

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

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1-12: ESCAPE & EVADE

Commanded by his master to destroy what remains of an ancient Sith temple Teron Sharr finds himself pursued not only by Jayk and Brae Udra, but also by his previous employer, anxious to retrieve what he took from them...

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1.

The heat of the jungle could be a struggle even for those raised to it but the latest of Brentan Tal's customers seemed to take it entirely in his stride. The man had given his name as Thal N'Krey and claimed to be an artist looking for inspiration but something about that did not ring true to Brentan.

"Well this is about as far as we can come." Brentan said as the trail they had been following came to an end in a clearing that was dominated by a jungle pool, "Is this what you're looking for?"

Thal ignored the guide and walked into the clearing, making his way around the water's edge until he reached a large stone covered in moss at the far side.

"This way." he said.

"We can't go that way." Brentan told him, "If there ever was a trail that way it's overgrown now."

"Then we must make our own." Thal said and he set his pack down on the ground and began to rummage through it.

"Hey look," Brentan said as he walked around the pool to where Thal was crouched, "you hired me to show you the trails and this is where the trail ends. Now if you want to take some pictures or even sit and paint or whatever for a while that's just fine by me but-" and then he gasped as Thal stood up suddenly with a machete in his hand that the guide had not realised he had had in his pack. He backed away with his hands raised, unsure of what Thal intended to do but the artist just got swung the heavy blade at the undergrowth beside the standing stone, "Are you insane?" Brentan said, "How far do you think you'll get doing that?"

"I'll get further if you use that vibroblade to help me." Thal replied.

"No chance. I'm heading back whether you're coming or not."

"In that case you may wish to consider that you were hired to bring me into the jungle and back again and that I haven't yet paid you. If you want your money then I suggest you earn it."

Brentan groaned.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." he muttered to himself.

"Master." Teron Sharr said as he knelt before the hologram of the hooded figure, "I await your command."

"You will go to the Geron system." the figure said "I will provide you with a map of your destination."

"Of course master. What do you require me to obtain?"

"Nothing. The Geron system was once controlled by the Sith but the last relic of any importance has already been removed, I witnessed its abandonment myself."

"Then why do I need to go there?" Teron asked.

"There are the remains of a Sith pyramid deep within the jungle." his master explained, "Inside this are writings that could lead anyone who finds them to other, more important sites. You are to take enough explosives with you to destroy this. The secrets of the Sith are not to be known by lesser beings."

"Master we have few explosives. I would have to-"

"I do not care about your logistical failings! If you do not have enough explosives to bring down a single pyramid then find somewhere from where you can obtain them. Remember Teron, your last mission was a failure, do not fail me again." and then the hooded figure flickered and disappeared.

Teron sighed as he got to his feet. Getting to Geron would be straight forward enough, but obtaining explosives in large quantities on an unfamiliar planet would be more tricky. However, the risks of failing his master were greater than those of getting caught by local law enforcement and so Teron left the communication room and went to find some of his men.

"You asked to see me master?" Jayk Udra said as he entered the briefing room and Grand Master Karadon Ress, the current supreme leader of the Jedi Order turned to face him. Grand Master Ress was an imposing figure, tall and muscular and looking like he would have been more at home in a gladiatorial arena than a temple.

"Ah Jedi Udra, yes, come in." the grand master replied before he looked at the control panel for the holo projector he was stood in front of, "This was forwarded to us by the judicial department when their system flagged it up."

"Flagged it up?" Jayk asked. He knew that the Jedi Order routinely shared information with the Republic's judicial department and vice versa but a great deal of what the Jedi Order did was considered 'need to know' information that outside agencies did not need to know.

"As you know we routinely provide the judicials with fugitive data so that they can help us track them," Master Ress said, "and it would seem that they have got a hit. Observe." and he activated the projector.

Jayk looked at the footage now projected into the air in the middle of the chamber. It showed a small group of beings standing outside a large structure. Where this was located or what they were discussing could not be

told from the footage but the beings pictured could be identified and one in particular stood out.

"Teron Sharr." Jayk said, "He must have escaped Uratas before the moon was destroyed. Has there been another outbreak of the Sith infection?"

"No, nothing like that. This footage was taken from a civilian security feed that was passed to local law enforcement on Geron. The beings you see here were trying to arrange the purchase of explosives without the correct authorisation. Local law enforcement suspected that they could be a terrorist cell and forwarded the information to the judicial department who ran it through a facial recognition program and that flagged up Teron Sharr."

"Do we know yet whether any other key members of Morton Crayne's organisation are there?" Jayk asked but Master Ress shook his head.

"No." he replied, "But let's face it we don't even know for certain how high up in Crayne's gang this Sharr is. According to your pilot he was only a low level thug. But he appeared to lead the assault on our outpost in the Veras system."

"And carried whatever it was that caused the infection to Uratas." Jayk added.

"Which is precisely why we passed what information we have on him to the judicials." Master Ress said, "Fortunately, so since we now know that he is in the Geron system trying to purchase explosives."

"Do we know why?" Jayk said but the grand master shook his head.

"No. The local police haven't been able to track him down after this was handed to them either. Which is why I want you and your apprentice to head out there immediately and find him. He may be able to lead us to the rest of Crayne's gang."

"Yes master. We will leave immediately." Jayk replied before turning to leave.

From the briefing room Jayk went directly to the temple's hangar where the YT-700 class transport *Swift Exit* was among the other vessels docked there. This ship did not belong to the Jedi Order as the vast majority of the others did, instead it was owned by a smuggler called Tylo Kurrast who had been compelled into helping Jayk uncover what had happened to Thal N'Krey in exchange for avoiding being prosecuted for his own crimes.

Walking up the access ramp into the ship he heard voices as he approached the lounge.

"You're kidding me." Tylo's voice said.

"No." another male voice replied, "There I was on the floor of the bathroom with my arm reaching under the refresher door bound to my sister at the wrist when all of a sudden this twi'lek woman walks in and sees me like that. Of course she couldn't see what was going on on the other side of the door. So I looked her straight in the face and said 'Jedi business ma'am.'"

"And what did she say?"

"Oh she just screamed and Lara and I got arrested for gross public indecency. Fortunately the charges were dropped before anyone told my superiors. Or worse yet my father."

Jayk entered the lounge and saw Tylo leaning back in a chair while the hologram of a human in Jedi robes spoke to him.

"Hey Jayk." Tylo said, raising the beer bottle in his hand, "Cal here was just telling me about the times he got arrested. Some interesting relatives you had back then."

"Well I've got a mission for us." Jayk told him, "Teron Sharr has been seen in the Geron system so we need to get there as fast as we can."

"Oh. Err." Tylo said and he looked at the beer bottle, "I may not be okay to fly."

"I'll take care of that." Jayk said, "But where's Brae?"

"Oh she went to her bunk to meditate." Cal told him, "For some reason she didn't like my anecdotes about being a Jedi knight."

"Perhaps because she's not interested in hearing about you being arrested." Jayk said as he headed towards the cockpit.

"At least I wasn't the one accused of murder." Cal responded. Then he looked at Tylo and added, "I'll explain more about that one later." before his hologram disappeared and the holocron in the corner of the room went dark as it entered a standby mode.

Ordinarily Tylo flew the *Swift Exit* and Jayk was happy to allow him to do this. But since he had been drinking Jayk sat in the pilot's seat and started to input the co-ordinates for a jump from Coruscant to Geron. He had just powered up the *Swift Exit*'s repulsorlifts when he sensed the approach of his padawan Brae. As well as being his apprentice, Brae was also his niece and the Jedi Council had taken the highly unusual step of assigning her to be Jayk's padawan hoping that to see how a member of her family was able to control and make use of the Force would enable her to overcome the difficulties she was having in controlling her own considerable powers. Like Jayk she had the fair hair and blue eyes that were common to the Udra family but unlike most others she was not very tall, barely one and half metres.

"Tylo said we're going after Teron." she said as she sat in the co-pilot's seat, "How did he survive Uratas?"

"I don't know." Jayk admitted, "Perhaps we can ask him when we catch him. But first there is another task to be done."

"What is it master?" Brae asked and Jayk smiled.

"Take the controls padawan." he told her, "The navigational data is already programmed into the computer. All you need to do is pilot us out into space, out of Coruscant's gravity well and into hyperspace."

"I've never done this before." Brae said as she took hold of the control column in front of her, "I mean I've been in simulators and flown in atmosphere but never done faster than light."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you'll do fine and if you don't I'm here to take over." Jayk said.

"Okay here goes." Brae said, taking over control of the *Swift Exit*.

Jayk had already set the ship on a course for orbital space and other aircraft had to remain a significant distance away from the Jedi temple to prevent accidental collisions if Jedi craft had to be launched on short notice so the first part of the flight just required Brae to stay on course as the sky darkened and before stars and orbital structures appeared ahead. Without needing to be told Brae switched over from the *Sift Exit*'s repulsorlift drives to its sublight ion drive and the vessel shuddered slightly.

"Oops." she said.

"It doesn't matter. Just keep going. You're doing fine." Jayk reassured her and Brae held her course away from Coruscant until they were outside its gravity well and it was safe to engage the hyperdrive. Reaching out, Brae pushed the lever forwards gently and the ship shook violently, "Push harder." Jayk told her, "All the way." and as Brae did when she was told the stars outside blurred and stretched as the *Swift Exit* entered hyperspace.

"I did it." Brae said, smiling.

"Yes you did. Well done." Jayk replied before Tylo suddenly appeared in the doorway behind them.

"What the kriff are you two doing to my ship?" he exclaimed.

2.

The web like structure that surrounded The Assembler was dotted with pieces of advanced technology set into it so that the three metre tall arachnid could make use of it all. Neurofibers running into the web connected The Assembler to it, fixing him in place but also allowing him to communicate with each of the smaller nodes of himself that were able to move around and take care of all the menial tasks required to maintain the web while The Assembler himself spent his time absorbing the information that earned him a living. His web was equipped to monitor interstellar communication across a large portion of the galaxy and the advanced decryption equipment also enabled him to decode some supposedly secure transmissions, though cracking the higher level Republic cyphers remained beyond him for now at least.

The Assembler knew his customers' needs well, having made sure to collect as much information about all of them as well. To his customers, The Assembler would claim that his interest in them was to help provide a better service, but in fact it was much to protect him against them if the need arose. For each customer The Assembler maintained a computer program that sifted through all the data he received, matching key words to specific customers and calculating the amount they would be likely to pay for the information. These results were then presented to The Assembler in order of the most profitable first. Therefore, when a report that his system indicated would be worth more than half a million credits to one of his clients The Assembler took notice.

"Get her for me." The Assembler told the node responsible for long range communications and moments later a hologram of a dark skinned human woman appeared in front of him.

"Why are you calling me?" she asked.

"Because I have information to offer you." The Assembler replied, "It will cost you five hundred thousand credits."

"Five hundred thousand? You must be insane if you think I'll just-"

"Teron Sharr." The Assembler interrupted.

"What about him?" the woman asked.

"He has left his stronghold and his location pinpointed by the Republic. I expect the Jedi will already have sent someone to retrieve him." then he paused before adding, "Along with your property."

Out of shot the woman operated a keyboard and then smiled.

"The money's been transferred." she said, "Now tell me where he is."

The Assembler looked at his accountancy node and the smaller version of himself confirmed that the payment was now in one of his many hidden accounts.

"I'm transferring the data now." he said, "It has been a pleasure doing business with you."

The Assembler abruptly terminated the subspace link and for a moment the woman wondered whether the creature had decided to end their business relationship by stealing half a million credits from her. But then her communication system chimed to indicate that she had just received a data packet from an anonymous source and she smiled, knowing that this would be from The Assembler. She wasted no time in opening the message and the attached data packet and smiled when she saw the contents.

Activating her subspace communication system again she smiled as the image of a human male appeared in front of her.

"Rylee." he said, smiling back at her, "You look in a good mood."

"And why shouldn't I be Mister Crayne?" Rylee responded, "You should be as well. I'm about to give you the opportunity to clear your considerable debt to me."

From space Geron looked almost entirely green. Most of its landmasses were covered by jungle while the seas were filled with an algae that gave them a similar colour and from a distance it was difficult to pick out where one ended and the other began. The only exceptions to this were the handful of cities that remained out of the larger number that had existed at the planet's peak. However, during the closing stages of the last of the protracted periods of galactic conflict centuries earlier the world had been extensively bombed and although the ecosystem had recovered, the population had not and now many of the settlements that had existed beforehand had been reclaimed by the jungle.

"Here." Jayk said, pointing to a map of the planet he had on his datapad, "This is the settlement where Teron was caught on the security camera. Take us down there."

"Got it." Tylo replied now that he was fully sober and able to fly the ship again and he set a course towards the settlement. Fortunately every settlement on Geron had its own beacon, an important feature on a planet where the easiest way to travel between different settlements was by air and the occupants of a speeder could be out of visual contact with any settlements at all and the beacon broadcasts provided a reliable long

range navigation system.

Tylo homed in on the beacon for the correct settlement and set the *Swift Exit* down at what passed for a starport on Geron. Far from most galactic trade routes the only services available here were those needed to allow ships to reach other nearby systems with better facilities. There was no-one there to meet the Jedi as they disembarked from the ship and instead they had to make their way through town to the local police station.

"Damn hot here." Tylo muttered as they walked up to the building, "Think they'll have air conditioning inside?" "I hope so." Brae responded as the main doors slid open for them automatically and Tylo frowned when he felt the air inside was just as hot as it was outside.

"Guess not." he added.

There was a single bored looking deputy on duty at the front desk when the party walked through the doorway and he watched them approach the desk before saying anything.

"How may I help you?" he asked.

"Jedi Udra." Jayk said, "This is my padawan Brae and my pilot Captain Kurrast. We are here about Teron Sharr."

"Who?" the deputy said.

"A guy in security footage you sent to the judicials." Tylo said, "He was trying to buy explosives."

"Oh right, one of them." the policeman said and he picked up a datapad and called up a file, "We don't have any of them but we do know that they left town without a guide. Or at least not with any of the usual guides." and he held out the datapad for Jayk to see. Taking it from the policeman Jayk saw that he had called up an image of Teron and a group of about a dozen other beings heading off into the jungle. Worryingly about half of the group carried bulky holdalls that had not been evident in the footage sent to the judicial department and that could easily contain explosives, "We got that yesterday." the policeman added.

"Did you try to apprehend them?" Jayk asked.

"Into the jungle? Are you insane?" the policeman exclaimed, "Look, the jungle around here is way too thick. You could hide an army out there and no-one would find it. Even aerial surveillance is no good thanks to the overhead cover from the trees."

"Can you at least point us in the general direction that he went in?" Jayk asked, "Oh and to a guide able to take us into the jungle if there is such a thing around here."

"I've been told that you can act as a guide." Jayk said to the duros sat in the cantina and the duros looked him up and down before studying Brae and Tylo as well. While doing this Jayk noticed that his eyes lingered on the lightsabers plainly visible hanging from his and Brae's belts given that the heat had caused them to abandon their cloaks.

"Jedi huh? Sure. But it'll cost you." the alien replied, "Five hundred a day."

"Five hundred? We don't have to listen to this." Tylo said, "We can find someone-" but then Jayk held up his hand for the smuggler to be quiet.

"We'll pay for five days in advance." he said, "If that turns out to be insufficient then we'll pay the balance on our return."

The duros stared at him for a moment before getting to his feet.

"Gan Dec." he introduced himself as, "I take it you want to leave now?"

"Correct." Jayk said, "We want to head east." and the duros snorted.

"Popular destination recently." he said and Jayk exchanged glances with Brae and Tylo.

"You mean you know about the other group that headed that way?" he asked Gan.

"Both of them." Gan answered.

"Both?" Tylo commented, "What's this second group?"

"A transport dropped them off late yesterday and hired a guide to take them that way. Mostly humans like you but they were led by a woman."

"Oh no." Tylo said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Was this the woman?" Jayk said, taking out his datapad and calling up an image that he showed to Gan.

"Yeah, that's her. I'm not always too good at telling you humans apart but she stood out."

"Mara Tosk." Jayk said, looking at Brae and Tylo.

"Morton Crayne's favourite thief." Tylo added.

"But master," Brae said, "if Teron Sharr is already here leading a group of Crayne's men then why did he need to send another group with Mara Tosk?"

"A good question my young apprentice." Jayk replied, "And one I sense we may not like the answer to."

3.

The sheltered nature of the jungle trails made it difficult for someone to determine how far along one someone had travelled and this problem was confounded by the planet's lack of a satellite navigation system. The closest thing it had were the beacons broadcasting from each settlement but the uneven terrain made it difficult to pick up two signals that could be used for bearings. For this reason alone Mara had been forced to procure the services of a guide after discovering from the local underworld that Teron and his men had headed into the jungle carrying with them a sizeable quantity of explosives.

Morton's instructions to Mara were clear. Teron's men were to be eliminated, none of them could be relied on to serve Morton with any degree of loyalty. Teron on the other hand was to be taken alive and able to lead Morton to the item he had stolen shortly before staging the mutiny that had seen him usurp Morton's position. But in addition to this Morton was interested in why Teron had come here, especially if it was for a reason that he could use to make money from so as Mara's group was making its way along the trail Teron had supposedly taken she approached their guide.

"So what do people come out here to do anyway?" she asked.

"Some want to gather specimens of the plants and animals." the man told her, "Nobody's found any real uses for any of them yet but every so often somebody thinks they may have and they want fresh specimens. Plus there are hunters of course. There are a few creatures out here worth hanging on a wall or turning into a rug or pair of boots."

"And would any of these creatures require a large amount of explosives to hunt?" Mara said.

"Explosives? Have you been snorting bad spice? Stang no, there's nothing that a decent blaster won't take down with a well placed shot. Anyway lady we're coming up on the end of the trail so-"

"Get ready." Mara called out before the guide could finish and behind them Mara's men drew their blasters.

"Hey, what's going on here?" the guide said, alarmed at the sudden display of weaponry, "You never said anything about a firefight."

"Because you wouldn't have agreed to come if I did." Mara replied, "Now stay back while we get this done." and then while the guide remained where he was Mara and most of her men advanced cautiously along the trail. Only one remained behind and as the guide turned to try and leave the man just smiled at him and tapped his blaster.

"Okay I get it. I'll stay here." the guide said nervously.

Meanwhile Mara and her men spread out as they advanced, departing from the trail and creeping through the undergrowth. This slowed their progress as they did their best to move stealthily but it was better than all rushing along the trail so that they could easily be seen by Teron and his men. But as they approached the clearing at the end of the trail it became obvious that it was empty.

The clearing was dominated by a pool of water and the shore around this was clear of obstacles which meant that there was nowhere for someone to hide.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Mara muttered as she studied the clearing through her macrobinoculars. For a moment she considered the possibility that Teron and his men could be in the water, hidden below the surface but there was no sign of any equipment left on the shore. The issue was that Mara's speciality was breaking and entering rather than tracking a target through the jungle so determining where her quarry had gone was not something she was ideally suited to. Morton had given her the task of bringing Teron back purely because he trusted her more than any of his other men not because she was capable of tracking him through the jungle. However, she knew someone that was suited to doing just that.

"Go get that guide." she whispered to the man closest to her and he nodded before carefully withdrawing. It took a few minutes for him to return but when he did so he was accompanied by the guide.

"What do you want?" the guide asked.

"Just take a look at the clearing." Mara told him, handing him her macrobinoculars and he lifted them to his eyes.

"It's empty." he said.

"I can see that. But what I want to know is where our target went. You said that this was where they came to." Mara pointed out.

"And they did. There's no indication that anyone left the trail before your lot did. That means they must have-" the guide responded before suddenly stopping.

"What's wrong?" Mara asked.

"Someone's made a new trail on the far side of the clearing." the guide told her, "By one of the stones."

"Stones?" Mara asked.

"Yes stones. There are some standing stones around the clearing. They've been there so long that they're all overgrown but if you know what you're looking for you can still find them and I can see from here that

someone's had a go at clearing a path through the jungle next to one of them." and he pointed to where the vegetation was disturbed.

Mara smiled. If Teron and his men were now resorted to hacking a path through the jungle then her party could follow this at a faster rate than he could progress.

"Okay let's go." she called out, "That's the way they went."

Mara and her men rushed out of the jungle into the clearing and circled around the pool. The first of her group was just reaching the standing stone when a thought occurred to Mara. Teron's men had left town with a large amount of explosives and the path they were clearing for themselves was an obvious route for someone following them to take.

"No!" she called out, "Stay back. It's a trap!" but before the man could react to Mara's warning he triggered the mine that had been left concealed behind the stone.

Mara found herself thrown backwards by the blast wave and she felt the pain of several small fragments of the standing stone as they cut through her clothing, but not all of the group were as lucky as Mara. The man who had triggered the mine was torn apart by the explosion while three others were struck by fragments that were instantly lethal and a fourth was thrown back into the water and when he surfaced again he was floating face down as blood spread out into the water around him.

Teron's men did not bother to ask how he knew that they were heading in the right direction as they continued to clear a path through the jungle, they simply accepted that each time he told them to adjust their heading he knew what he was doing. Hacking through the undergrowth would have been impossible using only mundane hand tools but Teron had known what conditions awaited his men and so they had brought with them a pair of vibroaxes that could slice through even the thickest tree trunks with relative ease. Even so, clearing the path was tiring work and the job of using the vibroaxes had to be swapped regularly. All of a sudden there was the sound of an explosion in the distance and Teron's men all looked back in the direction they had come."

"What was that?" one of them asked.

"Proof." Teron replied with a smile, "Proof that we were right to suspect the police were on to us. Now hurry. There is not far to go and I doubt that just one small mine will put our enemies off."

Jayk and Brae were able to move faster than either Tylo or their local guide and a gap had opened up between the two pairs. This posed some issues for Gan who had to shout instructions to them regarding what local landmarks they should be watching for.

"Hey!" Tylo called out, "How about we take a quick break?"

"There's no time." Jayk replied, "Whatever reason Crayne had for sending reinforcements, they have a lead on us that we must do our best to reduce."

"Well that lead is only going to get bigger if I collapse and die." Tylo pointed out.

"Master, perhaps we should stop for a while." Brae suggested.

"Very well. Ten minutes and no more." Jayk said and he and Brae halted while they waited for Tylo and Gan to catch up. The first thing that the other two men did when they reached the Jedi was find somewhere suitable to sit down and opened their canteens for a drink.

"So what did this guy do anyway?" Gan asked.

"Theft." Tylo replied.

"Theft? Seriously? That doesn't sound like it ought to warrant even one Jedi, let alone two chasing after him." Gan said.

"It's what was stolen." Brae explained, "The gang we are chasing is targeting artwork that may include contraband items." and then she took out her datapad and called up an image of one of the artworks created by Thal N'Krey and handed it to the guide.

"So this is valuable art then is it?" he asked as he used his finger to scroll from one image to the next in the directory.

"Some of it's okay." Tylo commented, "The artist had this model who-"

"Hey, I know this guy." Gan said suddenly, "I mean I remember seeing him." and he held up the datapad to show that he was looking at an image of Thal N'Krey himself, pictured standing next to a painting of an armoured figure wielding a large sword.

"What here?" Tylo asked and Gan nodded.

"That's right. He came into town one day looking for a guide."

"Let me guess," Brae said, "he wanted to come this way as well."

"I don't know." Gan said, shrugging, "He seemed like a real nerf herder. Agitated and paranoid. That's the sort of poodoo I can do without out here in the jungle so I didn't even make him an offer. He went with a man called Brentan Tal instead."

Jayk looked back along the trail in the direction they had come, frustrated that they may have missed an opportunity.

"How long ago was this?" he asked.

"A couple of years." Gan said.

"You've got a good memory for the face of a man you only saw briefly." Tylo commented.

"I remember it because that was the last time anyone saw Brentan." Gan said, "Whatever happened in the jungle he was never seen again."

"What about Thal N'Krey?" Jayk asked, "Didn't anyone ask him?"

"Oh we'd have done more than ask if he'd just come walking back into town alone but he must have sneaked back in the middle of the night because his ship was just suddenly gone one morning."

All of a sudden there was a dull booming sound in the distance and Gan frowned.

"That didn't sound like thunder." he said.

"No it didn't." Brae commented.

"It sounded like a bomb." Tylo added, "Looks like Teron's been using some of those explosives of his."

"We need to hurry." Jayk said, "Break's over."

With fully half of her men lost to the bomb, Mara doubted that her remaining force would be enough to deal with Teron and his gang, especially now that they would be alert for their approach. But that relied on them making a direct assault and Mara was too cunning for that. She may not have been a professional mercenary but she could take care of herself in a fight if she had to and she was adept at finding gaps in security.

"Come on." she told her men as she double checked her blaster to make sure it had not been damaged by the explosion.

"You can't be serious." the guide said, "I'm not following you any further."

"Then go back." Mara hissed, "But I suggest you either leave the money we've already paid you or be somewhere else when Mister Crayne sends someone to get it back."

The guide scowled and reached into his pocket to retrieve the roll of bank notes he had been given in payment for this job.

"What good's a reward if you ain't around to use it?" he muttered and then he started to walk back towards the trail.

Looking at one of her men Mara nodded and he promptly drew his own blaster and shot the guide in the back.

"What about them?" the man asked as he lowered his blaster and looked down at the bodies of their former comrades.

"Leave them." Mara said, "We might be able to pick them up on the way back but carrying them now will just slow us down."

With their blasters at the ready Mara and her men advanced past the remains of the standing stone, stepping over the bloody flesh that was all that remained of their comrade who had inadvertently triggered the booby trap to follow Teron's gang down the freshly made path. Mara herself led the way now, her skills at detecting security devices made her the logical choice to watch for further booby traps so they could be avoided or disarmed. Having to study every detail of the jungle for anything that looked as if it was out of place or had been deliberately positioned slowed Mara down and she suspected that Teron's gang would be getting further ahead of them but she also knew that eventually they would reach their destination and she and her men could catch up with them there.

4.

"Shouldn't someone stay back here to deal with them?" one of Teron's men asked him.

"No Krovak." he replied, "I need every man here to take a turn at clearing the jungle. Besides, splitting up would just make us weaker. If we are attacked then we need to be as strong as possible."

"Okay, I get it." Krovak said, "But how much further do we have to go?"

"Not far. We should be there shortly if everyone pulls their weight."

Still taking turns using the vibroaxes Teron's gang continued to cut their way through the undergrowth for another hour before all of a sudden the way ahead became clear and the jungle opened out into a massive clearing.

"What the kriff is that?" Krovak exclaimed as he exited the jungle just behind Teron and looked up at the vine and moss covered structure in front of them.

"A Sith temple." Teron replied, "Or at least it was. The jedi desecrated it centuries ago, removing and destroying everything they were afraid of. There is nothing of value to us left here."

"So why are we here then?" Krovak asked.

"To destroy it of course. My master knows that our enemies could make use of what the jedi missed to uncover knowledge that is not for them and wants to prevent that happening at all costs."

"Your master knows what's inside?" Krovak asked.

"Oh yes, he's been here before. Now come on. We need to find a way in." Teron said and he waved his men forwards, leading them towards the pyramid and ignoring the humanoid skeleton that lay on the ground not far from where they had emerged from the jungle.

Getting to the pyramid required the gang to walk across an area of grassy ground and Teron was well aware of the obvious trail they were leaving in their wake but there was nothing he could do about that so he simply carried on. Upon reaching the pyramid Teron and his men started to circle it while Teron himself inspected the wall at ground level. The moss and vines were at their thickest here but that did not prevent Teron from noticing the point where they would give way to any pressure that he applied.

"Here." he said, stepping back, "Cut this open."

The two gang members currently holding the vibroaxes stepped forwards and activated their weapons before swinging them at the vegetation in front of them. This gave way instantly and revealed an opening in the wall large enough for a humanoid mounted on any of the galaxy's most popular riding animals to enter without dismounting first. Taking out a glow rod, Teron held the device up so that he could examine the walls and saw that every bit of available area seemed to have something carved in it. He could not read more than a handful of characters of the Sith language but he knew enough to be able to recognise it when he saw it and from what he could tell from the repeated use of specific words this was the life story of a particularly powerful and feared Sith Lord and now Teron understood why his master wanted this place destroyed. The carvings were most likely a record of the Sith lord's achievements in life and this meant that they probably listed all of his victories over his rivals. Given how uncommon understanding of the Sith language was the jedi would have been unlikely to have gone through every detail written here, preferring to just empty the pyramid of every relic they could find, so anyone who was able to translate the writing would have a list of other sites where Sith artefacts and knowledge could be found. If Teron's master already knew of these then by destroying the pyramid that knowledge could be kept out of the hands of anyone that he did not want to have it.

"You." Teron said, pointing to one of his men, "Stay here and prepare the charges. I want everyone else to come with me. According to my master there is nothing left here but we need to be certain. Also we need to pick out the best places to lay our charges before company arrives."

"What the kriff is this?" Gan said as he looked at the bodies strewn around the clearing. Then he spotted one in particular and rushed to its side, rolling it over so he could see the face.

"Do you know him?" Brae asked.

"Of course I do. This is the guide that Mara woman hired." he told her.

"And someone shot him." Tylo commented.

"These others weren't shot." Jayk said as he looked at the other bodies that had been left where they fell, "I'd say blast and fragmentation damage."

"The explosion master?" Brae suggested and Jayk nodded.

"I believe so." he said. Then he saw the remains of the man who had triggered the bomb and the freshly cut path into the jungle, "And I think this was the epicentre." he said as he approached the opening of the path, "A trap placed to prevent anyone from following down this path someone has taken the time to create."

"They got caught out by their own trap? Very foolish." Tylo commented.

"Or maybe the trap was set for them." Brae responded.

"I thought you said we were dealing with two groups from the same gang here." Gan said.

"We are. Or at least we are as far as we know. But there is a lot about them we do not know." Jayk told him. Then he looked at Tylo, "Tylo, from what you know would Morton Crayne send two different competing groups on a single mission?"

"Play them off against one another you mean?" Tylo replied, "I don't know. Remember I never met him, I just heard others talk about him. He definitely seemed the sort to have someone killed if he thought they were a threat to him."

"Like you, you mean?" Brae said, smiling as she reminded him of how working with her and Jayk not only satisfied his plea bargain but also provided him with a level of protection against assassination attempts that only a pair of jedi could provide.

"Yes if you want to put it that way." he replied, frowning.

Jayk drew his lightsaber and stepped over the human remains at his feet onto the fresh pathway.

"Brae, Tylo, come with me." he said, "Gan I think you should head back to town. There's nothing more you can do here. Get someone to come and take care of these bodies if you can." and Gan nodded.

The duros watched as the trio all started to make their way into the jungle again, waiting until they were completely out of sight before turning around to start to head back to town.

Meanwhile Jayk and Brae led the way along the path. They advanced cautiously but did not rely on just what they could see to alert them to the presence of any further traps. Instead they reached out through the Force, looking to spot the tell tale disturbances that would warn them of any danger before they triggered a trap.

This enabled them to maintain a more rapid rate of progress than either Mara's or Teron's groups had managed and they were able to keep up the pace they had managed along the jungle trail earlier, once more leaving Tylo lagging behind.

Sensing a disturbance in the Force, Jayk came to a sudden halt.

"Uncle, what's wrong?" Brae asked.

"Don't you sense that Brae?" he asked in response, "A coldness."

"Yes, I've been sensing it since the clearing back there. I thought it was because of the people who died in the explosion."

"No, this is something else. Something older, much, much older."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tylo said as he caught up with the two jedi, "You sound like you're picking up on something to do with the Sith again. Now let's see what the results of that have been shall we? First there were the flying things carrying people off to their underground lair and then there was the stuff that made psychopathic killers. Perhaps this time we should hang back and try to get reinforcements here to help us."

"This doesn't seem that strong." Brae commented.

"I don't think we need to worry about it." Jayk added, "This is more like a remanent of something long gone. Though it might give us a clue as to why Morton Crayne's people are here. If the Sith were here once then there could still be something of interest left behind even if it is not especially dangerous itself."

"We're going on alone aren't we?" Tylo said.

"If what has been left behind is dangerous then we cannot allow Morton Crayne's gang to obtain it." Jayk said.

"And if it's not?" Tylo asked.

"Then we can't risk giving them too much of a head start in escaping." Brae said.

"Exactly. So try and keep up." Jayk added before he set off again.

Mara and her remaining men stepped into the clearing cautiously. There had been no further booby trap laid along the pathway but this was an ideal spot for an ambush as they came out into the open. For a moment Mara could not help herself but to stare at the pyramid, even in its overgrown state it was an impressive sight from the ground and she wondered why no-one else had come here before them. Then she realised that given the covering of moss and vines the structure was probably difficult to spot from the air so in all probability no-one even knew it was here. All of a sudden she remembered where she was and how vulnerable she was.

"Spread out!" she hissed as she crouched down to gain whatever cover she could from the grass that came up past her knees.

Teron and his men could not avoid leaving tracks through the grass when they had approached the pyramid and this gave Mara a trail to follow until she saw the opening in the pyramid that it led to and she ducked down and reached for her macrobinoculars. Scanning the opening she saw movement within and she zoomed in closer. As far as she could tell there was just a single individual there unpacking and inspecting explosive charges from a large bag. Obviously Teron had not used all his explosives for the trap by the water.

"Wait here." she told her men softly as she put her macrobinoculars away and then she began to crawl forwards through the grass, doing her best to cause as little disruption as possible until she reached the

outer wall of the pyramid a short distance way from the opening. Now hidden from view from inside the pyramid Mara got back to her feet and drew a dagger as she crept along the wall towards the opening. As she neared it she could hear the man inside muttering to himself, obviously less than happy about the environmental conditions he was having to work in. This gave Mara an indication of exactly where he was and remembering the position of the explosive filled bag she made an educated guess about when he would have his back to the opening and she chose then to strike.

Mara knew that she could probably have got information about Teron's gang from the man if he took him alive but then she would have to have someone guard him constantly to make certain that he did not escape and raise the alarm and this was something that with her limited resources she was unwilling to do.

Which left only one course of action open to her.

Leaping out from behind the wall of the pyramid, Mara thrust the tip of her knife blade into the man's back. She aimed away from the heart, instead pushing the knife into one of his lungs and twisting it to spread his ribs apart. Opening out the wound caused blood to spray out at Mara, something that she normally did her best to avoid but on this occasion she was more interested in silencing him and this way she knew her attack would deflate his lungs and prevent him from crying out. This only left the possibility that the noise made by his last few moments of panicked struggling could make enough noise to attract the attention of his comrades. To prevent this Mara wrapped an arm around his neck and dragged him backwards, away from the bag to prevent him from kicking it and spilling its contents onto the ground. When the body went limp Mara continued to drag it backwards, dumping it just outside the pyramid. Then she beckoned for her men to approach.

"Okay," she told them, "ideally we should split up to search this place but there aren't enough of us for that so we're going to stick together. Each time we come across one of Teron's little traitors we'll deal with them like I just did with that laser brain but remember, Mister Crayne wants Teron himself alive. Understood?"

There were murmurs of agreement from her men and Mara smiled.

"Then let's do this." she said.

5.

"A Sith pyramid." Brae said as she stared at the structure.

"So what was it used for?" Tylo asked.

"I don't know. Possibly a place of worship or perhaps a mausoleum." Jayk replied.

"Well it doesn't look like we're the first ones to find this place." Tylo said and he pointed to where the skeleton was just about visible among the grass.

Hurrying over to the remains Jayk crouched down to inspect them. Though all of the flesh had long since been stripped from the body the tattered remains of clothing were still wrapped around it and Jayk began to search through these.

"The clothing looks local." he commented, "I think that we have just discovered what happened to Brentan Tal."

"Let's just hope that the same thing doesn't happen to us." Tylo responded before adding, "So where did everyone go?" and he looked around.

"I'm guessing inside there." Brae said and she looked along the trail of damaged grass that Teron's gang had left behind them.

"Then we should follow them." Jayk said, "Get behind me." and he got back to his feet and began to advance towards the pyramid with his lightsaber in his hand.

It was only when they drew close to the opening that they saw the body dumped just outside and Jayk led them over to investigate.

"Master wasn't this one of the men in the surveillance footage we saw?" Brae asked and Jayk nodded.

"Yes he was," he replied as he rolled the body over to expose its back, "and it would seem that someone stabbed him from behind."

"So now we've got bodies from both groups of Crayne's men." Tylo pointed out, "That idea about two competing groups is looking all the more credible."

"But will they remain enemies once they find out about us?" Brae asked.

"I doubt it. They may not co-operate fully but we shouldn't plan on having them eliminate one another for us." Jayk replied.

With the interior of the pyramid in complete darkness Jayk activated his lightsaber and began to advance cautiously. He knew that the glowing light produced by his lightsaber blade would give away his position to anyone waiting in the dark but it was a necessary risk to take to be able to see the tracks left in the dirt covering the floor. Besides, Jayk was confident that he would be able to sense the presence of someone else ahead of him before getting close enough that they would notice the light.

"What the kriff is this stuff on the walls?" Tylo asked as he followed behind the two Jedi, wishing that despite the oppressive heat he had chosen to wear the armoured vest he had left back on the *Swift Exit*.

"It's Sith writing." Brae replied.

"Yeah, I'm not such a nerf herder that I don't get that but what does it say?"

"Nothing of importance." Jayk said, "This is most likely the final resting place of a Sith lord. Every crime he committed has been recorded in great detail on these walls."

"So it's a eulogy?" Tylo said and Jayk paused.

"In a way yes. It's to tell anyone entering who they may be disturbing." he said and then he continued on his way.

"Hang on, did you just say 'disturbing'? Tylo said, "Whoever this guy was, he isn't about to wake up or anything is he?"

"Unlikely. Though there may be traps." Jayk replied.

"So watch where you stand." Brae added.

"I'll be careful." Tylo said.

"You'll be dead if you trigger anything." Brae responded, "The Sith didn't go in for non-lethal traps. Not instantly lethal maybe. But still lethal even if it did take a week or two to die in agony."

"Concentrate on the task at hand Brae." Jayk said, "Look, the tracks split up here. Most go that way but a handful take the other route."

"So who do we follow?" Tylo asked.

"We deal with the bigger threat first." Jayk replied and he started to follow the tracks left by the larger group.

Just as she had said she would Mara had kept her remaining men together when their quarry had spilt into two groups, reasoning that this meant the odds would be roughly even when it came down to the inevitable violent encounter. What concerned her more was the state of the pyramid itself. The structure was clearly very old and although centuries of neglect had not left it in any danger of spontaneously collapsing there was

no way of knowing what effect a blaster hit would have. For all she knew it could just punch a hole in a wall or alternatively it could bring down an entire section of the ceiling.

Then all of a sudden she heard voices from up ahead and she ground to a halt.

"Stay quiet." she said softly and all conversation from her men stopped, "Now turn off your glow rods." and her men did as they were told. But rather than being plunged into total blackness Mara and her men found themselves left in a dim light from a flickering source somewhere out of sight.

"Come on." Mara whispered, "Stay close and stay quiet." then she began to creep forwards.

The voices became clearer as Mara approached a junction in the passageway and she risked a quick glimpse around the corner. In front of her she saw a group of half a dozen beings, one or two of whom she thought she recognised as having once been part of Morton's gang. The group had obviously found something on the wall that interested them and Mara could see two of them picking at it as if trying to detach a section. Mara knew what needed to be done.

"We take them together." she told her men, "Aim low. Put them down and then finish them, understood?" and there were nods of agreement, "Okay on three. One. Two. Three!"

Acting as one Mara and her men leapt around the corner with blasters ready and opened fire. Teron's men had set a watch but he was the first to be hit and did not have the time to warn any of his comrades. Just as Mara had ordered the blaster shots were aimed low, striking Teron's men in their legs and bringing them to the floor screaming in pain but still alive. Or at least alive until the follow up shots struck them in the head or chest now that they was less risk of a stray shot collapsing the pyramid.

"Cease fire." Mara ordered when the screaming stopped and then she paused to see whether anyone had survived. But when then was nothing but silence from the other end of the passageway she smiled and allowed herself to relax, "Okay," she said, "let's go deal with that sleemo Teron."

Jayk and Brae both halted suddenly when they heard the sound of blaster fire in the distance.

"What do you suppose that was?" Tylo asked.

"I think our rivals just ran into one another." Brae commented.

"So who do you think won?" Tylo said.

"Never mind that." Jayk responded, shutting down his lightsaber, "They're coming this way." then he darted towards a nearby alcove where a stone base indicated that something had been removed from there at some point during the past, "Quickly, over here."

"Oh what good will that do?" Tylo said as Brae followed Jayk into the alcove without question.

"Just get over here with us." she hissed at him, waving him towards the jedi.

Tylo groaned and stepped into the alcove as well, pressing himself right up against the wall behind them and raising his rifle.

"Your weapons, you will not need them." Jayk commented and Tylo frowned and kept his blaster raised.

Then came the sound of footsteps from along the passageway as Mara and her men approached. In response Jayk raised his hand and waved it in front of him right as Mara looked as if she was about to see the trio standing in the alcove and to Tylo's amazement she and the men with her continued past without seeming to notice.

"What the kriff just happened?" Tylo said in amazement as he watched Mara and her men disappear from view, "I never thought we'd get past those thugs."

"The Force can have a powerful effect on the weak minded." Jayk replied.

"Of course it helps that they weren't expecting to see us here." Brae added, "So Uncle Jayk just let their brains see what they expected to. In this case an empty alcove."

"And now we can follow them to their destination and try to find out why they are here." Jayk said and stepping out of the alcove he headed after Mara and her men.

At some point in the distant past the main chamber of the pyramid had been filled with the treasures that the unknown Sith lord entombed here had gathered during his life. Now though all of these were gone, removed by the victorious jedi as part of their purge against all traces of Sith knowledge. Even the bodies of the Sith lord and those slaves chosen to be interred along with him had been exhumed and removed to ensure that none of them had been used to conceal anything. This left the chamber as nothing but a giant empty space, devoid of any sense of purpose other than to exist for its own sake.

But the chamber also looked key to the efficient destruction of the pyramid. It was so large that the roof could only be supported by means of columns spread around it and Teron considered the effect of having an explosive charge placed against each of them.

"How much damage do you think bringing that roof down would do?" he asked Krovak and the other man looked upwards, shining his glow rod above his head.

"Well this is a pyramid isn't it?" he responded, "Aren't those supposed to need each wall intact to support the others?"

"That's what I thought as well." Teron said, "I'm thinking that we put one charge on each of these columns

and then see if we can just bring the entire thing down in one go.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Krovak said and he took out his comlink, “Jungo, how are we doing with those charges?” he signalled but there was no reply, “Jungo do you read me?” he repeated. Then he looked at Teron, “The structure must be interfering with the signal.” he said.

“Or maybe not.” Teron replied, drawing his blaster, “Perhaps our enemies have caught up with us.”

All of a sudden there was a flash of red as someone fired a blaster and one of Teron's men collapsed.

“Take cover!” Krovak yelled as he drew his own weapon and fired towards the source of the blaster shot, narrowly missing taking the head off one of Mara's men as he emerged from the passageway that led to the central chamber.

In an instant the chamber became a battleground with blaster fire travelling back and forth between the two groups. However, the poor lighting and preference for all the combatants to find somewhere that they could hide meant that no-one else was hit in these opening stages.

“Give us Teron!” Mara called out from behind a column, “Mister Crayne only wants him. The rest of you can go free.”

“Crayne wants us all dead.” Krovak replied before he fired towards the source of the shout.

“Then I guess you die.” Mara shouted as another of Teron's men was shot while trying to dash from one hiding place to another.

“We need a way out of here.” Krovak said, glancing at Teron.

“There will be an escape route.” Teron replied as he fumbled with his datapad, desperately checking all of the information his master had provided him with, “Yes, here it is. There's a river that runs underneath and is accessible from an underground level. Follow me.” and he darted from behind the empty platform they were hiding behind towards a row of columns that led away from Mara's position.

Seeing this Mara waved at two of her remaining men.

“Get after them.” she ordered, “Don't let them escape. We'll cover you.”

Obedying her order, the two men headed after Teron and Krovak. This was noticed almost immediately by one of Teron's other men and he fired his blaster at them. But the first shot missed and before he could get off another there was a volley of fire from Mara and her two remaining men towards him. Though only intended to force him to retreat into cover one of the shots struck him in the shoulder and he fell backwards.

All of a sudden the beams from glow rods and bright red flashes of blaster bolts were joined by a pulsing blue glow as Jayk and Brae both ignited their lightsabers from the entrance to the chamber.

“In the name of the Senate of the Galactic Republic you are under arrest.” Jayk called out, “Everyone here is ordered to lower their weapons and surrender.”

The reaction to this was immediate as one of Mara's men turned and opened fire on the jedi but Jayk simply swatted the blaster bolt aside with his lightsaber.

“Split up.” Jayk told Brae, “We'll surround them.”

“What about me?” Tylo asked.

“Cover us from here.” Jayk told him before he charged into the chamber, deflecting more blaster bolts as he ran.

Meanwhile on the far side of the chamber Teron watched this and smiled.

“Okay now's our chance.” he said to Krovak, “Let's get out of here.” and he and Krovak ran for the obscure passageway that would lead them to the underground river.

But they were not alone in this and the two men Mara had sent after them followed, holding their fire so as not to attract any attention from the newly arrived jedi. They chased after their quarry as they disappeared into the passageway and all of a sudden they were presented with a clear line of fire.

“Hold it right there!” one shouted and he fired a single warning shot into the wall close by Teron's side. This produced a shower of shrapnel that caught Teron in the face and neck and he fell, knocking Krovak over in the process. Grinning, both of Mara's men approached with their blasters trained on them. Both Teron and Krovak had dropped their own blasters when they fell and so now faced them unarmed.

“Mister Crayne wants you alive.” one of Mara's men said, snarling at Teron, “But he's not so fussy about what sort of shape you're in.” and he aimed his blaster at Teron's leg.

“No!” Teron yelled and as he extended his arms towards the two men standing over them, streams of lightning suddenly erupted from the tips of his fingers to envelop both of them.

Back in the chamber both Jayk and Brae sensed the sudden tremor of power through the Force and at the same time they heard screams from somewhere out of sight.

“Master, what was that?” Brae called out.

Something we must investigate immediately.” Jayk replied as he cut down one of Teron's men, “Tylo, follow us.”

“Got it.” Tylo replied, dashing from the entrance to the passageway and across the chamber, firing short bursts from his rifle to make sure that no-one tried to get in his way.

As Tylo and the jedi made their way towards the passageway Teron and Krovak had disappeared into Mara saw that the way to the chamber's main entrance was now open. Looking around she saw that neither of the

men she had kept here with her were now left alive and she guessed that the two she had sent after Teron had just met an unfortunate fate as well. Therefore, while the remainder of Teron's men were distracted by the Jedi she opted to make a dash for the main entrance and escape.

Entering the other passageway together, the first thing that Jayk, Brae and Tylo came across were two charred corpses with smoke still rising from them.

"What the kriff does this do to a person?" Tylo asked when he saw the damage that had been done, "It looks like they were burned alive but there's no sign of fire anywhere around them."

"Master this was the work of the Dark Side wasn't it?" Brae added as Jayk crouched beside one of the bodies, "This is what we sensed."

"Oh great." Tylo muttered.

"Yes it was." Jayk replied before he noticed something glistening on the floor ahead and he moved past the bodies to investigate. There he found the debris blasted from the wall scattered across the floor and on several pieces of it there were obvious traces of blood. Holding up his lightsaber for illumination he saw that there was more blood further along the passageway, leaving a trail that could be followed but the greatest concentration was right here at his feet and so he reached down to pick up one of the blood-soaked fragments and inserted it into a pouch.

"What's that for?" Tylo asked.

"A hunch." Jayk answered, "Now let's find out where this trail leads."

The trail of blood continued along the passageway as it started to angle downwards and from below the trio could hear the sound of running water.

"A river?" Brae commented.

"A way out." Jayk responded, "We must hurry." and he broke into a run.

The passageway came to an abrupt end at a ledge overlooking a fast-flowing river about a metre below and the trail of blood led all the way to it. Jayk looked around to see if there were any other possible exits but he was forced to come to the conclusion that Teron had escaped by diving into the water.

"Do we go after them, Master?" Brae asked.

"No." Jayk replied, shaking his head, "We should get back to the ship and report what has happened to the Jedi Council. This could be far more serious than we first thought."

6.

Both Teron and Krovak gasped for air as the river finally emerged above ground and they could surface to breathe before swimming to shore.

"Mind telling me how you did that stunt back there with the lightning from your fingers?" Krovak asked as they crawled out of the water.

"I'm not entirely sure." Teron replied, "I just knew I wanted it to happen and it did." then he got to his feet and started to walk into the jungle, "Come on, town is this way."

"How do you know that?"

"I can sense it."

Mara paused when she emerged from the pyramid and looked around. As she had expected the Jedi had not left a rearguard to prevent anyone getting out behind them but they would likely be close behind her. She was not worried about Teron or his men. Only one of them had survived their encounter with the Jedi in the main chamber of the pyramid and she had dealt with him when he tried to follow her out of the structure. On the other hand the Jedi could possibly catch up with her if they chose not to remain inside the pyramid for long and she tried returning to the settlement on foot. Fortunately she had an alternative way out of the jungle and she took out her comlink.

"Do you read me?" she signalled.

"Right here." the pilot of the transport that had brought her team to Geron.

"I need a pick up. Fast. Can you follow my signal?"

"I'm locked on. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Teron knelt before the holographic communication pad and bowed his head as his master's image materialised.

"Speak my young apprentice." the hooded figure said, "Tell me what happened on Geron."

"Master I failed to destroy the pyramid. Morton Crayne sent his forces and the Jedi were there as well. Only Krovak and I escaped."

"This is disappointing Teron. I warned you not to fail me again, did I not?"

"You did master. But there is more."

"More? What more?"

"I was cornered by two of Crayne's men and about to die master. But I killed them both. I just reached out my hands and took their worthless lives." Teron explained and he held out both his hands.

From beneath his hood Teron's master smiled.

"Good. Good." he said, "Your powers are growing. Forget the pyramid. If the Jedi do not decide to demolish it now then we can deal with it later. In the mean time we can progress with your training."

After returning to the *Swift Exit*, Jayk had Tylo fly straight back to the Jedi temple where he summoned the council to join him in the medical section while he left Brae and Tylo with the ship.

"What did you find on Geron?" Master Ressa asked.

"There was a Sith pyramid but it had been abandoned for some time." Jayk answered.

"Something of interest you found there, still?" Yoda added and Jayk nodded.

"There were two groups from Morton Crayne's gang present," he said, "and they appeared antagonistic towards one another. Teron Sharr was with one and Mara Tosk the other. The groups fought with one another and it was during this that both Brae and I sensed a significant disturbance in the Force, one that originated in the Dark Side. That is why I had you meet me here instead of coming to you in the council chamber."

"Explain Jedi Udra." another of the masters said.

"We found bodies that had been exposed to a massive energy discharge and a trail of blood leading away from the scene. I took a sample and brought it back for analysis." Jayk told him right as one of the temple's medical droids hovered toward him.

"The analysis is complete." the droid spoke, "The midi-chlorian test has been run. The count is eight thousand four hundred and sixteen."

"So high?" the Jedi master who had just questioned Jayk exclaimed.

"Indeed it is as I suspected." Jayk said, "Teron Sharr is strong with the Force. We may be dealing with more than a conspiracy to deal in forbidden Sith artefacts and knowledge, we may be dealing with an attempt to restore the Sith Empire."

"Troubling this is." Yoda responded, "Yet finished I sense you are not."

"No master there is more." Jayk said, "A local guide confirmed that the pyramid was visited by Thal N'Krey

some years ago and we found a body that we believe belonged to his guide. But the reason for Thal's visit remains unknown. It is possible that he found something in the pyramid and killed his guide to prevent him from telling anyone."

"So is this what you wanted?" Brentan Tal asked as he followed Thal out of the jungle and looked at the same overgrown structure he was.

"Yes. Yes this is perfect." Thal replied, staring at the pyramid. Then he placed his pack down on the ground and removed a large sketch pad from it, flipping through page after page of sketches until he reached a blank page. But rather than start to draw immediately he instead produced a narrow plastic stylus and held it up as if using it to judge the dimensions of the pyramid and Brentan frowned.

"I may not be an artist but don't you need ink or paint on that?" he said.

"Of course I do." Thal said, "But you'll understand more if you just come a bit closer."

Brentan sighed.

"Why not." he muttered and he took several steps towards Thal who in response waited for the guide to come within reach before suddenly driving the tip of the stylus through his eyeball and deep into his brain. Brentan had just enough time for a startled expression to appear on his face before he collapsed dead to the ground, the stylus sliding back out of his skull.

Turning back to face the pyramid with a smile on his face, Thal pressed the blood soaked stylus against his pad and began to draw.