

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

5-12: FIND & CHASE

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When Thal N'Krey's ship is located it offers answers to what happened to the missing artist. It is not just the Jedi who race to intercept the ship though as Rylee Drud and Teron Sharr also seek to claim it for themselves...

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1.

"Come on Thal I feel stupid." the young woman being led along with a blindfold covering her eyes said. "Just wait Vallani." Thal N'Krey, the kiffar artist said, "We're almost there." then he came to a halt and pulled the strip of cloth from over Vallani's eyes to show her the starship in front of them. The ship was a scout vessel capable of hyperspace travel but the most significant feature was the artwork that adorned the nose of the craft. This was a hand painted image of Vallani herself lay in a pose that covered her modesty despite her being completely naked.

"Thal it's beautiful!" Vallani exclaimed rushing forwards to inspect the ship more closely and she reached up to brush her hand against the bottom of the hull, "When can we take a trip in her? I want to make love in hyperspace."

"We ca leave right now for a short flight but then I need to leave for a while." Thal replied, walking up to the young woman and wrapping his arms around her.

"Why? Where are you going?" she asked.

"There are some things I've been looking for. This ship will help me get them." Thal told her.

"More of your old statues? Why can't you just get them sent here?"

"Some can't be trusted to be couriers Vallani. Some are far too important for that and there are people who would like to prevent me from getting hold of others. More importantly not everything I need for my art is even in the Republic. There are places out there were no-one has trodden for thousands of years and I need to go to them." Thal explained.

"Then take me with you." Vallani said and she smiled before she pointed to the nose art and added, "If it's just you and me I can spend the entire time dressed like you painted me."

"I can't Vallani. It could be dangerous. Very dangerous. But if I'm right about what's waiting out there then it will all be worth it. The entire galaxy will be saying my name for the next ten thousand years." Thal said.

"So what do we have now Kayle?" the female customs investigator asked as she set a mug of caf down on her nautolan partner's desk and he leant back and sighed. Despite them both wearing plain clothes they wore badges as proof of their office that displayed their names, the woman's reading Hessie.

"More smugglers making transfers in the Trianus cluster." Kayle told her and he pointed at he display screen on his desk that showed an image of two relatively small starships docked together in an asteroid field. The field was not particularly dense but the crews of the two ships obviously thought it would be enough to hide them from detection. What they clearly were not aware of was that the Istras Customs Enforcement Office had deployed dozens of micro probe droids around the system to monitor such places.

"Is that our old friend Caldar in the barloz-class?" Hessie asked as she studied the larger of the two vessels, a Corellian built medium freighter.

"It certainly looks like his ship, yes." Kayle replied, "I don't recognise the other one though."

"It looks like an Alderaanian scout. Old but functional." Hessie said and Kayle smiled.

"Just like me." he said.

"What's that on the nose though?" Hessie asked, leaning closer to the screen and Kayle zoomed in on the front of the scout ship to reveal the naked woman painted on it.

"Now that's impressive." he said, "The artwork I mean. It's not like I find your species terribly appealing. That must have taken some talent."

"You already knew that was there didn't you? Did you really think it would shock me?" Hessie said.

"Hessie if there is anything in this galaxy that would shock you then I don't want to see it. I would probably go blind. You know that behind your back people call you Hessie the-"

"Yes I know and they're all just jealous. Now I suppose we better run that through BoSS and see what their database has to say." Hessie said.

"Agreed. The probe picked up the transponder so we've got more to go on than a class and the estimated measurements of the woman painted on the side." Kayle said as he accessed the database of the Bureau of Ships and Services, the organisation that handled the registry of starships throughout the Republic. Ordinarily all that would be returned from queries made to the database would be basic information about the class of ship and its lawful owner, however on this occasion what Kayle and Hessie saw was radically different.

PRIORITY FLAGGED VESSEL. HOLD IN PORT. JEDI ORDER ALERTED.

"Jedi?" Hessie exclaimed, "What the hell is going on with that ship that needs the jedi to be involved?"

"I don't know about you Hessie but I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kayle replied.

Rylee Drud was exercising in her quarters, mimicking the movements of a droid that shouted encouraging phrases at her each time she began to slow down when her communicator sounded.

"Pause." she told the droid.

"You still have twenty minutes left to go. You can make it, I know you can." the droid responded.

"Oh shut off!" Rylee snapped while she walked over to the bed and the droid bowed its head as it closed down. Sitting on the side of the bed Rylee reached out to the table beside it and activated the communicator, triggering a small hologram of a spider-like alien to appear in front of her.

"Miss Drud I have information for sale that you have classified as a priority." the alien said, seemingly ignoring the fact that Rylee was dressed in exercise clothing rather than the formal suits she wore for most of their conversations.

"Go ahead Assembler." Rylee replied and she took a quick drink of water from the bottle in her hand. As far as Rylee knew Assembler was both the name of the individual alien and also of its species. The creature sold information for a living but information about itself was never on offer.

"The vessel belonging to Thal N'Krey has been located." the Assembler told her and Rylee's eyes widened.

"Where?" she asked.

"This information was not easy to come by. It required access to the private files held by the Bureau of Ships and Services." the Assembler said.

"How much?" Rylee asked, knowing that this meant he would be asking for a significant sum of money.

"A million credits." the Assembler told her.

"A million?" Rylee responded in surprise.

"The price is in line with the difficulty of obtaining the information." the Assembler replied. Rylee would normally attempt to negotiate any deal of this value but where the Assembler was concerned she knew that it would be pointless.

"Very well. I'll transfer the funds now." she said, picking up a datapad and using it to access her family's bank account.

"Your payment has been confirmed." the Assembler said, "I am transferring the data now."

Rylee looked down at her datapad again and she saw the image that had been transferred to BoSS from the Istras system. This confirmed what the Assembler had said about the vessel being the one that belonged to the missing artist Thal N'Krey. More troubling though was the response that BoSS had sent to Istras, confirming that Rylee was not the only one who knew about the ship. Now she had to move quickly before the Jedi could arrive and she activated the communication system again.

"Call Morton Crayne." she said.

The herglic crime lord Lusog walked up to the door leading to his master's private chamber only to find his way blocked by a pair of human women. The women were dwarfed by the massive alien but they did not flinch.

"Out of my way." Lusog told them.

"Lord Sharr is not to be disturbed. He is in conference with his master." one of the women said.

"I know." Lusog replied, "But Lord Sharr left standing orders that I was to inform him immediately if there was any news of Thal N'Krey. His ship has been found by our agents and Lord Sharr needs to know. Now will you stand aside and let me explain why I am disturbing him or will you explain to him why this news was delayed when he is done with his meeting?"

The two women guards looked at one another nervously. Neither of them wanted to risk the wrath of Teron Sharr, both familiar with how he had slaughtered their previous leader's elite unit of bodyguards before offering her the choice of submission or death.

Both of the women promptly stepped aside and one of them opened the door for Lusog to enter the throne room.

As he entered the room Lusog found his master, the young human Teron Sharr present along with his gen'dai advisor Turlan. The gen'dai were one of the galaxy's most long lived species and Turlan himself was old enough to have served the Sith Empire that dominated large parts of the galaxy up to seven and a half centuries earlier. There was a third figure already in the room as well but this individual was only a hologram projected from the communication system. Lusog knew of this individual only from what Teron and some of his inner circle had said of him. According to them he was the Sith lord that Teron himself was apprenticed to. Even now looking at the hologram of the man Lusog could tell little more about him. He was clearly either human or one of the numerous near human species that dominated the galaxy but his facial features were concealed beneath

"I gave orders that I was not to be disturbed." Teron said as he turned slowly towards the approaching herglic.

"Apologies my Lord Sharr." Lusog replied, bowing his head, "But there is important news from our agents in the Istras system."

"Important enough to interrupt my master's teachings?" Teron asked.

"The vessel belonging to Thal N'Krey has been seen there my lord." Lusog answered but somewhat unexpectedly it was not Teron that first responded to this. Instead it was this adviser Turlan.

"Ah yes, the vessel Teron used in his travels beyond the Republic." the gen'dai said before he looked at the holographic figure of Teron's master, "I take it that you want the craft retrieved before anyone else can learn its secrets my lord?"

"I have no sentimental attachment to that vessel." the figure said, "However, we cannot risk any rivals discovering what lies within its computer. The secrets of the Sith are not for mere mortals."

"Alert our agents in the Istras system Lusog." Teron ordered, "Tell them to expect my arrival shortly. I will personally lead the mission to recover that ship."

"Yes my master, I will see to it immediately." Lusog said, bowing his head before he turned and left the room.

"You are going personally my lord?" Turlan asked.

"I sense that we are not the only ones aware of the ship Turlan, right now our enemies are making their own moves to acquire it." Teron replied.

2.

"Hessie are you still in there?" Kayle called out through the open door of the women's bathroom at the customs office.

"Have they already landed?" Hessie responded.

"No but they're on approach. What's taking you so long in there? I warned you not to eat that-" Kayle began before Hessie appeared wearing trousers and a top that were significantly tighter than usual, "Oh I see. You've run out of clean clothing and decided just to paint your skin."

"I wanted to look my best for the jedi." Hessie said.

"Your best? Can you even sit down in that? In fact can you breathe in that?"

"As long as the breaths aren't too deep then yes. No let's go. I want to give this jedi, Jayk Udra I think his name is, a warm welcome." Hessie said as she started to walk in the direction of the docking bay.

"You think you can seduce a jedi?" Kayle said.

"From what I hear they are excellent lovers. With any luck I'll be sensing a disturbance or two myself before he leaves." Hessie replied, grinning.

"Well I'm sorry to disappoint you but it's a well known fact that jedi are all celibate." Kayle said.

"Poodoo. They aren't. Anyway even if they were celibate is just another word for a challenge and I do love a good challenge. Plus of course that would make me his first. I think I'd like that." Hessie replied and Kayle groaned as he opened the door to the hangar.

Inside the large chamber there were several corvettes with customs markings on them as well as a number of civilian vessels that had been impounded and the two agents looked around for a ship with the red markings of the Republic's Judicial Department on it. However, there was no such vessel present.

"Hey!" Kayle called out to a nearby service droid, "What happened to the jedi ship? Hasn't it landed yet?"

"This is it coming in now sir." the droid responded just as a YT-700 class light freighter entered the hangar.

"That doesn't look like a jedi ship to me." Hessie commented.

"They must be working undercover." Kayle said, "Come on let's go and introduce ourselves. Then after you've made a fool of yourself we can get to work."

"Joke all you like but just for that tomorrow I'm going to show you the video of me and this Jayk Udra." Hessie said and Kayle grunted.

"Ugh. Please don't. You humans are even more unsightly when you are mating." he said.

The two customs agents walked over to where the YT-700 came into land and Kayle pointed at the image of the woman painted on the side of the ship along with the name *Swift Exit*.

"There you have it. They're interested in that ship because they're fans of the nose art." he said.

"Shut up. Here they come." Hessie replied as the *Swift Exit's* access ramp lowered and three individuals in jedi robes emerged from inside the ship. One of these was a middle aged man with grey hair while he was accompanied by a young blonde woman and also a woman with darker skin, "Come to Hessie my silver haired dream date." Hessie muttered and she smiled as she approached the jedi.

"I am Jedi Jayk Udra." the male jedi said and Hessie reached out to shake his hand.

"Yes I know. I'm agent Hessie Lorat and this is my partner Kayle Num. I'm glad to make your acquaintance Jedi Udra. Or may I call you Jayk?" she said as they shook hands.

Lust.

The two women jedi looked at one another and smiled as they and Jayk sensed Hessie's thoughts about Jayk.

"I'm Brae by the way." the younger woman added, "That's Brae Udra. I'm his padawan and his daughter."

Surprise.

Embarrassment.

Brae's statement startled Hessie and her eyes widened as she tried to conceal her surprise.

"And I'm Jedi Knight Kat Maran. Jayk and I know one another very well as well. Extremely well in fact." the darker skinned woman added.

"Hah! Busted." Kayle said.

"A pleasure to meet you Agent Lorat." Jayk said as another man appeared from inside the *Swift Exit* although he did not wear jedi robes like the others did, "Captain Tylo Kurrast is our pilot." Jayk added.

"Hi there." Tylo commented.

"Oh, err, hi." Hessie replied.

"Perhaps you could show us what you have found." Jayk added to the customs agents and Kayle nodded.

"Come this way Jedi Udra." Kayle said, beckoning for the jedi to follow him and the crew of the *Swift Exit*

walked with the two customs agents towards their office, "So what's so important about a petty smuggling operation that requires the attention of the Jedi anyway?" Kayle asked while they walked.

"Smuggling?" Jayk responded.

"Yes, we put in a query about a smuggling ship and BoSS told us to expect you." Kayle told him.

"It's the ship itself that we're interested in." Brae said, "It belongs to someone that we've been looking for for a couple of years now."

"So what did he do?" Hessie asked.

"Painted pictures mainly." Tylo commented.

"No seriously, what did he do?" Hessie said.

"Tylo's telling the truth." Kat said, "The being we're looking for is a kiffar called Thal N'Krey, an artist who vanished about a decade ago."

"Since when was painting pictures a crime serious enough to drag the Jedi in? Here's our office now." Kayle said, opening the door that led into the main customs office and Kayle pointed towards his and Hessie's desk, "We're over there." he added.

"His crime was possession of forbidden Sith artefacts." Jayk answered, "He based almost all of his art on the Sith culture and he copied some of it directly from things they created. We are trying to find him because we are concerned that he may have more dangerous artefacts in his possession."

"Is there a market for Sith artefacts on Istras?" Brae asked.

"Not that I know of." Kayle replied, "If there was then we'd have heard about by now I'm sure because it would be a matter for us."

"Why you?" Tylo said.

"Istras was terraformed four hundred years ago." Hessie pointed out, "By that time the Jedi had already wiped out the Sith. Hadn't they?"

"The Sith are gone but there have been those who have tried to resurrect their culture." Kat said.

"And right now Thal N'Krey seems to be of interest to a lot of them so we need to get to him first." Brae added.

"Are you Krup Sol?" a voice said from behind where the local crime lord sat in his favourite cantina. Krup came to this place because he knew that the owner was easily intimidated into keeping quiet about anything he witnessed and also into keeping this private booth free, so he was not happy about being approached by a stranger.

"Kriff off boy." he said as he looked over his shoulder and saw the young man looking back at him, "Who are you anyway?"

"My name is Teron Sharr." Teron told him, "I believe you may have heard of me."

Fear.

"Lord Sharr." Krup exclaimed as he leapt to his feet, "I wasn't, I mean I didn't."

"Stop babbling and sit down." Teron interrupted as he sat down at the table and behind him two other humans stood either side of him. One was a man who had the look of an enforcer while the other was a slender woman who despite her largely human appearance had especially pale skin and eyes that were totally black.

"Of course my lord." Krup replied as he retook his seat.

"Good, now tell me about this ship." Teron said and he tossed a datapad towards the other man that showed an image of Thal N'Krey's vessel on its screen.

"Ah yes, the old scout ship. One of my pilots encountered it when they were taking delivery of some cargo. Their contact was piloting the ship." Krup explained.

"Who was their contact?" the man standing behind Teron said sternly.

Anger.

"Someone working for the Corellian outfit. Someone knew they were trying out with a simple run ahead of trusting him with anything complicated." Krup said and Teron sensed how annoyed he was at being questioned by someone that he saw as a mere bodyguard.

"Will the Corellians use the same contact on the next transfer?" Teron said.

"They might." Krup answered.

"Might isn't good enough. Find out." Teron said.

"If I start asking questions like that then they're going to-" Krup began before he suddenly felt his throat tighten while Teron glared at him from across the table, his hand reached out towards Krup but not making contact with him.

"Find out." Teron said again.

"So how much are we being paid for this?" the blue skinned wroonian mercenary Rayton asked Morton Crayne as they stepped off their transport on Istras. They had landed at a private docking bay where the

officials could be bribed into ignoring the stock of illegal weapons carried aboard and also fitted to the ship and also not to look too closely at the fake identity documents presented for the immigration register.

"A quarter of a million credits with twenty percent up front." Morton replied.

"And all we've got to do is snatch a ship that's worth less than half that?" Rayton commented.

"As always Rayton the ship is not the important thing here, it's what could be aboard." Morton said as he took out his datapad and looked at the information provided to him by his own employer Rylee Drud, "The ship was picked up by the planet's customs service and they ran a check so it's a fair bet that the Jedi know about it as well."

"Do you have the name of the customs agent who ran the check? Maybe we can look him up." Rayton said and Morton smiled.

"One thing you need to learn about the charming Rylee is that she has excellent sources of information. We have the name of the customs agent who ran the check and his home address as well as those of his partner." he said.

"Thinking that we should pay one of them a little visit and beat some answers out of them?" Rayton asked.

"Nothing so crude Rayton. You must remember that Istras is an advanced world where a citizen can work from home almost as easily as they can from a centralised office so I'm betting that that applies to customs agents as well." Morton said.

"So what?"

"So it stands to reason that they might use their home computers to access the customs network and we can use that to our advantage." Morton said, "Now this Agent Num is married so his home might not be empty. On the other hand the good looking Agent Lorat is single so I expect that her apartment is empty right now. Wouldn't it be a shame if she came home to discover that she had had burglars while she was at work?"

3.

Although in recent years Morton had entrusted breaking and entering to one of his subordinates, the woman called Mara who was now host to a Sith creature in the service of Morton's other former gang member Teron Sharr he had some experience in that field himself and so when he and his men arrived at Hessie's apartment he was the one who set to work overriding the lock.

"Keep watch." he told the mercenaries who had accompanied him, "I know this sort of lock. It's all tied into the alarm system so if I don't get this quite right then the alarm will trigger as soon as the door opens."

"And if you get it right?" Rayton asked.

"Then bypassing the lock also shuts down the alarm. It's a cheap system, trust me." Morton answered before all of a sudden the door to Hessie's apartment slid upwards and he smiled, "I told you it would work." he said before he and the mercenaries hurried inside and closed the door behind them.

"Not a bad place." Rayton said as he looked around.

"No, now I suggest that you and your men start taking a look around." Morton said as he walked over to the computer that was in plain sight and sat down at it.

"What for?" Rayton asked.

"Anything worth stealing. My lock breaking may have got us in here but it's not good enough that when Agent Lorat gets home she won't instantly realise that someone's been in here so we need to make it look good. Grab any jewellery, cash or credit sticks. Oh and go through her clothes as well. Lay all her underwear out on her bed and steal any that's in her laundry. She'll think it was some deviant that broke in and it will keep her mind off the computer. Just keep it all quiet. We don't want the neighbours calling the cops yet." Morton answered while the computer started up and Rayton smiled before he and his men began to search the apartment.

Meanwhile Morton quickly confirmed that the computer was set up to remotely access Istra's customs department computer and he opened up this application, evidently if there were any security features to the connection then Hessie had saved her clearance details and the connection was made immediately. Once inside the customs department computer Morton ran a search for Thal's ship and quickly found that an alert had been put out on it. Any customs vessel or probe droid that detected the ship was under orders to trail or if possible detain it. Examining the notice more closely Morton also saw that any sighting of the ship was to be sent directly to Kayle and Hessie as well as alerting the central customs office. All this had required was for the communication addresses of the two agents to be added to the alert and Morton simply added a third to the list, this one the disposable account he was using while on Istra. Now if Thal's ship was detected the customs service itself would alert him to where it was and where it seemed to be heading.

"This isn't a bad haul. There must be a couple of thousand credits worth here." Rayton said as he emerged from Hessie's bedroom with a handful of jewellery, "Is this her by the way?" he added, holding up a digital picture frame that was running a repeating pattern of images.

"That's what the image I was given looks like." Morton replied and Rayton smiled.

"Very nice. A couple of the guys were saying that we should wait here for her. Give her a proper welcome home." he said and Morton frowned.

"Then tell them to forget it. We have what we need so we're leaving and they better hope Rylee doesn't find out what sort of men they are or by the time her mandalorian cultists are done with them they won't exactly be men any more." he said sternly.

"This ship is one we've seen before." Kayle said, pointing to the second vessel in the footage of Thal's ship docked with another in the asteroid field, "Our corvettes have even been close enough to it sometimes that its crew decided to eject their cargo into space where it would be pulled into a gravity well and destroyed."

"Amateurs." Tylo said, snorting.

"Our crews are well trained. They couldn't stop-" Hessie began.

"No I mean the nerf herders in that ship." Tylo interrupted, pointing at the footage of the smuggling ship.

"As soon as customs can identify your vessel you're finished. They should have swapped it after the first intercept."

"Ah you're familiar with customs operations then." Kayle said and Tylo smiled.

"Kind of." he said.

"Tylo was a smuggler." Brae added, "He got caught several times."

"But never for the same thing in the same place twice kid." Tylo pointed out.

"I think we should ask Cal for his input." Jayk said and Kayle and Hessie looked at one another.

Confusion.

"Who's Cal?" Kayle said.

"An adviser. A very special adviser." Jayk replied.

"He's probably the only jedi who is remotely normal." Tylo added.

"I didn't realise you had another jedi with you." Hessie said.

"Oh I'm not sure you're quite his type." Brae said, reaching into her robes, "Although I don't think he's had a date in three and a half thousand years so his standards could have slipped." and then she produced a fist sized crystalline cube from beneath her cloak that she set down on the table before a hologram of a man in jedi robes appeared in the customs office.

Surprise.

Both Kayle and Hessie stared at the hologram, uncertain of what they were looking at.

"Allow me to introduce Cal Udra. Before he died he was a jedi knight." Brae said.

"He was also a distant ancestor of Jayk and Brae here." Tylo added.

"What is this?" Kayle asked.

"As Brae and Tylo explained I am Cal Udra, jedi knight." Cal's hologram responded, "During his life the original Cal put his knowledge and experience into this holocron, the crystal cube you see before you. He also created me, a virtual recreation of himself to control access to that information."

"Cal have you been listening?" Jayk said and Cal smiled.

"From the moment this young lady greeted you in the hangar." he replied.

"Stang I'm never going to live that down." Hessie said, holding her head in her hands.

"Live what down?" Cal said.

"She wanted to seduce dad. I could picture her imagining him using the Force to rip off her-" Brae began before Jayk interrupted.

"Cal perhaps you could offer your advice in how to find Thal's ship." he said.

"Well since it's only been seen once I'd suggest going after this other ship it was seen with. If you've been tracking it is there a pattern to its movements?" Cal responded.

"It operates in the outer system where it's harder to track ships. It must be using dead drops to transfer the cargo to other ships because it never seems to offload anything at any registered ports or rendezvous with vessels that are heading here." Hessie said.

"Based on long range scans we think that it makes a run every five to eight days." Kayle added.

"That means we could be waiting another seven." Tylo commented.

"Unless we go and look for it." Kat suggested.

"That's been tried. We send corvettes right out to the edge of the system to look for illegal shipping but that ship has always managed to destroy any evidence of criminal activity before our people can get aboard." Kayle said.

"That's because a corvette is easy to spot. The *Swift Exit* will be more of a surprise." Jayk said and Tylo groaned.

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

"We'll take the *Swift Exit* out to the area where this rendezvous was recorded and manoeuvre as if we're conducting a prospecting mission. Hopefully that will be enough to convince the smugglers that it is safe to continue with their next meeting." Jayk said.

"And then we strike." Brae added, smiling.

"Exactly." Jayk said. Then he looked at the two customs agents, "Of course it would help if we had someone from your office with us to help with local knowledge and also to make arrests for anything unrelated to our investigation."

"Hessie can you take care of that?" Kayle asked and Hessie sighed.

"Sure I'll do it." she replied before the communicator on her desk sounded and she reached out to answer it,

"Hessie Lorat." she said.

"Hessie we've just received a call from the police." the voice of one of the customs office's communication operators told her, "Your landlady called them to say that your apartment has been broken into."

Teron Sharr had taken over the most luxurious rooms Krup had available where he sat talking with Turlan while Mara was waiting outside the door when Krovak and Krup approached.

"It's okay Mara you can stand down." Krovak told Mara as she tensed up. Teron did not need a bodyguard but thanks to the creature that now inhabited her body he had a permanent telepathic link to Mara that enabled him to see everything that she saw, giving him advanced warning of who was approaching. Mara still watched closely as Krovak opened the door though to find Teron standing inside facing him while Turlan watched from behind.

"I take it there is news?" he said.

"I've made contact with the Corellians my lord." Krup said.

"And?" Teron asked.

"They have confirmed that a new shipment is on its way to us using the same vessel as the last one." Krup answered.

"Good. Where can it be contained? I do not want to risk our prize being damaged when we seize it." Teron said.

"There's an old refuelling station that was used by the first settlers. It's not regularly maintained so some of its systems have begun to break down and most of the docking bays need to be hard sealed instead of using magnetic containment fields for them. I gave the Corellians its location and told them to use a docking bay with a faulty shield. The ship will dock there and we can seize it with minimal risk. You realise that when we do this it's going burn some bridges with the Corellians?" Krup explained.

"The hurt feelings of the Corellians mean nothing. Soon enough they will be offered the choice of servitude or death just as you were Krup." Teron said, "Krovak make sure that we are ready. We don't know exactly who will be aboard that ship and we need to be ready for any eventuality."

"Of course. I'll see to it right away." Krovak said, a smile spreading across his face before he and Krup exited the room again and Teron turned back towards Turlan.

"I expect you to examine the ship once it is in our possession." he told his adviser, "You've been aboard before so you're best placed to tell me if any of its secrets have been removed."

"I am your adviser just as I was adviser to Sith before my lord. However, I was not privy to all of the secrets of that ship." Turlan said.

"Nevertheless you know more about it than anyone else other than my master and I do not want to present it to him without knowing what state it is in." Teron pointed out.

"Of course my lord." Turlan responded, bowing his head.

4.

Tylo was stood beneath the *Swift Exit* discussing which systems looked as if they were most in need of servicing with Brae when they saw Hessie approaching across the hangar with a bag slung over her shoulder.

"So did they get much?" Tylo asked.

"Thankfully no. Some cheap jewellery that I can easily replace and most of the credits I had in the apartment." Hessie replied.

"Well that's something at least. I hope your neighbours are keeping an eye out. People who break into apartments will often target others in the same block." Tylo told her, "Oh and make sure your security system is upgraded. A lot of thieves will come back for a second go after the insurance has come through and you've replaced everything they stole."

"Yeah the police said something similar. Looks like I'll need a lock for my underwear drawer and laundry basket then." Hessie said and Tylo frowned.

"Huh?" he said.

"The thief was a weirdo. He went through all my clean underwear and laid it out then stole all of the stuff waiting to be washed. I don't even want to think about why but since I'm going to be burning what he had his hands on and I've not been able to get to the store I only have the set I'm wearing left." Hessie explained.

"Talk to Kat. She might be able to lend you something." Brae suggested.

"Thanks I'll do that. Now where do I dump this?" Hessie said and she patted her bag.

"The *Swift Exit* is only intended to take four so I've set up an extra couple of bunks in the lounge that Jayk and I will take. You can have one of ours in the cabin. We'll just come in if we need the refresher. You might want to give a couple of minutes after I do." Tylo told her.

"A couple of minutes?" Brae said, "Tylo I'd rather stand behind a bantha with gas than use the refresher for an hour after you've been in."

"Hey kid that's just the sign of a healthy digestive system. Now we should get aboard. With Hessie here as well your father will want us to be on our way." Tylo said and all three of them then went aboard the ship.

Jayk and Kat were sat together in the *Swift Exit's* lounge.

"Not interrupting any violations of the jedi code are we?" Brae said as they both straightened up.

"Hessie's here." Tylo added.

"Ah Hessie, good. Then we can get going." Jayk responded as Hessie looked down and saw the two beds that had been set up in the lounge just like Tylo had said.

"Yes and I have an update for you." she said.

"Don't tell me Thal's ship is back in the system already." Kat said but Hessie shook her head.

"No, not the ship you're looking for but one of our probe droids did spot the other ship, the one we've been trying to track for a while now." she said.

"Where?" Jayk asked.

"Heading towards an old refuelling platform that's been out of service for more than a century now." Hessie said and Brae frowned.

"Isn't something like that a hazard to navigation?" she said.

"No the beacon still works and even though it isn't actively maintained its life support and communication are still functional so the place can be used as an emergency shelter. If not for that then our patrol corvettes probably would have used it for target practice a long time ago." Hessie said.

"Then I guess that's going to be our destination." Tylo said, "I'll go and set a course. I'll have us there in under an hour."

"This is the best docking bay to make use of." Krup told Teron as they stood in one of the refuelling station's hangars. The compartment was massive, far larger than was needed for the scouts ship that belonged to Thal N'Krey but this offered the possibility that the crew could be more easily separated from their vessel before Teron's gang seized it while still being sufficiently confining that engaging the ship's ion drive at sufficient power to burn through the outer door would also create enough of a back blast to destroy it. Although the docking bay had been built to use a magnetic field to prevent the atmosphere inside from escaping into space this had stopped working and now it was sealed by a large blast door across the opening. This would make the process of docking and departing from the station much slower than if the shield had still been operational but it had the advantage of keeping whatever happened inside hidden from view from outside the station, important to consider when modern optical sensors could read hull markings

from millions of kilometres away, "As you can see the blast door is all that's holding the air in so it will have to be sealed when the Corellians' courier arrives. Are you sure the ship's not armed.?"

"Not according to the two people I know of who have been aboard." Teron answered.

"Well as long as she isn't then this place should hold her long enough for you to get aboard. It's too confined for them to use their ion drive to blast through the door and small arms will just bounce right off." Krup said.

"Then all we need to do now is wait. When is the ship expected?" Teron asked and Krup checked the time on his datapad.

"Less than three hours now." he said.

"And then the ship will be mine." Teron muttered.

"There, look there's a ship already docked." Tylo said when the *Swift Exit* came out of hyperspace still more than a million kilometres away from the refuelling station the freighter's optical sensors showed a vessel docking on one of its external ports.

"That looks like the smuggling ship the locals have been watching for." Kat commented as she and Jayk looked at the image just as Hessie entered the cockpit.

"Thanks for the loan Kat." she said, "I have to say that this is a lot more comfortable than I thought it would be. I don't know why but I figured you'd be wearing things made from really coarse fabric."

"Trust me Hessie the last thing you need when you're trying to manipulate the Force is itches in personal places." Kat replied, "Now what do you think of this?" and she pointed to the display.

"We think it's the ship you've been following." Jayk added as Hessie looked closely at the screen as well.

"It certainly looks like it." she agreed.

"I'm not picking up any emissions at all. She's shut down, probably to try and avoid detection." Tylo commented.

"Then we should be able to approach undetected." Jayk said before there was a bleeping sound from the control console.

"What's wrong?" Hessie asked when she heard this.

"Nothing. That's the alert I set up for when your customs computer contacted us. It looks like Thal's ship just came out of hyperspace." Tylo replied.

"Where?" Jayk said.

"According to this more than two light hours out." Tylo said.

"Are you going to intercept her?" Hessie asked.

"No." Jayk said without hesitation, "I sense that we are right where we need to be. There is something aboard that refuelling station that will bring Thal's ship to us."

An alarm from his datapad made Morton pick up the device hurriedly and look at it.

"This is it." he called out to the mercenaries and they all looked towards him.

"You mean that ship's here?" Rayton asked and Morton nodded.

"Yes. It was picked up by a probe droid in the outer system the moment it came out of hyperspace. According to this there are just two other vessels registering as within five light hours of there and they're both pretty close to one another. One's an old space station and the other is a-" Morton began before he paused, "Oh no. I've got a very bad feeling about this." he said.

"What's wrong?" Rayton asked.

"A Corellian YT-seven hundred class freighter. Transponder reads *Swift Exit*." Morton told him.

"Tylo Kurrast's ship." Rayton said and Morton nodded.

"Which means the jedi have a head start on us." he said and Rayton turned towards the open doorway leading to the transport's cockpit where one of his men was on watch around the clock.

"Get us off the ground." he called out, "We're moving out."

The pilot quickly brought the transport's repulsorlifts on line and the ship rose up out of the docking bay before accelerating skywards and as the sky was turning from blue to black Morton and Rayton entered the cockpit.

"What's our destination sir?" the pilot asked, glancing over his shoulder at Morton.

"Here." Morton replied, holding out the datapad on which he had called up details of the abandoned refuelling station.

"Got it. I can plot us a micro jump in about ten minutes." the pilot told him.

"Make it five." Morton said.

Brae was sat cross legged on the floor of the lounge with her lightsaber floating in mid air ahead of her while Cal bombarded her with questions about the history of the Jedi Order when all of a sudden she gasped and her eyes widened.

"Mara." she said.

"Actually the correct answer is seven. Now can you tell me what they are?" Cal asked.

"No I mean Mara. She's aboard that station." Brae said as she got to her feet and snatched her lightsaber from in front of her and she rushed into the *Swift Exit's* cockpit, "Mara's here." she exclaimed as she burst through the doorway.

"Are you certain?" Jayk responded and Brae nodded.

"I can sense that link of hers to Teron. He might be there as well but I'm not sure." she said.

"Then we have to assume he is." Jayk said.

"Wait, who's Mara and who's Teron?" Hessie said, confused.

"Two of the most dangerous individuals in the galaxy." Jayk told her.

"One's a wannabe Sith lord and the other is some sort of puppet that he controls through the Force." Brae added.

"So they're the others who are after this Thal N'Krey guy then?" Hessie said.

"Lady they're just the start." Tylo told her.

Not all of the refuelling station's docking bays required solid barriers to maintain their internal atmosphere, some still had functional magnetic containment fields and Tylo steered the *Swift Exit* towards one of these, allowing the occupants to disembark rapidly. The Jedi all held their lightsabers at the ready as they rushed down the freighter's access ramp but they were inactive for the time being. Behind them came Tylo armed with a blaster rifle and then Hessie who carried only her issued blaster pistol and wore an armoured vest that clearly identified her as a customs agent.

"Brae can you tell where Mara is?" Jayk asked.

"No, I just know she's around here somewhere." Brae answered.

"I don't suppose you have a floor plan handy do you?" Tylo said, looking at Hessie.

"Sorry by the time I knew we were coming here it was too late to request one." she replied.

"I'm pretty sure I got a flash of a sign that said 'Docking bay'." Brae added.

"Then we start by searching them all. If Teron Sharr is here then he can't be allowed to get aboard Thal's ship." Jayk replied.

"Teron we just received word from the courier. They're on approach now." Krovak said when he entered the docking bay control room where Teron was waiting. Unlike his earlier casual appearance, Krovak now wore a suit of ornate armour and carried an equally ornate sword by his side. Both the armour and weapon had been crated by ancient Sith and when he wore the armour it bonded itself to his flesh, channelling the Dark Side into him to boost his speed and strength while providing a level of protection that was even capable of resisting a lightsaber blade.

"They aren't the only ones." Teron responded, "The Jedi have just landed. I can feel them."

"Then this is where they'll die." Krovak said and he lifted the helmet he carried and put it on his head, completing his suit of armour.

"Wait Krovak, I need very man here for when the ship arrives." Teron said as Krovak turned to leave, "Don't worry about the Jedi. They're here for the same reason we are. They want Thal N'Krey's ship. Be patient and they will come to us."

"There's the station." the pilot of Morton's transport said.

"And with another ship already docked. Should we destroy it?" Rayton added when he saw Teron's ship at one of the docking ports.

"No." Morton replied, "Thal's ship is still on its way. We need to wait and see what it does before we make a move. Take us to within a thousand kilometres of the station but don't do anything to attract attention. Once they dock we'll figure out the best way to get aboard. Remember though, blasters on 'stun'."

"You want the crew alive?" Rayton asked.

"If Thal N'Krey is aboard that ship then yes, I want him alive. Handing him over will get me more than just credits from Rylee I'm certain, I'll have her screaming my name all night long. But also I don't want anything else aboard being damaged by a stray shot."

Voices from around the corner alerted the Jedi to the presence of some of Teron's gang before they sensed them in the Force and Jayk signalled for the others to stay behind him while he peered around to see two armed men standing outside the door to a docking bay.

"There are two of them." he said quietly.

"I think we can take two easily." Tylo said but Jayk shook his head.

"No. It only takes one to raise the alarm." he said, "Besides they aren't why we're here. Obviously this is the docking bay we need so we just have to find another way inside."

"What about a ventilation duct?" Brae suggested.

"How can you be sure there is one?" Hessie asked and Tylo grinned.

“Trust me, there’s always a ventilation duct.” he told her.

5.

The scout ship flew towards the refuelling station as it had been instructed to before being sent to the Istras system. As with all previous rendezvous no transmissions were exchanged, just a simple series of pulse codes from the scouts running lights and on this occasion from a large searchlight set up in the docking bay that was to be used for what the occupants of the scout ship thought was the delivery of cargo. When the correct sequence of lights had been sent from within the docking bay the scout ship moved in, extending its landing gear as it came in to dock. Ordinarily in modern times that would have been all that was required before the ship's occupants were able to disembark but with the magnetic field not functioning the docking bay was exposed to the vacuum of space and before anyone could leave the ship without a protective suit was to wait for the outer door to be sealed and air to be pumped back into the docking bay, a process that took almost five minutes and once that was complete the ship's access ramp finally began to lower as Teron and his men entered the docking bay from the control booth that overlooked it.

Four figures emerged from the scout ship, all of them of different species but it was obvious that none of them were Thal N'Krey. Between them they pushed a pair of large, unmarked crates that floated just above the ramp as they came down it and after moving a few metres across the deck they deactivated the repulsorlifts built into the crates so that they settled to the floor. This was far closer to the ship than Teron had hoped for but rather than risk making them suspicious he continued to walk towards them.

"There you go, two more crates. I didn't expect to be back so soon." one of the crew said as Teron and his group approached, "So where's the payment?"

"There is no payment for the crates." Teron replied as he looked up at the ship.

"Hey now you asked specifically for these-" the man from the scout ship began.

"I asked for you to come here in this ship. I do not care about contraband cargo. You may keep if you wish but this ship is mine. If you wish to remain aboard it then you will pledge yourself to me." Teron said.

"Are you insane?" the man exclaimed and then he turned to his crew and added, "Come on, we're getting out of here."

A compartment the size of the docking bay required an extensive pumping system to get air into and out of it and the ventilation duct that the crew of the *Swift Exit* found was large enough for them walk along simply by stooping. This led them to a point above the ceiling of the docking bay where a grating in the open position allowed them to look down into it. From this position they could see the upper hull of the ship and make out the distinctive artwork that Thal N'Krey had painted on the nose.

"Yep, that's Jayk's favourite joy girl all right. This must be the right ship." Tylo said and he grinned as he looked up at Jayk.

"Where's Teron?" Brae asked.

"Can't you see him through Mara's eyes?" Tylo said.

"I don't have a permanent link to her like he does. My connection isn't even as strong as it used to be. I just get flashes every now and again." Brae pointed out.

"They must be under the ship." Kat said.

"Yes," Jayk agreed, "and that gives us the chance to get aboard."

"The top hatch?" Kat said, looking at him and smiling and he smiling back.

"Exactly." he said.

"But it must be a twenty metre drop and we don't have any syntherope." Hessie said, looking at the top of the ship.

"Syntherope? We don't need syntherope." Brae replied.

"Give me a hand with this grating." Jayk then said as he looked at how the grating they were looking through mounted to the duct.

To prevent the grating from being sucked out into space in the event of an uncontrolled decompression and causing all the air to be blown out of the ventilation system as well the grating had to be lifted inwards to be removed and this allowed Jayk and Tylo to gently remove it and move it out of the way without risking it dropping down into the docking bay and alerting those below to their presence in the duct.

"I'll go first." Brae said and then Hessie gasped as she suddenly leapt down through the opening in the vent and landed softly enough on the upper hull of the ship below that she made no sound on landing.

Teron frowned as the man in front of him continued to demand payment for the crates and ignoring Teron's demand to surrender his ship. However, Teron paid no attention to any of this when he sensed a disturbance

in the Force that suggested someone close by was manipulating it. At the same time he felt the presence of other beings who were as strong in the Force as he was and he came to an inevitable conclusion.

"We aren't alone. The Jedi are here." he said.

"Jedi?" the man with the crates exclaimed when he heard this, "What the kriff are you talking about? Then he turned to his men and added, "Come on let's get this stuff back aboard. This has been a waste of-" but before he could finish there was a 'snap-hiss' as Teron ignited his lightsaber and in an instant he decapitated the man while he crew looked on in terror.

"Spread out and find the Jedi. They can't allowed to get aboard the ship." Teron ordered.

All now crouched on top of the ship the three Jedi looked at one another and smiled.

"I really don't think he wants us opening this hatch does he?" Kat asked.

"No, I don't think he does." Jayk replied as he pressed the emitter of his lightsaber against the hatch's locking mechanism and pressed the activation switch, causing the blade to impale the lock and the hatch promptly slid open.

One after another the Jedi dropped down into the inside of the scout ship, finding themselves in a storage compartment that doubled as an air lock and Brae quickly opened the door to next compartment. Then she gasped as she looked into it.

"Dad look." she exclaimed, dashing through the open doorway into the next room and Jayk and Kat followed her to discover the row of paintings that were mounted along the opposite wall. Each of these was tall and narrow and followed a common theme, showing a darkened landscape with a clear pattern of stars in the sky. There were four of them in total, all unique and on their own they looked just to be four different paintings on a similar subject. However, the Jedi had already acquired a number of paintings from this set and quickly discovered that they could be combined. The belief was that they formed a map to something Thal N'Krey had discovered on his travels and then made a record of the location in the form of these paintings.

"We need to take these with us." Jayk said.

"We can't take them as they are. They're too bulky." Kat pointed out and Jayk nodded in agreement as he shut off his lightsaber.

"No-one tell Professor Hebro I did this." he said as he took a multi-tool, from a pouch on his belt and unfolded a small knife blade. Dahlis Hebro was a professor of art at the University of Coruscant who the Jedi had worked closely with to trace and identify art attributed to Thal N'Krey and Jayk did not want to give him the impression that he was the sort of person to vandalise it. Then he quickly began to cut around the sides of the paintings, separating them from the rigid frames that kept them flat. Then as each painting came free he rolled it up and tucked it into his belt.

"They're in." the pilot of Morton's transport said while Morton watched from the rear of the cockpit, "What do you want me to do?"

"Find us the nearest external docking port to the docking bay they used." Morton told him, "Then after we've gone aboard detach and wait for our signal. I expect we'll need your help in getting that ship out of that docking bay."

"Yes sir." the pilot responded, smiling as he steered the transport towards one of the refuelling station's exterior docking ports.

"Stay here." Mara said sternly to the crew of scout ship, producing a blaster and pressing the muzzle to the side of the one who Teron had spoken to and then she looked around to see if she could see any signs of the Jedi. Meanwhile Teron and the rest of his men were starting to spread out while more entered the docking bay from outside and began to search through the various piles of discarded crates and equipment that had built up over the years.

All of this was watched from above by Tylo and Hessie who saw Teron and his men as soon as they appeared from beneath the ship.

"Stang there must be twenty of them." Hessie said, looking at Tylo, "Can Jayk and the others handle that many?"

"Easily if they were all just typical weak minded thugs with blasters but Teron and Krovak are down there. Either of them could be a match for a Jedi. I don't see Mara though. Quick, let's get this grating back in place before any of them look up and spot the hole."

6.

"The Jedi aren't here Lord Sharr." Krup told Teron.

"If Teron says they're here then they're here." Krovak responded sternly, "Your men just aren't looking in the

right places.”

“Then where do you suggest we look? That antique armour hasn’t done anything to help us find them either.” Krup said and Krovak growled.

“Enough of this bickering. If the Jedi aren’t in here then they must be close. Very close.” Teron said as he looked around the docking bay again and then he looked up and noticed one of the gratings of the ventilation system and he realised that it was directly above the scout ship, “That’s it!” he exclaimed, “They’re aboard the ship!” and he drew his lightsaber and charged towards the access ramp.

Krovak immediately began to run along side Teron while Mara spun around and pointed her blaster up the access ramp just as Kat emerged from the ship with her lightsaber in her hand.

“Are you looking for us?” she asked as Brae appeared beside her and both Teron and Krovak ground to a halt.

“Where’s the other one?” Mara said, glaring at the two women and at that point the man she was holding onto lashed out to try and break free. His blow was clumsy but strong and Mara did release her grip on him but before he could get away from her she turned her blaster on him and shot him from point blank range.

“Go!” Kat yelled and she and Brae both charged down the access ramp with their lightsabers held out ahead of them.

The three surviving crewmen from the scoutship threw themselves aside while Teron’s men opened fire and both Brae and Kat deflected their attacks.

“Mara get back.” Teron called out before either of the two Jedi could reach her and strike her down and she backed away, firing her blaster at them.

It was then that Jayk appeared on top of the scout ship and he leapt into the air, spinning as he flew high over Teron and Krovak before landing beside Krup and two of his men. Then with a single swing of his lightsaber he cut down all three of them.

“Teron Sharr in the name of the Galactic Republic you are under arrest. Surrender.” Kat shouted.

“Never!” Teron screamed and he thrust out his arm towards her to unleash bolts of Force lightning from the tips of his fingers.

Kat immediately positioned the blade of her lightsaber to block the lightning attack but it stopped her in her tracks while Brae continued to run towards Teron, cutting down another of his men as he tried to stop her. Then she heard a scream as a stray blaster shot hit one of the crew from Thal’s ship but she did not waste any time checking on the others, instead focusing on getting closer to Teron while Jayk approached him from the rear, keeping him between them.

All of a sudden there was blaster fire from above as Tylo fired his rifle through the open vent grating. The narrow slots gave him only a limited field of fire but it was enough to scatter Teron’s men as they sought cover, preventing them from firing at the Jedi. Meanwhile Hesse could only stand and watch, her pistol lacking the long range performance to offer any further support.

Rage.

Krovak roared as his armour funnelled the Dark Side directly into him and he charged towards Jayk with his own Sith sword held high, his intention being to cleave Jayk in two with a single downwards strike. Krovak’s intention was obvious to Jayk though and he lifted his lightsaber to block the path of Krovak’s sword before stepping sideways and sweeping it down at an angle. The glowing blue blade clipped Krovak’s side but failed to penetrate the arcane material of his armour. He still felt the impact though, his armour doing nothing to protect him from the pain and instead it just funnelled more of the Dark Side into him to compensate for it as he swung his sword back at Jayk.

By this point Brae had got close enough to Teron to be able to attack him with her own lightsaber and their two blades clashed as he parried and then struck back only for her to block him as well. Although Brae was unable to land a blow on Teron her attack did prevent him from continuing his lightning attack on Kat and she rushed to join the younger Padawan. Before she could reach Brae though one of Teron’s men was able to fire at her from behind cover. Kat spun as the energy blast came towards her though, positioning her lightsaber blade to deflect it directly back towards the shooter and the man fell dead as it hit him. Seeing this Mara ran towards where the surviving crewmen from Thal’s ship were cowering and dragged one to his feet. Then holding him in front of her as a shield she took aim at Kat and began to fire her blaster repeatedly at the Jedi, knowing that although she could try to deflect the blasts away she could not send them back towards Mara without risking hitting the man in front of her.

Drawn to the docking bay by the sounds of blaster fire Morton and his mercenaries peered in through a side door.

“Well, well if it isn’t little Teron Sharr as well.” Morton said, grinning.

“You want to take him out?” Rayton asked and Morton thought for a moment about how easy it might be to put a shot into Teron while his attention was focused on Brae. However, then he had second thoughts.

"No. Right now we can use the little nerf herder to keep the Jedi busy. It's the ship we came for so we'll sneak aboard and seal ourselves inside. Then we'll have the doors blasted open and watch everyone get blown out into space. Teron, the traitors that follow him and the Jedi." he replied.

"I'll take point." Rayton said, bringing his blaster rifle up to his shoulder and then the Wroonian began to lead the group across the docking bay, moving from one stack of crates or abandoned piece of machinery to the next as they made their way towards the scoutship. With Teron, Krovak and Mara focused on the three Jedi and Teron's other men pinned down by the fire still coming from the vent in the ceiling they were able to advance largely unnoticed. At one point one of Teron's men suddenly appeared in front of them but Rayton simply shot the man down where he stood before he could raise the alarm and in the midst of the fighting no one noticed one more shot being fired.

Only when they got close to the scoutship's access ramp did Morton and his mercenaries have to halt and wait for a clear run. Mara was still facing towards the ramp as she continued to fire at Kat but the Jedi was moving towards the possessed woman and forcing her to retreat to avoid getting into arms' reach where Kat would be able to strike at her with confidence that she would not accidentally hit Mara's hostage. When she came to some of the equipment that had been abandoned in the docking bay this forced Mara to turn to avoid it and that gave Morton and the mercenaries all the opportunity they needed to suddenly dash aboard the scoutship. Seeing this happen, the two surviving members of the crew still free also leapt from their hiding place and followed the mercenaries up the access ramp, raising their hands when the mercenaries turned and pointed their weapons at the two men.

"Don't shoot!" one exclaimed.

"You need us." the second added.

"What for?" Rayton asked.

"We know the security codes for this ship." the first said, "Get us out of here and you can have the kriffing ship."

"Close the ramp." Morton ordered.

"What about them?" Rayton asked, looking at the two crewmen.

"They're coming with us." Morton answered, "They could have useful information." then he looked at the closest of the men and beckoned him closer, "Come on, show me how to get this ship moving and when this is over maybe I'll have a couple of vacancies that you can fill. I get the feeling you're going to be looking for new work." he told the man and they both went into the scoutship's cockpit. In here all of the flight systems were still online but security lockouts meant that the ship could not be flown without the controls being unlocked first. The crewman promptly sat in the pilot's seat while Morton sat down beside him while the controls were released. At the same time Morton took out his comlink and connected to the transport waiting outside.

"We're almost set here. Open the doors." he transmitted.

6.

As soon as the scoutship's controls were released its repulsorlifts came on line and roared into life. This attracted the attention of everyone in the docking bay and the fighting suddenly halted as they all looked towards the ship and saw Morton Crayne sat in the cockpit smiling at them and he waved.

"No!" Teron yelled and with a wave of his hand he unleashed a wave of telekinetic energy that pushed Brae away from him while she too was distracted by what was happening aboard the scoutship. Then he reached out his hand towards Morton and focused on him. Morton immediately felt his throat tighten and he reached for it with his hands as he began to choke. However, before Teron could inflict any serious injury there was a sudden explosion from the docking bay's outer door as the transport outside opened fire.

The blasts from the transport's laser cannon's ripped open the outer door and there was a sudden gust of wind as the air inside rushed out into space, dragging bodies and abandoned crates and equipment towards the hole as well. The people still inside the hangar all reached out to grab whatever they could to avoid the same fate while above them the ventilation grating responded to the unexpected drop in pressure by slamming shut.

"What do we do now?" Hessie asked, looking at Tylo.

"We get back to the *Swift Exit*. Jayk and the others will head there." he replied and they began to retreat down the duct.

Meanwhile in the docking bay below Teron and the members of his gang all began to drag themselves towards the nearest exit from the docking bay while the scoutship lifted off the deck, reversing out into space. Mara simply shoved her hostage aside, no longer interested in anything other than her own survival. On the other Kat had to reach out through the Force and used it to grab hold of the terrified man as he was caught up in the rush of escaping air and dragged towards the gaping hole in the external door.

"I've got you." she said, pushing him towards the deck where he could find a hand hold.

"We need to get out of here." Jayk called out, "Bring him as well."

"Which way?" Brae asked.

"The control booth." Jayk responded, noticing that Teron and his gang were all focusing on the exits at floor level instead of the control booth that overlooked it.

Jayk and Brae began to drag themselves towards the stairs leading up to the control booth while Kat instead made her way over to the crewman from the scoutship and took hold of him.

"Don't worry. We know what we're doing she told him and he just nodded nervously.

Jayk and Brae clung onto one another as they reached the stairs and looked back towards Kat.

"Ready Brae?" Jayk asked.

"Ready dad." Brae replied and then they both reached out towards Kat and the crewman, combining their power to take hold of them through the Force and pull them both towards the stairs despite the rush of air trying to carry them out into space. Once Kat and the crewman reached the stairs all four clung onto the safety rail as they pulled themselves up into the booth before Jayk sealed the door shut behind them.

"Tylo can you hear me?" he said into his comlink.

"Loud and clear Jayk. Did everyone get out of the hangar okay?" Tylo responded.

"Yes and we have one of the crew of Thal's ship with us."

"What the hell happened in there anyway?" Tylo asked.

"Morton Crayne was here. He got aboard the ship during the fighting. I suspect he had associates in another ship outside who blew the door open." Jayk explained before there was a loud groaning sound from all around them.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Brae said as everyone looked around for the source of the sound.

"I don't think that this station is entirely stable." Kat said, "The decompression must have affected the superstructure. This place could come apart at any moment."

"Then we need to get out of here. Tylo can you get back to the *Swift Exit*?" Jayk said.

"Hessie and I are almost there." Tylo responded.

"Good. We'll meet you there" Jayk said before he turned off his comlink and returned it to his belt, "Let's go." he told the others.

Teron, Krovak and Mara made it back to their transport together with some of the other members of their gang and as soon as they were all aboard Krovak sealed the hatch, ignoring the pleas from the men who had not quite reached the ship. Then while they were still hammering on the hatch and begging to be let in the ship blasted away from the station without first sealing the docking port, leaving the men to be blown out into space.

"Where to?" the pilot asked.

"Return us to Fulter's Reach. My master needs to know that his enemies have the ship along with its secrets." Teron responded, glaring angrily out of the viewport.

"Come on, hurry!" Hessie called out from the top of the access ramp as the Jedi entered the docking bay where the *Swift Exit* was landed and heard the ship's engines already running.

Bringing the crewman from Thal's scoutship with them the Jedi ran up the ramp and Hessie immediately hit the control to raise it.

"We're in." Brae said into the intercom.

"Okay we're getting out of here." Tylo responded from the cockpit and the *Swift Exit* lifted off the deck and backed out of the docking bay just as the ancient refuelling station began to break up.

The Jedi escorted the crewman into the lounge and Jayk shoved the man down into a seat just as Tylo entered the room from the cockpit.

"Okay we're clear. I didn't see any signs of other ships so we must have been the last ones out." he said and then he looked at Hessie and added, "We can have you back on Istras in a few minutes. Assuming that's what you want to do Jayk."

"Yes but first we have a few things to discuss with our new guest." Jayk replied, looking at the crewman, "Where is Thal N'Krey?"

"Who?" the man asked.

"Thal N'Krey. The kiffar artist whose ship you were flying around in." Brae said.

"Hey look I had nothing to do with getting that ship, it was all Grustas. He said he bought it cheap off some guy who said the owner just abandoned it and everything aboard." the crewman replied.

"Including these?" Jayk asked, taking one of the paintings from his belt and unrolling it enough for the man to see.

"Yeah, those too. Grustas figured they might be worth something but we didn't have any contacts who could move art so we hung onto them." he said.

"I don't sense any lies." Kat said when Jayk looked at her.

"Neither do I." he said.

"No, he's telling the truth. He doesn't know a thing." Brae added.

"But Morton now has the ship which means those Founding Families have it and we're no closer to finding Thal himself." Tylo pointed out.

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