

# STAR WARS

## DARKNESS RISING

2-03: ARTS & CRAFTS

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Work by Thal N'Krey is put up for auction and the crew of the *Swift Exit* arrive to investigate, only to discover that the works being offered are not what they seem...

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# 1.

*The laser drill cut through the block of metal with ease, allowing Thal N'Krey to turn the solid rectangular block of metal into a three dimensional reproduction of the woman depicted in not only numerous photographs pinned to the walls of his studio but also in various forms in many of the artworks present. The woman herself was not present but the images as well as Thal's own memory of her appearance allowed him to create this likeness of her.*

*Shutting off the drill Thal stepped back to study his creation from a distance and he smiled. "Perfect." he said to himself, "You are perfect."*

The holonet search filter that Dahlis Hebro had set up to monitor art sales across the galaxy had not come up with any results over the past few months since the university professor had set it up. Therefore it came as a surprise to him when he was just about to leave work at the end of the day to find that an alert appeared on his computer screen. Opening the alert message Dahlis read the details and smiled, recognising the opportunity that it represented. He reached for the communication panel on his desk and was just about to place a call when he decided against it. Picking up a datapad instead he copied the information from the alert to the portable device and then ran for the exit, waving away a pair of students who had chosen that moment to try and talk to him.

"Come back another time." he exclaimed as he hurried onwards.

"Where are you going professor?" one called out after him.

"To the jedi temple."

In the midst of its web-like home the arachnid creature known only as 'The Assembler' watched the data feed with interest. It had created a node, a smaller version of itself, to search for any information entered into public databases across the known galaxy regarding Thal N'Krey and now the node had returned some interesting results. The information was patchy, far below the standard to which The Assembler normally held itself in dealing with, but given how rare any mention of the missing kiffar artist was this could still be potentially profitable. There was also the fact that the information was time sensitive. If The Assembler delayed while the node attempted to verify the information further then it could be rendered worthless. The Assembler would have to lower its price for this information, but it still knew how to make a profit from it. "Communicator," The Assembler said to another node that managed the nest's external communications, "I need to speak with the client.

Moment later a hologram of a human woman appeared in front of the assembler.

"You have something for me?" she asked.

"I do. It is fifty thousand credits." The Assembler answered and the woman frowned.

"That's cheap." she said.

"The information is incomplete." The Assembler told her.

"Then why are you offering it to me?" the woman asked.

"It will soon be useless. You must move quickly if you are benefit from it."

"Very well." the woman said, "Fifty thousand." and when the hologram tapped at a datapad an alert flashed up on The Assembler's screen to confirm the transfer of fifty thousand credits to one of its accounts.

"Payment has been received. Transferring the data now." The Assembler said.

"Okay I've got." the woman replied, "I see what you mean. That's not a lot of time to go on. It's a good job I've got someone who still owes me that is perfectly suited to this."

There was a 'snap-hiss' as Jedi Knight Jayk Udra ignited his lightsaber and pointed it at his opponent.

"Ready?" he asked and the teenage girl standing a few metres in front of him smiled.

"Of course." she said and she started to raise her own lightsaber. However, before she could activate the weapon Jayk leapt towards her, knocked it from her hand and held his lightsaber across her throat.

"No Brae, you weren't." he said to his niece and padawan, shutting off his weapon. Then he heard the sound of laughter and glancing around he saw a group of half a dozen padawans clustered together watching him train his own student.

*Anger.*

The reaction came from Brae, who glared at the laughing padawans. Jayk had seen this sort of reaction before. Brae had been an outcast among the padawans before she was assigned to be his personal apprentice and even after that he had witnessed other padawans gathering to mock her.

"Perhaps one of you would like to show my padawan how it is done." he called out, "Or maybe all of you. I trust that it is common knowledge how I deal with those that disrupt private training sessions."

The faces of the padawans fell as they stopped laughing. Jayk was correct when he spoke of the last time other padawans had laughed at Brae during a sparring session with him. On that occasion he had challenged and defeated three of them in short order, "I thought not." he said when there was no response, "Now run along. Your practice session ended fifteen minutes ago and dinner will be being served in the refectory soon. Alternatively I shall chose an opponent."

The padawans turned and hurried from the room while from the other direction came the sound of someone clapping. Unlike everyone else in the room Tylo Kurrast was not a member of the Jedi Order and a powerful blaster pistol hung from his belt instead of a lightsaber.

"Bullying little kids." he said, "Nice." but Jayk ignored him and looked at Brae instead.

"You are progressing well." he told her.

"Really?" she replied, "Couldn't you have said that in front of the others?"

"You should not need their validation." Jayk said, "Remember that not one of them has left this temple on a live assignment yet whereas you have been my padawan for six months. I've seen you use your lightsaber in combat and your skills are improving."

"Jayk!" a woman's voice called out from one of the entrances to the training room and Jayk smiled as he looked towards the new arrival.

"Kat." he said, "What brings you here?"

"You actually. I've just finished cleaning up the firing range after a bunch of padawans that are just as likely to shoot themselves as an opponent and I thought maybe you'd like to grab some dinner with me."

"Unfortunately I will be instructing Brae this evening." Jayk replied, "Our last deployments have caused us to fall behind the schedule I planned."

"Oh that's a pity." Kat said.

"Hey look," Tylo said, "I can take care of Brae tonight."

"I'm seventeen. I don't need a babysitter." Brae commented.

"And I'm not the babysitting type kid. But I'm sure there's plenty I can teach you."

"About smuggling?" Brae asked.

"Knowing how smuggler's operate could be beneficial." Jayk said and he turned back to Kat, smiling, "It seems I have just become available." he said.

"Great." she responded, "Then let's go. There's this little place over by the senate building I've been dying to try out."

The *Swift Exit* was a YT-700 class freighter that Tylo had used for smuggling. Now it served as the transport for Jayk and Brae and was their home, as well as Tylo's away from the temple. Taking advantage of the Jedi Order taking on responsibility for the upkeep of the vessel Tylo had outfitted the ship with several luxuries that he could not have afforded otherwise and as soon as Tylo entered the lounge he activated the large video screen mounted on one of the walls and then sat down.

"I thought you were supposed to be teaching me about smuggling." Brae commented.

"I am." Tylo replied, "Take a seat and I'll show you how smuggler's relax."

Brae frowned as she sat down beside Tylo.

"If Jayk finds out-" she began but Tylo held up his hand for her to stop.

"Your uncle is out enjoying himself." he interrupted, "Why shouldn't you? Trust me, he'll be in a good mood tomorrow."

"Why?" Brae asked.

"Cal, are you listening?" Tylo called out and the hologram of a man in jedi robes appeared in the middle of the lounge, projected from the crystalline cube on a shelf. Cal Udra had been a jedi knight who lived almost four thousand years earlier and now the holocron that he had created and placed a virtual recreation of

"Of course." Cal said, "I'm always here. But where's Jayk?"

"Jayk got lucky. So it's just us tonight." Tylo replied.

"What do you mean 'got lucky'?" Brae asked.

"Oh come on kid," Tylo exclaimed, "you saw that woman he left with."

"Jedi Maran? But she and Uncle Jayk have been friends for years." Brae said and Tylo smiled.

"Yeah, she looked real friendly." he said. Then he looked at Cal's hologram, "Are all young jedi so naïve?" he asked.

"It's all changed since my day. I had a wife, remember?" Cal answered.

"Anyway, I've got a lesson to teach." Tylo said, reaching for the display screen's remote control, "Now let's see what movies the jedi temple library has. Ah yes, this will do. The Smuggler King. Very educational."

"I think not." Cal said.

"Why not? It may be about six thousand years old but it's a classic tale of smuggling and Brae could learn a lot from it." Tylo responded.

"And it also has the infamous slave girl scene." Cal pointed out, "The original me watched it several times. Jayk may accept you spending the evening showing Brae movies about smugglers but I don't think he'll be

impressed if you show her that.”

“Oh yeah.” Tylo commented. “Maybe there's something more suitable.”

“Tylo Kurrast!” a deep voice suddenly called out from outside the *Swift Exit* and he and Brae heard the sound of armoured feet walking up the ship's access ramp. The pair of them hurried to the door to the hold and looked through just in time to see a pair of temple guardians appear at the top of the ramp. Between them stood Dahlis, “This man wishes to speak with you.” one of the guardians said.

“Uh, sure. I know him.” Tylo replied and the guardians promptly turned around and walked back down the ramp, “Come on through professor.” Tylo said and as they all sat down in the lounge he added “So why do you want to speak to me?”

“Actually I asked to see Jayk.” Dahlis answered, “But apparently he left the temple not long ago.”

“Yeah, he has a date.” Tylo said and Dahlis frowned.

“But the jedi-” he began.

“It's complicated.” Tylo interrupted.

“Have you found more artwork by Thal N'Krey?” Brae asked and Dahlis smiled.

“Yes, I think so. Several pieces in fact. They all came up for auction together. But we need to hurry.”

“Why?” Brae asked.

“Because they were listed as last minute additions. The auction takes place in-” and Dahlis quickly looked at the time readout on his datapad, “in twenty hours.”

“Can't we just call the people running the auction and get them to halt the sale?” Brae suggested.

“Trust me kid, that's the sort of thing that lawyers live for.” Tylo responded.

“Tylo's correct. Unless we can show that the works are contraband, fake or stolen then the owner has every right to sell them and we can't do that from Coruscant. Our only option is to make it there in time to inspect them ourselves.”

“Where is it?” Tylo asked.

“Chandрила. The auction is being held in a gallery in the capital Hanna City.”

“Stang.” Tylo hissed, “That doesn't give us a lot of time to get there.” then he groaned.

“What's wrong?” Brae asked.

“Jayk. We're going to have to interrupt his date.”

“Stop calling it a date.” Brae said.

“Okay.” Tylo replied, “You call him and find out where he is. We'll have to pick him up if we're to be in with a chance of getting to Chandрила in time.” then he looked at Dahlis, “I'm guessing you're coming too?” he asked and Dahlis nodded.

“You'll need me to authenticate the artworks.” Dahlis replied.

“Fine, take a seat. We're leaving now.” Tylo told him.

## 2.

"Your friend's sense of timing is dreadful." Kat said as she and Jayk stood outside the restaurant they had only just reached when Brae contacted Jayk to tell him of Dahlis' discovery.

"I'd invite you to come with us." Jayk replied, "But-

"But you know the Order would go berserk if I just wandered off to Chandrila when I've got students to teach." Kat interrupted and Jayk smiled just as the *Swift Exit* descended above them, causing passers by in the large pedestrian area to scatter before the blast from the vessel's repulsorlift engines knocked them over. Several called out, hurling insults at the ship about regulations regarding air traffic in the area even though they knew that the pilot would not be able to hear them.

The *Swift Exit's* access ramp lowered while the ship was still in the air and Jayk saw Brae standing at the top, waiting for him.

"Well my ride is here." he said to Kat and she smiled before kissing him on the cheek.

"Good luck." she said and then Jayk sprinted towards the *Swift Exit* and leapt into the air and landed on the end of the access ramp.

"Sorry to interrupt your meal master." Brae said as he walked up the ramp and it closed behind him.

"That is unimportant." Jayk replied before he reached out for the intercom, "Tylo I'm aboard. Take us to Chandrila." he said.

"Copy that. Moving off now." Tylo responded and then the Jedi felt the ship start to move.

"I'm going to join Tylo in the cockpit." Jayk told Brae, "I suggest you keep Dahlis company until we make the jump to hyperspace."

Heading through the lounge to the cockpit Jayk nodded at Dahlis as he walked past. Then as he entered the cockpit he closed the hatch behind him before sitting down beside Tylo.

"This had better be good." he said.

"What did Brae tell you?" Tylo asked.

"Only that we had to go to Chandrila straight away and you were coming to pick me up." Jayk answered.

"Dahlis has found a bunch of artworks by Thal N'Krey up for auction." Tylo told him, "We've got less than a day to go and get them."

Jayk sighed.

"I suppose that counts." he said.

"Sorry about your date by the way." Tylo added just as he engaged the *Swift Exit's* hyperdrive and the ship jumped into hyperspace.

Chandrila was a world far less crowded than the Republic capital of Coruscant and from space there were large patches of green as well as surface water visible. With a transponder identifying it as a vessel operated by the Jedi Order, the *Swift Exit* was given immediate clearance to enter the planet's atmosphere and join the capital's flight pattern.

"Do you have the gallery's location?" Dahlis asked from the seat behind Tylo and he nodded.

"Yeah, I looked it up when I was plotting the jump here. I also saw that they have a private landing facility that ought to speed things up." he responded.

"There it is." Jayk added, pointing through the canopy to a large building covered in banners advertising the gallery.

"Okay hold on. We're going in." Tylo said and he performed a tight turn that put the *Swift Exit* into a steep dive towards the gallery below. The landing area was in a central courtyard and there were already several luxury shuttles present. However, there were still several vacant landing pads and Tylo set the *Swift Exit* down on one of these.

All four of the ship's occupants hurried down the access ramp as soon as it opened and they were greeted by a group of gallery staff rushing towards them. Most of them wore the uniforms of security guards and were armed with telescopic batons that when not deployed could be fit into a pocket without being obvious. Now though the guards had extended their batons, clearly wishing to be prepared for trouble.

"This is unacceptable!" the only staff member not in a security uniform called out. This man wore a more formal suit and a badge that simply said 'Senior Curator', "Get that ship out of-

"This is Jedi business." Jayk responded sternly and the gallery staff came to a sudden halt.

"Perhaps we should have called ahead after all." Tylo muttered.

"I told you so." Brae whispered back.

"We need to inspect three of the lots in today's auction." Dahlis said and he took out his datapad and handed it over to the curator. Looking at the device the man frowned.

"I'm afraid that you're too late." he replied, "These lots have all been sold already."



"Have they been removed from the premises?" Jayk asked.

"No. But payment has been made and the items have been packed. I'm afraid I can't authorise you to open the shipping containers. Only the new owners can do that."

"And are they on the premises?" Jayk asked.

"One of them is, yes. The other two items were both purchased by a remote bidder." the curator said.

"Then take us to the one who is around and tell someone to get hold of the other one." Jayk said, "Because until my expert here has authenticated all three of those works of art, none of them are going anywhere."

"Of course master jedi. Please come with me." the curator said and he turned around and started to walk back towards the nearest gallery entrance. Behind him the guards hesitated, unsure about whether they needed to put their batons away.

Motion sensors.

Pressure plates.

Magnetic anomaly registers.

Thermal imagers.

The gallery storage section was fitted with a wide variety of security devices to prevent anyone from entering without authorisation. But the section's weakness lay in that its security measures were all based around preventing someone from gaining entry into it. Once someone was inside they had almost free reign to move about as they wished and the easiest way of getting an individual inside was to have the museum staff take that individual in themselves.

Of course there was no way that the staff would just let Mara Tosk, one of the galaxy's finest thieves, into the storage section where millions of credits worth of art treasures were kept so she needed to find another way in. This was achieved by the simple method of having herself packed inside a container and then delivered to the gallery.

Entering the gallery in this manner was not Mara's first choice. Ordinarily she would have preferred to spend the necessary time surveying the security measures and how to defeat them rather than using this much cruder and far less comfortable method. To avoid arousing suspicion that the contents of the crate Mara was packed inside were anything other than carefully packed artworks intended to be appraised for auction the crate needed to be lined with a thick layer of foam that held her in place, giving her no opportunity to flex her arms or legs to relieve any discomfort brought about by her immobility. The structure of the crate also needed to be carefully considered. There were no guarantees about how it would be stored inside the gallery and though it was highly unlikely that anything heavy would be stacked on top of it, there was every chance that it would be placed on a shelf that prevented the lid from being lifted off. Therefore, the crate had to be built as six detachable panels connected to a solid frame, all of which would be released and allowed to fall away when Mara triggered the mechanism from inside using a handheld control unit. Tiny sensors built into the frame were connected to a set of data goggles that she wore so that she would know exactly when it was safe to do this. Of course, there was still the chance that the crate would be placed somewhere that it would be totally blocked in and none of the panels would detach, potentially leaving Mara trapped inside the crate until the oxygen in the cylinder she was using to breathe ran out. Mara also knew that this supply would last long enough that she would inevitably spend her final hours lying uncomfortably in her own waste in what amounted to a well padded coffin.

Fortunately for Mara the gallery staff directed the loading droid that brought the crate from the delivery bay to the storage area to place it on top of an unused bench before they all departed. Mara waited, counting off seconds in her head until she was satisfied that no-one was about to return to the room she had been left in and then she pressed the button she held in one hand to release the panels. As soon as she did this all four of the sides dropped away and she was able to push off the top of the crate before ripping the oxygen mask from her face.

Quickly she climbed down from the bench and took out her datapad, calling up the auction inventory that she had been able to access from the gallery's own publicly online data. This provided her with three lot numbers for the artefacts she had been sent to acquire and she swiftly found all three of them already packed up and ready to be sent out to their new owners. One of the items was a statue and as such the container it was packed in was roughly cubical. On the other hand the remaining two pieces were both flat paintings and the size of their containers were dictated by the frames they had been placed in. Fortunately for Mara her instructions did not require her to steal the frames at all, the only thing her employer's end customer was interested in were the paintings themselves. Acting quickly Mara drew a knife and used it pry open the two cases containing the paintings and she set them down beside one another on the floor before starting to remove them from their frames.

### 3.

"Our vault is quite secure." the curator said as he led his unexpected guests towards the gallery's storage section and he paused in front of the heavily armoured blast door that blocked their way, "As you can see, no-one can get inside without a pass." he added, removing his identity card from his tunic and holding it up to a scanner beside the door.

"Access granted." a computerised voice said and then the door slid open to reveal Mara kneeling in front of two broken picture frames as she rolled up the paintings that they had held.

"Mara!" Tylo exclaimed, recognising her from his previous encounters and he reached for his blaster.

"No blasters!" the curator yelled, envisioning the damage that even a single stray shot could cause inside a room filled with valuable artworks. Fortunately he had no need to worry and both Jayk and Brae drew their lightsabers, igniting them in unison.

Startled by the sudden arrival of the jedi, Mara leapt up with the two paintings in her hand and ran further into the storage section, disappearing behind a shelf.

Jayk and Brae ran after her while Tylo advanced more slowly, his blaster still in his hand despite the curator's warning. Meanwhile Dahlis and the curator stood by the doorway while the curator shouted into a comlink for the security guards he had dismissed after re-entering the gallery to come to the storage section as quickly as possible. Mara knew that she could not evade the two jedi and Tylo forever and so she did the only thing that she could think of to try and slow them down.

She gave them something more important than her to worry about.

Though well built and stable the shelves on which many of the treasures contained within the storage section were not built to withstand a dedicated attack and Mara paused just long enough to draw her compact hold out blaster and then she fired two shots that targeted the brackets holding the shelf to the floor on her side. Then she jumped into the air and threw herself at the shelf.

*Danger.*

Both Jayk and Brae sensed the risk to themselves even before they heard the sound of Mara impacting against the far side of the shelf they were chasing her around.

"Tylo look out!" Brae yelled just as the crashing sound echoed around the room.

"No!" the curator exclaimed as the shelf began to tip towards the jedi. Meanwhile Tylo froze and gasped as he looked up at the shelf now coming down towards him. But then he felt something hit him and he was knocked back as Brae pushed him out of the way and the pair rolled across the floor together while Jayk extended a hand towards the shelf and reached out through the Force to try and push it back into place. The difficulty was that there were a great many objects on the shelves that he did not want to see coming crashing down to the floor and breaking and so he had to try and spread his use of the Force across the entire set of shelves rather than being able to focus on just one section.

With both jedi distracted Mara made a dash for the exit where she effortlessly knocked both Dahlis and the curator out of her way before running off down the corridor behind them. A guard appeared ahead of her and reached into his pocket to draw his baton but before he could deploy the weapon Mara simply shot him.

Then she fired again, this time aiming for a window that exploded outwards when the energy blast struck the glass and she leapt through what remained of it into the gallery grounds.

"I need a pick up!" she shouted into her comlink and from overhead an airspeeder descended, coming to a halt and hovering about a metre above the ground as a hatch was thrown open to allow her to climb aboard, "Go!" she shouted at the pilot and she looked back towards the gallery to see Jayk and Brae rushing towards the speeder while Tylo was still climbing through the broken window behind them, "Go now!"

The engines of the airspeeder roared and the vehicle rose back into the sky, taking with it Mara and the two paintings while on the ground below Jayk and Brae could only watch.

"Did you see its registration markings?" Brae asked, looking at Jayk.

"No, they were deliberately obscured." Jayk responded, "We will need to find some other means of tracking where she has gone. But in the meantime perhaps we should return to the gallery and see what Professor Hebro has to say."

"But Mara escaped with the paintings." Brae pointed out.

"Only two of the lots in the auction were paintings Brae, the third was described as a statue that is approximately fifty centimetres tall and wide. I did not notice her carrying such an object. Did you?"

"No master." Brae replied and then the two jedi walked back toward the gallery, encountering Tylo when they were approximately half way there.

"Where are you going?" he asked, "Mara went that way." and he pointed in the direction taken by the airspeeder.

"Yes, but the man who can tell us what she may have stolen is back that way." Jayk replied, pointing back



towards the gallery.

As soon as the purchaser of the sculpture was contacted by the gallery permission was obtained for the Jedi to inspect it and while the local police began to cordon off the area the container was opened for inspection. "I know that face." Tylo said when he saw the metal carving of a partially clothed humanoid female inside the container.

"Vallani Mellet." Jayk agreed, nodding at the same time. Vallani had been a regular model for Thal N'Krey and although she was human he sometimes depicted her as a member of other species depending on the nature of the art he was producing. On this occasion however, he had left her as human though, the only obvious Sith influence in this piece being the carved crown on her head that bore markings reminiscent of the ancient Sith alphabet. Then he frowned, "The eyes are wrong though." he added.

"Really?" Tylo said, "After how close the pair of you got that's what you notice?"

"We were not close." Jayk replied.

"Of course not. Your relationship was purely a business one." Tylo said. Then he looked at Brae, "We both know what business she was in of course." he said to her.

"I would have expected Thal to produce a better likeness of his model." Jayk commented, ignoring the obvious barb about Vallani having been a prostitute when they encountered her.

"Thal N'Krey would have produced a better likeness." Dahlis said suddenly as he studied the sculpture closely, "This is a fake."

"Impossible!" the curator exclaimed from close by, "Every item put on display or up for auction authenticated by an expert."

"When it comes to Thal N'Krey, Professor Hebro is the best expert you are likely to find." Jayk told him before looking at Dahlis, "What makes you say that?"

"Well obviously the facial features of the model are wrong as you pointed out. Everything we know about Thal indicates that he was a perfectionist when it came to his art."

"According to her he was crazy." Tylo said, pointing at the sculpture in reference to Vallani herself.

"Perhaps," Dahlis replied, "but all of the artwork produced by him was made to an exacting standard even if it never attracted a great deal of interest."

"You must be mistaken." the curator said, shaking his head, "it cannot possibly be fake."

"How do you know that it is?" Jayk asked and Dahlis smiled then took a pen from his pocket that he used to point out a detail on the statue.

"Do you see this? It's a mould line." he said, "This was cast, not carved and it was cast by someone willing to sell something with a glaring imperfection. The moulding process also probably explains the distorted features."

"But shouldn't that have been noticed if it was properly inspected?" Brae asked.

"Of course it would. We have the highest standards when it comes to authentication." the curator said angrily.

"And yet here we are," Tylo commented, "all looking at a fake."

"Where did this piece originate from?" Jayk asked the curator and the man took out his datapad and called up the records of the statue.

"Ah, here we are. It and the other two items were procured by one of our agents. Then all three were passed on to one of our experts for authentication." he said.

"And how was the expert selected for authentication?" Jayk asked.

"We have a group of experts in different fields that we can draw upon depending on the nature of the work in question. The being who authenticated this piece as well as the others is among the best in the galaxy when it comes to Thal N'Krey. He has studied the artist closely for several years now." the curator said.

"Well I think it's obvious what's happened here then." Jayk said.

"Of course, someone has switched the genuine statue for a fake. As that woman was probably intending to do with the two paintings she stole." the curator said.

"Not quite." Tylo said and he looked at Brae, "Figured it out yet kid?" he asked and she smiled.

"The expert who authenticated the fakes is the one who created them." she said.

"My thoughts exactly." Jayk added, "He would have known that the gallery would go to him to authenticate anything supposedly created by Thal so he went through an agent to hide his identity."

"There could have been another party involved as well if the agent wasn't in on it." Tylo pointed out.

"So where do we start?" Brae asked.

"With the one being we know for certain has to be crooked. The so-called expert who authenticated the items." Jayk said, "If he created this copy then maybe he's got the original in his possession and if he has one piece of work by Thal then he could have more, including some that are genuine Sith artefacts."

## 4.

"Mara, tell me you brought me something good." Morton Crayne, the leader of the gang that Mara was a member of said when she walked into the building they were using as a temporary headquarters while on Chandrila. The air speeder had been abandoned several kilometres away and she and the pilot had ridden the rest of the way on speeder bikes to avoid being followed directly back here.

"Still trying to impress your way into Rylee's bed Morton?" Mara asked with a smile before she tossed a plastic tube towards him. Morton caught the tube and from inside it he slid the two rolled up paintings Mara had stolen from the gallery and laid them out on a nearby table.

"I got the paintings but the statue is still at the gallery. A pair of jedi walked right in on me while I was taking these and I was lucky to get away them. It was the same two that have been bothering us for the past few months and that moof milker Kurrast was with them as well."

"They'll do for now." he said, "Rylee is going to love these. We'll figure out a way of getting the statue later but I need to let her know we have these immediately." and taking the paintings with him he walked over to where a portable holonet transceiver had been set up and he stood on the scanning platform. Moments later a hologram of the same woman that The Assembler had sold the information about the auction to materialised in front of him.

"Morton." she said, frowning.

"What's wrong?" Morton responded, "Wait no, don't tell me because I've got something that's guaranteed to make your day better." and he held up a painting in each hand, grinning as he let them hang down so that his client could see them both clearly.

"Morton I've just heard from my source." Rylee said, "He told me all about how news of the robbery at the gallery is all over law enforcement networks across half the core thanks to your agent killing that guard."

"It was unavoidable." Morton replied, "He got in the way of her escape. It's not like we've not killed anyone before to get what you wanted now is it? Mara may not have been able to grab the statue yet but it's only a matter of time I assure you."

"Morton you nerf herder they're all fakes." Rylee said and Morton's jaw dropped.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that whoever painted those pictures, it sure as hell wasn't Thal N'Krey. The jedi have confirmed that the statue is fake and I'm betting those things are as well."

"Stang." Morton hissed, realising that despite having acquired two out of the three items his client had demanded he had achieved nothing in the long run.

"I'm sending you a datafile." Rylee added, "It lists all of the experts that the gallery uses to authenticate what they sell and display. Someone on that list must have seen these things and if they were even half way competent then they should have figured out that they were bogus. Either someone paid them off or they had a hand in this scam. Either way you need to find out."

"What's the point if they're fake?" Morton replied.

"Because you can't create a decent fake without seeing the real thing." Mara commented from behind Morton and he winced for not seeing the obvious.

"Find out where the originals are." Rylee told him, "Or at least find me someone that can tell me. Now don't contact me again until you've got something that's worth my time." and then the hologram disappeared.

In a room located in a distant solar system Rylee became aware of another presence in the room as she shut off the holonet transceiver.

"You heard?" she asked and the armoured figure nodded.

"Of course I did. You know I could probably grab that expert far more efficiently than that nerf herder. You know he's just trying to get you into bed."

Rylee snarled.

"As if I'd demean myself that much." she said, "But no, I'm not going to ask you or your men to act. That would risk drawing too much attention to us and I'd never be forgiven for that. We all answer to someone after all. Even you."

"So how did it go?" Cal asked as the others returned to the *Swift Exit* bearing the fake statue.

"The artwork is fake." Jayk replied.

"But we did run into an old friend." Tylo added.

"Your friend maybe." Brae muttered. Then she looked at Cal and added, "It was that thief Mara."

"I see you brought back a souvenir though." Cal said.

"This is the fake statue." Dahlis told him, "Unfortunately the two paintings were stolen before they could be

secured.”

“We're working on the theory that the expert used to authenticate the artwork supposedly by Thal N'Krey created this copy from an original statue.” Jayk said, “The gallery gave us his identity but we need you to help us dig into his background some more.”

“Sure, what are you looking for?” Cal asked.

“I'd like to know if he has had any known contact with Thal. He is supposed to be an expert in his work so there could be a personal connection. Also see what you can find out about unusual travel or financial transactions.” Jayk answered.

“Sounds straight forward enough.” Cal replied.

“Good, send us the results of your search as soon as you have them.” Jayk said.

“Where are you going?” Cal said.

“To see this expert. We'll keep him under surveillance until you tell us what you've found.”

“Why don't we just wait here?” Dahlis suggested.

“Because Mara might know that she's stolen a pair of forgeries as well.” Tylo pointed out, “In which case she'll be trying to track down the source for the same reason we are. We can't take the chance that'll she'll get there before us.”

“We'll operate in pairs.” Jayk said, “Tylo and I will take the close surveillance role. Dahlis, we'll need you to inspect anything we find related to Thal. Brae, I want you to protect him.”

“Yes master.” Brae responded.

“Protect me? Is this going to be dangerous?” Dahlis asked, concerned.

“Not with her looking after you.” Tylo told him and Brae smiled.

“Thank you.” she said.

“Hey no problem. I'd let you watch my back any day.” Tylo said and Brae snorted.

“You can watch mine more like.” she replied and Tylo smiled, looking at Jayk.

“She's learning.” he said.

“Yes. But what?” Jayk commented.

The expert contracted by the gallery to authenticate art related to Thal N'Krey ran a much smaller art studio of his own located called Falling Star Artistry in another district of the planetary capital. According to the information supplied he was a sullustan called Tal Nen and had worked with the gallery for more than a decade as well as having some of his own work occasionally sold there. Leaving Brae and Dahlis in a nearby cantina, Jayk and Tylo approached the building this was in and calmly walked all the way around it to see how many obvious ways in and out there were. In addition to the obvious entrance on the street at the front of the building Jayk and Tylo found a smaller doorway to the rear that looked intended for deliveries and waste disposal but there was no sign of any activity on this side of the building so they made their way back around to the front where they rather unexpectedly found customers all leaving the studio at the same time after which the lightly armoured shutters built into the front of each unit in the row began to lower.

“I've got a bad feeling about this.” Tylo said and Jayk nodded.

“Me too.” he said and then he reached out to tap one of the ejected customers on the arm as she came past him, “Excuse me,” he said, “but I couldn't help but notice you and everyone else coming out of the art gallery. My servant and I were just on our way there. Is something wrong?”

“I don't know.” the woman responded, “But things were fine until the owner received an urgent call and then he announced that the gallery was closing down for several days and asked everyone to leave.”

“Someone tipped him off.” Tylo said.

“He won't be leaving via the front door.” Jayk added and the two men spun around and ran back around to the rear of the building, leaving the confused woman staring after them. However, as the rear entrance came into view the two men saw a speeder already racing away at high speed with a sullustan sat in the back.

“Stang!” Tylo hissed, “We just missed him.”

“Brae do you read me?” Jayk said into his comlink.

“Yes master.” she replied, “Have you located Tal?”

“He is escaping via speeder.” Jayk said, “Tylo and I will attempt to track it down. I want you and Dahlis to investigate his premises. I suggest you make entry through the back door. It is out of sight from the street and we have observed Tal leaving. That should be sufficient justification.”

“Yes master, we are on our way.” Brae responded before Jayk put his comlink away. Then Jayk looked at Tylo.

“We need to get back to the *Swift Exit*.” he said, “We may be able to track Tal from there.”

Brae and Dahlis located the back door to the studio not long after Jayk and Tylo had left.

“How are we supposed to get in without a key?” Dahlis asked and Brae smiled at him.

“I've got a key.” she told him and then there was a 'snap-hiss' as she ignited her lightsaber and with a single swing of the weapon she sliced through the door's locking mechanism, causing it to slide upwards. Brae then

paused, shutting off her lightsaber as she waited to see whether an alarm would sound, "Looks like he left without setting any security." she said and she stepped through the open doorway. Inside the building Brae found herself in a small storage room that in turn led to the gallery at the front of the building and it was here that she went first.

"I see why so little of his work was shown in the planetary gallery." Dahlis said as he followed her.

"So this isn't good then?" Brae asked, looking around at the art on display in the compact gallery.

"It is passable." Dahlis answered, "But it is also entirely derivative. Look, that piece there is obviously attempting to mimic the style of the bothan artist Doorst Kal'Dey. Over there is something that is more similar to Harat Kenn."

"I'll take your word for it." Brae said, "But if they're good then why aren't these?"

"Because they tell nothing about the artist himself." Dahlis explained, "Art should have passion and this is almost entirely lacking in it."

"Nothing here copied from Thal N'Krey though?" Brae said and Dahlis looked around quickly before he responded.

"No, Thal's work focused on the Sith and I don't see anything like that here. Perhaps we should check upstairs?" he said.

"Sure, the stairs are back that way." Brae said, looking back towards the storage room.

"After you." Dahlis responded and he stepped aside to allow Brae to go in front of him.

The stairs were located just inside the storage room as Brae re-entered the room and she climbed them cautiously until she reached the door at the top. This proved to be unlocked and as soon as Brae pressed the control panel beside it the door slid open to reveal Tal's workshop.

Inside this were numerous pieces of art waiting to go on display in the gallery downstairs as well as some that were only partially complete. But more interesting than that to Brae was the section of the workshop that appeared dedicated to the Sith. Here there were images pinned to the walls of artefacts and places associated with the ancient species as well as a row of four identical copies of the statue Brae had first seen in the planetary gallery.

"Now this is familiar. I guess this proves that Tal was the source of the fake in the gallery." she said as she approached these. Then she looked around at Dahlis, "So can you tell me which one is real?" she asked.

"None of them would be my guess." he answered as he walked right up to the statues and inspected them more closely, "Yes, all of these are cast rather than carved. You can see mould lines on all of them."

"Great. Any sign of the mould itself?" Brae said.

"I don't think so. That is probably more valuable than these though." Dahlis said and he indicated the statues, "With it he can make more quite easily."

"There's more than just the statues here." Brae commented when she then found several painting leant one in front of the other against a wall and she started to browse through them, finding that all were depictions of figures wielding red lightsabers. Nearby there stood an easel on which there was an incomplete painting depicting a humanoid with red skin just like that possessed by the ancient Sith.

"Let me see." Dahlis said and he picked up the first of the paintings and placed it flat on a table that had a bright light mounted above it, "Yes, just as I thought." he said as he inspected the paintwork through a magnifier he took from his pocket, "Fake."

"How can you tell?" Brae asked.

"Because Thal always used a particular range of colours for lightsaber blades that do not match those used for this picture." Dahlis explained.

"Isn't that a bit sloppy?" Brae said.

"Perhaps." Dahlis agreed, "But remember that Thal was a kiffar, a near human with a range of vision almost identical to you or I. On the other hand Tal Nen is sullustan and his species has a range of vision just different enough that he could not accurately reproduce the effect Thal's painting created. Even that difference is only perceptible to someone who knows exactly where to look though. I have little doubt that most collectors would fail to notice any difference."

"So what do you want to do with all of this?" Brae said, looking around at the art forgeries.

"They will all need to be inspected to confirm that they are fakes. But after that they will be destroyed." Dahlis said and Brae sighed, "The photographs on the walls may be of more interest, however." he added, looking up at the images pinned above the area used to produce imitations of Thal's artwork, "Obviously he was able to record these images of Thal's original work at some point in the past."

"I suppose it's better than nothing." Brae said, "I just wish we'd found something produced by Thal himself. I hope Uncle Jayk and Tylo are having more luck."

Rushing aboard the *Swift Exit*, Jayk grabbed hold of Cal's holocron and along with Tylo he ran into the cockpit before setting the crystalline cube down.

"What's going on?" Cal said, his hologram materialising as Tylo hurriedly prepared the ship for take off.

"We're about to engage in a pursuit." Jayk replied, "Tal was leaving in a speeder when we arrived."

"We'd have caught him if we'd just gone straight in through the back door." Tylo commented.

"Probably." Jayk agreed, "But now we're in this situation we need to find his speeder."

"What do you need me for?" Cal asked.

"You can access the local computer networks." Jayk replied, "I need access to traffic cameras to locate a pale brown THX series SoroSuub landspeeder. It's a taxi with serial number one-one-three-eight."

"Got it." Cal said just as the Swift Exit roared into the air, "Searching the local system now."

"You know it may also be good to know where he might be heading." Tylo commented, "If he changes vehicles we'll lose him."

"Ah, now there I may be able to help you." Cal said, "You asked me to look into Tal's dealings so I did. It seems that his business makes regular payments to a travel company and looking at their details I'm guessing that this is to keep a room open in one of their hotels. My guess is that he'll head there."

"Makes sense." Jayk said, "He wouldn't need to go home to collect anything because he could keep spare things at the hotel where his name isn't directly registered."

"So are we keeping on with trying to find that speeder?" Tylo asked and Jayk paused to consider this.

"No." he replied, "Cal can keep searching traffic cameras for it, but we'll head straight for the hotel. Are there any landing facilities nearby?"

"As it happens there's a private starport just down the road." Cal told him.

"Kind of useful for a quick getaway off world." Tylo commented and Jayk nodded.

"We'll alert traffic control to deny all launch permissions from there until further notice. Then we'll head straight to the hotel and see if we can head Tal Nen off before he can escape."

## 5.

Morten took Mara and four of his men to the places of work of each name on the list of art experts used to authenticate art for the gallery. Dressed in smart clothing to make them appear as if they belonged, Morten and Mara would enter the premises and attempt to discover whether the expert was the one consulted by the gallery over the supposed works by Thal N'Krey. The first two of these locations resulted in failure, the experts present both dismissing Thal as a lesser known artist that they had rarely come across. Tal Nen's name was third on the list, however and the group headed for his studio next.

"Uh-oh." Mara commented as the speeder they were travelling in turned into the street and she saw that the studio front had its shutters lowered, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"I'll drop you here." Morten said, pulling the speeder over to the side of the road so that Mara could get out safely, "Check out what's going on and report in."

Nodding, Mara got out of the speeder and crossed over the road towards the studio. Initially she walked past the front of the studio so that she could get a better look at them and through small gaps between the metal plates she noticed that the lights inside were switched on, suggesting that there was someone present. With this in mind she proceeded to circle around the back of the building and searched for the rear entrance she guessed had to exist. However, when she turned into the narrow street that ran along the back of the building she saw a police speeder and a plain repulsortruck parked outside the studio. Ducking back around the corner before she was seen by the uniformed police officer standing guard outside the studio door she then peered around the corner to watch what was happening. Soon she was rewarded by the sight of four men in plain clothing carrying out paintings that they loaded into the truck while behind them first Brae and then Dahlis appeared.

"Morten." she said softly into her comlink, "This is the place alright but we're too late, the jedi are already here."

"Do they have the sullustan?" Morten asked in response.

"I don't think so. There's a cop speeder here as well as a truck that paintings are being loaded into but there's no sign of the sullustan himself. In fact I can only see one of the jedi, the younger one. She's with some older guy with dark skin that I recognise from the planetary gallery. He must be the jedi's expert."

"Okay stay there and keep watch on them. I need to know whether any of the others make an appearance." Morten ordered.

"Sure, what will you be doing?" Mara said.

"I'm going to check in with the client. Maybe her source can tell us whether or not the jedi are already holding Tal Nen somewhere else."

The hotel that Tal Nen maintained a room at was not intended for lengthy stays by tourists. Instead it offered basic accommodation and amenities to guests who were generally staying only until they could catch a flight from the nearby starport or while they conducted business here after arriving at it. Entering through the front door Jayk and Tylo found that the hotel also kept costs down by using droids almost exclusively for its staff. There were load carrying droids lined up in the main lobby ready to take luggage to guests' rooms, serving droids on hand to deliver refreshments and protocol droids being the reception desk that the two men walked up to.

"Weapons are prohibited as a condition of staying here gentle beings." the droid on the other side of the desk announced when it registered the heavy blaster pistol, holstered on Tylo's leg.

"This is jedi business." Jayk announced, moving his cloak aside to reveal his lightsaber and then he handed over an identity card.

"Your identity is confirmed Jedi Udra." the droid said, "How may I assist you?"

"We need access to a room that is being held under the business account of Falling Star Artistry." Jayk said.

"Understood. The room is not currently in use."

"We know that." Tylo commented, "We don't care."

"We need to see the room itself." Jayk added, "We believe that it may be being used to store contraband goods."

"Understood." the droid replied, "Storage of contraband violates the terms of use agreement. The room is number three-zero-four. Do you require directions?" and it held out an electronic key.

"No thank you, we'll figure it out ourselves." Jayk said as he took the key and he was just about to turn to leave the reception area when something else occurred to him, "Oh yes, we also have reason to believe that the account holder may arrive soon. When he does he is to be allowed to proceed without being told about our presence here but you are to alert us as soon as possible. We may also be met here by another jedi, a young female and an older civilian advisor. When they arrive send them straight to us. Do you understand

that?"

"Of course master jedi. Your instruction has been uploaded to all staff. You will be contacted using the room communication system should the account holder check in." the droid answered and Jayk nodded before he and Tylo headed for the nearby turbolifts, taking one up to the third floor where they followed sign on the walls to the room they were looking for. Jayk then presented the key to the lock panel beside the door and it slid open.

"Looks like the tin can at reception was right." Tylo commented as he and Jayk entered the room, "No-one's home." and then Jayk gasped, "What's wrong?" Tylo asked.

"Tal Nen may not be here, but he's left something valuable." Jayk replied and he marched up to one of the closets and opened it with the same key that had allowed them access to the room. As soon as the door slid open it revealed what appeared to be the original of the statue they had seen at the planetary gallery and that Brae and Dahlis had then seen multiple copies of in Tal Nan's studio. There were also four tubes that obviously had paintings rolled up inside them but none of these were of interest to Jayk. Instead he reached down for a small featureless case that he opened to reveal a small pendent.

"This is a lightsaber crystal." Jayk said as he held up the pendent to the light and focused on the sliver of red crystal dangling from the pendent, "A Sith lightsaber crystal."

"No prizes for guessing who Tal Nen got that from." Tylo commented right before the room's communicator sounded and he walked over to activate it, "Yes?" he asked.

"Tal Nen has just checked in at reception. You requested to be informed." an automated voice told him and Tylo hung up quickly.

"Jayk, we're going to have company." he called out.

"Quick, shut the door." Jayk said and Tylo darted to the room's door and closed it while Jayk concealed himself. Tylo then also found himself a hiding place and drew his blaster. Shortly after the two men heard the sound of the door sliding open again and footsteps as Tal entered the room. The sullustan walked right past both men without noticing either of them before setting down something bulky that was wrapped in a plastic sheet. Tal then turned around and unexpectedly found himself face to face with Jayk.

*Surprise.*

*Fear.*

Turning again. Tal started to move towards the door with the intention of running away. However, before he could take two steps Tylo stepped in front of him and pointed his blaster at the sullustan's head.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked, smiling.

"Do take a seat Mister Nen." Jayk said and he pointed towards the couch at the side of the room.

"What do you want?" Tal asked, "I've done nothing wrong."

*Deceit.*

Jayk smiled and glanced at Tylo.

"Sure, we believe you. Don't we Tylo?" he said.

"Even I sensed that lie," Tylo replied, "and I'm not even a jedi."

Jayk then walked over to the bundle Tal had set down and pulled away the plastic to reveal a rubbery pouring mould.

"Ah, the means by which the statue at the gallery was reproduced." he said.

"That was a mix up." Tal exclaimed, "I meant to send them the original and keep a copy for myself."

*Deceit.*

"My padawan has already found the other copies you made in your studio. Along with other forged artworks." Jayk said and Tal sighed.

"So how many suckers have you conned into buying them?" Tylo asked.

"Four." Tal answered now that he realised that his scheme had failed, "Each in a different system. None of them would have known about the others. Thal's work is worth being on any major art registers."

Jayk then looked at the original statue in the still open closet.

"So how did you come by the original statue?" he asked, "The paintings as well."

"I got them from Thal." Tal said and Jayk and Tylo looked at one another in surprise.

"You know where he is?" Tylo said.

"No, why should I? I travelled with him for about a month aboard his ship but he was intolerable so I left, taking with me some pieces of his art that I thought I could sell to make up for the trouble he'd caused me. He promised that we'd be able to sell our art across the galaxy, but all he wanted to do was dig in the dirt and I lost one commission after another." Tal answered.

"Wait, Thal N'Krey owned a ship?" Tylo said.

"Of course. It was old but he owned it. He even turned parts of it into art, painting everything he could with image of that woman he was always producing art of." Tal answered.

"He probably needed a ship of his own for moving artefacts past customs at major starports." Tylo said to Jayk.

"So why didn't you sell the statue and the paintings?" Jayk asked.



"Don't you think I tried? But no-one wanted them. So instead I got my studio here and managed to get a job helping out the planetary gallery. Then I noticed that the price of his work had suddenly gone up when he disappeared. I was going to sell what I had when I suddenly had the idea to reproduce it myself. That way I could keep on selling it over and over again."

Just then the intercom of the room's door sounded.

"That must be Brae and Dahlis." Tylo said and he walked over to the door. But just as he was about to open it Jayk suddenly realised that he could not sense Brae's usually powerful presence in the Force close by.

"No!" he shouted, drawing his lightsaber. But he was too late and as the door slid open there was a flash of blue as someone standing in the corridor outside shot him with a blaster set on stun.

"That's not him you fool!" someone hissed and as Jayk stepped into view of the doorway he saw two men that he did not recognise standing just outside.

"Drop your weapons." Jayk ordered as he activated his lightsaber but in response both men raised blasters and fired at him.

Although one of the blasters was still set to stun the other produced the red energy blasts of a weapon on a lethal setting and Jayk focused his efforts on blocking the more dangerous attacks, deflecting them into the walls either side of him. But then one of the stun blasts came in at the perfect angle for the Jedi to be able to send it towards the other gunman and the stun bolt rendered him unconscious instead. Seeing this the man armed with the weapon set to stun turned and started to run down the corridor and Jayk went after him.

*Danger.*

However, as he leapt over Tylo's unconscious body into the corridor Jayk sensed a tremor in the Force and he dived across the corridor rather than just running straight after the man right as a blaster shot passed over him. Obviously the man had adjusted his blaster and was now firing lethal shots at Jayk. In response he leapt to his feet and charged down the corridor while the gunman backed away, still firing and there were screams from behind Jayk as other hotel guests who had emerged from their rooms to see what the commotion was about sought cover in their rooms again. Meanwhile Jayk continued to run through the barrage of blaster fire, deflecting each shot in turn until the slower moving gunman came within reach and with a single swing he cut the man down. It was then that Jayk realised that he had made a critical error, however.

He had left Tal Nen unguarded.

"Stang" he hissed and, shutting off his lightsaber, he ran back to the room where he had left the Sullustan only to find that the window leading to the fire escape was open and Tal Nen was gone.

Hurrying to the window Jayk looked out just in time to see Tal leap to the ground from the bottom of the fire escape with one of the tubes containing paintings in each hand. Then he started to run across the hotel grounds.

Jayk knew that he had little hope of catching the Sullustan, however just at that moment a speeder pulled up on the road nearby and Brae and Dahlis got out.

"Brae." Jayk said, pulling out his comlink and he watched as his Padawan took out her own device.

"Yes master?" she asked.

"Tal is fleeing on foot. Heading West across the grounds. Stop him."

"Yes master, I see him now." Brae replied and Jayk saw her start to run across the grounds towards Tal while Dahlis stood back and watched her go.

While Brae was chasing after Tal, Jayk went to check on Tylo. The former smuggler was still lying on the floor just inside the hotel room and as he crouched down beside him Jayk took a medpac from his belt and opened it up. After checking that Tylo's pulse was still stronger Jayk removed a stimulant injector and pressed it against Tylo's neck.

"What?" Tylo exclaimed as he sat up suddenly. Then he blinked and frowned, "That little nerf herder shot me." he said.

"Yes. However, fortunately the weapon he used was set on 'stun'. My guess would be that your assailant expected Tal Nen to answer the door and were preparing to stun him instead."

Tylo then saw the unconscious gunman lying in the corridor right outside the room.

"You got one of them though." he said.

"Both actually." Jayk replied, "The one that shot you made the mistake of attempting to stand his ground after resetting his blaster to 'kill'."

"Don't tell me, it didn't end up being you that got killed. Right?" Tylo said.

"Indeed. Unfortunately Tal was able to take advantage of my distraction to escape." Jayk told him and Tylo groaned.

"So we're back to square one." he said.

"Not quite. Brae is giving chase and now that I know you are well I can assist her." Jayk said and he stood up again and started to head for the open window.

"Hey wait!" Tylo called out and he too started to get to his feet. However, before he could stand up straight he wobbled slightly and had to steady himself against the wall, "No." he said, "Never mind. You go on. I'll be

right here raiding the mini bar. It's all on Tal's account, right?" and Jayk smiled.

## 6.

Tal had a considerable head start on Brae as he ran across the wide lawn surrounding the hotel towards an area of woodland that helped limit the noise from the nearby starport. However, Brae's Jedi training meant that she was in perfect physical condition whereas the Sullustan was decades older than she was and also lacked exercise. This meant that as he reached the edge of the trees he was already out of breath and when he looked around he saw that Brae was rapidly gaining on him. Then to make matters worse he saw that Jayk was also running towards him from the direction of the hotel.

The Sullustan turned around again and staggered into the woods, still clutching the paintings he had been able to escape from the hotel room with. Moving more slowly through the woods Tal soon had to stop to rest again and he looked nervously around the trunk of a tree to see how close the two Jedi were now. He saw neither of them through the trees and was about to continue when he heard a sound from the other direction and he spun around in a panic. However, once again he saw nothing in front of him and he started to continue towards the starport, hoping that there would be a transport of any kind ready to take him away as soon as he got there.

All of a sudden a woman clad in a skin tight black bodysuit appeared in front of Tal, stepping out from behind another tree and she smiled at him.

"Going somewhere?" she asked. Then she looked down at the paintings in the tubes he carried, "Oh, I know someone who would be very interested in those." she added.

Tal turned around again and was about to break into a run when all of a sudden Mara leapt at him from behind and wrapped an arm around his neck while the other was used to hold his head in place.

"Don't struggle." she hissed, "I'm not here to kill you intentionally and this will all be a lot easier if you don't resist." but her words had no effect on Tal and he continued to struggle until the lack of oxygen made him lose consciousness.

"I'm done." Mara then signalled using her comlink, "Where are those Jedi?"

"The closest is about fifty metres away. The other one twenty behind her." Morten replied, "No sign of Kurrast though. I'm bringing the ship in now."

While she waited for the transport to arrive Mara dragged Tal behind a tree to keep him out of sight of the approaching Jedi and picked up the two tubes from where the Sullustan had dropped them. However, just as she took hold of the second tube she heard the sound of running and looking up she saw Brae running through the woods towards her.

Brae came to a sudden halt when she saw Mara looking at her and then she drew her lightsaber and ignited it.

"Stay where you are!" she called out, "You are under arrest."

But then the air was filled with the sound of powerful repulsorlift engines as a transport ship descended out of the sky to hover just above the ground between the trees. The transport mounted a blaster cannon under its nose and the pilot reorientated the craft to point the weapon towards Brae who rolled aside just as it opened fire, blasting through the undergrowth and any trees in its path. Meanwhile the access ramp beneath the transport hissed open and two more of Morten's men jumped down. Then while Mara ran towards the open ramp with the paintings they ran to where she had left Tal and dragged him between them to the ship.

Morten was waiting inside the ship as Mara came aboard and she handed him the two paintings.

"I'm not sure exactly what these are but he thought they were important enough to want to bring with him." she said.

"Great, at least we've got something to show for all of this. Plus him of course." Morten replied, looking around Mara at Tal as he was dragged aboard the transport as well, "Now let's get the hell out of here and hand all this over to Rylee."

Having been forced to move in an erratic manner to avoid the cannon fire Brae stopped running only when the transport finally ceased fire rose back into the air. She watched as the ship disappeared into the clouds and then looked around as Jayk arrived behind her.

"They got away master." she said, "I saw Mara and two other men take Tal onto the ship."

"Unfortunate." Jayk said, "However, at least we were able to recover this." and he reached into his robes to produce the pendent that included the Sith lightsaber crystal, "Also we now know that Thal N'Krey owned a starship. Tracing that could lead us to him."

"Who's there?" Tal called out from beneath the hood he had been wearing since he regained consciousness. Tied to a chair of some sort he was unable to remove it himself but he could still hear when someone entered the room.

“The only friend you have left in the galaxy Mister Nen.” Rylee said as she pulled the hood from his head and he saw that as well as the dark skinned human woman there were two armoured figures standing in front of him in the room and he instantly recognised the distinctive mandalorian design of their armour, “Now I'm rather busy.” she continued, “So I'm going to leave you in the capable hand of these two gentlemen. They're going to ask you some questions about our mutual friend Thal N'Krey and I do suggest you answer them satisfactorily. Otherwise things could become rather unpleasant for you.”