

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

4-1-2: TIME & AGAIN

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4-12: TIME & AGAIN

Although Rylee's recent success has drawn her father's favour he instructs her to remove an obstacle to their ambitions. Meanwhile the Udras and Tylo go hunting for the cultist transport ship that escaped them at Teramar, not knowing what really awaits them.

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1.

Rylee had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of the transport ship and now that it was being unloaded she stood at the side of the hangar and watched the labour droids as they carried one Sith artefact after another out of the hold. Most of these items were rather mundane and although they would be inspected by the Jedi Order if they discovered them, they would not be seized or destroyed. However, there were also a number of more dangerous items, things that were either directly harmful or those held fragments of forbidden Sith knowledge.

"I hear you were offered a special discount on all this." a voice said from behind Rylee and she looked around to see the man who acted as the commander of the private military force that was contracted to her family walking towards her.

"True." she replied. Many of the objects now being unloaded had been presented to her in payment of a debt by the criminal who had been helping her gather Sith related items for a number of years now, a gang leader called Morton Crayne. However, the haul had also included a number of items of great value that she had not been aware of. This meant that Morton could charge her extra and he had not been especially subtle about suggesting that he would sell them to her for a reduced rate if she agreed to a significant change in their relationship. Rylee had instead opted to pay the full amount, "It was more than I was willing to pay." she added.

"Your father has heard about this." the warrior told her.

"And what did he have to say about it?" Rylee asked.

"He is impressed." the warrior said and Rylee stared at him in disbelief. Despite the number of artefacts Morton had been able to gather for her over the past few years her father had remained largely disapproving of their working relationship, "However, he does foresee a problem that he wishes to discuss with you."

"He could have just used the intercom." Rylee commented.

"Oh he wants to see me as well and since was on my way there he thought it would be easier if I-"

"If you made sure I went straight there." Rylee interrupted and the warrior smiled at her.

"Quite. Shall we?" he said, pointing towards the exit from the hangar.

When Rylee and the warrior entered her father's office he was not quite alone. Holograms of several of his associates were seated in front of him in addition to the hologram of a spider-like alien that Rylee had made use of in obtaining information about the artefacts she had collected over the years. Known only as the Assembler, the creature's services were expensive but the information he was able to obtain was second to none.

"You asked to see me father." Rylee said and the dark skinned man at the far end of the room smiled at her.

"Ah yes my dear. We were just discussing your recent success. Please sit down." then he looked at the holograms of his human associates and added, "I suggest we adjourn for now and reconvene later." then one by one the holograms faded to leave only Rylee, her father, the warrior and the assembler's hologram in the room.

"Father I-" Rylee began but her father held up his hand for her to be quiet."

"My dear you have done me proud." he said, "Your little haul is the biggest find that we or any of the others have come up with almost a century. Certainly most of it is of little importance but the fact that your agent managed to spirit it away right under the noses of the Jedi speaks volumes for your planning. Obviously the resources we had to spend to get him out of prison were worth every credit?"

"We?" Rylee commented, remembering how she had had to fund the operation out of her own accounts.

"Of course I'll refund what you had to pay." her father told her, "However, we do foresee a complication."

"What complication?" Rylee asked.

"The Jedi." the Assembler answered and then the images of three other humans appeared in the room with them. Two of these, a young woman and an older man wore Jedi robes while the third, a man who appeared to be in his thirties wore civilian clothing and had a heavy blaster pistol holstered at his belt.

"I understand that the Jedi are a father and daughter team." Rylee's father said, "Almost unheard of among the Jedi since the Ruusan Reformations. Jayk and Brae Udra. An interesting name that. Do you know the history of their family?"

"Yes father, I know it." Rylee said.

"Good. Then you'll know why we need to deal with them. The Udras came very close to foiling your man this time around and previously they've prevented him from carrying out your orders on several occasions. I understand that this other man that works for them used to work for your agent."

"His name is Tylo Kurrast. He serves the Jedi as part of a plea bargain." the Assembler explained.

"I know who he is." Rylee said.

They have to be eliminated, all three of them. The jedi to stop them from interfering and Kurrast as a demonstration of what happens to those who betray us even indirectly." her father said.

"Killing jedi? Easier said than done." Rylee pointed out, "Plus what's to stop the Jedi Order from sending more after us?"

"The jedi are not invincible. In fact another being who betrayed us has just come very close to achieving what I want you to do with only a fraction of the resources you'll have at your disposal Rylee." her father said.

"The one known as Teron Sharr was able to divert the Udras to an uninhabited system and ambush them." the Assembler added, "Had his forces had greater numbers or superior fighter craft then they would likely have succeeded in destroying their ship."

"So what exactly do I have to work with?" Rylee asked her father.

"Whatever you need my dear. Within reason of course and I will have to approve your plan before it is put into practice but don't worry about that in your planning." he told her and Rylee smiled.

"Then just leave it to me father." she said.

"Stang." Rylee said as she sat down in her own office, turning around in her chair.

"Something bothering you?" the warrior asked, following her into her office and sitting down on the sofa that ran along a side wall.

"I've got a bad feeling about this. I'm supposed to come up with a plan to kill jedi." she replied, staring at him, "How the hell do I do that?"

"You seemed more confident when talking to your father just now." the warrior pointed out.

"What did you expect me to say? 'Sorry father but I'm not up to the task? Perhaps you should ask someone else.'" Rylee said.

"Teron Sharr almost pulled it off." the warrior said.

"Pure luck. Besides, almost means that he still failed." Rylee replied.

"But as your father pointed out you will have far more resources. He has faith in you, perhaps you should have faith in yourself as well." the warrior suggested and Rylee sighed, "Look, just a few months ago you took part in a successful raid on a Republic high security facility to break Morton Crayne out of custody. You can do this Rylee."

"Okay so supposing we can bring enough force to bear that we can take down two jedi, how do we even figure out where to deploy them? Ideally we'd need to catch them in a system that's outside the Republic entirely. At the very least somewhere in the Outer Rim Territories otherwise we'd be fighting against local security as well." Rylee said and the warrior smiled, "What?" she asked.

"You see? You've already started to identify what you need." he replied, "Now Teron supposedly was able to divert the jedi so perhaps we should think about that. We need a lure. Something they want."

"The transport." Rylee said as a smile appeared on her face as well, "The ship that Morton Crayne stole from those religious nuts in the Teramar system. He said that he took off while the jedi were in the grounds of the cult's headquarters. They're bound to have identified the ship and they know what it contained which means that if we can leak details of where it is then-

"Then they will come looking for it." the warrior interrupted.

"A bomb aboard the ship would kill them with the minimum amount of effort." Rylee went on.

"Perhaps. But that relies on both of the jedi being aboard at the same time. How would you guarantee that?"

"I can't. Also we haven't studied the ship that closely ourselves. I'd hate to blow up something that could have more information about the Sith in its data banks." Rylee admitted.

"Okay so the ship is just the bait. Now we need to figure out what we're going to use to spring the trap." the warrior said.

"Tylo." a familiar voice called out while Tylo Kurrast was perched on top of his ship, the *Swift Exit*, carrying out repairs following the recent ambush and he peered over the side of the hull to see Brae Udra standing on the deck of the jedi temple's main hangar. Unusually for a jedi she was not wearing the typical robes. Instead she wore a bright red bodyglove that Tylo had seen before.

"Hey kid, I thought you were going to find some solvent to get out of that. How long have you been stuck in it now?" he said.

"Oh I found that yesterday. It wasn't hard. I'm just wearing this now to make the point that I like it and you gluing the zipper shut-" Brae began.

"Hey, it was your dad that glued it and Cal's idea." he protested.

"Yes and you threw the solvent from the ship into a lake." Brae reminded him, "But my point is the same. Just because this doesn't meet with jedi guidelines while on duty doesn't mean I can't wear it while I'm not on assignment. Once I'm a full jedi knight I'll be able to wear what I want anyway."

"Yeah and how long is that going to take. You're nineteen now and the typical padawan undergoes the trials

when exactly? Their mid twenties?"

"Actually it depends on the strength of the padawan and as I'm sure you remember my midi-chlorian count is considered exceptionally high. I'll probably be taking the trials in a couple of years. But that's not important and I didn't come here to discuss jedi dress codes." Brae said.

"So why are you here kid?" Tylo asked.

"I came for Cal." Brae replied, "I need his help with my studies."

"Isn't using a four thousand year old AI to do your homework considered cheating?" Tylo said. Cal Udra was the gatekeeper of the holocron created by a distant ancestor of Jayk and Brae who had also served as a jedi knight. Cal's first padawan had been his own younger sister and so the jedi council had allowed Jayk and Brae to take the holocron from the archives so that he could advise them on the best way to work with a close relative while remaining true to the jedi code.

"He's in the cockpit. He was running a scan of all the ship's systems to see if there are any other nasty surprises like that homing beacon hidden anywhere aboard." Tylo told her and Brae nodded.

"Thanks." she said, walking beneath the ship to get to the access ramp while Tylo returned to his repairs. Brae found Cal in the cockpit right where Tylo said he would be. The holocron was a compact crystalline cube that could not move of its own accord but was able to interact with electronic systems through a wireless connection and could project a hologram of the original Cal Udra while communicating in person.

"Couldn't you find any solvent?" Cal asked as his image materialised in front of Brae.

"Oh not you as well." she replied, "Look I like wearing this, okay?"

"Fine. I've told you about my sister's taste in clothing, right?"

"That she dressed like a stripper and earned three hundred credits in a night?" Brae said and the hologram smiled.

"Exactly." he said, "Now what can I do for you today Brae?" however, before Brae could reply the *Swift Exit's* communication system activated and Brae reached out to answer it.

"Brae Udra." she said.

"Brae it's me." the voice of Jayk Udra said, "Is the ship ready to leave yet?"

"I don't know. Tylo was still working on it when I got here." she answered.

"Not yet." Cal added, "The ship is flyable but there are still some repairs needed before it is fully operational."

"Find out how long they will take. Something important has come up." Jayk said

"What is it?" Brae asked.

"The transport ship that got away from us on Teramar has been sighted in the Outer Rim. We need to get going as soon as possible before it can vanish again. I'm on my way up to the hangar now so if the *Swift Exit* isn't ready we'll have to take a different ship." Jayk told her.

"I'll go and let Tylo know." Brae said.

"Oh and one more thing Brae." Jayk added.

"Yes master?"

"I know what you're wearing. Change." Jayk told her.

2.

When Jayk arrived in the hangar he found Tylo hurriedly pulling power and data cables from the *Swift Exit*, disconnecting the ship from the temple's hangar systems.

"Tylo what is the status of the ship?" he asked.

"Good enough." Tylo replied, "There are a few monitoring systems that need looking at but we can deal with those later. If we're heading off to the Outer Rim then we should have plenty of time."

"Brae told you what we're dealing with then?" Jayk said and Tylo nodded as the two men headed up the access ramp into the ship.

"She said the ship that the boss of that loony cult took off in has shown up there. Probably to try and find some gullible locals he can trick into funding another fancy exploding pyramid. Obviously you're in a hurry to get there before he can disappear again." he said.

"Exactly." Jayk said, entering the ship's lounge ahead of Tylo where he found Brae now wearing her usual Jedi robes.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Professional." Jayk replied, "So is everyone ready?"

"The ship is fully fuelled. As soon as you tell me exactly where we're going we can lift off." Tylo replied and Jayk handed him a datapad.

"A charming little planet called Nyryll located at the centre of a hyperspace crossroads known as the Demon's Sanctuary." he said and Tylo winced.

"What's wrong?" Brae asked when she saw this.

"Haven't you ever heard of the Demon's Sanctuary kid?" he asked and she shook her head.

"No. should I have?" she said and Tylo looked at Jayk.

"Doesn't the Jedi Order teach anything useful nowadays?" he said before Cal's hologram appeared.

"Well they taught us about the Demon's Sanctuary back in my day." he said, "It was held to be located at the centre of one of the most violent and unpredictable hyperspace disturbances this side of the Unknown Regions. For some reason the system has escaped being cut off from hyperspace travel by random gravity fluctuations like many others in the area have been but there are only a relatively few routes to it and even those can suddenly close for a few hours or even weeks at a time. It's also very difficult to get subspace transmissions through the area."

"It's also cut off from the holonet so basically once we're there we're on our own. Even if we could get a signal out it could be weeks before help could arrive." Tylo added.

"I don't like the sound of that. It sounds like too good a place for a trap. I've got a bad feeling about this." Brae said.

"Perhaps but at the same time we can't afford to overlook this Brae. That ship could be loaded with Sith material that has to be recovered." Jayk replied.

"It'll take us a while to get there as well." Tylo said.

"How long?" Brae asked.

"About forty hours." Tylo answered, "Still at least that gives us plenty of time to finish fixing the ship."

"Then perhaps we should get a move on. After you Tylo." Jayk said and he pointed towards the cockpit.

It did not take long for Tylo to get into his seat and take off. As a ship operating under the authority of the Jedi Order the *Swift Exit* was guaranteed priority clearance for taking off and then heading far enough into space to activate the ship's hyperdrive so there was no further waiting once they were ready to leave. However, among the other vessels in space around Coruscant was a ship that the crew of the *Swift Exit* paid no attention to, completely unaware that its occupants had been waiting for them to take off and monitoring for the light freighter's transponder signal.

"There they go." one of them said and the other nodded.

"I'll make the call. The boss will be waiting."

The structures had stood unused for decades before Rylee, the warrior and a large force of troops had taken up residence there while they prepared for the arrival of the Jedi. Located in the wilderness more than a hundred kilometres from the nearest settlement, which itself was little more than a tiny outpost, the structures were located among several hills and overlooked a valley in which the starship stolen from the Sith worshipping Children of Korriban cult had been landed. Now empty of the precious artefacts it had been loaded with the vessel was nothing more than bait in a trap. Rylee and most of her soldiers had not arrived aboard the stolen transport, instead they had their own transports that were better suited to moving a

paramilitary force such as theirs along with their equipment. Chiefly among this equipment were the materials necessary to conceal their ships and the structures they had made their camp in. Built from local materials, the structures already blended in reasonably well with their surroundings but Rylee and her forces wanted to be certain that the Jedi would not notice them and decided to set up a camp there themselves before investigating the transport.

"Rylee." a voice said from behind Rylee as she stood on a balcony looking down into the valley and she turned around to see the warrior standing behind her, now wearing a set of ancient Mandalorian armour that had been handed down in his family for more than a hundred generations.

"Is there news?" she asked and the warrior smiled.

"There's news." he said, "The signal barely made it through the subspace distortion even with our relay ship only just outside but we received the message."

"And are the Jedi on their way?" Rylee said.

"The *Swift Exit* left Coruscant half an hour ago and entered hyperspace on a vector that will bring it here in forty hours." the warrior told her.

"Finally. I've been waiting here days without a shower or proper heating at night. The Jedi might think that patience is a virtue but mine is starting to wear thin." Rylee replied as she turned back to look down into the valley and a smile spread across her face.

Jayk awoke suddenly and reached out his hand to grab the one close to his face at the same time as he turned on the light in his bunk.

"Brae, what exactly is that you are holding?" he asked and Brae smiled nervously.

"Lipstick." she said.

"I take it that this is supposed to be some sort of revenge for gluing the zipper of your bodyglove shut?" Jayk said and Brae nodded.

"I was going to put makeup on you while you slept." she admitted and Jayk sighed as he swung his legs out of his bunk and sat up, letting go of Brae's wrist.

"Brae there are two things I ought to point out to you. Firstly this is revenge and revenge is not an idea we Jedi are supposed to practice." he said.

"Okay and secondly?" Brae replied as she returned the lipstick to her pouch.

"Secondly you should know better than to try and sneak up on me in my sleep while so excited. My mind is still attuned to the Force and I was able to sense your strong emotional state. Now go back to sleep. We will reach the Demon's Sanctuary not long after breakfast."

"Okay dad." Brae said, climbing back into her bunk and then she smiled to herself and muttered, "At least Tylo looks pretty."

"Brae I am going to kriffing kill you!" Tylo's voice yelled from the *Swift Exit's* bathroom and Jayk awoke again, looking towards the doorway leading to it just as Tylo appeared in it and his eyes widened at the sight of the former smuggler with his face now largely covered in brightly coloured make up, "Look at me." he said to Jayk, "Your kid did this while I slept."

"Brae?" Jayk said and Brae leant over the side of her bunk to look down at him.

"You never specifically asked about whether you were my first target." she said, "So from a certain point of view I did nothing wrong. I didn't lie to you."

Jayk sighed.

"Tylo just wash it off." Jayk said.

"Sure, I'll wash it off." Tylo replied, still staring at Brae, "But I'm telling you Jayk if she wasn't your daughter then right now I'd be plotting something in revenge that she'd find very unpleasant. Especially when it comes time for her to use the refresher." and then he turned around to go back into the bathroom

"Err washing it off might be a bit difficult with ordinary cleanser." Brae said.

"What?" Tylo responded, glaring at her again.

"Well it's designed to stay on." Brae told him, "You need a specific remover to remove it."

"Okay kid hand it over." Tylo said and he held out his hand for the remover.

"Oops." Brae said, smiling, "I think I forgot to bring any."

"Oh that's it, daughter or not someone's getting mummified in engineer's tape until we get back to Coruscant when I remove it from their skin very slowly."

"Tylo no." Jayk said, getting out of his bunk as Tylo lunged for Brae, "We're in the middle of nowhere out here. If we need to meet with any of the locals then you can stay here in the ship. Now I suggest you go and check on how long we have left until we reach our destination while Brae and I get dressed."

"Fine. But this isn't over kid. Not by a long shot." Tylo said before storming out of the crew cabin and Jayk looked at Brae.

"We will discuss this later." he told her, "For now we have work to do."

After dressing Jayk and Brae made their way to the *Swift Exit's* lounge where they went to the kitchen units to get some breakfast.

"Would someone like to explain Tylo's current appearance?" Cal said as the holocron that sat on a nearby shelf projected his hologram into the middle of the room.

"You mean why does he look like a very effeminate circus clown?" Brae asked.

"Yes, precisely." Cal replied.

"Brae decided to take revenge for the joke you and I came up with involving the glue on her bodyglove." Jayk told Cal and his hologram smiled.

"Impressive. I did wonder whether he was about to come out as having made a major lifestyle choice. What about your father though? I take it he didn't give you the chance to get your revenge?" Cal said.

"He woke up."

"Fortunately it seems, since the specialist cleanser to remove the make up is back on Coruscant." Jayk said and Cal laughed and appeared to clap.

"Well done Brae, that is good." he said.

"Cal you are not helping." Jayk told him."

"Sorry Jayk. I forgot that a sense of humour now appears to be against the jedi code. Back in my day padawans could be very creative with their practical jokes." Cal said.

"Did anyone ever play a joke on you then?" Brae asked.

"You mean apart from when the council assigned Lara to me as my padawan?" Cal responded before the ship shuddered slightly.

"Okay folks nothing to worry about." Tylo announced over the intercom, "We just encountered a bit of chop when we exited hyperspace. We've arrived in the Nyryll system. Welcome to the Demon's Sanctuary."

Jayk and Brae both made their way to the cockpit and sat down.

"Is that another ship out there?" Brae asked when she spotted something moving in the distance through the cockpit canopy.

"What's left of one." Tylo replied.

"What do you mean?" Brae said.

"I mean it's a hulk kid. It was probably hit by pirates, they come through here every so often to prey on ships while they're far from help." Tylo told her.

"Then shouldn't we get ready just in case we're attacked?" she suggested.

"Don't worry kid. I'm not picking up any other ships in the system right now and if anything comes over the horizon or up from the surface we'll get plenty of warning." Tylo reassured her before he looked at Jayk,

"Okay so where do we start looking for this ship?" he asked.

"The report came from a settlement called Oltyr's Way." Jayk answered, "According to my information it's a mining town."

"Mining what?" Brae asked.

"Iron ore. Then they smelt it into steel." Jayk said.

"And that's about as advanced as local industry gets. More modern technology has to be imported from outside and since only smaller trading come by here it's expensive." Tylo added and then he frowned before continuing, "Maybe we should have thought to bring along a few trinkets ourselves. We could have turned a tidy profit."

"I'm uploading the co-ordinates of Oltyr's Way into the nav computer. Take us in but don't set down, if the information is correct then the transport came down to the north west of the settlement." Jayk said and Brae smiled.

"So the locals won't get to see how pretty you look Tylo." she said and he snarled.

"One more word kid and you'll spend the rest of this mission looking at the sticky side of engineer's tape." he snapped, jabbing his finger towards her. Then he checked the co-ordinates of the settlement and set a course towards it.

3.

Unable to use active sensor systems for fear of their use being detected, the troops under Rylee's command had set sentries to watch the approach of the *Swift Exit*. A starship entering the atmosphere of a planet was impossible to conceal fully, no matter how good it was at absorbing radar energy or limiting its own engine emissions it would still emit heat from the friction of entry and produce a sonic boom as it descended. This made soldiers with macrobinoculars just as effective at detecting them as the most advanced sensor arrays and a dozen troops had been deployed in and around the old structures.

Thus as the *Swift Exit* approached it was detected well before it could land.

"Are you sure you don't want us to shoot them down sir?" one of the warrior's men said when he entered the room that had become their command centre to report this to him and Rylee. The main feature of this room was the holographic display in the centre that showed a map of the surrounding area, highlighting the locations of the cult transport, the abandoned buildings and also the positions occupied by the troops brought along by Rylee and the warrior.

"No, we need to account for all of the occupants. Shoot them down and we might never find out if anyone managed to get out. Have an air defence unit on standby though just in case the Jedi try to take off again." the warrior ordered.

"Yes sir." the other soldier replied before leaving the command centre.

"So what do you think they'll do?" Rylee asked.

"If I was them then I'd land within walking distance and finish the journey on foot. That way they protect their ship." the warrior told her before there was the sound of powerful repulsorlift engines passing overhead.

"What was that?" Rylee asked.

"The Jedi. It looks like they are suspicious enough that they are carrying out an aerial survey." the warrior told her.

"Will they see us?" Rylee responded, concerned that the Jedi would just turn around and leave.

"I hope not. My men have worked hard to conceal our position. They might notice the presence of some structures here but they'll look as abandoned as they were when we arrived." the warrior reassured her.

"There she is." Tylo said when the cult leader's transport ship came into view. The vessel was of an unusual configuration that suited it having been hidden away at the top of a pyramid for many years. Split into two decks, the larger bottom deck held the engines and cargo hold while the cockpit was in the smaller deck located centrally above this.

"Right out in the open?" Brae commented.

"It's a good spot to land for someone with minimal flight training. Nothing to smash into and besides I don't think a lot of people come out this way." Tylo told her.

"Someone did once." Jayk added as he studied the sensor readings.

"You've found something?" Tylo asked.

"It looks like there are buildings down there in the hills. I can't tell if there is anyone living in them at the moment." Jayk told him.

"How can anyone live out here?" Brae said, studying the terrain beneath the ship. The ground was entirely devoid of vegetation and no surface water was visible either.

"Moisture vaporators or wells to underground water. It's the only way." Jayk said.

"Those buildings might make a good hiding place for someone on the run." Tylo pointed out.

"Yes but the ship has to be our primary concern. I doubt that the cult leader would have gone to the trouble of unloading his collection here." Jayk said, "Bring us in on the other side of those hills over there. Then Brae and I will investigate on foot."

"What about me?" Tylo said.

"You stay here. Something about all this does not feel right and I want to know that the ship is safe and ready to leave at a moment's notice." Jayk replied.

Tylo flew the *Swift Exit* over the hills at the far side of the valley where the crew saw another barren valley and he descended to touch down close to the edge.

"I'll keep the engines ticking over." he told Jayk as the two Jedi got up to leave and Jayk nodded.

"We'll check in every hour." he said, "If we miss two in a row then I'll leave it up to you whether to come and get us or take off and head out as far as you need to to send a clear signal back to the Jedi Order."

Although the conditions outside the ship were clear for now, the two Jedi collected scarves and goggles just in case any dust storms suddenly developed while they were away from the ship but their faces were still exposed as they walked down the *Swift Exit's* access ramp. The sun was starting to set and the light was

fading but to avoid giving themselves away neither Jedi was bothering with the glow rods they were both equipped with, instead relying on their superior Jedi senses to guide their way. As Jayk began to walk towards the hills that separated the valley Tylo had landed in from the one the cult transport was in he suddenly realised that Brae had halted just a few strides away from the bottom of the ship and was staring into the hills.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, but have the feeling that someone is watching us." Brae answered before she began to walk away from the ship as well.

Rylee and the warrior watched the direct feed from the macrobinoculars being used by the sentries to observe the *Swift Exit* in the next valley.

"Only the two Jedi." Rylee said, "Tylo must be staying with the ship."

"That isn't a problem." the warrior replied, "Our plan can handle them separating. As soon as the Jedi cross the hills into this valley we'll activate the jammers and cut them off from one another. Then I'll send a section to take their ship. I'm sure they have some sort of arrangement for being out of contact but that won't count for anything if they don't have a ship. That is their lifeline and without it they're trapped here."

"And the Jedi? Are you sure that your men can handle them?" Rylee said.

"Of course. You and I have planned this carefully and my men are the best available." the warrior reassured her, "All you need to do is wait and watch while the Jedi die."

The hills that separated the valleys of Nyryll from one another were fairly steep but the ground was firmer the higher up the Jedi went thanks to the desert sand that collected in the more sheltered low ground between the hilltops, deposited there by the sand storms that the Republic records indicated were common to the planet. Therefore, crossing the hilltops was still easier than sticking to the more level path although as they reached the crest of the hill they had chosen to cross Jayk came to a halt and crouched down, signalling for Brae to get down as well as he took out his macrobinoculars.

"Let's take a look at what's waiting for us over this hill before rushing over it shall we?" he said and Brae nodded, reaching for her own macrobinoculars as well.

Making their way to the very top of the hill the two Jedi lay flat on the ground as they peered over it into the valley where the cult leader's transport could be clearly seen near the centre.

"I don't see any signs of life." Brae commented.

"No, but the ground all around the ship looks disturbed." Jayk pointed out, "See how the sand is darker? That's because the sun hasn't had the chance to dry it out to the same extent as the surrounding surface sand."

"Couldn't that be from the engines? If the pilot spent too long hovering at a low altitude then the blast would have brought up a lot of the surface." Brae suggested.

"Perhaps, yes. But I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this. Something just isn't right about it. We had better be very careful from here on." Jayk told her.

"Don't worry dad, I'll be careful." Brae said.

"Better careful than dead." Jayk responded as the pair both put their macrobinoculars away and then crawled over the top of the hill, staying low until they were far enough over the side that they would not be silhouetted against the skyline when they finally stood back up to walk down the opposite side of the hill towards the transport.

"I heard something." Brae said suddenly and both Jedi came to a halt, "There it is again." she added as there was a high pitched screeching sound.

"It sounded like an animal. Perhaps what local wildlife there is is nocturnal." Jayk said.

"As long as it's not carnivorous." Brae replied.

"I suggest we watch where we put our feet just in case." Jayk said as he started moving again and Brae followed him.

When they reached the bottom of the hill the two Jedi broke into a sprint towards the transport. The ground between them and it was almost totally featureless, with nothing for them to use for cover if they came under attack and so it made sense to cover the ground as quickly as possible.

"The ship is open." Brae said as they got close enough to see that the access ramp beneath the transport was in the lowered position, giving them instant access to the vessel without needing to force their way aboard.

"Take care Brae, there could be other security measures in place." Jayk responded and he plucked his lightsaber from his belt but did not activate it right away. Instead he waited at the bottom of the ramp while Brae drew her own weapon, looking up into the darkened interior of the ship, "I don't sense anyone aboard." he said and Brae shook her head.

"Neither do I. I don't sense anything." she said.

"Then let's go aboard and see what's inside. But be careful and watch for traps." Jayk said and the two of them walked slowly up the ramp into the ship.

Finding themselves inside the pitch black cargo hold the Jedi now activated their lightsabers, with a double 'snap-hiss' sound as the blades extended to illuminate their surroundings. Now that they had light the Jedi could see that the cargo hold of the transport was filled with crates of various designs and all marked as if they contained perfectly innocent cargo.

"Am I the only one who thinks that this crate doesn't contain meiloorun fruit?" Brae commented.

"I doubt that the leader of a Sith worshipping cult would have been so keen on it as to waste so much space that could have been given over to more Sith artefacts instead." Jayk added before he noticed the ladder at the centre of the hold that led upwards, "The way to the cockpit?" he said and he picked his way between the crates towards it. Reaching the bottom of the ladder Jayk looked up into the next deck and sensing nothing dangerous he leapt upwards, using the Force to boost him high enough that he landed on the floor of the upper deck, "It's clear. Follow me up." he called down to Brae and moments later Brae appeared beside him having also leapt up instead of climbing the ladder.

"Given that the front of the ship is that way, I expect that's the cockpit." Brae said, pointing to one of the four closed hatchways that were evenly spaced around them in the circular compartment at the top of the ladder. "Agreed." Jayk replied, nodding, "In which case the others are probably a refresher and one or two cabins. Regardless I think that the cockpit is the most important. If this ship is ready to fly then we can take it straight back to Coruscant for analysis at the Jedi temple." and he moved to the door towards the front of the ship and opened it, revealing the cockpit just as the two Jedi had expected and since there were two seats inside it they both entered the small compartment and sat down.

"There, that's it. The Jedi are aboard the transport." the warrior said.

"And with Tylo Kurrast aboard their own ship we have them all buttoned up." Rylee said, smiling, "Send in your men commander." she ordered and the warrior nodded.

"Fire team Esk move in on the enemy ship and take control of it. Teams Aurek and Besh move to forward positions and stand by. Team Cresh await my arrival, I will lead the assault on the Jedi myself." he said into his comlink.

"You could let your men handle it and watch from here." Rylee pointed out as the warrior picked up his ancient Mandalorian helmet and put it on.

"You and your family may be content to watch but I would rather handle this myself. You don't need me here anyway. Even if somehow the Jedi locate this command centre and are able to evade the assault teams long enough to get here there is still another team of my men in the building to protect you." he replied, his voice now distorted by the helmet.

"Very well, go if you must. But I don't want you to kill the Jedi." Rylee said and the warrior looked at her.

"No?" he asked.

"No. I'm not content to just watch as you said. You've been teaching me how to fight and I want to put some of that knowledge to use." Rylee answered.

"You aren't ready to face a Jedi in battle yet."

"Maybe not. But I can still kill one if you bring them to me in binders. Two even. So I don't want you to kill them, I want you to bring them back here for me to do it. Now go and carry out my instructions." Rylee told him and then she smiled, "And may the Force be with you." she added jokingly.

4.

While the Jedi had gone over the hills to get from one valley to the other a number of the troops under the command of Rylee and the warrior had positioned themselves in the low ground between them, making use of the loose sand to help conceal their positions by spreading it over the sheets of plastic that covered them. At the warrior's command several of these were thrown back so that the four man fire teams hiding under them could crawl out into the open and make their way towards their assigned targets.

Four soldiers headed towards the *Swift Exit*, using light intensifying goggles to avoid the need for light sources that would give them away to anyone who happened to look out of the ship in their direction and keeping their rifles tucked into their shoulders ready to fire if a target presented itself. Tylo had closed the ship's access ramp after the Jedi left and so the four soldiers could not simply rush aboard. However, this eventuality had been predicted and while three of the four dropped to their knees and aimed their weapons at where the ramp would open the fourth slung his rifle over his shoulder as he rushed up to where the locking mechanism was located and took out an electronic lock pick. Plugging this into the lock he began the process of trying to override it.

"Tylo we've got company." Cal said, his hologram appearing suddenly in front of Tylo as he sat in the *Swift Exit's* lounge with a mug of caf in his hand.

"Stang, be careful about just popping up like that," Tylo exclaimed as he came close to spilling the hot beverage over himself, "Now what do you mean company?"

"I mean that someone is trying to get into the ship. It can't be Jayk or Brae because they know the access code. Whoever it is doesn't and is using an electronic lock pick to try and get inside." Cal explained.

"Okay thanks." Tylo said, setting down his drink and getting to his feet, "I'm going to grab my rifle. We'll let them get aboard and I'll deal with them then. I may need you to cause a distraction for me when the time comes. Can you do that?"

"It's not exactly what the original me had in mind when he made this me but I'll give it a go." Cal replied before his hologram disappeared and the light coming from his holocron went out, making it much less noticeable as it sat on a shelf.

Tylo hurried from the lounge and went to the crew cabin, turning out the lights in the lounge and the corridor that connected the different parts of the ship together. Although he generally kept his heavy blaster pistol holstered on his hip he also had a larger rifle that he kept in his locker while not using it. Although the weapon was longer and more cumbersome in the confines of the *Swift Exit's* small frame, Tylo wanted the weapon for its ability to fire in bursts as well as semi-automatically and also for its much greater ammunition capacity. Tylo had just taken the weapon from his locker and loaded it when all of a sudden the intercom activated.

"Tylo," Cal's voice said, "they're in." and without responding to this Tylo went to the nearest light switch and turned out the lights in the cabin.

"Okay let's do this." he said to himself.

After coming up the *Swift Exit's* access ramp the four soldiers in the fire team split up into two pairs, one for each exit from the cargo hold that the ramp led to. One of these exits connected with the port side airlock so that cargo could easily be transferred between vessels in space while the other went directly into the lounge. The pairs of soldiers moved cautiously as they advanced, knowing that Tylo was somewhere aboard the ship but not knowing exactly where. The fact that the lights were out in the lounge suggested that he was not in there but the two soldiers who entered the room took no chances, moving in slowly and looking around while making use of the night vision goggles to be able to see without needing to turn the lights on.

The cockpit was just forward of the lounge and while one soldier kept watch the other made his way towards the hatch and opened it, only finding that it was empty as well. Both soldiers then headed towards the open doorway at the rear of the lounge that led into the main corridor. However, just as they were getting close to the open doorway Cal's hologram suddenly materialised behind them, projected close to the cockpit doorway.

"Excuse me gentlemen but can I distract you for a moment?" he said and both soldiers spun around and opened fire instinctively only for their blaster fire to pass right through Cal and strike the wall behind him. Cal's appearance had been timed so that Tylo could then emerge from the corridor outside the lounge and he too fired his rifle before the soldiers had had chance to take in the fact that they were facing a hologram. The two men were close enough together that Tylo caught them both in the back with the same burst. Both men wore armoured vests but at such close range these were ineffective against direct hits from a weapon as powerful as Tylo's rifle and they both fell dead without ever seeing who it was that had shot them.

Tylo heard a voice coming from the comlink headset that had fallen from one of the dead men in front of him and he knew that there was someone else aboard. Rushing to one of the dead men he rolled the body over and then plucked a pair of stun grenades from the dead man's webbing.

"Cal I'll need your help with the doors." he said.

The other two soldiers had been making their way around the *Swift Exit* in the opposite direction, the plan being to trap Tylo between the two pairs and prevent him from escaping. Now that it seemed that something had happened to their comrades though, the surviving pair hurried to find out what.

When they reached the doorway to the lounge at the end of the corridor they found it open and thanks to their night vision equipment could see the body of one of their comrades on the floor inside and they slowed down to advance more cautiously as they entered the room. Reaching the doorway they saw that the body of the other missing soldier was also lay on the floor except this one was lain against the bottom of the door to the hold that instead of being wide open as it had been when the fire team came aboard was now closed.

"Kurrast must have gone into the hold." one of the soldiers said softly and the other nodded.

"He might be making a run for it. Going for the jedi." he said.

"Then we need to make sure he doesn't make it there." the first replied and he rushed forwards to the door, reached out over the body on the floor in front of it to open it, unfortunately as soon as the door slid upwards the soldier realised his mistake as the levers from the two grenades that had been pinned under the door, hidden by the body Tylo had dragged across the floor flew off and bounced off the walls.

"Oh stang." he just had time to say before both stun grenades went off almost in unison.

The blast disorientated the two soldiers, the one closest to the door and centre of the blast collapsed while the other just dropped his weapon and staggered towards a wall to steady himself on. It was then that Tylo emerged from behind a quickly assembled barrier of cargo crates in the hold and fired through the doorway at the fallen soldier. The rapid burst hit the soldier repeatedly in his back and his body jerked until Tylo ceased fire. At this point Tylo leapt over his defensive barrier and charged to the doorway he had booby trapped. From here he could see the other soldier who rather than attempting to retrieve his rifle instead reached for his sidearm when he saw the former smuggler in the doorway. Fortunately Tylo had the advantage in having his rifle already in his hands and he fired before the soldier had managed to get his pistol from its holster. The single shot hit the man in his throat, just above the top of his armoured vest and fell back through the doorway into the corridor.

It was then that Cal's hologram reappeared and gave the appearance of looking around himself at the bodies on the floor.

"Do you think there are any more of them Tylo?" he said.

"I doubt it. If there were then why aren't they already here? I'll give the ship a quick check but first I want to see if I can figure out who these guys are. Do me favour and lock all the doors on the ship while I'm working. If anyone else gets aboard that will keep them trapped I hope." Tylo replied and he crouched down beside the body he had dragged to the cargo hold door.

In addition to the armoured vest that the dead soldier wore, the body was also protected by elbow and knees pads that looked as if they would work against accidental physical knocks but were useless against weapon fire. The general clothing worn by the soldier looked to be focused on protection from the desert conditions outside the ship, with a tight mask covering most of his head so that just his eyes showed through. These of course had been covered by the soldier's night vision equipment but there was also a pair of ordinary sun goggles tucked into the man's load carrying vest that were obviously intended for use during the day.

"You know what Cal?" Tylo said as he pulled the mask from the corpse, "This gives me an idea."

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Cal replied.

While one of his teams was forcing their way aboard the *Swift Exit*, two more were forming up towards the rear of the cult transport from where they could not be seen by anyone. They waited here until a third team arrived that was led by the warrior himself, his mandalorian armour standing out from the more conventional attire of his troops. The teams that he was about lead into the cult transport were armed in a radically different way to the team assigned to assault the *Swift Exit*. The weapons carried by these troops were designed specifically with fighting against an opponent armed with a lightsaber in mind, they carried scatter blasters that functioned in a similar way to the archaic pump action shotguns that were still found on some primitive worlds or in the collections of certain sportsmen. Although their rate of fire and especially their ammunition capacity were much lower than that of an ordinary rifle, the fact that they fired multiple simultaneous energy blasts along slightly different trajectories made them almost impossible to parry with a lightsaber and removed the jedi's advantage instantly.

"Report." the warrior said to the leader of one of the waiting fire teams.

"The jedi are still aboard. There's no indication that they've spotted us yet." the team leader replied and the warrior nodded.

"Good. Breath masks on and all teams advance with me. The boss wants to end the jedi herself if she can so

we capture if we can, but I don't want anyone taking stupid risks so kill them if you have to. One way or another we're ending this now." he ordered and the soldiers around him began to fit breath masks over the masks they already wore to cover their faces before advancing with the warrior towards the transport.

5.

"This is incredible." Jayk said while he and Brae studied the contents of the transport ship's computer files, "The cult amassed a massive collection of Sith artefacts from the black market that was uncertified by the Jedi Order. There are also records here of their contact with Thal N'Krey, including-" and then he stopped. "Including what dad?" Brae asked.

"Including details of his proposed flight path after he last left them. According to these records the cult paid Thal N'Krey on three different occasions to create art specifically for them." Jayk answered.

"So they were regular customers and wanted to keep in touch. When did they last see him?" Brae said.

"About two months before he vanished. There is a list of the places he intended to go so that the cult could contact him if they had more work." Jayk told her.

"No doubt to obtain even more artefacts to use in his art." Brae said as Jayk connected his datapad to the computer and began to copy relevant files to his device. Then all of a sudden he frowned, "What's wrong?" Brae asked.

"The hold of the ship is supposed to be filled with Sith artefacts, yes?" he said.

"That's right. Everything brought from Teramar." Brae responded.

"In that case why can't I sense any of them?" Jayk pointed out and Brae's eyes widened.

"I never thought of that. I can't sense anything either." Brae said.

"It's a trap." Jayk said, pulling his datapad from the computer and getting to his feet.

Brae also got up and the two Jedi hurried out of the cockpit before jumping back down into the cargo hold with their lightsabers in their hands. However, as they rushed towards the exit from the transport they both sensed a tremor in the Force.

Danger.

"Down!" Jayk snapped and both he and Brae threw themselves to the floor moments before the first volley of blaster bolts came flying up the ramp. With the Jedi out of their path these energy blasts instead struck the crates that filled most of the hold and blew several of them apart. Debris from the crates, along with packaging material fell all around the Jedi but just as they had expected there was nothing in the crates connected to the Sith at all.

"There must be more than twenty of them out there." Brae said as energy blasts continued to fly over her and Jayk.

"I don't think so. A dozen perhaps but not many more than that." Jayk replied.

"But the amount of shots they're firing."

"Scatter blasters." Jayk said, "Consider how we get clusters of shots together instead of a rapid succession. Plus the time between volleys is longer. They brought along weapons specifically designed to fight us."

"Jedi!" the voice of the warrior suddenly called out from outside the ship and at the same time the blaster fire into the hold ceased, "Come on out and surrender. You have my word that I and my men will not harm you. Our employer merely wishes to speak with you."

Deception.

"He must be really dumb if he thinks that we'll fall for that." Brae whispered.

"Quite. Although I think he is being honest about him and his men not harming us. I get the feeling that it is his employer that will cause us harm." Jayk replied.

"But who is that?" Brae commented.

"Perhaps Morton Crayne or Teron Sharr. There is also the possibility of Neela Vortress having hired mercenaries to use against us." Jayk said, reeling off a list of beings who had made attempts on their lives before.

"Wow I'm not even twenty and I already have three mortal enemies. More if you count the minions working for them." Brae said, "So what do we do?"

"We are Jedi. We may not be warriors by nature but we still fight when needed." Jayk said and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated his lightsaber, "Remember," he added as Brae activated her own weapon, "don't try to parry their attacks, dodge them. Their rate of fire is low so make use of the time between firing to get closer. The spread pattern of their shots means that they can't shoot at us if we're too close to any of them. Unless they're willing to risk hitting their own men that is. Now let's just hope that the Force is with us." and then he leapt back to his feet and charged down the transport's access ramp.

The warrior and his men had not expected such an aggressive response from the Jedi but they were still ready when Jayk and Brae both appeared, firing their weapons at them in rapid succession. However, this proved to be counter productive when instead of trying to use their lightsabers to block the attacks the Jedi instead used their agility to just dodge them instead, after which there was a pause as the soldiers worked

the actions of their weapons before being able to fire them again and Jayk and Brae took advantage of this brief respite to split apart and rush at the nearest of the soldiers, cutting down two of them instantly before the others fired again.

Once again the jedi dodged the attacks before moving on but now the warrior decided to change his men's approach.

"The man!" he called out, "Concentrate on him. The girl is mine." and he tossed aside his blaster before drawing a sword from his back and charging at Brae.

Brae heard the order the warrior had given to his men and saw that the ordinary soldiers were now retreating away from her to concentrate their attacks on Jayk, the older jedi now having to spend more time dodging instead of attacking. On the other hand the man dressed in an antiquated suit of mandalorian armour was now rushing headlong towards her with a sword in his hand. Brae knew that there were still a handful of mandalorians who stuck to their culture's old militaristic ways and also that their armour and weapons had often been made from an unusual iron ore known as beskar that was resistant even to attacks by lightsabers. Therefore she knew that she should not underestimate this man and she braced herself to meet his charge.

As Brae expected the warrior launched into an attack as soon as he came within reach of her and she parried his first swing of his sword with her lightsaber. Also as expected his sword remained intact, confirming to Brae that the weapon was made from beskar. The warrior quickly pulled his sword back before striking again and Brae found herself having to retreat as he continued to make one attack after another in rapid succession. All of the attacks were easily predictable for Brae and she began to suspect that the warrior might not be quite the threat she had first worried he might be, all she needed to do was wait for him to overexert himself and get tired. However, then she realised that he was never attacking in quite the same way twice and she realised what it was that he was really doing. The warrior was testing her, observing how she responded to each different attack so that he could assess her strengths and weaknesses and Brae became concerned that she might not have the experience to deal with him on her own. Glancing around she looked for Jayk and saw her father still battling the other soldiers. Despite being heavily outnumbered he had been able to close the distance to his opponents to the point where he was so close that they could not risk using their scatter blasters for fear of hitting their own men, two more of which were already lying dead on the ground and the remainder were now attempting to fall back and put more distance between themselves and the jedi.

The warrior saw Brae look aside for a moment and he lunged forwards, aiming his sword away from where she was looking so that it got under her lightsaber. At this point he swiftly brought his blade upwards just as she realised what was happening. She was able to lower her own blade to block the attack with the very base of it but this time the strength of the blow was such that it sent her lightsaber flying from her grasp. Brae gasped as she watched her weapon fall to the ground and before she could use the Force to call it back to her the warrior lashed out with a foot and kicked one of her legs out from underneath her, dropping her to her knees before he stepped closer and grabbed hold of her by her hair with one hand while pressing his sword blade against her throat.

"Jedi!" the warrior yelled, "Surrender or your daughter dies."

Jayk suddenly stopped his attacks against the soldiers and looked towards Brae, seeing her on her knees in front of the warrior. In an instant he knew that the right thing to do was to fight on. He knew that if he gave up then both he and Brae were likely to be killed anyway and a jedi knight was supposed to have no attachments, even to their own padawan, but Brae was his daughter and at that moment in time he could not see anything past that.

"Don't do it." Brae called out but Jayk lowered his lightsaber and shut it off.

"I give up." he said.

"Fire team esk what is your status?" the leader of the fire team observing the *Swift Exit* transmitted using his comlink. The team that had gone aboard the jedi's vessel had not been heard of since entering the ship and the observers were getting suspicious, "Fire team esk, what is your status?" he repeated when there was no reply. Once again no-one from fire team esk responded over the comlink but this time a figure descended the *Swift Exit's* access ramp. Dressed in the uniform and armour of one of fire team esk the figure tapped the side of his head where his comlink headset was located and then shook his head.

"Looks like we've got a communication malfunction." one of the other soldiers said.

"We'd better take a look at it." the team leader replied and then he stood up, revealing his position and waving the figure towards him. Seeing this through his night vision goggles the figure then began to walk towards the observation team, holding his rifle low in both hands, "What happened?" the team leader called out as the figure got closer but he did not answer. Instead he just raised one hand and waved next to his head again.

"Something's wrong. I've got a bad feeling about this." one of the other soldiers said.

"I'm starting to think you're right." the team leader replied and he looked back at the figure who was now not

much more than ten metres away, "That's far enough. I'm coming to meet you." he shouted and the figure came to a halt.

The team leader then began to walk towards the figure while his men remained where they were, out in the open now that the cover of their position had been thrown back so that their leader could get out. Meanwhile the figure remained where he was still holding his rifle low and unthreatening.

"What's going on?" the team leader demanded when he was right in front of the figure.

"Simple." Tylo replied from behind his stolen mask, "I killed all your men." and then he head butted the team leader, smashing his own forehead against the man's nose to produce a sudden 'crunch' as it broke.

The other soldiers saw this and raised their weapons but with their own team leader in their line of fire they did not dare shoot. Meanwhile Tylo grabbed hold of the stunned team leader and held him in place before bringing up the rifle he held and resting it over the shoulder of the man who was now his living shield. With the rifle set on fully automatic Tylo pulled the trigger and held it back, sending a stream of blaster bolts at the other three soldiers that cut them all down while they hesitated. Then he pushed the team leader back so that he fell to the ground and fired another burst into him. With all four soldiers dead Tylo then dropped to the ground, waiting to see if there were any more around who had witnessed what he had just done but when no-one opened fire on him he decided that he was now alone in the valley and got back to his feet before starting to walk towards the next one.

In his disguise Tylo was not worried about being seen by any other soldiers in the area and as soon as he reached the top of the hill he simply walked over it and then broke into a run. He guessed that the operation would be based in the abandoned structures that were located fairly close to him and so he headed right for them. Sure enough as he got closer he saw that there was another pair of soldiers standing guard just outside the open gateway in the outer wall that surrounded and connected the structures.

"Where's the boss?" Tylo asked as he walked right up to the two men, trusting in the mask that he wore to account for any difference in his voice to any of the men he had already killed.

"The command centre." one of them replied, and he helpfully pointed towards one of the buildings on the far side of the courtyard that was on the other side of the gateway.

"Thanks." Tylo said.

"Oh and if you're about to ask for a raise then now's a good time." the soldier said.

"Why?" Tylo said.

"Haven't you heard? The jedi are being brought here right now. Miss Drud is in a very good mood." the other soldier said and Tylo nodded.

"Thanks again." he said, stepping between them but before he went through the gate he drew the knife he was carrying on his belt and quickly thrust it into the neck of one of the guards. Rather than waste time pulling the blade free Tylo simply let go of it and before the other guard could call out a warning Tylo punched him in his throat. The blow was not strong enough to do any permanent damage but it did silence the guard and disorientated him long enough that he was able to wrap his arm around the man's neck and put him in a choke hold that he rapidly tightened, holding the man until his struggling finally stopped.

Stepping into the courtyard Tylo took a look around. He could see no-one else there with him or even observing from any of the many windows that overlooked it from the various buildings. The only feature of the courtyard was a well and Tylo walked over to this before removing his night vision goggles and peering down into it.

"You better not have dropped your chronometer into it." a voice suddenly called out and Tylo looked up to see a female soldier now walking across the courtyard from one of the buildings towards him. She was the first of the soldiers that Tylo had encountered that was not masked, although he could see that she had one pulled down around her neck, "Apart from the fact that you'll never get it back I'd hate for there to be something in the water that I'm about to drink that was worn next to your sweaty skin." she added as she walked up to the well and picked up the bucket on the end of a syntherope line that was next to it. However, before she could lower the bucket into the well Tylo grabbed hold of the back of her neck and slammed her head into the well, stunning her and allowing him to then push her head first into the well where he heard her bounce off the walls until there was a 'splash' as she landed in the water. With this third soldier now dealt with Tylo then made his way inside the building that had been pointed out to him as housing the command centre.

Without prior knowledge of the layout of the building, Tylo had to check each room in turn until he finally found one that had light coming from it, telling him that he had found his target. Peering through the open doorway he saw that there were two people inside the command centre, one of them was another soldier who like the woman he had just killed was not wearing his mask while the other was a woman wearing expensive looking civilian clothes instead of combat fatigues and Tylo guessed that she was the one in charge. Miss Drud as the guard had referred to her.

Bracing his rifle against his shoulder Tylo suddenly stepped through the doorway and shot the soldier before he realised that there was anything wrong, triggering a gasp from Rylee.

“What the hell are you doing?” she demanded and Tylo reached up to pull off his mask.

“Sorry princess, all your guards are dead.” he told her and she frowned.

“What the hell happened to your face?” she said and Tylo suddenly remembered the make up that Brae had put on him.

“Damn it Brae.” he muttered before scowling back at Rylee, “Just shut up about that. All you need to know is that you're my prisoner.” he snapped at her and she sighed and raised her hands and snorted.

“Morton Crayne was right about how arrogant you are Mister Kurrast. You're one man. You can't hope to kill all of Mister Mott's men.” she said.

“Ah so you know me, you're who Crayne is working for. Well just you let me worry about you're private little army princess. In the mean time I've met a number of women who didn't look like much but were actually pretty handy in a fight so I need to be one hundred percent sure you aren't hiding any weapons on you.”

“What do you mean?” Rylee asked and Tylo grinned.

“I mean you're going to have to take your clothes off. All of them.” he told her.

6.

The warrior known as Mott watched as Jayk and Brae were secured, their hands bound behind their backs and hoods placed over their heads. He considered it unfortunate that he had lost so many of his men, only half of the dozen soldiers he had brought with him were still alive and two of those had sustained injuries at Jayk's hands. However, their mission had been a success and the Jedi were their prisoners which meant that all of the soldiers involved could expect themselves or their families to be well rewarded.

"You can't win." Jayk said as the hood was being pulled over his head and Mott smiled.

"We'll see about that Jedi. I've been waiting a long time for this." he replied. Then he looked at his men and added, "Let's get moving. We're done here."

"Well princess it looks like I owe you an apology." Tylo said when he had finished searching through Rylee's clothes and he turned to where the young woman now sat, her body wrapped in tape from her ankles to her shoulders, immobilising her completely.

"So give me back my clothes and maybe I'll have you killed quickly." Rylee hissed back at him.

"Oh I don't think so." Tylo said as he turned his attention to the holographic display at the centre of the room, "Now let me see. Each of your men carries a transponder connected to their comlinks so you can tell exactly where they are. I made sure to deactivate that on the one I took by the way. I'm not interested in being tracked. That means I now know exactly where all your men in this valley are located. These groups around the edge are reinforcements I'm guessing, probably equipped with some long range firepower for dealing with beings who can dodge blaster bolts they know are coming. That then leaves this little group here heading this way from the transport who I guess are bringing Jayk and Brae here for you to kill. So here's what's going to happen. You're going to contact each of these support units in turn and send them into the neighbouring valleys where they'll be out of contact. Then we're going to have a little surprise ready when my friends are brought here."

"Not a chance." Rylee said and Tylo smiled before walking up to her and clamping one of his hands over her face so that it covered her nose and mouth. Unable to breathe, Rylee tried to break free but the tape was too strong for her to escape from.

"Changed your mind yet princess?" Tylo said as he took his hand away and Rylee gasped for breath.

"Okay, I'll do it." she replied.

"Commander there are no guards on the gate." the soldier at the head of Mott's group said as they approached the cluster of buildings and Mott signalled for his men to halt.

"Team xesh report." he said into his comlink but there was no response, "Team xesh report." he repeated but again there was no reply, "Advance." he then told his men, "But be cautious. I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Something not going to plan?" Brae commented from under her hood but the soldiers ignored her.

Making their way to the gate Mott and his men went into the courtyard at which point they all came to a sudden halt when they saw Tylo standing on the other side of the well, holding Rylee in front of him as a shield. To prevent her from calling out a warning to Mott and his men Tylo had gagged her with more tape wrapped around her head and when he saw the soldiers enter the courtyard he leant her forwards over the well.

"That's far enough." Tylo called out, "One more step and your boss joins her clothes at the bottom of this well. Think you can fish her out before she drowns?"

"Who is this guy and what the hell happened to his face?" one of the soldiers commented when he saw the makeup on Tylo's face, causing Tylo to scowl.

"What do you want?" Mott asked, keeping his blaster pointed at Tylo.

"Lots of money and a life of luxury." Tylo answered.

"If it's money you want then it's money you'll get. But not if you harm her." Mott told him.

"Oh please," Tylo replied, "I wouldn't live long enough to spend any ransom you paid me for her. Mind you I knew a rich girl like her wouldn't go anywhere without a significant supply of spending money so I've already helped myself to what she had with her. A tidy sum if you ask me too."

"Get to the point Kurrast." Mott said.

"Ah so you know who I am. I thought you might. In which case you'll know that my staying out of prison kind of depends on those two Jedi you have there. So for starters you're going to turn them loose and hand over all your weapons and comlinks to them. Then they'll toss them down this well so that we can leave without being shot in the back." Tylo explained.

Mott hesitated for a moment. The aim of this mission was specifically to remove the Jedi as a threat but he could not risk Rylee's life on that aim and so he lowered his weapon.

"Do as he says," he told his men and when they hesitated he snapped, "Now!"

Reluctantly the soldiers removed the hoods and binders from Jayk and Brae before Mott returned their lightsabers to them.

"Thank you Tylo, I had a feeling you'd come through for us," Jayk said.

"You could have let me in on it," Brae added as she began taking weapons and comlinks from the soldiers.

"This valley is surrounded by my men," Mott said as he was handing his weapons to Jayk.

"Not any more. You see I thought of that and the princess here was kind enough to send them all off past the hills where they can't be contacted. Mind you Jayk and Brae they're bound to get suspicious about what's happening eventually so we need to hurry."

"This is the last of their weapons," Brae replied as she tossed an armful of blasters into the well.

"Good. Now how many sets of binders are they carrying?" Tylo asked.

"One each I think," Jayk answered.

"Then grab them and the keys and secure them to each other. Wrist to ankle so they can't come at us. Oh and don't forget to get the keys and toss them down the well as well," Tylo said.

"What about her?" Brae asked, looking at Rylee.

"Ah yes, Rylee Drud, Morton Crayne's employer it seems. I'd love to drag her back to the ship and hand her over to your Jedi Council but she'd slow us down and we're on the clock here," Tylo replied.

"Then leave her for now," Jayk said as he was locking Mott's wrist to the ankle of one of his men, "We know who she is now and we have the data from that ship's computer."

"So this wasn't a bust after all," Tylo said, smiling and then he looked at Rylee and added, "Thanks princess." before shoving her as if he was about to push her into the well but instead pushing her to the ground, "Okay now let's get going. I want to get back to Coruscant and clean this poodoo off my face."

"Well I think you look pretty," Brae said as the *Swift Exit's* crew sat in the ship's lounge once it was safely in hyperspace and Tylo glared at her.

"Yeah right. We finally find out who's been pulling Crayne's strings and I have to face her looking like this," he replied, pointing to his face.

"Did I miss something?" Cal asked as he appeared in front of the others.

"We met Morton Crayne's employer," Brae said.

"A nice young lady called Rylee Drud. I can show you some interesting pictures of her," Tylo added and Cal's hologram gave the appearance of staring at him.

"Did you just say 'Drud'?" he asked.

"Cal what's wrong?" Jayk asked.

"That name,... Drud. Did you get any other names?" Cal asked.

"Only of her chief thug. A guy in ancient Mandalorian armour called-" Tylo began,.

"Mott," Cal interrupted, "Jayk I've got a very bad feeling about this."