

# STAR WARS

## TALES OF THE JEDI



### IV-X: MONSTERS

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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...

**MONSTERS**

THE CALLAN FAMILY DID NOT REMAIN IN THE NARTHIS SECTOR LIKE THE OTHER FOUNDING FAMILIES, INSTEAD RETURNING TO THE CORE WITH THE DELVAD FAMILY. NOW THE DELVADS ARE GONE AND HUGO CALLAN HAS DISCOVERED SOMETHING INTERESTING IN THEIR EFFECTS. SOMETHING THAT BRINGS HIM BACK TO THE NARTHIS SECTOR TO DO MORE THAN JUST MAKE A DELIVERY...

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.html>

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# 1 .

## *Fear.*

The feelings of his captive were so strong that Kyle Jenner could sense them even outside the room and at the instant he opened the door he felt them increase.

"I've brought you something to eat." He said as he stepped inside and with a wave of his hand he closed the door behind him.

The control panel for the door had been disabled on the inside and now the only way to open it again without breaking it down was for him to use his telekinetic powers to operate the controls on the outside. The room itself was of moderate size, about five metres square but was only sparsely furnished. A simple foldaway bed was pushed up against the far wall while two lightweight chairs lay on their sides more centrally. The only other piece of furniture was a portable refresher unit that Kyle had included purely to eliminate the unpleasantness of having to enter a room that stank of bodily waste while a tap set into one wall provided water from a central source for both cleaning and drinking. Reaching out with his hand and the Force he picked up one of the overturned chairs and pulled it towards him, setting it down the right way up and sitting down on it. Then he pulled the second chair closer the same way and lifted it upright as well, positioning it in front of him so that he would be facing anyone sat in it. Finally he held out the ration packet he had brought with him and looked at his captive.

The young woman sat on the bed in the corner of the room, curled up in a ball as she watched Kyle. Charity Crassis was the daughter of one of the Narthis Sector's most famous families. The Crassis family was one of those descended from the crew of the first Republic ship to survey the sector and since then as well as becoming incredibly wealthy they had become known as the Founding Families. Officially they had no power, but their wealth bought influence and during his time as the Jedi knight assigned to the Narthis Sector Kyle had come to realise that they were plotting to exploit knowledge left behind when the Sith had briefly controlled the sector a thousand years earlier.

"Take a seat." He told her, "It's time for us to have another little chat." And then when Charity did not react he added, "If you don't talk, you don't eat."

Nervously she got up from the corner and made her way to the chair and as soon as she sat down he gave her the ration package and watched as she tore it open.

"I see you've decided to change." Kyle said, noting that Charity was wearing a set of simple overalls that he had given her instead of the less practical wetsuit she had been wearing at the time of her capture.

"Did I have a choice?" Charity responded.

"Of course you did." Kyle answered, "I have not compelled you to do anything since I brought you here. I have given you the option of refusing every suggestion I have made."

Charity frowned.

"And made it clear what would happen if I refused most of them." She said.

"Since you arrived here I have done my best to make you comfortable." Kyle told her, "I have provided you with clean and warm accommodation, clothing and nourishment. All I ask in return is that you answer a few simple questions."

"Questions about how to destroy my family." Charity replied and Kyle sighed.

"If I recall correctly you were banished to Delvad because your own actions risked destroying them. Oh I know your home on Delvad was a mansion, but when you can't leave it is still a prison. So why hold back? You've made it clear that you want nothing to do with your family, that you are not a part of their schemes and I believe you. Mark my words, if you were trying to deceive me then I'd know about it. Now I know about the scheming of the Founding Families and it has to end Charity. As a Jedi I couldn't stop them, you know as well as I do that the Jedi Order cannot act without the Founding Families being warned by their spies, something I've tried to warn my replacements Cal and Lara about but they refuse to listen. That means that it's down to me Charity and I need your help. So just tell me what you know."

For a few seconds there was silence as Kyle waited for Charity to reply. He had tried to place the compulsion for her to respond into her mind using the Force but there was never any guarantee of a positive result using this method, particularly when the individual was as stubborn as Charity Crassis was reputed to be.

"They never let me in on their plans." She said, "I never saw the point in spending three hundred years chasing rumours."

"But you know how they operate." Kyle said, "And that information can be of use to me. It can tell me how to disrupt their plans. Think about that Charity, if the Founding Families cannot operate as they have been then they cease to be the danger they are now and just maybe your family can be saved."

"But only if I help you?"

"Exactly."

"I don't know anything." Charity said and Kyle sighed.

"Then you may be here for quite some time." He said as he got to his feet and headed for the door. With a wave of his hand he opened it and looked back at Charity, "That ration pack is designed to last for a week." He told her, "But I can't guarantee that I'll be back by then so you better make it last." And then he continued out of the room. Just as the door was closing behind him he felt a brief flash of emotion from Charity.

*Despair.*

With no useful information obtained from Charity, Kyle headed back to his ship. The passageways he walked through as he headed for the hangar where it was kept were all deserted. At one time this place had been a survey post on this remote planet in the Levik Cluster but when nothing of value had been found here the Republic's survey team had moved on and left the prefabricated structure behind.

The *Destiny's Shadow* was a vaya-class scout ship that Kyle had acquired to replace the far less practical starfighter issued to him by the Jedi Order. For much of the time this ship was his home, but the abandoned survey post provided him with somewhere to retreat to when he wanted to escape the settled areas of the Narthis Sector. Right now Kyle wanted to make use of the *Destiny's Shadow's* computers. Only the most basic systems had remained in the survey post when Kyle had discovered it, the rest having been taken either by the original Republic scouts when they abandoned it or plundered later by one of the many outlaws who made the Levik Cluster their home.

Walking up his ship's access ramp Kyle made his way to the cockpit and sat down in the pilot's seat. Charity may not have given him any useful information but the visit to the Delvad system where he had abducted her had revealed some odd behaviour by the Founding Families that he wanted to investigate and now was as good a time as any. Hopefully a few days of hunger would help to convince Charity to be more forthcoming.

Hugo Callan was not native to the Narthis Sector. In fact he had spent very little time there in his life. But from the moment he was old enough to learn about his family history he had been taught about the vital role the Callans had played since Trent Callan had returned to Coruscant instead of remaining there to become another of the Founding Families. Koman Delvad had also returned to Coruscant, supposedly to exploit the scientific discoveries he had made during the survey mission but in reality he and his descendants had been scouring the Republic's central archives for any information regarding the Sith that the Jedi Order had not been able to expunge. This information would then be relayed back to the Founding Families in the Narthis Sector to help them in uncovering what had been left there. Such information could not be transmitted through normal communication routes that could be monitored. Instead it required someone totally trustworthy to take the data themselves and that was where the Callan family came in.

Today Hugo had come to the home of the most reclusive of the Founding Families, the nautolan Runns who made their home on the seabed of the ocean world of Delvad and Ket Runn himself showed Hugo into a chamber where the holograms of most of the other senior members of the Founding Families waited.

"I was told that this would be a full meeting." He said, looking at Ket and the nautolan snorted.

"Blame Vorn Torin for his family's absence." Ket replied, "The head of that family is a twelve year old boy thanks to the rest being either dead or in prison."

"Yes, I'm was made aware of that before I left Coruscant." Hugo said, "But what about Erill Crassis? Even if he's too ill then surely his son—"

"There's been a slight incident with the Crassis family." Ket interrupted.

"The attack on their residence here?" Hugo asked, "I thought only Charity was killed. She's never been involved in this."

"No." Ket replied and he looked at the holograms of Heddren Drud and Han Shill. The Shills were not one of the Founding Families, but Shill Security was the private military company that provided them with troops, "Some of us sought to take action against the Crassis family without first consulting the rest of us. For the time being at least they are operating independently of us."

"Just tell us why you called this meeting Hugo." The hologram of Faye Karn said, "Never mind why the Crassis family isn't here."

Hugo held up a datapad.

"I've been going through what Keleen Delvad was working on before she died." He said.

"We know what she was working on." Trent Narthis said.

"Yes," Josh Drud added, "the hyperspace cannon."

"No." Hugo replied, shaking his head, "I mean her academic research before you asked her to access details of hyperspace cannon production."

"And what did you find?" Nissel Fayl asked. Nissel was by far the youngest of the heads of the Families, having become head when her mother had suddenly been committed to an asylum.

"She was studying architecture." Hugo told the holographic audience, "In particular the design of Sith buildings throughout their old empire." And then he held the datapad towards Ket, "Could you plug this in please?" he said and Ket took the datapad and connected it to the holographic projection system. Instantly three-dimensional images of various buildings began to appear, floating in the air in the middle of the room. In their respective homes all of the others involved in this meeting would be seeing identical images, transmitted to them along with Hugo and Ret's own holograms.

"Very nice I'm sure." Del Karn said, "But I'm not in the mood for building a new home. Why don't you just tell us what all this means?"

"Most of these images were taken on the worlds of the old Sith Empire." Hugo said, "Zoist, Korriban, Rhelg and so on."

"Yes we all know which worlds were part of the Sith Empire." Trent said, "How about you get to the point?"

"This image here wasn't recorded on any world recorded as being settled by the Sith." Hugo said and he stepped into the centre of the room to point at one of the images. This showed the top of a stone tower protruding from a dense jungle, "It was recorded by an aerial probe that sent the image back to Coruscant where it's sat in an archive for about two hundred years without anyone noticing it. It was taken here in the Narthis Sector."

"Where?" Ket demanded, "And how have we missed this for so long?"

"Because we weren't looking for it." Hugo replied, "No one was and with Keleen dead we'll never know what led her to it. But that structure is on Elth."

"Elth?" Heddren Drud exclaimed, "Are you insane? We can't go to Elth. No one can."

"People have tried." Nissel pointed out.

"And none came back." Ret added.

"Which is precisely why we need to go there." Hugo said, "If that tower really was built by the Sith then whatever else they had there should still be there."

"And the whole everybody who goes there dies thing?" Faye asked.

"Every expedition had been just a simple survey team." Hugo replied, "I was thinking of something a bit bigger."

"How much bigger?" Han Shill asked.

"How many men can you spare?" Hugo responded.

"Oh I can give you more than a hundred." Han said, "But moving that many troops will attract attention."

"Not if we conceal them in my ship." Hugo said, "A herkalon-class freighter can carry that many easily. If anyone asks we'll just say that we're going to try and chart the planet from orbit."

"I can't be involved in this." Trent said, "The election for senator is in two weeks and if I'm involved with something like this that goes wrong I'll look reckless and foolish. Besides, I've got a bad feeling about this. We don't have a clue why all the ships that have landed on Elth have never returned."

"Well maybe we'll be the first to find out." Nissel commented.

"Plus we should consider the benefits of being able to establish a presence on Elth." Del said, "We'd have unrestricted access to a planet that everyone else is afraid to approach."

"And if they did we could just shoot them down without anyone getting suspicious." Josh added, "After all, it'd just be another ship that never came back."

"Then unless there are any objections I'd say it was agreed." Hugo said, "I'll take as many troops as will fit into my ship to Elth and see what's down there. Would anyone else like to join me?" and he looked around as not a single person replied.

As soon as the *Destiny's Shadow* dropped out of hyperspace in proximity to Delvad, Kyle scanned the area of the planet where he had detected the floating residences of all of the Founding Families aside from the Crassis family. This had been directly over the undersea estate of the Runn family so it was easy to relocate the area. Sure enough all of the artificial islands floating above the waves on repulsorlift fields that Kyle had seen there before were still there now. In addition he detected a shuttle rising up from one of them that was broadcasting a Shill Security transponder. Kyle redirected his sensors into space around the planet, attempting to determine where the shuttle may be heading and what he saw surprised him.

A large transport ship sat in a low orbit, its cargo bay doors wide open as a swarm of shuttles manoeuvred to dock with the larger vessel and all of these shuttles were also broadcasting Shill Security transponders. "Han, what are you up to?" Kyle said to himself before he noticed the transponder of the transport ship. This identified the vessel as a commercial transport belonging to Callan Shipping, the company wholly owned by the descendents of Trent Callan. Though the Callans were not one of the Founding Families, Kyle was well aware of the connection between them and he instantly realised that what he was seeing here was important.

He leapt out of his seat and rushed to the internal access for the *Destiny's Shadow's* concussion projectile launcher. Right now this held eight powerful explosive guided projectiles but at this moment Kyle needed something less destructive. From a rack on the wall he took a modified projectile that replaced the explosive warhead with a powerful subspace transmitter and power cell. Then opening up the access hatch to the launcher he manually inserted this into the chamber before closing the hatch again and rushing back to the cockpit.

Using the *Destiny's Shadow's* active sensors would have given Kyle a better chance of hitting the transport ship from a greater distance, but it would have also run the risk of the weapon's lock being detected and discovery would ruin everything. Therefore, to be on the safe side Kyle kept his ship's sensors in passive mode as he lined up to take the shot, letting the Force flow through him as he concentrated on what he wanted to achieve.

He fired from behind and above the transport and watched the projectile streaking towards the transport, still reaching out through the Force as he willed it towards its target. Kyle had tried to aim for one of the ion drives, knowing that these were filled only with machinery and a successful hit would not produce a sound that would echo through to the inside of the ship.

The projectile struck right where Kyle had hoped it would, a spot where no one inside the ship would notice the hit. The front of the projectile burst open on impact, releasing the transmitter that promptly sealed itself to the hull and sent out a brief signal. Kyle looked to his communications panel and smiled as he saw that the transmitter had functioned properly. That was just a test signal to let him know that the transmitter was working as it should. From this point on it would send another signal every time it detected that the transport had dropped out of hyperspace. That way Kyle could trace the signals back to wherever the ship had gone and follow it.

With the transmitter in place and functioning Kyle then sat back and waited. Whatever the Founding Families were up to now, he was going to be right behind them.

## 2.

The first two jumps through hyperspace, from Delvad to Crassis and then on to Aurek Station were relatively short. However, the final jump to Elth was poorly charted and so the jump took far longer. In a fast ship it would have taken about two days, but Hugo's heraklon-class freighter was not designed for speed and so it took just over twice that to make the trip. This was made even worse by the necessity of using jump data that had not been updated for some time. Requesting the latest information from Aurek Station would have revealed the freighter's intended destination and Hugo wanted to keep that a secret. As far as the crew of Aurek Station were concerned he was taking his ship back towards the core.

Hugo himself made sure to be on the bridge when the ship dropped back into realspace so that he could get a good look at the planet of Elth itself. Even though he had spent far less of his life in the Narthis Sector than the Founding Families he had heard plenty of tales about this mysterious world. Most had the ring of the tall tales that could be heard in spacers' cantinas around the galaxy about how the most well prepared groups had come here only to vanish without a trace. However, in preparation for this trip Hugo had reviewed all the available information about the planet and confirmed that only small scouting parties had ever tried to land before now.

From space the planet Elth looked like a paradise world. Thick green jungles covered every landmass, while deep blue oceans made up the remainder of the surface. Elth orbited close to its sun without an axial tilt and this produced a warm surface without seasonal variation.

"Sir the gunship pilot is requesting permission to launch." One of the bridge crew said to Hugo.

"Very well." He replied, nodding once, "Open the hold doors and allow him to depart."

The gunship was part of the plan to avoid the expedition suddenly vanishing like those that had come before it. The small vessel would remain in orbit and scan the area around the landing site to provide advanced warning of attack. Of course this assumed that the earlier expeditions had been lost to attack rather than some natural phenomena. But Hugo hoped that whatever the cause, having the gunship in orbit would help to ensure that his expedition became the first to make it back.

"What about the planet?" Hugo asked, "Are our sensors picking anything up?" and he looked at the comscan operator.

"Massive life readings from all landmasses and the oceans." The man replied.

"What about technology?" Hugo asked.

"I'm picking up several emissions from various locations." The comscan operator said.

"Really? Can you identify them?" Hugo asked, surprised at this and for a moment he considered the possibility that there was a settlement on the surface.

"They look like automated distress beacons sir." The comscan operator replied, "Short ranged and very weak. As if someone hoped for a rescue ship that never came and the beacon was just left to run down."

"Give me a fix on those beacons." Hugo ordered, "If any of them are near any of the ruins we've got data on then that's where I want to start."

"You want us to land where someone else has already been killed?" the helmsman asked nervously.

"Don't worry, I'm not suggesting that we land the ship straight away. We'll send down a squad of those troops Han Shill provided us with and see what they find. Hopefully there'll be some clue as to what happened to the others who have landed here that we can use to avoid the same thing happening to us."

Hugo explained and this seemed to calm his crew.

"There's a beacon coming from an equatorial area sir." The comscan operator announced, "And sensors also indicate a large ruin at that location."

"Then that's where we start." Hugo said, "I'll go tell Captain Du Vrey that his men are needed."

Du Vrey was a duros who had worked for Shill Security for more than a decade. He was the ranking officer of the force assigned to this mission and he had no intention of sending his men down to the surface of a potentially dangerous planet without him accompanying them.

"These are my men Mister Callan." He explained as he watched his squad embark on the shuttle, "If I'm not willing to do something myself then how can I ask them to do it?"

"I'd just rather not lose you." Hugo replied.

"If you think we're all going to die then why are you sending any of us?" Du Vrey asked in response.

"I suppose you're right. But take care down there captain." Hugo said.

"I always do." Du Vrey said, "It's safer that way." And then he joined his men aboard the shuttle.

Hugo remained in the hold long enough to watch as the main doors were opened, a magnetic field preventing the hold from decompressing and the shuttle's engines roared as it accelerated out into space. Then he turned around and hurried back to the bridge.

"What's the shuttle's status?" he asked as he came through the doorway.

"Just entering the atmosphere now." The comscan operator replied, "I'd estimate three minutes to landing."

Kyle stared at the display in disbelief. The Elth system had long been regarded as somewhere to be avoided and until now even the Founding Families had shown no interest in that seemingly cursed system. Now though they had suddenly decided to send a significant force there covertly.

However, as much as the destination was unexpected there was a certain kind of logic to it. The Founding Families were hunting down Sith artefacts wherever they could be found and it was well known that the Sith had been in the habit of protecting their places of power by means that would continue on even a thousand years after their species had vanished from the galaxy. In retrospect Elth was an entirely logical place for there to have been a Sith presence when they had controlled this region of space.

Turning to the navigation panel he began to lay in a course for Elth, resolving that the Founding Families expedition would become the next in the long line of those that had never been heard from again.

A klaxon sounded in the shuttle's troop compartment and the soldiers all climbed out of their seats and reached for their rifles.

"Two minutes!" Du Vrey yelled, "Lock and load people."

The soldiers lined up facing the large ramp at the rear of the shuttle and the moment that it set down the ramp dropped open and they ran down, rifles held at their shoulders and levelled for use. Du Vrey was the last down the ramp and he found himself surrounded by his men who had formed a semi circle around it. Looking around he noticed not one but two other starships on the ground nearby, both of them badly overgrown. However long they had been abandoned here the jungle had been able to claim them now. Du Vrey then checked his point-to-point communication link. His orders had stated that only a single beacon was being transmitted from this location and that he was to investigate it. For that he needed to know which of the starships was broadcasting it. The PTP link easily detected the signal and it pointed Du Vrey towards the closer of the two ships.

"Fire team aurek with me." He called out, "Team besh stay put and stay alert. I don't want anything to be sneaking up on us."

Accompanied by the fire team Du Vrey ran towards the overgrown starship. Vines now wrapped themselves around the hull of the ship and most of it was covered in some kind of lichen that made it blend into the background.

"It looks sealed." One of Du Vrey's men told him when he saw that the main hatch was closed and the access ramp retracted.

"There's a hull breach over here." Another called out and the team headed for this.

The breach was a gash cut into the side of the ship and the hull around it was bent inwards. Clearly something had struck the hull here but there was nothing around to indicate what this may have been.

"Move in." Du Vrey ordered and the first of his men crouched down to help the second climb up into the ship. This second man switched on the light mounted to his rifle to illuminate the ship's interior and he move the rifle back and forth as he checked the compartment he was in.

"Clear." The man called out from inside the ship and as he waited the rest of the team climbed inside and activated their own weapon-mounted lights so that they could see.

The inside of the ship had the same greenish look as the outside, with every surface being covered in lichen that Du Vrey guessed had spread in through the same hole in the hull that his team had used to gain entry.

"Tost, Jexx, check engineering." Du Vrey ordered, "Teller and Hurn with me. We'll check the cockpit." And the fire team split up to search both ends of the ship.

It was in the cockpit that Du Vrey found the first body. One of the crew was still sat in the pilot's seat, strapped in and wearing a vacuum suit and safety harness. However, this had failed to offer any protection from whatever it was that had impaled him through the neck, piercing the suit at the join of the helmet.

However long the body had been here it had been long enough for all the flesh to decay down to the bones and the same greenish lichen that covered every surface of the ship was also starting to take hold on both the outside and inside of the suit.

"Bridge is secure. Anything in engineering?" Du Vrey transmitted.

"No sir. This place is dead." Jexx responded.

"Well the pilot is at least." Teller commented as he overheard this.

"Okay then I'm making the call." Du Vrey said, "Mister Callan can come down here himself."



### 3.

In orbit Hugo waited for a signal from the surface.

"Captain Du Vrey for you sir." The comscan operator said suddenly and he activated the communications panel.

"Captain, what have you found down there?" Hugo asked.

"Whoever set up that beacon has been dead a long time sir." Du Vrey replied, "And if there was anyone else aboard then they aren't here now."

"Very well captain. We're on our way." Hugo replied.

"You heard the man." Du Vrey said to his men as he shut off his PTP link, "Mister Callan will be here soon. So let's get back outside and-" and then he was interrupted by a sudden scream, "Tost! Jexx! Report!" he yelled as he and the two troops with him in the cockpit rushed towards the rear of the ship.

As they ran they heard two shots from a pulse wave rifle fired in rapid succession and as they burst into the engineering compartment they saw Jexx pointing his rifle up at the ceiling while Tost was lay motionless on the floor.

"What's happening?" Du Vrey demanded.

"There's something alive up there sir." Jexx replied.

"What do you mean 'something'? Describe it." Du Vrey ordered.

"I-I didn't get a good look at it." Jexx said, "I just saw a tentacle lash out from above and it got Tost right in the face."

Du Vrey crouched down to examine the body of Tost and he saw that there was a line of tiny wounds stretching diagonally across the dead man's face. Around each of these the flesh was already badly discoloured and Du Vrey instantly realised what had happened.

"Poison." He said, getting abck to his feet and he aimed his rifle up into the darkness near the ceiling, "Set to full auto." He told his men and as each man adjusted the setting on his rifle Du Vrey suddenly snapped, "Fire!"

All four soldiers opened fire at once, spraying streams of energy blasts into the darkness. There was a sudden high pitched squeal as one of the spatial distortions struck something made of flesh rather than metal and a tentacle with a viciously barbed tip lashed out towards Du Vrey. But the duros officer was ready and he sidestepped out of the way before shifting his aim towards the source of the tentacle. His next burst of fire struck the creature directly and the four soldiers all leapt backwards as it suddenly dropped from the ceiling and dropped to the floor where it lay still.

"What the kriff is that thing?" Hurn asked.

"Looks like a dianoga." Teller replied.

"Oh don't talk poodoo." Jexx said, "That's no dianoga."

"No but it could have been once." Du Vrey commented, "Before it changed into whatever it is now."

The blaster cannon mounted on the shuttle fired to clear an area of jungle large enough for the heraklon-class freighter to land, a process that took just a few seconds as the one hundred and fifty metre long ship appeared overhead.

Captain Du Vrey was waiting as the freighter landed and a ramp extended down to the ground and Hugo Callan came striding down it.

"Report captain." Hugo called out, "I was told of weapons fire."

"That's right sir. My men were ambushed by something and one was killed." Du Vrey answered.

"Something? Can't you be more specific?" Hugo asked.

"Not really sir. I think you ought to see for yourself. It's in the wreck over there." Du Vrey said, pointing back to the ship that had been broadcasting the beacon.

"Lead the way." Hugo said and the captain and his surviving men took him to see the creature they had killed.

"Looks similar to a dianoga." Hugo said as he looked at the misshapen corpse from across the room, not really wanting to be even this close just in case it happened to still be alive and lashed out with one of its tentacles.

"Though dianogas don't tend to have those poisoned barbs." Du Vrey commented.

"No, but the very fact that this is an abnormal specimen could be significant." Hugo said, "Captain I want this corpse packing for transport. Understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Now what about the crew of this ship. Does it look like this creature killed them all?"

"I can't say for certain." Du Vrey replied, "There's a body in the cockpit that could have been killed by either this creature or another like it. But there 's no sign of the rest of the crew and I doubt that the pilot was the only one."

"Then for now we'll assume that there are more bodies to be found out there somewhere." Hugo said, "Have your men check that second ship I saw and then establish a secure perimeter. I want two lines set up, one just around our ships and the other to also include these two wrecks and the structure."

"Yes sir, I'll see to it myself."

"Oh and captain?"

"Yes sir?"

"Try to get it done before night falls. I'd rather not have jumpy men shooting at one another in the dark."

"Of course sir." Du Vrey replied, hiding his annoyance at being told how to do his job by a man he regarded as nothing more than a merchant.

The *Destiny's Shadow* dropped out of hyperspace some distance from Elth and Kyle let the ship coast towards the planet, hoping to be able to land undetected. His sensors picked up the various faint distress beacons that Hugo's ship had also detected, but added to these were the transponders fitted to Hugo's freighter and also the two Shill Security vessels that had been deployed from it and Kyle noticed that one of them had remained in orbit. At first Kyle was concerned that the vessel would have spotted him, but he soon noticed that it was not reacting to his presence at all. The gunship was holding position over a specific location on the planet and another quick look at the communications system told Kyle that it was almost directly over not only one of the automated distress beacons but also Hugo's freighter as well. Further examination of the energy emissions of the gunship told Kyle that it was directing its sensors down towards the surface of the planet, centred on the freighter's location and Kyle immediately knew what it was for. It was acting as a sentry ship to keep an eye on the surface camp to provide advance warning of an attack. But this meant that the crew were focused on what was going on below them when the biggest threat to them in fact came from behind them in the shape of Kyle.

He let the *Destiny's Shadow* continue to coast towards Elth, making only the bare minimum of course corrections to line the ship up on the orbiting gunship and he watched as it drifted into the cross hairs of his targeting display.

"I have you now." He muttered to himself as he squeezed his trigger.

A stream of bright red energy blasts erupted from the *Destiny's Shadow's* nose mounted laser cannon, taking the gunship completely by surprise. Kyle's aim was good and the volley struck the gunship's engines. In an instant there was a bright flare as one of them exploded and the gunship began to tumble. But the vessel was not finished yet and Kyle did not want it to be able to transmit a warning to its comrades on the surface. Using the *Destiny's Shadow's* main antenna to broadcast a signal that he hoped would jam any message that the already damaged gunship tried to send, Kyle moved in for the kill.

The gunship returned fire, its gunner doing his best to compensate for the uncontrolled motion of his ship but unlike the gunship's crew Kyle was prepared for this and he had focused his shields to the front of the *Destiny's Shadow*. No longer worried about energy emissions alerting his enemies to his presence Kyle switched to active sensors and it took only seconds for his targeting computer to achieve a lock on the already damaged gunship. The moment he heard the audio indication of a lock he launched a projectile. But unlike the one he had fired at Hugo's freighter this one contained a live warhead and the gunship was torn apart.

Satisfied that there were no further obstacles in his path Kyle then selected a suitable landing site on Elth and headed towards it.

But as he neared the planet Kyle felt a sudden tremor in the Force. There was life everywhere on Elth, but some of it consisted of things that should not be. Things that had been warped by concentrated and deliberate exposure to the Dark Side of the Force. A single sensation rushed over Kyle.

*Evil.*

"Come in." Hugo said when he heard the knock at the door of his private cabin and the door slid open to reveal Du Vrey, "Ah captain, what can I do for you?"

"I've just come to inform you that the perimeter has been established. I've set up a command and control station in the hold."

"Very good." Hugo replied, "I'll come and take a look now." And the two men walked down to the hold where Hugo saw that a small prefabricated structure had been assembled. Normally this sort of structure would

have been assembled outside but in this case erecting it inside the cargo hold was regarded as adding an extra layer of security. The walls inside of this structure were lined with display screens and a table in the middle featured a holographic representation of the surrounding area.

"As you can see we've set up two rings of security just as you asked." Du Vrey said, pointing to the holographic display, "The first surrounds the whole area encompassing this ship, the two wrecks and also the ruined structure. On the other hand the second forms an inner cordon that just protects this ship. That way if there are any more nasty surprises in either wreck or the ruins they can't get in here."

"What's in these cordons?" Hugo asked.

"Passive infra red motion sensors mainly. They're configured to pick up anything warm bloodied that's at least as big as a medium sized dog." Du Vrey replied, "But we've constructed dugouts at regular intervals. Each of these is big enough to contain a single fire team and is equipped with a support weapon, mainly pulse wave cannons but we also have four automatic grenade launchers and a mortar on the inner line. With the mortar we can call down high explosive fire on anything that gets within fifteen hundred metres and the grenade launchers can deal with anything that gets within five hundred."

"And what about the wrecked ships and the ruins?" Hugo asked, "What precautions have been taken before we can make certain that they are secure? I'd rather not have the men on the outer perimeter being taken by surprise from within our lines."

"We've checked the hulls of both wrecks and made sure that they're sealed up." Du Vrey answered, "My men welded up the hole in the one we checked and the other looks perfectly intact. In the mean time I've got men going over the ruin and setting up more motion sensors at every entrance they find. Don't worry Mister Callan, we're perfectly safe in here."

The rays of daylight were disappearing as Kyle walked down the access ramp of the *Destiny's Shadow*. On this uncharted world he was taking no chances and the lightsaber on his belt was not the only weapon he carried. On his leg he had a pulse wave blaster in a holster while a knife was located on his belt close to his lightsaber. But the weapon that would be his first response to any threat was the plasma carbine he carried in his hands. This weapon was bulky and short ranged, but it packed a tremendous punch and Kyle had faith that it would allow him to outfight anything that he could not outrun. He turned around to seal his ship, setting its systems to alert him if anyone or indeed anything tried to get inside. Then he turned back towards the jungle.

Kyle had made a note of where Hugo Callan's freighter had landed and he began to walk in that direction, expecting to reach the camp some time before dawn. But as he walked he realised that he could sense something else in that direction. Something that had remained hidden here for centuries, but that was now waking up and calling out to him.

## 4.

The alarm was triggered just after midnight and the sound woke Hugo suddenly. He had fallen asleep in a chair while still fully dressed so he was able to make his way straight to the command centre where he found Du Vrey studying the holographic map.

"What's wrong?" Hugo asked.

"Something tripped a motion sensor here." The duros replied, pointing to a spot just beyond the outer perimeter.

"Well has anyone seen it?"

"No." Du Vrey said, shaking his head, "I've sent a squad from our reserve to bolster that section, but I'd rather not send any men out beyond the perimeter while it's dark. When the sun comes back up we'll see if there are any tracks out there."

"What about that mortar of yours? You could drop a round on that location now." Hugo suggested, but Du Vrey just sighed.

"This could be an attempt to measure our response." He said, "and if we fire the mortar we reveal that we have it. For now our defences are just as unknown to whoever is out there as their identities and strengths are to us."

"You better be right about this captain." Hugo said, "Because I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Then perhaps you should not have brought us all here Mister Callan." Du Vrey said, staring at the hologram rather than Hugo.

Hugo frowned and left the command centre, heading back to his cabin and once there he went to a locked drawer and opened it. From inside he took a pulse wave blaster and loaded it before hooking its holster to his belt.

### *Danger.*

Kyle came to a complete stop and brought his plasma carbine up to his shoulder as he looked around. He could sense life everywhere, though none of it qualified as coming even close to sentient and that made it difficult to sense an attack before it happened. Animals tended to act more on instinct than emotion. But Kyle knew that there was something here that meant him harm and he instead concentrated on using the Force to bolster his more mundane senses. Just in time to notice the creature crawling down the trunk of a tree behind him.

Dropping his carbine, Kyle instead drew his knife and whirled around to drive the blade into the creature's neck with such force that it punched right through and pinned the creature to the tree trunk.

Then he ducked as a screeching sound alerted him to a second creature leaping from another tree and he drew his lightsaber, igniting it with a 'snap-hiss' and the light of the blade illuminated the jungle around him as well as the dozen or so creatures he was surrounded by. These had the look of a small primate, but instead of fur their bodies were covered in tiny interlocking scales that gave them the appearance of wearing primitive chain mail armour while what seemed to be their fingers and toes were tipped with curved, sharp looking claws. The creatures stared at Kyle through milky white eyes and he sensed that they were not necessarily 'seeing' him in the truest sense of the word. Indeed he sensed more of the Force in them than was normal for such creatures and it was definitely of the Dark Side.

Kyle lashed out at the closest creature and sliced it in two. This provoked a collective screeching from the others and they leapt backwards, continuing to hiss and waving claws at Kyle. He had no idea what the effect of being scratched by any of these imp-like beings would be, but he had no desire to find out and he held out his hand and used the Force to call his carbine back to his grasp. As soon as he felt the weapon in his hand Kyle swung it towards the largest of the creatures and fired, the flash of energy lighting up a wider area just briefly. Plasma weapons were notorious for their blasts' effectiveness dropping with range as the super heated ionised matter cooled and repelled itself but the creature Kyle aimed at was at just the right distance for the blast to totally envelope it in plasma and in an instant it was incinerated.

This was the final straw for the pack and with more screeching they turned and fled, retreating into the darkness beyond the area illuminated by Kyle's lightsaber and the flames produced by the blast from his plasma carbine. Keeping a watchful eye out for the creatures returning, Kyle went back to the tree where he had impaled one of them to examine it more closely. From the looks of it the creature was arboreal in nature and the claws were presumably intended to allow it to cling to the trees it lived in. But at some point someone powerful with the Dark Side had twisted an ancestor of this creature into something like what Kyle

saw before him now and turned a small and presumably docile creature into a vicious pack predator that could drop down on its prey unannounced.

Kyle slung his carbine over his shoulder before pulling his knife from the tree, allowing the corpse of the creature to drop to the ground. Then he returned the knife to its sheath and continued on his way towards the camp, using his lightsaber to light his way and keeping a careful eye on the trees overhead.

"What was that?" Du Vrey asked when he saw the sudden blip on several of the perimeter sensors.

"Could have been a sudden heat flare." The sensor operator replied, "It could have triggered a bunch of the motion sensors all at once."

"Yes but what caused it?" Du Vrey said, "That could have been an energy weapon discharge. Make sure none of our people are outside the perimeter."

"No sir, no-one's gone past us." The perimeter guard responded when questioned, "But we did think we saw a brief flash of light a few minutes ago."

"Then why didn't you report it?" Du Vrey demanded.

"It didn't seem worth it sir. It was only there for about a second. We thought it was just a reflection."

"Just a reflection?" Du Vrey repeated, "Now look here trooper, I want you to report absolutely everything. Do you understand that? On this world everything to be treated with suspicion. I have no intention of making this place my tomb."

"Of course sir. I'll-"

"You'll what?" Du Vrey said when the transmission was suddenly cut short, "Are you still there trooper?"

"Yes sir, I'm here. But I don't think that we're alone."

The soldier shut down his PTP link as he stared down the optical sight of his rifle at the tree line about twenty metres away from his dugout. There he saw leaves and branches moving as something leapt between them and then he realised that the same thing was happening all along the tree line.

"There's nothing from the motion sensors." One of the other troopers in the dugout said.

"Yeah, well there's plenty those things won't pick up." another replied.

"So what do you suggest we do then?" the previous one asked.

"Easy. This." And before anyone else could stop him the third trooper lifted his rifle and fired into the trees, aiming for the movement.

There was a brief screech, followed by the sound of something falling from a height before there was a period of eerie silence. This ended as suddenly as it had begun as swarms of the tiny primates leapt out of the trees all around the perimeter and charged it, all screeching as they ran.

"Sir the perimeter's under attack!" one of the command centre staff exclaimed.

"Whereabouts corporal?" Du Vrey asked, "There's nothing on the sensors."

"Everywhere." The corporal replied.

Despite the small size of the creatures charging towards them, the troopers manning the perimeter realised that they posed a threat and they opened fire without Du Vrey needing to give the order. The troopers favoured their pulse wave rifles against the creatures and most fired short burst or single shots that sent many of them tumbling backwards under the impact of the spatial distortions that burst their organs. But unlike the small group that had attacked Kyle, this swarm was massive and consisted of several thousand. With such massive numbers it was hardly surprising that some of them managed to avoid being shot for long enough to reach the perimeter. Here they leapt at the troopers, aiming for their exposed faces and clawing at them. It took little effort to dislodge one of the creatures and a good strong kick or slash of a combat knife would deal with it, but in this time several men had eyes gouged out or arteries in their necks ripped open and worse still the defensive fire from the perimeter was lessened with each man forced to cease fire and in turn this allowed even more of the creatures to reach the perimeter.

"Everyone out!" Du Vrey yelled, "We need every man on the line right now!" and he waved the command centre staff towards the door. Obeying Du Vrey's orders, the command staff abandoned their posts and joined the duros in going to help defend the perimeter. Had even one of them stayed then they would have seen the alert as one of the motion sensors was triggered.

Kyle followed the sound of the fighting. As far as he could tell there was less pulse wave fire than there had been five minutes ago, but he doubted that the tiny creatures would be able to overwhelm the camp by themselves. What they were good for in Kyle's mind though was causing a distraction and shutting off his

lightsaber to avoid giving himself away he got down on his stomach and began to crawl from the tree line towards the camp perimeter.

He came to one of the dugouts somewhat unexpectedly, almost falling into it by accident in the dark. All four of the troopers stationed here were dead, their eyes and throats ripped out. But they had taken a great many of the creatures with them and the ground that Kyle had crawled over was littered with their tiny bodies.

Looking at one of the dead troopers Kyle noticed that the man had been about his size and he realised that this was an opportunity to be able to infiltrate the ranks of his enemy. Cautiously, aware that there could be more of the creatures around he slid down into the dugout and then began to remove the dead man's armour and uniform.

## 5.

"How many?" Hugo asked.

"Eighteen dead and five more seriously wounded." Du Vrey answered and Hugo frowned.

"Why so few wounded?" he asked.

"Those critters go for the face and throat." Du Vrey explained, "If they get their claws on you then they'll rip your throat out. But they've got to get to you first. Four of the injured lost eyes so I hope you'll be covering replacements."

"Of course." Hugo replied, "What about a sample?"

"Oh we've plenty of bodies, but we managed to get a live one as well if that's what you're wondering."

"You did? Let me see it." Hugo said and the duros officer led him to a small shipping container that had been modified by replacing the doors with wire mesh welded over the end. Inside one of the creatures that had attacked the camp was frantically running about looking for a way out and screeching. Hugo noticed that the floor of the shipping container was smeared with blood.

"What happened?" he asked as he peered through the mesh at the creature.

"We actually caught four of them." Du Vrey replied, "But they don't seem to take well to captivity and they went mad and attacked one another. This one was obviously the strongest. It killed the others."

"Keleen would have been fascinated to have studied you." Hugo said, still staring at the creature. Then he looked at Du Vrey again, "What precautions are being taken to stop a repeat of last night?" he asked and the duros reached to a bulky pouch on his belt and removed a mask of black rubber from it.

"Breath masks." He said, "As far as we can tell those things won't be able to cut through them so it'll give the men a better chance to get rid of them. Plus it means we can try seeing how they react to gas. I've ordered that riot control gas grenades get issued to the men."

"Only riot control gas?" Hugo asked, "Not nerve gas?"

"No." Du Vrey said, "That stuff's too difficult to handle. We've brought some of the stuff with us if it's needed, but only as shells for the mortar. The last thing I want to do is poison my own men because one of them accidentally broke a seal."

"Very wise captain. Now what about the ruin?" Hugo asked and Du Vrey smiled.

"I've a full platoon ready to go." He said, "All volunteers. I'll lead them myself."

"No." Hugo replied, "I'll lead them. You remain here and watch the camp. I don't want any more incidents like last night."

The platoon prepared to enter the ruins waited for Hugo next to one of the entrances to the structure. Three of the masked troopers had climbed up the sloping side to the gaping hole that was going to serve as an entrance and were peering inside, shining flashlight beams into the darkness.

"See anything interesting?" Hugo called out.

"Nothing." One of the troopers replied, his voice somewhat distorted by his breathmask.

"Well let's hope that there's something of more interest deeper inside." Hugo replied, "Otherwise all this has been one massive waste of time."

Another trooper then walked up to Hugo and handed him a breathmask of his own.

"You should put this on Mister Callan." He said, "Just in case."

"Of course. What's your name trooper?" Hugo asked as he began to pull the mask over his face.

"Knight sir." The trooper replied and Hugo nodded.

"Very well Trooper Knight. You stick with me. Understood?"

"Yes sir."

The members of the platoon all activated the lights mounted to their pulse wave rifles before entering the ruin and cautiously following the passageway within. This sloped downwards at a shallow angle and it rapidly became apparent that the group was below ground level.

Unlike the soldiers surrounding him Hugo held a flashlight in his hand and he pointed this towards the walls either side of him. At the start of the passageway, where the ruin had been above the ground these looked to have been made of stone blocks cemented together, but down here it appeared that the passageway had been carved right into the rock itself.

"The passageway levels out here." The lead trooper called out.

"Then leave two men here." Hugo ordered, looking back up towards the surface, "I don't want to risk our communications being cut off so we'll leave them to relay signals to Captain Du Vrey."

One of the squad leaders picked out two of his men to remain behind and then the rest of the group continued on their way.

Before long the passageway opened out and the troopers halted again, searching the chamber that lay in front of them with flashlight beams rather than risk walking into a nest of creatures like the one that had attacked them the previous night.

"I need to see this." Hugo said, looking at Knight and then the pair of them made their way to the front of the platoon and looked into the chamber.

It was obvious that the chamber was not empty. Whatever purpose it had been put to long ago, the remains of whatever furniture and equipment it held were still here but in the narrow beams of flashlights it was difficult to get a good look at them.

"I need more light." Hugo said.

"Allow me." Knight replied and he pulled a chemical light stick from his webbing, activated it and then hurled it into the centre of the chamber.

The light illuminated the centre of the chamber and also dimly lit the outer edges enough for Hugo to see that it held numerous rows of raised metal pedestals and that from many of these massive broken tubes of glass protruded.

"What is this place?" one of the troopers asked out loud and although he had a good idea Hugo remained silent.

"I want a closer look." He said, "Knight with me. Everyone else cover us."

Hugo and Knight darted towards the closest of the pedestals and shining his flashlight on it directly, Hugo was able to see that there was a row of monitoring gauges along one side. Then he shone his flashlight at the centre of the pedestal, in the middle of the destroyed tube and he saw a collection of tiny bones scattered there.

"That's not one of those creatures from last night." Knight commented.

"No it's not." Hugo agreed, "Despite the size of them I think that they come from something far bigger."

"How much bigger?" Knight asked.

"Oh I'd say that it grew big enough to fill the tube it was being grown in." Hugo said.

"Three metres across?" Knight said and Hugo nodded and pointed his flashlight upwards.

"And I'd say it went all the way up the ceiling when it was intact. What would you say that was? About six metres?" he replied.

"This was a genetic engineering lab." Knight said, sweeping his rifle around so that the flashlight attached to it passed over several of the other pedestals and their destroyed tubes.

"Oh I don't think that genetic engineering comes close to describing what went on here." Hugo said, "But the question is did any of these creatures survive long enough to be taken from their tubes? And if they did how many are there around here now?"

"Contact north." One of the command centre staff said and Du Vrey looked at the main holographic display to see flashing red lights where movement had been detected and unlike the tiny creatures to have already attacked the camp, it was obvious that what was heading for it now was far larger.

"Tell the men to stand to." Du Vrey ordered, "And tell the mortar crew to open fire."

The rest of the platoon advanced into the chamber and spread out to investigate not only its contents but also to see where the various doors that were half visible in the dim light went to. Leaving Hugo to continue his examination of the various pedestals and what remained of the creatures that had been growing the now destroyed gestation tanks Knight went to join this search, focusing on the walls of the chamber and when Hugo looked up he saw Knight focusing on a section of apparently blank wall.

"What have you found?" he asked, walking over to where the soldier was running his hand down the wall.

Shining his own flashlight at the wall Hugo saw that as Knight had wiped away the layer of grime covering the surface he had revealed a crack in the wall. A crack that was perfectly straight, "There's a door here!" He called out, waving the platoon closer.

"What are your orders sir?" the platoon leader asked as Hugo wiped away more grime to mark out the edge of the door, "Shall we break it down?"

"Yes." Hugo replied, "This has been deliberately hidden. There must be something important behind it."

"Okay you heard the man. Get that door open." The officer ordered.

"Perhaps we should stand clear." Knight suggested, pulling Hugo away from the door.

"What?" Hugo asked as the other troopers formed a line in front of the hidden door and took aim. Then there was a sudden volley of pulse wave blasts accompanied by the sound of splintering stone.



“Advance.” The platoon commander ordered as the door disintegrated into rubble and the troopers closest to the doorway moved slowly forwards.

The attack that came next was silent; three bizarre disc-shaped creatures about a metre in diameter hurled themselves through the doorway at the troopers. One trooper reacted fast enough to fire his rifle, blasting a hole through the thin membrane of tissue that made up the bulk of the creature’s body between the multiple limbs running from the centre to the edge where they ended in short claws. But this did not stop the creature’s flight and as it and the others struck the troopers they enveloped them, wrapping their limbs around the troopers bodies.

“Get them off!” Hugo yelled, but it was too late and there was a hissing sound followed by shrieks of agony as the creatures sprayed digestive acid onto the troopers that burned right through their armour as well as the flesh underneath.

The other troopers rushed forwards to try and help their comrades. Knight held Hugo back while this was happening and that turned out to be fortunate for them both as another pair of the creatures sprang from the doorway to surprise the troopers now using their knives to try and cut the creatures’ initial victims free. As the creatures were cut free the extent of the damage they had inflicted became apparent. The first three troopers to have been attacked were dead, the acid had eaten into their chests enough to melt the tissue between their ribs and from there burn into their hearts and lungs, leaving their ribs as hollow cages around still melting organs. Meanwhile the other two troopers were still alive, but only just and it was obvious to everyone that neither of them would live long enough to get to the medical facilities aboard the freighter. Sure enough their screams continued for only a few seconds more, turning to choking coughs as the acid silenced them just before they died.

“I think the coast is clear now.” Knight said as he crept towards the doorway with his rifle raised.

Hugo frowned.

“I just hope that Captain Du Vrey is doing better than this.” He said.

## 6.

The first beasts to burst out of the jungle were twice the height of a man and three times that in length. Some bore flesh wounds from the mortar rounds that had been fired at them, but the only effect the attack seemed to have had on the beasts was to anger them. Now that they were visible though, the troopers defending the perimeter opened fire and the air was filled with pulse wave blasts and grenades. The beasts roared as they were struck repeatedly, more flesh being torn off. But their numbers meant that the defenders from different dugouts were firing at too many different targets, each group targeting the beast they considered the greatest danger to themselves rather than concentrating on just a few of them. One of the beasts reached a dugout and opened its mouth to pluck a trooper from it. The man screamed briefly before he was bitten in half and while his legs dropped back into the dugout his torso was swallowed in a single gulp. The creature roared as it looked back down to see the other three troopers from the dugout fleeing in terror at this and it scooped up another of them in its jaws, swallowing the man whole before charging after the other two.

"We need fire support!" Du Vrey snapped, "Where is that gunship?"

"I don't know sir." One of the command staff replied, "I can't make contact with them."

"Well why not? Is our transmitter down?"

"No sir, there's just no reply."

"When did we last hear from them?" Du Vrey demanded.

"Just after they were deployed sir. They were supposed to maintain communications silence just in case."

"Yes, I know their orders. I gave them. But what I want to know is what happened to them?" Du Vrey said and then he sighed, "Never mind. Just get our reserves onto the inner line and tell them to open fire on anything that gets inside our outer perimeter. Then take a quarter of the men from the south and send them to-"

"Err sir, I don't think you want to take men from the south." Another of the staff interrupted as the motion sensors to the south of the camp all triggered within seconds of one another.

The chamber on the other side of the hidden door appeared to be a perfect sphere about fifty metres across. The door was located at about the widest point and a narrow walkway led from it to a column rising up from the bottom to the exact midpoint where there was a small platform. There was something on this platform, but from the door it was impossible to tell precisely what it was.

Knight looked down from the doorway and dropped another chemical light stick into the darkness. When it stopped it revealed that the bottom of the sphere was filled with bones. The sheer number of these meant that they had to have come from many hundreds of individuals but there was no telling an exact number or where one skeleton ended and another began. Only a handful of visible skulls that looked of the shape possessed by most humanoid species in the galaxy suggested that these had once been sentient beings.

"Knight, follow me." Hugo said, looking at the platform ahead and he began to make his way across the walkway, moving slowly due to the lack of any form of safety railings.

As the pair got closer to the platform it became obvious that there was another body on it, but this one had been carefully laid out rather than just tossed to the bottom of the chamber. The body was humanoid and had been carefully mummified, leaving enough tissue to be able to identify it as a female sith. It was obvious from the way the body had been treated that this sith had been someone important during life and this fact was made all the more obvious by what it held where its hands met over its chest, a small pyramid made of crystal.

"Get me that." Hugo ordered Knight, pointing to the holocron. It appeared as if a person just had to reach out and take the precious repository of sith knowledge, but if Hugo had learnt anything about the Sith, it was not to underestimate their willingness to make use of traps for the unwary.

Knight swung his pulse wave rifle by the barrel to gently knock the holocron out of the dead Sith's grip, taking off a few fingers at the same time and only then did Hugo reach down to scoop it up in his hands.

"Now let's get out of here." He said before there was the sound of doors opening above them, "Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." He added.

"Move!" Knight yelled, firing his rifle into the air as a pair of muscular humanoids began to rapidly drop towards them, their descent slowed by some form of organic rope that they appeared to be secreting from their wrists.

The defenders to the south of the camp opened fire as soon as their attackers emerged from the jungle. These were much smaller than the massive beasts attacking from the north, humanoid in form and able to fling sticky web-like material from their hands as they charged. This did little to limit the movement of the troopers but it made equipment difficult to operate and obscured faceplates so that aiming a weapon was impossible until it had been scraped off.

"There's too many of them!" one of the troopers called out as he struggled to clear sprayed web from his weapon so that he could reload it. But before he could manage this one of the creatures jumped down into the dugout and pounced on top of him, uttering a bizarre insect-like chattering as it started to beat his head and chest.

The platoon fell back towards the surface, pursued by more of the humanoid creatures that hurled web material at them. Whatever it was that had alerted these guardians to someone disturbing the Sith's tomb it had triggered a reaction throughout the entire underground complex, not just the area around the tomb and literally hundreds of them were now converging on the withdrawing troopers.

"There are the sentries!" Hugo exclaimed as he saw the two men left behind at the bottom of where the passageway sloped up to the surface, both of them crouched down and aiming towards the surface, "We're going to make it."

"Maybe not." Knight responded when he saw the troopers firing their rifles at something out of sight.

"What's going on?" the platoon commander demanded as he reached them.

"The camp's being overrun." One of the sentries replied, "We tried to contact you, but this place was blocking our signals."

"Well we're getting out of here now." Hugo said and he held up the holocron, "This ought to tell us everything we need to know about this place."

"You heard the man. Move!" the platoon commander snapped and he began to run back up the passageway towards the surface, followed by his men. But as he reached the entrance to the ruin he just carried on going, rushing out into the path of one of the larger beasts attacking the camp and he screamed briefly as he was trampled underfoot.

"We have to get back to the ship." Hugo said as he looked out from the ruins to see chaos everywhere as isolated groups of soldiers tried to hold back the waves of Sith spawned creatures.

"We go together." Knight said and he looked around at the other troopers, "All of us. Form up around Mister Callan and concentrate your fire in your sectors. Now let's go."

Rushing out of the ruins the troopers quickly formed a ring around Hugo and together they ran for the freighter. Several of the humanoid creatures tried to rush them, but the closest troopers fired while the rest kept watch in other directions and cut them down. But the formation still took casualties. As it moved through the inner defence line more of the humanoid creatures leapt out of the dugouts where they had been feasting on their previous occupants. Too close for the troopers to react in time, the creatures were on top of them before they could even take aim.

"Leave them!" Knight yelled at Hugo, pulling him along while the other troopers attempted to defend their fallen comrades and the two of them ran up to the freighter's access ramp and straight up it.

Inside they found Captain Du Vrey and a squad of his men behind a barrier made from equipment cases.

"Captain we need to leave." Hugo said, "Come with me to the bridge and order all your remaining men to fall back here."

"Yes Mister Callan." Du Vrey replied and he activated his PTP link, "Retreat, I say again retreat. Everyone get back to the ship." Then he joined Hugo and Knight in heading for the bridge.

As soon as he stepped onto the bridge Hugo addressed the flight crew.

"We're getting out of here." He told them, "Start the launch sequence but hold until Captain Du Vrey signals that his men are all aboard. I don't want to leave a single man behind on this planet."

The flight crew took their stations and began to get to work, running through checklists as they brought the freighter's systems on line. While they worked Hugo turned to Du Vrey.

"Captain how long do you think it will take your men to get aboard?" he asked, but before the duros could answer a pulse wave blast struck him in the chest and hurled him back against the bulkhead behind him.

Instinctively Hugo drew his own pulse wave blaster as he turned to face the source of the attack but Knight lashed out with one hand to knock the weapon from his hand before spraying energy blasts around the bridge, killing the flight crew and destroying their control consoles, "What are you doing?" Hugo demanded as the trooper reached up to remove his breathmask.

"Making sure that this mission joins the others that never returned from this place." Kyle Jenner said as he dropped his breathmask and pulse wave rifle to the deck. Then from his webbing he took his lightsaber,

“Now I’ll be taking that holocron thank you very much and then I’ll be on my way. I have my own ship.” He added, holding out his free hand and to emphasise his point he activated his lightsaber.

“What? You think I’m just going to give up this-“ Hugo yelled, holding up the holocron. But before he could get any further Kyle simply swung his lightsaber and cut off Hugo’s head. Then he calmly picked up the holocron and looked at it closely.

“Now I wonder who you are?” he said with a smile.