

# STAR WARS

## DARKNESS RISING

1-04: LOVE & MONEY

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Searching for clues about the whereabouts of Thal N'Krey, the Udras travel to his homeworld where they find that there are other parties interested in the missing artist....

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# 1.

*The room in which Thal N'Krey worked was a mess with empty food containers and broken furniture scattered around as he continued to apply paint to the canvas in front of him.*

*"Gods Thal, what happened here?" a female voice said from behind him.*

*"I was inspired." he replied without bothering to turn around.*

*"Thal how long has it been since you slept?" the woman asked as she walked towards him, doing her best not to stand on anything. But along the way she felt her foot hit something that made a rattling sound and she looked down to see a small plastic container on the floor that she bent down to pick up before reading the label and shaking it, "This is three weeks old." she said, holding up the bottle of pills even though Thal was too engrossed in his work to look at her or the bottle, "It's full. Thal you're off your meds again aren't you?"*

*"They cloud my mind." Thal said, "The art speaks to me without them."*

*"Thal that's not art, it's just you. You need to take your meds. You need-"*

*"I need to be allowed to create!" Thal bellowed, turning around and glaring at the woman and she gasped.*

*"How long is it since you even slept?" she asked.*

*"I don't know. Sleep takes too long." Thal answered and he started to turn back towards his painting.*

*"No! You don't get to keep doing that Thal!" she yelled and she ran up to him and grabbed hold of him, pulling him back around, "You have to realise what's happening to you."*

*"What's happening is that I'm creating the finest work of my life." Thal said*

*"Your finest work? Thal this is junk. What was the last thing you sold? I mean what is this stuff even supposed to be?" the woman said and she reached out and took hold of a bizarrely shaped humanoid sculpture and held it close to Thal's face but he just batted it aside with enough force that it flew across the room and broke against the wall. However, as he did so he accidentally struck the woman across her face and she recoiled in pain.*

*"Get out!" he yelled with rage, "Get out now!" and with tears in her eyes the woman turned around and ran for the door.*

*"That's it Thal!" she shouted back at him as she ran, "I'm done with you for good. Don't try contacting me again."*

*As the door slid shut behind the woman Thal calmly looked down at his hand and saw that where it had caught the sculpture it was bleeding. But rather than get a bandage and dress the wound he just stared at it and smiled.*

*"Of course." he said to himself as he turned around to face the painting and picking up a brush, "That was always the answer." Then he dabbed the bristles into the blood pumping out of the wound and started to mix it into the paint already on the canvas.*

The YT-700 freighter *Swift Exit* looked somewhat out of place in the main hangar of the Jedi temple on Coruscant. Most of the craft here were single person starfighters or small shuttles intended to transport small numbers of Jedi rapidly to wherever in the galaxy they were needed. On the other hand an ordinary looking freighter was not the sort of craft generally used by the Jedi.

The *Swift Exit* was owned by Tylo Kurrast, a smuggler who was now compelled to assist a pair of Jedi in hunting down his former employers in exchange not only for a pardon for his own relatively minor crimes but also as a means of protecting him from the employers who now knew that he was working with the Republic against them. Tylo was busy working on his ship in the cockpit when all of a sudden one of the Jedi he was required to work with, the Jedi knight Jayk Udra appeared behind him.

"Having trouble with your ship?" he asked and Tylo suddenly raised his head, banging the back of it on the flight console.

*Pain.*

"Ow!" he exclaimed as he rubbed the back of his head where he had hit it, "No. The *Swift Exit* is flying just fine. I just wanted to make a few modifications that's all."

Jayk frowned.

"Tylo the resources of the Jedi Order have been placed at your disposal to keep your ship operating smoothly, not so you can customise it at our expense."

"Well as a matter of fact I'm trying to install an upgrade that one of you lot says will make things easier for us all." Tylo replied.

"Who?" Jayk asked.

"Cal." Tylo answered.

Cal Udra was an ancestor of Jayk's who had been a Jedi knight thousands of years earlier and during his life

he had created a holocron in which he had effectively reproduced his personality to act as the guardian of the knowledge he had placed inside it. The holocron had been granted to Jayk recently given Cal's experience in training a close family member as his padawan, something almost unheard of in more modern times. But since Jayk had been assigned to train his niece Brae it had been felt that he would benefit from Cal's advice. But Jayk had not expected the holocron's guardian to start making suggestions about upgrades to the *Swift Exit*.

"Really?" Jayk said and he turned around and left the cockpit, heading for the lounge where as usual Cal's holocron sat on the table, "Cal, I need to speak with you." he said as Tylo followed him and a holographic projection of Cal appeared in the lounge.

"Ah Jayk, how may I help you today?" Cal asked, his image smiling.

"You can explain why Tylo is making modifications to his ship at your suggestion." Jayk replied.

"Because I can only interface with systems connected to wireless communication ports." Cal replied, "Which on this ship means the communications and that's about it."

"I'm adding a wireless link to the main computer." Tylo added.

"You mean Cal will be able to control any system on the ship?" Jayk asked.

"Within reason." Tylo told him, "I mean although he could theoretically fly the ship I wouldn't recommend it. But he'll be able to program the nav computer, run sensor scans, monitor life support, raise shields, run system start up sequences-"

"I get it." Jayk interrupted, "Very well, I'll sign off on your upgrades. But next time run them by me first okay? The council does not like to receive unexpected bills because of holocrons." and he glared at Cal briefly, "Now if you need me I'll be in my bunk. I have paperwork to catch up on." and then he turned and left the lounge.

"So." Cal said, looking at Tylo when Jayk was gone, "You didn't tell him about the full spectrum entertainment decoder?"

"It never came up." Tylo said and he smiled at Cal before the hologram vanished.

Tylo then headed back into the cockpit and crouched down under the control console again, returning to the task of installing the wireless port. But just as he began there was a sudden knock on the outside of the canopy that startled him and once more he banged his head on the console.

*Pain.*

"Ow! Stang! Again?" he exclaimed before he looked outside and saw a short statured young woman in jedi robes waving at him through the transparisteel, "What do you want Brae?" he asked her.

"Tylo, have you seen my uncle?" Brae called out so she could be heard inside the ship.

"Yeah, he's in his bunk. Why?"

Rather than answer directly Brae darted around the ship and ran onboard before headed for the cramped crew quarters where she found Jayk lying on his bunk reviewing the content of a datapad.

"Master." she said excitedly.

"Yes Brae?" he replied, looking up from the datapad.

"Master Lorces sent me to find you. Apparently there's been some further information regarding the stolen Sith artwork. She wants to see us in the council chamber immediately."

"Then let's go." Jayk said, tucking the datapad into his robes as he got up and the two jedi rushed towards the access ramp.

"Tylo!" Jayk shouted and there was a 'Clump!' from the cockpit.

*Pain.*

"Ow! What now?" Tylo shouted out.

"We are wanted in the council chamber." Jayk told him.

"Okay I'm coming. But can we go via the infirmary? I may have a concussion by now."

The council chamber was where all twelve of the senior jedi masters could meet to discuss matters of importance to the Jedi Order. But on this occasion there were only two present. One was Jedi Master Sal Lorces, a female twi'lek, while the other was the more imposing form of Karadon Ress, the supreme grand master of the Jedi Order.

"Ah Jedi Udra." Ress said as they group entered the council chamber, "Thank you for joining us. We have news about your assignment. Master Lorces will explain."

"As you know," Master Lorces began, "the artwork stolen from the gallery on Corris was all attributed to the same artist. As was the genuine Sith artefact that had been misidentified as being a reproduction. A report has now reached us of a theft from an auction house in the Velenta sector. The only item taken was a painting created by the same artist, while more valuable objects were left."

"You think that this item could also be a genuine Sith artefact masters?" Brae asked.

"No, not this time. A jedi local to the scene was able to investigate and the auction house had video footage made by the artist of himself creating the painting. However, we do believe that it is possible that there could be other genuine Sith artefacts hidden among his work." Master Lorces explained, "Now we've tried tracking

down the artist, a kiffar named Thal N'Krey, but according to local security his last known address has been abandoned for some time."

"Let me guess," Tylo commented, "we're getting the job of tracking him down."

"Quite so mister Kurrast." the supreme grand master said, "Without any evidence of a crime being committed the local security forces will not investigate."

"Possessing Sith artefacts is a crime." Brae pointed out.

"But one that falls under the jurisdiction of the Jedi Order." Jayk reminded her.

"Quite." Grand Master Ress added, "Jedi Udra you will locate Thal N'Krey and seize any Sith artefacts he may have in his possession before bringing him back here for questioning. Do you have any questions?"

"No grand master." Jayk replied.

"Good. Then go and may the Force be with you."

Jayk and Brae both bowed to the supreme grand master before they turned to leave, accompanied by Tylo.

"So where to now?" Tylo asked, "I'm guessing that they'll give you an address for where this guy used to live."

"They will." Jayk replied, "But we aren't leaving Coruscant before we've had chance to consult with an expert in these matters."

"Who would that be master?" Brae said.

"I don't know. But I know where we can find one. Though first we should return to the *Swift Exit*. There's something else I'd like to take with us."

## 2.

The Galactic Museum was a grandiose building even by the standards of Coruscant and inside it housed the greatest collection of art and cultural objects from millions of civilisations, some of which no longer existed in any form other than a handful of artefacts now gathering dust within the museum. There was even a hall that contained carefully chosen examples of Sith culture, all of which were supposed to have been cleared by the Jedi Order as being free from the presence of the Dark Side. More important to Jayk than the physical objects it contained though was the knowledge that was housed in its vast computer system and more importantly in the minds of the staff who worked there to gather every piece of knowledge that could be learned.

When they entered the museum Jayk marched right up to the front desk and looked at the wiry young woman sat behind it.

"My name is Jedi Udra." he said sternly, "I need to speak with someone from the artistry department."

"Of course, I'll have someone brought down to see you." the woman replied and Jayk nodded.

The individual that appeared soon after was a male human with dark skin and hair that was turning grey with age. The woman behind the front desk pointed out the two Jedi to him even though he could tell by the way they were dressed and the lightsabers they displayed prominently who they were.

"Good morning to you." the man said as he greeted them, "My name is Dahlis Hebro and I am a professor of art here at the museum. How may I help you?"

"Mister Hebro, we are looking for information on an artist." Jayk told him.

"Please call me Dahlis." Dahlis replied, "And I'll be happy to help you with any information I can. Please come with me and we can discuss this in my office."

The Jedi and Tylo followed Dahlis away from the public areas of the museum with their carefully arranged displays to the network of passageways, storerooms and offices where the staff who ran the building worked from. Dahlis had his own office but it lacked any natural light and was not very large so with four people inside it felt rather crowded.

"I'm afraid I don't have enough seats for us all." he said.

"Tylo and I will stand." Jayk said.

"As you wish." Dahlis replied and he sat down and leaned across his desk, "So who is the artist you are interested in?"

"Thal N'Krey." Jayk told him, "A kiffar from the-"

"From the Mid Rim." Dahlis interrupted before Jayk could finish.

"You know him?" Brae said in surprise.

"I know of him." Dahlis said as he began to tap at his computer keyboard, "I monitor the galactic art markets for any indications that the work of specific artists is suddenly capturing people's attention, both from the point of view of obtaining culturally significant items for the museum and for making sure that what we already have is properly insured."

"So this Thal N'Krey appeared in one of your searches then?" Jayk asked.

"Yes indeed, about three years ago to be precise." Dahlis answered, "There was a sudden spike in the value of his art and so I looked into him further. Ah, here we are. Thal N'Krey." and he turned his monitor so that the others could see it.

"One moment." Jayk said, reaching into his robes and he produced Cal's holocron and set it down on Dahlis' desk, "Cal may we have your advice?" he said and Cal's image suddenly materialised, making the small room seem even more crowded, "Were you listening?" Jayk asked.

"What, to you talking about the artist that created the work stolen from the gallery on Corris?" Cal asked."

*Surprise.*

"Stolen?" Dahlis said, "Why would anyone steal work by Thal N'Krey?"

"Well didn't you just say that it was becoming more valuable?" Tylo pointed out.

"Yes, but not so valuable that it would be worth stealing. To be honest, Thal N'Krey was something of a mediocre artist. He had some talent, perhaps just enough to get by producing commissioned works for middle class beings who wanted something unique to hang on the walls of their homes but not the sort of thing that people would go to all the trouble of stealing." Dahlis explained, "Are you certain it was his work?"

"Actually we think that there could be some dangerous artefacts that have been mistakenly identified as being his work." Jayk replied.

"Sith artefacts?" Dahlis responded and Jayk nodded.

"Correct." he said.

"That figures. Most of his work centred around the Sith. Unusually for an artist he created work in a variety of mediums, holographic, sculptures, paintings, sketches and so on."

"You said 'was something of a mediocre artist.'" Cal commented, "And that he 'created' work. Why use the past tense?"

"Because Thal N'Krey hasn't been seen in eight years." Dahlis said, "For a time he was creating new pieces of art at a fantastic rate but then all of a sudden he stopped. Later on beings familiar with the art world realised that he had disappeared completely and demand for his work increased. Though he's still not among the most collectable of artists."

"You know I've heard you tell us what this guy wasn't. But how about you tell us something about what he was?" Tylo said suddenly.

"What I think my associate is trying rather rudely to say is that we will need as much information about Thal N'Krey if we are to track him down." Jayk added, glancing at Tylo before looking back at Dahlis.

"Well as I'm sure you're aware he was a kiffar." Dahlis began, "Are you familiar with the species?"

"Yes." Jayk replied, "They are near humans. Physically indistinguishable from the human species itself that are generally recognisable by the facial tattoos that mark out their clan affiliation. But what really sets them apart is that about one percent have strong abilities in psychometry that leads to a relatively high number exhibiting full Force sensitivity and joining the Jedi Order."

"Psychometry is reading the memories of inanimate objects by the way." Brae commented, looking at Tylo and he snarled briefly.

"Quite." Dahlis said, "Now as far as we know Thal was one of his people who possessed this ability and there are indications that he used this to draw inspiration for his work."

"Would there be significant collectors of his work that we could speak to?" Jayk asked and Dahlis considered this for a few moments.

"Perhaps." he said, "I suppose I could obtain records of sale but the problem is that all of them only started collecting his work after his disappearance. When he was still producing art he sold pieces only intermittently and as individual pieces rather than as sets."

"Do you have a complete record of what he produced?" Jayk said.

"No, unfortunately not. New pieces are still being discovered in collections across numerous sectors and frankly the process of confirming the provenance of them is complicated so there could be more that have been discounted." Dahlis answered.

"But you can provide us with a partial catalogue?" Cal added.

"Yes of course." Dahlis replied and he opened a desk drawer and began to rummage through, "I must have a spare mem-stick here somewhere."

"Don't bother." Cal told him, "I can carry the information myself."

"Of course, I've heard of the capabilities of jedi holocrons but I've never interacted with the guardian of one before." Dahlis said.

"Transfer the files." Jayk said, "We have Thal's last known address so we'll start our investigation there. Professor if you come across anything more then you can contact us through the jedi temple."

The journey through hyperspace to Thal's homeworld lasted for several hours and this gave the jedi chance to relax during the flight, both of them choosing to meditate in their quarters while Tylo sat in the lounge making use of the new holographic projection system that had been installed in the *Swift Exit* at the Jedi Order's expense to watch a holovid of a sports game he had recorded.

"How many times can you re-watch the same game?" Cal asked as he appeared, "I've observed you watching this six times since I was first brought aboard."

"This game is a classic." Tylo replied, "I only wish I could win the four thousand credits I was supposed to get from picking the right winners every time I watch it."

"Supposed to?" Cal commented.

"Well the bookmaker wasn't exactly an honest and upstanding citizen. Though he did happen to have good taste in fast getaway ships. I swear if I ever catch up with him I'll make sure I get paid in full." Tylo said. Then he looked at Cal and added, "Besides it's not like there's much else to do."

"Well you could be familiarising yourself with Thal N'Krey." Cal suggested and Tylo groaned, "Take a look at his work for example." Cal said and making use of the *Swift Exit's* new wireless computer interface he shut off the sports match recording and replaced it with examples of Thal's art.

"Hey I was watching that!" Tylo exclaimed, "Get it back."

"As you wish." Cal replied just as an image of a nude sculpture appeared on the display.

"Wait a moment." Tylo said, holding up his hand, "Are there many like this?" and he pointed to the image of a woman that looked to have been cast from some sort of metal.

"This piece does appear somewhat typical." Cal said, "You'll notice that the woman depicted here had been given the facial features that were characteristic of the Sith species. But if we look at these pieces instead," and Cal changed the display to show several smaller images each of which featured the same model but in a different pose and holding various different objects or adorned with various jewellery, "we can see that she was most likely human."

"So she's a real person then?" Tylo asked.

"I think so." Cal answered, "In fact you may want to take a look at this. It was provided to us by the auction house in the Velenta sector as proof that the stolen picture was created by Thal N'Krey." and he called up a video clip in which Thal could be seen working on a painting. There was no sound accompanying the clip but as Tylo watched a young woman who despite now wearing much more clothing than she had done while posing he immediately recognised as the one from the previous images came storming into the frame. She appeared agitated while Thal remained perfectly calm right up until the point where she picked up a small statue and all of a sudden he lashed out, striking her across the face. At that point she turned around and stormed back out of shot.

"Pause it there." Tylo said, just as Thal was looking down at his hand, "Who is she? She's beautiful. I thought this Thal guy was supposed to be some sort of loser artist. How could he get someone like her to pose for him?"

"I don't know." Cal replied, "Her name is not recorded in any of the notes we've been given and I don't think that any of the work featuring her bears her name."

"So there are more?" Tylo asked.

"Quite a lot I'd say." Cal answered and Tylo leant back in his chair.

"Show me." he said.

When Brae came walking into the lounge she was rubbing side of her head.

"You know I never thought that meditating on the Force could be so tiring." she said, "I need a sandwich." and then she glanced at the display that Tylo was studying closely as he made notes on a datapad,

"Seriously?" Brae exclaimed suddenly and, not having noticed her there even as she spoke, Tylo jumped, "You're watching porn?"

"I am not." Tylo protested and he pointed at the display before realising that all of the images floating in mid air showed could quite easily be described as pornographic, "Cal shut this down." he added and the display turned off.

"Cal was a part of this as well?" Brae said before she looked towards the crew quarters, "Uncle Jayk!" she called out, "Cal and Tylo are watching porn!"

Jayk appeared in the lounge with a confused look on his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Tylo and Cal were-" Brae began.

"Cal was just showing me some of Thal's artwork." Tylo said, "He thought it would be a good idea for me to be as familiar with it as possible. After all, that is why the Jedi Order installed the new holographic display system."

"Yeah." Brae muttered, "Familiar with all the naked women."

Just then there was a beeping sound through the intercom.

"Oh thank goodness. Saved by the chimes." Tylo said, "We're coming out of hyperspace." and he hurried into the cockpit.

"Let me know if you need anything else." Cal added and his image disappeared.

"Brae get ready to disembark." Jayk told her, "We'll be landing soon."



### 3.

Jesrex was the planet that Thal N'Krey was last known to have called home. A Mid Rim world settled in the early years of the Republic the world had known early prosperity followed by economic collapse before crawling its way back to a situation where it was self sufficient but offered little of interest to anyone from outside. This had created a mix of regions from those inhabited by the ultra wealthy while at the other end of the spectrum there were slums that spread over hundreds of square kilometres of the surface. Unsurprisingly for an artist whose work had not attracted a great deal of interest Thal's home had been located in one such area and according to the land registry the entire area was owned by one corporation located elsewhere on the planet. However, a request from Jayk had an employee of the company waiting for them outside the building when they arrived.

"Jedi Udra I presume." the rodian asked as he stepped out of his speeder when he saw the two jedi and Tylo approaching down the street.

"That's correct." Jayk replied, "And you are?"

"Fraygo." the rodian replied, "Junior land administration executive for the Lat Mek Corporation."

"So is this heap of poodoo typical of what your company pedals?" Tylo commented as he looked up at the residential block they were stood outside. Constructed of ferrocrete and steel the building looked to have been constructed to the same pattern as all of the neighbouring ones and just like them it now had a rundown appearance where exposed metal looked corroded and paintwork was faded and chipped.

"The Lat Mek Corporation has been investigating redevelopment of this entire area for the last decade."

Fraygo replied defensively, "The only thing holding us up is-"

"Perhaps you could show us to the apartment we are interested in." Jayk suggested before the rodian could finish.

"Of course." Fraygo said, "I'll just get the power cell from my speeder."

"What do you need a power cell for?" Brae asked.

"There has been no regular supply for three blocks around us for the last four years." Fraygo explained as he took a bulky hand held power pack from his speeder, "So we'll need a local supply to get any of the doors open."

"I guess we're taking the stairs though." Tylo muttered.

By plugging the power cell directly into the door motor systems Fraygo was able to give them access to the building though none of the other systems such as lighting, turbolifts or air conditioning worked and so the group had to use handheld glow rods for illumination as they walked through the somewhat stuffy darkened hallways of the building until they reached the door to the apartment that Thal N'Krey had occupied.

"According to our records there were numerous works of art that were removed and sold off to clear what Mister N'Krey owed in back rent and utility payments." Fraygo said as Jayk led the way into the apartment, "But apart from those everything ought to be as he left it."

"Why not remove them as well?" Brae asked.

"Why bother?" Tylo responded before Fraygo, "If this place was going to be knocked down then it would be a waste of time to remove it separately rather than just knock the whole building down and gather it up with all the other debris."

"Do you have a list of the artwork you removed?" Jayk said as he studied the sculpting tools that were laid out on a table.

"Not with me no." Fraygo told him, "The only note I have says 'artwork'. I can't even tell you how many items there were."

"But you do have a record of-" Jayk began before his hand brushed against a paint smeared spatula and he felt a sudden shiver run up his arm.

"Master, what's wrong?" Brae asked but Jayk did not reply directly. Instead he stood up straight and turned towards Fraygo.

"Mister Fraygo I must ask you to wait outside." he said, "Everything in this apartment is being impounded by the Jedi Order. I will also need whatever information you have regarding the items that were removed."

"Of course." Fraygo replied, "The information was compiled for the lawyer who asked for the same information."

"What lawyer?" Tylo said.

"As I understand it a lawyer acting on behalf of a collector wanted to track down further pieces for his collection." Fraygo told him and Jayk and Tylo exchanged glances.

"I'll need information regarding the lawyer as well." Jayk said, "Now if you wouldn't mind this may be a crime scene."

The rodian nodded and stepped out into the hallway, closing the door behind him, at which point Jayk held

up the spatula towards Brae.

"Tell me what you think of this." he said and she walked over to him and reached out to take hold of the object. But as soon as she touched it she gasped and shuddered, pulling back her hand.

"What's going on?" Tylo asked.

"Here, take it." Jayk said and he held out the spatula to Tylo who walked forwards and took it from him.

"I don't get it." Tylo said as he looked at it, "It's just covered in paint."

"But it resonates in the Force." Brae told him, "It was made by the Sith."

"Stang!" Tylo exclaimed as he dropped the spatula and jumped back away from it, "And you let me hold it?" then he reached down to wipe his hand on a nearby sofa.

"I don't think it's harmful." Jayk said as he picked the spatula back up off the floor, "But it does tell us something important."

"Really? What?" Tylo said.

"That Thal N'Krey had contacts who could obtain genuine Sith artefacts." Brae said, "The original batch you were hired to help steal included one and now we find another just lying around here? That's a pattern."

"The police will have to gather up everything in here." Jayk said, "Then it can be shipped back to the jedi temple on Coruscant for proper examination. In the mean time we should concentrate on looking for anything that could suggest any alternate residences that Thal may have had."

Thal's apartment contained no datapads but there were several mem-sticks as well as the recording rod that he had used to create the record of himself at work Tylo had seen earlier and he and the two jedi gathered all of these up for examination aboard the *Swift Exit*. The local police were just arriving to clear up everything else as they left the apartment and Jayk suggested that they take advantage of this to get something to eat since it was getting late and the sun was already down.

"I saw a cantina back there on our way from the starport." he said, "If the police need us for anything they can get hold of us there."

"You really think that this is the sort of area that serves food that's safe to eat?" Tylo commented.

"I think if there was a hygiene problem then the locals wouldn't eat there either." Jayk pointed out, "And the cantina I saw looked pretty busy."

"Okay. But if I get sick then the Jedi Order is getting my doctor's bill as well." Tylo said.

The trio entered the cantina through the main entrance and given that they did not believe that there was any need to remain inconspicuous they made no attempt to conceal their presence or identities. However, unknown to any of them a figure was watching the cantina itself from across the street in an apartment in another of the rundown buildings that characterised this area of the city.

As soon as he saw them entering the cantina he rushed away from the optical magnifier by the window and to a portable subspace transmitter that was set up on the other side of the room, activating it as quickly as he could.

"Get me mister Crayne." he exclaimed, "He has to know about this right now."

On the world of Protas in Hutt space Morten Crayne found himself rudely shaken awake by a woman.

"Mara?" he said, "What time is it? Holy kriff, it's three in the morning. What's wrong?"

"Sellas is calling." Mara replied.

"Sellas? What's bothering him? I thought he was just supposed to sit tight."

"As far as I know he has. But he wants to speak to you now and won't tell anyone else what it's about."

Morten groaned as he swung his legs out of his bed.

"Pass me my pants." he said and Mara hurled his trousers at him.

Putting them on, Morten yawned as he walked with Mara to the newly established communications room and sat down in front of the subspace communications array.

"Okay Sellas, let's hear it." he said.

"Two jedi just walked into the cantina boss." Sellas reported and Morten's eyes widened.

"Jedi?" he exclaimed, "Are you sure?"

"Well they were wearing the robes and I caught a glimpse of the lightsaber that the girl was carrying. There was another guy with them as well that I didn't recognise."

"A guy?" Morten said, "Not N'Krey though? Did you get a picture?"

"Sure I did. I'll send it through to you now." Sellas said and both Morten and Mara turned to the nearby display used for visual communication as an image of Jayk and Brae entering the cantina with Tylo taken by Sellas using his magnifier was shown.

"Kurrast." Mara hissed, "How could he know about-"

"He couldn't. He doesn't." Morten interrupted and he turned back to the subspace communicator, "Okay Sellas, listen very carefully because I'll say this only once. Your mission is over. We can't afford to just wait for N'Krey to come back. After all this time I doubt he is anyway. Now you need to tie up all the loose ends he

left behind as well as one we've got outstanding. That guy with the jedi is a smuggler called Tylo Kurrast who did a job for me before becoming an informant for the Republic Judicial Department. You need to kill him and you need to kill the little whore as well. Now go earn your pay." and Morten shut off the subspace communicator.

"So Tylo's resurfaced." Mara said, "And he's still working with the jedi. Are you going to tell our client?"

Morten shook his head.

"Rylee doesn't need to know just yet." he said, "I'll wait until I've got something worth reporting. Like the fact that Tylo Kurrast is dead."

## 4.

The cantina was a large establishment where more than a dozen serving staff worked to deliver food and drink to tables and private booths. There was also an upper floor that consisted of a landing that ran around two sides of the establishment and numerous doors lined this.

"What do you suppose those are for?" Brae said as they walked into the cantina.

"Maybe they offer rooms for the night as well." Jayk suggested. Then he looked around for somewhere to sit. As he had indicated the cantina was busy and all of the tables he could see appeared taken. However, he did notice a group of vacant seats at the central bar itself and he pointed them out, "We'll sit there." he said and the trio made their way towards them.

As soon as they sat down a disinterested looking man placed menus in front of them before walking away to serve someone else. Picking up the menu Brae looked down it, recognising many of the dishes as one commonly served at such establishments across the galaxy while other were obviously more local dishes.

"What do you think this is?" Brae said, pointing to one of the latter and she glanced at Tylo to see him staring across the cantina, "What are you doing?" she asked, looking in the same direction but seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

"I don't believe it." Tylo said.

"Don't believe what?" Brae replied.

"It's her. She's here." Tylo said.

"Who's here?" Jayk said.

"That's model." Tylo told him, "She's a few years older but it's definitely her. Perhaps if either of you had studied the records of his work you were given then maybe you'd know her as well."

"Where is she?" Brae said as she looked at each female face in turn, trying to pick out someone who looked like an artist's model.

"The one with the tray and her hair tie back." Tylo said and he pointed out one of the serving staff.

"If that woman was in the pictures I caught you looking at then I'm surprise you recognised her without her being stark naked." Brae commented.

"Perhaps I ought to speak with her." Jayk said and he waved the nearest of the bar staff over to them.

"Ready to order?" he asked.

"Yes." Jayk replied, "But also I need to see that waitress privately. It is a matter of-" but before he could finished the barman turned around and called out to the waitress.

"Hey Vallani! Customer." he shouted, pointing to Jayk and the woman nodded before returning to the bar and placing her tray on it. Then she walked around to where Jayk was sat and she took him by the arm.

"This way." she said. Jayk got up off his stool and Tylo and Brae began to get up as well but Vallani suddenly stopped, "Hey, just him okay?" she said, "I'm not that kind of girl." and she pulled Jayk along with her towards the nearest set of stairs that led up to the upper floor.

"I don't understand." Brae said and a smile spread across Tylo's face.

"I do." he said, "While we're having our main course your uncle is getting desert."

Upstairs, Vallani took Jayk into one of the rooms that lined the landing and locked the door behind them.

"Okay," she said as she walked across the room, kicking off her shoes and starting to unzip her dress, "how do you want to do this. If it's nothing out of the ordinary then it's a hundred for the hour. If you're after something wild then I start at three hundred." then as she reached the closet on the opposite side of the room she let her dress fall to the floor and stood there in her underwear as she opened the closet to reveal an assortment of different outfits that was made up primarily of parodies of various official uniforms, "My only rule is no recordings are to be made. You want to relive the experience you can come back and pay for another hour. So what do you want?" she asked.

Jayk smiled as he realised what was happening.

"My name is Jayk Udra." he said, "I am a jedi knight."

"Oh sure Jedi Udra." Vallani replied as she crossed the room towards him, "I get it. I've done this the other way round. I was the jedi and he was a Sith that had to be punished. So have I been bad? Have I fallen to the Dark Side and need saving?" and then she slid her arms around Jayk, reaching beneath his cloak where she felt his lightsaber, "I have something like this as well." she said as she unhooked the weapon from his belt and pulled it out into the open, "Only mine's actually a-

"Wait don't touch that!" Jayk exclaimed just as Vallani flicked the lightsaber's activation switch and there was a 'snap-hiss' as the blade ignited vertically, only narrowly missing impaling both of them.

"Holy kriff!" Vallani snapped and she released her grip on the lightsaber as she staggered backwards, startled by the sudden flash of light right in front of her eyes, "That thing's real! Look, you need to get out of here. Do you know what the penalty is for possessing a lightsaber? You'll have the jedi down on you if they

find out you've got it. I've got a panic system in here. One word from me and a dozen guys twice as big as you will come in here and-

"You misunderstand me." Jayk said and he returned his lightsaber to his belt, "My name is Jayk Udra and I am a jedi knight. Look." and he reached out with his hand and focused his mind. Then Vallani gasped as she felt herself being lifted up off the floor and levitated backwards before Jayk set her down on her bed.

"Wow." she said, "I mean, I've never had a genuine jedi as a customer before." then she frowned, "I know I'm not exactly in a position to judge here, but aren't you forbidden from this? I mean I heard you took vows of celibacy or something."

"No." Jayk replied, "Attachment is forbidden but we are free to enter into intimate relationships as we see fit within this stipulation."

Vallani smiled.

"Well I don't do a jedi discount." she told him, "Now the clock is ticking and your hour started when the door closed. So shall we get this started?" and she reached behind her back to undo her bra.

"No wait." Jayk said before she could remove it, "I am here on official business. I understand that you used to model for a kiffar artist called Thal N'Krey." and Vallani groaned.

"Look," she said, getting to her feet, "I haven't seen Thal in eight years. The last time I saw him we argued and he hit me so I got out of there and never went back."

Jayk was about to ask for more information when all of a sudden he felt a tremor in the Force.

*Danger.*

"Look out!" he snapped and he dived forwards, landing on top of Vallani and pushing her back down onto the bed underneath him a fraction of a second before a blaster bolt punched through the window behind them and slammed into the wall beside the door.

Reacting quickly, Jayk lifted Vallani up over his shoulder as he stood back up and drew his lightsaber, activating it just in time to deflect the next shot to come in through the already broken window. Then as Vallani screamed Jayk turned around and ran towards the door and with a single swing of his lightsaber he sliced through the magnetic lock and the door slid open.

With Vallani still being carried over his shoulder Jayk then rushed out onto the landing and headed for the stairs.

"We're leaving!" he shouted as there were sudden cries of alarm at the sight of him rushing down the stairs with Vallani over his shoulder and his lightsaber in his hand.

"What's happening?" Brae exclaimed.

"I think you're uncle's getting the take out service." Tylo replied and he scooped up as much of his meal as he could fit in his mouth and crammed it in as he got up and drew his blaster.

"No blasters! No blasters!" one of the bar staff yelled as Tylo and Brae both broke into a run, heading for the exit along with Jayk.

"Hey no!" Vallani yelled, "Wait! My clothes!"

"No time." Jayk replied, "Trust me, I know what I'm doing." and he ran out into the night with Tylo and Brae close behind.

Another blaster bolt flew through the air and Jayk deflected this as well.

"Up there!" Brae shouted, pointing to an open window in the apartment block opposite the cantina and Tylo pointed his blaster upwards and returned fire more in the hope that it would prevent any further shots being fired at them than any expectation that he would be able to hit the shooter.

"Police!" a voice called out in the darkness as a pair of the police officers sent to clear Thal's apartment came rushing down the street to investigate the sound of blaster fire as well as Vallani's continued screaming.

"Help me!" she yelled, "I'm being kidnapped."

"Jedi business." Jayk told the two confused officers, "There is a gunman armed with a blaster in that building. Call for back up and detain him for questioning while we get this witness to safety. We'll need to take a speeder."

"Wait I'm not a witness." Vallani called out, "I'm a victim. Help me!"

More police officers were emerging from Thal's building to support their colleagues who Jayk had sent after the gunman as Jayk rushed up to one of their speeders.

"This one." he said as he pulled open the door of the nearest one to push Vallani into the back seat before he got into the front Brae and Tylo joined him, all of them sliding across to let the next one into the vehicle and leaving Tylo sat in front of the controls. Fortunately for them the police had left their vehicle unsecured and so Tylo was able to engage the repulsorlift engine right away and the vehicle rose up off the ground.

"Back to the ship?" he asked and Jayk nodded.

"Back to the ship." he agreed.

"Oh kriff no!" Vallani snapped, "I'm getting out of here!" and she tried to open the door beside her. But the police vehicle was designed for the transportation of prisoners in the rear section and so the doors were designed to only open from the outside and her attempt to open it from inside the vehicle was fruitless.

"This ought to help." Brae commented as Tylo set off and she reached out to a set of switches in front of her

that were labelled 'EMERGENCY' and flipped them into the active position. As soon as she did this there was a blaring sound and the blue and red lights mounted on the roof of the speeder began to flash as a warning to other traffic to move out of the way of the police vehicle as it sped along.

## 5.

Returning to the *Swift Exit*, Jayk carried Vallani up the access ramp and into the lounge where he set her down on the first available chair and as he did so Cal's hologram appeared.

"Kriff!" Vallani exclaimed, "What's that?"

"A hologram of a dead jedi." Brae told her, "Now be quiet. You're safe now."

"What's happening?" Cal asked.

"Oh nothing much." Tylo replied, "But your great great great whatever grandson just decided to kidnap a hooker."

"I did not kidnap her." Jayk said, "I saved her life."

"Could you not have saved my clothes as well?" Vallani asked.

"Brae give her your cloak." Jayk said and Brae sighed as she removed it and handed it to Vallani.

"Thanks." she said as she put it on.

"Wait a moment." Cal said as his hologram gave the appearance of studying Vallani, "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"She's Thal's model." Tylo said.

"Of course. The young lady he based some of his art around." Cal said. Then he looked at Jayk, "Have you considered asking her about Thal?"

"I was just getting to that when we were rudely interrupted by someone trying to kill her." he replied and Vallani's jaw dropped.

"Yeah," Tylo muttered, looking at Brae, "That's what they were doing that she had to strip down to her underwear."

"Kill me?" Vallani exclaimed, "Why would anyone want to kill me? I'm just a waitress."

"And a prostitute." Brae added.

"And I suppose you think those robes make you so much better than me don't you?" Vallani hissed.

"Vallani." Jayk said, "I believe that someone wants to prevent you from answering any questions about Thal N'Krey. He has been implicated in serious criminal offences and we are trying to locate him. We know that others are interested in him as well because of his work and it seems that they are willing to go to extreme lengths to stay ahead of us. Now I want you to remain here with Brae while Tylo and I go and assist with his capture."

"Me?" Tylo said suddenly, "How come I have to start help hunting down armed criminals?"

"And why do I have to stay here?" Brae added.

"She has a point." Tylo said, "She is your apprentice."

"And today she will learn patience." Jayk said, "A jedi must protect those in need and right now Vallani is in need."

Tylo sighed.

"Fine." he said, "But if this is going to be a regular thing I expect to be provided with something more than just this." and he tapped the blaster holstered on his thigh.

"That weapon is already pushing the limits of what is legal in most Republic systems." Jayk pointed out.

"For civilians maybe. But since I seem to have been deputised I may as well start packing government grade firepower."

"As you wish." Jayk said, "But for now I suggest you make use of what you have. Now we should hurry, I have a bad feeling that the police will not be able to contain our assailant for long." and he and Tylo exited the *Swift Exit*, closing the access ramp behind them.

Meanwhile in the lounge Brae and Vallani stared at one another as Cal looked on.

"I think I'll just have a rest." Cal said, "Let me know if you need me." and his image disappeared, leaving just the two women staring at one another in silence.

At the apartment block police reinforcements had arrived by the time Jayk and Tylo returned, with a perimeter having been established at ground level and a pair of speeders hovering in the sky above the roof to make sure that an escape by air was not possible. However, despite their increased numbers the police had yet to move into the building, lacking enough men to properly conduct a search. The problem was exacerbated by the crowd that had emerged from the cantina to see what all the excitement was about. The situation had also attracted the attention of the local media and news crews could be seen on the ground and in more air speeders hovering further out from the building than the two police vehicles.

"Sergeant." Jayk called out as he and Tylo disembarked from their commandeered police speeder.

"Yes jedi Udra?" the nearby police sergeant responded.

"What is your status?"

"We think there's a single shooter but we haven't been inside yet. We tried landing our speeders on the roof but they came under fire and withdrew to a safer distance." the sergeant answered.

"Don't you have specialist tactical teams for this work?" Tylo asked.

"Yes, but none are available at the moment. We probably won't have any here for at least an hour."

"Call them off sergeant." Jayk said as he turned around and looked up at the building, "We'll deal with the situation from here."

Tylo sighed and shook his head.

"I had a bad feeling you'd say that." he said as he drew his blaster and checked it.

*Danger.*

Jayk sensed the threat through the Force and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated his lightsaber to deflect the blaster shot that came from the building, aimed at Tylo. There were screams of panic from the crowd as the energy blast was sent harmlessly back at the abandoned building and most instinctively ducked for cover.

"That's new." the police sergeant said, "He hasn't fired at us back here yet."

"He was aiming for you." Jayk said, looking at Tylo.

"Me? What did I do?" Tylo replied.

"This is not the first time you have been targeted." Jayk pointed out, "I would suggest that whoever is up there is associated with your former employer." and Tylo snarled.

"Okay, now this is personal." he said, "If they're going to keep trying to kill me then I'm going to return the favour. Lead the way Jayk. I'm right behind you."

Jayk strode towards the abandoned building with his lightsaber held ready to deflect any further shots from inside and Tylo followed him, his blaster aimed upwards as he looked for a target. Meanwhile the open display of Jayk's weapon had announced his identity as a Jedi knight to the gathered media, who had already received reports of his presence in the cantina earlier and they responded excitedly.

"What does this have to do with the Jedi?" a reporter called out.

"Is the gunman Force sensitive?" another asked.

"How many Jedi are on the planet?" a third yelled but Jayk ignored them all. Instead he swung his lightsaber at the main entrance to the apartment block to unseal the doors and then waved his hand to push them apart with the Force.

The interior of the apartment block was as dark and gloomy as the one Thal had lived in but the blade of Jayk's lightsaber gave it a bluish hue as he and Tylo advanced inside. Despite the blaster fire having come from a floor several levels up the two men advanced cautiously just in case the shooter had an accomplice or had laid traps intended to catch the unwary in the darkness.

"So how do we do this?" Tylo asked as he and Jayk reached the emergency stairwell.

"We keep climbing." Jayk replied, "I can sense the presence of someone above us somewhere so hopefully I'll be able to tell when we reach the correct floor. Then we'll have him trapped."

"Couldn't we have brought a few cops with us as well?" Tylo suggested as they started to climb the stairs.

"They're doing their job so we can do ours." Jayk answered, "Now stay alert. There are species that are harder to sense in the Force and the gunman could still have accomplices."

Brae sat on the floor of the *Swift Exit's* lounge with her legs crossed and her eyes closed as she tried to meditate while Vallani paced up and down.

"This is taking too long." Vallani said, "Do you know how much this is costing me in lost wages? I bet that master of yours isn't even going to pay for the time he bought."

"Jedi do not pay for sexual gratification." Brae responded without opening her eyes.

"Really? Because your master told me that it's just attachment that is forbidden to your order and – Brae isn't it? Well Brae I'm about as attachment free as you can get."

Brae opened her eyes and stared at Vallani briefly before taking a deep breath and closing them again.

"Just sit down." she said, "Tylo has a video library you can take a look at if you want but keep the noise down while I meditate."

"That's it!" Vallani snapped, "I'm out of here." and she dashed towards the access ramp. But before she could reach it Brae jumped to her feet and turned towards her.

"Get back in here and sit down." Brae said, "Your wearing my cloak and you don't even have any shoes on."

"Well it was your master that brought me here in my underwear and I'll manage without shoes." Vallani responded as she opened the access ramp.

"I said sit down!" Brae snapped, extending her arm towards the other woman with the intent of using the Force to simply close the access ramp again before Vallani could leave the ship. But her impulsive use of the Force instead unleashed a telekinetic pull that yanked Vallani back into the lounge and she screamed as she flew through the air.

"Brae!" Cal snapped as he reappeared. The crystalline structure of the holocron made it sensitive to disturbances in the Force and her use of it brought its guardian out his dormant state, "You must be more



careful in your use of your power.”

“You’re crazy!” Vallani exclaimed as she staggered back to her feet, fortunately unharmed after being thrown across the room, “I’m out of here.” and she made to head for the access ramp again.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea young lady.” Cal said.

“Like I care what a computer program has to say.” Vallani replied.

“Well you ought to.” Brae told her as she stepped between Vallani and the ramp but Vallani reacted by just trying to push her out of the way. However, Brae was able to grab hold of Vallani’s wrists and she gripped them tightly, “Let go of me.” Vallani said as she tried to get loose.

“Sit down.” Brae told her.

“No. I’m leaving.”

“You’re staying.”

“Now ladies.” Cal said, “Perhaps you should both just calm down and-” but then Vallani pulled her arms back suddenly and one wrist came free unexpectedly. This caused her to overbalance and she fell to the floor, dragging Brae down with her in the process and both screamed. Cal winced as the pair began grappling with one another as Vallani tried to break free while Brae did her best to keep her away from the access ramp, “Oh this is just like Lara and Charity.” he added, shaking his head, “If there was an evil super villain here then I’d be really embarrassed about this.” Then as the two young women continued to struggle he waved a finger at them accusingly, “You two do realise that when Tylo finds out about this he’ll probably want me to play him my memory of the incident don’t you?”

At that point Brae was able to pin Vallani to the floor beneath her, holding her by the wrists while sitting on top of her.

“Stay still.” she order Vallani.

“I’m leaving. You can’t keep me here.”

“Oh yes I can. You’re a material witness so I can-” Brae began before she suddenly gasped as she felt a powerful disturbance in the Force and Vallani stared at her.

“You are crazy.” she said.

“Brae what’s wrong?” Cal asked.

“Uncle Jayk and Tylo.” she replied, “They’re in danger.”

## 6.

Jayk came to a sudden halt beside an exit from the stairwell and for a moment the only sound was the humming of his lightsaber blade.

"Here?" Tylo asked.

"Here." Jayk replied, nodding.

"Deal with the door, I've got it covered." Tylo said, standing back and crouching down before taking aim at the door just in case there was someone waiting immediately behind it.

As he had done with the main entrance to the building, Jayk used his lightsaber to destroy the lock holding the door shut and then the Force to lift the door itself out of the way. Tylo waited as his eyes adjusted to not having the lightsaber blade in front of him before he darted through the doorway and checked that the hallway was empty.

"Clear." he said and Jayk slipped through the open doorway after him. Looking in both of the directions that the hallway extended in Tylo added, "So which way now?"

"Difficult." Jayk told him, "I can sense our target in that direction." and he looked at the blank wall directly opposite the access to the stairwell, "So either direction could be the right one."

Tylo groaned.

"I've got a bad feeling about what you're about to suggest." he said.

"We need to split up." Jayk said and Tylo sighed.

"I knew it." he responded, "Okay so which way do you want to go?"

Jayk looked in both directions, hoping that the Force would point him in the right direction but he felt nothing and so he picked a direction at random.

"That way." he said, "Hopefully we'll meet up again before we encounter our target." and he began to walk down the corridor.

"Sure. Hopefully." Tylo said before he started to head in the opposite direction, reaching into his pocket for a glow rod.

The two men moved cautiously through the darkened hallway of the apartment building. Along the way both of them saw signs of habitation in the form of litter either scattered in individual pieces or gathered in bags for disposal but it was clear that it had all been deposited after the building had been supposed to be abandoned, indicating that the gunman had taken up residence here to watch Vallani after that time.

However, there was no sign of the gunman himself before both Jayk and Tylo rounded corners in the hallway that resulted in them facing one another from opposite ends. From his lightsaber Tylo could tell that he was facing Jayk immediately, while Jayk soon realised that he was looking at Tylo when the smuggler made no hostile moves against him and the men advanced towards one another until Jayk came to an unexpected halt.

Tylo matched this from some distance away, waiting to see whether Jayk would start moving again. Jayk was stood between two apartment doors on opposite sides of the hallway, one of which obviously led to an apartment positioned on the exterior of the building and was the type of place that the gunman had to be in order to shoot down at the street. Tylo pointed at this door and looked directly at Jayk and the jedi nodded in response. Tylo hurried forwards and the two men positioned themselves either side of the door.

*Danger.*

"Our target is expecting us." Jayk whispered as he sensed the threat through the Force.

"Deal with the door." Tylo replied, "Then I'll put a few blasts through to keep his head down long enough for you to get inside."

"Okay. Get ready." Jayk said and he pointed his lightsaber downwards to the magnetic seal at the base of the door. But although he had sensed danger through the Force, Jayk had misinterpreted what this meant and unknown to him Sellas had rigged the door using an explosive compound fixed to the inside of the seal. The charge was not particularly powerful, not even matching the potential of commercial explosives but it did not need to be. All that Sellas wanted was that it was sufficiently volatile that contact with a lightsaber blade would trigger it.

The blast from the crude bomb produced a blinding flash of light and deafening 'Boom!' as the blast not only lifted the door open but also hurled both Jayk and Tylo away, slamming them into the wall on the far side of the corridor. Inside the apartment Sellas emerged from behind a barricade that he had prepared for just this situation and fired his rifle on fully automatic. He could see that there was no-one right outside the door so he directed his fire at the walls to either side of it instead. The first few blasts on each side merely tore chunks out of the wall before they punched right through and as Jayk and Tylo lay dazed in the corridor they found a stream of blaster bolts flying over their heads.

Jayk recovered his senses first and looked around for his lightsaber. The weapon lay on the floor right in

front of the door out of his reach so instead he extended his arm and summoned the weapon to his hand using the Force. He activated its blade as soon as he had the weapon in his hand but the light it produced alerted Sellas to what he was doing and he directed a sustained burst towards the jedi. Under normal circumstances it would have been straight forward for Jayk to simply deflect this attack and even turn it back on his assailant, but given his vulnerable position and the fact that he was being fired at through a wall the best he could manage was to scramble out of the way before a blaster bolt struck the floor right where he had been lying just seconds earlier.

"Tylo." he said, "Are you injured?"

"Ugh." Tylo responded as he crawled further away from the doorway and the continuing volleys of blaster fire coming through the wall, "What happened?"

"The door was rigged with an explosive device that my lightsaber triggered." Jayk said, "Now we have lost the advantage of surprise."

"You don't say." Tylo replied right before another blaster bolt blew a piece out of the wall next to his head, "I think we need a new plan."

But before Jayk could reply there was a roaring sound that obviously came from outside the building that grew in intensity.

"What the hell?" Tylo shouted over the unexpected noise, "Have the cops brought in their tactical teams already?"

"No. That's not the police." Jayk replied as he sensed a powerful and familiar presence in the Force, "It's Brae."

Ignoring the warnings to stay clear from the police speeders, the *Swift Exit* descended outside the apartment block to hover right outside the apartment where Sellas had been firing from.

"Cal, can you hold this position?" Brae asked as she looked through the cockpit canopy at the building.

"Of course I can. Tylo's modifications allow-" Cal responded, his hologram positioned in the lounge as if looking at her in the cockpit.

"Good." Brae interrupted as she got to her feet and rushed from the cockpit. As she ran through the lounge she grabbed hold of her cloak from the chair it was now draped over and put it back on, "And make sure she doesn't go anywhere." she added without looking around.

"Probably not an issue." Cal said as Brae opened the access ramp and the roaring sound of the engines filled the inside of the *Swift Exit*.

At the bottom of the *Swift Exit's* access ramp Brae could see the sudden drop that led to the street below and on the other side of a gap of several metres were the windows of the apartment where Sellas was located. The 'snap-hiss' of her lightsaber igniting was muffled by the sound of the engines as Brae ran headlong down the access ramp and leapt across the gap to crash through what remained of the window, using her arms to shield her face as she landed.

Startled by the sudden arrival of a starship outside the window and then by Brae's unconventional entrance Sellas turned his blaster towards her and fired. Lacking the skill to try and deflect each shot in turn Brae lifted her lightsaber in front of her as she dived out of Sellas's line of fire. At the same time Jayk took advantage of the distraction to leap to his feet and charge into the apartment. Seeing this Sellas turned his attention back towards the door and fired at Jayk but the jedi knight was now perfectly positioned to take full advantage of his skills.

Each blaster bolt was effortlessly deflected aside harmlessly. He chose not to send any back towards Sellas, wanting to take the man alive and instead each shot was directed into a wall. But Sellas did not remain still as Jayk charged towards him, preferring to back away from the jedi. The difficulty he faced here was that there was only so much room available to him before he found himself with his back up against the wall and he could only edge sideways towards the window.

As Jayk advanced, Brae moved around Sellas to try and box him in, holding her lightsaber up in front of her for protection. Seeing what was happening Sellas turned towards Brae and fired a rapid burst towards her but her lightsaber was perfectly positioned to block the attack. However, she was unable to control the direction in which the energy blasts were sent and one of them rebounded straight at Sellas and struck him in his thigh, prompting a cry of pain as his leg gave way. Unfortunately this resulted in him toppling through the window and he was only able to stop himself from plummeting straight down to the ground below by grabbing hold of the window sill with one hand.

"Get him back inside!" Jayk yelled and both he and Brae shut off their lightsabers as they rushed towards the window in an attempt to pull him to safety. But just as they reached out to take hold of his arm Sellas's grip gave way and he fell to the ground below, his screams matched by those from the crowd that looked on horrified as he landed on top of a parked police speeder.

The two jedi watched as police officers rushed in to check on Sellas but they already knew that he was dead, having sensed his sudden passing even from this distance such was the extreme state of his emotion as he fell to his death.

"Hey!" Tylo called out from behind them as he walked into the apartment, "If we're all in here then who the kriff is flying my ship? Did you put that hooker behind the controls?"  
"Don't worry." Brae replied, "Cal's operating the ship. I figured all he has to do is keep it hovering out there and then take it up to the roof for us to get back aboard."  
"Then I suggest we do just that." Jayk said, "Vallani is now our only lead. Assuming that she has not found a way to escape since you left her alone aboard the ship." and Brae smiled.  
"Oh I wouldn't worry about that either." she said.

They found Vallani in the *Swift Exit's* lounge. Since Brae had taken back her cloak the other woman was once again in only her underwear only now she was lay on the floor, hog-tied with plastic cable ties and her mouth taped shut. As the *Swift Exit's* crew entered the room she glared at them.

*Anger.*

"Brae, how do you explain this?" Jayk asked.

"She tried to escape so I stopped her." Brae answered.

"Sounds right to me." Tylo commented as he strode to Vallani and ripped the tape from her mouth.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed, "Untie me!"

"We need to ask you some questions." Jayk told her.

"Are you insane? Do you think I'm going to help you after that bantha cow did this to me?"

"I apologise for the manner of your treatment, but the situation is more serious than you realise. If you will not talk to us as a witness then we will have to take you back to Coruscant as a suspect." Jayk warned her.

"Suspect? Suspect in what?" Vallani said.

"Trafficking Sith artefacts. A very serious offence." Jayk replied.

"Trust me lady, they're serious about this." Tylo added, "You'd be smart to tell them what they want to know."

"She's not going to talk." Brae said, "Let's just get going. She's secure."

"Okay I'll tell you what you want to know. I'm not getting in trouble for that vacc head Thal." Vallani said and Jayk nodded at Tylo who promptly produced a pocket multi-tool and cut through the cable ties that bound her then helped her to her feet.

"Brae give her your cloak." Jayk said and Brae handed the cloak to Vallani who snatched it from her.

"Okay so what do you want to know?" she asked.

"We want to know everything you can tell us about Thal N'Krey." Jayk told her.

"That's easy. He's mynock poodoo crazy." Vallani answered, "He thought that the junk he bought was talking to him."

"Talking to him?" Tylo said and he glanced at Jayk.

"He had medication." Vallani went on, "But he kept refusing to take it because he said it clouded his mind too much."

"If he was so crazy then why work for him?" Brae said and Vallani sighed.

"Look, I was seventeen when I came to the city. I ran away from home and he gave me a job modelling for him."

"Is that all it was?" Tylo said.

"What, you think that just because I took my clothes off for him I had to be sleeping with him as well?"

"It is a legitimate question." Jayk commented.

"Well no I wasn't. Not once in all the years I posed for him did he ever make any advances on me and he could have, I mean for most of them I couldn't have quit because I didn't have the money. When I finally did leave it was for other reasons."

"Other reasons?" Jayk said, "What were they?"

"He was getting worse. He was off his meds pretty much all the time and he was starting to get angry a lot at stupid stuff. Then one day he hit me and I walked out. I had the job at the cantina by then. It came with a room and I thought I could get by." Vallani told him. Then after a brief pause she added, "Of course I found I could make more money by offering the extra service as well and I've okay since then."

"You walked out on Thal to a job just a block down the street and he never came after you?" Brae said, "Why not?"

"I thought he might, but the cantina had security just in case we had problem customers. Anyway it wasn't necessary because he vanished a couple of weeks later. I haven't seen or heard from him since I quit. Now that's all I know. Can I go now?"

"I think we have enough to be going on with." Jayk said, "I will escort you back to the cantina."

"Seriously? She told us hardly anything." Brae responded.

"She told us enough. Our mission was to find out what happened to Thal N'Krey and Vallani does not know. Unless you sensed any deception that I did not." Jayk said.

"No master."

"In that case we are finished here." Jayk said.

When Jayk and Vallani returned to her room the damaged window had already been boarded up and Vallani quickly swapped Brae's cloak for a robe of her own.

"I suppose I should thank you for saving me." she said as she handed him the cloak, "That guy would have tried to kill me sooner or later, right?"

"Possibly." Jayk replied, "However, it is also possible that it was only our presence here that caused him to act."

"Good job it was you that was here then rather than that lawyer."

"Lawyer? What lawyer?" Jayk asked.

"I don't know. Just some lawyer that wanted to know if I'd seen Thal. She came by a few months ago saying that her client wanted to buy some of his work. Thal was long gone by that point so I couldn't tell her anything more than I told you."

Jayk thought about this, wondering whether there was a connection between the lawyer and the gunman.

"You think it's important don't you?" Vallani said.

"Perhaps." Jayk replied. Then just as he was about to turn to leave he paused, reaching into his robes and producing a credit stick, "This should compensate you for your lost earnings tonight." and he tossed it to Vallani. Catching the credit stick she inserted it into a nearby datapad to check how much it was worth and her eyes widened.

"Hey." she called out just as Jayk was about to open the door to leave, "This pays for a lot of my time. Sure you don't want to get what you've paid for?" and Jayk smiled.

"Get the lady home safely?" Tylo asked as Jayk returned to the *Swift Exit*.

"Quite safe." Jayk replied, "I also discovered that a lawyer was asking about Thal some months ago."

"She told you that when you took her home then?" Tylo said.

"Yes, she hadn't realised the significance of the information when we questioned her earlier."

"Well I'd have thought she'd have had a lot more to say than that." Tylo commented, "You were gone a long time."