

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

4-06: TRAPS & PATTERNS

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When a lightsaber is used during a burglary the Udras find themselves not only hunting for more stolen artwork by Thal N'Krey but also facing an old enemy. Worse is to come when they discover that the paintings being stolen may have had a larger purpose when Thal N'Krey created them.

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1.

"It looks like the others." Tylo Kurrast, owner of the YT-700 class freighter *Swift Exit* said as he watched the jedi knight Jayk Udra and the teenage girl who was both his padawan apprentice and daughter Brae studying yet another of the paintings that he had brought them to the system to see. The paintings were all the work of the kiffar artist Thal N'Krey who had based his work around the culture of the Sith. The artist had vanished years earlier but left behind a significant amount of art in a variety of mediums. However, it had been discovered that he had based a number of pieces of artwork on genuine and forbidden Sith artefacts, reproducing them in such detail that even the artwork was considered dangerous. Furthermore after his disappearance the original artefacts had become mixed in with his art and some of them were being traded without people knowing exactly what it was they were paying for. Now Jayk and Brae had been assigned to track down Thal and all of the Sith material connected to him while Tylo was forced to provide them with transport as part of a deal that kept him out of prison for his role in stealing some of Thal's art for a buyer in the galactic underworld.

"Tylo's right." Brae agreed, "It's just a landscape. They're all just landscapes."

"And pretty much the same as one another as well." Tylo added, "Painted at night so that all of the ground is just black and showing stars in the sky."

"Yes, these represent the only pieces of art by Thal N'Krey we have discovered to date that have not had any observation to the Sith." Jayk said, nodding.

"So does that mean you'll be getting out of my home now?" the owner of both the painting and the apartment that it hung on the wall of asked.

"Yes it does. I have made a recording of the painting and we'll be in touch if we need any further information from you Mister Qu'Arlon. I apologise for the disturbance." Jayk replied and then he looked at Brae and Tylo and added, "Come on, I think we should be getting back to the ship."

"Yes that way we can get some sleep before we go and look at another dull painting tomorrow." Tylo responded and the owner of the painting frowned at the way the former smuggler had just described what to him was a valuable possession.

The apartment owner escorted Jayk, Brae and Tylo to his front door and as soon as they had left the apartment he sealed it behind them.

"Not even an offer of a drink for the road." Tylo commented, looking back at the door.

"I know. How rude." Brae added sarcastically.

"It has been a long day. I recommend we find somewhere to get something to eat rather than go straight back to the *Swift Exit*." Jayk suggested as they walked along the hallway towards the turbolift at the end.

"Are you paying?" Tylo asked.

"It will go on the account of the Jedi Order." Jayk replied and Tylo smiled.

"In that case count me in. I'm feeling expensively hungry." he said.

The trio took the turbolift down to the lobby of the expensive apartment building and the service droid stood by the main door opened it for them as they approached saluted them as they walked past as it was programmed to do with all residents and authorised visitors.

"So where to?" Tylo asked as they paused on the pavement outside and Jayk looked around.

"I seem to recall seeing several restaurants in that direction." he replied, pointing, "Brae do you have a preference for what you'd like?" and he looked at his daughter. However, she seemed to be staring blankly into space, "Brae what's wrong?"

"What?" Brae said suddenly.

"You're parsecs away kid." Tylo said, "Look, if she can't chose then I'm sure I can-"

"No." Brae interrupted, "I'm not eating fries out of a basket while you stuff credits into the underwear of our waitress again."

"Two points kid. Firstly you agreed that it was my turn to chose and secondly that young lady was saving for college. I was doing her a service." Tylo said.

"Brae are you okay?" Jayk asked, still concerned about what may have distracted her.

"I'm fine. I just had a really bad feeling all of a sudden. Like we were being watched." Brae answered and then she looked in the direction Jayk had pointed in, "I liked the look of the bantha place we passed down there." she added.

Jayk, Brae and Tylo then set off together, heading for the restaurant Brae had chosen while from the rooftop of a nearby building a hooded figure watched them through a set of macrobinoculars.

With his unexpected jedi visitors now gone, Qu'Arlon decided that it was time for him to go to bed. Before he did so however, he carried out his usual routine of walking around his apartment and checking that all of the

appliances had been shut down for the night and that the cleaning droids were set to clean the apartment while he slept. While he was doing this though he unexpectedly heard the sound of his apartment's front door sliding open. Qu'Arlon's wife was visiting relatives and he was not expecting her back for two days yet and so there was no reason why the front door would be opening.

"Hello?" he called out as he made his way towards the hallway and as he stepped into he saw that the front door was wide open and also that there was a pulsing pale blue light coming from the living room, "Hello?" he called out again and his hand reached for the emergency bracelet he wore on his wrist, his finger hovering over the button that would automatically summon the building's security droids. The blue light suddenly vanished, leaving the hallway and living room dark. Knowing that his apartment had been broken into Qu'Arlon pressed the button on his bracelet and watched as it began to flash, confirming that the distress call had just been sent, "I've just summoned security." he said out loud, "They'll be here in less than a minute so you may as well-" but before he could continue a hooded figure burst out of the living room and leapt at him. Qu'Arlon had no ability in self defence and he was helpless to avoid the blow that struck him in the abdomen, knocking the breath from him and making him double over in pain as the intruder rushed past him.

"Halt!" he heard an electronic voice call out from the main hallway outside his apartment and he knew immediately that the building's security droids had already arrived. Then he heard a sound that reminded him of blaster fire but was much quieter before there were two rapid crashes as the security droids were destroyed one after another and Qu'Arlon knew that the intruder had escaped.

Dragging himself back to his feet Qu'Arlon then staggered into his living room.

"Lights." he gasped and the room was immediately illuminated. He had half expected to find the room a mess, with every drawer pulled open as the intruder hunted for valuables. However, only one item in the entire room had been disturbed, the landscape painting by Thal N'Krey. This had been removed from its mounting on the wall and the frame that Qu'Arlon had had fitted to it broken off to exposed every part of the canvas surface. The painting itself remained undamaged though and Qu'Arlon guessed that he had disturbed the intruder before they could rip the painting from the rigid support it was mounted on so that they could roll it up and steal it.

"I'm fine." Tylo said as Jayk and Brae both steadied him as they returned to the docking bay where the *Swift Exit* was located.

"No you are not Tylo. You clearly shouldn't have used so much of their special hot sauce." Jayk replied.

"Oh you think I was going to let Brae out do me?" Tylo asked, "She tried it so I was going to try it too."

"Brae had a small amount on the side of her plate that she dipped her steak into. You covered your entire steak in it." Jayk pointed out and Brae smiled.

"What's so amusing kid?" Tylo said when he saw this.

"I was just thinking back to when we first met and you tricked me into drinking that stuff that made it burn when I used the refresher Tylo." she told him.

"Oh so this is revenge is it kid?" he responded.

"The jedi do not take revenge." Jayk commented.

"No, but we do see the funny side of people getting their just deserts." Brae added.

Jayk then reached out to open the door to the docking bay and as soon as it slid upwards they all saw the police air speeder that had also landed in there beside the *Swift Exit* while a pair of uniformed officers stood looking towards them.

"What are the cops doing here?" Tylo said, frowning.

"I don't know, but I've got a very bad feeling about this." Jayk responded.

"Jedi Knight Jayk Udra." one of the police officers called out and Tylo grinned.

"How about that, they aren't after me." he said softly.

"Padawan Brae Udra and Captain Tylo Kurrast." the officer continue.

"Think again." Brae said to Tylo as his face fell.

"Is there a problem officers?" Jayk asked.

"You must come with us." the police officer told him and Jayk frowned.

"Are we under arrest?" he said.

"If that is necessary." the police officer said and both he and his partner placed their hands on their sidearms.

"No, it is not. We will go with you." Jayk said.

"One question." Tylo said, raising his hand, "Can I at least use the refresher first?"

2.

As soon as the police airspeeder touched down on the roof of the apartment block the two police officer who had brought Jayk, Brae and Tylo there from the docking bay leapt out and began to gasp for breath as behind them their passengers disembarked.

"Hey guys, I tried to warn you." Tylo commented, grinning as the two police officer glared back at him.

"They should just be glad they don't have jedi senses." Brae added, "Mind you, I think even they felt that disturbance."

Meanwhile Jayk noticed a man in a suit walking towards them across the building's roof, a police badge clipped to his pocket.

"I think we're about to find out why we've been brought back here." he told Brae and Tylo and then he addressed the detective, "Detective, I am Jedi Knight Jayk Udra. Why have we been brought back here?"

"So you admit to being here before Jedi Udra?" the detective responded and Jayk nodded.

"I do. We visited an individual called Qu'Arlon regarding a painting in his possession." he answered.

"And why did you do this?" the detective asked.

"Detective is it not customary on this planet for you to identify yourself before questioning someone?" Jayk said, tiring of the detective's accusative tone.

"I am Detective First Class Ol'Rayton. Now can you explain what interested you about Mister Qu'Arlon's painting?" the detective said.

"Of course, the artist who created the painting is a being of interest to the Jedi Order. We are operating under the authority of the Judicial Department of the Galactic Republic in our attempts to locate him and any contraband works by him. You can check with them if you wish." Jayk said.

"I already have and they confirmed that you are on this planet on official business. However, they also said that you are not empowered to remove any private property unless it violates Sith control statutes. Even then the owner must be informed at the time of seizure." Ol'Rayton said.

"Hey, I don't need to be a jedi to know that there is something going on here that you haven't bothered explaining. So how about you cut all the poodoo and just be straight with us?" Tylo said and the detective glared at him.

"Come with me." he said and as he turned towards the exit from the rooftop landing pad the detective beckoned for the jedi and Tylo to follow him.

The detective led the trio from the roof down to the floor where Qu'Arlon's apartment was located and as soon as they stepped from the turbolift they saw that something was very wrong. Two destroyed security droids lay on the floor of the hallway while a pair of hovering analysis droids studied the damage that had been inflicted to them and more uniformed police officers stood watching.

"As you can see the being that destroyed these droids took care to destroy their sensory logs." Detective Ol'Rayton said as he walked past the two wrecked machines, "They struck at the heads and the chests to get the in circuit memory and also the storage drives. The weapon used was able to punch right through their armoured chassis." then as he reached the entrance to Qu'Arlon's apartment he paused and pointed to the base of the door frame where it was scorched and added, "The same goes for the locking mechanism of the apartment door, a precisely aimed energy attack that destroyed the locking plates and triggered the door opening sequence. The being that did this was disturbed by Mister Qu'Arlon while attempting to steal the painting that you showed so much interest in and then assaulted him while fleeing. He had already summoned building security though and the two droids attempted to stop the intruder from escaping."

"Fat lot of use they appear to have been." Tylo muttered, glancing back at the wrecked security droids.

"Was Qu'Arlon injured?" Jayk asked.

"No, fortunately the intruder seemed more interested in escape than conflict. That was despite their obviously being able to overpower him easily." Ol'Rayton said before there was a shout from within the apartment.

"That's them! They came here and then tried to steal my painting." Qu'Arlon yelled, pointing at the jedi from inside his apartment.

"Oh great." Tylo said, sighing when he heard this.

"You should be used to being accused of crimes by now." Brae commented.

"Yes but normally it was because I'd committed them. I'm supposed to be going straight now yet here I am being accused of theft again." Tylo protested.

"Detective I can assure you that we had nothing to do with a break in here. Perhaps if Mister Qu'Arlon could describe exactly what happened after we left then we can find out who is really responsible." Jayk said.

Anger.

"You know what happened here." Qu'Arlon snapped, "You jedi are thieves. You steal people's younglings, why not a painting as well?"

"Mister Qu'Arlon, if you could just tell the jedi what you told me." Detective Ol'Rayton said.

"Oh very well. After they finally left my apartment I was getting ready for bed when I realised that there was an intruder in my living room where the painting is kept. I summoned security and that was when I was attacked." Qu'Arlon said.

"So which of us is supposed to have attacked you?" Tylo said.

"Well none of you obviously." Qu'Arlon replied.

"Obviously not since we were all at dinner and there are witnesses to prove it." Tylo pointed out and he smiled at the detective.

"It was your other friend. Taller than her but shorter than either of you two and wearing a hood so I couldn't see their face. But I know it was a jedi." Qu'Arlon said.

"How?" Jayk asked.

"Look at my door! Look at the security droids! I didn't hear the weapon used to break into my apartment and when the droids were destroyed it was too quiet for a blaster. It was one of those laser swords you carry." Qu'Arlon said and he jabbed his finger towards Brae's lightsaber that hung on her belt openly.

"The analysis droids have confirmed that the weapon used to gain entry to the apartment matches the profile of a lightsaber. They're still checking the two security droids but it looks likely that the same weapon was used to destroy them." Detective Ol'Rayton added.

"Yes and then when I went into my living room I found that my painting had been ripped from the wall and its frame destroyed. Another few minutes and I'm sure I'd have lost it." Qu'Arlon went on.

"The watcher." Brae said suddenly.

"You mean there really was someone watching us on the street outside kid?" Tylo said and Brae nodded.

"They must have waited for us to leave before breaking in." she said.

"Detective I can assure you that we had nothing to do with this. It is just a co-incidence that Mister Qu'Arlon was burgled after we left." Jayk said.

"Oh really?" Detective Ol'Rayton said and he took out his datapad, "Is it also a co-incidence that break ins were reported at the homes of a Ka'Edlel, Mo'Door, Et'Vellis and Ga'Hadro? Each of them reported the loss of a painting that had just been inspected by you."

"Those are the people we visited the last two days." Brae said.

"Yes and all four were broken into within an hour of you leaving their homes. All that was taken were the paintings that you wanted to look at." Ol'Rayton said.

"Detective the Jedi Order is not the only group interested in the work of the artist Thal N'Krey." Jayk said and Tylo winced.

"Stang. Sharr and Crayne." he added.

"Who?" Ol'Rayton responded.

"Teron Sharr and Morton Crayne, leaders of two underworld groups both collecting work by Thal N'Krey." Jayk told him.

"One of whom is Force sensitive and has a lightsaber of his own." Brae added.

"Then he's a jedi?" Ol'Rayton said.

"No. Teron Sharr avoided detection by the Jedi Order until recently." Jayk replied, "But he has managed to develop considerable skill with the Dark Side of the Force."

"He must have been following us." Tylo said.

"Yes, but only for the last two days." Jayk added, "Detective Ol'Rayton I can provide you with a detailed description of Teron Sharr and several of his associates. You should distribute this information planetwide but with the warning that they are not to be approached. They are very dangerous individuals. In the mean time there are several other beings that we need to visit while we are on your planet. If Teron Sharr and his gang are following us then it makes sense for us to turn that to our advantage."

"You mean deploy a support team ready to ambush this Teron Sharr?" Ol'Rayton said and Jayk nodded.

"Exactly. Now if you don't mind detective my companions and I had been intending to turn in for the night before we were brought here. If we are done then we would like to return to our ship." he said.

"Of course. But don't try leaving the planet. I'll pass your information on to my superiors but I can't guarantee that they'll want to devote massive resources to finding these fugitives of yours." Ol'Rayton responded.

"Brae it's oh six twelve and two men have just entered the docking bay." the hologram of a man wearing jedi robes said loudly to Brae, waking her up from her slumber on the couch of the *Swift Exit's* lounge.

"Huh? Cal? What's going on?" she said, blinking as she sat up.

"I said that there are people outside." Cal answered.

"Hey kid, up already?" Tylo then said as he entered the lounge, "How did you sleep?"

"Better than I was managing in my bunk thanks to your active digestive system right above me." she replied,

"And the reason I'm up is because there are people outside."

"Outside? Now?" Tylo said.

"Two of them." the hologram of Cal Udra, an ancestor of Jayk and Brae's told him. Cal was the guardian of a holocron created by the original Cal Udra more than three thousand years earlier and had been assigned to Jayk and Brae to advise them on working together despite being closely related.

"Go get your dad kid. I'll check them out." Tylo said and he rushed from the lounge towards the cockpit, peering out into the docking bay where he saw two men in suits. One of these was obviously Detective Ol'Rayton and Tylo relaxed.

"It's okay." he called out, "It's that cop and one of his friends."

"I'm going out to see what they want." Jayk responded as he made his way from the cabin they shared to the cargo hold where he opened the freighter's access ramp and strode down it.

"Good morning Jedi Udra." Ol'Rayton called out when he saw Jayk approaching, "I hope we aren't disturbing you too early."

"Not at all. Though perhaps you can explain why you are here so early." Jayk replied and Ol'Rayton smiled.

"Why to best carry out your plan of course master jedi. My superiors have agreed to provide you with a full tactical team to help deal with the threat this Teron Sharr presents to planetary law and order. Please allow me to introduce Watch Leader Second Class En'Veron. He commands the tactical team that has been placed at your disposal."

"Did it occur to you that by coming here like this you may have alerted Teron Sharr to the fact that we are working together?" Jayk asked.

"Please master jedi, I know my job." En'Veron responded, "I have already deployed my team to watch all the approaches to this docking bay and I have hunter droids patrolling the area that have been programmed with the images you gave us. If anyone from that list comes within a hundred metres of here we'd know. Trust me."

The hooded figure headed towards the docking bay where the *Swift Exit* was berthed just as it had for the past three days. Today was different however, this time there were numerous hunter droids flitting around above head height and their movement pattern indicated that they were centred on the *Swift Exit*'s docking bay. One of the droids turned towards the hooded figure and it was obvious that it was performing a scan, most likely using ultrasound to see through the hood of the cloak and create an image of the face underneath it. This took just a few seconds before the droid was satisfied that the figure was not any of the beings on its list of targets and continued on its way. Their curiosity spiked, the figure decided to try and find out who the droid had been programmed to search for and seeing a pair of uniformed police officers close by, headed towards them.

Although their uniforms clearly proclaimed them to be police officers, they were obviously not standard patrol men. Both wore armoured vests that were heavier than standard and each of them had a carbine slung across their chest. It was not unknown for sensitive areas such as docking bays and commercial starports to make use of more heavily armed police units but their sudden appearance today along with the hunter droids suggested that their presence was not routine.

One of the two officers noticed the hooded figure approaching them and alerted his partner.

"Would you mind lowering your hood please." he said and the hooded figure halted right in front of him..

"You don't need to see my face." the figure replied, the voice having the soft tones of a humanoid female and she gently waved her hand in front of his face.

"We don't need to see her face." the officer said to his partner.

"If you let me see that datapad I might be able to tell you if I've seen who you're looking for." the figure said, waving her hand again and the police officer handed over the datapad.

Rather than waste time on going through the contents of the datapad right there, the figure instead plugged in a memory stick and quickly copied the contents of the device's drive to it. Then the figure handed the datapad back to the officer.

"I'm finished. I'll move along." she said.

"Move along. Move along." the police officer replied, waving her past and she nodded slightly as she continued on her way towards the docking bay where the *Swift Exit* could be found. As she walked the woman uploaded the information from the police datapad to her own and began to cycle through the collection of images that Jayk had provided them with. These showed the standard mugshots of Teron Sharr and his accomplices Krovak and Mara Tosk as well as various vid captures of all three that gave more up to date likenesses of them.

"Oh Jayk you do disappoint me." she said to herself, "You really don't know what you're dealing with here do you? No matter, I'll put a stop to your game now."

3.

"These cops are rubbish." Tylo said as he and the Udras walked past another pair of heavily armed police officers on their way to the tram terminal, "A blind man could spot them."

"Tylo's right. They're too obvious. They'll scare Teron off." Brae added.

"I am sure that Detective Ol'Rayton and Watch Leader En'Veron know what they are doing." Jayk replied, "Teron may be able to pick them out but once we get away from the starport the police will pull back from us." "They better had or all this will be for nothing." Tylo said.

Presenting travel cards to the scanners at the tram terminal, the trio were able to quickly board the transport vehicle that would take them into the main city to where the next of the beings who was suspected of owning one of Thal N'Krey's paintings lived. However, on this occasion the owner had already been approached by the city police department and evacuated from their home for their own protection and replaced by an undercover officer who would impersonate them.

The tram that they took had enough passengers aboard that the trio were unable to find seats and had to stand, supporting themselves with the overhead handrails as it began to move and Jayk noticed Brae looking around.

"Is something wrong Brae?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." Brae answered, "It's just that I can't shake the feeling that Teron has someone close by."

"Well I don't see him or Krovak around." Tylo replied as he too looked around, "Mind you I can see someone in a cloak at the end of the next carriage. It could be Mara I suppose."

"No." Brae said, shaking her head, "Remember that I can sense the link between Mara and Teron. If she was anywhere near here then I'd know about it."

"Mara could never have got past the security scanners at the terminal anyway, they've been configured to search for her." Jayk pointed out.

The address that Jayk, Brae and Tylo walked to after disembarking from the tram had not been the next one of their list to visit. Instead it had been chosen with the aid of Ol'Rayton and En'Veron as one that the police tactical team could easily observe while remaining hidden themselves. Unlike the previous address they had visited this home was a free standing house that could be watched from all directions, including by a police air speeder that was patrolling high overhead.

"Do you think the officer is ready?" Brae asked as they walked towards the front door.

"I'd be raiding the food and drink if it was me." Tylo commented.

"Fortunately not everyone thinks like you Tylo." Jayk responded as he reached out to activate the door intercom. Then rather than a response over the intercom the door simply opened to reveal the undercover police officer holding a plate of food.

"Yes?" she asked and Tylo grinned.

"But then again." Jayk muttered before he addressed the woman, "Are you Sy'Kyryn?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm her." the woman replied.

Deception.

Brae now smiled as well, detecting the lie she knew the undercover officer had told and wondering how she would hope to fool Teron Sharr if he was standing where she was.

"I am Jedi Jayk Udra and I have an order permitting me to enter your home to study a painting that you have in your possession." Jayk told the woman as if she was the real house owner.

"Show me then." she replied, holding out her free hand and Jayk passed her a datapad. Glancing at the device, the woman nodded before returning it, "You had better come in then." she added.

Inside the house the policewoman led them into the room where the painting was hung on the wall. Just like all of the others that the Jedi had inspected since arriving on the planet this painting showed an area of wilderness at night, the ground too dark to make out many details other than the horizon while the lack of clouds permitted the stars in the sky to be shown in great detail.

"Well would you look at that?" Tylo said, "Another in Thal N'Krey's great series of dull paintings of absolutely nothing. Who pays for this poodoo?"

"Somebody must like it." Brae pointed out.

"Brae do you sense anything from this?" Jayk asked, turning to look at her instead of the painting, "I don't see any indication that Thal N'Krey placed any Sith knowledge in this painting, nor do I sense it in the Force." Brae shrugged.

"I've got nothing either." she answered, "It seems to be just what it looks like, a regular painting hanging on a wall."

"And a big waste of our time, just like all of the others." Tylo added, "Come on, I say let's get out of here and

let Teron steal them all. He gets the paintings, we know that they are worthless and the owners collect on insurance for something they probably regretted parting with their hard earned credits for about a second after they bought them. Everybody wins."

"I agree." Jayk said and both Brae and Tylo stared at him.

"Okay, I've got a bad feeling about this." Brae said, "But you just agreed that we should leave."

"Yes." Jayk replied, "Teron won't try to steal this painting while we're here so we have to leave in order for him to make his move. Then when he does we can move in and arrest him. After that perhaps he can explain the significance of these paintings to us. Then a decision can be taken about whether they are contraband. If not at least we can recover those that have been stolen and return them to their rightful owners. We get Teron Sharr and the owners get their paintings back. All of us get what we want."

"Except for Teron." Tylo said.

"Who cares what he wants though?" Brae added.

The hooded figure had walked right past the house she had watched Jayk, Brae and Tylo enter. The police were doing a better job of concealing themselves around the house but she had still seen indications that the building was under surveillance, windows open in nearby buildings to provide clear lines of fire and a number of parked speeders that she could sense beings hiding inside. There were no further hunter drones in the area but she guessed that the police would have deployed other scanning methods to identify people passing by.

However, in setting up their surveillance of the house the police had inadvertently provided her with a means to approach it without triggering their suspicions.

After passing by the house the hooded figure circled around one of the neighbouring homes that she had determined contained a police surveillance team before simply vaulting over the wall that surrounded the back garden. Dashing across the lawn, she waved her hand at the back door and found it to be unlocked as it slid open when she triggered the mechanism telekinetically.

"Ja'Sell is that you?" a voice called out from elsewhere in the house.

"No, it's me." the hooded woman responded.

"Who?" the other voice asked and there was the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs.

Hurrying towards the stairs the hooded woman was in time to see an armoured policeman coming down them. He was larger than she was but his physical size was not daunting. Instead the moment that he looked at her and before he could call out a warning she extended her hand towards his throat and grabbed it through the Force. The policeman stood immobile for a few seconds, instinctively reaching up to his throat to try and free it from the invisible hold that the hooded woman had on it before he collapsed and fell down the remainder of the staircase before landing in a lifeless heap at the bottom.

"Are you okay down there?" another voice shouted from upstairs, this time a woman's and the hooded figure pulled her lightsaber from beneath her cloak as she stepped over the body of the policeman and started to climb the stairs as quietly as she could, "Hey what's going on down-" the policewoman who appeared in a doorway just as the hooded woman reached the top of the stairs began. Then when she saw the hooded figure standing almost right in front of her she reached for her blaster. However, before the policewoman could draw her weapon there was a 'snap-hiss' as the hooded figure activated her lightsaber and with a single swing she decapitated the policewoman.

4.

After leaving the house Jayk, Brae and Tylo made a point of walking along the street where they could easily be seen by anyone watching them, heading back towards the tram station they had got off at. However, rather than go all the way to the station they halted a short distance away where an unmarked repulsortruck was parked and they looked around before Tylo knocked on the side of the vehicle.

"Get in." En'Veron said when he opened the side hatch and he let the trio enter the back of the vehicle.

Inside the back of the repulsor truck had been converted into a mobile command and control unit.

"No signs of anyone approaching the target yet sir." one of the two police officers monitoring the surveillance equipment that had been set up around the house.

"Except for one of your lot." Tylo commented when he noticed an armoured police officer dart between one of the neighbouring houses and a hedge.

"Who the hell is that?" En'Veron said, frowning, "He'll blow the entire operation if he's seen."

"Ki'Morson, Ja'Sell and Co'Tarse were deployed to that location sir." one of the police technicians replied.

"Ja'Sell pulled back to get a replacement for their recorder unit though." the other one added.

"Then get on the comlink and tell them both to stay put. We can't afford any screw ups." En'Veron ordered.

"They're moving again. Heading into the house." Brae said when she noticed the police officer again, this time vaulting over the hedge and rushing towards the house she, Jayk and Tylo has just visited.

"What the hell are they playing at?" En'Veron said.

"Watch leader I don't think that is one of your men." Jayk said.

"Have everyone check in. Now." En'Veron ordered and the two police technicians began to contact the members of the tactical team one at a time, confirming their locations and status as the police officer on the video feed ran into the house.

The undercover policewoman inside the house heard the sound of the back door opening and went to investigate, holding a compact hold-out blaster pistol behind her back ready to defend herself against the intruder if necessary. However, when she entered the kitchen she came face to face with someone wearing a police uniform and full armour, including a helmet with a flash protected visor that concealed their facial features and carrying a standard police issue blaster carbine.

"Stang you had me worried there." she said as she relaxed and lowered the hold-out blaster to her side,

"What are you doing here anyway?"

"I've come for the painting." the woman in the armoured uniform replied and it was then that the undercover police officer noticed that the collar of the uniform looked burned.

"Who the hell are-" she began but before she could finish the woman in the stolen uniform levelled her blaster carbine and shot her from point blank range.

"So uncivilised." she commented as she let the weapon drop to her side, supported by its sling as she jumped over the body of the undercover officer and left the kitchen in search of the painting she had come for.

It was not difficult to find the painting hanging on the wall of the living room and the woman walked up to it and calmly removed it from the wall before igniting her lightsaber and using it to cut through the frame. With the painting free of its frame the woman shut off her lightsaber and instead took out a pocket multi tool and unfolded the knife blade it contained. This she used to cut around the side of the painting, separating the canvas itself from the supporting frame underneath without damaging any of the paint itself. She was most of the way around this when all of a sudden a repulsor truck ground to a halt in the street outside and the side hatch was thrown open so that Jayk and Brae could leap out with their lightsabers in their hands.

The woman hurriedly finished cutting around the painting and rolled it up so she could hold it in one hand while she ran for the kitchen. However, before she made it there the front door slid open and Jayk strode into the house.

"Stay where you are. There is no escape." he called out to her.

"Oh Jayk Udra, how your fall has blinded you. I don't know what these paintings lead to but I intend to make sure you never find it." the woman replied and there was a 'snap-hiss' as she activated her lightsaber again.

"Err dad, that's blue." Brae commented.

"I see it Brae." Jayk replied as he and Brae also ignited their own lightsabers.

However, rather than charge at the two jedi blocking the front door the woman turned and ran towards the back, forcing Jayk and Brae to chase her through the house. As she ran into the kitchen though she closed the door behind her and then slashed at the control panel with her lightsaber, destroying the panel and jamming the door shut. She knew that it would not take long for the jedi to cut through the door but it still gave her a slight head start as she rushed out of the back door only to be tackled from the side as Tylo dived

into her.

The pair of them landed on the ground with Tylo on top of the woman, one hand grasping her wrist to keep her lightsaber away from him while he reached for her helmet with the other and pulled it free.

"Neela? You?" he exclaimed when he saw the familiar face underneath.

Tylo's surprise at seeing the former Jedi knight whose determination to prove that Jayk and Brae Udra had fallen to the Dark Side in accordance with an ancient prophecy had in fact caused her own fall was enough of a distraction that Neela was able to strike him with the hand that still held the painting. Unprepared for this, the blow was strong enough to knock Tylo off Neela and she leapt back to her feet before breaking into a run again as she headed away from the house.

Neela had already leapt over two hedges to cross from one garden to another by the time Jayk and Brae came rushing out of the house and they paused to help Tylo back to his feet.

"Neela." he said, "It's Neela Vortress."

"Neela? What does she want with the paintings?" Brae said.

"I didn't get the chance to ask her. Just get after her, I'll be fine." Tylo replied.

Jayk and Brae set off after Neela, leaping over the hedges separating the gardens from one another. The fallen Jedi still had a significant head start on them though and she was able to keep ahead until she reached the end of the row of houses at which point there was the roar of repulsorlift engines as the police airspeeder descended from above. The speeder's wings folded up as it touched down and the canopy raised to permit one of the two officers inside to leap out and point his weapon at Neela.

"Get down on the ground!" he yelled at her as he took aim but instead of obeying Neela turned towards him and continued running. Faced with this threat the police officer had no choice but to fire his carbine at her. However, Neela was expecting this and she used her lightsaber to parry the blast, deflecting it in the direction of the air speeder where it hit the startled pilot and he slumped forwards over the controls. Despite having seen how easily Neela could deflect his shots the police officer fired again and this time she sent the attack straight back at him, sending him toppling backwards as the blaster bolt punched through his armoured vest.

Neela then shut off her lightsaber as she ran to the airspeeder and tossed both her weapon and the painting into the compact craft. Then she dragged the body of the pilot from its seat and climbed in herself. Taking hold of the controls she pulled back on them so that the air speeder rose up off the ground before either Jayk or Brae could reach it. Instead the two Jedi could only watch helplessly as Neela flew off into the distance with the stolen painting.

"This is Neela Vortress." Jayk told the room filled with local law enforcement officers. Not only had various planetary police forces sent representatives to this briefing but also customs agents and local militia commanders were present, such was the threat that Neela was considered to pose. Neela's face was shown on a large screen at one end of the room and Jayk stood beside this as he spoke, "Until a year and a half ago she was a member of the Jedi Order known for her ability to root out and expose corruption in high places. However, that changed when she falsely became convinced that a fellow Jedi had fallen to the Dark Side."

"You mean you and Brae." Tylo commented from the back of the room.

"Quite." Jayk responded before he continued, "Neela's fanaticism in pursuing her theory led to the death of her own padawan and she was declared a renegade when she failed to return to the temple on Coruscant. Now it is believed that she herself has fallen to the Dark Side and is consumed by an obsession to prove the case against myself and Brae."

"So you brought them to this planet then?" one of the gathered agents said.

"From a certain point of view, yes. She must have found out that we were here to examine a set of paintings and so came here to stop us from doing that."

"She seems to think that we want the paintings for something." Brae added.

"That is why I've requested that all of the other paintings be seized until we can be sure that Neela is no longer on the planet." Jayk said.

"That's been taken care of." OI'Rayton commented.

"Good. Now what about tracking the airspeeder she stole?" Jayk asked.

"It headed towards a settlement on the coast." a custom agent responded, "We tracked it as it flew out over the ocean before it ditched into the water. We've got search and rescue craft out there now looking for wreckage."

"With any luck that lunatic died in the crash." another police officer said.

"I doubt it." Tylo responded, "If Neela was going to off herself then she could have done it easily before now. She'll have bailed out."

"Are there any docking bays along the path she took?" Jayk said.

"I'll have to check to be certain but I think so." the customs agent said.

"Please do so. Also look out for any variation in speed and altitude. Neela may have set the airspeeder's autopilot to lead us away from wherever she bailed out but she will still have had to slow down and reduce altitude to bail out without using the escape system. If we can find out where she did that then we'll be on our way to finding out where she went."

Neela screamed in rage as she looked at the four other stolen paintings inside the ship she had hijacked to bring her to this planet.

"Where do you fit?" she yelled at the latest painting she had stolen as she compared it to the others. One by one she walked up to the other paintings and held up the one she had just acquired, checking to see if the horizons in any of them met when placed side to side as two of the paintings did. However, the newest painting did not match any of the others and so she threw it across the room, "How many? How many more of you must I find before I know what you're trying to show me?" she said angrily, "Jayk Udra I promise that you will never unlock the secret of these paintings. I'll find the others and I'll find where they are leading to."

"This is the list." Ol'Rayton said as he stood in the lounge of the *Swift Exit*, holding out a mem-stick, "Every ship docked at the bays within ten kilometres of any point along the stolen airspeeder's flight path."

"Cal I'm going to need you to take a look at this." Jayk said as he took the mem-stick from the detective and Cal's hologram materialised suddenly, startling the unsuspecting detective.

"Just plug it into the system and I'll get right on it." Cal said and Jayk inserted the mem-stick into his datapad, connecting it to the *Swift Exit*'s network remotely, "Thanks, I've got it." Cal added.

"Who's he?" Ol'Rayton asked, "You never mentioned there being someone else aboard this ship."

"Cal Udra was a jedi a few thousand years back." Tylo told him, "When he was alive he put everything he knew into a holocron along with as close a copy of his own personality as he could to guide you through everything else. With all that computing power going through a list on a mem-stick is child's play."

"Okay I'm done." Cal said rapidly and Tylo smiled.

"See? I told you so." he said.

"Do you know where Neela's ship is then Cal?" Brae asked.

"Not precisely but I've been able to eliminate most of the ships on that list." Cal replied, "For starters the fact that only beings you've visited over the last three days have been burgled means that that's when she probably arrived so I've eliminated everything more than a day before that. The extra day allows her time to have found you and is probably longer than needed. Then we have the types of ship. Neela will probably be operating a ship that she can run by herself, although there is the chance that she just booked passage on a larger vessel so I've broken down the list into two parts. The first is of ships that one person can pilot by themselves and constitutes eighty-seven vessels. The second is of vessels capable of transporting passengers with a degree of privacy and that has a further twenty-four vessels on it."

"That's still more than a hundred ships." Tylo commented.

"I can have starport records pulled for all those ships." Ol'Rayton said, "The captain of every ship that visits this planet has to-"

"Yeah I know." Tylo interrupted, "I had to provide ID for your database."

"Neela could have handed over obviously fake ID and the starport officials would have taken it. She's not a jedi any more but you've seen that she still has the power of one." Brae pointed out.

"That also opens up another possibility. One that gives us a much smaller pool of possibilities." Cal said.

"What's that?" Ol'Rayton asked.

"Well it's possible that Neela could have manipulated your starport staff into simply not logging her ship as being present here at all. They'd mark the docking bay itself as unavailable but there would be no entry for the ship itself on their landing records." Cal answered.

"So how many options does that leave us Cal?" Tylo said and the hologram smiled.

"One." he replied, "A star port less than ten kilometres from here so Neela could easily have made it between here and there quickly each day to be able to follow you around. The information online shows that it has forty-two docking bays for small craft such as light freighters and yachts. Of these four are closed for repairs and twenty-four ships are listed as being present. That should leave fourteen docking bays available for use but they list only thirteen."

"So we have a docking bay without a ship. How curious. I think that this deserves some investigation." Jayk said.

"I'll have a tactical team assembled." Ol'Rayton said but Jayk held up his hand.

"I don't think so detective. You saw what Neela is capable of. All we ask is that the docking bay is isolated. Brae and I will deal with Neela." Jayk said and Tylo smiled.

"I guess I'll just stay here then shall I?" he said.

"No Tylo. We will need you and the *Swift Exit* to get us there and make sure that Neela's ship cannot escape." Jayk replied and Tylo's face fell as he realised what Jayk was asking of him.

5.

The flight to the starport Neela was believed to have her ship docked at took only a few minutes in the *Swift Exit* and Tylo touched down in the parking lot just long enough for Jayk and Brae to rush down the access ramp before taking off again just as a security droid came speeding up to the Udras on its wheeled base.

"Attention!" it called out, "This area is reserved for the use of surface and ground effect traffic only. All aerospace craft are required to use formal docking bays."

"My name is Jedi Jayk Udra. I need to speak to the dock master immediately." Jayk told the machine and it paused while it relayed this message to its overseer.

"Confirmed." the droid said, "Follow me." and then it spun on the spot and began to roll away.

"I guess we go after it then." Brae added and she and Jayk followed the security droid into the main starport terminal building.

As a provincial starport rather than a major commercial hub the terminal was small and quiet, featuring a number of administrative points but few of the other independent businesses that could often be found at such places. Escorted by the security droid, the Udras were taken through a door marked 'Private' and into the operations area of the starport where the traffic control centre was located and as they entered the room a man got to his feet and turned to face them.

"My name is Ad'Poro, senior dock master. What brings the jedi to my starport?" he said.

"We are looking for this individual." Jayk answered and he held out his datapad to show the dock master an image of Neela Vortress.

"She doesn't look familiar to me, but then again I see hundreds of beings come through here each week. What is the name of her vessel?" he asked.

"We don't know." Jayk told him.

"Then what makes you think that she is here?" Ad'Poro replied.

"Because you only list thirteen docking bays as available when the numbers of ships docked and bays under repair indicate that you should have fourteen." Brae said and the dock master frowned.

"That can't be possible. I check every docking bay myself." he said.

"Neela Vortress is a former jedi knight. She could manipulate you or any of your staff into altering records and you wouldn't even know that you were doing it. Please show us the list of the ships you have docked here along with the bays they are berthed in. We have a ship overhead that can tell us which is the additional bay that is occupied." Jayk said and Ad'Poro nodded.

"Of course master jedi." he said and he quickly called up a list of all of the starport's docking bays that included the names of ships berthed in them and details of those closed for scheduled maintenance.

Looking at this list Jayk took out his comlink and lifted the device to his mouth.

"Tylo do you read me?" he transmitted.

"Loud and clear Jayk." Tylo responded.

"Tylo I'm going to give you a list of the docking bays that have ships listed against them. I want you to check the others from the air and see if there are any extra craft present." Jayk told him.

"Understood. Go ahead Jayk." Tylo said.

"Okay here goes. Firstly bays one through six.." Jayk began.

"Copy, one through six are occupied."

"Next we have eight through twenty-one. Then twenty-four." Jayk continued.

"Stop there a moment Jayk. Can you confirm that bay twenty-two is supposed to be vacant?" Tylo interrupted.

"Yes, according to the list of ships docked there is nothing in bay twenty-two." Jayk replied.

"Then you might want to check it out because there's a light freighter in there now." Tylo told him.

"I'll have security investigate immediately." Ad'Poro said when he overheard this and he reached for the nearby controls to the intercom.

"No!" Jayk snapped, "Don't do anything. Brae and I will deal with this. Just make sure that everyone stays out of our way." and then he looked at Brae and added, "Ready Brae?" and she nodded.

"Ready when you are master." she replied, drawing her lightsaber.

Jayk and Brae ran through the starport, dodging the few other beings and droids in the terminal as they made their way to the docking bays themselves. These were organised into rows that made finding a particular bay faster by first locating the row in the right range. Jayk and Brae then ran along this until they reached docking bay twenty-two where they found the door to be locked despite no ship being logged as present inside it.

"Do we break through the door?" Brae asked and Jayk nodded.

"Normally I would be against such a direct means of getting inside but on this occasion I think that it is

warranted. However, we need to make sure that she can't simply take off while we are still cutting through the door.

Even inside her ship Neela heard the sound of another vessel descending low over hers and she hurried to the cockpit of the stolen light freighter. Looking up through the canopy she saw the *Swift Exit* now hovering low over the docking bay, making sure that she could not take off. Although YT-700 class freighters were reasonably common in the galaxy Neela realised instantly that this was the *Swift Exit* and that meant only one thing, the Jedi had somehow managed to locate her.

Expecting to be facing both Jayk and Brae, Neela decided that the best course of action was to get outside her stolen ship into the docking bay where she would have more room to move and so she rushed to the access ramp and ran down it. She had expected the two Jedi to deploy directly from the hovering *Swift Exit* and had planned to ambush them the moment that the first of the landed. However, as soon as she ran down the access ramp she saw the docking bay's personnel entrance hatch being melted through by what was obviously a lightsaber and she realised that the attack was going to come from the ground instead.

This new information made little difference to Neela's plan of action though, it only meant that she would be directing her initial attack in a different direction. It also offered her a way out and a means to put more space between her and the two Jedi now breaking into the docking bay.

The moment that a large section of the hatch fell into the docking bay Neela was ready and with a wave of her hand she used the Force to unleash a powerful wave of telekinetic energy that picked up numerous equipment and cargo containers and hurled them towards the hatch.

Danger.

"Look out!" Brae yelled as she sensed the disturbance in the Force when Neela called upon it and both she and Jayk ducked back out of the way as the objects hurled by the former Jedi smashed into the hatchway with such force that they broke apart and pieces of them flew through the hole in the hatch.

Before Neela could unleash a second telekinetic attack both Jayk and Brae dived through the hole in the hatch with their lightsabers active. Seeing the Jedi coming storming into the docking bay Neela activated her own weapon and there was a 'snap-hiss' as the blade extended. This sound combined with the bright glow from the blade alerted the Jedi to her location and Jayk immediately turned towards her.

"She's under the ship. Brae take the left, I'm on the right. Circle round and we'll take her together." he ordered.

Jayk and Brae sprinted across the docking bay, splitting apart so that Neela could not launch another telekinetic attack at them both simultaneously. Instead Neela reacted by launching a charge of her own, rushing out from beneath her ship towards Brae. Jayk had expected this, despite her strength with the Force Brae was still the weaker opponent of the pair and so it made sense for Neela to seek to remove her from the fight first. To counter this Jayk turned and ran towards Brae as well, intending to reach her before Neela could overpower her and catch her between them. At the same time Brae came to a halt and adopted a defensive posture, ready to meet Neela's charge. However, as Neela charged at Brae the younger Jedi she leapt up into the air, channelling the Force to boost her jump in a way that initially made Brae think that she was about to unleash another Force based attack so it came as a surprise to her when Neela suddenly jumped upwards and flew over her head. Neela's leap carried her up through the open roof of the docking bay where she landed on the surface beside the opening of docking bay twenty-two. This now gave Neela all the room to move that she could want. All of the private docking bays at the starport were housed in a single large building and now that she was on the roof she could get to any of them.

"Where's she going?" Brae said as she looked up from the floor of the docking bay.

"I don't know but we can't let her escape." Jayk replied, taking out his comlink, "Tylo can you see Neela?" he transmitted.

"Yes I see her. She's up above you now. Do you want me to set down?" Tylo responded.

"No. Increase your altitude to about a hundred metres, I don't want Neela getting to the *Swift Exit* and even she won't be able to jump that high. Brae and I will go after her." Jayk told him.

"Understood. But you had better hurry Neela's on the move." Tylo told him.

"Ready?" Jayk said to Brae as he put his comlink away again and she nodded at him, "Then let's go." Jayk added and both Jedi jumped up at the same time, using the Force just as Neela had done to boost herself up onto the roof.

The two Jedi landed side by side on the roof almost exactly where Neela had landed earlier. However, she had already started to run across the flat surface and had a head start on the Jedi. Fortunately the flat roof gave her nowhere to hide and the Jedi spotted her easily.

"There she is." Brae exclaimed.

"After her. Stick together this time." Jayk replied and the pair set off across the roof after the fleeing Neela.

Neela sensed the presence of Jayk and Brae and knew that she could not escape them while the *Swift Exit*

was maintaining a watch from overhead and she began to look for a suitable escape route. There were of course ways off the roof all around her in the form of the large openings that led to the starport's docking bays. However, Neela did not just want to drop down into a random docking bay that already housed a ship. The crew of any such ship would have sealed the docking bay for security and she did not want to have to waste time cutting through a hatch while Jayk and Brae caught up with her. Fortunately for her though she heard the sound of construction from close by and she realised that she was heading for one of the docking bays closed for maintenance. This offered Neela the best of all possibilities, the docking bay would be cluttered and provide her with cover for as long as she chose to stand her ground while the entrance would not be sealed and she could easily leave if she needed to.

Leaping down into the docking bay that was under repair Neela landed close to the edge and took a quick look around to judge her surroundings. As expected the work in the docking bay was being largely undertaken by droids using built in tools but there were also a pair of organic workers overseeing the process who stared at the lightsaber wielding woman in surprise.

Fear.

"You should leave." she told them and the workers both turned and ran towards the hatchway while the droids continued to work on as if they were oblivious to Neela's presence and Neela herself shut off her lightsaber and concealed herself among the equipment that was scattered around the docking bay. The two workers left the docking bay at the same time as Jayk and Brae dropped down from the roof.

Anger.

Hatred.

"She's still in here. I can sense her." Brae said and Jayk nodded slowly.

"Yes, so can I. I can't tell where she is though." he replied, searching the shadows around the sides of the poorly lit docking bay.

"Do you think any of them could tell us?" Brae suggested, pointing to some of the droids still at work but Jayk shook his head.

"Fifth degree labour droids? I doubt it." he answered, "We should seal the door. Limit her options for escape."

"Okay I'll do it." Brae said and she started to walk towards the open hatchway while Jayk continued to search for Neela.

It was when Brae was about half way to the hatch that Neela suddenly emerged from her hiding place and the sound her activating her lightsaber was drowned out by the scream she released as she charged at Brae. At the same time Neela waved a hand and sent an unsuspecting droid flying through the air towards Jayk. Seeing this coming towards him Jayk used the Force to create a wave of telekinesis of his own and knocked the machine aside before it could hit him but Neela made use of this distraction to finish her charge and she swung her lightsaber at Brae.

The young jedi was prepared for this and she brought up her own lightsaber blade to block Neela's attack. Neela then snarled at Brae, continuing to try and push her blade at the padawan and forcing Brae to pull her blade closer to herself. Before Brae could be burned by her own blade though she suddenly rolled aside and Neela stumbled forwards before regaining her balance. Spinning around she then delivered a kick to Brae's back just as she was attempting to get back just as she was attempting to get back to her feet. Brae then dropped her lightsaber and cried out in pain and at the same time she unleashed an uncontrolled blast of telekinetic energy through the Force that hurled Neela backwards several metres.

"I knew it!" Neela cried out as she landed and ignoring her own use of the Force she continued, "I feel the anger in you, I felt the Dark Side in your actions."

"Brae be careful." Jayk warned his daughter as he ran towards Neela, attempting to strike her down before she could defend herself. However, Neela was able to spin out of the way of Jayk's first strike and then parry his next as they began to duel.

Neela was a skilled combatant but there was no doubt that in addition to his superior physical strength, the extra years of experience that Jayk possessed made him the superior swordsman and had he been attempting to simply kill Neela he would have been able to overpower her very quickly. However, Jayk still wanted to take her back to the Jedi Order for them to deal with and so he found his blade close to Neela's neck he suddenly backed away and struck again elsewhere in the hope that he could inflict a non-lethal injury instead. In this moment of respite though, Neela reached out her hand and used the Force to call Brae's lightsaber to her hand while the padawan was still reeling in pain on the floor of the docking bay. Activating the lightsaber as soon as it was in her hand, Neela went on the offensive with both blades. She lashed out with one of the lightsabers as quickly as she could, hoping that Jayk would be too slow to react to every attack while the second blade was kept for defensive purposes to parry any attack that Jayk was able to launch.

It was when Jayk struck at Neela and she was able to block his attack with her own lightsaber that she saw an opportunity to finish the fight in her favour. Jayk had aimed low, hoping to hit her hip and immobilise her. Now though his lightsaber was jammed against hers in a position that left him vulnerable from above and she

grinned at Jayk as she raised the weapon she had stolen from Brae.

"All too easy," she said but when she tried to bring the weapon down she found that her hand would not move.

"I think you'll find that's mine." Brae said and when Neela looked around she saw that the padawan had got back to her feet and was now holding out her hand towards her lightsaber.

"I wasn't expecting you to get up so quickly." Neela said.

"I think you'll find I'm full of surprises." Brae replied and she used the Force to rip her lightsaber from Neela's grasp, pulling back into her own. At the same time Jayk took advantage of Neela being distracted, stepped away and then struck again. This time though as Neela tried to parry his attack she misjudged the angle of his strike just enough that instead of meeting his blade with her own it was the grip of her lightsaber that was struck and the end was sliced from the weapon. In an instant Neela's blade vanished as the severed part fell to the floor and rolled away.

"It's over Neela. Return to the temple with us and face the council." Jayk told her as she now found herself facing two armed jedi while she was without a weapon.

"Never!" Neela screamed and she threw herself towards the hatchway out of the docking bay that Brae had not had the chance to seal. Diving through this Neela then picked herself up and started to run through the starport.

"Brae are you okay?" Jayk asked and Brae nodded.

"I'll be fine," she answered, "Though I'm not sure how fast I can move right now."

"Then stay here, I'll deal with Neela." Jayk told her before he ran out of the docking bay and after Neela.

6.

Now just looking for a means to escape from the starport Neela headed for the sound of engines powering up, intending to get aboard a ship that was about to depart when it was too late for the crew to abort their departure. Rounding a corner she saw something that suited her even better though. At the end of the row of docking bays she saw that the hatchway of one was open so that cargo could be unloaded from the ship while a customs agent scanned containers and discussed the contents with one of the crew. At the same time Neela could hear the sound of the ship's engines from inside the docking bay and she knew that it would be ready for immediate launch. Rushing towards the open hatchway she thrust her hand out ahead of her and used the Force to scatter the cargo containers as well as pushing the customs agent and the crewman out of her way before she ran through the hatchway.

Inside the docking bay Neela found another light freighter that had only just landed and was being unloaded while the engines were still active, suggesting that the crew intended to offload their cargo and then depart as quickly as possible. A pair of cargo hands were bringing more cargo containers down the access ramp when Neela entered the docking bay and they stopped and looked at her when she appeared.

"Hey lady, what are you doing here?" one of them called out as she rushed towards them but in response Neela just reached out towards him and began to choke him through the Force.

"Stang!" the other crewman exclaimed and he charged at Neela, taking a wrench from his tool belt and raising it to use as a weapon against her. Even without her lightsaber Neela was still a skilled combatant though and she grabbed hold of the man's arm and twisted it sharply, causing him to cry out in pain before she threw him over her shoulder and then kicked him off the edge of access ramp. Doing this had forced Neela to release the other crewman but he was too busy gasping for breath to be able to engage her before she struck him hard enough to knock him off the ramp as well.

Responding to the commotion on the access ramp the freighter's pilot came running out of the cockpit with a blaster pistol in his hand that he aimed directly at her.

"Get back!" he shouted at her but Neela carried on up the ramp and used the force to pull the weapon from the pilot's hand before he could use it. Catching the blaster one handed, Neela then turned it on the startled pilot and shot him before he could try to escape.

Not even bothering to turn around as she crossed the cargo hold, Neela closed the access ramp with a wave of her hand before making her way to the cockpit and sitting down in the pilot's seat. With the engines already running she did not need to worry about any security lockouts and she simply took hold of the flight controls and took off, smiling from the cockpit as she saw Jayk come rushing into the docking bay just moments too late to prevent her escape.

"Tylo can you stop the freighter taking off now?" Jayk said into his comlink.

"Not unless you want Cal to take over flying the ship while I shoot it down." Tylo responded and Jayk frowned.

"No, we can't bring it down over a populated area. Contact the planetary militia, maybe they can get a corvette into place to stop Neela escaping." he said before he heard Brae's voice over the comlink.

"Dad I'm aboard Neela's ship. The missing paintings are here and she's done something weird with a couple of them. I think you should come and take a look." she said.

"The paintings definitely match." Cal told Jayk, Brae and Tylo when they were all gathered in the lounge of the *Swift Exit*, "It's no co-incidence that the skylines of those two paints meet when they are placed side by side. In addition to that if you bend the upper parts of the pictures inwards then the star patterns overlap perfectly. I've compared the images you took of the other paintings you've looked at and I found another such match."

"So what you're saying is that all these pictures combine to form one bigger one?" Tylo asked.

"Exactly." Cal replied, "I think that there are seventy-two of these paintings altogether, each on covering five degrees of a complete circle. Since the list we have puts only twelve on this planet that still leaves us with sixty to find before we can piece them together and see the whole picture."

"They're a map." Jayk said, "The star pattern will be unique to a particular system while the skyline will identify a particular place on a planet in that system. Thal N'Krey created the means to find somewhere significant to him and hid it in his paintings."

"But what could be so important to him that he'd do that?" Brae asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine there Brae." Cal said, "But I bet that it's nothing good."

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

When Vallani Mellet awoke she smelled the smoke immediately and sat upright in bed. Looking across the large room that was littered with artwork in various stages of completion she saw the artist Thal N'Krey, for whom she was both model and lover, furiously ripping pages from his sketch book and tossing them into an ornate metal vase that had flames coming out of it.

"Thal?" she said as she got out of bed and hurried towards him, "Thal what are you doing?"

"What I must Vallani. What I must. I went there, I stood at the gates and I saw what was beneath. As I stood there I drew everything around me in this book don't you see? It contains a guide to the place. The finished paintings are scattered, I sold them all to different beings who had no idea what they were really buying but my sketchbook, yes my sketchbook contains them all so I have to destroy it." and he continued to tear pages from the book and toss them into the flames.

One of the pages missed the vase and Vallani crouched down to pick it up, looking at the detailed pictures drawn on both sides.

"But why Thal?" she said.

"No!" Thal exclaimed as he snatched the page from her grasp and threw it into the fire with the others, "You want it too don't you?"

"I don't even know what it is Thal. Why are you burning your drawings?" she responded.

"Because I can't let anyone else find what I found." Thal told her, "The power is immense, too great for anyone else to have control of."

"Anyone else?"

"Of course. I can always find it again like I found it the first time Vallani. It's mine." Thal said as a smiled spread across his face.