

# STAR WARS

## TALES OF THE JEDI



### V-V: REGENERATION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



ELEVEN FAMILIES.  
TWELVE GENERATIONS.  
ONE EVIL.

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THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO A SMALL GROUP OF INTREPID EXPLORERS SURVEYED THE NARTHIS SECTOR AND SOON IT BECAME ANOTHER PART OF THE GALACTIC REPUBLIC. THE DESCENDANTS OF MOST OF THESE EXPLORERS STILL RESIDE IN THE SECTOR, WHERE THEY HAVE BECOME BOTH FAMOUS AND WEALTHY. BUT DID THE ORIGINAL EXPLORERS DIVULGE EVERYTHING THEY DISCOVERED, OR HAVE THEIR FAMILIES BEEN HIDING SOME DARK SECRET EVER SINCE? NOW A JEDI KNIGHT HAS VANISHED WITHOUT TRACE AND THE INVESTIGATION WILL BRING ANOTHER FAMILY TO THE SECTOR. FROM NOW ON NOTHING WILL BE THE SAME...

**REGENERATION**

ERILL GRASSIS IS FINALLY SUCCUMBING TO THE ILLNESS THAT HE HAS SUFFERED FROM FOR SO LONG AND THE ONLY WAY TO PROLONG HIS LIFE APPEARS TO BE A SITH TALISMAN THAT GAYAL HAS DISCOVERED THE EXISTENCE OF. BUT THE TALISMAN MUST FIRST BE LOCATED AND RETRIEVED...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.  
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.html>

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# 1 .

Luke Crassis returned to his family home an excited man. His trip to the mysterious world of Shadowfall had netted everything the Crassis family had hoped for and now he was bringing them the good news.

"Salla!" he exclaimed when his wife appeared at the top of the stairs and began to descend them, "You should see the factories on Shadowfall. There are legions of-" and then he saw the expression on Salla's face, "Salla, what's wrong?" he asked, rushing to his wife's side and meeting her at the base of the stairs. "Luke, it's your father." she replied, "He's dying."

Erill Crassis had been ill for a long time. His condition was always known to be terminal and all possible treatments had been exhausted and since then it had been just a matter of time until his failing body gave out. But the news that his father was finally approaching the end of his life still came as a shock to Luke. In the past few months the old man had appeared more excited than Luke had seen him for a long time thanks to the advances their family had made in their plans to gain access to the storehouse of Sith knowledge that had been found by the original explorers of the Narthis Sector, explorers that included Bail and Leia Crassis from whom the current generation of the Crassis family was descended.

"Take me to him." Luke said.

Salla led Luke back up the stairs and through the extensive hallways to the large bedroom of Luke's father. Unsurprisingly Erill was lay in bed and holding an oxygen mask to his face while Luke's younger sister Charity sat close by. But as Luke entered the room he handed the mask back to the nearby GE-3 protocol droid that functioned as his valet.

"Victor take this." he gasped and waved Luke towards him.

"Father." Luke said as he headed to the bed and Victor moved a chair into position.

"Luke." Erill responded weakly, "Did you find them? The droids, did you find them?"

Luke smiled.

"Yes father, I found them. Just as we thought there are millions of them down there and now every last one of them will follow your every command." he said, taking his father's hand.

"I'm afraid that I may not be around to be giving many more orders to any-" Erill began before he began to cough uncontrollably and Victor reacted by handing him the oxygen mask back. Luke grabbed the mask and held it to his father's face.

"Breath deeply father." he said and Erill nodded. Then he said something that was too quiet for Luke to hear properly, "What did he just say?" he asked, looking up at Charity and Salla.

"Gayal." Erill repeated after removing his mask briefly.

The Gayal that Erill was referring to was his wife, Charity and Luke's stepmother. She was several decades younger than Erill, younger even than his children. She too was descended from one of the sector's original explorers and the marriage was one of convenience. When Gayal's family had discovered that she was romantically involved with the jedi knight assigned to the sector they had secretly had her imprisoned in an asylum. What they had not suspected was that their daughter was Force sensitive and as such could be the key to gaining access to the Sith storehouse. Instead it had been the Crassis family who discovered this and Erill had sent a force of mandalorian mercenaries to free her. Then to protect her from her own family he had married her and since then she had lived in seclusion in a fortified mansion in the Lovas system. All of this had infuriated not only her own family but also all of the other families descended from the survey team, known collectively as the Founding Families and after an attempt by them to reclaim Gayal by attacking her residence the Crassis family had effectively ceased its association with them.

"He's been asking for her since yesterday evening." Charity commented with a frown. She had never approved of the marriage even after discovering the reason for it and she still held suspicions that Gayal was using it to gain access to the Crassis family wealth.

"Have you sent for her?" Luke asked and Salla nodded.

"We signalled the mansion on Lovas and a force of mandalorians is escorting her here." she replied.

It was at that moment that the door to Erill's bedroom opened again and a young woman entered escorted by a pair of armoured mandalorians.

"Gayal." Erill said as he tilted his head to look at her and he waved her closer.

Nervously Gayal looked at Charity who in return just turned away.

"He's been asking for you." Salla told her.

"Yes, they said." Gayal replied, glancing at her mandalorian bodyguards before moving to the bedside where she took Erill's hand, "How are you?" she then asked him.

"I am afraid that I may not be able to protect you much longer." Erill responded from behind his mask, "But – but I want you to know that I expect Luke to offer you the same protection."

Salla frowned as Luke smiled briefly.

"Not that he will be marrying you though." Erill added and Charity snorted, still avoiding looking directly at

Gayal.

"Can't anything be done?" Gayal asked, looking up at Luke and Salla.

"I'm afraid not." Salla replied, "His doctors-"

"Oh kriff doctors." Gayal exclaimed, "The Crassis family has three hundred years worth of collecting Sith artefacts to fall back on. Surely you have something usable. I've seen descriptions of talismans for regenerating flesh in those documents you've had me studying."

"Something that powerful would probably require priming for use by a Sith." Luke commented.

"Or anyone Force sensitive." Gayal replied, "Remember, I've been able to get more information out of those texts than any of you."

"Are you saying that you can save him?" Charity asked, her dislike of Gayal forgotten for the time being.

"I- I don't know." Gayal replied.

"But you suspect-" Erill began before he began to cough and Victor leant over him and held a tiny cup of medicine to his lips.

"Master Crassis, you really should rest." the droid said as Erill drank the contents of the cup.

"Gayal," Luke said, "tell us what you've seen. This really is a matter of life and death."

"I can show you." Gayal replied, "But I need my datapad from my bag."

Luke looked at the mandalorians who had accompanied Gayal and one of them nodded before leaving the room, reappearing moments later carrying a holdall that Gayal snatched from him before rummaging through it.

"Here we go." she said as she found the datapad and she called up an image of what looked like a carved stone tablet.

"That's meaningless gibberish." Charity said when she tried to read the carved pictographs.

"It is the language of the Sith." Erill gasped.

"It describes the use of a talisman that could heal any sickness or injury." Gayal said, "If you could get me the tablet itself then-"

"You mean the tablet isn't amongst the items we gave you?" Luke interrupted and Gayal shook her head.

"According to your inventory the Torin family has it." she said and both Luke and Salla groaned, "What?"

Gayal asked, "The current head of the Torins is like fourteen years old. He should be easy for you to manipulate." then she looked at Charity and pointed, "Just send little miss perky to him in a short dress and she'll have him handing over their entire collection."

Charity scowled.

"Charity wouldn't get anywhere near the boy." Salla said.

"Why not?" Gayal asked.

"Because since the current head of the Torins is so young the Druds are effectively running the family in the guise of being his lawyers." Luke told her, "And in case you've forgotten they were up to their necks in the attempt to kidnap you from Lovas."

"The plan she helped with?" Gayal commented, looking back at Charity who continued to glare at her.

"The point is that we cannot go to any of the other families." Salla said, "We have to do this ourselves."

"Does the image tell you where the tablet came from my dear?" Erill asked.

"I'm sorry no." Gayal replied, "It just mentions something about its maker. But it doesn't give a name, only that he was a teacher of some sort."

"The Teacher." Erill gasped and he tried to laugh before he started to cough again. This time he waved Victor away, "The Teacher was one of the Sith lords who settled in the sector." he continued, "They all had such pompous titles. One of them saw himself as someone who could build an empire by setting himself up as a god to primitive civilisations and giving them advanced knowledge and technology in the guise of miracles."

"Do you know where this Teacher lived father?" Charity asked.

"He lived amongst primitives of course." Luke said, "That means Brena or Atch."

"And since Brena no longer exists that only leaves one place to look." Salla added.

Erill turned his head towards his son.

"It seems that you need to visit the good Doctor Larnson on Atch." he said, "Find out what the money we have invested in his archaeological dig there has uncovered."

"I should be with you." he said, "Surely we can send-"

"Luke, I am your father." Erill gasped, "Now go my son. Take Gayal with you and find this talisman. You can do more good for me there than you can here."

"I can't take one of our ships." Luke said, looking at Salla, "The other families may notice and send a force to intercept us."

"Then we need something more discrete." Salla replied, "Someone we can trust."

"I thought you couldn't trust anyone." Charity said, "A result of all your scheming."

"No one from the Founding Families maybe." Luke responded, "But there is an individual who has worked for us before and we can rely on his discretion we're on Atch. After that it doesn't really matter."

"Plus his ship has room for the two of you and a squad of Mister Mott's troops." Salla added.



"Then it's settled." Luke said, "I'll contact Ren Distler and arrange passage to Atch immediately."

Ren Distler described himself as a courier who would move goods in the least public manner. The Republic's authorities would be more likely to call him a smuggler, but he had so far managed to remain out of prison thanks to his skill in avoiding being caught most of the time and having Drud Legal, the premier law firm in the sector being willing to take on all of his cases free of charge. This was an arrangement that was mutually beneficial, Ren stayed out of prison and in return was available to move goods around in secret for the Founding Families. Luke knew that this could be an issue if Ren was aware of the schism between the Crassis family and the others, as much as the Druds may benefit from keeping Ren at large they would not hesitate to have him incarcerated if they thought he was a threat to the Founding Families' plans. Therefore he decided that he would not call ahead before going to the starport where Ren docked his ship while on Crassis Major, preventing Ren from informing the other families of Luke's imminent arrival.

"Mister Distler." Luke called out as he entered the docking bay, followed first by Gayal and then Kaylor Mott, the commander of the Crassis family's mandalorian security force and seven of his troops, "I need to discuss an urgent business issue with you."

Ren noticed the armoured mandalorians as soon as he turned around and instinctively his hand went to the pulse wave blaster holstered on his leg.

"Don't!" Kaylor snapped, raising his rifle and aiming it at the smuggler and in an instant the other mandalorians followed suit.

"Now, now. There's no need for any of that." Luke said, "Mister Mott, would you please order your men to lower their weapons and do so yourself as well."

Kaylor nodded and lowered his rifle, his men copying him. But Ren noticed that all still held their weapons in positions that would make it easy to bring them back to bear on him.

"So what's so important you turn up here unannounced with a squad of thugs?" he asked, walking slowly towards Luke, knowing that having him in close proximity would make the mandalorians less likely to open fire just in case they hit their own client.

"We need transport to Atch." Luke replied, "You'll be well paid."

Ren glanced at Gayal and smirked.

"You and your step mother looking for a little private time?" he said, "A motel would be cheaper. Besides, I was just about to take a trip out to Xyros and that happens to be in the opposite direction to where you're asking to go."

"He isn't asking." Kaylor said, "He's telling you that you're taking us to Atch."

"Hey buddy, this is my ship and I decide-" Ren began before Luke interrupted him.

"Five hundred thousands credits." he said, "Cash."

Ren stared at him.

"Let's see it." he said and Luke smiled.

"I don't have it on me." he said, "But when we return my father will pay you."

"The old man himself huh?" Ren said as he considered what he could do with that amount of money. He would never need to worry about upsetting a client again. The problem was that such richly rewarding jobs often came with a price of their own.

"What's the catch?" he asked, "I get a bad feeling when such big amounts of money get chucked around."

"Let's just say that we would value your silence more than normal." Luke replied, "Particularly where the other families are concerned."

"Yeah, I heard they were kriffed off about her." Ren replied, looking at Gayal, "I take it your goon squad will be coming too?" he asked and Luke nodded.

"we'll be a long way from help on Atch." he said.

"Yes you will." Ren said, "Fortunately you'll have me and my ship to bring you back safely."

## 2.

Even with a ship as fast as Ren's it still took more than two days to reach Atch. The world was not a member of the Republic and was home to a stone age civilisation of amphibians named the arthen that lived in tribal settlements close to water, of which there was plenty. Most of these tribes were friendly to outsiders, but a few had retained the Sith inspired beliefs that The Teacher had instilled in them a thousand years earlier and it was not unknown for them to attack members of other tribes or even visitors from off world.

The nearest thing to a Republic presence on the planet was a research team investigating the ruins left behind from when the Sith had settled the planet. When it had first come to the attention of the Jedi Order that the mysterious aliens who had spread through the Narthis Sector before the coming of the Republic they had placed one of their number with the research team to oversee their operation. But after he had been killed he had not been replaced and now the team operated unsupervised once more, though they were supposed to file reports with the Jedi Order regarding anything believed to be associated directly with the Sith.

"I take it that they're not expecting us." Ren said to Luke as they both looked through the cockpit canopy at the planet growing ever larger as Ren's ship, *Distler's Luck*, approached it. The cockpit had only a single seat so Luke had to stand looking over Ren's shoulder. Unlike when he had first walked into the docking bay on Crassis Major when he had been wearing a clearly expensive formal suit he now wore more practical clothing for outdoor use, though its condition gave it away as being brand new.

"No." Luke replied, "We've done everything we can to ensure that no one gets wind of us coming here and sending a subspace signal would be like sending out invitations."

"I get it." Ren said, "In that case I suggest we land some distance from Dayle's camp and walk there."

Luke nodded in agreement.

"Just make sure that it's not too far." he replied, "We're already looking at a round trip time of five days even without the time we'll spend down there on the surface."

"Don't worry. I've done this before." Ren said, "Now go tell everyone to strap in. This could be a little rough."

Luke returned to the cramped rear compartment where the other passengers all sat and strapped himself in to the only vacant seat.

"Ren says we're almost there." he said, "And atmospheric entry may be a bit-" but before he could finish the ship lurched suddenly.

"Rough?" Gayal said, gripping the arms of her chair.

"He says he knows what he's doing." Luke said.

"It's a standard combat drop." Kaylor said, apparently remaining completely calm about being shaken about inside the *Distler's Luck*, "Designed to get us to low altitude as quickly as possible so we can move in undetected."

Then the ship shook again.

"How long does it last?" Gayal asked nervously.

"Not long." Kaylor said, "About two or three minutes." then he tilted his head back, obviously looking up at the ceiling even though his helmet concealed his features, "Ah, did you feel that? We're levelling out. That means we're almost there."

"Excellent." Luke said, "Mister Mott, we'll be approaching the camp on foot."

"On foot?" Gayal responded, "Why not just land the ship right there?"

"Because they may hear us coming and signal the Republic." Luke said, "It wouldn't be the first time that this place has been attacked. Would it Mister Mott?" he added and he smiled. The attack he was referring to had been carried out by Kaylor's mandalorian force before they had taken over as the Crassis family's security force, though it had been commissioned by the Founding Families. Luke guessed that the other seven mandalorians that Kaylor had brought along with him would be troops who had taken part in that attack so that they would be familiar with the conditions on the planet.

When Ren left the cockpit he was in time to see Luke fastening a holster containing a pulse wave blaster to his belt.

"You know how to use that?" he asked and Luke smiled.

"Yes, though I doubt that I have quite the experience of yourself or Mister Mott's men." he replied.

"Me either." Gayal added as she inserted a magazine of bullets into a compact slugthrower pistol and chambered a round before she then tucked it into a pocket inside her jacket.

Luke looked at Kaylor.

"Whatever happens, keep her safe." he said and the mandalorian just nodded.

Then the ship's access ramp opened with a hiss and the eight armoured mandalorians charged down it, forming a perimeter around the base of the ramp.

"Clear!" Kaylor yelled before the others followed the mandalorians out of the ship. Ren had brought the ship down in a swamp and there were pools of shallow water all around, but as planned there was no sign of intelligent life.

"The camp is that direction." Ren announced as he sealed the ship behind them, "About three thousand metres."

"In that case I suggest we get started." Luke said, "Mister Mott, if you'd be so kind as to lead the way. Though be careful not to let anyone see you. They may think that this is another raid."

Kaylor waved and most of the mandalorians began to move off, only two of them remaining in place until Gayal, Luke and Ren had started to follow them so that they could form a rearguard.

Moving on a direct path towards the research camp the group soon left the swamp and began moving through lightly wooded terrain with little undergrowth to slow or conceal them. The mandalorians were all in the peak of physical health and they maintained a rapid pace that at times saw all of the others struggling to keep up.

"How about a break?" Gayal asked as she tried to catch her breath.

"We ought to be almost there now." Kaylor responded and then he glanced at Ren, "Assuming that his information was correct." he added.

"My navigation is just fine." Ren said, "I've been to the camp before."

"So have I." Kaylor replied, "Though last time I was able to land a lot closer."

All of a sudden the mandalorian leading the way dropped to his knees and raised his rifle without saying a word. As soon as they saw this the other mandalorians did likewise.

"What's wrong?" Gayal asked.

"Quiet." Kaylor hissed, "We've got company."

Luke looked straight ahead and saw a small group of arden accompanied by two humans.

"The research team." he said softly.

"I don't think they've seen us." Ren added.

"If they had I'm sure we'd know about it." Luke replied, "They'd panic."

"Looks like they're heading for the camp as well." Kaylor said.

"In that case I suggest we follow them." Luke told him, "And perhaps I should be near the front of our group. Hopefully they won't think that they're under attack if they see me."

"Yes sir." Kaylor replied and then he looked towards the mandalorian at the front of the group, "You heard Mister Crassis. Follow them." he ordered.

As expected the camp was only a short distance ahead and it took only a few minutes for it come into view. Located beside a large set of ruins the camp consisted of a number of tents that were clearly of Republic origin and also numerous native shelters belonging to the arden working with the researchers as guides and labourers. Here and there pieces of modern machinery could be seen between the tents. Most of these were compact fusion generators but there was also a large antenna set up outside one of the tents.

"Subspace transmitter." Kaylor said, "We'll have to secure that."

"They'll have another aboard their ship." Ren pointed out.

"I don't see a ship." Gayal said.

"They have a landing field over that way." Ren told her, pointing.

"That makes it easier." Kaylor said, "We can take the transmitter and stash it in their ship along with a couple of my men."

"Very good. But first we need to announce ourselves." Luke said and he strode towards the camp.

At first no one noticed Luke as he entered the research camp, despite being brand new his attire was not sufficiently different from that worn by some of the research team to stand out and a number of the researchers were also openly armed. But when the mandalorians appeared they attracted attention immediately.

"Mandos!" someone yelled and the camp's occupants began to run.

"Quickly, secure the subspace transmitter before they can tell anyone about us." Luke ordered and Kaylor and one of his men rushed off in the direction of the antenna. Then Luke turned his attention to the researchers, "I need to speak with Doctor Larnson." he called out, "My name is-"

"Luke Crassis." another voice interrupted and a tall, long haired man stepped into view, a pulse wave blaster in his hand and aimed towards the mandalorians.

"Stand down." Luke ordered as the armoured warriors took aim and he stared at the new arrival, "Hello again Dayle. It's been a while." he said to him.

"What are they doing here?" Dayle asked, still aiming his weapon at the mandalorians.

"They're with me." Luke replied, "They're here to protect my party."

"They killed my people." Dayle said.

"Not this group I assure you." Luke lied, knowing full well that Kaylor had personally led the earlier attack on the camp, "Now could you please lower your weapon?"

For a moment Dayle kept his weapon pointed at the mandalorians and Luke began to wonder if he would

actually fire. It was clear to everyone that even though there were only a handful of mandalorians armed only with rifles their training and experience would make them more than a match for whatever improvised force the researchers could put together. But then he slowly lowered the pulse wave blaster and returned it to the holster on his belt.

"So what brings you all the way out here from Crassis Major?" he asked.

"She does." Luke replied, looking around at Gayal and Dayle frowned.

"Isn't that Gayal Karn?" he asked.

"Gayal Crassis now." Gayal replied as she stepped forwards.

"I thought he already had a wife." Dayle said and he looked at Luke.

"Actually she married my father." Luke said. Then before he could get and further there was a commotion as Kaylor returned, he and the other mandalorian carrying a subspace transmitter between them.

"Doctor Larnson! They've taken the transmitter!" a voice cried out from behind Kaylor.

"I'm afraid it's necessary." Luke explained, "We can't risk anyone being made aware of our presence here until after we leave. There are those who would wish us harm and I doubt they'd be at all squeamish about harming any of your people either."

"So how about you explain what it is that's brought you and those mandalorian thugs here." Dayle said sternly.

"We need to find out where this tablet was found." Gayal said, stepping forwards and holding out her datapad with its display showing the tablet that described the regeneration artefact.

Dayle frowned.

"The Jedi made it pretty clear that they don't want any more artefacts moving off world without their permission." he said.

"Yes, I understand that." Luke replied, "But the artefact in that image has already been taken away from here and if we can't find out where it came from then people could die as a result of it."

"Let me question him." Kaylor said, "I'll find out where that lump of rock was found."

"No, I don't think that will be necessary." Luke told him, "I'm sure that Doctor Larnson is intelligent enough to realise that it is in his own interest to help us. My father pays a considerable amount of the operating costs of this expedition after all."

"Nice try Mister Crassis." Dayle replied, "But I know a ruse when I see one. I'm not telling you anything."

"As you wish." Luke said. Then he looked around at the nervous faces of the research team and their native allies, "We'll be at your landing field." he announced, "We need to make sure that the transmitter aboard your ship is secure as well. In the mean time I'll offer a hundred thousand credits to anyone who tells me where this tablet was found." and Gayal held up the datapad for everyone to see, "Just give me an account number and the money will be in it as soon as I get back to Crassis Major."



### 3.

"Are you really going to pay a hundred thousand credits to whoever tells us where the tablet was found?" Gayal asked when they reached the landing field and Kaylor and his men set about securing the research team's transport.

"Of course I will." Luke replied, "I'd pay ten million if it meant accomplishing what we need to in whatever time we have left. Besides, you aren't seeing the big picture here. That hundred thousand could be just the start."

"What do you mean?" Gayal asked, frowning.

"Easy." Ren said, walking over to Gayal and Luke, "He's saying that once he knows who around here is willing to take a pay off then he can approach them the next time he's looking for a souvenir."

"Precisely." Luke added, "Gayal, if this goes to plan then we could obtain dozens, maybe even hundreds more artefacts and data files."

"That I'll have to be the one to figure out how to use no doubt." Gayal replied.

"Movement." Kaylor suddenly exclaimed as something caught his attention and everyone reached for their weapons.

"Don't shoot!" a voice called out as a young woman emerged from the undergrowth at the edge of the landing field.

"What's wrong with the path?" Gayal asked her.

"It's being watched." the woman replied, "Doctor Larnson asked some of the arden to stand guard and tell him if anyone tries coming up here to see you."

"I see." Luke said, "So how about you start by telling me your name."

"Temmis." the woman replied.

"Well it's good to meet you Temmis. Now what can I do for you?" Luke asked.

"I want to help you find what you're looking for." Temmis answered and Luke smiled.

"I thought you might." he said and he looked at Gayal, "Could you give us your datapad please?"

Gayal handed him the device and Luke called up the image of the stone tablet.

"Are you familiar with this?" he asked.

"Sure." Temmis said, "We found it in what was left of a hill temple just over a year ago, right before that Jedi who was sent here left and got murdered. He told us it was a Sith artefact so it got put to one side to be sent back to the Jedi Order. But it got stolen before anyone could come and get it."

"Well it's turned up." Luke replied, "What can you tell me about it?"

"Like I said, it was in some old temple. The weird thing was that there wasn't any open water around so it wasn't the sort of place that the arden normally live."

"So it was probably a Sith built temple then?" Luke suggested and Temmis nodded in response.

"The time frame of its construction fit. But we didn't get much of a chance to study it. We got a handful of artefacts and images and then had to leave." she told him.

"The natives?" Kaylor asked.

"Yes. The local tribe didn't want us around."

"I thought you said that it wasn't the sort of place the native lived." Gayal commented.

"It's not." Temmis replied, "But when we asked some of the groups in other settlements nearer to water they said that there had always been a small number living in the hills. They also said that their leaders couldn't be killed, that their history told of individuals being seen to suffer injuries that ought to have been fatal but after being carried off they were seen in perfect health a day or so later."

Luke looked at Gayal and smiled.

"Heals sickness and injury." he said, paraphrasing how Gayal had described the device mentioned on the tablet. Then he adjusted the datapad display to show a map and held it back towards Temmis, "Now if you'd be kind enough to show us exactly where this temple is." he said with a smile.

Given the distance between the landing field and where Temmis indicated the temple was located it was decided that Ren and one of the mandalorians would return to his ship and then pick them up and fly them to the temple, leaving two mandalorians behind aboard the research team's vessel to make sure that they could not send a signal off world.

The temple looked to be in much better condition than any of the other ruins that Luke had seen, appearing almost completely intact. Luke guessed that much of this was on account of the radical differences in construction methodology. Whereas most of the Sith built settlements consisted of free standing structures this temple was set into the hillside and Luke guessed that what he could see was just the tip of the iceberg, representing an entry into a much larger underground structure.

As when they had first arrived on Atch the mandalorians were the first to emerge from Ren's ship, a move considered important given what Temmis had had to say about the hostility of the local arden tribe. For now

they appeared to be alone and after sealing the ship they headed towards the temple. As they got closer Gayal suddenly shuddered and grabbed Luke by the arm for support.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he steadied her.

"I- I don't know." she replied, "I just feel something from inside."

"Something?" Luke asked and Gayal nodded.

"Something cold." she said.

"Sounds like something a jedi would say." Ren commented and Luke glared at him briefly, "What did I say?" he asked in response.

"Nothing useful." Luke said before turning to Gayal, "We have to go on. Lean on me if you have to." then he turned to Kaylor, "have your men stay alert. There may be more here than meets the eye."

"We're mandalorian. We're always alert." he replied, though Ren noticed that the mandalorians did all adjust their grip on their weapons.

The light outside the temple was fading and with no artificial sources inside to provide illumination it appeared pitch black. But this was something that Kaylor had planned for before they had even left Crassis Major.

"Infra goggles." he said and all of the mandalorians produced sets of light enhancing goggles that they clipped to their helmets' faceplates. Now able to see through the darkness they saw what awaited them inside the temple and without a word of warning to the others they opened fire.

Gayal screamed in shock and dropped to her knees while Luke and Ren both reached for their weapons as a cluster of four legged reptiles came bounding out of the temple. These creatures possessed vicious looking fangs and claws and rows of short spines that ran along their backs and all the way to the tips of their tails.

"Hssiss." Luke exclaimed as he fired at one of the charging beasts.

"What?" Ren replied as he did likewise.

"A creature that the ancient Sith used to use as attack beasts." Luke told him.

"Sith attack beasts? Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Ren said.

There were more than twenty of the creatures that rushed out of the temple towards the group, outnumbering them considerably. But the hssiss were just animals and they were no match for half a dozen mandalorians armed with pulse wave rifles set to fully automatic and the roars of the creatures became howls of pain as they were struck repeatedly by the compact spatial distortions fired by the weapons. The sudden death of most of the pack triggered the innate fight or flight instinct in the remaining hssiss and they turned on the spot before bounding back towards the temple entrance.

"Don't let them get back inside." Kaylor called out, "They'll just jump us when we go in."

The mandalorians advanced, following the retreating reptiles and continuing to fire until the last of them was dead and at this point Kaylor looked over his shoulder at Luke.

"Stay here." he said, "We'll check out the temple before you go in." and Luke nodded.

The mandalorians moved forwards again, splitting into two groups of three just short of the entrance. These groups then alternated between advancing and remaining stationary while watching for trouble. Kaylor led his group into the temple the other one remained just outside from where they could both support Kaylor's group and watch over Gayal, Luke and Ren.

Luke waited anxiously to hear from Kaylor until the darkness of the inside of the temple was replaced by a dim white glow and Kaylor reappeared, his infra goggles now folded upwards out of the way.

"It's clear." he called out, "And I think you'll want to bring her in here to take a look." and he looked at Gayal.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked as he helped Gayal back to her feet and she just nodded before he helped her into the temple.

As soon as they were through the doorway they saw that the white glow was coming from a chemical light stick that had been tossed into the centre of the room from where it was just enough to illuminate the carvings on the stone walls.

"Incredible." Luke said as he looked around.

"You can say that again." Ren agreed, "These would be worth a fortune to the right collector."

"Luke is the right collector." Gayal commented. Then she looked at Kaylor, "Nothing to add about the quality of this site Mister Mott?" she asked and he shrugged.

"Just stone to me." he replied.

"Does any of this tell you where to find the artefact?" Luke asked Gayal, waving at a random section of the walls.

Gayal walked over to the spot where Luke had pointed and began to consult her datapad. She had never been a particularly studious person and despite spending more than six months studying everything the Crassis family had regarding the Sith she was still far from fluent in their language. Fortunately the datapad held a translation matrix that allowed her to select various pictographs and produce a translation into basic.

"I need more light." she said, "That stick is too far away."

"Here." Kaylor replied, producing a second one from his webbing and activating it. Then he carried it over to Gayal and held it up in front of the wall so that it lit up the carvings more clearly, exposing some of them as

being coloured rather than just plain carvings. Now more able to read the pictographs, Gayal began to enter selected groups into her datapad.

"Okay, this is all bragging about The Teacher and the construction of the temple." she said before moving on to another section, Kaylor following her to provide illumination.

All of a sudden there was a 'Thunk!' and turning towards the doorway the group saw one of the mandalorians stood on guard now had an arrow sticking out of his chest plate. The weapon had failed to penetrate his armour however, but had embedded itself firmly. Then a second arrow struck the mandalorian in his neck, piercing him at the narrow vulnerable point between his chest armour and helmet. As the unfortunate mandalorian collapsed to the floor of the temple another of the armoured warriors dashed to the doorway and peered outside.

"Natives!" he snapped before firing a burst from his rifle.

"How many?" Kaylor asked as he dropped the light stick and ran to join the man by the door.

"A lot. I can see torches all over the place."

"What about my ship?" Ren asked, drawing his weapon again.

"Its sealed isn't it?" Luke asked in response, "They can't get in if its sealed."

"I still don't like to think of what they could do to damage it, savages or not." Ren replied.

Kaylor and the other mandalorian at the door ducked back inside as a flurry of arrows was fired in their direction.

"I'm guessing that this lot are the local tribe." Kaylor said and he looked at Luke, "Your orders?" he asked.

"Wipe them out." Luke told him, "All of them."

The leader of the arten war band, an individual who wore a mask made out of the front half of the skull of another member of his species waved once and a third barrage of arrows was let loose at the entrance to the temple his tribe protected. In reply there was a stream of energy blasts that was characteristic of off world weapons. The arten had seen these weapon often in recent years, but whereas other technologically primitive cultures may be overawed by such displays the arten were unmoved by it. Similar technologies had been demonstrated by the beings they had worshipped over the past thousand years and so the arten knew that the power had its limits. A fourth volley of arrows was unleashed on the intruders and the arten leader strode towards a unit of his best troops that stood nearby waiting for the order to attack. These were all armed with a style of polearm that mounted a thin disc within the axehead at the end. One of the arten held two of these and he passed one to the leader as he arrived. Holding this weapon up above his head the leader let out a sudden screeching and his elite troops suddenly charged forwards.

## 4.

"Launcher!" Kaylor called out between volleys of arrows and one of his men stepped forwards, bracing himself against the side of the door. The pulse wave rifle he carried was fitted with a grenade launcher beneath its barrel and the mandalorian loaded a round labelled 'WP' into the tubular weapon and brought it up to his shoulder, angled upwards slightly. There was a sudden 'Pop!' as the weapon was fired and the mandalorian ducked back inside the temple as the projectile flew through the air to land amongst the arten archers. Barely two seconds later the grenade went off but there was no explosion or ball of flame. Instead there was a brief flash followed by a thick white cloud that expanded around the grenade and where this touched the exposed flesh of the arten warriors it burned them.

"Phosphorous?" Ren asked.

"It works rather well don't you think?" Luke replied as he peered out of the temple at the unit of archers that was being scattered by the lethal burning chemical cloud.

Then came an unusual whizzing sound and something shiny flew through the air, then bounced off the door frame before embedding itself in a wall inside the temple.

"Lanvarok!" Kaylor snapped, "Everyone get down."

"Luke, what's a lanvarok?" Gayal asked as both of them took cover.

"A weapon." Luke replied, "It's a lot like a halberd but it can be used to hurl circular blades as well."

"And the natives know how to make these things?" Ren said from behind a column.

"They're Sith weapons." Kaylor answered, "No one's made any in a thousand years."

"Then I guess the Sith must have left some behind here." Luke commented.

Then came another 'Pop!' as the mandalorian with the grenade launcher fired a second grenade in the direction of the charging force of arten warriors. This time the grenade was not aimed directly at the arten, instead it struck the ground in front of them, bounced once and then detonated. Once again the mandalorian had chosen a white phosphorous round and a cloud of thick white chemical smoke began to form. This had two effects, firstly it blocked the artens' line of sight to the temple door and prevented them from aiming any further spinning projectiles and secondly as the arten warriors continued to charge forwards they ran into the cloud and came to an immediate halt, screaming in pain as like the archers before them they turned and began to run.

Kaylor studied the fleeing arten with interest. Most still carried long pole arms with heads that looked bulky enough to be lanvaroks, but there were a handful that did not and he guessed that in their panic they had dropped them. Then one of the arten in particular caught his attention. Rather than the basic animal hide clothing and armour worn by the other warriors this individual also wore an ornate mask that made him look like a tribal leader or possibly a shaman of some sort. As he continued to study this individual he noticed that he had been injured, a large chemical burn evident on his shoulder where he had come into contact with the phosphorous cloud. This reinforced Kaylor's view that this was a leader of some sort since he would have been at the front of the group and amongst the first to run into the cloud.

"They'll be back." Kaylor said, "And in greater numbers most likely."

"That was the last of the wesk peth." the mandalorian with the grenade launcher said, using the aurebesh designations for the initials 'WP' of the high galactic alphabet.

"Then we need to find what we came for and get out of here before they do." Luke said, "So I suggest we all listen to whatever Gayal has to say because from here on in she's the expert."

Getting to her feet, Gayal suddenly became aware that everyone present was now looking in her direction.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." she muttered. Then she checked her datapad and flipped through several pages of information before holding it up. On the display was shown a collection of Sith pictographs, "Okay then," she said, "each of these is associated in some way with life, medicine, strength or healing. If we can find these symbols then maybe we can find the artefact."

Luke looked around the chamber they were in.

"Well it looks to me like this is just the entrance." he said and then he pointed towards a door in the wall opposite to the way they had come in, a door that could only lead underground, "My guess is we have to go deeper to find what we're after."

Kaylor turned first to the mandalorian with the grenade launcher.

"You stay and keep watch." he told him, "Let us know as soon as you see anything." then turning back towards Luke he added, "I better lead the way. This place could be booby trapped and I think I'm better able to spot any triggers."

"I wholeheartedly agree Mister Mott." Luke said, nodding and he stepped back to allow Kaylor to head towards the other doorway.

Unsurprisingly there were more carvings on the walls of the passageway beyond the doorway and as the

group headed down this they studied them for any signs of the pictographs Gayal had shown them but found no sign of any of them. The passageway continued for a short distance before leading up to a cluster of doorways, two to either side and one at the end. Holding up a light stick Kaylor revealed that the rooms to the side were all small and had only plain walls whereas the one at the end was much larger and shared the carvings of the entrance and passageway.

"This is it." Luke said, peering past Kaylor, "The temple itself. It has to be."

"Then I suggest we get searching." Kaylor said, tossing the light stick through the doorway and then pulling two more from his webbing and activating them before throwing them in as well.

"What about checking for traps?" Ren asked.

"There are none." Kaylor told him.

"How do you know?" Gayal responded.

"Because when the researchers bugged out they left some of their stuff behind and it's right there." Kaylor said, pointing to a small pile of transport cases. Some of these were closed while others were open to reveal the foam lining for protecting artefacts placed within them, "If there were any traps then the researchers would have either deactivated them or triggered them."

"No." Gayal added.

"No what?" Luke asked.

"There is something in there." Gayal said, "I can feel it. I- I can almost hear it calling to me. I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"If there's anything alive in there we can handle it." Kaylor said.

"Okay then, let's get searching." Luke said as he stepped into the temple, "If you have any questions just ask Gayal."

The group split up, some heading for the sides of the temple chamber while others moved straight ahead either heading for what looked to be an altar at the far end or inspecting the various columns that held up the ceiling, all of which were covered in the same style of pictographs. Along the walls and in some of the columns were small alcoves that looked as though at one time they had held either small artefacts or religious texts. However, over the past thousand years these had been removed and now they stood empty. This did not prevent the group from inspecting them anyway, there were more carvings inside the alcove and it was reasonable to assume that they related to whatever had been kept there.

A sudden clattering sound made the team turn towards the stack of cases where Ren was stood with one of the smaller cases in his hands and the rest scattered around him.

"What are you playing at?" Luke demanded.

"Well since all the alcoves look empty so I figured that maybe some of what was in them had been taken by the research team and maybe they didn't get chance to take all of them away before the natives forced them out." Ren replied.

"That's actually a good idea." Kaylor commented.

"Hey, it's me." Ren said.

"Which is what makes it so unusual I think." Gayal said.

"Keep checking them." Luke told him, "You'll get a bonus for anything you find. Ten thousand credits per item." then he looked around at the mandalorians, "That goes for the rest of you as well. Ten thousand to anyone who finds a genuine Sith artefact and a hundred thousand if its the one we're after."

"Wow. You really want that artefact don't you?" Ren said as he went back to inspecting the transport cases.

While most of the group focused on looking for the handful of pictographs that Gayal had shown them, she instead entered the carvings she found into her datapad to determine what had been taken from each alcove she came to in the hope that the translation would give her more of a clue as to where the artefact they were looking for could be found. Unfortunately none of the thousand year old writing seemed to give any clues at all and in the end it was Luke that found where the artefact had been kept prior to its removal and it was not due to any pictographs.

"Gayal!" he called out from the far end of the temple, standing close to an altar of some form and waving her closer, "Come and take a look at this."

Gayal dashed across the temple towards the altar.

"What is it?" she asked.

"An altar I think." Luke replied, "But look at these indentations." and he pointed to where someone had carefully carved indentations into the stone. There were none of the pictographs that covered almost every other surface in the temple but the indentations had been carved with such detail that it was possible to determine the size and shape of what had been kept in them.

Gayal moved around the altar to stand beside Luke as he studied the indentations and it was then that she suddenly collapsed.

*It can't save me.*

Gayal gasped as Luke caught hold of her.

"Gayal, what's wrong?" he asked.

"He's still here." Gayal replied weakly, looking around.

"Who's still here?" Ren asked when he heard this. Meanwhile the mandalorians ceased examining carvings and brought their weapons into positions where they were ready to fire.

"Him." Gayal replied, "The Teacher. The Sith lord."

Luke's free hand went to his weapon.

"Gayal, he died a thousand years ago." he said.

"I know." Gayal replied, "He died right here. But a part of him got stuck and it's still in here with us."

"We can't fight ghosts." Kaylor said sternly.

"Who else can we call to do that then?" Ren asked.

"We don't need to call anyone." Luke replied and he looked Gayal in the face, "Look Gayal, The Teacher is dead. Whatever remains is nothing but an echo that can't harm anyone. Otherwise it would have attacked the research team. Understood?"

Gayal did not respond straight away, but after a short pause she nodded.

"Okay then, let's see if we can figure out if any of these used to hold what we're looking for."

"Hang on." Gayal said, turning back to her datapad and calling up the information she had on the healing artefact. Unfortunately this amounted to only a single section of the carving on the image of the tablet held by the Torins. But the image of the tablet was of sufficient resolution that when Gayal zoomed in the lines could be made out clearly.

"Well if we assume that the depiction of the artefact is in scale to that Sith priest then we can hazard a guess at the size and we have the shape of one end." Luke said.

"It could be any of them." Gayal said as she moved her hand over the indentations.

*The Corrupter did this.*

Gayal shuddered before realising that the voice in the Force had spoken to her just as her hand passed over one particular indentation. Then she took a deep breath and moved her hand back over it.

*My own people have turned against me. Some have risen up and I have crushed them. But The Corrupter was waiting for this and has sent agents against me. Tried to murder me in the streets.*

"Gayal what are you doing?" Luke asked, breaking her concentration.

"Shush." she replied as she focused her mind once more.

*I am injured. Dying. Came here to be regenerated. I shall not die as long as there is one willing to sacrifice himself for me. But the talisman is drained. A traitor has used all the power and I am alone. No one else to save me. All is lost.*

"It was this one." Gayal said, "The healing talisman should have been here but it's not."

"Ren what about those cases?" Luke asked.

"Nothing." Ren replied, shaking his head, "Whatever was kept in this place has already been taken."

"The researchers." Kaylor said, "Temmis must have left out mentioning that they had already looted the temple."

"No." Ren said.

"What?" Kaylor replied.

"If they'd taken everything then why all the cases?" Ren asked, "When they left here there were still artefacts to be taken."

"But who?" Luke said.

"What about the Torins?" Gayal suggested, "If they had the tablet then maybe they sent someone else to get the rest of the stuff as well."

"Commander!" the voice of the mandalorian left on guard suddenly called out over their communications net, "The natives are-" and then he was cut off.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Ren said, drawing his pulse wave blaster.

"We can figure out where the artefact is later." Kaylor announced, "Right now we've got more important things to worry about."

"At least there's plenty of cover in here." Luke said, looking around at the columns.

"Yeah, plus we can barricade the door with these." Ren replied and he lifted up one of the cases.

"Let's do it." Kaylor ordered and he began to dash towards the cases, "We'll hold them as long as we can at the door and then fall back to the columns." then as Ren and the mandalorians began moving the cases to the doorway he looked at Gayal and Luke, "I suggest you two stay over by the altars and cover us from there. With any luck the natives won't bother with you while we're closer."



## 5.

The barricade was not quite complete when the first lanvarok disc came flying through the doorway, clipping the shoulder of a mandalorian but the disc bounced off harmlessly before it struck a wall and shattered. Immediately the mandalorians dropped the cases they were still carrying and unslung their rifles. Two of them knelt behind their hastily constructed barricade while Kaylor and his final remaining trooper positioned themselves either side of the doorway. Ren on the other hand ducked low as he ran towards one of the columns and pressed himself up against it out of sight.

There were the dull thuds of pulse wave fire as the two mandalorians on the barricade opened fire, using short bursts to take down their targets while not expending massive amounts of ammunition. The screams of the arten could be heard as far as the altar where Luke and Gayal waited, but it soon became apparent that Kaylor's men would not have the fight all their own way.

A spinning disc took the arm off one of the mandalorians and he fell backwards, dropping his rifle as he clutched at the stump of his arm. While the man on the opposite side of the doorway went to see to his injured comrade Kaylor turned and fired down the passageway, taking the arten who had just hurled the deadly razor sharp disc off his feet as he was trying to reload his weapon. But then he noticed that while his men had been focused on the arten hurling lanvarok discs at them another group of natives had been crawling along the floor of the passageway where the darkness made them harder to spot. Dropping his infra goggles into position he was just in time to see one leap up and with a sudden shriek drive a spear into the throat of the other mandalorian at the barricade.

"Get him back!" Kaylor yelled to the mandalorian trying to stem the bleeding of the other and then he fired his weapon through the doorway on fully automatic to keep the arten back while the surviving mandalorians fell back into the temple.

Luke and Ren both leant around their cover and fired just as the barricade was kicked out of the way and both pulse wave blasts struck the first arten who attempted to enter the temple sending him crashing to the floor. More arten began to flood into the temple after the first. Firing on them as they emerged from the passageway was the most efficient way of dealing with them, but any who survived were able to disappear into the shadows. And one of them got as far as the mandalorian protecting his injured colleague. This warrior swung a sword at the mandalorian as he was trying to bring his rifle to bear on the alien who had taken him by surprise. The sword struck the rifle with enough force to send it clattering from the mandalorian's grasp and then on the reverse swing the arten warrior smashed open the side of the mandalorian's helmet. The alien then turned his attention to the wounded mandalorian at his feet, but as he raised his sword a blast from Ren's weapon smashed open his ribcage and the arten fell dead beside his next intended victim.

"Keep targeting the door." Kaylor said, "I'll take care of the others." and moving from column to column he began to hunt down the arten that made it through the door.

Meanwhile Gayal crouched beside Luke, her compact pistol in her hands. The concealable slugthrower was meant for use at close range and so she had yet to fire a single shot. Instead she just peered around the altar and watched as the firefight unfolded.

*Betrayed and my most precious secrets revealed to my enemies.*

Gayal frowned as she tried to block out the echoes of the last lingering remains of The Teacher's spirit. But it was to no avail and the voice in the Force went on.

*I can flee no further, my personal escape route is blocked.*

A sudden shudder ran down Gayal's spine. The voice seemed to speak as it is was recounting the last moments of The Teacher's life as they happen. He had known he was dying and knew that some of his own followers had had a hand in his fate. This last message indicated that there was another way from the temple and it was intended only for the Sith lord's use then it was likely in close proximity to the altar. Gayal looked around just as a section of the wall began to slide open.

"Luke!" she cried out and she fired her pistol repeatedly, emptying the magazine into the arten that stepped from the newly appeared secret passageway. While Gayal then struggled to reload Luke turned and was only just able to shoot the next arten to appear before he struck. However, the third arten was right behind him and as the second fell was already in position to strike. Luke rolled out of the way at the last moment and the arten's spear scraped across the stone altar towards Gayal who screamed and held up her hands in front of her.

Hands from which bright blue lightning promptly leapt and engulfed the arten warrior.

At the other end of the temple chamber Kaylor found himself facing a familiar figure. The arten leader in the skull mask had returned to lead this attack, his injuries no longer appearing as severe as they had been when he had run from the phosphorous cloud. The sudden screaming accompanied by the flash of Force lightning made the arten turn his head, taking his eyes off Kaylor for just long enough that the mandalorian

was able to swing the butt of his rifle as a club and cracked the arten's skull mask. But his seemed to bother the alien less than what was happening at the far end of the temple. Pointing towards the altar where Gayal had just incinerated one of his warriors using Force lightning he pointed and called out to his men in his own language. None of the humans in the temple understood what was being said but the reaction of the arten made it clear to them what it was intended to convey, while Gayal felt it clearly through the Force.

*Fear.*

The arten warriors turned to flee, including the leader who made the mistake of turning his back on Kaylor and the mandalorian promptly shot him down before he could escape. Then he aimed his rifle towards the main temple door again and fired into the passageway, hitting more of the arten trying to escape. On the other hand the rest of the surviving members of the group were content with letting the natives escape, especially Gayal who looked down at her hands in amazement still unable to fully comprehend what had just happened.

"How long have you been able to do that?" Luke asked and Gayal looked up at him, her eyes and mouth wide open.

"I- I-" she said.

"Okay." Luke said and he reached out to take hold of her arm, "Come we need to move." and he helped her out from behind the altar.

"That's a neat trick." Ren said suspiciously as he looked at Gayal, "Though it would have been nice to have a bit of advanced warning about it."

"I'm not sure she realised she was capable of such a feat." Luke replied while Gayal still seemed too dazed to respond of her own accord. Then he looked around at the arten and mandalorian bodies, "Well there's just the four of us now." he said, "And we're no closer to finding out where the artefact is."

"Actually I think I may know." Kaylor replied and he marched over to the fallen arten leader and dragged the body into a sitting position, "I saw this guy when they first attacked us." he said, "He was burned by the phosphorous cloud."

"How can he have been?" Ren asked, "Even with bacta treatments it would take days to heal that sort of chemical burn."

"The artefact." Luke said, "The arten have it." and Kaylor nodded.

"So if we want to take it back to Crassis Major I suggest we get after the survivors and see if they'll lead us back to wherever they're keeping it." he said. Then he turned to look at his dead troops, "I suggest everyone grabs a rifle. We may need the firepower." he added.

## 6.

Following the arden back to their settlement was not difficult, their way of warfare gave no importance to marching into battle without leaving a trail and the sun was just starting to appear over the horizon when they arrived at the settlement. Surprisingly for a tribe of arden this particular settlement was located in a large cave system but the reason for this became apparent very quickly.

"Flowing water." Kaylor commented at the sound of a distant lapping sound.

"So that explains how they can live here." Luke said, "There must be a river flowing beneath these hills."

"From here on in keep all noise to a minimum." Kaylor said, "This is enemy territory now." and then he began to creep forwards, his rifle braced against his shoulder. He continued to follow the easily visible tracks of the arden in the soft floor of the cave. This continued until the cave narrowed and the individual tracks became indistinguishable from one another as the arden who had made them had all been forced into the same small area and obliterated any detail left behind.

"Kill you lights." Kaylor whispered as he dropped his infra goggles into position again and the group was plunged into darkness. Looking through his goggles Kaylor saw the dim reflection of a light source up ahead and moments later he spotted the shadow of an arden on the wall opposite him, "There's a sentry." he said softly, "Wait here while I deal with him." and he slung his rifle over his shoulder and drew his knife. Carefully he continued to advance. As he continued the light from what looked to be a burning torch got brighter and began to obscure the image from his goggles and Kaylor lifted them out of the way again, now relying on his own vision instead. As far as he could tell the sentry was on his own and armed only with a spear. The arden paced up and down, repeatedly disappearing from view. This told Kaylor that the caved opened out considerably at this point and Kaylor used this to his advantage by pressing himself up against the cave wall and waiting for the arden to vanish at that side. Then he darted forwards so that just as the arden reappeared he was able to reach out and grab the warrior around his throat and pull him close enough to drive his knife into it, twisting the blade to do the maximum amount of damage without letting the arden cry out a warning.

"Clear." he said as he then knelt down to study the view ahead of him.

As expected the cave opened out and most of it was filled by a large underground lake fed from a low waterfall at the mouth of another tunnel to one side. There was no exit visible but the level of the lake appeared steady and so Kaylor guessed that the water was flowing out of a tunnel concealed somewhere below the surface. But the significant part of the view was the arden settlement. All around the lake were shelters made from what looked to be the typical animal hides over wooden frames. These were fixed to the rock face and joined to one another by an interconnecting network of walkways and ropes. Illumination was sparse and came from torches that were also set into the cave walls.

"We can't search all of these without being seen." Luke said when he arrived and saw the settlement for himself.

"What about letting her blast a few more arden with lightning?" Ren commented and he glanced at Gayal.

"I – I don't know if I can." she replied, "I don't even understand how I managed it last time."

"We don't need to search every structure in the settlement." Kaylor replied, "We just need to figure out where they'd keep the artefact we're looking for." and all of the group began looking from one shelter to another. Had this been a more conventional above ground settlement then the inhabitants would have placed important objects in a larger central shelter. But the peculiar methods used to construct this settlement limited the size of individual structures so none of them stood out as being significantly more important than any other.

However, as Gayal looked back and forth she continuously found her gaze returning to one structure in particular. This was mounted on the cave ceiling and had a ladder that descended down to a platform that floated on the lake below as well as two walkways that sloped down to join with the network of them covering the walls.

"That one." she said, pointing, "Something's in there calling to me. I can feel it."

"Are you sure?" Luke asked and Gayal nodded.

Kaylor looked up at the shelter indicated by Gayal and began to study the route between it and where they were.

"How are we supposed to get to that?" Ren asked, "The arden are bound to spot us and we'll be surrounded."

"Not unless they can fly." Kaylor replied.

"What?" Ren responded.

"There's an almost direct route between here and there." Kaylor began, pointing to a walkway that led from the shore of the lake not far from their current position and then made its way up to the structure on the ceiling, "I reckon we can make that in under five minutes."

"Ren's right though." Luke said, "We'd be surrounded." but Kaylor tapped his rifle.

"Not if we take out the walkways." he replied, "These things ought to make short work of a few sticks and

ropes. We don't bother with any sort of stealth at all, we just go in firing. I'll take out the walkway and you cover me. If it moves, blast it."

Ren sighed.

"I can't believe we're even thinking about this," he said.

"We're not just thinking about it." Luke told him, "We're doing it. Lead the way Mister Mott."

In an instant Kaylor leapt up and ran for the walkway, followed by the rest of the group. At first everything remained calm, but as Kaylor reached the walkway and began to run along it his footsteps attracted attention and there were cries of alarm from the arden all around the cave. At the same time Kaylor opened fire and just as he had said the spatial distortion that was his first blast ripped apart a section of walkway that spurred off from the route he followed. Two arden warriors armed with swords that had been running along it dropped their weapons as they suddenly found themselves having to cling on to what remained of the walkway beneath them as it began to swing downwards before breaking off and dropping the pair of them into the water.

Kaylor kept on firing at the walkway, isolating his route from the rest of the network and in the meantime the others in the group gave him cover. The route soon pulled away from the cave wall and the group found themselves running over the water as they headed upwards. Kaylor saw a handful of arden armed with lanvaroks and he expected to have to start dodging spinning discs at any moment. But the alien warriors held their fire, apparently concerned about the effects that any missed shots might have should the blades strike the ropes holding the walkways together. The damage that Kaylor was doing to it deliberately was enough without them adding to it by chance as well. There were a handful of arrows fired at the group, but the accuracy of these was poor and Kaylor had more faith in the ability of his armour to stop an arrow than a lanvarok blade.

However, as Kaylor found himself running along the final stretch of walkway before the structure he was heading for a pair of arden guards emerged and blocked his path. Kaylor was tempted to just blast them with his rifle, but then the same consideration that was preventing the arden from using their lanvaroks struck him. If he missed for any reason at all then the walkway or worse yet the structure itself could fall into the lake and the artefact would be beyond reach. Instead Kaylor just dropped his rifle and it bounced off the walkway before toppling over the edge into the water below. Without watching this he drew his sidearm, a pistol that fired magnetically accelerated projectiles and opened fire. The first two projectiles struck one of the arden and he fell screaming into the water. Kaylor then moved onto the second arden warrior and fired again, this time hitting the guard in his head and he collapsed onto the walkway where he stood. With his way unbarred Kaylor rushed forwards and burst into the structure ahead. Inside he found the walls lined with shelves that held an assortment of artefacts that were all of Sith origin. But just as he was taking all of this in there was a shriek and an arden lunged at him clutching a dagger. Like the leader that Kaylor had seen earlier this particular native wore an ornate skull mask and had clothing covered in various totems. But in addition every exposed piece of skin was tattooed with what looked to be Sith pictographs and Kaylor realised that he was facing the tribe's shaman.

Fortunately the shaman was of somewhat advanced years and was not in peak physical condition and as he swung his dagger Kaylor responded by bringing up an armoured forearm to knock the blow aside before slamming the butt of his weapon into the face of the shaman hard enough to crack his bone mask and knock him backwards. Screaming something in his own language the shaman tried to charge at Kaylor once again, but the mandalorian was easily able to bring his pistol around and fired a single shot between the shaman's eyes. A sound from the other side of the structure attracted Kaylor's attention and he turned to see another arden warrior enter via the other walkway. But just as Kaylor was about to aim his pistol again there was the sound of a pulse wave blast and the arden fell back out of the structure. Spinning around again Kaylor saw Ren standing in the doorway behind him with his rifle pointed past him.

"That's one I owe you." Kaylor said as Luke and Gayal also appeared, "Now go take out that walkway while the others find what they want."

"It's this one." Gayal said almost straight away and she rushed to an artefact that looked to have been given pride of place amongst the others and plucked it from its shelf.

Luke looked down through the hatchway in the floor where the ladder led down to the floating platform and saw more arden climbing up towards them.

"We don't have time for the rest," he said as he fired a few shots down at the arden, "We need to go."

"Then give me that and get behind me." Kaylor said as he holstered his pistol, took Gayal's rifle from him and headed back out onto the walkway.

Following the same route back was easy given that the connecting elements of the walkway had all been destroyed and this time Kaylor focused on firing at any arden who showed themselves, regardless of whether they looked as if they were about to attack or not. Reaching the edge of the lake and stepping back onto the shore the group found that there were arden rushing towards them along the water's edge.

"Head for the tunnel!" Kaylor yelled as he opened fire on automatic and sent a stream of spatial distortions at the arden that either slammed into them or tore up clumps of sand from the cave floor. Now Kaylor let the

others move ahead of him while he remained at the rear of the group to cover their retreat, ceasing fire only when they reached the narrow part of the cave that led back towards the surface, "Keep moving. Fire in the hole." Kaylor said as the cave widened out again and he plucked a grenade from his webbing and pulled out the pin. Then he tossed back into the narrow passageway and broke into a run, putting as much distance between himself and the grenade as he could.

Unlike the white phosphorous grenades that his men had used against the arden warriors outside the temple complex, Kaylor had thrown a more conventional explosive filled one and when it detonated the sound of the explosion echoed through the cave and shook loose debris from the ceiling. But the significant effect was confined to the narrow passageway where the blast brought down the walls and ceiling, effectively cutting off the arden from the surface for the time being.

"Excellent work Mister Mott." Luke said as he looked back at the collapsed passageway, "Now I suggest we get back to the ship, collect your men and return home. Hopefully we will still be in time."

"And don't forget my money." Ren added, "You owe me five hundred thousand credits."

"Oh don't worry Mister Distler." Luke replied, "You'll get exactly what's coming to you I assure you."

When Luke led Gayal, Kaylor and Ren into his father's bedroom Erill looked even worse than he had just a few days earlier. Every breath he took seemed laboured and it was not hard to see that he had very little life left in him. As before Luke's sister and his wife were both sat by Erill's bedside.

"We've got it." Luke announced and both Charity and Salla's faces lit up.

"Quickly." Salla exclaimed, "Bring it over here."

Gayal advanced towards the bed containing the old man who was her husband and he strained to lift himself up.

"Here, let me help." Salla said and she and Charity both helped him to sit.

"Really, I do think-" Victor began.

"Shut up Victor!" Salla snapped while Gayal set down the case she carried on the bed and opened it reveal the artefact.

"You can't really believe that thing is going to do him any good can you?" Ren whispered to Luke, but in return Luke just scowled at him and walked to the end of the bed.

"So how does this work?" Erill croaked.

"I just hold this to your chest." Gayal replied, removing the artefact and holding it out towards Erill. Slowly she moved it closer and placed it over his heart. But all of a sudden she cried out and dropped the artefact.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked.

"It burned." Gayal replied as she looked at the palms of her hands. However, despite the pain her hands were unmarked.

"What went wrong?" Salla asked.

"Probably she did." Charity said, "She doesn't know what she's doing."

"Oh not now Charity." Erill strained to say and then he slowly turned his head towards Gayal, "I have faith in you." he told her.

"Let me check my datapad." Gayal replied and she took the device from her bag and brought up the image of the stone tablet that had led them to the artefact. Moving around the bed Luke stood beside her and looked at the image himself.

"That looks like exactly what you just did." he said as his attention was drawn to the picture that had been carved into the tablet supposedly showing the artefact in use. It clearly a standing figure holding the artefact to the chest of a kneeling one while lines between them seemed to indicate the flow of energy between them. *A traitor has used all the power and I am alone. No one else to save me.*

Gayal suddenly remembered the words of The Teacher and she smiled as she understood what needed to be done.

"No." she said, "I got it backwards." then she placed her finger on the datapad display where the lines showed the transfer of energy, "See?" she said to Luke, "We thought this represented the artefact healing the kneeling figure. In fact it shows the standing one taking life from the one on his knees. There's no power left in the artefact and he's too ill for it to be able to take anything from him. That's why it burned."

"So we need someone to act as a donor?" Luke asked and Gayal nodded.

"That's right." she told him.

"And what happens to this donor?" Salla asked.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Charity commented.

"The artefact takes their life energy." Gayal said, "I think that kills them."

"I knew it." Charity said, "Then it's no good."

"I wouldn't say that." Luke replied and he looked at Ren, "Bring him." he ordered the mandalorians standing nearby.

"Hey wait!" Ren exclaimed, "I helped you. Without me you'd have never found that thing." but then he found himself seized by the mandalorians and they dragged him towards the bed and forced him to his knees," No!

You can't do this!" he yelled.

"Here father," Luke said to Erill, handing him the artefact, "take hold of this and press it to his chest."

"No!" Ren shouted again, "You can't-" but then, still supported by Salla, Erill leaned towards him and pressed the artefact to Ren's chest over his heart and his words instead became a continuous scream.

The gathered members of the Crassis family and their mandalorians guards looked on in a mix of amazement and horror as the colour vanished from Ren's hair and skin and he became visibly gaunt before their eyes. Ren's screaming soon ceased but the look of agony remained on his face as his irises and pupils became milky white. Meanwhile the effect on Erill was the exact opposite. The colour returned to his skin and hair while he was no longer supported by his daughter in law. Then cracks began to appear on Ren's flesh and it split open. But no blood poured from these breaks, Ren's body now being nothing more than a dried out husk and at the same Erill removed the artefact from Ren's chest the mandalorians holding his arms released their grip and the body fell to the floor.

Then, with everyone in the room watching in silence Erill got out of bed unaided for the first time in a long time.

"Really sir, you should think of-" Victor began.

"I don't need to be told what I can and cannot do!" Erill snapped angrily and then he made his way to the nearest mirror and studied his features carefully. Smiling, he turned around to face his family who were still trying to comprehend the drastic change in him.

"Find me that Natalay Shill woman who visited a few weeks ago." he said, "Tell her to organise a meeting of all the families. With our new army under my control none of them will dare move against us again."