of the main gate that blocked access to the driveway.

"Hello?" a slightly distorted female voice asked when Tull reached out of the speeder to activate the intercom that stood

"Marshals Miss Poul. We have two jedi who want to speak to you about the break in." Tull explained.

"Of course." the woman replied and then the intercom went silent.

"Think she'll let us in?" Tylo said before the gate began to slide open.

"I am confident of that." Jayk replied with a smile and Tylo frowned.

"Okay smart ass." he muttered as Tull began to drive towards the house, still more than twenty metres distant.

As the speeder made its way up the drive the lights inside the house suddenly came on and the humans inside the vehicle got the chance to see the house properly. More light appeared when the front door opened and Ashra stood in the doorway so that she could be clearly seen. As with the vast majority of miraluka she opted to wear a covering over her empty eye sockets but in addition to covering her eyes her mask also featured a series of tassels that hung down from the main part of the mask to obscure the rest of her facial features.

"Jedi, it is such an honour to welcome you to my humble home." she said as Jayk got out of the speeder.

"Humble? Who' she trying to kid?" Tylo whispered.

"Thanks you for agreeing to see us Miss Poul." Jayk said, "My name is Jayk Udra, this is my padawan Brae and our pilot Tylo Kurrast. We have questions about the break in at your home."

"Yes, do come in. I was expecting someone to call back though I must admit that I did not expect jedi." Ashra said as she showed her guests into a lounge and sat down.

"Could you tell us about the assault Miss Poul?" Jayk asked as he sat down opposite her.

"Damn this couch is comfy." Tylo muttered to himself as he also took a seat.

"I have already given a statement to the marshals." Ashra responded, looking towards Tull.

"Please indulge me Miss Poul." Jayk said and she sighed.

"Very well then. I had just returned home from work and I noticed that my alarm was not armed as it should have been. Also, although I ought to have been alone I could sense someone else in the house." Ashra explained.

"And did you recognise this presence from anywhere?" Jayk said but she shook her head.

"No. I don't have the same ability as a jedi. It was just a stranger. Though they didn't create much of a disturbance so I don't think that they were miraluka." she said.

"Human?" Tylo commented.

"Perhaps." Ashra replied, "But they were masked and their face was not visible to my Force sight. I was attempting to reach the blaster I keep in the house for protection when they charged at me, knocking me down before they ran off."

"You're lucky you weren't badly hurt." Brae said.

"Next time try keeping your blaster on you." Tylo suggested.

"It is illegal to carry a weapon in public on Mareal." Tull pointed out.

"Yeah, the guy who broke in worried about what was illegal, didn't he?" Tylo responded sarcastically.

"Which agency do you work for Mister Kurrast?" Tull asked sternly, "The Republic is supposed to respect-"

"Tylo is an independent contractor." Jayk interrupt and Tylo snorted at the idea of him being independent.

The Jayk looked back at Ashra, "Do you own many items of Sith manufacture?"

"No, not really. Just half a dozen. They are rather expensive after all."

"Why do you keep them?" Brae asked.

"As an investment. As I said, they are expensive and the price is increasing yearly. According to my insurance valuations the items in my collection have increased in value by eight percent this year."

"Not a bad investment." Tylo said, "I can see why someone would want to steal them even without caring about the Sith."

"Perhaps not so good." Ashra responded, "I have no doubt that my insurance premium will rise now that my security system has proven to be inadequate."

"I would like to see your collection." Jayk said.

"Of course, let me show you." Ashra said, getting to her feet.

The miraluka woman then led the crew of the *Swift Exit* into what looked to be a dining room where six display cases were lined up along the wall and inside each of these was a single item of Sith manufacture.

"This is my collection." she said, extending an arm towards the cases, "I hope that looking at them inside the cases is good enough because I do not wish to risk damaging anything by removing it. Nor will I consent to having any of the items taken from my home."

"Even if the burglar could come back?" Brae asked.

"Not even then." Ashra replied.

Two of the items were ornate jewelled headdresses, one was a sculpture of a female member of the original Sith species, another an ancient text folded so that only part of it was visible and the other two were both carved stone tablets depicting images of life in the Sith Empire before its destruction by the Republic.

"This doesn't look familiar." Tylo said as he leant down to get a closer look at the sculpture. Many of the missions Tylo had undertaken with Jayk and Brae centred around trying to locate an artist known for creating work based on the Sith culture and many of his pieces had been based on a human woman that had modelled for him regularly prior to his disappearance."

"Perhaps because it has its clothes on." Brae commented. Then she looked at Jayk, "Master, I can't sense the Dark Side in any of these very strongly."

"Neither can I." Jayk agreed, "Obviously all fall within the limits of collectable items."

"Perhaps that's why nothing's been stolen yet." Tylo suggested, "Somebody's looking for something that isn't legal to own."

"That is a possibility." Jayk said and he looked at Tull, "We'll need a list of everyone in the city with a licence to own Sith artefacts." and Tull nodded.

"I'll check our records." he said.

"Good. Have the information sent to us at our ship." Jayk said, "We'll review everything there."

With the jedi gone and once again alone, Ashra went to one of the communication terminals in her home and activated it, searching an online directory for the service she required before placing the call.

"Total Security." the voice of the male miraluka who appeared on the device's screen said.

"Hello, my name is Ashra Poul. I am concerned that my home may be at risk of being burgled and I'd like to arrange for some additional security."

"Of course Miss Poul. We offer a wide range of professional services. I'm sure we can find something that meets your needs."

"So how did it go? Did you crack the case or are you still in the dark?" a hologram of a man in jedi robes said as the *Swift Exit*'s crew returned to their ship. This was the guardian of the holocron created by Jedi Knight Cal Udra, an ancestor of Jayk and Brae that the two jedi had been provided with as a source of advice on how a jedi should instruct a close family member.

"Still in the dark?" Tylo responded, glaring at Cal while the hologram grinned back at him and the others,

"How long did it take you to think of that one?"

"It occurred to me about five minutes after you left." Cal said.

"That's about four and a half minutes more than it was worth." Tylo said.

"How did it go anyway?" Cal asked.

"Tylo has a theory about someone searching for illegal artefacts hidden among legitimate collections." Jayk said, "Which would make a lot more sense if Ashra Poul hadn't been lying to us." and both Brae and Tylo stared at him.

"Master, I didn't sense any attempt at deception from her." Brae said.

"No, nor did I. But she was lying to us." Jayk said.

"Okay so if you couldn't sense that she was lying then how do you know that's what she was doing?" Tylo said.

"The same way you would. I studied her reactions to our questions. I asked her to describe being assaulted in her own home." Jayk said.

"Yeah and that's just what she did." Tylo said while Brae groaned.

"Of course." she said, "She told us what happened like she'd rehearsed it. There was no emotional reaction to being the victim of a crime."

"Well done my young apprentice." Jayk said, "Ashra Poul is not the helpless victim she claims to be."

"So she's dirty?" Tylo said, "Could she be behind these other incidents? She could be looking to expand her collection by theft."

"A falling out between her and someone she hired to steal more items for her collection?" Cal said.

"It wouldn't be the first time something like that has happened." Brae said and Tylo looked at her.

"Is that a dig at me?" he asked.

"Oh no." Brae said, "It's not like you had much choice after you got beaten up by a seventeen year old girl."

and Tylo scowled as Brae smiled at him.

"This bickering is getting us nowhere." Jayk said, "Obviously Ashra Poul needs watching closely. As does her collection. She was very keen to keep us from inspecting it too closely."

"Is there any chance that those cases could be stopping the pair of you from sensing anything about what's inside?" Tylo asked.

"The Sith did use their sorcery to make some materials that were capable of blocking the Force itself." Cal said, "Of course the secrets of their manufacture were lost with the Sith and the Jedi Order made sure that the Republic banned the possession of any surviving examples."

"So Ashra could have a dozen forbidden artefacts in her home and we just walked out without doing anything about it?" Brae asked.

"Unfortunately, yes." Jayk replied.

"Thinking about paying her another visit?" Tylo said, "One that she's not around for maybe?"

"Breaking and entering is just as illegal for us as it is for anyone else Tylo. You know that." Brae replied.

"There is one more thing to consider." Jayk said, "For Ashra to be able to conceal her feelings from us so effectively could mean that she knows the ways of the Force far more than she admits to. Cal, can you look into her background and see whether she's ever come to the attention of the Jedi Order before now?"

"Of course. I'll get right on it." Cal responded and then his hologram vanished.

3.

The list of items owned by the miraluka targeted for their collections of Sith artefacts proved to be harder to obtain than had been hoped and when Veleer arrived at the *Swift Exit* he did so empty handed.

"None of them would even let me through the front door." he said.

"Isn't it somewhat odd for victims of crime not to want the police to investigate?" Brae commented and Tylo smiled.

"Depends on the victim. Sometimes they have as much to hide as the person who attacked or robbed them." he told her.

"Which means that they're hiding illegal artefacts." Brae said.

"Not necessarily." Jayk responded, "Marshal, did any of the victims give a reason for why they did not want to provide you with a list of what they own?"

"Four wouldn't even open their doors." Veleer answered, "The rest of them opened them just long enough to tell me that since nothing was taken and they weren't filing any insurance claims they didn't see the point in the investigation going any further. One gave the impression that they were specifically concerned about the involvement of the Jedi Order in the investigation."

"What did they expect?" Tylo asked.

"Now they seem to expect you to try and confiscate their property." Veleer answered.

"Which we'd only do if they were in possession of forbidden artefacts." Brae said.

"None of this is enough for us to obtain a court order giving us access to the homes where these collections are kept." Jayk replied, "If they want the investigations dropped then that is their right."

"So that just leaves us with Ashra Poul and she's hiding something as well." Tylo said. Then he frowned, "Do we know if any of these supposed victims know one another?" he asked.

"You suspect some form of collusion?" Veleer said.

"It's odd that they'd all decide to refuse to co-operate at the same time otherwise." Brae pointed out.

"Those punks on Arkania formed themselves a nice little Sith worshipping cult and all they had was one lousy book." Tylo said, "Maybe when you put all of the things this lot own together you come up with something more dangerous than the individual artefacts."

"An interesting idea." Jayk said, "One that makes gaining access to the private collections even more important."

It was at that point that Cal reappeared, making Veleer jump back in surprise.

"Marshal Veleer, meet Cal Udra. Dead guy." Tylo said.

"Pleased to meet you." Cal added, smiling.

"I've heard of jedi holocrons, I've never encountered one before." Veleer said.

"Cal is here to offer us the benefit of his experience." Jayk said, "Which when it comes to the Sith is far greater than what any living jedi possesses."

"I can also search through computer networks extremely quickly." Cal added, "Which has allowed me to conclude that the Jedi Order has never had any dealings with Ashra Poul. I have also concluded that she has never gone under any other names. As far as I can tell she is a typical miraluka."

"Thank you Cal." Jayk said, "And thank you for your efforts Marshal Veleer. Since Miss Poul is the only one of the victims who has agreed to speak to us we will focus our investigation on her case. We also have the list of all licence holders in the city from senior Marshal Tull that might allow us to predict where the burglar will target next."

"Of course." Veleer replied, "Feel free to contact the marshals' service if you need any further assistance."

The miraluka marshal had only just left when there was a chiming sound from the *Swift Exit's* communication system that indicated an incoming message.

"A local call coming in." Cal said. The holocron was connected to the *Swift Exit's* systems and Cal was able to control the ship to a limited degree.

"No ID I take it?" Jayk asked and Cal shook his head.

"None." he said.

"Put them through." Jayk told him.

"I bet it's some nerf herder trying to sell guided tours or fix errors in our nav computer." Tylo commented but when Cal opened the channel the voice was one that they all recognised.

"Jedi Udra?" Ashra's voice asked.

"Yes, I'm here." Jayk answered.

"Help me Jedi Udra, you're my only hope." Ashra said and the *Swift Exit's* crew looked at one another across the lounge table.

"What's wrong?" Jayk asked.

"Jedi Udra, I think that there's someone prowling around near my house." Ashra told him, "I've tried calling the police but all they did was send a patrol speeder by. They said there was no-one there but I'm certain they're still out there."

"We're on our way." Jayk said, "Stay inside and don't open the doors for anyone other than us." and then he shut off the communicator.

Renting a landspeeder, the trio made their way to Ashra's home as quickly as they could but when they arrived they found no signs of life. All of the lights were out and the gates were still sealed. Knowing that a lack of lights meant little to the miraluka, Jayk pressed the intercom button beside the gate but there was no response.

"I don't think there's anyone at home." Tylo said.

"Ashra asked us to come here." Brae pointed out.

"We have a duty to protect her." Jayk added and then he leapt up into the air, boosting his jump with the Force so that he easily cleared the gate.

"That's just great." Tylo said, "You two can jump but how am I supposed to get inside?"

"Same way as me." Brae replied, "Wait for my uncle to open the gate from the inside." and just then the gate began to open as Jayk located the controls on the other side.

"Leave the speeder here." he said, "We'll approach the house on foot." and the three of them then started to make their way towards the house. As a precaution Tylo drew his blaster and the two Jedi their lightsabers, but they all kept their weapons in an inactive state while they had no targets.

Approaching the front door cautiously they found that it was not fully closed, a block of plastic having been jammed in the doorway to keep it slightly open. The sensors built into the door had obviously detected the obstacle and the motor had shut down to conserve power and avoid damage.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Brae whispered, "I don't sense anyone inside."

"Let me guess, that just means no-one alive." Tylo said and Brae nodded, "I just knew you'd say that." he added.

"We need to search the house." Jayk said and with a wave of his hand he used the Force to push the door fully open before stepping inside, "Miss Poul," he called out as he entered the darkened house, "it's Jedi Udra. Let us know where you are." but there was no response, "Spread out." he said softly after waiting to see whether Ashra would call out and glancing over his shoulder at Brae and Tylo, "I'll take upstairs. Brae search the rear of the house, Tylo the front rooms."

The group split up and each of them made their way through the house separately. Tylo crept up the stairs and began searching the upper floor of the house, giving each room just a cursory inspection for now to make sure that Ashra was not in one of them and in need of medical attention. Meanwhile Brae made her way towards the rear of the house and as she walked past the door to the dining room she remembered the display cases inside and rather than continue towards the back of the house she went inside the dining room. Inside the room was too dark to see and rather than turn on the lights Brae took out a glow rod and activated it. Then she directed the light at each of the cases in turn before noticing that the one that held the folded text was not properly in place. Rather than sitting neatly on top of the plinth that it stood on the case was at an angle and slightly raised at one side as if someone had lifted it up and then returned it in too much of a hurry to position it correctly.

Gripping her glow rod in her teeth, Brae returned her lightsaber to her belt and then lifted up the case fully to allow her access to the text underneath. Unfolding this she began to study what was written on it closely. Unfortunately, as with most things to do with the Sith it was written in their own ancient language and Brae could not read any of it. However, there were numerous illustrations alongside the text and these Brae could just about understand the meaning of.

"Found something interesting kid?" Tylo said suddenly as he came into the dining room and Brae almost dropped the text in surprise, "Interesting enough to be searching in my part of the house?"

"Don't do that." she told him.

"Do what?" Tylo responded, "I thought you could sense when people were sneaking up behind you."

"I was distracted." Brae said defensively, "But you're right. This is interesting."

"What is it?" Tylo said as he walked over to join Brae.

"I think it's a set of instructions for putting something together." Brae replied, "Look, each of these is a different part." and she indicated several different shapes drawn on the large sheet.

"But building what?" Tylo said.

"If the Sith made it then it can't be anything good." Brae said.

"Freeze!" a voice yelled out suddenly and both Brae and Tylo looked around in surprise to see a pair of miraluka in armoured vests aiming blasters at them. The clothing worn by these two individuals was similar to the uniform of a marshal, but the cut and colouration was sufficiently different that they could not easily be mistaken for marshals.

Tylo briefly considered pointing his own heavy blaster pistol back at the two new arrivals but the simple fact

that there were two of them gave him second thoughts.

"Hey, there's no need for this to get ugly." he said, placing his blaster down on top of one of the display cases, "We're supposed to be here. Ashra Poul invited us and when we turned up the house was empty and the door had been jammed open."

"We're Miss Poul's security service and she told us nothing about guests." one of the security officers said, "Especially not ones who trip her alarm."

"The case." Brae said, "I must have triggered something when I moved it."

"Great work." Tylo responded.

"Look, we're jedi." Brae told the two guards.

"Look at him. You really expect us to believe that poodoo?" one of them responded, waving his gun towards Tylo but Brae just smiled.

"Then what about him?" she asked, "Does the guy behind you look more like a jedi?" and there was a 'snap-hiss' as Jayk, who had been able to sneak up behind the guards while their attention was focused on Brae and Tylo, ignited his lightsaber.

Surprise.

"If you wouldn't mind returning your weapons to their holsters then perhaps we can sort out this misunderstanding." he said as the shocked guards spun around to face him and at the same time Tylo took the opportunity to pick up his blaster again while Brae drew her lightsaber.

Reluctantly the two guards returned their weapons to their holsters.

"The marshals have been notified of the break in." one of them said, "They'll be here soon to arrest you."

"Like we already said, we were invited." Tylo said as he and the two jedi shut off their weapons and returned them to their belts as well, "It's not our fault she vanished before we got here."

The sound of sirens then became audible as a marshals' airspeeder touched down in the grounds of the house and moments later a pair of uniformed marshals came rushing inside.

"What's going on here?" one of them demanded.

"Jayk Udra, jedi knight." Jayk responded, "We are here at the invitation of Miss Poul."

"We work for Total Security," one of the guards added, "and Miss Poul hired us to protect her. These three triggered the alarm and Miss Poul isn't here even though she informed our office that she would be at home this evening."

"Okay that's it." one of the marshals said, "You're all coming with us. Hand over your weapons."

"You're arresting us?" Brae exclaimed.

"That's one way of putting it, yes." the marshal replied.

"Cops." Tylo muttered, "Dumb on every planet."

4.

Detained on suspicion of burglary, Jayk, Brae and Tylo had their equipment confiscated before being locked a single cell together at the marshals' station while arrangements were made to question them and Brae took this opportunity to tell her master what she had found.

"It looked like the assembly instructions for a larger Sith artefact." she said.

"Yeah, there were several smaller pieces that formed a base and then one central piece on top of them." Tylo added.

"Interesting, but it gets us nowhere if we can't locate any of the other pieces." Jayk replied.

"Which are probably owned by some of the miraluka who wouldn't speak to us." Tylo said.

"Perhaps that is why nothing was taken from any of the other victims." Brae suggested, "Whoever is responsible didn't know what they needed to steal until they found the instructions."

It was then that the door to the cell opened to reveal Senior Marshal Tull and his displeasure was evident from the expression on his face.

Anger.

"What the kriff is going on?" he demanded.

"Have you located Miss Poul?" Jayk asked in response.

"Oh yes, we found her. Wrapped up all neatly in plastic and stashed in the freezer. Oh and I also checked her communication logs and she didn't place any calls at all tonight, let alone one to you at the starport." Tull answered.

"Then check the *Swift Exit's* communication log." Tylo said, "Hear it for yourself."

"Hear what? A message put together from snippets you could have recorded when you met her? I already told you that we know no call came from Ashra Poul." Tull replied, "Now what's going on? Because so far all I have is you three being caught red handed at the scene of a murder, having broken into the victim's home. My superiors are already putting in calls to the jedi temple on Coruscant about this." and Brae groaned.

"Marshal, the death of Miss Poul had nothing to do with us." Jayk said, "In fact I am interested to discover how she died, but the most important thing here is to warn the other owners of Sith artefacts in the city that they may be in danger. If we could be allowed to see one of the items that Miss Poul owned, a large folded text with images on it, then we could perhaps narrow down what the real perpetrator is attempting to do."

"Well to answer your question about how Ashra Poul died, she was cut in half by a weapon that cauterised the wound as it passed through her. Kind of like what your lightsabers are reputed to be able to do to someone. Secondly, there is no chance I'm letting you near any of her property, especially not some text that doesn't even exist." Tull said.

"We all saw it." Brae replied.

"Well I just came from the evidence locker and the large folded Sith text in there doesn't have any pictures on it at all." Tull told her.

"That's not possible." Tylo said.

"It is if we are dealing with someone familiar with the ways of the Force." Jayk said.

"A fallen jedi?" Brae said, "But who could it be?"

"Right now you three are the prime suspects." Tull said, "However, since we don't have anything other than circumstantial evidence yet we're turning you loose. Just don't get any ideas about leaving Mareaal. Starport control is under orders to keep you on the ground by whatever means are necessary."

As soon as the trio returned to the *Swift Exit* Cal's hologram appeared.

"So how did it go?" he asked.

"We're being accused of murder." Brae replied.

"Not you as well." Cal responded, shaking his head and holding it in his hands, "I had enough of that with Lara."

"We didn't do it." Tylo added.

"Neither did she but I still ended up living in a floating wreck of a space station for six months." Cal said, "So tell me what happened."

"Ashra Poul is dead." Jayk said, "Killed by a lightsaber it seems."

"Then wrapped up and stuck in a freezer." Tylo added.

"Also no call was placed from her home to us here tonight." Jayk continued, "Whoever made that call was luring us to her home so we could be accused of her murder."

"Don't forget the document." Brae said, "I found a Sith document that looked like a set of instructions for assembling something. But Marshal Tull told us that it wasn't part of the evidence they took from the house. Someone must have removed it."

"All of this sounds very familiar." Cal said, "Depressingly so."

"Of course without the marshals to tell us any more about what happened we've been left in the dark." Tylo said and then he frowned, "Which is nothing new for this kriffing poodoo hole of a moon." he added.

"Cal, can you still access any of the local networks?" Jayk asked.

"Of course." Cal replied, "The locals gave me access but never revoked it."

"Then can you get me the results of the autopsy on Ashra Poul?" Jayk said.

"Hang on, I'm checking." Cal said and he paused, "No, no autopsy has been carried out yet. But there is a preliminary report."

"Give me the basics." Jayk said.

"Okay here goes. Poul, Ashra. Female miraluka. Age at time of death forty-two. Height one hundred and sixty centimetres, weight."

"Wait." Jayk interrupted.

"Yes, I was just getting to that." Cal said.

"No I mean wait a while." Jayk explained, "You said her height was one hundred and sixty centimetres? That's not much taller than Brae."

"Yes I get it, I'm short." Brae commented.

"The woman we met when we supposedly visited Ashra Poul wasn't." Tylo pointed out, "She must have had about twenty centimetres on you."

"So who did we meet?" Brae said.

"My guess would be the killer." Tylo replied, "The real Ashra Poul was probably already in the freezer by that point."

"A female fallen jedi who is approximately one hundred and seventy five centimetres tall." Jayk said, "I've got a bad feeling about this. Cal, can you access the Jedi Order's records and tell us how tall Neela Vortress is?"

"Kriff no. Not that laser brain." Tylo exclaimed when Jayk brought up the name of a jedi knight that had accused the Udras of colluding to resurrect the Sith. After her actions had led to the death of her own padawan she had disappeared and the Jedi Order officially registered her as a renegade,

"Neela is listed as one hundred and seventy five centimetres." Cal replied, "Just as you thought."

"Then it is likely that we are dealing with her. Everything that has happened here is probably intended to draw us into her trap."

"You mean all this is because of a grudge she's holding against the pair of you?" Tylo said, "I suppose that explained the full face mask instead of one just covering her eyes. She didn't want us to see her face because she knew she'd be recognised."

"Then why doesn't she just come straight out and attack us?" Brae asked.

"Because she doesn't care about killing us. She wants to disgrace us." Jayk said, "The local authorities will most likely eventually discover that we could not have murdered the real Ashra Poul so she won't be finished with us yet. She must have something more in mind for us."

"Those instructions." Tylo suggested, "Could it be related to them?"

"That seems likely." Jayk replied.

"But what? Why did she want us to see them?" Brae added.

"So we'd go rushing off to try and obtain all the pieces in the pictures perhaps?" Tylo said.

"Which I'm guessing can be found in the other homes that were broken into. Neela created that fake text and put it where we could find it. Then she swapped it back for whatever was there before after we were arrested." Jayk said.

"But if we just go barging in without permission and take them then it makes us look like we're stealing them for our own purposes. Especially when it turns out that the pieces have no special powers when combined." Brae said and then she looked directly at Jayk, "So what do we do now master?"

"Well we can't leave. That's already been made clear by the marshals." Tylo said.

"We can't allow Neela to remain at large anyway." Jayk replied, "We have a duty to apprehend her and return her to the jedi temple for judgement."

"But the marshals didn't return our weapons. They kept them as evidence." Brae pointed out, "How are we supposed to take Neela on unarmed?"

"We still have weapons aboard the *Swift Exit* with us." Tylo reminded her, "There's my rifle, the grenade launcher and that pistol you picked up at the shadow port in Gentar."

"It isn't much but it'll have to do." Jayk said, "The more pressing problem is how to locate Neela."

"The call." Cal said, "Obviously it's too late to trace it. But it's recorded in our logs. Perhaps there's something in it that will give us a clue as to where it came from."

Jayk smiled.

"Play it again Cal." he said.

5.

"Help me Jedi Udra, you're my only hope.

"Jedi Udra, I think that there's someone prowling around near my house. I've tried calling the police but all they did was send a patrol speeder by. They said there was no-one there but I'm certain they're still out there."

The *Swift Exit's* occupants listened carefully to the words spoken by the woman pretending to be Ashra Poul. This time however, they were not as interested in what she said as they were in what was going on in the background. Any sound could give away where the call had been placed from and give them some idea of where Neela Vortress could now be found.

"There's definitely something there." Tylo said, "But I can't make it out. It's more of a general noise than anything specific."

"It's not regular." Cal said, "So it's not technological which is a shame. That sort of thing is generally easier to trace."

"If it's not technological then that makes it organic." Brae said.

"Beings talking perhaps." Jayk suggested, "A large number of them so that they drown one another out."

"But wouldn't that drown Neela's voice out as well?" Brae asked.

"There must be something in the way. Something designed to muffle noise but that can't block it entirely."

Tylo said.

"A communication booth." Jayk said, "They have to limit background noise."

"There is a slight but measurable increase in the background noise about half way through." Cal said, "Listen, I think I can isolate it." and then he played back a brief clip of the background noise with Neela's voice removed. The sound was unintelligible but part way through there was a slight increase in its volume, just as Cal had said.

"What was that sound right before it got louder?" Brae asked and Cal played just that part of the clip again.

"Brae's right." Jayk said, "There's some sort of chime."

"An announcement." Cal said, "The chime was letting everyone know that a message was about to be broadcast over a public address system."

"So we're looking for somewhere that has com booths and a public address system." Jayk said.

"But where could that be?" Brae asked and Tylo smiled.

"What, did you Jedi never take a bus?" he said, "I'll bet that that message was sent from a public transit hub."

"Some of those include docking bays for small starships. Neela could have landed her ship at one." Brae added.

"That would allow her to move about easily." Tylo pointed out.

"Only a handful of such facilities are that large." Jayk pointed out, "So that also limits the number of possible locations that need searching."

"I'll run a check on Neela's ship." Cal said, "We know the sort of vessel she was assigned by the Jedi Order prior to her disappearance. If she's still flying it then even if she's altered its registry then it'll still be recorded as the same class."

"Do it." Jayk replied with a nod, "Meanwhile the rest of us must go through our remaining equipment to see exactly what we have at our disposal."

It took less than a quarter of an hour for Cal to come back with the results of his search. Like any well developed Republic world, Mareaal maintained a record of every starship that entered the range of its traffic control system, recording the class and transponder details of each vessel in a searchable database and by looking at this Cal had found an entry for a ship that was of the same class as the one Neela had been piloting when she had disappeared.

"It landed a little over three weeks ago." he explained while projecting a holographic image of the ship class into the *Swift Exit's* lounge, "Two days before the first reported break in attempt."

"How many of that class of ship have been made?" Brae asked.

"Less than a thousand." Tylo said, "It's never been intended for mass market."

"What do you know about the class?" Jayk responded but Tylo shrugged.

"Not much. A few people I knew claimed to have seen one but I've never met anyone who I knew had been aboard one, let alone owned one. They're fast and manoeuvrable but lightly protected and unarmed." Tylo said.

"One certainly wouldn't have looked out of place in a private docking bay owned by one of the galaxy's elite." Brae added as she studied the hologram.

"Where did it land?" Jayk asked, looking at Cal.

"Ah, now there it gets more interesting." Cal told him, "Initially it landed on the far side of the moon. But then

a day later it relocated to here in this city. At the main transport hub.”

“Then that's where we'll head for.” Jayk said, “Brae, bring Cal as well. We may need him to plug into the building security system.”

By its very nature, getting to the transport hub was easy and from there the crew of *Swift Exit* searched for the private docking bays available for rent. There were six of these in total, each one consisting of an individual hangar that opened onto a common landing platform built on the side of a tall cliff that was also used by scheduled air transport and sub orbital shuttle services. A raised walkway ran along the front of the hangars and by walking along this it was possible to look through windows into the hangars and see the craft that were currently inside. Doing this it was possible to see that four of the docking bays were occupied by starships under the forty metre long limit imposed by the physical size of the hangars. Three of these were short range passenger transports as befitted a public transport hub whereas the fourth one was a sleek private yacht, now painted silver instead of the red of the Judicial Department that Neela's vessel had been prior to her disappearance. However, the class of the vessel was indeed the same as hers and Jayk decided that it was worth further investigation.

“Are there active surveillance cameras in the docking bay?” he asked Cal when the group was sat in a secluded alcove in a cantina beside the transport hub. To avoid attracting unwanted attention Cal's holocron was still out of sight inside Brae's robes so that although his voice could be heard by those gathered around the table but his hologram remained inactive.

“I picked up a feed when we passed, yes.” Cal responded.

“Is their network security any good?” Tylo added.

“From the cameras to the control room? Yes, too good for me to slice into easily and without being noticed. But this is a public facility so all of their surveillance data will be archived into the public network I've still got access to.” Cal answered.

“Then see what you can come up with before the locals realise they've left themselves open and lock you out.” Jayk said, “We need to confirm whether or not that ship really is Neela's.”

“I'm on it.” Cal replied, “I've got the time stamp for when the ship landed and I'm starting from there. A-ha. I've got a single occupant disembarking. Humanoid, looks female but her face is hidden by one of those masks the miraluka wear. This one comes right down over her face rather than just covering her eyes.”

“That sounds like our woman even if it isn't Neela.” Tylo said, “So what do we do now?”

“We break into her ship.” Jayk said, “We can't afford to risk innocent people getting hurt and ambushing her inside her own vessel makes that a lot less likely.”

“Won't she sense you two when she comes back?” Tylo asked.

“Not as long as we can maintain relaxed and keep control of ourselves.” Jayk replied, “Though I think you should remain outside.”

“What for?” Tylo said.

“Because just one shot from that grenade launcher could kill us all.” Brae said.

“Good point. I'll keep watch.” Tylo replied.

The first hurdle to gaining entry to Neela's ship was getting into the hangar itself. The most obvious routes were through the personnel access door that led to the main hub terminal or the large external door on the landing platform. However, both of these were exposed and the Jedi would not be able to hide their activities while they tried to override the lock. Nor could they force access without leaving visible evidence of their actions.

Fortunately the hangars required considerable power to be provided to them for recharging starship reserve batteries while their engines were shut down and this was provided using a large service tunnel that led beneath them. Access to this was limited to hub personnel but obtaining a key for this was much easier than breaking into the tunnel.

Watching one of the entrances to the tunnel, Jayk and Tylo waited until they saw a technician in overalls emerge and seal the door behind him. Then both men made their way across the hub, doing their best to blend into the crowd until they were right behind the technician.

“Excuse me.” Jayk said to the man and when he turned around Jayk waved his hand in front of his face at the same time as he let the Force flow through him as he spoke, “Could you please direct me over there?” Jayk asked and the technician turned his head in the direction the Jedi waved in.

“Oh that's easy.” he said, “It's right down there in front of you.” and he too pointed in that direction.

While he was distracted Tylo walked close by the technician and subtly removed the identity card from his belt that had been used to seal the entrance to the service tunnel.

“Thank you.” Jayk said, smiling at the technician as if the man had just done him a great favour. Then he waited for the technician to walk away before hurrying after Tylo, catching up with him just as Brae was joining him as well.

“Who knew being a criminal would come in so useful?” Brae commented.

"Yeah, remember that the next time someone tells you that crime doesn't pay." Tylo replied, "Now shall we go somewhere a little more private?" and he held up the stolen ID card.

Gaining entry to the service tunnel was now nothing more than a process of placing the card against the control panel beside the door and waiting as it hissed open before simply walking inside before anyone got suspicious.

As the door to the service tunnel closed behind the crew of the *Swift Exit* a miraluka who had been sat on a bench as if waiting for his scheduled transport to arrive quickly reached into a pocket and took out a comlink. "We may have a problem." he said into the device, "I followed the jedi like you said and they're at the transport hub. They just disappeared into the service system."

Intended for miraluka technicians, the service tunnels were pitch black and the trio had no choice but to use glow rods to light their path despite the risk of discovery that came with this. The light enabled them to follow the tunnels under the private docking bays. Thick power cables ran along the tunnel ceiling here and each time there was a vertical shaft that led up to one of the docking bays one of these cables also spurred off and ran upwards. Jayk counted off the number of vertical shafts until they reached the docking bay that housed Neela's yacht.

"This is it." he said and he looked at Tylo, "I'll need Brae's blaster."

Tylo set down the holdall he was carrying and opened it to reveal the weapons inside before taking out the blaster pistol and a power cell that he then handed to Jayk. With the weapon tucked into his belt Jayk climbed the vertical shaft using the handholds set into the side of it until he reached the top where a closed hatch barred his way. This hatch was a simple affair, just a strong metal grill that was hinged at one side and had a lock at the other to prevent it from opening. This was something that Jayk had expected though and taking the blaster from his belt he pressed the muzzle against the lock and then averted his eyes before firing.

In the close confines of the shaft Jayk could not shield himself fully from the flash of light and heat that accompanied the shot but he was not injured in any way as fragments of the lock dropped down the shaft.

"Are you okay up there?" Tylo asked, trying to avoid raising his voice too loudly.

"I'm fine." Jayk answered as he pushed open the hatch and then peered out into the docking bay, "There's no-one around. Follow me up."

"Don't forget the camera." Cal's voice called out from under Brae's robes, "Stay to the rear of the ship or under it. You'll be out of its field of view there."

"This hatch comes out right behind the ship. We should be fine." Jayk responded as he climbed out of the shaft and made his way under Neela's ship to where its access ramp was located.

Jayk was just about to begin attempting to override the locking mechanism on the yacht's access ramp when all of a sudden he heard a hissing sound as the door leading to the hub terminal opened and moments later the docking bay's lights came on.

"Jedi Jayk Udra," a female voice called out, "taken to breaking and entering now have we?" and as Jayk looked around he saw the woman he had originally met in her guise as Ashra Poul striding towards him and as she got closer she reached up to remove her mask and reveal Neela Vortress' smiling face.

Acting quickly Jayk pointed his blaster at Neela and fired but she was quick enough to be able to produce her lightsaber from under her jacket and ignited the blade in time to deflect the shot towards the side of the docking bay.

"Quickly!" Brae snapped at Tylo, "Give me the rifle." and as Jayk fired again while running for cover behind the yacht's landing gear.

Tylo threw the holdall out of the shaft and Brae hurriedly took the rifle from it, loading the weapon before turning it on Neela. Switching the weapon to automatic she then fired a rapid burst at her. Knowing full well that Neela was a skilled swords woman who was capable of sending many of the blaster bolts straight at her, Brae deliberately aimed her burst at Neela's feet. This way she hoped that the attack would come in from too low an angle to enable her to be able to deflect the shots while also maintaining her defence against Jayk. However, rather than moving to protect herself against the attacks Neela performed a backflip through the air back towards the entrance before diving through it. Then she swung her lightsaber at the control panel beside the door and it exploded with a shower of sparks. This triggered the mechanism of the door and it slammed shut as Jayk and Brae were charging towards it. Reaching the door first, Jayk slammed his hand down on the control panel but the door did not open.

"Stang!" he hissed. Then he turned around on the spot, "Tylo!" he called out to the smuggler who was just climbing out of the service shaft, "We need to go back through the tunnel. We can't let her escape."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tylo responded.

The moment that Neela burst out of the docking bay she attracted attention from the crowd of beings in the hub terminal and when she used her lightsaber to destroy the door controls there were cries of alarm and

panic. At the same time the crowd began to retreat away from Neela while a pair of security guards rushed towards her.

"What's-" one of the guards began when they reached Neela but before he could finish she swung her lightsaber at him and cut him down.

Surprise.

Fear.

The second guard was too startled to react to the sudden murder of his colleague and before he could come to his senses Neela lashed out at him, delivering blows to his stomach and face that left him lying on the floor with blood pouring from his face. As the shocked crowd looked on Neela then ran towards the main exit, the glowing lightsaber in her hand making sure that the crowd kept their distance. However, as she neared the entrance a group of speeders in marshals' colours pulled up outside and a number of heavily armed marshals led by Senior Marshal Tull and Marshal Veleer disembarked. At the same time the undercover marshal who had been assigned to follow the crew of the *Swift Exit* after their release stepped out of the crowd and drew his concealed blaster, pointing the weapon directly at Neela.

"Marshals' Service!" he called out, "Drop your weapon and surrender."

Neela ground to a halt and spun to face the marshal but rather than follow his instructions she extended a hand out in front of her and unleashed a wave of telekinetic energy that sent not only the marshal but also the crowd around him flying backwards while Neela continued her dash towards the exit. Her escape route was not clear, however and the newly arrived marshals were already deploying to try and stop her from getting away while also yelling at the crowd to stay clear of their line of fire.

With a flick of her wrist Neela sent numerous pieces of luggage that had been abandoned by their owners in the face of danger flying at the marshals in the doorway. Some of the marshals ducked out of the way while others were knocked down by the flying cases hurled at them. This opened up a gap in the marshals' line and Neela leapt through it. In an attempt to stop her Veleer jumped out in front of her with his blaster in his hand.

"Stop right-" he began before Neela thrust the tip of her lightsaber blade through his chest and he let out a gasp as he died.

"No!" Tull yelled as his friend was killed with such callousness and he watched as Neela rushed up to one of the marshals' speeders before leaping into the empty vehicle with its engine idling and driving off.

When the crew of the *Swift Exit* reached the entrance a short time later they found their way blocked by the marshals and even Tylo could sense their mood.

Anger.

"What's going on?" Tull demanded, "Who was that woman?"

"That woman was your killer marshal." Jayk responded, "A rogue jedi named Neela Vortress and I think you'll find that when you thought you were talking to Ashra Poul you were in fact speaking to her and the real Miss Poul was already wrapped up in the freezer."

"So how about you get out of our way and let these two do their jobs?" Tylo suggested.

"And see if you can get our weapons back." Brae added.

"We're your only hope of stopping her without risking massive loss of life." Jayk told Tull and the marshal scowled as he took out his comlink.

"I need the weapons confiscated from the jedi sent to me at the main transport hub immediately," he said into the device, "and get a unit in the air. Tell them to track speeder unit Trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight. I need real time updates on its location."

6.

In the time it took for the confiscated weapons to be delivered to the transport hub Neela had built up a considerable head start even though they came via airspeeder. However, the Jedi and Tylo had two advantages over her. Firstly just as Senior Marshal Tull had ordered, another air unit had tracked her clearly marked speeder as it wound its way through the city streets and secondly the airspeeder that delivered their weapons to them was capable of travelling much faster than Neela's landspeeder as well as being able to move in a direct path towards her rather than having to follow the same streets that were limiting her travel. "Tylo, get in the pilot's seat." Jayk ordered as he was climbing into the four seat airspeeder.

"This is a marshals' service vehicle." the miraluka pilot said when he heard this.

"And the Jedi Order is requisitioning it." Jayk told him.

"Do it marshal." Tull said from nearby and the pilot nodded before releasing his harness and getting out of the craft so that Tylo could take his place. Then with him in the pilot's seat and the two Jedi sat in the air speeder with him Tylo pulled back on the control column hard enough that the vehicle rapidly climbed up into the air.

"Hey!" Brae exclaimed as she struggled to strap herself into her seat, "Warn me before you do that again."

"We have little time for warnings Brae." Jayk responded, "You must be ready for sudden manoeuvres." and then he scowled as the airspeeder lurched suddenly when Tylo adjusted its heading to close with the other airspeeder that was following Neela. Seeing the other airspeeder just a few hundred metres ahead of them, Jayk picked up a communication headset from the control console and clipped it over his ear, "Marshals' airspeeder this is Jedi Udra in the unit closing to your rear, "What is the status of the renegade speeder?"

"Unchanged for the last four minutes. Running at maximum speeder and altitude along highway seven." the miraluka pilot of the observation unit answered.

"I've got her." Tylo added as he looked down and saw the speeder with the lights on its roof pulsing brightly as it raced just above the ground level traffic on the major highway that led out of the city, "Looks like she's making a break for open country." but Jayk frowned.

"Master, what's wrong?" Brae said when she noticed this reaction.

"Search your feelings. Does this make sense to you Brae?" Jayk replied.

"She knows she's being followed." Brae said.

"Yes she did." Jayk said and then Tylo frowned.

"What do you mean 'did'?" he said.

"Take us lower." Jayk told him.

"How much lower?"

"All the way."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Tylo muttered as he pushed forwards on the controls and the airspeeder began to descend towards the fleeing landspeeder.

The highway that the landspeeder was following was crowded and the mass of Force sensitive beings travelling on it made picking out one individual presence more difficult than it would normally be but as the airspeeder descended to an altitude just above the marshals' landspeeder it became apparent to both Jayk and Brae that something was wrong.

"Uncle, I can't sense her." Brae said.

"Neither can I." Jayk replied, "It's a trick."

"What's going on?" Tylo asked, frowning.

"Neela's not in that landspeeder." Jayk said, "It's on auto cruise."

"So where the kriff is she?" Tylo said.

"She must have bailed out after setting the controls." Brae responded.

"Which could have been at almost any point after she left the transport hub." Jayk added.

"She's heading for her ship isn't she master?" Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"I expect so. It is her only way off this planet." he said before activating the airspeeder's communication system again, "Senior Marshal Tull, this is Jedi Udra. Do you read me?"

"Yes I read you Jedi Udra." Tull's voice responded.

"Neela Vortress has abandoned her speeder and is likely attempting to return to her ship. You must take steps to secure it while we return to the hub." Jayk told him.

"Understood. We managed to get the launch door open and I've got two men inside the hangar now. I'll send in reinforcements immediately." Tull replied and Jayk nodded.

"Use caution." he said.

"Yes I've seen her in action Jedi Udra. I'm not taking any more chances. See you soon." Tull said and then the channel went dead.

"The hangar!" Tull called out as he put his comlink away and drew his blaster, "Everyone with me." and he waved at the other marshals present outside the transport hub to follow him.

With the internal door still jammed shut Tull led the other marshals around onto the landing area from where they could enter the hangar holding Neela's yacht through the large external door. The two marshals who had been standing guard saw the much larger group of marshals rushing towards them and turned to face them.

"What's wrong sir?" one of the guards asked.

"The renegade jedi may be coming back for her ship." Tull said, "Has there been any activity?"

"None sir." the guard answered but right then there was a sudden roaring from the yacht as its engines powered up.

"She's already aboard." Tull exclaimed.

"Impossible sir. The hatches are all sealed." the guard told him.

"Then what the hell is going on?" Tull said just as the roaring sound grew in volume and the yacht rose up off the hangar floor and there was a sudden down blast from the vessel's repulsorlifts that sent the marshals flying as it flew right over their heads.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tull said as he watched the yacht fly over the city.

Perched on the rooftop of a fifty storey office building Neela held the beckon call unit that was connected to the remote slave circuit of her yacht and smiled as she watched her vessel flying towards her. Unfortunately the launch of her yacht had attracted a lot of attention and she could see several marshals' airspeeders moving to intercept it. Fortunately for her she had only triggered the launch sequence when she was close enough to the hangar that it would not be possible for anyone to intercept the yacht before it reached her. Neela brought the yacht to a halt about ten metres from the roof and then sent the signal to open the ship's access ramp. From where she sat it was a trivial act to leap across the gap and run up the ramp into her ship. Making her way to the cockpit she sat in the pilot's seat and took manual control of the ship just as the marshals' airspeeders drew close.

"She's aboard." Jayk said when he saw the yacht start to rise away from the office building.

"But her ship has no weapons and the marshals are within firing range master." Brae pointed out and a moment later there was a flash of red from one of the airspeeders closing in on Neela's yacht. Given that it was still over a densely populated area of the city, the blasts from the laser cannon were not aimed directly at Neela's yacht. Instead the volley of energy blasts passed above it as the marshals tried to prevent Neela from escaping. In response to this Neela instead began to fly off at a constant altitude, doing her best to turn away from the marshals' airspeeders.

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

"Why?" Brae asked, "There are a dozen airspeeders on her tail and she can't outrun them in the atmosphere. They have her now."

"She doesn't need to." Jayk said and he reached for the communication system as quickly as he could, "This is Jedi Udra to all air units. Break off pursuit. Break off now."

"Master, what are you doing?" Brae asked.

"Kriff!" Tylo exclaimed suddenly as Neela demonstrated what she had planned by activating her yacht's sublight ion drive. The powerful engine was not intended for use inside the atmosphere of a planet, especially in such close proximity to a settled area and the blast from the exhaust produced a massive sheet of flame that engulfed all of the speeders chasing after her, sending the burning wrecks of the vehicles plummeting towards the ground below. At the same time the power of the ion drive accelerated the yacht forwards at a tremendous rate and by just lifting the nose of the ship slightly Neela caused it to shoot upwards just as fast.

"Let that be a lesson to you my young apprentice." Jayk said solemnly as Neela's yacht vanished from view above them on its way out of the atmosphere, "Never underestimate an opponent."

"So what now?" Tylo asked.

"Now we return this speeder to the marshals." Jayk told him, "Then we return to Coruscant. The Jedi Order needs to know that we have encountered Neela Vortress again."

"Yeah and that she's holding a grudge against you." Tylo added.

"Do you think that's true uncle?" Brae asked.

"Unfortunately yes. The circumstances surrounding this mission were too similar to those Neela knew we were looking out for. She deliberately lured us here. Whether she intended to disgrace or kill us I can't say. But I sense that she will try again."

"Now I've definitely got a very bad feeling about all of this." Tylo said.