

# STAR WARS

## DARKNESS RISING

### ENDINGS & ANSWERS

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Morton, Rylee and the Founding Families have control of Thal N'Krey's ship along with its navigational logs, telling them exactly where he travelled to. Meanwhile the Udras have enough of the paintings created by the missing artist to determine where he was when he painted the. Finally Teron Sharr's mysterious master is forced to reveal the location of Thal's discovery to Teron so that he can prevent any of their enemies from claiming it for themselves.

All three groups are led to the remote Andromora system in search of this for their own purposes. This world was once scoured clean of all life and now history may be about to repeat itself in a way that would dwarf even that level of destruction.

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# THAL

A loud crashing sound woke Vallani Mellet from her sleep and she looked across the bed to where her boyfriend typically slept. However, when she saw that he was not there she realised that he was probably responsible for the noise instead of an intruder in the apartment they shared. Putting on a robe, Vallani got out of bed and walked across the room to the doorway that led to the apartments main lounge area. Vallani's boyfriend, the kiffar artist Thal N'Krey used this area as a studio and it was filled with examples of his artwork. Vallani was the model for many of these pieces, her appearance modified to resemble whatever humanoid species was the subject.

Thal was about twice Vallani's age but she had been drawn to the near-human artist from the moment they first met and they had rapidly entered into a romantic relationship despite the kiffar's bouts of depression, excessive habit of talking to himself and tendency to throw himself into his work and abruptly vanish on a quest to locate something that inspired him.

The vast majority of Thal's work was based on the ancient Sith culture and as well as Thal's artwork the room contained numerous original Sith artefacts. Such things were controlled in the Republic to try and prevent the resurgence of the now extinct Sith civilisation and it was the shelves of such artefacts that Thal was now searching.

"Thal it's the middle of the night. What are you doing?" Vallani asked.

"I think I've found something incredible." Thal replied, glancing towards Vallani just enough for her to be able to see the family markings tattooed beneath his left eye.

"What is it? Let me see." Vallani said, always eager to see what Thal intended to base his next batch of artwork on so she could see how he might be expected to participate. However, rather than presenting her with an image or statue that he intended to replicate Thal held out a piece of parchment. Obviously very old this looked as if it had once been part of a larger tome before being removed.

"This." he said.

"I don't remember you getting that." she responded, frowning as she looked at the indecipherable characters written on the side of the parchment that she could see.

"No, it was inside that." Thal told her and he pointed to a nearby statue that was now broken in half to expose a hollow interior. Seeing this Vallani realised that it was the sound of the statue being broken that had woken her up, "I woke up from a dream in which I found that it was hollow and filled with treasure and came to find out if it was true."

For someone to break open an ancient statue on the basis of a dream might have sounded insane to some people but Vallani had come to realise that Thal had some sensitivity towards such things. He was one of the small percentage of his species that had psychometric ability, able to determine information about an object just by touching it. Sometimes he seemed to know other things an ordinary person should not as well and there had been occasions when he had spoken to Vallani as if answering a question that she had not yet asked but had been thinking about.

"I can't read any of that Thal. What does it say?" Vallani said.

"It talks about the work of a Sith lord named Hasran who claimed to have found a way to construct a device that would amplify and direct his power so that it could cover an entire world, even one on the far side of the galaxy." Thal said.

"What would that do?" Vallani asked.

"Does it matter? Can you imagine what that device must have looked like? I have to find it." Thal said and then he turned back towards the shelf that was filled with a number of printed books, folders of individual documents and more modern, though still often out of date datapads. All of these contained information about the Sith, including a large amount that was technically illegal in the Republic. Thal's journeys often took him beyond the Republic's borders or to those dark places where forbidden treasures could be obtained providing a buyer had enough money and did not ask too many questions.

Vallani sighed. It was probable that the quest to search through his collected library would keep Thal busy until the morning and even if he was able to find what he was looking for the artwork he would create using this mysterious Sith machine would not require her as a model.

"I leave you to your search then." she said, kissing him on the cheek, "Just try not wake me again, okay?"

Thal did not reply to this, instead continuing to search through his library for more information on the Sith lord described in the parchment as Vallani headed back into the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Unlike Vallani, who had no knowledge of the Sith language whether it was written or spoken, Thal had been studying what he could find of it long enough to be able to understand large parts of it without the need for translation devices but the datapads that held most of the information he possessed still featured translations of large parts of the text they held and this made searching them easier. Although the parchment named the

*Sith lord who had created the machine to focus his power it did not indicate where it had been created or if it was something that could be transported from one place to another. Fortunately for Thal the name of the Sith lord sounded familiar to him so he searched through his library for any other references to him. Ideally Thal hoped to discover where the Sith lord had been based, knowing that this would most likely be the place where the device had been created. If Thal could find this then he would have a place to start his search.*

# 1

The holographic recreations of paintings floated in the air of the lecture hall in the Jedi temple on Coruscant. Designed to present information to over a hundred trainee padawans, the projection system was one of only a handful in the temple that would allow such a large number of individual holograms to be projected simultaneously. A trio of Jedi studied the holograms, trying to arrange them so that the images merged to form one single giant picture. The originals of these were all held in storage at the temple but it was far easier to rearrange holograms using a computer console than it was to physically reposition more than twenty large paintings.

All created by Thal N'Krey, the paintings had been discovered during the Jedi's mission to locate the missing artist. Thal's artwork had been based on the culture of the ancient Sith and he had used genuine Sith artefacts for his inspiration, some of which were illegal to possess in the Republic because they contained pieces of forbidden Sith lore. When this had come to the attention of the Jedi Order they had despatched a pair of Jedi to try and find Thal, wanting to ensure that any other Sith artefacts that he may have had in his possession were seized before they could be used for evil purposes. Unfortunately the Jedi were not the only ones hunting Thal. Two underworld groups were also interested in the artist, or at least the artefacts they knew he possessed and so a third Jedi had been assigned to assist the first two later on.

The paintings were landscapes but had been painted at night so the ground itself was just a large patch of black, the old detail being the contour of the horizon along with the occasional shadowy silhouette of a tree, the species of which could not be determined without any detail. It was not the ground that the Jedi were interested in though, it provided a means of lining paintings up with one another but the important subject matter was the pattern of stars in the sky. The Jedi had come to realise that when correctly arranged the paintings would form a map of sorts, with the complete star field being unique to a single system in the galaxy. Arranging the paintings was complicated by some of them still being missing though and some of them had multiple possibilities for which other paintings they would match up with.

"Are we sure that those two are meant to fit together?" the youngest of the Jedi asked. Brae Udra was the only padawan among the three, while the other two were fully qualified knights. Jayk Udra was Brae's master and unusually for members of the Jedi Order he was also her father, Brae being the result of a brief relationship he had had with a non-Jedi woman while on extended assignment two decades earlier. Brae had been on the verge of being expelled from the Jedi Order because of her lack of control over her power. The Udra family had a tradition of service in the Jedi Order though, with the most promising children from each generation serving as Jedi. Therefore, rather than simply expel her the council had decided to pair her with a close relative so that she could witness her family tradition in action. Neither Jayk nor Brae had known he was her father initially though, the council had claimed that he was her uncle but this ruse had been exposed when Brae was poisoned and Jayk had to take her to a civilian hospital where blood tests had been run on them both. The other Jedi, Kat Maran was a Jedi that Jayk had entered into a relationship with more recently and the pair were careful to remain within the rules laid down by the Jedi code and not become overly attached to one another.

"The skylines meet up." Kat pointed out as she looked at where the two holograms met and studied them carefully.

"Yes but there's a peak. The one on the left looks like it might also meet up with this one over here and make a larger slope." Brae pointed out.

"Let's see." Jayk added and he used the projector console to place duplicates of the painting Brae had picked out next to both of the paintings it could possibly align with, "So we have either a slope that changes its steepness or a peak where they join." he added.

"Or we're missing the painting that is next to this one entirely." Kat commented.

"Or maybe the problem is that the picture you're looking at is a fake." a male voice said from behind the Jedi and all three looked around to see two men standing in the open doorway to the hall. Neither man wore Jedi robes but both were well known to the three Jedi present.

"Professor Hebro. I was not expecting you." Jayk commented. Dahlis Hebro was one of the Republic's leading art experts and he had proven a valuable source of information to the Jedi in their search for Thal N'Krey, helping them to locate and authenticate works by the missing artist.

"Or you Tylo. What happened to your date with Zara?" Brae then asked the younger of the pair.

"Ah." Tylo commented, "Well you see-"

"She left him." Kat commented.

"She was offered a fancy job by some mining conglomerate but it meant heading off to the Outer Rim." Tylo replied, "On the other hand she did promise to send me the credits she offered for saving her."

Unlike Dahlis, who had willingly provided his support to the Jedi, Tylo's role in the investigation had been compelled. Formerly a member of one of the gangs also attempting to obtain as much of Thal's work as possible, he had been arrested and charged for his role in the theft of some from an art gallery. He had avoided prison by agreeing to assist the Jedi in their mission while they also now provided him with protection against retaliation for turning on his former comrades.

"Quite the mercenary isn't he?" Kat said glancing at Jayk.

"I'm sorry to hear about your relationship Tylo." Jayk added.

"Thanks, but since I don't have anything else worth doing tonight after all I figured I would come up here and see if I could give you a hand. Then Dahlis arrived with news and I told the padawan who came looking for you that I'd show him up." Tylo said.

"Is that painting really a fake?" Brae said, looking at the hologram that had been confusing the Jedi and Dahlis nodded.

"I'm afraid so. The tests I had carried out on the paint show it to be different to the others." Dahlis said and then he glanced at his datapad to check the exact wording of the report he had received, "Spectral analysis indicates the presence of an extra ingredient in the blue used for the majority of the background." he read before he looked up again, "I'd say that someone used a colour matching system to get the right results but they used a different range of colours as their starting point."

Fake works of art claimed to be by Thal N'Krey had surfaced before in the Udra's mission and they had been down more than one dead end as they tried to track work back to the missing artist himself.

"In that case I will remove it from our collection." Jayk said and the offending hologram promptly flickered before vanishing entirely.

"Woah, hold on a minute." Tylo said unexpectedly and the others all turned towards him to see him pointing at one of the holographic images while looking at the others as if searching for something in particular.

"What's wrong?" Brae asked.

"Nothing's wrong kid, but it's just occurred to me that I think I've seen that constellation there. You can only see part of it in that picture so I'm looking to see if the rest is in one of the others." Tylo responded and then he smiled, "Yes there, that could be it." he added and he pointed to another of the holograms, "Can I see those two?" he asked and Jayk brought the two holograms Tylo had indicated to the front of the projection area, placing them directly side by side.

"They don't match." Brae said, watching as Jayk tried both possible arrangements.

"Space them out a bit, the distance of one painting." Tylo said, moving his hands apart to demonstrate and Jayk complied, "I knew it. It's the Fire Trail."

"Fire Trail? I've not heard of that one." Kat said.

"Neither have I. Constellations have been the subject of a lot of artwork over the millennia but that's a new name on me." Dahlis added.

"It's a nickname given by smugglers. I'm not sure that it has an official designation in the Republic's astrogation database." Tylo told her.

"I still don't see what you're looking at." Brae said, frowning.

"I'm sure that Tylo will explain." Jayk said, "Won't you Tylo?"

"Look at these two rows of stars." Tylo said, walking up to one of the holograms and he ran a finger along two sets of stars. Each of these was arranged in a roughly straight line and these lines tapered, coming closer together towards the edge of the painting. Then he moved his finger across the gap between the hologram and the other that he had asked Jayk to focus on, "If you follow these lines then they run into this 'V' shaped star formation here." The formation that Tylo pointed to in the second hologram also consisted of two roughly straight lines of stars but this time they sloped until they met, "I'm guessing that the painting missing from here would have these lines in and that they'd make the link between these two formations so we'd have two long lines that meet right here. I've heard this formation referred to by all sorts of names over the years but the one I was brought up to call it was the fire trail, like it was the tail of a giant shooting star."

"What system can this be seen from?" Kat asked.

"Ah, now there's the problem." Tylo responded.

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

"The stars in this constellation are pretty bright. You can see them for more than five hundred parsecs.

Hundreds of star systems and thousands of planets." Tylo said.

"Then we've already eliminated more than ninety-nine percent of the star systems in the galaxy." Jayk said,

"Tylo can you us on a map where this constellation is visible from?"

"Sure." Tylo said and Jayk nodded.

"Good. Then once we have that we can see if there are any other patterns of stars in these paintings that we can identify. Then maybe we'll have our system." he said.

The scoutship had nose art that depicted a naked woman in a pose that just about protected her modesty. For anyone familiar with the private life of Thal N'Krey it was obvious that the woman in question was his



frequent model and girlfriend Vallani Mellet and this alone marked the ship out as his. Thal had long since vanished from the galaxy by the time it had come into the possession of Morton Crayne but the ship still had the potential reveal the kiffar artist's secrets to the right person.

"Rylee." Morton called out across the hangar as a dark skinned woman descended the access ramp of a far more expensive looking transport, followed by a pair of armoured warriors, "What did I tell you? Here she is, Thal N'Krey's personal transport. One hundred percent intact, including the navigation logs."

"Morton I am actually impressed." Rylee said, smiling as she looking up at the scout ship, "Your message said that you were able to outwit both the jedi and your former protege Teron Sharr?"

Morton frowned for a moment at the mention of Teron Sharr, the young man who had seized control of Teron's gang.

"That brat was just another kid off the streets. If I'd known he was Force sensitive then I'd never have taken him on." Morton said before he glanced back at the scout ship and added, "We also have a couple of the crew. I don't think they know much but at least they were able to unlock the controls for me."

"So we don't even need a slicer. Very efficient." one of the armoured warriors behind Rylee commented and she nodded.

"Quite so Mister Mott." she said, "I think we should take a look, don't you?"

"Indeed Miss Drud. It would be nice to know exactly what we should tell your father." Mott replied.

"Your old man still breathing down your neck?" Morton commented when he heard this.

"My father is still concerned that I'll bring unwanted attention to the actions of our family. Of all the Families." Rylee said. The families in question were the descendants of a group known as the Founding Families, the original explorers of an entire sector of space. When they discovered that they had been beaten to that sector by the Sith a millennia before them they had attempted to profit from this by secretly plundering what the Sith had left behind. Unfortunately the greatest prize had eluded them and the Founding Families were defeated by the jedi. A handful had escaped though and for more than three thousand years they had continued to scour the galaxy in search of Sith knowledge, hoping to unlock their secrets and use that knowledge to enrich themselves beyond their already vast wealth.

"Well I'm sure he'll look more favourably on you when this ship leads us to everywhere Thal went." Morton said.

"I hope so. I've seen what my father is capable of when he's angry Morton." Rylee said, "Now lead the way please."

Morton walked up the access ramp that led into the scout ship's lounge area, followed by Rylee and Mott while the other armoured warrior remained outside. From the lounge Morton made his way into the cockpit and sat in the pilot's seat before Rylee sat down beside him. With only two seats in the cockpit this left Mott standing behind the pair of them and he leant over the back of Morton's chair as a subtle reminder to the gang leader that he was there.

"I had a brief look at the logs and Thal seems to have travelled all over the place, inside the Republic as well as beyond." Morton said.

"Sounds like we'll have our work cut out following up all those leads." Mott commented.

"Perhaps, but I suspect that there are some destinations that are more worth following up than others." Morton said and he reached out to all but one of the entries in the navigation log.

"You weren't kidding about how widely travelled he was, were you?" Rylee commented when she saw the list of systems that the ship had been to scrolled up the screen.

"Some of these will have been visited by the most recent owners of course," Morton pointed out, "but even for the time period when we know that Thal had it he sure racked up the parsecs."

"We need to know where Thal was when he was last aboard." Mott said.

"That doesn't sound easy given the number of systems this ship has been to. We don't know exactly when he was last aboard so we don't have a date to sort by." Rylee pointed out and Morton smiled, "What do you know Morton?" Rylee asked when she noticed this.

"I took a look at the logs on my way here and I noticed a pattern." Morton replied.

"What sort of pattern?" Mott said.

"There's a period of a handful of years where most of the trips that this ship made were to and from one particular system. They extend into the period where your research lost track of Thal so not all them may have been him but they definitely start while we know he had the ship. I'd say that there was definitely something in that system that caught his attention, possibly something that would have caused him to give up travelling the galaxy and settle down in one place. Wouldn't you like to know what that is?"

"Name the system." Mott said.

"Andromora." Morton replied and Rylee frowned for a moment.

"I'm not familiar with the system." she said.

"There's no reason you should." Morton commented, "It's a backwater. A few settlements here and there but it's largely wilderness. Just give me a few men and I'll-

"No." Rylee interrupted, "I'm going."

Morton stared at Rylee for a moment but it was Mott that spoke first.

"Miss Drud that may not be advisable." he told her.

"Advisable or not I'm going. I want to be there when we find out what interested Thal N'Krey so much. Then I can present it to my father in person and prove to him that I was right to search for Thal and his art." Rylee replied.

"Hey wait a minute, we had a deal. Are you just going to cut me out now?" Morton said, concerned mainly about losing the money from the assignment but also aware that if this really was the last step in locating Thal N'Krey and uncovering his sources of Sith artefacts then his efforts to pursue Rylee in a romantic fashion would also come to an abrupt end.

"No, I may need your skills at liaising with other criminals so you can come along as well. Just remember that this is my mission Mister Crayne. You'll do as you're told." she told him and he smiled at her.

"I love a woman who can take charge when she has to." he said.

Teron Sharr's master did not tolerate failure well. As soon as his herglic subordinate, the former crime lord Lusog had informed Teron that Thal N'Krey's old ship had been located Teron's master had ordered him to recover it. His master, who appeared to Teron only as a hologram via the communication system of his new headquarters on the planet Fulter's Reach had no interest in claiming the ship for himself but he was concerned that information aboard it could be dangerous in the wrong hands.

Unfortunately it now appeared that that was exactly what had happened and the ship had fallen into the hands of Teron's former employer who would undoubtedly pass it along to the person paying him to scour the galaxy for Sith artefacts and they had no right to. Now Teron had to give this news to his master.

"Clear the room." Teron ordered once he had been brought up to date on the status of his new underworld empire upon his return and all three of the former crime lords, the herglic Lusog, the human female Sinsa Turgen and the man known only as The Hand turned to leave, "Krovak, Mara, you two as well." Teron added. Krovak had been a part of Teron's gang since the beginning when he had seized control of it from its former leader Morton Crayne. The thief Mara on the other hand had remained loyal to Morton and only come into Teron's service when she fell victim to a creature created by an ancient Sith Lord. Once the eel-like creature had wormed its way into her body she had become possessed by it and was now a thrall to Teron. The two subordinates did not question the order, Mara unable to question any instruction he gave anyway and they followed the former gang leaders from the throne room. Teron was not quite alone however, the gen'dai Turlan remained with him.

The gen'dai were among the longest lived of all sentient species in the galaxy and to him the wars between the Republic and the Sith Empire were something he personally experienced. Once he had been an adviser in the court of a Sith lord and now he was able to give the benefit of his experience to Teron. Experience that Teron now needed.

"Tell me Turlan, how do you think my master will react when I tell him that our enemies have the ship?" Teron asked.

"With anger of course. He gave you an order and you failed to carry out that order. Whether it as your fault or not won't matter, either way you failed. If he was physically standing in front of you when you told him then I expect he would at least take a limb or two. That he isn't here won't limit his anger of course." Turlan answered.

"So what would you advise?" Teron said.

"Explain to him that you can mitigate the damage done." Turlan responded.

"How?"

"Most of what could be gained from possessing the ship was probably removed long ago, Thal's works of art and perhaps some Sith artefacts but the greatest prize lies within the navigation logs. If those are still intact then whoever controls the ship could use them to learn where he travelled and go there themselves. Then the secrets he found would be theirs." Turlan explained.

"Then that is the offer I will make." Teron said as he got up from his throne and walked up to the holographic communication pad, kneeling down on it and bowing his head, "I have news my master." he said and in front of him an image of a hooded humanoid figure appeared.

"Speak." the man said, his features hidden by the hood of his robe.

"Master our enemies were able to acquire the ship before I could." Teron said.

"You fool! If they are able to unlock all of the information aboard that ship and turn it to their own use they could destroy us all." the hooded figure hissed.

"Master there could still be time. You said that all of the ship's secrets were known to you. Share them with me and I will make sure that Morton Crayne and those that he serves never get their hands on them." Teron said.

"Yes, perhaps it is time. You have grown strong in the time you have been my apprentice. Perhaps strong enough to be entrusted with the power that ship can grant to anyone who understands what it holds." the



holographic figure said, "Teron Sharr hear my words and obey them. You will go to the Andromora system. Do not fail me again."

## 2

Rylee's father did not look up from his computer terminal when she entered his office, only his personal guards watched her as she walking from the door to his desk and stood in front of it.

"Are you just going to ignore me father?" she said after waiting for him to react to her presence.

"I am busy child. If you have something to say then say it." he responded.

"I have Thal N'Krey's ship father."

"Do you think I don't already know that? I knew the moment you did." Rylee's father replied and she frowned.

"You're spying on me." she said and he finally looked up from the computer, leaning back in his chair.

"Of course I am Rylee. Your actions have put us all at risk and the other Families are demanding that I take action to reign you in before you bring the Jedi Order down on us." he said.

Rylee leant forwards, leaning on the desk as she stared her father straight in the eyes.

"Father we have the navigation logs. Thal went to the Andromora system repeatedly. There must be something significant there, something so big that Thal couldn't remove it, at least not all at once. Maybe a storehouse, a library of Sith science. What would the other families have to say about that father?" she said and her father considered this for a while.

"I take it that you intend to go there yourself?" he said, "If you were just sending that odious little man Crayne then he'd already be on his way."

"I'm taking Crayne as well but, yes I intend to go to Andromora. For that though I need more than just my yacht, Mister Mott and couple of his men. I want a full company of his men and for that I need your authorisation." Rylee told her father and he snorted.

"A full company of troops? Never mind the Jedi, you'll have every law enforcement agency in the galaxy down on us if we deploy that sort of firepower. I'll give you a platoon. Mister Mott can pick out his best. I certainly wouldn't trust Morton Crayne with you alone. I won't have any of his bastard offspring polluting our bloodline." he said and Rylee smiled.

"Thank you father. You won't regret this." she said.

"Wait one moment Rylee." her father added when she then turned to leave.

"What is it?"

"There are conditions attached to my approval." Rylee's father said and Rylee had a feeling of dread, "A planet is a big place to search. I can't have you just wandering around at random. Firstly narrow down your search area."

"Of course. I'm sure The Assembler will be able to tell us exactly where Thal landed." Rylee said, "What else?"

"This is your last chance to prove that your little adventure has been worth the risk and the expense Rylee." her father said sternly.

"So if I turn up nothing I'll come home and be your good little daughter. I'll play my part in the family firm and do only as you say." Rylee said.

"No Rylee. If you can't bring me anything worthwhile you won't be coming back at all. You'll be completely cut off. You won't have your name, your money or even the clothes on your back."

Rylee hesitated. She had secreted money away in accounts she did not think her father knew about, something that she had done more of since her father had begun to express his displeasure at her actions and this was enough for her to live off if she was careful but it would mean a drastic reduction in her living standards. The Drud family was fabulously wealthy and Rylee had lived in luxury for her entire life so the threat of the loss of this made her hesitate for a moment.

"I don't think that will be an issue father." she said suddenly, not wanting to show the slightest weakness and she calmly turned around again and walked out of her father's office.

Returning to her private quarters Rylee immediately activated her communication system and waited for the connection to be made.

"You have need of me?" the being known only as The Assembler said when a hologram of its spiderlike form appeared in front of her. As far as Rylee knew 'Assembler' was both the name of the individual and its species, although if there were any more of its kind in the galaxy Rylee had no knowledge of them.

"Yes." Rylee replied, "Morton Crayne was able to obtain the ship belonging to Thal N'Krey. Thal himself wasn't aboard but some of the current crew were willing to give Morton full access, that means we have the navigation logs. These show that the ship visited the Andromora system frequently and I think Thal found something there."

"A system is a large place." The Assembler said, "I assume you want me to narrow down the area to be searched."

"In part, yes. I want to know exactly where Thal's ship docked but I also need confirmation that Thal was still in control of the ship at that time." Rylee told the alien.

"Your first requirement is straightforward. Even if the ship did not land at an official starport it would have been detected on approach by planetary traffic control." The Assembler said.

"And the second? What about Thal himself?" Rylee asked.

"That is more difficult. It will depend on the availability of security recordings. Thal may have officially registered his presence but if he didn't then I will have to locate him using alternative means." The Assembler explained to her.

"How much?" Rylee said.

"My usual rate. I will contact you as soon as I have answers." The Assembler said and Rylee nodded.

"I'll be waiting on your call." she said before she shut off the communicator and the hologram of the alien faded away.

Although narrowing the region of space down to one that was five hundred parsecs long eliminated most of the star systems in the galaxy it still left far too many of them for the Jedi to examine every single one and the only way to narrow down the search further was to try to identify other constellations in the available paintings. Unfortunately the field of view included in each painting was so narrow that constellations could only be identified when two or more of them were correctly combined.

"See anything else you recognise Tylo?" Brae asked as she and the former smuggler continued searching for identifiable star formations while Jayk and Kat took a short break.

"Look kid, I've been from one end of the galaxy to the other but I've not had the opportunity to memorise every set of stars I saw." he replied.

"You recognised the Fire Trail even with part of it missing." Brae pointed out.

"Well that was a common run to make for a lot of the beings I worked with." Tylo said before Jayk and Kat returned to the lecture hall and in his hand Jayk held a crystalline cube.

"I thought we could use some help." he said, holding up the cube.

"Going to see if Cal can run a comparison of the star patterns against the temple's records?" Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"Exactly." he said, setting the cube down on top of the console that controlled the holographic projector,

"Okay Cal we could do with some help." he said.

Almost instantly another hologram appeared, this time of an older man wearing Jedi robes. This was an image of Cal Udra, an ancestor of Jayk and Brae who had been a Jedi knight thousands of years earlier, long before the reforms that led to Jedi being prohibited from marrying and having families. During his life Cal had created a holocron to store all his knowledge and experiences, along with a virtual version of himself to act as the gatekeeper to this information. Given his experience in instructing family members in the use of the Force the council had thought that his holocron would be able to offer useful advice to both Jayk and Brae. As well as acting as a secondary instructor, Cal's impressive processing power had also proven useful to the two living Jedi on occasion as well.

"Name it." Cal said.

"We're trying to identify the star system shown in these paintings." Kat said and the image of Cal appeared to turn towards the holograms of the paintings.

"Ah, still on this then?" he commented, having seen the original paintings before and help identify some of the ones that fit together.

"Yes but thanks to Tylo we've been able to make a start." Brae replied and Tylo grinned, "There's a constellation called the Fire Trail that stretches across these two pictures as well as over one that must sit between them." and she pointed to the two holograms that showed the opposite ends of the constellation.

"Unfortunately that particular constellation can be seen over five hundred parsecs." Jayk added.

"Let me guess, you want me to see if I can find any other known constellations by interfacing with the temple records?" Cal said.

"If you could." Jayk responded.

"Of course I can. It would likely take a lot of time though. The thing about constellations is that they can be known by different names even on the same world in the same time period. Although if you don't mind an alternative suggestion there is another possibility." Cal replied.

"What's that?" Kat asked.

"Do any of you know how the name Fire Trail got applied to that constellation?" Cal responded.

"Because it looks like the tail of a meteor." Tylo answered and Cal's hologram smiled.

"Not quite." he said, "You see the star at the point of the formation isn't a star at all any more. It went supernova almost four thousand years ago. Naturally by the way, there was nothing untoward about it. That's when the Fire Trail name started off. As the supernova became visible further away the name spread. Assuming that Thal painted exactly what he saw then we should be able to determine how far from that star he was."

"Then we'll have a direction and a distance." Kat said, smiling.

"It'll be an approximate one." Tylo pointed out, "As much as two or three parsecs."

"Yes but that would cut the number of systems to worry about to a handful." Jayk added, "Cal, see what you can find. Work on the assumption that Thal painted that picture within ten years of his disappearance."

"Okay I'm checking now. According to the temple records the supernova was close to the Kayoun system, about twenty parsecs distant. The only settlements in that system are orbital structures so the inhabitants made sure to keep a close eye on the emissions coming from a supernova right on their doorstep. According to their measurements what Thal painted represented the supernova that took place about two hundred and sixty years after it took place."

"So that puts the planet about four thousand two and sixty parsecs from the supernova." Kat said.

"Give or take three or four parsecs." Tylo added.

"Which cuts the number of systems in which the Fire Trail constellation is visible to six." Cal said.

"What are they?" Brae asked.

"Maphason. Tek'Tal. Nocos. Andromora-" Cal began.

"Did you just say Andromora?" Jayk interrupted.

"Yes. Why? What's wrong?" Cal answered.

"During the last great war against the Sith the planet was part of the Sith Empire." Jayk said.

"So were about half the systems currently in the Republic if I recall correctly." Tylo commented.

"Yes but unlike Andromora the Sith didn't decide to scour them all clean of every last life form." Jayk replied, "Whether it was an accident or some kind of weapons test, by the time the Republic arrived to clear out anything that had been left behind there wasn't as much as a microbe left there. The entire ecosystem had to be rebuilt from scratch."

"The Jedi Order must have cleaned it out though." Kat said while Cal paused, looking up the Andromora system in the temple records.

"There have been more than seventy prosecutions for people possessing Sith artefacts that can be linked to Andromora since the end of the war." he said, "There are still gangs of scavengers active looking for anything we may have missed."

"That's it." Jayk said, "Whatever Thal found is there."

Jayk, Brae, Tylo and Kat stood in the chamber of the Jedi high council while Jayk explained what had led them to determine that Thal had considered Andromora significant enough to want to make a record of his presence there, even if it was a record that required someone to gather together dozens of paintings and combine them in precisely the right manner.

"Worrying this is." Master Yoda said when Jayk was finished with his explanation.

"Agreed." Grand Master Ressa added. Unlike the diminutive Master Yoda, the grand master of the Jedi Order was a physically imposing man, "If all life on Andromora was destroyed by a Sith weapon then we know that it wasn't found by the Jedi who searched the planet after the war."

"Maybe Thal N'Krey knew better where to look." Tylo commented and some of the Jedi masters present frowned, annoyed that a non-Jedi would address the council in such a dismissive manner.

"The Drud family have Thal's ship. They may know by now where to go as well." Brae pointed out.

"Then there is no time to lose." Grand Master Ressa said and he looked directly at Jayk, "Jedi Udra you will go to the Andromora system and investigate the planet. If Thal N'Krey is there then take him into custody. If not then find out why he was so interested in the planet that he created this map. Good luck and may the Force be with you."

# THAL

*Just like the lounge of his apartment, Thal had converted the lounge area of his ship into a workspace where he could paint or sculpt while the ship travelled through hyperspace under autopilot and he was sat at a workbench with a set of gauntlets patterned after a set he had seen in an image of a Sith lord from the time of their first empire laid out in front of him when an alarm sounded to tell him that the ship had reached its destination. Ignoring the sound to begin with Thal picked up the gauntlets one at a time and slid them onto his hands, flexing his fingers to make sure that he had made them the correct size to be able to retain as much manual dexterity as possible. Then he picked up a nearby stylus and datapad before drawing a few simple shapes on the screen to further test the control he had. Only once he was satisfied that the gauntlets he had just crafted would not impede his ability to work with his hands did he get up and make his way to the cockpit of his ship.*

*By the time he reached the cockpit and sat down in the pilot's seat the ship had already dropped out of hyperspace and was flying towards the planet now known as Andromora in the system of the same name, the voice of a traffic controller coming from the communication system demanding that Thal identify his ship. "This is the Sculptor's Blade," Thal said, "requesting permission to land."*

*"What is the purpose of your visit Sculptor's Blade?" the controller responded.*

*"Academic research." Thal answered.*

*"Understood Sculptor's Blade. You are clear to follow beacon one-one-three-eight. Landing fees are thirty credits per day. Be advised that the export of artefacts is restricted and any prohibited items may be taken without compensation." the controller said.*

*"Affirmative control, I have the beacon on my scope." Thal said.*

*"Welcome to Andromora Sculptor's Blade. Control out." the controller added before the channel went silent. The beacon that Thal had been told to follow led him to one of the few cities on Andromora. Compared to many cities that he had seen on other worlds this one seemed small from a distance but its buildings were all tall and densely packed, suggesting that the city still had a large population. As he descended he saw a platform rise up out of a large cylindrical structure on a repulsorlift field, a set of slowly flashing lights around the edge suggesting that this was where he was supposed to land his ship. Lowering the ship's landing gear Thal set down in the centre of the platform and shut down his engines. Only once the platform detected that the repulsorlift field from Thal's ship was no longer active did it begin to descend again, heading back down into the structure it had emerged from and Thal was able to see that the inside of this housed a number of such platforms, some of which also had starships on them while others stood empty. These other platforms were all fixed to the inside of the structure using large clamps and Thal was not surprised to see the platform on which he had landed move towards the only unused set of these he could see before locking into place. "Landing process complete. You may leave your vessel." an automated voice said over the communication system and Thal got out of his seat and headed for the ship's access ramp.*

*As he walked down the ramp the door to a turbolift located on the interior wall of the docking structure opened and a humanoid droid appeared, walking across the platform towards him. The droid had a sturdy construction but was not obviously armed, indicating that although it was designed to resist an attack it was not meant for combat.*

*"Greetings and welcome to Andromora traveller. How will you be paying your docking fees?" the droid asked as it came to a halt in front of Thal and the reason for its construction became immediately apparent. If the droid was capable of storing physical currency then it would be an obvious target for thieves.*

*"Credit transfer." Thal told the droid and he held out a credit stick. In response the droid extended a hand that it clenched into a fist so that Thal could see the socket mounted on the back of the hand.*

*"How long will your stay be?" the droid asked.*

*"At least ten days. You may take it all now." Thal answered.*

*"Confirmed. Three hundred credits has been charged against your credit fund. If you wish to extend your stay then additional days can be purchased ahead of time from any of the payment droids in this facility. Please be aware that overstaying will be charged at a higher rate of sixty credits per day." the droid explained before pulling back its hand.*

*"I require information about this city." Thal said.*

*"There are information points located on the first floor of this facility." the droid said before it turned around and began to walk back towards the turbolift.*

*"Hold that car." Thal said as he turned to seal his ship, not trusting the security of the docking bay to keep out thieves or ship jackers. Then he followed the droid to the turbolift, travelling down to the first floor of the structure with the machine.*

When he exited the turbolift Thal saw that the first floor of the docking bay structure looked like many starport facilities across the galaxy, providing travellers with places to wait for ships, meet with other beings, get a meal or even just buy a souvenir. As he had told the droid though Thal was interested in information about the planet. From his research he knew that it had been controlled by the Sith almost up to the end of the final war between their empire and the Republic more than seven hundred years earlier and that it had been wiped clean of all life by them, needing to be entirely reseeded before it could be resettled. Since then thousands of beings had hunted for anything that the Sith may have left behind, knowing the value of such items to the right people and the authorities did their best to control this trade. None of the information Thal had been able to uncover before coming here indicated that anyone had found any signs of significant Sith facilities that had not already been purged by the Jedi Order though and he could not help but believe that what he wanted was still here somewhere, waiting to be found.

Spotting an information desk close by Thal made his way directly towards it and the woman behind it smiled at him as he approached.

"Welcome to our planet. How may I help you?" she said.

"I wish to study the ruins. Where can I find a guide?" Thal replied.

"There are organised tours departing from several points in the city. Do you have a datapad?" the woman said and she tapped a nearby screen to bring up information about tours of the Sith ruins that littered the planet. Thal knew that the tours were an attempt by the local authorities to attempt to lure tourists to their planet but this had been far from successful. There were no regular visits by passenger liners to bring tourists to Andromora and only a handful of private vessels such as his own came here each month.

"No, that's not what I mean." Thal said, shaking his head, "I want to see unspoiled ruins, not the ones that the Jedi have sanitised."

At this the woman's previously friendly expression became harder as she frowned.

"I'm sorry sir but no-one is allowed to visit any Sith site that has not been cleared as safe. I should warn you that it is also illegal to remove any item from-" she said but Thal did not let her finish, instead turning around and walking away from her without saying anything more.

The rejection by the tourist information agent was not overly surprising to Thal. He knew that the restrictions placed on Sith artefacts by the Republic meant that the planetary government could not be seen to endorse any of the treasure hunting that went on on Andromora but he had hoped that the agent would be willing to put him in touch with someone that could help him with what he wanted in exchange for a fee.

"Hey buddy." a voice said to Thal from close by as soon as he was out of earshot and he turned to see a uniformed man walking towards him. Fortunately the uniform was not one of local law enforcement and the man carried no visible weaponry, instead his uniform identified him as one of the starport's maintenance engineers.

"Yes?" Thal said, wondering whether the man was about to tell him that his ship would have to be inspected for some reason and that this inspection would have to be paid for. However, the man turned out to have an alternative business offer for him.

"I heard what you said to the woman at the information stand. One piece of advice while you're on Andromora, never ask anyone from the government for anything. All they're interested in is keeping the Jedi from turning up and taking over. I can help you though." the man said.

"Don't you work for the government too?" Thal said, looking at the man's uniform and he smiled.

"My employer is an independent contractor." he replied.

"So how can you help me?" Thal asked.

"Let's just say that I have a speeder and I've spent most of my life exploring the areas outside this city. I know where every site for five hundred kilometres in any direction is."

"I take it that you're willing to show these to me. For a price of course." Thal said, "How much?"

"Ah now that's the delicate part. Obviously I need to make up for the money I'll lose from not being able to work this job and there are safety issues to consider. You see once you leave the cities on this planet you can kiss goodbye to have the police to back you up. Out there you're on your own and the locals aren't exactly friendly. A lot of people come here to search the ruins for something worth selling but the Jedi picked most of them clean before they let colonists come back here after the war. A lot of people that fail to find anything are stuck here without any money. They can't get off planet and they can't buy a place to stay in the city so they stay out there and do whatever they have to to survive." the man explained to Thal.

"You mean they rob and murder?" Thal said.

"Yes I do. So considering the risk I'll have to charge you two hundred per day. Plus if you do find anything worth selling we split it fifty-fifty. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Thal said without hesitation and for a moment he noticed the man frown, obviously thinking that if Thal had agreed to two hundred credits per day without a second thought then perhaps he should have asked for more. However, it was too late to renegotiate and Thal held out his hand, "Two hundred credits per day for transport and guidance." he added.

*"And protection." the man said as he shook Thal's hand to complete the deal, "I prefer to avoid trouble entirely but if it comes down to it I can take care of us. The name's Marik by the way."*

*"It's good to meet you Marik." Thal said as the two men let go of one another's hands, "But I should tell you not to underestimate me from my appearance, I am quite capable of protecting myself if needed." and he smiled at Marik.*



### 3

The warship that came out of hyperspace in the Andromora system was centuries out of date but still considered a powerful vessel. Formerly a pirate raider the ship had been adopted by Teron Sharr as his flagship. Knowing that the approach of such a powerful ship would probably cause the authorities on the primary world to alert the Republic, Teron ordered his flight crew to exit hyperspace on the far side of the system's star so that its energy emissions would conceal the warship's arrival.

"Hyperspace exit complete. All systems functional." the helmsman reported.

"Has anyone seen us?" Krovak asked while he stood beside Teron's command chair.

"I don't think so. There aren't any other ships on our sensors and we aren't picking up any active probes." the ship's comscan operator responded.

"Are there any signs of Morton Crayne or his employer?" Teron asked.

"It's impossible to tell from here. We can't scan the planet or the space around it while we're behind the star." the comscan operator answered.

"Very well, Krovak go to the docking bay and make sure that our transport is ready. The cruiser will wait here while we go to the surface of Andromora. I will inform my master that we have arrived." Teron said as he got to his feet and the two men exited the bridge, Krovak heading for the main hangar while Teron made his way to the compartment that had been set up to act as a combination of living quarters and private training area for him. This was complete with a holographic communication pad and he knelt in front of this, "Master." he said.

"Speak." the hooded figure said when it appeared on the communication pad.

"Master we have arrived in the Andromora system. So far we remain undetected. Krovak is making sure that the shuttle to take us to the planet's surface is ready. The ship will remain hidden behind the star" Teron said.

"Excellent. Deploy a shuttle to act as a communications relay and maintain a link to this ship so we may remain in contact. You will need me to make full use of the weapon but I cannot be risked until it is secured. I will join you after that is achieved." Teron's master told him.

"What are your orders concerning the locals master?" Teron asked.

"Any that oppose you should be killed. They cannot be allowed to prevent us from gaining control of the weapon." his master told him.

"It will be done my master." Teron said before the image of his master disappeared.

With his orders from his master fresh in his mind Teron made his way to the warship's docking bay. This was designed to hold both shuttles and starfighters but right now it held only several shuttles, some of which were armed though. Upon entering the docking bay Teron saw Krovak, Mara and Turlan standing at the base of the access ramp for the largest shuttle while a group of members of his gang were proceeding aboard. These gang members had been recruited from a variety of sources and a number of them had been members of rival groups prior to them being absorbed into Teron's growing underworld empire. There were still occasional fights between former rivals but everyone knew not to do anything that might compromise the effectiveness of Teron's organisation. The young man had made some very public examples of what would happen to those who did.

"Dock master!" Teron called out and the senior member of the docking bay crew came rushing across the large compartment towards him.

"Yes my lord?" she asked as she reached him.

"Is that shuttle ready for launch?" Teron asked, pointing to another nearby shuttle.

"Yes my lord. Fuelled and ready, but I thought you were taking that transport to the surface." the dock master answered and she looked towards the larger craft that Teron's landing party were currently boarding.

"I am. I need this ship launched to establish a communications relay between us and this warship while it remains behind the local star." Teron told her, "It needs to be provisioned to be able to stay on station until we return and must run silent."

"Of course my lord. It can launch at the same time as your transport." the dock master told him.

"Good. See that it does." Teron replied before he stepped around the woman and strode across the docking bay to the transport that would take him and his party to the surface.

"These are the last of the boarding party." Krovak said as Teron approached.

"Yes, I was watching." Teron responded and he glanced at the possessed Mara while her totally black eyes, a clear indication of the presence of the Sith spawned creature inside her, watched the loading process.

"Of course." Krovak commented, finding the idea that Teron could see everything that Mara saw in real time even across half a galaxy unnerving.

"Is your armour aboard?" Teron asked and Krovak nodded. When Teron had been captured by Morton Crayne, Krovak had approached his master for help and although the hooded figure had not been able to

intervene personally to release Teron he had been able to lead Krovak to a set of armour that had been created by an ancient Sith lord for use by one of his personal guard. The armour was designed to partially meld itself to its wearer and channel the power of the Dark Side into them, filling them with rage. This not only made the wearer faster and stronger but also allowed them to ignore a great deal of pain.

"Of course. I made sure it was loaded first." Krovak replied, "Do you want me to be wearing it when we land?"

"No. I don't want you losing control but if we face serious opposition then you need to be ready to put it on. Make sure it's close by." Teron said and Krovak nodded again.

"I'll keep it close." he said before he looked towards the shuttle Teron had ordered launched, "Are we taking additional air support? We could have brought a couple of fighters instead of that unarmed tub." he added.

"No. That ship is to be our relay. As soon as the weapon is secured we will summon my master and he will complete the process of bringing it online." Teron said and Krovak frowned.

"Can't you do that?" he said.

"Initialising and controlling the weapon is beyond Teron's power." Turlan commented before the shuttle's engines powered up as the pilot prepared for take off.

"I guess that's our signal to go." Krovak commented before he, Teron, Mara and Turlan all headed up the access ramp and with a wave of his hand Teron used the Force to activate the control to shut the ramp before they even reached the top.

The shuttle's cockpit had room for three human-sized occupants other than the pilot and so Mara waited in the passenger compartment while Teron, Krovak and Turlan sat in the cockpit. The pilot flew the craft from the warship's docking bay and turned it towards the horizon of the nearby star. Before moving around this and potentially being seen by the tracking equipment on the planet Andromora the pilot engaged the transport's hyperdrive. The jump was not large and the shuttle's occupants barely had time to register their entry into hyperspace before the shuttle returned to realspace less than a light minute from the planet. To any observers it would appear that the transport had just arrived in the system instead of from a mother ship sheltering out of sight.

"Don't land at any of the settlements." Teron told the pilot, "Head towards the capital on atmospheric entry but divert and avoid all local tracking until we reach the landing zone."

"Sensors are picking up increased radio emissions from that area my lord." the pilot said.

"The locals must have upgraded their tracking system." Turlan commented.

"Do they have the range to see us land in the target area?" Krovak asked.

"Possibly." the pilot responded.

"Then land further away." Teron said.

"We don't have any surface transport." Krovak pointed out.

"Then we walk." Teron replied.

"Lord Teron the local tracking system looks to have a significant range. A hundred kilometres or more." the pilot said.

"That's way too far to walk." Krovak said.

"Then we'll have to procure transport after we land." Teron said, "Secrecy is key to our success."

Rylee's luxury yacht came out of hyperspace just over an hour after Teron's transport ship entered the atmosphere of Andromora. The Assembler had been as good as his word and provided Rylee with the exact settlement that Thal had repeatedly landed his ship at although the official records indicated that he had not favoured any particular docking bay so any was good enough.

"When we land I want you to make contact with the locals. Try to find out what Thal was doing here." Rylee told Morton and he nodded.

"Sure. Will you be coming as well?" he responded.

"Miss Drud will remain aboard this ship." Mott said before Rylee could answer, "This place is a wretched hive of scum and villainy, inhabited by the dregs of society."

"You should fit right in Morton." Rylee added with a smile.

"So I just walk into the nearest cantina alone and hope no-one chooses to murder me do I?" Morton said.

"Don't worry Mister Crayne, I'll be there to look after you along with two of my men." Mott reassured him and Morton frowned.

"I don't need this mercenary there to hold my hand." he said.

"I thought you didn't want to go alone." Rylee commented.

"I certainly wouldn't want to hold your hand anyway." Mott added.

The yacht's pilot brought the ship in to land, requiring one of the settlement's larger docking bays to fit the luxurious craft and as soon as the access ramp was deployed both Morton and Mott strode down it with two of Mott's mercenaries behind them. Although Mott and his men had brought along heavy body armour capable of protecting them from even modern energy weapons for now they had opted for more covert vests that could be worn beneath their clothing so that they would not stand out. All four men were visibly armed

though since the information that was available about this settlement indicated that this was not unusual, with pistols holstered on their belts. Like their heavier armour, the mercenaries' larger and more powerful weaponry was to be left aboard the yacht for the time being.

"So what do you want me to do?" Morton asked as he and Mott stepped from the ramp.

"Right now this is your show Mister Crayne." Mott answered, "My men and I will follow you from a distance. If you need our help then just call for it.

Mott and his men waited while Morton left the docking bay to give him a head start while he crossed the street and went into one of the numerous cantinas in the starport district. He hesitated before going inside and looked back over his shoulder to make sure that the three mercenaries were following him. Only when he saw then start to cross the street towards him as well did he proceed through the doorway.

Inside the cantina was filled with beings of various species. Many of them wore the overalls common for the crews of starships that gave them pockets in which to store tools but there were also a number of locals, most of whom wore starport uniforms and Morton approached the bar where a group of such beings stood.

"Please state your choice of beverage." the bartending droid that rolled towards where Morton stood said.

"Can you recommend anything?" Morton asked, looking at the group of dock workers.

"Just stick with the beer." one of them replied and Morton nodded as he looked at the droid.

"I'll have a beer." he said to the machine, holding out a credit stick.

The droid dispensed Morton's drink from an internal store as payment was made and he took a sip. The taste was far from the best beer that he had ever drunk but it was still passable and as he continued to drink he produced a datapad and turned back towards the drinking dockworkers.

"Perhaps you can help me find someone." he said, "I used to know a man who came to this city a lot, he told me about it several times. I haven't seen him around in a while though and I thought you may have seen him." Morton then held out a datapad on which was shown an image of Thal N'Krey, "His ship is called the *Sculptor's Blade*."

The Jedi arrived in the Andromora system aboard Tylo's YT-700 class light freighter, the *Swift Exit* and all of the vessel's occupants were gathered in the cockpit when they exited hyperspace.

"Doesn't look too bad." Brae commented when she saw the green and blue planet through the viewport.

"According to the temple records every life form on the planet needed to be imported after the war." Cal commented, "Whatever the Sith did here wiped out everything down to the last microbe."

"Think that whatever did that is still down there?" Tylo asked.

"It's a chance we can't afford to take." Jayk said.

"So where do we start?" Kat said, "The planet looks sparsely populated but we're still looking at tens of millions of people in total."

"The capital." Jayk answered, "Tylo set a course for the capital beacon. We need to know where Thal went and with any luck they'll have his name in their travel records."

When the *Swift Exit* was lowered into the capital's starport tower it was met by a living being instead of a droid expecting payment and the man's eyes widened when he saw Jayk, Brae and Kat all come down the access ramp together. Tylo followed the three Jedi but his appearance indicated that he was not a Jedi.

*Fear.*

"Is something wrong?" Jayk asked when he sensed the man's apprehension.

"I'm sorry but when I was told that a Jedi vessel was on approach I didn't expect there to be three of you." the man replied.

"There is nothing to be afraid of. Our presence here is just part of a routine investigation." Jayk told him, not wanting to trigger a planet-wide panic by warning of a Sith weapon that had already destroyed all life on Andromora once and could potentially do so again.

"Of course. I've been asked to act as your liaison master Jedi. My name is Secas." the local official said.

"Thank you Secas, please lead the way." Jayk replied.

Secas escorted the Jedi and Tylo to the turbolift and from there up to the control and tracking centre where multiple organic and droid controllers tracked vessels in the airspace of the capital. Their job was also to monitor the approach of the occasional starships that visited the system.

"What information do you require?" Secas asked as he showed the Jedi into a private office and sat down behind the desk.

"We're looking for information on a being called Thal N'krey." Kat told him, "We believe that he has been a frequent visitor to this world."

"Ah, docking and immigration records then." Secas said, "Do you have a time frame in mind?"

"Begin eight years ago and work backwards from there." Jayk told him and Secas nodded.

"Of course. That shouldn't be too difficult." he said.

"An open ended search from about a decade ago is easy?" Tylo commented and Secas smiled.

"We're pretty far off the beaten path here." he said, "We may have had a bit of a rush on recently but

normally we only get one or two ships a month that visit. Excluding the regular shipping run that comes once every other month to handle bulk imports and exports or course."

"I saw plenty of ships down in the docking bay. What about them?" Brae said.

"They operate exclusively within the system." Secas explained, "There a number of mining outposts on the outer planets and they service them. They still use hyperdrive to cut the journey time to a few minutes but they don't make interstellar jumps very often."

"You say you've had a rush on recently. Why is that?" Jayk asked, suspicious.

"I couldn't tell you. You're the only ship to have landed here at the capital within the last month but we've had two others arrive in system within the past couple of days."

"Tell me about those ships." Jayk said and Secas looked at his computer terminal.

"Okay," he said after a few moments, "both were transports of some form. One was a medium freighter that headed out beyond the coverage of ground based radar before it landed while the other is a yacht. That one landed at the Hallarn Point starport." then he frowned.

"What's wrong?" Brae said when she noticed the change in his expression.

"The yacht landed at Hallarn Point." Secas said.

"You already told us that." Tylo commented.

"I'm sure that is significant." Jayk added.

"Hallarn Point was where the medium transport was heading towards when it was last seen on radar." Secas said.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Tylo said, looking at the jedi.

"That can't be a coincidence." Kat said.

"Is the yacht still at Hallarn Point?" Jayk asked.

"Yes. We've not had any departures from there in a week." Secas told him.

"What class is the yacht?" Tylo said.

"Spirit-class. A Soro-"

"A SoroSuub ship. Top of the line and very expensive." Tylo interrupted, "Do you get a lot of billionaires coming to your off the beaten track world?"

"No." Secas said, shaking his head, "We're not really a tourist hotspot. The ruins that attract attention do so only to scavengers that think your Jedi Order may have left something valuable behind."

"Did we?" Kat said.

"Every now and again someone digs something up, yes. Often enough that we run checks to make sure that nothing illegal is being smuggled off world." Secas said.

"And are there a lot of ruins near Hallarn Point?" Jayk said.

"They're scattered all over the planet but most are just piles of rubble. It took a century to get the planet fully liveable again after the war and no-one was interested in maintaining what the Sith had left behind so it was left to decay. It's only when the scavengers started to move in that anyone even bothered to start marking down where they were." Secas said.

"So there could be the remains of an entire Sith city near Hallarn Point." Tylo said.

"I don't think anything as big as a city would have escaped attention but there are bound to be some ruins out there, yes." Secas said.

"As well as the search for Thal N'Krey we're going to need to know who was aboard that yacht. What can you tell us?" Jayk said.

"From here, nothing right now. Everything gets sent to us eventually but our networks aren't linked. I can submit a request for the data to be sent ahead of schedule if you want." Secas said.

"No. Focus on the search for Thal N'Krey." Jayk told him, "We will travel to Hallarn Point ourselves to investigate this yacht. As soon as you have the results of the search you can forward it to us there."

The woman tossed a datapad onto the table in front of the man called Carrasson.

"I warned you." she said.

"Terresa what are you talking about?" the man replied as he picked up the datapad in his gauntleted hands.

"We've had word of two ships arriving on planet. The crews from both of them have been asking about Thal N'Krey." Terresa replied.

"Thal?" Carrasson said, looking up from the datapad that had the details of both vessels on it.

"I told you that getting involved with him would cause trouble, well now it has. Take a look at that information from our informant in the capital starport. Those are jedi Carrasson. Jedi that will be looking for us.

"As long as they stay in the capital we're fine. What about these others?"

"Right here in Hallarn Point." Terresa answered.

"Are they jedi as well?" Carrasson asked but the woman standing in front of him just shrugged.

"Don't know. It's a fancier ship that I'd expect the jedi to arrive in but then again that freighter the other lot arrived in doesn't look like Judicial Department issue. More like they're trying to avoid people knowing that

they're here. They were taken straight from the landing pad to the control section without going into any of the public areas." Terresa said.

"So we could be dealing with two teams of jedi." Carrasson replied, looking at the datapad again, "Okay we'll start with the ones already here. Find out how many of them there are. This guy who's been asking all the questions could be one in disguise. Check him out. No wait, kill him. Make it look random though. If it looks too much like a hit the jedi will know they're on the right track."

Terresa nodded.

"Okay, I'll get it done." she replied.

## 4

Morton sat on the bed in the room he had rented above one of the city's cantinas. So far he had been to more than a dozen of them to try and find information on Thal N'Krey but no-one had told him anything useful. In each of the cantinas he had been in Morton had bought a drink to make his presence appear natural and even though he considered himself able to handle his drink well he was feeling the effects of this now.

Fortunately Morton had foreseen this and he had brought along with him medication to counteract, or at least lessen the effects that the alcohol was having on him and he put a pair of tablets into his mouth before washing them down with a glass of water. He then winced at the taste he was left with, partly from the tablets but also the water itself that used chemicals to make it drinkable that were very noticeable to him compared to the more subtle ones used on most of the other planets in the galaxy that he had been to.

Rubbing the sides of his head as he waited for the tablets to kick in, Morton suddenly heard the sound of movement outside his room and moments later there was a flash from the access panel as it was overloaded and the door slid open. Three masked figures burst into the room through the open doorway and charged towards Morton. He reacted quickly to this and reached for the hold-out blaster he had concealed beneath his jacket, pointing it towards one of the intruders before pulling the trigger. The energy blast hit his assailant but the man was wearing a crude but effective armoured vest that absorbed enough of the attack that it did no more than slow him down.

The other two intruders were on Morton before he could fire again though and the first act of one of them was to grab his arm and twist it, forcing him to let go of his blaster. Although this hurt, Morton was still able to deliver a blow to the side of the man's head that made him release his arm and Morton used the opportunity to lunge at the third intruder and tackle him. Morton and his opponent landed in a heap on the floor of the room and Morton struck at the other man's throat, suspecting that he would also be wearing an armoured vest that would protect his torso. The blow was enough to stun the man who responded by clutching at his throat. However, before Morton could follow this up with another attack the other two men grabbed hold of him and dragged him off their comrade while he struggled to get his breath back.

As he got back to his feet, the man Morton had punched in the throat drew a knife and started to advance towards Morton. However, before he could take more than a single step there was a flash of blaster fire from across the street as the window exploded inwards before the powerful energy blast hit one of the men. This man was also wearing body armour but this shot came from a far more powerful weapon than Morton's hold-out blaster and it easily punched through the basic protective garment. This enabled Morton to break free from the other man who had been holding him before diving aside. This gave the mercenary across the street a clear shot at the second man and there was another flash and the sound of a blaster shot before he too was shot.

The final masked man turned and ran from the room, getting away from the window before the sniper could fire again. Rushing from the rented room into the hallway he turned towards the exit and ran in that direction. However, as he approached the neighbouring room the door to it slid open and Mott emerged to block his path.

"Get out of-" the man began, not realising that Mott was there to support Morton before he punched him in the face. This blow sent the man reeling, falling onto his back as two of Mott's men appeared behind him. Meanwhile Mott drew his blaster, a military style pistol and set the weapon to 'stun' before he pointed it at the man on the floor and pulled the trigger. There was a flash of blue as the blaster was discharged and the shot hit the prone man in the head. Had Mott's blaster not been set to stun the shot would have been instantly fatal but instead the energy pulse scrambled the man's nervous system and he lost consciousness right away.

"Get him inside." Mott told his men as he returned his weapon to its holster and he stepped aside to let them pick up the unconscious man. As they were dragged the man back into the room they had been waiting in Mott looked towards Morton's room where Morton himself had just stepped into the hallway, "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Sure." Morton replied, nodding, "Your man across the street has good aim, but couldn't you have moved a little sooner?"

"Perhaps you misunderstand my job here Mister Crayne." Mott said, "I'm here to assist Miss Drud in finding whatever it was that brought Thal N'Krey to this planet and keeping her safe. I'm under no obligation to protect you unless any harm that you suffered would risk either of those orders."

"So what's the plan?" Morton asked and Mott looked back over his shoulder at where his men were dragging the unconscious thug into the room they had been waiting in.

"We box him up and get him back to the ship. Whoever sent him and his friends to attack-" he began.

"They came to kill me Mott." Morton interrupted.

"Of course. Whoever sent them to kill you obviously has friends in the local authorities." Mott continued.

"You noticed the lack of sirens then?" Morton commented and Mott nodded.

"We fired a blaster rifle across a public street. Someone should have called local law enforcement." he said.

"If they're strong enough to have that sort of pull on the local cops then they ought to be able to put together a team bigger than just three sleemos with knives." Morton pointed out.

"There could be another unit waiting to ambush us on the way out." Mott said and Morton nodded. Mott then took out his comlink and activated the device, connecting him to the sniper across the street "I want a street survey. Does you see any potential hostiles?"

"I've got a few beings that could be loitering and trying to look natural but nothing obvious sir. Do you want me to-" the sniper began before there was the sound of an explosion that was heard both over the comlink and from outside the cantina building.

Terresa stood back while the first of the five other gang members she had brought with her rushed through the hole where the door had been blown open. Blaster fire was notoriously easy to track back to its point of origin and it had taken only seconds to determine where Morton's support was coming from. Terresa had immediately led her unit into the building, a mixed commercial structure with several floors of offices above a cluster of retail units and found their way to the sniper's position.

The explosive used to force an entry would have disorientated most beings but the sniper was well protected and his armoured helmet shielded him against the sudden burst of light and sound that filled the room. This meant that instead of facing a stunned and helpless individual the first gang member through the doorway found himself staring down the barrel of a blaster rifle that was fired straight at him. The blast hit the gang member head on right as he charged into the room and he fell back, dead with a smoking hole in his basic armour. This was followed by two more shots that came through what remained of the doorway in rapid succession. The rifle he was armed with was capable of firing sustained bursts but without knowing the exact strength of his opposition the sniper did not want to waste an excessive amount of ammunition on suppressive fire when a couple of individual shots would do the same job and be less likely to leave him struggling to reload while more of the gang rushed into the room.

"Get back!" one of the gang called out as he stepped away from the doorway. However, the sound of his voice gave away his position to the sniper who then fired three more shots into the wall, putting them in a row about where he expected the man to be. The internal wall was of lightweight construction and although some of the energy of each shot was absorbed, the shots still penetrated it and the second one struck the hiding gang member in his back.

From the other side of the doorway Terresa held her blaster pistol through it and fired several shots at random. This forced the sniper to cease fire and throw himself to the floor, giving the gang members outside the room the chance to withdraw as Terresa waved them back. Although she had been half expecting to face a professional Republic Judicial Agent she had not expected such a show of resistance and she would rather live to explain her failure to Carrasson than be gunned down here. As she and the other surviving gang members ran towards the exit she took out her comlink to call Carrasson.

"The operation failed." she transmitted, "He had a sniper to cover him who took out team one. We tried taking him out but he was ready for us. You better tell the cops to move in now. We need the cover to get out." Inside the room the sniper aimed at the doorway again as soon as Terresa stopped shooting and activated the comlink inside his helmet.

"Mister Mott, are you there?" he said.

"Right here. What's going on?" Mott's voice responded.

"Looks like there was a back up squad for those thugs who attacked Crayne sir. I think they were expecting their blasting charge to stun me and make it easy for them to get in." the sniper told him, "I've taken out at least two and the others are running."

"Copy that. We're on our way out as well. Meet us at the rendezvous point as soon as possible, the local cops won't stay away forever and I don't want to start an open war with them." Mott ordered.

"Yes sir. I'm on my way out now." the sniper responded as he made his way to the doorway and peered out into the hallway, keeping his rifle held ready just in case his attackers were still lying in wait outside after all. However, the only gang members he found in the hallway were the two he had killed and the sniper jumped over them as he headed out of the building.

Tylo flew the *Swift Exit* in a direct route from Andromora's capital to Hallarn Point. Not wanting to attract any more attention to their presence than necessary, Jayk had Tylo identify the ship as a private commercial vessel rather than one operating under the authority of the Jedi Order so unlike in the capital there was no local government representative present in the docking bay when the light freighter landed.



"So what's our first move?" Tylo asked as he walked into the *Swift Exit's* lounge from the cockpit and found the three jedi gathered there in their cloaks.

"I'll take Brae and Kat to search for the yacht. A ship like that shouldn't be too difficult to find and then we'll confirm the identity of whoever is aboard it." Jayk replied.

"Yeah," Tylo commented with a smile, "it sure would be embarrassing to break into a ship that actually was carrying a billionaire on vacation."

"I thought you were convinced that the ship belongs to Rylee Drud?" Brae commented.

"Oh I still do kid. I just think it'd be funny if the three of you burst in on someone who didn't have a clue what was going on." Tylo said. Then he looked at Jayk again and added, "So what should I be doing while you're gone?"

"Just make sure that we have a ship to come back to. We'll be leaving Cal with you, he can try accessing the local computer networks and see if there is anything in there that would give us some help." Jayk told him and at that point Cal's hologram materialised, projected from the holocron that rested on a shelf.

"Anything in particular you're looking for?" he asked.

"We didn't see the yacht on approach so if you could locate which docking bay it's in that would speed things up." Kat said and Jayk nodded.

"Yes, along with any registry data you can find. I doubt that Rylee Drud would be operating under her real name but the more information we have the better." he said.

"There could still be information about Thal N'Krey in local databases dad." Brae pointed out.

"What like fluff pieces in news feeds about a visiting artist? I didn't think he was that famous." Tylo said.

"It could be worth a look anyway." Jayk said, "Oh and look for any mention of discoveries of Sith artefacts and law enforcement investigations into the smuggling of them."

"I'll get right on it." Cal said and Tylo grinned.

"And I promise not to take off and leave you stranded." he said as he removed a bottle of beer from the fridge and then sat down on the nearby couch.

Jayk then looked at Brae and Kat.

"We should try to blend in. Make sure your lightsabers remain hidden and I think we should try to hide our faces as well. The locals may not know us but if Rylee Drud is here then she may have people watching out for us." he said before the three jedi made their way out of the lounge and into the hold where the ship's access ramp was to be found.

As Tylo took a sip of his beer he noticed that Cal's hologram was watching the three living jedi leave.

"Something bothering you?" he asked.

"Oh just thinking about how much those three remind me of my days as a jedi. I worked closely with members of my family. Of course Kat isn't related to Jayk or Brae but-" Cal began.

"But her and Jayk are about as close as they're allowed to be by the rules of the Jedi Order." Tylo interrupted and Cal's hologram nodded.

"Yes. Of course if those rules had been followed back in my day I wouldn't even have been born. Both my parents were jedi." he said.

"And if you hadn't existed neither would Jayk or Brae." Tylo added, taking another sip of his beer, "Ever think that the Jedi Order is run by small minded fools?"

"Things weren't perfect in my day. Remember Hargood Nollar fell because of his rage at losing his family and he wasn't the only one that something like that happened to. I'm sure that when the code was made mandatory the jedi council meant to prevent that from happening again but-" Cal said before suddenly trailing off.

"But what?" Tylo asked.

"But I think by not giving the jedi an interest in the future of the Republic they are being kept too far apart from it. One day that could destroy them." Cal answered.

"Destroy the jedi? There are thousands of them. You'd need an army, a real army not one of the small planetary or corporate militia units that exist now and no-one in their right mind would suggest the Republic should make itself an army. It'd be seen as an occupying force on any planet they were deployed to." Tylo said.

"Perhaps." Cal said, "But that doesn't change the fact that the Jedi Order of today is not the Jedi Order I was a part of. The jedi of my day may have had their flaws but at least they could connect with the population they served. I've spent most of the years since the Ruusan Reformation on a shelf in the temple archives and the past two have been more interesting than all of the rest put together. They remind me of the days before that when I could travel the galaxy with my descendants and actually make a difference. Now I can go decades without anyone asking for my advice at all and I suspect that will be the case when Jayk and Brae finish their assignment."

"Then I'll be gone too." Tylo commented, "The terms of my plea deal were to ferry those two about until they caught up with Thal N'Krey or at least found out what happened to him."

"Will you go back to your old life?" Cal asked and Tylo hesitated.

"I don't know. I mean I had considered settling down with Zara before she left so I suppose I could go where I wanted again but frankly Jayk's sense of right and wrong seems to have rubbed off on me. Maybe I'll travel the galaxy and earn an honest living," he said. Then he paused for a moment and added, "At least the Jedi Order paid for all the improvements to my ship."

The area in which Teron's pilot landed the transport ship had little cover available in the form of vegetation so he picked a dip in the ground in which to land. The first tasks to be carried out when the ship landed were to make sure that the immediate area was secure and that the ship was hidden. Under Krovak's command a unit of the gang members brought along in the transport was despatched to carry out the first of these tasks, searching the nearby woods for anyone who may have already seen them landing. Krovak's orders were clear, if he did find anyone then they were to be killed. The rest of the gang members worked to conceal the transport from observation. The landing site had been chosen in part so that it would be necessary to get very close in order to see it from the ground so their efforts were focused on concealment from the air and for this purpose they had brought along camouflage netting and spray paint so that the colour of the netting could be tailored to match the surrounding terrain.

Teron allowed his gang to get on with their work while he and Turlan made their way to high ground to get their bearings.

"What route do you recommend?" Teron asked as they both looked around from the top of a hill.

"I'm not entirely sure," Turlan replied, "I've not been here before in person. All I have is the information that was shared with me by Thal. I take it your master didn't expand any further on how the site is to be approached? He is more familiar with it than either of us after all."

"No, that was left to me. All my master had to say was that he expects the facility to be secured before he will come here," Teron said.

"In that case I suspect that Krovak is the man to ask. This planet was scoured of life by the Sith so none of their creations would have survived and any other defences would have been triggered by now. If not by the Jedi then by the scavengers who plague this world," Turlan said and Teron took out a set of macrobinoculars that he then used to examine the terrain in the direction of their destination more closely.

"We are too far to get there on foot in a reasonable time," he said, "We will need to procure transport. There is a cluster of buildings about six thousand metres from here. I will take a raiding party to seize whatever they have."

"And what do you wish of me while you mount this attack?" Turlan said.

"For the time being nothing. Unless Krovak and his troops have come across anything of value in their search of the area. If they do then I'll want your report on it," Teron told him and the gen'dai bowed his head.

"Of course my lord," he said before Teron started to make his way back down the hill.

As he reached the base of the hill he found that Krovak had already returned from searching the local area. The lack of natural hiding places had made this a straight forward operation but he had left several gang members to prepare observation posts that would alert the transport if anyone approached.

"The area is clear," Krovak said after removing the helmet from his ornately constructed armour, "I have deployed lookouts."

"Good. Now I need a raiding party," Teron said and the two men began to walk along together towards the transport ship.

"Of course. What's the target?" Krovak asked.

"There's a settlement of sorts not far from here. Given how remote it is from the more established settlements they must have transport. I intend to seize it," Teron said.

"And the occupants of the settlement?" Krovak added.

"As with anyone else we encounter, they are to be killed. I do not want anyone spreading word of our location," Teron said and Krovak nodded.

"Any idea of the strength of the settlement?" he said.

"I counted several structures but no obvious defences. We'll need to cut off any escape routes and secure any vehicles present. Then we'll deal with the inhabitants," Teron said, "We'll need troops and a couple of techs to deal with any issues relating to the transports."

"Okay, when do you want to leave?"

"Now. Gather a force while I get Mara," Teron said.

With a small raiding force of a dozen, including himself, Krovak and Mara, Teron led the way towards the small settlement he had seen from the hilltop. Although the terrain was uneven it still took the party less than two hours to cross it before the structures came into view.

"Take cover," Teron ordered and the raiding party spread out, taking advantage of the unevenness of the ground to conceal themselves while Teron studied the settlement again through his macrobinoculars.

The settlement buildings were arranged in a rough circle, with eight of them in total. Six of these were large, rectangular buildings with varying numbers of windows on what appeared to be three levels. On the other

hand the remaining two were quite different from one another. One was a tall cylinder that appeared to be a storage tank, though what exactly it was used to store could not be determined from Teron's position. The other was more obvious though, a generator hut designed to house a fusion generator that would easily be capable of supplying all of the settlement's energy needs as long as it had fuel.

What Teron could not see, however were any vehicles and he assumed that these must be inside one of the larger structures. This assumption was supported by the large doors he could see on the side of one of these structures facing him. Here and there he did spot signs of movement though as some of the inhabitants made their way between buildings. Teron noticed that these beings had various items of technological equipment, offering further evidence that they would have transports of some kind Teron and his gang could make use of.

"Mara, that's your target," he said, pointing towards the building with the large doors, "Take half the men, including our techs and check to see if there are any vehicles in there and secure them if there are."

"And if there aren't?" Mara replied.

"Start searching for any other possible vehicle hangars. We need transport." Teron told her.

"What about me?" Krovak asked.

Wearing his Sith armour, Teron knew that Krovak could easily lose control of his actions unless directed personally by Teron so he did not want to risk having him secure any of the settlement's vehicles just in case he damaged any of them beyond the ability of the trio of technicians they had brought along with them to repair rapidly. Instead he would be better put to use in dealing with the inhabitants.

"Seek out the beings who live here and kill them all. Take the rest of the men and wipe them out." Teron replied and a smile spread across Krovak's face, not even caring whether this included killing any helpless civilians such as children, "I'll take that building there," and he pointed to a structure that had a large antenna array fixed to an outside wall. This was obviously some kind of communications antenna and Teron did not want the inhabitants sending a call for help, "Move in as soon as you get my signal." Teron added before he got to his feet and began to sprint towards the settlement still several hundred metres away, making use of what cover was available to try and avoid being spotted by anyone who happened to look out of a window. Teron quickly located a doorway into the building with the antenna mounted on it and he ignited his lightsaber, the scarlet blade extending with a 'snap-hiss' even as he swung it at the door's locking mechanism.

The weapon easily destroyed the lock holding the door closed and it abruptly slid upwards, enabling Teron to enter the building. Inside he was confronted by one of the settlement's inhabitants almost immediately and the woman gasped when she saw him.

"Who the hell are-" she began before Teron cut her down with a single stroke of his lightsaber. The woman was able to let out a scream as she died and Teron knew that this would bring additional attention and he ran towards a nearby alcove where he shut down his lightsaber again while he concealed himself in it.

It did not take long for someone else to arrive to investigate the scream and Teron struck quickly, emerging from behind the man and activating his lightsaber again before holding it to the man's throat.

"Where is the communications room? Tell me now!" he hissed.

*Fear.*

"Top floor. Room Aurek Four." the terrified man replied and Teron smiled.

"Thank you." he said when he sensed no deception in the answer before decapitating the man.

Spotting a ladder shaft nearby Teron ran to it and found that it did appear to lead all the way up to the top floor. He scaled this as quickly as he could while behind him he heard another scream as someone discovered the bodies he had left in the hallway. Knowing that time was not on his side, Teron hurried the rest of the way up the ladder and climbed out into the top floor hallway. Here he saw a sign that indicated the directions to different rooms, each indicated by a combination of a single letter and a single number. Knowing that the communications room was marked with the letter 'Aurek' Teron ran in the direction indicated by the arrow also marked with that letter on the sign.

Each door he passed was marked with a letter and a number so it was easy to identify the room that he had been told held the settlement's communications equipment. As he ran to the correctly marked door he waved his hand towards the control panel, using the Force to operate the opening switch and this meant that the door slid open ahead of him far enough that he did not even have to slow down as he charged into the room on the other side.

The settlement had no need of an extensive communications suite and all that was inside the room in terms of communication equipment was a bulky desktop comlink set that was capable of communicating with any other settlement with a similar device on the planet or even with starships in nearby space. There were two of the locals inside the room to monitor their communication system when Teron suddenly burst in and he cut down the closest with his lightsaber in an instant. Then he extended his arm towards the second communications officer and used the Force to grasp her by the throat.

"Have you send a distress call?" he asked as the woman began to choke, clawing at her throat in a desperate attempt to breathe, "I said have you send a distress call?" Teron said more sternly.

Unable to speak while she was being choked, the woman instead shook her head rapidly. Maintaining his grip on the woman through the Force, Teron shut down his lightsaber and returned it to his belt before he thrust his hand towards the communications set and unleashed a blast of lightning from his fingertips. This struck the communication set and the device exploded in a shower of sparks. Then moments later the choking woman collapsed and Teron released his grip on her as he sensed the life leave her body. He then took his comlink from his belt and lifted it to his mouth.

"Their communications are down. You can move in now." he said into the device and then shut it off before waiting for a response.

Drawing and igniting his lightsaber again, Teron ran from the communication room in search of any other of the settlement's inhabitants he could find. From outside he heard the sound of blaster fire as his troops began their assault and this was joined by panicked screams coming from inside the building as the occupants realised that they were under attack. Teron sensed several beings somewhere in front of him and he charged towards them. This required him to pass through a doorway and again he used the Force to open it with a wave of his hand instead of needing to slow down. As soon as the door slid open Teron saw a small cluster of beings of various species standing beside a set of storage lockers, some of which had been opened. From his angle of observation Teron could not see what was in these lockers but he was able to watch as various small arms were taken from them and passed around the group, along with ammunition. Obviously Teron had stumbled on an armoury, possibly the only one in the settlement and by destroying this he would make his gang's assault far easier than if the inhabitants were able to organise their resistance. "There!" one of the locals called out when he noticed the glow from Teron's lightsaber and he turned to fire at him as he charged towards the group.

Teron defended himself by parrying the rapidly fired blaster shots with his lightsaber, deflecting them into the walls and ceiling of the hallway but this became more difficult when a second member of the group was able to load their weapon as well and joined in firing at him. Switching from a two-handed grip on his lightsaber to a single handed one, Teron thrust his arm out ahead of him and unleash an unfocused telekinetic blast through the Force. This spread out to fill the hallway as it headed towards the locals before slamming into them and knocking them all from their feet.

Some of the locals dropped their weapons as they fell and these clattered to the floor, at which point Teron unleashed a second telekinetic blast. This was less powerful than the first but it did not need to have the same strength, instead of being intended to strike at the locals themselves Teron was now only interested in their weapons and any that were not secured were promptly sent flying away from them before they could recover them. Teron expected that there were still more weapons in the lockers yet but for the time being he had disarmed most of his opponents and he sought to make the most of this as he picked up his pace towards them.

He reached the first of the locals in the hallway just a few seconds later, this being one of the men who had shot at him moments earlier and with a single swing of his lightsaber Teron not only killed the man but also sliced his blaster in half, rendering it useless to anyone else who might attempt to recover it. Teron continued to hack his way through the panicked group of locals. Even those who had been able to keep hold of their weapons were unable to make use of them, by the time they could aim them Teron struck with his lightsaber and either destroyed the weapon before striking at the wielder or just went straight for them, impaling and slicing with his blade.

In less than a minute Teron had made his way through the entire group and they all now lay dead at his feet and he turned to the lockers. The weapons these still contained a motley assortment of small arms that were mainly obsolete or civilian models. There had been a time when Teron would have viewed these as a useful addition to his own gang's armoury but since he had expanded his force by taking over other underworld groups the quality and quantity of weapons they had available were superior to what Teron was looking at now. This meant that the weapons in the lockers were of far more use to the settlement's inhabitants than to Teron and he held out his lightsaber towards the lockers as he walked along the row of them, slicing through the weapons they held so that they could not be used against his followers.

## 5

Before she became the host to a Sith organism Mara had been an expert thief, able to override or bypass many security systems and this skill had been preserved following her possession. The door was large enough to provide vehicle access that Mara had been instructed to investigate had only a basic security system and she was easily able to short out the mechanism. However, when the door slid open it was immediately obvious that the large room on the other side was not used for the storage of vehicles. Instead there was a small clear area just inside the doorway while the rest of the room was filled with various containers. Some of these were marked as containing foodstuffs or spare parts but there were also several crates and drums that either had no markings or what they had once had had been defaced to make them unreadable.

Supplies were not Mara's concern though, her orders were to secure transport for the gang and so after a quick search to ensure that there was no-one inside the room she beckoned for her unit to follow her back outside so they could investigate one of the other larger structures.

With the settlement arranged in a ring Mara had her unit move in a circle around the outer perimeter. At the same time Krovak was leading his unit right into the centre of the settlement, firing their weapons at any of the inhabitants that they saw. This helped keep the locals' attention away from Mara and her unit as they continued to circle around until one of her men pointed out another large doorway. This time though it was wide open and as Mara's unit charged towards it they saw that this building contained the transport the gang needed. However, it was not what Teron had expected.

Had Mara seen the contents of the building a few moments earlier Teron's surprise could have been fatal. His permanent telepathic link to the creature he had placed inside Mara's body meant that he was always aware of what Mara could see and hear, even if it was only at the back of his mind and he had just dealt with a man who emerged from a room holding a blaster when Mara saw what form of transport the settlement made use of. Had he seen it earlier then the man would have most likely got a shot off at point-blank range, too close for Teron to parry, before he was almost cut in two by Teron's lightsaber. Teron made use of the telepathic link to have Mara look around, just in case there were any other means of transport inside the building but everywhere she looked she saw the same thing.

The inhabitants of this settlement used riding beasts for transport exclusively.

For a remote settlement this did make a kind of sense. The manufacturing industry on Andromora was small in scale and with few imports the supply of parts for more modern repulsorlift vehicles was bound to be limited. On the other hand a steady supply of riding animals could be bred for transport and feed could be grown locally.

Teron's surprise did not last long though and he pushed the images and sounds he was receiving from Mara to the back of his mind again as he moved on. More of the building's occupants had been attempting to get to the armoury, unaware that Teron had already rendered all of the weapons useless. There were only so many beings inside the building though and after he had killed the armed man Teron could no longer sense the fear and panic that was gripping the settlement from close by. This suggested to him that everyone who had been inside the building was now either dead or had fled.

"This is Teron. I want a situation report," he said into his comlink.

"Transports are secure," Mara responded, "There were only two people here. They offered little resistance before they died."

This was followed by a dull explosion before Krovak spoke and looking out of a window he saw that smoke was now billowing from one of the other buildings.

"The inhabitants were no match for us," he said, "Those that aren't dead are fleeing."

"Then go after them," Teron ordered, "If even one makes it to another settlement they'll give us away."

Locating the ship Rylee Drud had used to reach Andromora was somewhat time consuming but not especially difficult. The Jedi soon discovered that there were only a handful of docking bays in Hallarn Point that were capable of handling a vessel of its size but instead of being concentrated in one area of the city they were spread around it and each of these needed to be checked until they found the vessel they were looking for.

"I need to know the type of ship you have docked here," Jayk said to the controller of one of the docking bays while Brae and Kay remained across the street.

"We don't give out any information about who or what is docked here. It's bad for business," the man replied without looking up from his desk in the cramped information office. Unfortunately the docking bay that he ran

had no windows either outside or in the office that looked into the bay itself so Jayk had no choice other than to ask.

"Of course." Jayk replied with a smile. A docking bay that did not give out information about vessels that landed there was exactly the sort of place that Rylee Drud was likely to land but Jayk still needed to be sure and he waved his hand in front of the man as he spoke again, "You want to tell me about the ship docked here." he said and he used the Force to push the desire to answer into the man's mind.

"It's a real fancy ship." the man now responded casually, "A SoroSuub space yacht, top of the range."

"And the people inside it?" Jayk added, waving his hand again but the man shrugged.

"Don't know. I only saw a few of the crew I think. The owner stayed inside the whole time." he said.

"Tell me about the crew then. Then you can just forget about this conversation. Was this one of them?" Jayk asked, and he held out his datapad. On the screen was an image of Morton Crayne that had been taken following his arrest.

"Yeah, that's one of them. The others were military looking types." the man told him and Jayk smiled at him again.

"Thank you, that's all I need I needed to know." he said, no longer using the Force to manipulate the man's mind and he turned to leave.

"No exceptions." the man called out after him, having completely forgotten that he had told Jayk what he wanted to know after all.

Crossing the street, Jayk walked directly to where Brae and Kat were waiting for him.

"There wasn't any activity while you were over there." Kat said and Jayk looked at Brae.

"What about you, do you sense anything?" he asked. Brae's sensitivity to the Force was exceptional even for a Jedi and that had been why the Jedi Order had been so keen to retain her in the order that they had been willing to pair them together.

"Nothing significant." Brae replied shaking her head, and she focused her mind on the Force as much as she could while she continued, "I can't sense any exceptionally strong emotions from in-"

"Brae what's wrong?" Kat asked when Brae suddenly reached out to steady herself on a nearby wall.

"Mara. Mara is here on Andromora." Brae replied and Jayk and Kat looked at one another. Brae had once got close enough to Mara after her possession that she had been able to sense the telepathic link between her and Teron. Ever since then she had found that she could sometimes intercept that link if she happened to be focusing hard enough.

"That seems to confirm that the other transport ship belongs to Teron." Jayk commented.

"How do you think he knew about this planet?" Brae asked.

"Hopefully he found some record made by Thal N'Krey." Jayk answered.

"Hopefully?" Kat repeated.

"Yes, because the only other alternative is that he is in contact with someone familiar with whatever drew Thal here and the consequences of that can't be good." Jayk replied.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Brae added.

"We can deal with Teron later. For now though Rylee Drud's ship is in that docking bay and we need to deal with her and Morton Crayne."

Rylee and Morton watched as the sole survivor from the group that had attempted to kill Morton was tied to a chair in the yacht's cargo hold. The chair was entirely metal and had been bolted to the deck so that it would not tip over no matter how far the prisoner leaned.

"This would be better in the cold storage chamber." Mott commented as he pulled the last cable tie tight.

Their prisoner was still unconscious as a result of the stun blast but Mott wanted no chances taken before he woke up.

"I'm not having that man near my food. Who knows what sort of infections he's carrying." Rylee replied.

"The cold would have been more unsettling to him." Mott explained.

"Constant discomfort can be better than sudden pain at getting answers." Morton added in agreement before the intercom sounded and Rylee reached out to answer it.

"Yes?" she said.

"Miss Drud we're receiving a signal. The caller wishes to speak with you urgently." the voice of the yacht's pilot told her.

"And does this caller have a name?" Rylee asked.

"All he identified himself as is The Assembler miss." the pilot said.

"I'll take the call in my quarters." Rylee replied and she shut off the intercom before quickly exiting the hold and hurrying to her quarters. Unlike the hold that was designed for functionality above everything else, Rylee's cabin was designed for comfort and the decoration closely matched that of her suite of rooms at home, including the presence of a holographic communication system that she activated as she sat down, "Assembler," she said as an image of the spider-like alien creature appeared in front of her, "I wasn't expecting you to call."

"This concerns one of your standing requests." The Assembler responded, "I have news of the *Swift Exit*."

"So Tylo and the Udras are on the move again. I can't send anyone after them right now but if things can be finished here soon enough then-" Rylee began.

"You do not need to go to them." The Assembler interrupted, "The *Swift Exit* has come to you. I have been monitoring the traffic control data for Andromora and the *Swift Exit* landed at the capital several hours ago. It departed soon after but the ship has not left the atmosphere."

"Oh no. I've got a bad feeling about this." Rylee said before she quickly added, "Thank you for the warning. I'll see to it that your fee is transferred as soon as possible." and then she shut off the communication unit and ran for the door, opening it before the image of The Assembler had even had time to fully vanish.

Running back to the storage room, Rylee burst in through the door and the men present turned towards her.

"Something wrong?" Morton said.

"The Jedi are here!" Rylee exclaimed, "The Assembler has confirmed that the *Swift Exit* is here on Andromora."

"Then we need to secure the area." Mott said, "I'll deploy sentries immediately."

"Do it. He can wait." Rylee said, nodding her head and she looked at the unconscious thug tied to the chair.

"You two stay here and keep an eye on him." Mott told the two warriors also present and he calmly made his way from the storage room and made his way to the crew quarters where the rest of his men were billeted. Most of the warriors were relaxing but four of them were fully armoured and equipped, ready to respond to any sudden emergencies such as this one, "Everyone gear up." Mott ordered, "Alert team with me."

"What's the mission?" one of the soldiers asked.

"The Jedi could be on their way. The docking bay needs to be secured." Mott told them.

Mott and the four already armoured warriors rushed down the access ramp of the yacht and dropped to their knees at the bottom to cover all approaches. Mott then beckoned for two of them to follow him as he darted towards the door that would take him into the administration office. Bursting through this door Mott and his men found the startled docking bay supervisor alone.

"What's going on?" the supervisor demanded.

"Has anyone else been here?" Mott asked and the man frowned, struggling to remember.

"No, not today." he said, his conversation with Jayk entirely forgotten but the moment he stopped speaking the door to the street outside suddenly slid open to reveal the three Jedi.

Although the Jedi reacted quickly to seeing Mott and his men in the office they were unable to draw their lightsabers before Mott could turn his blaster towards them and Jayk was only just able to ignite his weapon before he fired and the docking bay supervisor threw himself to the floor in panic.

"Fall back!" Mott snapped, firing his blaster again with one hand as he reached for his comlink, "The Jedi are here!" he said into the device, "We need to take off now."

"They're getting away." Brae exclaimed as Mott and his men began to retreat, laying down suppressive fire with their blasters to try and dissuade any pursuit. However, this was of little use against Jedi armed with lightsabers and Jayk stepped forwards through the doorway, continuing to swat any blaster bolt that came towards him aside while Brae and Kat followed him.

The last of Mott's men backed away from the door and they all broke into a run towards the yacht's access ramp while the ship's repulsorlifts began to power up. However, this was not enough to even slow the Jedi down and with a wave of his hand Jayk was able to open it again using the Force. When they saw this the two warriors Mott had left opened fire, yelling a warning to Mott and the other mercenaries. This fire was ineffective again though and as one of the blaster bolts sped towards Brae she deflected it straight back at the man who had fired it. The shot hit his armoured chest plate but this failed to block the energy and he fell backwards onto the ramp just as Mott reached it. He knelt down briefly to check on the man but it was instantly clear that he was dead and with the Jedi closing in he just kicked the body from the ramp rather than risking it jamming the mechanism.

"Close the ramp!" Mott yelled and as he and his surviving men began to retreat into the ship the ramp began to rise. At the same time the yacht's repulsorlift engines roared and the ship began to slowly rise up off the ground. The Jedi continued to run towards the yacht, hoping to get close enough to leap aboard before either the ramp closed or the ship gained too much altitude.

"I can make it." Brae called out but Jayk ground to a halt and looked up at the yacht.

"No, it's too far." Jayk replied as he came to a stop and shut off his lightsaber.

"Do you think Tylo could go after them?" Kat suggested but Jayk shook his head.

"He'd have to pick us up first to be able to do any good. I doubt that they'll go far though." he responded.

"Of course not." Brae added, "Whatever brought Thal N'Krey to this planet is still here. I don't see them leaving without it."

"Perhaps we can still find out what they were doing here. We know Morton left it for a time at least. Maybe he's still here." Kat pointed out and Jayk smiled as he looked at her.

"Well it's a start I suppose." he replied.



Carasson and Terresa were discussing their options now that numerous groups seemed to have come to their planet in search of the same thing that drew Thal N'Krey to it when a junior member of the gang burst into the room they were in.

"The jedi just carried out a raid!" he exclaimed.

"On us? Where were we hit?" Carasson responded.

"No, not us. They hit the docking bay where the yacht that guy asking the questions came from is." the gang member said.

"Was the strike successful?" Terresa asked.

"I don't think so. The yacht took off." the gang member said.

"A pity. I was hoping that the jedi might have dealt with them for us." Carasson said.

"I suspect we'd have been better off if it was the other way around. It's not like we can just lie low for a while and hope the jedi go away. I warned you when we got into this that they'd come after us sooner or later. I knew Thal was trouble."

"Well we're in this now. You could have walked out when I got these but you chose to stay." Carasson said, holding out his hands that were still clad in his metal gauntlets.

"Do you think those will protect you Carasson? Terresa said, "We need to move quickly. If the jedi knew where we were then they'd already be at our door so we have some time. We should use it wisely."

"Agreed. Find out what our scouts have come up with about that other ship that didn't land at any of the settlements." Carasson told her and she nodded.

"I'll check." she said before she walked over to the communication set at the side of the room and picked up the handset, "Mellok are you there?" she said.

"Yes I'm here." the distorted reply said.

"Have you found anything yet?" Terresa asked.

"Nothing certain but we've spotted a column of smoke that could be something. It looks like it's coming from one of the smaller scavenger outposts. We're going to go and check it out now."

"Okay, make sure you check in every hour and right away if you find anything." Terresa told the man and then she shut off the communicator, "Did you get all that?" she asked, looking back around at Carasson and he nodded back at her.

"Yes, I got it. If someone was able to hit a scavenger outpost without word getting out then they're either very good or very well equipped. Either is a threat to us." he said.

"And we have three groups to worry about, all of whom are either very good or very well equipped." Terresa added, "Perhaps we should prioritise one group over the others."

"Then it has to be whoever landed in that transport we lost track of." Carasson replied, "We can't just take down three jedi and think that no-one is going to notice."

"You're thinking that we should go to ground where they're concerned?" Terresa said.

"For the most part, yes. I want then watched though. The more we know about them the better. Maybe they aren't here because of Thal N'Krey and we'll be off the hook. If it looks like they're getting close to us though then we need to throw them off the scent." Carasson replied.

"I'll put the word out. What about the scavengers though? If the jedi find any of them then they'll be able to connect them to us." Terresa pointed out.

"Perhaps it's time to clean house." Carasson replied.

"You mean kill them? If they aren't digging stuff out of the ground then-" Terresa began.

"All the good stuff was taken decades ago. Thal was the last to make a big score." Carasson interrupted.

"As far as we know. All we ended up with was a few trinkets and his ship." Terresa said.

"Which is more than we get from most of the dregs out there digging up centuries old junk. Carasson commented.

"Are there any signs of pursuit?" Rylee asked the pilot of her yacht.

"No Miss Drud and I've positioned us behind one of Andromora's moons so their sensors can't pick us up." the pilot responded.

"Very good. Keep monitoring for signs of activity. We know the jedi have a ship that's armed. They could try and come after us." Rylee said.

"Do you want me to contact your father? Perhaps he could send us a gunship." the pilot suggested but Rylee was quick to reject this, knowing that her father would be in no mood to divert any further resources to support her.

"No. Military force beyond what we already have would attract too much attention. If the Republic sends a Judicial Department cruiser here then we're finished. Maintain communications silence." she said before she turned and exited the cockpit. From there she made her way down to the storage compartment where Morton and Mott waited with the still unconscious prisoner, "Okay let's get this over with, wake him up."

Mott was already prepared with an injector gun loaded with a stimulant and he pressed it to the prisoner's chest before triggering it. All of a sudden the man opened his eyes wide and gasped as he regained consciousness.

"Well hello there. Remember me?" Morton said, grinning at the man and then he jabbed the end of the electrical prod he was holding into the man's side.

The man screamed as the electricity coursed through him and into the metal frame of the chair.

"Careful Morton, we don't want to fry him." Rylee said.

"You might not." Morton muttered as he withdrew the prod and the man slumped forwards as far as the ties binding him to the chair would allow.

"The stimulant will make the pain centre of his brain more sensitive." Mott said, "Just a short jolt will suffice."

Rylee then stepped forwards and looked down at the man in the chair.

"Look at me." she said sternly and he lifted his head, "Good. Now tell me why you tried to kill one of my employees."

"Because I was being paid to you rancor-" the man began before Morton jabbed him with the prod again.

"Now is that any way to talk to a lady?" he said.

"You must know who paid you." Mott added.

"Never saw him before." the prisoner replied, snarling at Mott and the warrior smiled for a moment before suddenly punching him in the face.

"Let's try this again shall we?" Mott said, "Tell us why you tried to kill this man and who put you up to it."

"Kriff you." the man said and Morton jabbed him with the prod again.

"Answer the question you nerf herder or I'll shove this down your back and just leave you here all night." he said before taking the prod away again.

"Okay!" the man exclaimed, "It's that picture he was flashing around. The guy he's looking for."

"Thal N'Krey? How do you know him?" Rylee asked.

"I don't. I've never seen him in my life but people say that he came here about a decade ago. Carasson knew him I think." the man answered as he gasped for breath.

"So who's Carasson?" Morton said.

"He's who I work for. If you want to go hunting for anything the Sith left behind around here then you make sure to pay him off." the man said.

"So Thal paid him off? Do you know what he found?" Rylee said.

"No, like I already told you I never met him. I don't think he paid Carasson off though. I know something went down between them but not what."

"He's holding back." Mott said and he looked at Morton, "Perhaps you should shock him again. Give him a full minute."

"No wait!" the man snapped, "Look, I'm telling the truth. I never met this Thal N'Krey. I didn't join Carasson's outfit until a year or two after he left but I've heard bits of conversations I think I wasn't supposed to. I think Carasson was afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Rylee said.

"Afraid that Thal N'Krey would come back again." the man replied.

## 6

Tylo stood at the top of the *Swift Exit*'s access ramp as the Jedi walked up it.

"Were you able to track their departure?" Jayk asked when they reached him.

"Cal was for a time, yes. But he lost them when they left the atmosphere." Tylo replied, "He's running some numbers to try and figure out where they went now."

"Hopefully far enough away that we only need to worry about Teron." Brae commented while they were heading for the ship's lounge.

"Teron?" Tylo exclaimed, "Since when was Teron here? No wait, let me guess, he came in that other ship the locals tracked."

"Probably." Kat said.

"I sensed Mara's link to Teron again. Just for a moment but it was definitely her." Brae added.

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

"As well you should." Jayk responded as he entered the lounge ahead of the others, "Since as far as we know Teron did not get control of Thal's ship to be able to study its navigation computer that means he must have an alternate source of information. One likely to know far more about whatever Thal was interested in on this planet than us."

"Well that's not exactly difficult now is it? We don't know a damned thing." Tylo pointed out.

"Cal." Jayk said out loud and Cal's hologram appeared in the centre of the room.

"You called?" he said.

"Tylo said you were trying to determine where the Rylee Drud's yacht went." Jayk said.

"Yes, I was able to track it as far as low orbit before they accelerated away. Our sensors may not have picked up a hyperspace entry from the ground but the heading the yacht was on suggests that it was heading for Andromora's moon anyway." Cal said.

"No-one heads for a gravity well if they're planning on going into hyperspace." Kat commented.

"No, it seems logical that they flew over the horizon to hide themselves from Andromora's traffic control system." Cal said.

"What about Thal? Did you find anything on him in the local database?" Jayk asked.

"A little. I found references to him and his ship in docking bay records and a few captures on security cameras, a number of which had him with another man. A local I think." Cal told him.

"Does this local have a name?" Brae said.

"He did. Marik. I found a match for him in the records of the capital starport where he worked maintenance for several years. He was removed from their employee roll over a decade ago." Cal said and he projected the image he had found of Marik in the planetary records that showed him wearing his starport uniform.

"Presumably Thal took him on as a guide." Kat said.

"And then the pair of them were never heard from again." Tylo added, "Is anyone else creeped out by that?"

"Tells me we're on the right track." Brae replied.

"Brae, you should meditate. See if you can connect to Mara again." Jayk then told her and she nodded.

"Of course. I'll be in our cabin." she said before she turned around and left the room.

"So what do we do in the meantime?" Tylo asked.

"I'm going to speak with the local authorities. I suspect they will be interested in why a ship left so abruptly. They may also have some information on Morton Crayne's activities while he was here." Jayk answered.

"If we know where he went we could learn what he learnt?" Kat suggested and Jayk smiled.

"Exactly." he replied.

As it turned out the inhabitants of the scavenger outpost did have some modern transport technology but this was limited to a pair of repulsor sleds. These were capable of supporting themselves about a metre above the ground but lacked any forward propulsion. Instead they were designed to be towed behind another vehicle, or as the scavengers had done behind their riding animals. This allowed them to move larger cargoes than a single animal could carry across rough terrain without risking getting stuck. Now Teron's gang used these for their provisions while the gang members themselves rode the animals. Being unused to such a mode of transport meant that they could not risk pushing them to move quickly, instead they proceeded at a slow but steady pace with Teron and Turlan at the head of this group while Krovak and Mara rode close behind them.

The gang's slow speed, combined with the significant number of tracks they had left behind them made them easy for Carasson's scouts on speeder bikes to catch up with them though. As soon as they saw the first signs of the gang ahead of them they immediately brought their vehicles to a halt and took out macrobinoculars to get a closer look.

"These guys look serious." one of them said when he saw the weapons that Teron's gang carried. In addition to the small arms that could be found on almost every advanced planet in the galaxy a number of them also carried support weapons such as repeating blasters and grenade launchers that were much harder to obtain. "Who's that guy near the front? The one in the fancy armour." the other added when he noticed Krovak among the gang.

"We should get ahead of them." the first said as he lowered his macrobinoculars and took out a datapad that held a map of the local area, "Look, if they keep going in the same direction they'll go right past this ridge here." he said, pointing to a line on the map, "If we get there first then we can watch while they go past and get a proper look at them all."

"Looks like a good place for an ambush as well. Maybe we could pick a few of them off." the other suggested and the first smiled at him.

"Sounds like a plan." he replied, "Let's go."

The two men took hold of the controls to their speeder bikes again and accelerated away, circling around Teron and his gang far enough away that they would not be noticed. Then they continued on until they reached a ridge that overlooked an area of flat and open ground that they expected Teron's gang to cross. Leaving their speeder bikes away from the edge of the ridge so that they would be hidden from view the two scouts unpacked the blaster rifles they had brought with them and dashed to the edge where they lay down. Their rifles were long barrelled weapons designed for large game hunting instead of combat but this made them reasonably effective sniper rifles that could shoot accurately for several hundred metres. Lying down on the ground to make themselves as difficult to spot as they could they began to wait for Teron's gang to appear.

"There they are." one said when he saw Teron himself appear alongside Turlan and moments later Krovak and Mara followed them, in turn followed by the rest of the gang, "That sure is some fancy armour." he added as he used his rifle's optical sight to study Krovak more closely and saw the ornate nature of his armour as well as the sword slung across his back.

"He should be the primary target." the other responded.

"Agreed. Shouldn't we let Carasson know that they're here though?" the first said and the other scout nodded as he took out his comlink and activated it.

"We've found them." he said simply.

"Where?" Carasson's voice replied.

"Grid trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight. Moving in a straight line from the outpost. One of them looks to be wearing some real fancy armour. We're in position to engage now, it looks like we've got the drop on them." the scout told him.

"Then do it. Take out as many as you can then fall back and let me know how many are left. We're on our way now." Carasson said before he closed the channel at his end.

The scout smiled as he put his comlink away.

"Did you get that?" he said.

"Yeah, I got it. I'm going to put the first shot into the leader, start shooting as soon as I do." the other scout replied, as he looked down the sight of his rifle and lined it up on Krovak's chest. Then when he decided that his aim was on target he added in a soft voice, "I have you now."

*Danger.*

Teron sensed the attack through the Force a fraction of a second before the first shot was fired but this was not soon enough for him to be able to call out a warning. This meant that the shot struck Krovak's chest plate and he let out a roar as he tumbled from the saddle of the beast he was riding, uninjured because of the Sith armour he wore but the arcane nature of it meant he still felt pain and became more enraged as the armour channelled the power of the Dark Side into him. The armour also protected Krovak from injury as he landed and the Dark Side energy that flooded into him enabled him to immediately leap back to his feet, drawing the sword from his back at the same time as he looked around for the source of the attack.

Moments later there was another shot, this one aimed at one of the gang armed with a grenade launcher and he too fell from his mount. Unlike Krovak though he wore only a conventional blast vest and this was not enough to stop a blaster bolt from the powerful hunting weapon being used by the scout and he was killed where he sat.

"Up there!" Teron called out, having seen where the blaster fire came from and behind him his gang hurriedly dismounted from their riding beasts and began to return fire towards the top of the ridge.

Carasson's two scouts remained calm as they came under fire, the blaster bolts were crudely aimed and they impacted the ground around the two men rather than striking them directly. This allowed them to continue firing their own weapons and they did their best to pick out the gang members armed with support weaponry until the man that had shot Krovak saw him once more as he strode towards Teron.

"Wait, I shot him. I saw him fall." he exclaimed.

"Then shoot him again and this time make sure he's dead." the other replied as he shot at a man busy setting up a repeating blaster only to miss him by a narrow margin, the impact of the blaster bolt in the

ground churning up enough debris to shower him with dirt and small pieces of stone. Then he noticed a flash of red that did not come from a blaster and he turned to see Teron now standing in front of the rest of his gang with his lightsaber in his hand, "Stang!" the scout exclaimed.

"Is that a lightsaber?" the other scout added when he saw the glowing weapon as well.

"Shoot him. Carasson needs to know." his partner told him, reaching for his comlink, "Carasson, are you there?" he said into it in a hurry while the other turned his rifle towards Teron and began shooting at him repeatedly. Teron stood his ground as he came under fire though, swinging his lightsaber back and forth to deflect each shot in turn. Had the scouts been closer then Teron would have attempted to send their shots straight back at them but they had opened fire at long range and Teron was more focused on defending himself than trying to pick them out so precisely.

"Yes, I'm here. What do you have to report?" Carasson responded to the scout's hurried call.

"Jedi, one of them's a Jedi." the scout said.

"Are you certain?" Carasson asked.

"Of course I'm sure. He's got a bright red lightsaber and he's swatting blaster shots out of the air like they're flies." the scout told him.

Before Carasson could respond to this though Teron lifted his free hand and held it out towards the ridge he could see the blaster fire coming from, reaching out through the Force and drawing on the Dark Side. Almost immediately the two scouts felt the ground beneath them begin to shake and both of them ceased fire.

"What the hell?" one of them said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"We've done enough. Let's get out of here." the other suggested and the two men were just beginning to get to their feet when all of a sudden the ground itself exploded, hurling both of them and their speeder bikes high into the air while Teron slumped to the ground, worn out by the exertion of channelling such a large amount of power at once and his lightsaber shut down.

"Impressive." Turlan said, walking up behind Teron, "Though a Sith should not show weakness."

"I think he's telling you to get up." Krovak added and Teron got back to his feet.

"Krovak come with me. We're not finished yet." he said.

Ahead of them debris was still falling to the ground and lying among this were the two scouts, both badly injured after being thrown into the air and then suddenly dropped from a significant height. Krovak strode up to the nearest of them with his Sith sword in his hand and he thrust this downwards, impaling the scout through his chest and killing him instantly. The second scout was still aware enough to see what happened to his comrade as well as Teron heading directly towards him and he reached for the blaster pistol he still had holstered on his belt despite having lost his rifle. Drawing the weapon he fired several shots in rapid succession at Teron but he deflected each one in turn with his lightsaber. From this short range he could have directed any of these directly at the scout and killed him with his own blaster bolt but instead he opted to get as close as he could before using the Force to rip the blaster from the injured man's hand and send it flying away from him. Then he held his hand towards the man's throat and reached out through the Force again. Immediately the scout began to choke, clawing at his throat as he felt it tighten but could not clear it.

*Fear.*

Teron maintained his grip until the panicking scout died, by which time Krovak, Mara and Turlan had joined him.

"They were on speeder bikes." Krovak commented, looking at the wreckage of the two speeder bikes the scouts had ridden on.

"Then they didn't come from the settlement. Someone is hunting us." Teron replied and he looked towards Turlan.

"When Thal told me about his experiences here he talked about the scavengers hunting for Sith artefacts. They routinely fight among themselves for control of territory." the gen'dai told him.

"What if they've already got to our target?" Krovak asked.

"We would know if they had. These scum couldn't keep something like that secret and the Jedi would have flooded this world to destroy it." Turlan answered.

"We must go on. My master expects the site to be secured. If any others are foolish enough to try and get in our way then we will kill them as well."

"They're gone." Carasson said to Terresa when his comlink failed to re-establish a link to either of the scouts. The pair of them were standing in a landing zone located beside the dense cluster of buildings that served as the gang's main base of operations where several air transports were being loaded and prepared for take-off. No two of the vehicles were of the same model but all of them were civilian vehicles. Despite this two of them had been fitted with whatever weaponry the gang could obtain, a light blaster cannon and a crude rocket launcher designed to fire home made projectiles.

"They said they saw a red lightsaber." Terresa replied nervously and Carasson nodded.

"It's been a long time we saw one of those here and no Jedi would be carrying one." he said.

"If this is related to Thal-" Terresa began before Carasson interrupted her.

"Then we'll deal with it in the usual manner. We're more than just a couple of scouts on speeder bikes Teresa. We've got more than a hundred troops and we'll have air support." he said before turning towards the air transport armed with the blaster cannon and boarding the vehicle. Teresa followed him they both sat in the cockpit behind the two flight crew.

"Are we ready?" Carasson asked and the pilot nodded.

"Yes, all transports have checked in. All our people and gear is loaded." he said.

"What about the cannon? Are we sure it'll work?" Teresa added.

"It should." the co-pilot said and Carasson frowned.

"You haven't tested it?" he commented.

"There wasn't time to run an operational test." the co-pilot said, "But the capacitors charged just fine."

"So we're going into combat with a cannon that may not even work? So much for effective air support." Teresa said.

"Well we don't have time to test it now. Let's just get going. Tell the others that we're taking off." Carasson ordered and the pilot pulled back on the flight controls.

One after another the transports rose into the air and turned towards the co-ordinates given to Carasson by his scouts. Then they accelerated away, heading directly towards it at top speed.

# THAL

*Thal met Marik again the next day after the starport technician had had the chance to fetch his landspeeder. Marik's vehicle was a basic utility speeder designed to be able to transport either half a dozen humanoid beings or just two beings sat at the front while the rear area could be used for cargo and on this occasion this section of the vehicle was being used for provisions.*

*"So are you looking for anything in particular?" Marik asked as Thal got into the vehicle beside Marik and placed his bag in the cargo area behind him.*

*"I have the name of a Sith Lord Hasran that once operated on this planet. I need to find out where he was based." Thal replied.*

*"That could be tricky unless you can read Sith." Marik said and Thal held his datapad towards the other man, showing him a screen filled with Sith icons down one side and explanatory text in basic on the other.*

*"Where did you get that?" Marik asked.*

*"There is more knowledge of the Sith in the galaxy than many people realise and far more than the Republic would like. I've spent more than a decade putting together this little translation system." Thal told him.*

*"Well there are ruins to the south-east that are thought to be what's left of some sort of temple where the natives of this planet worshipped their Sith overlords, before those same Sith wiped them out of course. If that doesn't have any names in it then I don't know what would." Marik said.*

*"Has much been taken from the site already?" Thal said.*

*"Pretty much everything that wasn't fixed down, it was one of the first sites discovered but it was the walls that were all carved with holy texts. The jedi didn't think any of what was on there was a threat so they left it alone and the panels are far too big and heavy to be worth stealing for the price they'd bring. Collectors want stuff that the jedi don't want them to have. I should warn you that it's pretty remote through, more than a hundred kilometres. The regular tours give it a wide berth because of the distance, plus there are bandits out there." Marik replied*

*"Bandits? You mean those failed tomb robbers?" Thal commented and Marik nodded.*

*"Yeah. They hide out in the old Sith settlements out that way." he responded.*

*"Then we'll start there. How long will it take us to get there?" Thal said.*

*"About an hour and a half." Marik replied.*

*"Then go. I don't want to waste a moment." Thal told him and Marik set the speeder in motion.*

*Beyond the city the terrain of Andromora was still largely barren. Before the destruction of all life on the planet by the Sith the planet had been covered in dense forests almost everywhere outside the numerous settlements but only a handful had been planted when the world was resettled. Most areas were simply seeded with more basic grasses and ferns that had not been able to take root everywhere it was hoped that they would and while there was enough vegetation on the planet to maintain a basic biosphere the scenery was not what most species would consider pleasing to look at.*

*The lack of vegetation did make travel by repulsorlift easy though, with little to no undergrowth to be avoided while most of the rockier areas were low enough that they could be crossed without risk and Marik was able to maintain a fairly high speed as he headed for the remains of the Sith temple he had described to Thal.*

*The temple itself had been built in the middle of what had been a large city when the planet was controlled by the Sith but the vast majority of the surrounding structures had succumbed to the jedi purge, looters or simply to the elements in the more than seven hundred years they had stood empty but the temple itself had been better built and most of its structure remained intact. The same could not be said for the interior though, as Marik had explained to Thal anything that could easily be removed had been and now the temple was just an empty shell.*

*The main entrance to the temple was large enough for Marik to drive the speeder straight inside before he brought it to a halt while Thal looked around.*

*"Is this the only chamber?" the kiffar artist asked. Around him the large circular chamber seemed to occupy all the internal space of the building he had seen from the outside, with a balcony running around it that would have provided an extra level for worshippers to occupy. This balcony was supported by a ring of columns and there were further columns closer to the centre of the chamber that supported the ceiling itself.*

*"This is the main chamber but there's a network of passageways and smaller chambers below us. They can be accessed from over there." Marik replied as he climbed out of the speeder and walked to the rear of the vehicle, "The layout isn't too complicated, they just all spread out from a central point without meeting up again so you're not likely to get lost. Feel free to take a look around while I set up the sensors." he added as he took a case from the speeder's cargo area.*



*"Sensors?" Thal said.*

*"Motion detectors. Like I said there are bandits around here and these will give us ample warning if they come near." Marik said.*

*"Good. I'm going to start looking around. I'll start in here. I suspect that the Sith would want their servants to know who they were worshipping and would proclaim their greatness publicly. Those tunnels were probably for another purpose." Thal said and he took his bag from the speeder as well before he started to walk away. Marik hesitated when he saw Thal pick up the bag, convinced that for a moment he thought he saw the handles move towards the other man's outstretched hand in its ornate gauntlet. After a few moments though he decided that he had imagined it and turned towards the main entrance so he could set some of his sensors there.*

*While Marik was setting the sensors Thal headed for the closest of the carvings he had seen from the speeder. As far as he could tell all of the wall panels and structural support columns were heavily engraved and without any way of knowing how these markings were organised Thal just began with those easiest to reach. This was on one of the supported columns, located just a few steps from the speeder that was one of those holding up the balcony and rather than attempt to fully translate what he was looking at Thal searched for specific words within them that would either refer to the Sith lord who had created the device Thal was searching for alternatively tell him that he was looking in the wrong place.*

*Unfortunately for Thal it took some time for him to come across a cluster of glyphs that let him know that the information carved into this particular column was unrelated to the Sith he was interested in and he looked around as he tried to determine a pattern to his search of the temple. He settled on working his way around the columns that supported the balcony and he repeated the process of searching them for key words and phrases that would tell him if he was on the right track. As he continued around the circle of columns though he took notes on what he found just in case it led him to something else he could use. As he did so though he started to notice a pattern to the carvings on this particular set of columns, instead of describing the exploits of the Sith on Andromora they instead told the history of the Sith before they came to this planet. This was still information that Thal found interesting but he did not want to become sidetracked from his search and he decided to move onto another part of the temple.*

*Suspecting that the other sets of columns may also be more concerned with the ancient history of the Sith in general Thal began to walk towards the outer wall but when he drew close he was struck by the sudden feeling that he needed to look elsewhere and he glanced to his side to side an opening that he could not see beyond. Making his way towards this he found that there was a stone staircase on the other side of the opening that led down into darkness. It was obvious to Thal that this was the entrance to the network of underground passages that Marik had told him about. Thal had brought a compact glow rod with him and he took this from his bag to shine down into the darkness, not wanting to simply step into the darkness onto a potentially unsafe staircase. Having to be taken back to the city for medical treatment would undoubtedly delay him finding the Sith lord's headquarters.*

*Although the steps showed some signs of wear they looked intact in the light from the glow rod and Thal cautiously stepped onto the first one just through the opening. This did not shift under his weight and he continued to walk down the stairs, noticing that the walls either side of him were also carved in the Sith language. Significantly these carvings contained numerous glyphs that suggested they were telling the story of the Sith's arrival on Andromora and that only reinforced his suspicion that the information he was looking for would be somewhere in the passages beneath the main temple building.*

*Sure enough as Thal reached the bottom of the steps and continued to study the engravings on the walls he saw repeated use of numbers that seemed to indicate years since the arrival of the Sith on Andromora. Thal didn't know exactly when the Sith lord he was looking for information about had become significant among the planet's rulers but he did know that that particular lord had been active up to the end of the final war against the Republic so it was likely that any mention of his exploits would be in the last of the engravings prior to the world being scoured of all life. With this in mind Thal began to walk along the passageway he was in, shining his glow rod onto the walls but no longer paying any attention to what was written there. Instead he was searching for a point where the carvings ended, hoping that they would be the most recent before the destruction of all life on the planet and he would be able to work his way backwards until he found what he was looking for.*

*Unfortunately he encountered a problem when he reached a junction. Here the carvings continued in different directions and a quick check of the dates given for each told him that they described events that took place at the same time as one another but from the point of view of different Sith and their apprentices. Thal then realised that this was likely to be the case at each junction, the network of tunnels had not been constructed randomly, instead it was intended to be a means by which the history recorded here was organised. By following a particular path through the passages a person could read about a specific lineage of Sith lords and apprentices. This meant that for Thal to find the information he was looking for he needed to find the right lineage to follow and without knowing this already he was faced with having to follow multiple routes through the passageways until he found the right one by chance.*

With no other choice but to try this random method Thal continued on his way, continuing through the passages until he came to the end of a particular history. Along the way he found several small chambers that now stood empty. Each of these had engravings on the walls as well and from what Thal could tell they described the actions of a Sith during some key moment or major battle in their history. Thal suspected that artefacts relating to these events would once have been stored in these chambers but these had been removed long ago. There was no blank wall beyond the point where the history ended though, instead the passageway itself came to an end and Thal realised the tunnels must only have been dug out as the wall space was needed for more information to be carved on them.

It was just after he had doubled back from a dead end to follow a new path through the tunnels that Thal suddenly heard the sound of footsteps from behind him and in the belief that it was Marik come to check on him looked around only to see a glint of light reflecting from the blade in the stranger's hand.

Marik spun around and unslung his blaster when he heard the scream, searching for its source. The weapon was a long barrelled hunting rifle was perhaps not the best suited to use in a confined space but it was all that he had available.

"Oh stang!" he hissed when he realised that it had come from the entrance to the underground tunnel network and he ran towards the entrance to the stairs. He had no personal interest in whether anything happened to Thal or not but if the artist from off world was killed then Marik knew he would not be paid beyond the up front deposit Thal had already given him and he wanted to protect the rest of the money he expected to earn from this job. His rifle was fitted with a tactical light and he turned this on before he headed down the stairs into the darkness with his weapon held ready.

"Thal! Thal where are you?" he called out when he reached the bottom of the steps and ran to the first junction.

No reply came from either direction and so Marik picked one at random before hurrying down the passage. It was not long before he noticed a light coming from somewhere ahead of him and he knew that he had chosen the correct direction so he called out again.

"Thal!"

"I'm here, I think I've found something." Thal's voice responded from the direction that the light was coming from and Marik hurried towards it.

The light led him to a stretch of tunnel that looked just like any other to Marik but Thal was stood shining his glow rod at one of the walls while he studied what was engraved on it. What attracted Marik's attention though was the body slumped on the floor of the passageway.

"What the hell happened?" Marik said as he crouched down to inspect the body, rolling it over so he could see the dead man's face.

"He attacked me with a knife. I defended myself." Thal said, "Now do you know how important this section of wall is here?"

"You killed him?" Marik commented. The dead man appeared to have been in poor physical condition even before he had attacked Thal and Marik thought that the tall and well fed kiffar would have been able to best him in a physical fight but that would have taken time. However, there were fresh burns to the side of the dead man's face that looked as if they could have been inflicted by a blaster from point blank range but Marik had never seen an injury quite like this before, it was as if the entire side of the man's face had been caught in an energy blast. Weapons capable of doing that would have been so powerful that they would have taken his entire head off and bulky enough that there would be no way that Thal could be concealing one under his coat.

"Yes, now look at this." Thal replied, pointing to a section of glyphs on the wall, totally uninterested in the dead man who had attacked him.

"Sure, the carvings. What do they say?" Marik asked as he got back to his feet and studied Thal closely, trying to make out where he was hiding the weapon he had not known the artist was carrying.

"They talk of a Sith lord who arrived from off world to claim a region of this planet as his own and was challenged by several of the existing lords." Thal said.

"So what happened?" Marik asked.

"I'm not sure yet but the symbols used to refer to this newly arrived Sith lord name him as Lord Hasran, the same as the one I came here to trace the headquarters of. That means that the information I want could be in this section of these tunnels." Thal explained before a chiming sound came from Marik's belt, "What is that?" Thal added.

"It's the sensors I set. We've got company upstairs, possibly some of this guy's mates come to find out where he is. We better go and check it out before they take all our stuff." Marik said.

The two men made their way back through the tunnels quickly and headed up the stairs. Marik noticed that Thal did not draw a weapon even as they were climbing the stairs that led up to the main temple and they heard the sound of voices.

"You might need that blaster of yours." Marik told Thal before the two men emerged from the staircase and he aimed his blaster rifle in the direction of the speeder. Around the vehicle he saw a cluster of beings wearing damaged and tattered clothing, all of them rummaging through the containers of supplies that Marik had brought along. Some of the containers had already been pulled from the speeder and their contents tipped out onto the floor. Only one of the figures was visibly armed with anything other than a close combat weapon, having a blaster tucked into a belt and rather than shout out a warning Marik just took aim with his rifle and fired at this figure. The attack took the scavengers entirely by surprise and the armed figure was hit in the side, giving out a high-pitched scream that suggested it was a woman as she toppled from the speeder.

This sent the other scavengers into a panic and they all jumped clear of the speeder and ran for cover. Had the temple still been intact then there would have likely been rows of seats for them to hide behind but in its present state there was no cover to be found other than the columns supporting the balcony and roof or Marik's own speeder.

The scavengers began to yell at one another, encouraging one another to launch a counter attack while still remaining in cover themselves. The body of the scavenger that Marik had shot had landed beside the speeder and another of the scavengers suddenly broke from cover to try and recover the weapon she had carried. Advancing from the entrance to the stairs towards his speeder Marik saw this and fired his rifle again. This time his aim was off slightly and the energy blast tore a chunk from one of the columns.

"No! Don't damage the temple!" Thal yelled when he saw the damage that this had caused to the engravings.

The scavenger was able to take hold of the blaster and he turned it towards Marik. However, when he pulled the trigger nothing happened and he looked at the weapon in surprise before Marik fired a third shot that hit him square in the chest.

While Marik continued towards his speeder, eager to ensure that the vehicle was safe so that he and Thal would not be left stranded more than a hundred kilometres from the city Thal remained by the entrance to the underground tunnels and this did not go unnoticed by the scavengers, some of whom began to dart from behind one column to the next as they made to circle around Marik and towards the seemingly unarmed kiffar. Marik saw this and fired at the scavengers, killing two in rapid succession but there were still more of them heading for Thal and he called out a warning.

"Thal!" To your right!" he shouted and Thal turned just as a scavenger charged at him with a knife in his hand.

Thal reacted quickly, turning towards the scavenger and punching him in the face with his metal gauntleted hand before the charging man could make use of his knife. The blow was strong enough that the scavenger screamed in pain, dropping his knife and clutching at his face as he fell to the floor at Thal's feet. Marik expected Thal to finally draw his blaster to finish off the scavenger or at least be ready to face the next to attack him but the weapon that he then made use of was nothing like what Marik had been expecting. Instead of producing a blaster of any kind from beneath his coat he thrust out the armoured hand that had just delivered the blow and to Marik's shock bright blue lightning erupted from Thal's fingertips to engulf the scavenger. The man on the floor screamed in agony as the lightning engulfed him, burning his flesh before finally killing him.

This attack terrified the other scavengers and in moments all of them turned and began to run from the temple, ignoring the threat posed by Marik and his hunting rifle but Marik was also too startled by what he had seen to take advantage of this and rather than firing at them as they fled he just stared in the direction of Thal.

Slowly Thal turned towards Marik and in response Marik levelled his blaster rifle in Thal's direction.

"What – what was that?" he stammered and Thal smiled.

"I told you was capable of looking after myself." he responded.

"But what did you do? How did you do that? I've never-" Marik began.

"This place," Thal interrupted as he looked around at the engraved walls, "the people who built it were like me. Disciples of a higher power, a power with the ability to reshape the universe if properly directed."

"You're not a jedi." Marik said.

"Of course not, I'm something far different. Now are you planning on trying to use that weapon against me or will you finish setting up our camp while I return to my study of the tunnels? Those scavengers may have been easily startled but I suspect that they may soon return and in greater numbers." Thal replied.

Returning to the tunnel network Thal quickly located the section of tunnel that described the arrival of Sith Lord Hasran and he smiled when he read an account of how he raised a fortress to rule from. Consulting his datapad for a translation he began to read out loud.

"The Lord Hasran's armies were swift to secure the Isles of Acam and from there launched their attack against the tribes of Mer, slaughtering them to the last. Lord Hasran then raised a great fortress in the lands

*of the Mer and the blood, flesh and bones collected was worked into an army of beasts to guard it." Thal said. Then he smiled and added, "I have you now."*

The yacht's pilot accelerated the vessel at full power before throwing the ship's ion drives into reverse to slow down just enough to be able to re-enter Andromora's atmosphere. Although there was no chance that the ship would be fired upon, the interrogation of the prisoner had proven to Rylee and her team that Carasson had traffic controllers on his payroll who could warn him about any approaching ship. The interrogation had also revealed the location of Carasson's headquarters and Mott's plan was to have his men deploy from the air while the yacht flew over.

With this in mind Mott and his men were gathered in the large cargo hold when the yacht began its acceleration, all fully armed and armoured and with rocket packs fitted to their backs.

"Three minutes." the voice of one of the flight crew announced over the yacht's intercom.

"Okay this is it." Mott told his men and they assembled in front of the main cargo hatch while sealing their helmets. As soon as this was done the displays built into the visors began feeding each mercenary with data such as their location and altitude that would guide them to their target once they exited through the open doorway. This was large enough to permit luxury ground vehicles to enter the yacht so it was easily large enough for the mercenaries to be deployed from without risking them colliding with one another in mid air. With his men lined up, Mott walked over to the controls to the door and opened it. The cargo hold was then filled with the sounds of both the yacht's repulsorlift engines and Mott looked out through the doorway to see the ground rushing past far below. Initially no exact details could be made out but as the yacht continued to descend both terrain features and structures became clearer. The cluster of buildings that were the mercenaries' target would not be visible from inside the hold before they were to deploy so the mercenaries were dependent on the yacht's flight crew to tell them when they should jump.

"One minute." the same voice from the cockpit said and the mercenaries prepared themselves, "Ten seconds. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Jump."

"Go! Go! Go!" Mott yelled and the mercenaries all ran towards the doorway before throwing themselves from the yacht one after another. Mott watched his men jump to make sure that all of them cleared the yacht safely before he too leapt through the doorway. Immediately the altitude display inside his helmet began counting down as he descended. He soon located the cluster of buildings that was his unit's target, identifying it from the description given by the prisoner of large structures that mounted communications antennas and that had a dedicated landing field beside them. It was the antennas that permitted precise identification of the headquarters, some of them were used as a navigation beacon for the gang's aircraft and the comlink built into Mott's armour was able to pick out the transponder code.

The falling mercenaries did not need to do anything to steer themselves towards the landing field that because of its location right next to the headquarters buildings and the clear space it offered had been set as their drop zone. Instead the guidance systems built into their armour automatically fired their rocket packs, first to set them on course for the drop zone and then to slow their descent so that they had just about come to a halt as they reached the ground.

It was when their rocket packs fired that the mercenaries were at their most vulnerable to ground fire.

Carasson's gang had no dedicated anti-aircraft weapons but any of them could fire into the sky where the mercenaries had no cover. To try and counter this Mott and his men held their blaster rifles in their hands. Given that blasters possessed minimal recoil these were safe to fire during free fall as well as the controlled stage of their descent. However, there turned out to be no need for this precaution as no-one from inside the buildings came rushing outside to investigate the sounds of soldiers descending with rocket packs even at the last moment.

As soon as they landed Mott and his men got into formation, covering the nearby buildings but they still saw no signs of life.

"Go." Mott ordered and the raiding party immediately began to move, most rushing towards nearby structures and breaking in through the closest access point while a small number engaged their rocket packs again to propel them onto the rooftops from where they could fire down between the buildings should anyone show themselves.

Strangely there was no response from Carasson's gang even when Mott and his men forced their way into the buildings with blasters and breaching charges. Once inside they began to sweep through the buildings and it did not take long to determine that the reason their landing and entry had been totally unopposed was that the buildings were deserted.

"Room clear, moving on." one of Mott's men reported as yet another part of a building was found to be empty.

"This is getting us nowhere sir. Are we sure that the prisoner told the truth?" one of the soldiers in Mott's own assault team said when he heard this over the group communications net.

"No, I've interrogated enough people to know when they're lying or just trying to tell me what they think I want to hear. This is Carasson's base." Mott replied.

"So where is everyone? I've got a bad feeling about this." the other mercenary said before there was another signal over the communications net.

"Commander Mott this is Gardor, I'm in building three and there's something here I think you ought to see. I think I know where everybody went." another soldier reported.

"Okay we're on our way. Everyone else continue you sweeps, I don't want to risk being ambushed because we stopped searching early." Mott responded before he and his team made their way out of the building they were searching and towards the one that had been given the label of number three during their plan for the attack. As soon as they entered the building they were met by a member of Gardor's team who had been sent to meet them.

"Come with me commander, I'll take you to where we found it." the man said.

"Found what?" Mott asked.

"It's probably easier if you just see it sir." the mercenary said and he turned to lead them deeper into the building.

Most of the rooms that Mott and his team had seen in the building they searched appeared to be storage for mundane items such as spare parts and dry food but in this building the contents of the rooms were far more specialised. Some held computer terminals while others were equipped for administering medical treatment. For a gang of outlaws it appeared that Carasson's organisation was well equipped by the standards of a backwater world like Andromora.

"It's in here sir." the soldier said as he stopped outside an open doorway then stepped back to let Mott pass through into the room on the other side.

This was obviously some kind of command centre. Located on the outer edge of the building there was a wall that had numerous windows in it but all of these had been painted over. There was a computer terminal at one side of the room and several large comlink sets but most of the room was given over to physical maps of different parts of Andromora and some of these made use of the additional wall space that had been created by covering the room's windows. These were all annotated with various markings to show the territories of other gangs in other regions of the planet while others indicated the sites of ancient Sith settlements or where Sith artefacts had been uncovered.

"Looks like a complete record of everything anyone ever dug out of the ground on this backwater rock." Mott commented as he looked around from the doorway.

"There are dates on a lot of these maps sir." Gardor replied and he started to point out the notes that were beside many of the marks that had been made on the maps. Then he walked over to the map on the table in the centre of the room and pointed to it, "This has today's date on it." he said.

Mott walked over to the table himself and looked at what Gardor was pointing to. This map showed a region close to Hallarn Point that had numerous locations marked on it and dated. Many of these went back a number of years but as Gardor had said there were a few that had the current date on them. One of these was a circle around a settlement while the others were crosses not far away. A line drawn through all three and starting at the settlement showed that they formed a straight line and Mott did not think this was a coincidence.

"Something started here and moved this way." he said, running his finger along the line.

"Do you think they're heading somewhere in particular?" Gardor asked and Mott paused to consider this.

Noticing a ruler not far away along with a writing stylus he picked both of them up and laid the ruler down on the map before extending the line already drawn on it as far as it would reach.

"Somewhere along this path." he replied, "Something at this settlement must have given them a bearing."

"So what do we do now sir?" Gardor added.

"This is Miss Drud's operation. We kick it up to her." Mott said and he activated his comlink, "Mott to Miss Drud, are you listening?" he transmitted.

"Of course I am." Rylee responded, "I've been listening to your comms since you jumped. What have you found?"

"Maps." Mott said simply and he looked around the room again at the numerous annotated maps, "They are all marked with points of interest and dated. It looks like this Carasson was studying something about eighty kilometres from here. There are three points all in a straight line that are dated in the last twenty hours. I suspect that if we follow that line we'll find whatever they are looking for."

"And do you know what that is? Is it what brought Thal here?" Rylee asked.

"No. the map is marked with locations and times but there is nothing to indicate what this group had found." Mott told her.

"Then I guess we'll just have to go and take a look for ourselves. Let me know as soon as your search of the facility is complete and we'll come back and pick you up." Rylee said.

"Of course. What are your orders for this place then?" Mott responded and there was a pause while Rylee considered this. Had her yacht been armed then she would have been tempted to simply destroy the

buildings used by Carasson's gang from the air, despite the attention that may attract. Using the exhaust from the yacht's ion drive was a possibility but the damage would be spread over a wide area and Rylee knew that an attack on that scale would result in authorities across the galaxy actively trying to hunt her down. She still did not want to leave anything that could be of use to a potential rival or the Jedi she knew to be in the area though and that left her with only one option.

"Destroy it. Gather up anything of interest and bring it back to the ship but burn the rest. Leave nothing intact," she ordered.

"Of course Miss Drud," Mott replied.

"Show me," Jayk said as he and Kat rushed into the cockpit of the *Swift Exit* where Tylo had been keeping watch.

"Here," Tylo replied as Jayk sat in the co-pilot's seat and Kat leant over the back of it so she could also see the flight console easily. Tylo then pointed to the sensor display where it showed a recording of a ship as it rapidly descended over the settlement before suddenly gaining altitude again as it moved out of sensor range.

"And that's Rylee Drud's ship?" Kat commented and Tylo nodded.

"The transponder is a match for the ship that took off from the docking bay you raided," he said. Then he moved the recording to a particular time point where several other contacts split off from the fast moving vessel. These were obviously much smaller than the main contact and they fell towards the ground before vanishing as they dropped beneath the *Swift Exit*'s ability to scan while in a docking bay, "There were heat blooms as they fell but no explosions. I think those were rocket troopers being deployed rather than bombs."

"Power up the engines," Jayk ordered, "We're going to investigate."

"Shouldn't you let Brae know?" Tylo suggested as he powered up the ship's repulsorlifts ready for take off but Jayk shook his head.

"No. Kat and I should be able to handle this. Brae needs to continue her meditation and locate Mara," he said.

"Okay then. Here we go," Tylo responded, pulling back on the control column and the *Swift Exit* rose up off the ground into the sky.

Jayk and Kat left the cockpit to make their way to the cargo hold but as they were walking through the lounge they encountered Brae heading to the cockpit.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Rylee's back. It looks like she deployed a unit of troops from her ship," Jayk answered.

"Let me get my lightsaber," Brae replied but as she turned back towards the doorway leading to the cabin they all shared Jayk called out to her.

"No," he said, "This is Rylee Drud. We still need to locate Teron and the only way to do that is through Mara."

"I've been meditating for hours and I haven't been able to make a connection," Brae said, "I should-"

"You should keep trying. Jayk and I can handle this and if we need you then you're only a call away," Kat interrupted before Tylo shouted from the cockpit.

"We're getting close. Get a move on!" he yelled and Jayk beckoned for Kat to follow him.

Darting into the cargo hold Jayk opened the access ramp but as soon as he did he and Kat both felt a tremor in the Force.

*Danger.*

The two Jedi ducked just as a blaster bolt came flying in through the opening as the access ramp lowered and it hit the ceiling.

"Jayk we're under fire from the roof of one of the buildings below. Wait make that two," Tylo's voice said over the intercom, "Small arms only but I'd rather not hang around just in case they get a lucky shot in."

"Okay we're going," Jayk replied and then he and Kat both charged down the access ramp and leapt from the end into thin air.

Using the Force to control their descent, the two Jedi both ignited their lightsabers as they dropped and landed on the rooftop not far from one another. Jayk was also within arms' reach of one of the armoured soldiers on the roof and he acted quickly, swinging his lightsaber in a broad arc so that he almost cut the man in half.

Taken completely by surprise by the two Jedi who suddenly jumped down from the hovering *Swift Exit*, the soldiers on the rooftops were still able to lower their aim from the sky before the Jedi could strike again and they opened fire with their weapons. Neither Jayk nor Kat had to say anything to one another in order to instantly turn back to back so that they could cover all directions and they rapidly swung their lightsabers back and forth, deflecting one blaster bolt after another and where they could they sent these back at the soldiers who had fired them.

This process slowly reduced the numbers of soldiers firing at the Jedi to the point where they were able to split up and charge at the survivors. Jayk ran across the rooftop, continuing to deflect any incoming blaster fire while the mercenaries backed away from him. Jayk moved far more quickly than they could though and

he reached them quickly, cutting them down in rapid succession with his lightsaber. The last of the mercenaries was almost to the edge of the roof as Jayk approached him and with nowhere left to retreat to he instead activated his rocket pack, shooting up into the air. However, Jayk was also able to leap upwards, drawing on the Force to boost his jump and he swung his lightsaber at the airborne mercenary. His strike just missed the man himself but the tip of his blade clipped the rocket pack itself and it briefly spluttered before it died, leaving the mercenary tumbling helplessly through the air. The mercenary began to scream in panic as he fell between the buildings, plummeting to his death on the ground below while Jayk landed back on the roof.

On the other hand Kat charged towards the edge of the roof and used the Force to enhance her jump between it and the neighbouring building where a second unit of mercenaries had been firing from. She landed on this second rooftop right in front of one of the mercenaries with her lightsaber held pointing directly ahead of her and she impaled him through his chest plate. There were two other men left on the roof and both of them aimed their weapons at Kat, firing almost in unison from two different directions. Trying to deflect either attack would have left Kat exposed to the other so instead of standing her ground she dived and rolled out of the way, heading for one of the startled mercenaries. She then sprang back to her feet and slashed her lightsaber across his chest and he collapsed dead on the spot. With only one opponent remaining to her Kat turned towards him only to see that he had also turned around and was running away as fast as he could, heading for an entry point that would take him down inside the building below. Kat started to run after the man but he had too much of a head start on her and she knew that there was no way that she would be able to catch him in time. However, the door was wide open and through it Kat could see the control panel. This gave her an opportunity and with a wave of her hand she triggered the locking mechanism. The door slammed shut in an instant, sealing itself closed and when the mercenary reached it he found himself unable to open it. Turning back around the mercenary raised his blaster rifle only to find that Kat was now much closer and he fired instinctively at her. His aim was good and the blaster bolt sped towards her only for her to block the shot with her lightsaber, sending the energy blast straight back at the mercenary who had fired it and he fell against the closed door before slumping to the roof. Hearing a sound from behind her Kat turned around again but she did so calmly, sensing Jayk's leap from the other rooftop through the Force.

"So where to now?" she asked, looking around.

"Well there's a door right here. I suggest we get it open again and see what these men were protecting." Jayk replied.

From inside the command centre Mott and the mercenaries with him heard the sound of the *Swift Exit* approaching.

"We haven't called the yacht in yet." Mott commented before the sound of repulsorlifts was joined by the sound of firing, "This is Mott, what's going on?" he said into the comlink built into his armour.

"Jedi! The Jedi are-" the voice of one of the mercenaries on the roof responded before he was cut off and Mott looked around at the mercenaries who were in the process of gathering up the contents of the command centre.

"We don't have time to sort through anything now." he told them, "Just grab what you can carry in your suits and we'll burn the rest. I'm going to see what's going on." then he strode from the command centre with his rifle in his hands.

Mott began by heading towards the nearest turbolift but before he reached it he heard a blaster shot along with the hum of a lightsaber coming from around a corner ahead of him. Knowing that the trooper who had just fired at the Jedi was probably dead Mott opted for an alternate means of attack and he took a grenade from his load carrying vest. Then he pulled out the pin, released his grip to begin the timer before tossing it towards the corner so that it bounced around it and then exploded before the Jedi could use their powers to hurl the explosive back at him. Mott just had time to turn around and crouch down so that the rear of his heavily armoured vest would protect him from any secondary effects of the explosion but there were none of these when he heard the booming sound from behind him.

Mott then turned around again and gripped his blaster rifle as he rushed towards the corner, hoping to capitalise on the effects of the grenade. The handheld explosive had done considerable damage to the corridor, including the floor and Mott slowed to avoid accidentally collapsing the floor. When he looked around the corner though he found himself looking only at the ruins of an empty corridor with the remains of one of his own men in it. Of the Jedi he knew had to have been there, there was no sign at all.

"Mott to all units." he said into his comlink as he turned back towards the command centre, "We have Jedi on the loose in the primary building."

Jayk and Kat clung to the inside of the turbolift shaft above the hole they had cut in the car's roof, waiting to see if anyone would approach it after the grenade went off, letting their minds focus on the Force for even



the slightest disturbance caused by the presence of a living being.

"I think he's gone." Kat whispered and Jayk nodded in agreement.

"I suggest we continue our search. I suspect that there may be something in the direction he came from." he said.

The two jedi then carefully climbed down through the hole beneath them, alert for any threat that may have somehow evaded detection. It was unlikely that a living being would be able to escape the jedi's senses but there were any number of technological threats from mines to battle droids that could be waiting for them.

Jayk was first out of the turbolift and he checked in both directions while Kat followed him.

"That grenade really did a number." she said as she felt the heavily damaged floor creak beneath her weight.

"We should take care." Jayk replied, making his way down the corridor towards the corner Mott had thrown the grenade around. Kat waited a few moments before she followed him, not wanting to concentrate their weight where it could not be supported. Coming to the corner Jayk looked around it to confirm that the corridor was empty on that side as well, "Coast's clear." he said as he stepped around the corner and waited for Kat to catch up with him and then they hurried on together.

"That's definitely the *Swift Exit*." Morton said, looking at the detailed scans taken by the sensors of Rylee's yacht. Tylo had worked for Morton long enough that he knew the ship and its distinctive nose art of a scantily dressed woman reclining with a blaster by sight. He and Rylee were standing at the rear of the yacht's cockpit

"And that's a problem for us." the yacht's pilot added.

"That piece of junk?" Rylee replied.

"That piece of junk has a laser cannon and we don't." Morton reminded her and he pointed to the dorsally mounted turret that the *Swift Exit* was armed with, "There's no way we can slow down enough for Mott and his men to rocket pack back up to us without Tylo shooting us down."

"The jedi are on the ground. If Tylo is flying that ship then who is going to operate the turret?" Rylee replied.

"Are you sure they're all down there Rylee? It only takes one to have stayed behind." Morton said, "Call Mott and tell him to get out of there. He should be able to pull out and find somewhere to lay low until we can sort something else out."

Rylee frowned, impatient to get the material Mott and his men had discovered safely aboard the yacht but she could not deny the truth of what Morton and her pilot were telling her. Reaching for the communications headset she wore, she activated the device to patch directly into the yacht's communication system.

"Mott it's Rylee." she said.

"Go ahead." Mott's voice responded.

"Mott we can't get to you, the jedi have air support. You're going to have to withdraw and go to ground. Transmit images of the material you have. If you find an alternative means of exit then take it."

"Understood. Stand by for our transmission. We'll be on our way out then." Mott replied.

Tylo glanced over his shoulder when he heard the cockpit door open and he saw Brae enter before she sat down beside him.

"Aren't you supposed to be meditating kid?" he said and she sighed.

"I can't concentrate knowing dad is down there. I should have gone with them but instead he sent me to my room." she replied.

"Okay I'll let you stay up as long you're good but don't tell your dad I said it was okay." Tylo said.

"Deal." Brae said before she noticed the ship on the sensor display, "Is that Rylee's ship?" she asked.

"Unless there are two fancy yachts filled with rocket jumpers around, yeah that's her. Which means that that creep Morton Crayne is probably aboard with her." Tylo answered, "Right now Rylee and Morton can't come in to pick up their men and we can't shoot them down because they're over the city and a crashing starship would kill a lot of people down there."

"On the other hand if they bring their ship in to pick up their men then they'll be over an uninhabited area." Brae added.

"May I interject?" Cal's voice said over the intercom, his holocron accessing it wirelessly from the *Swift Exit*'s lounge.

"Yes Cal, what is it?" Brae said.

"I'm patched into the communication system and we're picking up a transmission from the ground." Cal said.

"Yeah Cal, I've been spotting those but they're encrypted." Tylo commented.

"Yes but they were voice signals, this is a data packet. Or rather several data packets. I can't decrypt audio in real time but I'm sure I can crack a data signal using the tools in the *Swift Exit*'s computer." Cal said.

"That sounds like a good idea to me Cal." Tylo said before Brae pointed to the sensor display.

"Look! They're leaving." she said as the display showed the yacht turning and flying away, their path rapidly taking them away from the city.

"Stang!" Tylo hissed, "If we go after them then we're abandoning your dad and Kat but the turret isn't charged up. We can't hit them right now. You know this is where a concussion missile system would have come in useful but your Jedi Order turned me down."

"We need to stay here." Brae said, "Dad might need help and without their soldiers Rylee and Morton aren't going to be much of a threat to us."

"If you say so kid but I'm charging the gun just in case they come back." Tylo responded.

Jayk and Kat were able to sense the concentration of sentient minds from some distance along the corridor outside the command centre and they advanced towards it cautiously. To help hide their presence they shut off their lightsabers so that there was no glow or characteristic 'hum' to give them away and they paused at each junction to check around it before proceeding. However, Mott had seen fit to position a sentry at the entrance to keep watch for them and the moment that Jayk peered around the final corner there was a flash of blaster fire that caused the jedi to quickly retreat.

"How many?" Kat asked.

"One guard." Jayk answered as the pair both ignited their lightsabers.

At the same time Mott and his mercenaries swapped from packing as much of the material from the command centre as possible to readying their weapons.

"Back from the door." Mott ordered the sentry as he took another grenade from his load carrying vest. Unlike the first one he had tried to use against the jedi though this was a smoke grenade instead of an explosive one and he hurled this out into the corridor where it burst open and a thick cloud of smoke began to form rapidly.

"Team Aurek, suppressing fire." he ordered and one of the teams of mercenaries quickly took cover where they had a clear line of fire through the doorway and began shooting their rifles, sending rapid pulses of blaster fire randomly into the corridor.

At the same time this was happening Mott turned his blaster rifle towards the command centre's exterior wall and opened fire with his blaster rifle set to fully automatic. Although the windows set into the wall had been covered over the original transparent polymer material was still there and the impact of the high energy blasts into these burned large holes through them, splintering what was left and causing the pieces to fall to the ground below.

"Okay let's go." he said, charging across the room but not climbing through any of the destroyed windows. Instead he turned around and watched as his men grabbed whatever they could, stuffing it into pockets or pouches before they ran for the smashed windows and dived through them, igniting their rocket packs as they dropped.

The thick smoke rapidly filled the corridor between the jedi and the command centre and although Jayk and Kat could sense the presence of the mercenaries on the other side of the cloud they could not pick out their exact positions. Therefore, although they could deflect any of the blaster bolts from the storm of them flying out of the cloud that came close enough to be a threat they could not direct them back at their attackers and without that ability they were unable to lessen the weight of fire coming at them.

"We'll have to do this together." Jayk said as he continued to bat blaster bolts away and Kat nodded.

"Ready when you are." she said.

"From three then." Jayk said the two jedi changed their double handed grips on their lightsabers to single handed ones, "Three. Two. One. Now!" Jayk added and in unison he and Kat both let the Force flow through them and extended their free hands to direct it in the form of a telekinetic blast that travelled along the corridor into the cloud of smoke like a strong gust of wind. This was strong enough to blow the smoke further along the corridor and cleared the approach to the command centre enough to reveal the entrance and the mercenaries defending it.

With their opponents now in clear view Kat was able to send the next blaster shot that came towards her straight back at the firer and the man spun around as he was hit in his shoulder.

"Fall back!" Mott yelled at his men when he saw this and another of the mercenaries helped the injured man back to his feet before the unit started to fall back, still firing their weapons as they backed up towards the smashed windows.

Mott lifted his own rifle again and pointed it towards the entrance as soon as his men were out of his line of fire. Even though the jedi were not in sight he fired a burst through the doorway to try and dissuade them from simply rushing into the command centre before Mott and his men could complete their withdrawal. When he saw the glow from a lightsaber appear around the door frame he ceased fire though, not wanting to give the jedi the opportunity to turn his own weapon against him. Instead he now turned his weapon on what remained of the contents of the command centre and he fired a sustained burst from his rifle, shattering artefacts and setting light to both modern maps and ancient documents alike. He ceased fire just as Jayk dived through the doorway and turned towards the broken window behind him. Before Jayk could do anything to stop him, Mott dived towards the window and triggered his rocket pack while still inside. This sent a blast of flame towards Jayk and also Kat as she came through the doorway behind him, forcing both of them to take cover while Mott flew through the window. Within the confines of the command centre the

flames also enveloped the maps and artefacts that Mott and his men had been forced to leave behind, setting them all on fire before the Jedi could claim any of the material for themselves.

Now unopposed Jayk and Kat rushed across the room and looked out of the smashed windows. As it turned out the mercenaries were still very easy to see. Rather than simply using their rocket packs to control their descent as they had when they jumped from the yacht they were now using them to sustain flight as they sped away from the cluster of buildings that served as Carasson's headquarters, flying over the surrounding buildings.

"We'll never catch them now." Kat commented.

Had either Jedi been carrying a more conventional blaster instead of their lightsabers then they could have probably picked off the mercenaries one by one. However, lacking ranged weaponry all they could do was watch as they fled and Jayk quickly reached for his comlink.

"Jayk to *Swift Exit*." Jayk said into the device.

"Go ahead dad." Brae responded and Jayk frowned.

"Brae? Why aren't you meditating?" he asked.

"Oops." Brae answered.

"I thought an extra pair of eyes would be handy to keep watch on that yacht. If they made a move towards us I can't fly and operate the turret at the same time and Cal can't handle complex combat manoeuvres." Tylo added.

"Of course you did." Jayk said, his tone indicating that he did not believe a word that Tylo was saying before he got to the real reason he had contacted their ship, "Tylo do you see the rocket troopers heading away from us?" he said.

"Sure, they're showing up clearly on our sensors." Tylo told him before he suddenly added, "Wait a moment. One just vanished."

"He landed. He disappeared between the buildings." Kat said loud enough for her voice to be picked up by the comlink and as she and Jayk watched more of the mercenaries abruptly shut off their rocket packs and dropped out of sight, losing themselves among the settlement's other structures.

"We've lost them. There are too many for Tylo to track individually." Jayk said and Kat turned to look at the remains of the room.

"And it looks like they didn't leave much behind. This must have been important." Kat said as she looked at the ruined and burning contents of the command centre.

"I suspect that this is just what they couldn't carry." Jayk added.

"Hey Jayk." Tylo's voice then said from the comlink that Jayk had not yet turned off.

"Yes what is it Tylo?" Jayk replied.

"Cal was monitoring all of the enemy communications right up to where Rylee's ship turned and ran. He said that in addition to the expected voice signals there was a data packet at the last minute." Tylo explained and Jayk and Kat looked at one another.

"Recordings of all this maybe?" Kat suggested and Jayk smiled.

"From what we know of Rylee Drud I doubt she'd want to lose even the smallest clue. Right now if her soldiers were able to save anything then they have it, not her and she won't be getting any of this so sending digital images seems like a sound idea." he said, "Tylo does Cal think he can crack the encryption?"

"He's working on it now. He seemed confident he could come up with something." Tylo said.

"In that case I think it's time you came down and joined us. Rylee's people are gone and it looks like they didn't leave anything behind but I'd still like to check and see if they missed anything." Jayk told him.

"Okay we're on our way. I'll have us down in two minutes." Tylo responded.

Even as the yacht was speeding away Rylee and Morton were already going through the images that Mott had sent in his data packet in the yacht's main lounge.

"They've been poking around this planet for years." Morton said, "So how come your family never came here?"

"The resources of the Founding Families do have their limits. Why else do you think I hired you and your people? I couldn't just ask Mister Mott and his mercenary force to follow up every lead. Besides this planet was supposed to have been purged by the Jedi Order. It would have been way down on our list of priorities before you were able to acquire Thal's ship. That does look interesting though." Rylee said as she looked at the image of the map marked with the current date.

"Yes, interesting enough for an entire gang to go rushing after." Morton added.

"Then we need to go there as well." Rylee said, "I'll tell the pilot to set a course."

"Whoa, wait a moment there." Morton said, "We knew a gang of armed criminals headed out that way and most of your troops are now lying low in the city. We've got less than a dozen men including the flight crew."

"I'm not planning on fighting a war Morton. Whoever is in charge of that gang obviously thought they needed the manpower so there must be some other threat there. Either we can wait while the gang and whoever

else is out there destroy one another or we can use the distraction for you to show off the skills that you are always bragging about."

"That could be possible, yes." Morton agreed, "But we don't know exactly what's out there."

"Which is why we need to go now. I don't want some backwater scavengers getting to my prize before we can Morton. My father would not look kindly on that and trust me, he is not as forgiving as I am." Rylee said. "Fair enough but we should keep our distance until we know exactly what we're up against." Morton replied. Rylee then reached for a nearby intercom panel and activated it.

"Pilot." she said.

"Yes Miss Drud?" the pilot responded.

"Lay in a course. Grid trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight is our target but I want you to stop ten kilometres short so we can survey the area before we proceed." Rylee ordered.

"Yes Miss Drud, laying in a course now." the pilot said before Rylee just turned off the intercom.

Following the ambush by Carasson's scouts, Teron and his gang were alert for further attacks and he had deployed pairs of outriders on each side as well as sending a unit of men ahead led by Mara, enabling him to be aware of their position and status at all times. However, instead of one of these patrols being the first to detect an approaching threat Teron sensed it directly through the Force, his enhanced senses hearing the sound of repulsorlifts.

"Incoming." he said calmly and he brought his mount to a halt.

"Where?" Krovak asked, also bringing his mount to a halt and looking around for the source of the threat.

"Approaching from the direction of Hallarn Point in several aircraft." Teron said and he pointed towards the sound only he could hear.

"Dismount and deploy. Incoming air attack from that direction." Krovak yelled, waving an arm in the same direction that Teron had just pointed in and the gang began to dismount from the beasts they rode.

"Find cover." Teron ordered, knowing that the gang's stock of dedicated anti-aircraft weapons was limited to a pair of shoulder fired concussion missiles but instead of following his own order he began to walk across the open country in the direction of the oncoming aircraft.

"Teron, what are you doing?" Krovak called out. Even though he could feel the rising power of the Dark Side flowing through his own armour his sense of self preservation was still strong enough for him to have found a rock formation to hide behind while two other gang members were setting up a light repeating blaster on it.

"Testing a theory." Teron replied and he drew his lightsaber just as the aircraft came into view. He did not ignite the weapon just yet though, not wanting to reveal his power to the pilots of the oncoming craft, instead he wanted to trick them into focusing on him while the rest of his gang prepared themselves.

Focusing his mind on the aircraft, Teron could tell that each contained multiple beings and that the Dark Side surrounded them all, proving to him that their intent was hostile. Had they been attack craft then Teron would have taken cover along with his gang at this point but when he lifted his macrobinoculars to his eyes he could see clearly that they were civilian transport speeders rather than military craft. Two of them did appear to sport bolted on weaponry though and Teron focused his attention on these two craft in particular.

One of the unarmed transports, the smallest of the approaching squadron suddenly pulled ahead of the rest and raced towards where Teron stood on his own in the open. Teron did not flinch as the transport headed directly towards him, already knowing that it lacked dedicated weaponry but as it came closer still he felt a tremor in the Force.

*Danger.*

Teron suddenly realised that despite the craft's lack of mounted armament he was still about to come under attack and he ignited his lightsaber just as a large door on the side of the transport was opened by the passengers and a blaster pointed out through it. The transport veered off slightly so that the weapon could be aimed at Teron more easily and a sudden stream of energy bolts erupted from it. Teron reacted swiftly, standing his ground but moving his lightsaber rapidly enough that he was able to deflect each blaster bolt away from him in turn. He was unable to target the transport or its gunner and so the blaster bolts went either into empty air or the ground where they tore up small plumes of dirt.

After several seconds of watching this Krovak suddenly pushed aside the gang member with the repeating blaster next to him, the Dark Side energy flowing through him making him far too angry and impatient to wait for an order from Teron and he took control of the weapon. Pulling the trigger Krovak sent another stream of energy blasts into the sky towards the transport. The pilot had had to slow down to give his passenger the chance to shoot at Teron with any degree of accuracy so Krovak was also able to take aim at the transport. The transport was still moving fairly quickly though and initially he failed to take this into account, the blasts from the repeating blaster passing through the air behind it. Krovak quickly realised his mistake though and shifted his aim, leading the shots so that the transport flew right into them. Lacking any armour plating or ray shielding, the cockpit of the transport was ripped open in a ball of flame and what was left of the craft tumbled out of the air until it crashed into the ground and exploded.

"He used himself to draw in our transport." Teressa said after witnessing the destruction of the transport from the cockpit of the craft she and Carasson were aboard.

"That gunner still gave away where his people are hiding though and he'll be a lot easier to deal with without them." Carasson replied and he reached for the comlink, "Gallask, let's heat things up. Put your rockets around the source of that ground fire." he ordered.

"Understood. Beginning our run now." the pilot of the transport armed with the improvised missile system responded and he moved his craft into a firing position.

The moment that the rocket armed transport had a clear line of fire towards the positions occupied by Teron's gang the craft's co-pilot launched them all in a single volley. The crude weapons had no guidance system and simply shot ahead of the transport, spreading out slightly as they travelled and this spread meant that they impacted the ground over a wide area before exploding. Lacking military grade explosives, Carasson's engineers had instead improvised incendiary warheads for the missiles and they created a fierce firestorm spread over an area several hundred metres across. Teron himself was outside the blast but he had not been the primary target in any case and Carasson smiled as he saw the destruction that the incendiary rockets had wrought. Several burning figures were visible, attempting to flee despite already being on fire to varying degrees and those mounts that had not been burned were panicked by the flames and fled.

"Now we take out that guy with the lightsaber." Carasson said, "Pilot take us in and let's see how well he can deal with a blast from our cannon."

"I'm starting my run." the pilot replied and he moved the transport away from the others, mimicking the path of the rocket armed vehicle that was now circling around to join the rest of the squadron.

"Hold on I'm not set." the co-pilot said as he prepared the blaster cannon that had been fixed to the nose of the transport for firing, charging up the capacitors that would store the energy needed to fire the weapon.

This process took just a few seconds though and when he was done he turned to the screen that was acting as his targeting system, displaying an image of Teron with an aiming reticule overlaid onto it, "All set. Target acquired." he added and Carasson smiled.

"You may fire when ready." he told the co-pilot.

Moments later the co-pilot squeezed the trigger built into his flight controls, intending to fire a powerful energy bolt that even someone well trained in the use of a lightsaber would be powerless to overcome and the moment he did this there was a brilliant flash from outside the transport. However, this was not the easily seen muzzle flash of an energy weapon, it was the cannon itself exploding and an alarm began to sound in the cockpit.

"What's wrong?" Teressa exclaimed.

"The cannon exploded." the co-pilot answered as he frantically jabbed at the controls in front of him while flames flickered outside the canopy from the burning weapon.

"I knew we should have tested it properly." Teressa added, looking at Carasson.

"Just turn us back around. We'll have to deal with him on the ground instead. What can he do against us on his own anyway?" he said.

Teron had been prepared to face the attack from above before he saw the blaster cannon mounted beneath the transport's nose explode and the vehicle abruptly veer off with smoke trailing from the burning weapon. The other aircraft were also turning away now and Teron copied them, looking back at where his gang had been. Now the area in front of him was a raging inferno with multiple large fires burning fiercely.

Not quite everyone that had accompanied him this far had been killed in the rocket attack though and as Teron watched an armoured figure strode through the flames, apparently unarmed.

"Krovak is there anyone else left?" he asked.

"None that I've seen." Krovak replied from under the Sith-crafted helmet that had saved his life before Teron spotted more movement.

Turlan had been on the periphery of the area affected by the rocket attack and combined with the fantastic healing ability of the gen'dai had survived with only minor burns.

"As you already know it takes more than a little fire to kill me." he said, referring to injuries that he had suffered when they first met and he had to heal from.

"What about Mara?" Krovak said, knowing that Teron had a telepathic link to the possessed woman.

"Her team is still five hundred metres ahead of us." Teron told him, "Holding position and waiting for orders."

"Then everyone we lost was expendable anyway." Turlan commented.

"What do we do about the beings that attacked us? We can't let them get away with this." Krovak added and Teron smiled.

"They will be among the first to pay Krovak. When my master takes control of the weapon we will unleash a fresh purge on this world that will strip away everything. Those fools with their improvised weapons are insignificant compared to the power of the Force." he said.

"Apart from Mara's, all our mounts and the repulsor sleds are gone though. We're going to be walking from now on." Krovak pointed out, "How long will that add to our journey?"

"Not as much as you fear Krovak. We are very close to our destination now. Perhaps another five or six kilometres." Teron said.

"Five or six kilometres?" Krovak repeated.

"Yes Krovak and then we will bring the Jedi and their precious Republic to their knees. By this time tomorrow the Sith Empire will have risen again." Teron replied.

Jayk and Kat were waiting as Tylo brought the *Swift Exit* in to land and they walked towards the access ramp as it was lowered.

"Dad." Brae called out as she walked down the ramp to meet them, "Come quick. You have to see this, Cal's cracked the encryption on the data files he picked up being transferred."

"That was quick." Kat commented and Jayk nodded in agreement.

"Yes and if Brae's reaction is anything to go by there is obviously something important in them." he said.

"There is. Come on, Cal and Tylo are waiting in the lounge." Brae told them both and they followed her back up the ramp into the ship.

Since being forced to serve as transport to Jayk and Brae, Tylo had taken significant advantage of the Jedi Order making funds available to him to maintain the *Swift Exit*, something that Jayk had turned a blind eye to and among the luxuries Tylo had been able to install aboard the ship at the Jedi's expense was a large video screen in the lounge. Normally Tylo used this to watch sports broadcasts during the time between assignments but it also came in useful for the purpose it was officially installed for, the display of vital mission information and as the three Jedi entered the lounge Tylo stood looking at the screen while Cal used it to show the images he had been able to decrypt. Cal could have just projected these from his holocron using the same system that enabled him to project an image of himself for people to interact with but by making use of the screen he was able to project his own hologram at the same time and it appeared that he was standing beside Tylo when the Jedi arrived.

"What have you found Cal?" Jayk asked.

"It seems that Rylee Drud's people were taking an interest in maps." Cal answered.

"So unless they've suddenly taken an interest in orienteering then I think some had made notes on where stuff related to the Sith had been found and those mercenaries were feeding the locations to Rylee." Tylo added.

"It looks like a lot of artefacts have been found here." Kat commented, looking at the various maps shown on the screen and noticing the numerous markings that had obviously been added by hand to them.

"Tell me again how you lot conducted a purge on this world that was supposed to clear up all of this stuff." Tylo said.

"Not all Sith artefacts are banned, you know that Tylo." Brae pointed out.

"No but I know that what can be owned is supposed to be inspected and cleared by the Jedi Order to make sure it can't be used to bring the Sith back and it's obvious you only did a half assed job of that here." Tylo replied.

"The purge was carried out during the time of the Ruusan Reformation. The Jedi Order was distracting by rebuilding itself." Jayk told him.

"Ah yes, your precious rules. If they'd been followed since the dawn of the Republic then Kat and I would be the only people in this room. None of the rest of you would have been born. Haven't you ever considered telling the council to stick their rules and just leaving to live a real life?" Tylo said.

"Debating the Jedi Code will get us nowhere." Jayk said, not noticing that Brae's eyes had widened for a moment as she considered how different her life might be if she had been raised openly by Jayk and her mother, "Cal are there any indications of what may have brought Thal here?"

"Thal? No. There are a number of notes from around the time we know he was coming here but they're spread out all over the place." Cal said before he changed the image on the screen to show just a single map instead of the selection of smaller ones that had been shown when the Jedi first arrived in the lounge,

"On the other hand this map has three entries for today, all of them connected by the line you see here."

"Three discoveries by one being or one group?" Kat suggested and Jayk nodded.

"It looks that way to me." he said before he looked towards Cal's hologram, "Cal do you have a record of the purge?" he asked.

"You mean a detailed list of everything that the order found?" Cal replied.

"Yes. Whatever it is on this world that is important enough to attract Thal N'Krey, Teron Sharr and Rylee Drud has to be big and while I can believe that the Jedi Order may have missed a few icons and documents I doubt they would have missed something so major unless-" Jayk began.

"Unless it was hidden by something bigger." Brae interrupted with a smile and Jayk looked at her and smiled as well.

"Exactly." he said.

"I'll need to access the temple records for that." Cal said.

"Do we have hypernet access here?" Kat said.

"Yes, I can log onto the hypernet using our Jedi Order ID." Cal replied.



"Then do it." Jayk told him, "We're looking for a major find that is located somewhere in the path of that line." he continued and he pointed to the line that linked the three points.

"Okay, accessing the hypernet. This may take a few minutes." Cal said.

"You think that someone is moving towards something?" Tylo said.

"I do." Jayk responded, "I don't think those marks represent artefact finds. I think they are places where the group that created this map has seen Teron Sharr."

"We haven't seen him so I suppose he has to be somewhere." Brae commented.

"And if he knows what is on this planet somehow he's also likely to know exactly where it is." Jayk said, "Of course if he just landed his transport right on top of it then he'd be telling everyone else where it is as well. On the other hand if he landed where surface tracking couldn't pick him up then he could travel over ground to avoid detection."

"So you think the locals have been tipped off about Teron and have been trailing him?" Tylo said.

"It's a reasonable conclusion." Kat added.

"And one that fits the available facts it seems." Cal added.

"You've got an answer?" Brae said.

"I have." Cal responded, "When the Jedi Order launched its purge of Andromora there was a large structure located in the region that this map covers and someone following the path of that line would come right to it."

"You said there 'was' a large structure. You mean it's not there now?" Brae said.

"No. The temple archives say that the structure was a fortress that had been constructed by a Sith called Hasran. Although there were no living defenders there were still a number of battle droids protecting it that had to be subdued and that caused significant damage. Beyond that the design of the fortress included significant structural features and decoration that were considered to hold too much information about Sith technology and the Jedi master on the scene decided that the most efficient means of removing it all was just to demolish the entire fortress." Cal explained.

"So what do we know about this Hasran?" Tylo asked.

"Not much. He was confirmed killed on Ruusan at the end of the war along with the rest of the Sith when the thought bomb was triggered prematurely. Apart from that he seems to have been something of a minor Sith from a backwater planet in the empire." Cal answered.

"If the entire fortress was destroyed though, what could be left?" Brae said.

"An underground facility." Kat said, "Unless there was time to bring in specialised scanning equipment almost anything could be hidden beneath the above ground structure of the fortress."

"There are no records of any such scans being carried out." Cal commented.

"Then we need to carry them out." Jayk added and Tylo nodded.

"That should be possible." he said, "The *Swift Exit* may not be a dedicated geological survey ship but her sensors are the best the Jedi Order was willing to pay for and they're more than seven centuries more advanced than what would have been available when you guys purged the planet after the war."

"The problem is that in order to carry out a scan we're going to have to position the *Swift Exit* directly above the former site of the fortress before running very obvious active scans and that will give us away. If any of the other groups looking for the facility don't know where it is but are monitoring us then we'll be telling them exactly where to look." Jayk said.

"And we could be handing them the means to take control of the most powerful weapon ever created." Tylo said and Brae frowned.

"What makes you so sure it's a weapon Tylo?" she asked.

"Oh come on kid, it has to be." Tylo responded, "Something wiped out all life on this planet and there just so happens to be a secret Sith facility here? It's a weapon, mark my words and if that brat Teron or Rylee and her Founding Family mates get a hold of it then you can bet your last credit that they'll turn it on the Republic the first chance they get."

"Rylee has this map as well and if it is marked with sightings of Teron then he must have a good idea of the weapon's location and it won't take long for Rylee to find him." Kat pointed out.

"Is Rylee Drud a problem now? Without her mercenaries she's no match for Teron." Brae said.

"And her ship is unarmed. If we catch them then we can shoot them down easily." Tylo added.

"Tylo get us ready to launch again." Jayk said, "I don't want to go into this blind. We need to have some idea of what we're dealing with even if that means leading Teron or Rylee to it as well. As Kat said they can't be far behind us anyway."

Although the sight of heavily armed and armoured soldiers dropping from the sky had startled those passers by who happened to be close to where Mott and his men landed none of the mercenaries faced any challenge by the local authorities who were too ill equipped to deal with such a force anyway. The first thing that Mott did when he landed was assess the locations of his men, to increase their chances of evading any sort of pursuit the mercenaries had split up and this had left them spread over a wide area of the city and Mott needed to gather them together again.

"Report locations." he said into the comlink built into his armour, broadcasting his order to all of his men and one by one they began to tell him their locations as given to them by their armour. It rapidly became apparent that his men were all located within a hundred metres of his current position. This was a relief to Mott who knew that if the Jedi were to pursue his men then they would find it very easy to pick them off one by one in their current isolated state, "All units rendezvous at sector one one point three eight." he ordered and he immediately began to run down the street he had landed in. There was a small crowd present but they quickly parted as Mott ran, afraid that they would simply be gunned down where they stood if they got in his way.

The location that Mott had given to his men for them to rendezvous at was not far from where he had landed but he was not the closest and there were already three armoured warriors waiting when he arrived. The location that Mott had chosen was a backstreet that was deserted apart from the mercenaries.

"Did the Jedi follow us?" one of the mercenaries that arrived ahead of Mott asked.

"I left them in the command centre but they could be after us now." Mott answered before all of them turned towards the sound of approaching footsteps and raised their weapons just in case they were about to come under attack.

"Friendlies." one of the approaching warriors said and those already present relaxed their stance.

With more of his men present Mott now began to consider their next move. Although Rylee had images of everything they had found in the gang's headquarters Mott and his men still had possession of what he considered the most useful items and he wanted to be able to deliver these to her as quickly as he could. For that though they were going to need transport and Mott began to consider the potential sources available to them.

"We need speeders." he said.

"Why not a starship?" one of his men asked.

"Do you really think there are many of those around here?" Mott responded, "Even if we do find another ship we'll probably have to try to get around a security lockout. There'll be more speeders and they don't have the same level of protection."

"I saw several speeder trucks on my way here." one of the recently arrived mercenaries told him.

"Where?" Mott asked.

"It looked like a loading area beside a docking bay commander. There were at least half a dozen speeder trucks there." the mercenary answered.

"Probably waiting to be hired for moving cargoes from ships that land in the docking bays." another added and Mott nodded in agreement.

"Then that is our target. We'll wait for the others to get here and then move out together. If the Jedi are coming after us then we'll need the advantage of numbers." Mott told his men that were already present. Given the relatively small area in which the mercenaries had landed it did not take long for the rest of Mott's men to arrive and as soon as they were gathered together Mott led them out, allowing the soldier who had seen the parked speeder trucks to direct him. Just as when the individual mercenaries had made their way through the streets the crowds had parted, the local inhabitants backed away as soon as they saw the band of heavily armed soldiers advancing towards them to leave a large gap for them to pass through. Not long after they started though they saw a small starship rise up into the sky and disappear into the distance as it ascended further.

"That was the *Swift Exit*." Mott said.

"Tylo Kurrast's ship? The one the Jedi use?" one of his men responded.

"Yes. This makes things easier for us. If Tylo's ship is gone then the Jedi probably are as well. Now there is nothing here that can threaten us." Mott said, carrying on in the direction he had been told to follow.

As he had been told the loading area was only a short walk away from where Mott had told his men to gather and when they came into view he saw that the largest of the vehicles looked to have enough cargo space to hold all of the mercenaries inside it and that immediately became the focus of his attention.

"Okay that one's our target." Mott told his men and he pointed to the chosen vehicle.

"What's the plan commander?" one of his men asked and Mott looked at him.

"Simple." he replied, "We march over there and take it. It shouldn't be difficult to hot wire and it's not like anyone can stop us."

The loading area was surrounded by a simple fence to keep out casual trespassers but this was ineffective against Mott and his mercenaries who simply blew the lock from the gate and pushed it open. The repulsor trucks were not totally unguarded though and the blaster shot and opening of the gate attracted the attention of a security droid that had been left to protect the loading area. Mounted on three sturdy wheels the machine rolled out from behind the small cabin within the fenced area.

"Halt! You are in violation of legal statutes. Withdraw from this property or you will be fired upon." the droid called out. The droid had two pairs of arms mounted to its cylindrical torso, one of which ended in three-fingered grasping claws while the other mounted a pair of energy weapons.

As soon as the droid called out its warning the mercenaries raised their weapons and the droid responded by firing its built in weaponry. There were two flashes of blue light from the muzzles as they discharged their blasts and both struck mercenaries before they could fire. However, as was the case on most planets in the Republic droids such as this could only mount non-lethal weaponry and so the blasters were fixed on 'stun'. This meant that they lacked the power to penetrate the mercenaries' body armour and both men that were hit remained unharmed. In response to the droid's ineffectual attack the mercenaries unleashed a volley of fire from their own rifles. The droid was designed to resist a limited attack but a volley of fire from military blasters at short range went beyond the limits of its protection and the machine promptly exploded in a shower of sparks. The wheeled chassis remained intact though and it rolled onwards for a short distance before toppling over.

"You." Mott said, pointing to one of his men, "Get that truck started, I want to be out of here in ten minutes. Everyone else keep watch for more of these damned tin cans."

The mercenaries waited as one of their number dashed towards the repulsortruck that Mott intended them to take and he climbed inside, finding the outer door unlocked. Inside though the controls were security sealed and the mercenary used the butt of his rifle to smash open the control system mounted beneath the control console. With access to the control circuitry the mercenary was able to use the tools he carried to bypass the vehicle's security system to start the engine. The mercenary sat up and took hold of the control column as the heavy vehicle rose up off the ground. Checking the instruments he saw that the engine output was stable and he slowly moved it forwards a few metres to test that it was functional.

"We're set." he then called out to the other mercenaries.

"Embark. We're leaving." Mott said and he and his men all turned and rushed towards the repulsortruck.

There was a large cargo door mounted on the side of the vehicle that like the door to the cabin was unlocked and Mott pulled this open so that his men could climb into the back of it while Mott instead made his way to the forward cabin and climbed in to sit beside the mercenary now sat in the driver's seat.

"What's our destination commander?" the mercenary asked and Mott reached into his armour to take out the map he had taken from Carasson's command centre. This was the map that had been laid out on the central table and marked with the locations at which Teron and his gang were known to have been.

"Here." Mott said, pointing to the most recent of the marks, "This is where Miss Drud will be heading so that's where we need to go."

"Yes commander." the driver replied before he set the fully loaded repulsortruck in motion.

"Are we there yet?" Morton asked when he and Rylee entered the cockpit of the yacht.

"We're still forty kilometres out." the pilot answered, "We came in steep and are flying low to try and avoid being spotted."

"Spotted by who?" Rylee said, frowning.

"We're picking up six contacts in nearby airspace." the co-pilot told her and he pointed to the sensor display where there were a cluster of returns.

"Those aren't the jedi." Rylee commented.

"The scavengers." Morton said, studying the sensor returns, "Those are speeders, not starships."

"He's right. They aren't broadcasting any of the transponders we'd expect from a starship." the co-pilot added.

"What the hell are they doing?" Rylee said, seeing that the sensor contacts all appeared to be loitering at the limit of the range that the yacht's sensors could scan at this altitude given the curvature of the planet.

"The same as us I think Miss Drud." the pilot told her, "They're deployed in a search pattern."

"And they're searching along that line on the map." Morton added.

"Have they seen us?" Rylee said.

"I don't think so Miss Drud." the pilot said, glancing at his instruments again, "We're not picking up any active sensor scans from them and we're probably too far away from them for any passive sensors that would be fitted to speeders to pick us up."

"Unless they have military technology." Morton pointed out.

"Modern military technology here on Andromora? I don't think so." Rylee responded, "Which means we know that they're there but they haven't seen us."

"Fat lot of good that does us when we don't have any weapons aboard this ship to shoot them down with. You should have asked your father for a gunship." Morton said.

"Well we don't have a gunship." Rylee snapped at him angrily, "But I believe that Mister Mott did place a number of missile launchers in the hold when his men loaded their gear." then she looked at the pilot and added, "Is there anywhere nearby that we can set down?"

"Yes Miss Drud." the pilot replied, nodding his head, "The ground all around here looks pretty stable."

"Then put us down. We'll travel by speeder from here on." Rylee said.

"The speeder only takes six." Morton reminded her.

"I know that but I don't want to risk the ship and I'm certainly not walking forty kilometres. We'll take the speeder. Besides six is still the two of us plus four of the crew."

"Deploying landing-" the pilot began before an alarm sounded from the control console.

"What's wrong?" Rylee said.

"Someone just bounced an active sensor pulse off us." the co-pilot said.

"The scavengers?" Rylee asked.

"No. The pulse came from above, someone is conducting an orbital scan of the area." the co-pilot said.

"That's too much of a co-incidence. It must be the jedi, but how would they know to be scanning here?" Rylee said.

"The must have intercepted the transmission from Mott." Morton said.

"But that was encrypted." Rylee reminded him.

"Then the jedi must have an expert slicer with them, someone who can break your encryption because they obviously figured out that we were coming here. The question is whether they're more interested in finding what we're after or just stopping us." Morton said.

"What difference does it make?" Rylee asked.

"Well if they want to get to whatever drew Thal N'Krey here in the first place then they'll go straight there. On the other hand if they just want us then they'll be coming here." Morton said and Rylee looked at the pilot again.

"Get us on the ground as quickly as you can. If the jedi are coming for us then I want to be as far from them as possible when they get here." Rylee said.

"Of course Miss Drud. But what are we supposed to do if the jedi attack?" the pilot asked.

"Lock the doors." Rylee told him.

"And hope they don't have lightsabers." Morton added.

Sat in the cockpit of the *Swift Exit* the three jedi and Tylo watched as the freighter's sensors conducted several sweeps of the ground around the former location of Lord Hasran's fortress. The first few were intended to determine the contours of the surface while these were followed by scans using frequencies that could penetrate the ground to varying depths depending on the density of the material they had to pass through. The need to conduct multiple scans in order to build up a complete picture of what lay beneath the surface meant that they had to be patient, watching as new features were added with each subsequent scan. "Is it just me or does the airspace around here look busier than anywhere else on the planet?" Tylo said when he saw the multiple sensor returns from airborne craft, most clustered in one area while a single contact was picked up a significant distance away from them.

"I expect that those contacts are the scavengers." Kat said, pointing to the cluster of multiple sensor returns.

"And the single contact over here has a transponder that matches Rylee Drud's ship." Jayk added as he checked the readings more closely.

"Which means Teron is probably right in between them and heading for the fortress." Tylo said.

"Which is huge." Brae commented as the *Swift Exit's* sensors built up a more detailed picture of what was hidden beneath the mesa on which the fortress had once stood.

All eyes in the cockpit then turned towards the subsurface scan and they saw that beneath the ground there was an enormous void.

*With the site of Lord Hasran's fortress so far from the city where he had landed Thal knew that it would be necessary to travel there by air. He could have simply taken the Sculptor's Blade but he still wanted to make use of Marik's services as a guide and lookout and he preferred not to let anyone aboard his ship unless absolutely necessary. He was also concerned about his ship being tracked, using an anonymous airspeeder instead of the Sculptor's Knife would make it more difficult for anyone trying to follow him from being aware of where he had gone.*

*"This should get us there in about six hours." Marik told Thal as they walked across the hangar to the airspeeder that Marik had hired on Thal's behalf.*

*"That should do. What record will be kept?" Thal asked and Marik smiled.*

*"None. I paid in cash as you asked and did a deal with the agent. He's pocketed the money himself and put it in the log that the previous customer reported a repulsorlift field instability when the speeder went over four hundred kilometres per hour. According to his records we're just taking it out on a test flight to evaluate the complaint. Then when we get back he will list it as no fault found. I had to pay over the odds though. It was less than you were willing to go to but-" he explained.*

*"The money doesn't matter." Thal interrupted, "I can get more money easily. The anonymity you have purchased is all I am interested in."*

*The controls of the airspeeder were similar to those of Marik's landspeeder so operating the vehicle would not be a problem for the man. Initially after take-off Marik flew the airspeeder at a low level away from the city in a different direction to the one needed to reach the area Lord Hasran had made his headquarters in. Only once they were beyond the effective range of the city's radar did Marik gain altitude and turn the speeder in the correct direction, accelerating to maximum speed.*

*The two men did not speak to one another during their flight, Marik focusing on piloting the speeder while Thal used the time to study his notes until he noticed that Marik had turned the speeder again.*

*"Why are we changing course?" Thal asked.*

*"There's another settlement up ahead." Marik told him, "It's not very large and there's no air traffic control to pick us up on radar but they'll see us if we get too close. I'm going to take us around."*

*"Will it take long?" Thal said.*

*"Not long. About ten minutes. Then five after that we'll be where you want us to be." Marik replied and Thal nodded.*

*"Good. As soon as we set down I want to start looking for the entrance to Lord Hasran's fortress." Thal said.*

*"And you're certain that it's still here?" Marik added and Thal nodded.*

*"Positive. I saw the fortress in a dream, the important parts of it are still here despite the efforts of the Jedi to remove it all." he said.*

*"So how come no-one's found it in more than seven hundred years of looking?" Marik said.*

*"Because they weren't worthy of finding it. I am." Thal answered.*

*"I just hope this is worth it." Marik muttered as he steered the airspeeder away from the nearby settlement, circling part way around it until he was able to resume their previous course.*

*The terrain in this region of the planet was one where some of the few forests to have taken root could be found and there were numerous clusters of trees scattered across the hilly ground with areas of rough grass and rocks spread out between them.*

*"That looks good." Thal said, pointing to an area of high and roughly level ground.*

*"If we land there then we'll be easy to spot if anyone comes past." Marik pointed out, "Just because we're past that town doesn't mean that there's no-one around. A lot of treasure hunters come out here to try their luck. I wouldn't be surprised if there were a dozen groups within ten kilometres of here."*

*"Then land down there at the base of the slope." Thal said and he pointed down towards the bottom of the rise where a loose cluster of trees was located. This cluster of vegetation was not particularly dense and appeared to offer enough room for the air speeder to fit without hitting any of the trees while providing cover for the vehicle once it was on the ground.*

*Marik did as he was instructed and flew the air speeder down between the trees before gently setting it down on the ground. As soon as the speeder was on the ground Thal opened his door and leapt out without even waiting for Marik to turn off the speeder's engines. Heading towards the slope, Thal began to run towards the top.*

*"Hey hold on there." Marik called out after him, grabbing his rifle and making sure that the speeder was sealed before he chased after the kiffar.*

The ground that Thal had picked out was a mesa several hundred metres across and as soon as he reached the top Thal began to study the ground.

"Here," he announced, tugging at a clump of grass to reveal the remains of a thick metal rod about ten centimetres in diameter poking up out of the ground.

"What is it?" Marik asked as he ran up the slope behind Thal.

"One of the structural pins from the fortress walls." Thal replied.

"So there really was a fortress here." Marik said, looking around the mesa for any signs of a structure.

"Of course. The Jedi tore down everything they could find, they were afraid that the Sith's places of power would become beacons to those of their followers who had survived the deaths of their masters. Every brick and every treasure was taken away and destroyed. Fortunately Lord Hasran was more cunning than any Jedi and he knew how to hide his greatest treasures from his enemies. Especially those on his own side." Thal said and then he stood up and began to walk across the mesa, his eyes directed down at the ground as he searched for the entrance to an underground chamber he knew had to exist.

While Thal searched Marik kept watch and it was not long before he heard the sound of a repulsorlift engine approaching and he saw a basic skiff come around the mesa, heading for the woods where he had landed the airspeeder. The driver of the skiff slowed down as he approached the woods and Marik saw several figures jump down and start to head towards the trees.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this," he muttered to himself before he added, "Thal we've got company!"

Hearing this shout one of the figures still standing on the skiff's cargo platform turned and fired a blaster towards him. The skiff was still moving at this point and this motion threw off the shooter's aim. On the other hand when Marik threw himself to the ground and took aim with his rifle the skiff had come to a near halt and Marik was able to hit the man with the blaster cleanly, causing him to topple over the skiff's side railing.

This brief exchange of blaster fire, along with a warning shouted by the skiff's driver alerted the rest of the group and they turned towards the slope and began to charge up it.

Marik fired his rifle again, picking off three of the charging scavengers one by one and they quickly took whatever cover they could find before returning fire. Luckily for Marik the weapons the scavengers were armed with were not well maintained and their accuracy suffered as a result. Marik flinched as chunks of dirt were blown from ground around him but for now at least nothing came close to hitting him.

"I could do with a hand here!" he called out to Thal but the kiffar did not come to his aid.

"Just keep them back," he responded as he crawled on his hands and knees over the remains of a section of paving stones. These looked as if they had once had writing carved into them just like the walls of the temple and its underground tunnel network but centuries of erosion combined with debris filling the carvings made it difficult to identify exactly what had been written.

Ignoring the blaster fire still being exchanged between Marik and the scavengers Thal attempted to wipe away some of the dirt obscuring the carved hieroglyphs and as he did so he felt a sudden shiver run down his spine. Certain that this was the spot that he was looking for Thal began to scrape around the edge of the stone he was crouched on.

Not all of the scavengers had charged directly at Marik though. While most of them engaged him directly there was one that instead made his way around the mesa, using its sloping sides to keep him out of Marik's line of sight and fire and he climbed up the side of the mesa instead. As the scavenger reached the top of the slope he saw Thal scraping at the ground and suspected that he had discovered something. Having spent years desperately searching in vain for anything valuable the scavenger did not want anyone not part of his own group to gain control of such artefacts he drew the blaster he carried from his belt.

Rather than simply shoot Thal from a distance the scavenger instead crept towards him with his weapon aimed at Thal's back. Rather than just shoot Thal the scavenger hoped to get a look at what he had found first. Thal sensed the approach of the scavenger though and just as the man was peering over his shoulder Thal spun around and leapt up at him, knocking the blaster from his hand as the two men collided before falling to the ground.

Taking advantage of the metal gauntlets he wore, Thal punched the scavenger in the face and there was a 'crunch' as the man's nose broke. Despite the pain from this the scavenger did not give up though and he attempted to push Thal off him. Thal's grip on the scavenger was too tight for him to break though and instead they rolled across the ground onto the engraved stone that Thal had been studying closely when the scavenger had approached him, with Thal on top of the scavenger. Seeing his blaster close by on the ground, the scavenger reached out for the weapon and was able to grab hold of it. However, Thal saw what the other man was doing and struck first, delivering another punch to his face to disorientate him before reaching out to stop him from aiming the blaster. Grabbing the scavenger's arm just above the wrist Thal slammed it back down against the stone repeatedly until he lost his grip on the blaster and it fell from his hand again. Thal then let go of the scavenger's arm and reached his free hand out towards the blaster with his fingers spread wide. The weapon was beyond the reach of both men at this point but the scavenger gasped when it seemed that his blaster was caught by some invisible force that caused it to fly through the air. Instead of coming towards Thal though the blaster was sent flying away, far out of the reach of either

man. Thal then gripped the scavenger with both hands by his neck and began to squeeze. Snarling as he glared down at the scavenger Thal continued to strangle him while the scavenger focused his attention on trying to break Thal's grip. However, instead of trying to strike at Thal he instead clawed at his arms to try and pry his hands away. This was futile though, the metal of Thal's gauntlet's was proof against simple scratches and Thal did not even notice the scavenger's efforts before he went limp and blacked out. Thal did not release his grip on the man right away though, continuing to squeeze his neck to make sure that he was dead before finally letting go.

For a few seconds Thal just looked down at the body of the scavenger, barely noticing the blood that was still coming from the dead man's nose. This bleeding did not last long though, with his heart no longer beating there was nothing to pump more blood from the wound and the flow soon stopped. However, when a drop of it fell from the scavenger's face to land on the stone beneath him the effect was dramatic. A red light shone from the engraving on the stone where the blood landed and this light spread out to rapidly cover all of the hieroglyphs on it briefly before vanishing again. Then once the light was extinguished Thal felt the stone shift beneath him. Pushing down on the stone Thal found that it now moved and after moving the body of the scavenger out of the way he was able to slide it under the adjacent one to reveal a hollow space underneath. It was then that he remembered the other scavengers and he hurried to where the dead scavenger's blaster had landed. Scooping this up he turned and began to walk back towards where Marik was holding off the rest of the band. Raising the blaster Thal began to fire repeatedly, shifting from one target to another between shots. Thal was not a skilled shot though and combined with the poor condition of the weapon this meant that all of his shots went wide but it did attract the attention of the other scavengers who now found themselves facing two opponents instead of just one.

"About time too." Marik said as he gunned down another scavenger just as he emerged from cover to try and shoot Thal, "What took you?"

"I think I've found what we're looking for." Thal replied.

"Great timing. Let's hope we can deal with these guys before they just take it from us." Marik said, "I don't suppose it's something we can use is it?"

"The position is more defensible than this." Thal said.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Marik said, getting to his feet.

The two men then began to fall back, continuing to fire their weapons to dissuade the scavengers from pursuing them right away. Having begun the fight with a fully charged weapon Marik's rifle still had plenty of ammunition to lay down this covering fire but the handgun that Thal had acquired had a power cell that was already largely drained and all of a sudden the weapon failed to fire when he pulled the trigger. Frowning as he looked at the weapon he then tossed it to the ground and broke into a run.

"Come on, this way." he said, running to the opening and rushing down the steps inside the hole. Pausing after several steps he turned on his glow rod and looked back up towards the top, "Marik, hurry." he called out, hearing the sound of Marik's rifle from outside the hole.

"I'm coming." Marik replied as he reached the top of the stairs and descended part way down them so that he was able to fire out of the hole at the scavengers.

Thanks to the covering fire from Marik the remaining scavengers had not pursued the two men yet and he took the opportunity to reload his rifle to make sure that he would not run out of ammunition as Thal had done. This break in firing seemed to offer the scavengers an opportunity to advance and they quickly charged up the side of the mesa, appearing at the top just as Marik had his rifle reloaded and ready for use again. There were only seven of the scavengers left at this point and Marik held his fire for a few moments to give them chance to get onto the flat top of the mesa where there was no cover for them. Then once they were all exposed he fired two rapid shots at the scavengers towards the back of the group, judging them most likely to be able to retreat back over the side of the mesa.

Realising that Marik still had ammunition after all the remaining scavengers panicked. Two turned to run while two others immediately threw themselves to the ground. The final scavenger dropped into a crouching position and raised his blaster, firing it towards Marik but the shots hit the stone around the opening instead of him.

"Don't let them damage the stone!" Thal shouted when he saw the small shower of debris from the blaster impact and Marik targeted the crouching man. Firing a single shot Marik saw the energy blast from his rifle hit the scavenger at the base of his neck and he spun as he fell, letting off a single shot from his own battered pistol at the same time but this headed harmlessly up into the sky.

By this time the two running scavengers had already made it to the edge of the mesa and were heading down the slope out of sight to Marik so instead he turned his fire on the men now lying on the ground before they could recover their senses enough to attack.. He saw one of the men jerk as a shot hit him while he was on the ground and as far as Marik could see he did not move after that. Suspecting that he was dead, Marik then swung his rifle around towards the other scavenger.

Before he could fire at the man though there was the roar of an engine and the scavenger's skiff appeared over the top of the mesa with the two men who had fled on its deck. The driver of the lightweight vehicle flew

it towards the surviving scavenger on the ground to try and pick him up while the other fired his blaster over the side of the vehicle, shots passing over Marik's head.

"I think they've had enough. They're leaving." Marik told Thal.

"Don't let them escape. No-one can know that we've found anything here." Thal replied.

Marik's hunting rifle was not designed for anti-vehicle use but the skiff was little more than an open-topped platform with engines attached to it so instead of firing at the scavenger still on the ground he aimed his weapon towards the driver. Waiting for the last scavenger to pull himself aboard the skiff, Marik fired his rifle as soon as the driver began to accelerate and hit the man in the chest before he was able to build up too much speed. This caused him to slump across the controls of the skiff, pushing the throttle all the way and this sudden acceleration knocked the two passengers off their feet. The skiff turned to one side as it sped onwards, circling back around towards the wooded area where Thal and Marik's airspeeder was hidden. The passengers were unable to get to the skiff's controls before it reached the edge of the woods and crashed into one of the trees, exploding on impact.

Marik climbed back out of the opening in the mesa to make sure that no-one had survived the crash or explosion. Seeing no signs of life among the twisted and burning wreckage he then slung his rifle back over his shoulder and looked down the steps towards Thal.

"That's it," he said, "they're all dead. Now let's take a look at what you've found."

The steps continued deep underground, suggesting that whatever had been constructed under Lord Hasran's fortress had been something the Sith wanted to protect from bombardment. Eventually they ended in a chamber that was not very large and was devoid of anything of interest. The walls were blank and the only feature of note was a doorway at the far end of the room from the steps. Unsurprisingly after more than seven hundred years the door was no longer functional and it had to be pried open by Thal and Marik before the two men could enter the chamber on the other side where Thal shone his glow rod around to see what was there.

"Stang this place is huge." Marik said as he looked around. Even with the limited light available from Thal's glow rod it was easy to see that this chamber was far larger than the previous one and it appeared that they had entered it on a balcony of some sort that overlooked the main chamber.

Thal approached the edge of the balcony where no safety rail would prevent him from accidentally stepping over and falling into the darkness below if he was not careful. Although the chamber was too large to see all the way across the curvature of the wall behind Thal indicated that it was circular in shape and shining the glow rod downwards he saw that the floor of the chamber they were in was so far below them that the beam of light was barely capable of illuminating any of it. However, it was clear that the chamber was filled with machinery of some kind that looked to be arranged in a concentric pattern around something in the very centre. This was too far away for the glow rod to light up clearly enough to make out any real details but whatever was at the heart of the machinery stretched up from the floor to the ceiling of the chamber.

"This must be worth a fortune." Marik said as he followed the light cast by the glow rod, "Look at it all, it must be the biggest find of Sith tech since the end of the war. We'll get millions."

"Nothing here is yours scavenger." Thal replied and Marik frowned.

"Hey look, we had a deal." he snapped.

"I am altering the deal." Thal said simply.

"Well I'm not. Half of this is mine. If you want it then you can buy me out but-" Marik began before Thal suddenly spun to face him and raised one of his gauntleted hands in a gripping gesture. Instantly Marik felt as if he was being grasped by his throat despite Thal's hand being half a metre away from him. Choking, he lifted his hands to his throat to try and clear away whatever it was that preventing him from drawing in breath but the force that was strangling him could not be broken.

"You were never my partner. You are no better than the scum we killed outside or in the temple. This place and everything in it are not for you. I'm the one who has spent years of my life studying to be a worthy inheritor of the power it holds. You could have been my disciple but it is obvious that your avarice is what drives you and I have no need of anyone who can be swayed by trinkets and baubles." Thal hissed before there was a 'crunch' sound from Marik's neck as the force gripping it crushed the bones and the man collapsed in a heap before his body rolled under the safety rail and plummeted to the floor far below. Looking round the balcony Thal saw that there was a ramp at one side that ran along the wall as it descended. Thal began to walk down this ramp, shining his glow rod towards the centre of the chamber. As he got closer to the bottom of the ramp he was able to see the machinery more clearly and he saw that each of the machines had a core of solid red crystal. When he finally reached the base of the ramp Thal followed these machines towards the centre of the room until he reached the central structure. The side of this sloped upwards but were not too steep for Thal to be able to walk up and he scaled it carefully, alert for any reaction to his presence. If Lord Hasran had left any defences behind though these were as inactive as everything else in the chamber.



*The slope at the base of the structure led to a platform that had several control stations on it surrounding a large sphere about four metres across at the centre. The construction of this suggested that it would split apart to give access to the interior, the upper section being drawn towards the structure above that extended up to the chamber ceiling by a large piston. Thal suspected that the lack of power would prevent the sphere from opening and he did not want to risk damaging anything by attempting to physically force it open. Instead he took out his recording rod and began to take images, starting with the sphere before moving onto the consoles so that he would have a complete visual record of everything.*

*The University of Addrassa was an unremarkable institution in the Mid Rim but its history department included a member of staff who was able to offer a unique perspective on the past few thousand years of galactic history. Here though the gen'dai Doctor Turlan taught history, taking advantage of having lived through more of it than most beings in the galaxy. Some of his lectures were known to be controversial thanks to his past association with the Sith Empire and it was through some of these being distributed beyond just the university that Thal had come to know of him. The kiffar artist had tried previously to contact Turlan but the gen'dai had refused his efforts at communication. Now though Thal was convinced that Turlan would speak to him.*

*"I have told you before, I have no time for the likes of you. Get out." Turlan said when Thal walked into his office unannounced. Thal did not reply, instead he simply tossed a number of flimsiplast images onto the gen'dai academic's desk. Glancing down at these, Turlan's eyes widened and he picked them up to inspect them more closely.*

*The images were taken from the recordings Thal had made of the machine created by Lord Hasran and Turlan studied the crystalline paths all leading to the sphere at the centre.*

*"Where did these come from?" Turlan asked and Thal smiled.*

*"From a facility beneath the site of a Sith fortress. The jedi destroyed the fortress itself but they never found what was concealed beneath it." Thal told him as he sat down opposite Turlan, "I think it has something to do with channelling the Force itself."*

*"Yes, these crystals leading into the centre," Turlan began, holding up one of the images that showed the long, red crystal structures, "they look like the ones used to focus a lightsaber blade. How did you find this?"*

*"A dream. It told me to break open a statue that I had acquired recently. Inside I found a document that described a Sith called Lord Hasran and the machine he created to focus his power."*

*"Yes, I remember him boasting about it. He wiped out every living thing on a planet he said, though no-one really believed him. He didn't seem that smart. Interesting that this information would come to you in a dream though." Turlan said.*

*"I have had a great deal of inspiration from dreams over the years. You knew Lord Hasran though?" Thal asked and Turlan nodded.*

*"I knew him for a time. He was powerful but arrogant and often at odds with other Sith lords." he said.*

*"And this is a weapon?" Thal added.*

*"Yes, one of the most powerful weapons ever created. Hasran claimed that he could have used it to hold the entire galaxy to ransom but his superiors had other ideas and he never got the chance before the one with the nerve to call himself Darth Bane betrayed them all."*

*"Darth?" Thal commented.*

*"A title used by some ancient Sith meaning 'Dark lord'. It fell out of favour for a time since anyone who used it made themselves a target, both to rival Sith and the jedi in their efforts to destroy what they could not control before Bane attempted to resurrect it along with the infamous 'Rule of Two'." Turlan explained.*

*"The master and the apprentice. One to wield the power and another to crave it." Thal said.*

*"Yes, supposedly a way to get around the infighting that the Sith became known for." Turlan said before he placed the flimsiplast images back on his desk, "Forgive me Mister N'Krey. When you came to see me previously I had no idea that you had such knowledge. I took you for just another amateur counter-culture drop-out who thought playing at being a Sith would make them appear more interesting. I had no idea that you were a true believer."*

*"Apology accepted Doctor Turlan." Thal responded, smiling across the desk at the gen'dai, "Now though we should consider how we can best make use of our knowledge."*

Teron, Krovak, Mara, Turlan and the last two gang members walked towards the former site of Hasran's fortress. Having already been ambushed twice they proceeded cautiously, searching not only the terrain around them but also checking the sky just in case they came under aerial attack once again. They were helped in their efforts to remain unseen by the fading daylight as they came closer to the mesa and when it came into sight it appeared to them as a massive shadow on the horizon.

"This is it." Teron said, coming to a complete halt as he looked at the mesa ahead of him.

"Thal told me about this of course." Turlan added, "But I had started to think it had been lost with him and I would never see it myself."

"It will give us the power to kill will it?" Krovak asked and Teron smiled.

"Oh yes Krovak. It will give us the power to deliver death to wherever we chose. We can kill thousands, millions or even billions in one fell swoop with little more than a thought." he said.

"If I might offer a correction?" Turlan commented, "The power to bring death to any planet in the galaxy will be yours, not ours. Yours and your master's. That is the way the weapon was designed."

Teron reached out through the Force, focusing on the mesa in an attempt to see if he could sense anything and almost immediately his eyes widened and he let out a gasp as he dropped to his knees. At the same time Mara staggered and grabbed her head in her hands as the same disturbance that had affected Teron also fed through to her via their telepathic link.

"Are we under attack?" Krovak exclaimed and he looked around for any signs of attack.

"Such power." Teron said.

"Had Lord Hasran not been killed along with the other Sith at Ruusan then he would have been able to wield power that could have brought the entire galaxy to its knees. There were stronger Sith than him but none of them could match the destructive power he would have wielded." Turlan replied.

"So what the kriff are we waiting for?" Krovak said and he began to stride forwards towards the mesa.

"Krovak stop." Teron called out after him and the armoured warrior came to a halt.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Do you really think that we can simply walk up there and open a door?" Turlan said, "Not only is the entrance concealed, the facility is protected. Thal knew that scavengers operated in this area and he was not willing to trust to the facility's concealment alone to the defence of what he had found. With the defences of the fortress destroyed by the Jedi, Thal needed to add something new himself."

Teron then turned to Mara.

"Mara, this is your field." he told her, "Find us a way in."

"Yes my lord." Mara responded before she started to advance again, moving more slowly and cautiously than Krovak had but continuing past him and up the side of the mesa.

The creature inhabiting Mara still had access to all of her memories and skills and it now drew on her significant experience as a thief and burglar, using a glow rod to illuminate the ground on top of the mesa as she searched for an opening as well as any disturbances that would indicate the presence of any sort of booby trap. The sheer length of time since Thal N'Krey had been here made Mara's task more difficult. Any tracks he had left when moving to and from the entrance to the underground facility had long been eroded away by the weather while the grass and mosses that covered much of the mesa had grown enough to conceal any digging that may have been done to either gain access to the facility or plant mines to protect it. Among the vegetation there were numerous paving stones visible and the carvings made centuries earlier had largely stood the test of time. However, here and there were signs of damage to the stones that had obviously been caused by blaster fire hitting them from an angle that suggested that the shots had been fired from a significant distance away.

Anyone trying to deliberately obliterate the carvings using a blaster would have done so by standing over the stone and firing at it from point blank range instead of shooting from a distance without then coming closer to check on the effectiveness of their work. The logical conclusion was that somebody had come under fire close to the damaged stones and what Mara was seeing was the result of inaccurate fire. The only reason why someone under such attack would not simply withdraw was if they were very interested in something close by and that could only be the entrance to the facility that Teron's gang had come here to take control of. With this in mind Mara got down on her hands and knees and began to inspect the nearby stones more closely.

As well as the knowledge it gained from its host, the creature that resided inside Mara had considerable knowledge of its own, especially when it came to the Sith and their language. This enabled the possessed Mara to read the hieroglyphs on the stones and understand them perfectly, therefore when she came to the stone that covered the entrance to the underground complex she was able to understand the instruction to

activate it with a blood sacrifice as well as the significance of this that had escaped the Jedi when they destroyed the fortress itself.

Mara carried a knife with her as a means of killing silently and without any visual indication but now she used it in a more subtle manner, drawing the blade lightly across the palm of her hand and then clenching her fist to promote the flow of blood. Mara let the blood flowing from her hand to fall onto the stone at her feet and she watched the effect that had closely.

For a few moments parts of the stone began to glow red but this soon faded and when the glow vanished there was no trace of the blood, it obviously having been absorbed by the stone.

While Mara had been hunting for the entrance to the underground facility Teron had been watching her every move through her own eyes and so he witnessed the effect of the blood on the stone, realising that the quantity she had applied was insufficient at the same time as she did.

"Mara needs help." he said and he turned to one of the two remaining gang members, "Go and assist her."

"Yes my lord." the gang member responded, nodding before he darted up the mesa and to where Mara stood beside the carved stone cover.

"Look at that and tell me what you see." she told the gang member, pointing at the stone and he looked down at it. As his attention was away from her though Mara struck quickly, slashing his throat with her knife and there was a sudden spray of blood from the wound that splashed across the stone before the unfortunate gang member toppled forwards onto it and lay still.

This time the light from the stone spread out to cover the entire surface before it vanished and Mara noticed the slight shift in its position under the weight of the dead body lying on top of it. Dragging the body aside Mara then began to try to move it, first attempting to simply slide the stone before she applied firm enough pressure to push it downwards and the stone retreated into the ground before moving aside on its own. Mara then shone her glow rod into the hole that had opened up and she grinned when she saw the flight of steps that led down into the darkness.

"Mara's done it." Teron said, the telepathic link allowing him to see the staircase for himself at the same time she did, "There was a booby trap but it's clear now." he added, not wanting to reveal to the last remaining gang member what had happened to his comrade.

"So now we go in and claim the power of this place for ourselves?" Krovak asked.

"Yes Krovak, now the power of the weapon shall be ours." Teron answered before he led Krovak, Turlan and the other gang member up the mesa to where Mara waited.

They found her waiting by the hole, the body of the gang member dumped unceremoniously close by but Teron ignored this as he looked into the hole for himself. Standing here at the entrance to the underground facility he could clearly sense the presence of the Dark Side of the Force but it was obviously without focus, just waiting for someone to take control of it.

"Lead the way." Teron told the final gang member and the man brought his blaster rifle up to his shoulder before he began to slowly descend the stairs, using the glow rod mounted to the barrel of his weapon to light his way.

"It looks like there's a room down here." the man called out when his glow rod illuminated the floor at the bottom of the stairs and then when he spotted a vaguely humanoid but obviously mechanical figure not far from this he added, "There's a droid as well. Looks like a-"

Before he could finish his sentence though the droid raised an arm and the gang member saw that it was holding what looked like some form of spray gun supplied by a hose that ran further into the darkness. Then just a moment later there was a 'whoosh' as a jet of flame burst from the nozzle of the spray gun towards the stairs and the gang member was engulfed in fire before carrying on up the stairs and forcing the group standing by the hole to leap back to avoid being set on fire themselves.

Screaming in agony the man fired his blaster on fully automatic but he was unable to aim effectively as he burned and the burst of energy blasts struck only the wall, failing to come anywhere near the droid that had now lowered its arm again.

"Go!" Teron snapped as soon as the flames ceased and Krovak leapt in the hole, charging down the stairs towards the room at the bottom and he drew his sword as he ran.

Detecting the approach of Krovak the droid raised the arm that held the flamethrower again and the machine unleashed another jet of flame. The blast of fire engulfed Krovak and he began to burn, however his arcane Sith armour protected him against the fire just as it had done against the earlier incendiary rocket attack and even as he burned he let out a roar and continued to charge towards the droid with his sword held high.

Having no tactical programming beyond what was needed to point and discharge the flamethrower, the droid stood its ground and maintained the flow of flames that did nothing to even slow Krovak down. The moment he got within arms' reach of the droid though he swung the sword downwards and the ancient blade struck its lightweight torso that lacked any true armour protection. Strengthened by Sith sorcery, the sword was easily able to split this right open as well as smashing the mechanisms and circuitry that it contained. The jet of burning liquid from the flamethrower ceased immediately but as Krovak's sword cut through the droid it

broke open its power cell and the sparks from the damaged electronics ignited the chemicals it contained, causing the droid itself to burst into flames as it collapsed in a heap at Krovak's feet.

"It's done. You can come down now." Krovak called out, looking down at the smashed machine.

"What was it?" Teron asked.

"It looks like a labour droid of some kind. It must have been modified to use a flamethrower though." Krovak replied, knowing that ordinarily a labour droid would be unable to wield any kind of weapon effectively.

"Thal came across some parts from Sith war droids during his travels. Never enough for a complete and operational machine but he may have been able to use them to get around the life preservation programming of a more mundane machine." Turlan told him as he descended the stairs with the others into the now safe chamber at the bottom.

"So there could be more of them?" Krovak said.

"Possibly. Thal did not discuss his security arrangements with me." Turlan replied and Krovak looked at Teron.

"It would have been nice if your master had warned us about them." he said.

"Anyone who can't handle a few droids has no right to call themselves a Sith." Teron said, staring at the door leading to the next chamber. Walking towards this he kept his lightsaber in his hand and he paused before he brought his other hand down on the controls to open the door.

"I should go first." Krovak said, "If there's another droid with a flamethrower on the other side then my armour can take it. You'll just burn."

"No." Teron responded, "Beyond this door is what we came here for. Using a flamethrower or other ranged weapon in there could risk damaging it." and then there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated his lightsaber before opening the door.

*Danger.*

Although Teron could not sense the presence of a droid through the Force he was able to sense the incoming attack as a labour droid stood just inside the doorway swung a large axe blade towards the door the moment that it had opened. With his lightsaber already active though, Teron was easily able to bring up his blade and he sliced through the axe before it came close to impaling him. Then he leapt through the doorway and delivered a second strike with his lightsaber that cut the stationary labour droid in half. Holding his lightsaber at the ready Teron then took a look around, searching for more threats but he saw nothing and instead he turned his attention to what else was in the chamber he now stood in.

The plume of flame that erupted from the hole in the ground showed up clearly on the infrared sensors fitted to Carasson's speeder as well as being visible through the forward canopy.

"What the hell was that?" Terresa exclaimed when the display turned entirely white as the extreme heat overwhelmed the thermal detector.

"It must have been a booby trap." Carasson said, waiting for the heat of the flames to subside enough for the sensors to be able to pick up detailed information again. Before this could happen though there was a second flash of light in the distance coming from the location occupied by Teron and what remained of his gang on Andromora.

"Looks like they triggered another." Terresa commented and Carasson checked the map on his datapad.

"If I've got this right then they're right here on this mesa. That means if we're careful we should be able to get close without being seen.

"Two sides and catch them in a cross fire?" Terresa suggested and Carasson nodded.

"We'll need to come in low and deploy where they can't see. Three kilometres should be enough to stop them hearing us but without forcing us to walk an excessive distance." he said before he looked at the pilot and added, "Take us in. Signal the others to move. I want half the transports to land west of the mesa and the others to land to the south.

The gang's transports all began to move forwards together, the pilots descending as far as they dared to avoid being seen as they headed for the mesa. The formation then divided into two halves, with one group maintaining their original course while the other began to circle around the mesa so that their passengers could deploy on different sides. They approached to just within three kilometres of the mesa before setting down and then all of their occupants, both passengers and crews disembarked. Some of them began to activate glow rods but Carasson yelled at them not to.

"Do you want to give us away?" he said, "We do this carefully and we stay out of sight until the last minute. Now let's go."

"There's obviously some kind of machine in there." Jayk said, studying the sensor readings of the void beneath where Hasran's fortress had once stood.

"But does it work or is it something that needs repairing?" Brae asked.

"If it's some kind of weapon that draws on the Force shouldn't you be able to sense it kid?" Tylo asked.

"From space?" Brae responded, "I doubt it unless it was actually being used."

"At which point I suspect it would be too late to do anything about it." Jayk added before the *Swift Exit's* sensors showed a sudden surge of heat from the surface.

"What was that?" Brae said.

"Looked like something suddenly caught fire and then went out." Tylo said.

"Could it be from explosives?" Brae suggested.

"You think someone's trying to blast their way into that cavern?" Tylo replied.

"It's one possibility isn't it? Of course that means that someone else has already beaten us there." Brae said and then there was a second surge of heat.

"I don't think those are explosions. Just fire." Kat said, "Look at the surface scan, it hasn't changed. An explosion that size would leave a crater."

"Look, the speeders are moving." Tylo said suddenly when the *Swift Exit's* sensors then showed the loitering aircraft begin to close in on the mesa.

"They must have seen the heat blooms as well." Kat commented.

"If they're moving in then I don't think we can spend any more time studying these sensor readings. Tylo take us down there now." Jayk ordered.

"Charge right towards the Sith super weapon? Sure why not?" Tylo replied and then he took hold of the *Swift Exit's* flight controls.

It took only a single brief blast from the *Swift Exit's* ion drive to propel the ship into an atmospheric re-entry course and Tylo guided it out of orbit. Positioned directly above the site of Hasran's fortress the *Swift Exit* had to fly away from it to maintain an angle of re-entry that would not make the ship burn up but as soon as the process of entering Andromora's atmosphere was complete Tylo turned as sharply as possible to bring it back onto a heading for the mesa.

"Is there any sign of Rylee's yacht?" Brae asked, leaning around the co-pilot's seat that Jayk occupied to try and get a good look at the sensor display, knowing that there was a brief period during entry into an atmosphere that blinded a ship's sensors.

"No, nothing since they landed. They must be fully powered down." Jayk told her as he looked at the sensors himself, just in time to see the air transports that had now split into two separate groups also descend to ground level, "I've got a bad feeling about this." he commented.

"What's to be worried about? Aren't they just scavengers?" Tylo said.

"Yes but if it's likely that the weapon will draw on the Force in some way and if the scavengers engage Teron and his gang then the Dark Side will grow stronger around them and the weapon." Jayk said.

"Jayk do you think the weapon could just go off?" Kat said.

"I don't know but we can't ignore the possibility." Jayk replied.

"But isn't the weapon what wiped out all life on Andromora?" Brae commented.

"Most likely, yes." Jayk said.

"You're right Jayk." Tylo added, "I've got a very bad feeling about this as well."

Although the landspeeder that Rylee had had loaded aboard her yacht was also a luxury model it was a type designed for beings who wanted to travel off the beaten path and so it had no difficulty in traversing the rough terrain of Andromora while providing its six occupants with a smooth ride. As well as Morton, Rylee had brought along four of her yacht's crew for back up and all of them wore armoured blast vests that while lacking the protection of the armour worn by Mott and his mercenaries still offered them the chance of surviving a hit from a blaster.

"Look they're on the move." Morton said from the driver's seat when he saw the dark outlines of Carasson's speeders moving through the air despite having their running lights extinguished.

"They're low. Are they looking for us?" Rylee said, noticing how low the speeders were flying.

"I don't think so." Morton replied, "I'd expect them to spread out more if they were in a search pattern."

All of a sudden the cluster of air speeder transports split into two groups as one of them peeled off and headed directly away from their landspeeder.

"Like that you mean?" Rylee said.

"No that's something different. I'd say they're getting ready to attack Teron." Morton answered.

"Doesn't dividing their forces make them weaker though?" Rylee pointed out.

"Not if they still attack together. They must be planning to get Teron in a crossfire." Morton said and he began to slow the landspeeder and turned off its headlights.

"Morton what are you doing?" Rylee asked, confused at his action.

"Giving the scavengers time to engage that little nerf herder Teron. It'll take the heat off us." Morton responded, "We only need to keep them in sight, we don't need to match their speed and position."

Morton now followed the nearest group of airborne transports, keeping them in sight while still trying to maintain enough distance between them that anyone looking out from one of the transports was unlikely to notice the landspeeder trailing them. As they continued to follow Carasson's speeders though Morton, Rylee

and the others in the landspeeder saw something else in the sky, a streak of light coming from a high altitude as something entered Andromora's atmosphere.

"Morton up there." Rylee said when she saw this and he nodded in response.

"Tylo and the Jedi, it has to be. It's too soon to know whether they're coming for Teron or our ship yet though," he said. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the crewmen sat behind him and Rylee, "Best double check those blasters though, just in case."

As Morton continued to follow the air transports he saw them slow to a stop and he matched this, bringing the landspeeder to a halt as well and as he was slowing down he saw the transports descend out of sight.

"Did they just land?" Rylee said and Morton nodded.

"I think so," he said, "Which means that they'll be disembarking now. We should too."

Morton then shut down the speeder's engine and the occupants all got out of the vehicle. Morton looked around and when he saw how the others were standing he frowned.

"What's wrong?" Rylee asked when she noticed this.

"We're all going to die if you lot can't do better than this," Morton replied angrily and he pointed around them,

"This isn't some camping trip, there could be someone hiding behind any rock or rise and I don't want to get a blaster shot in the back just because you lot weren't paying attention. I'll take point so I want two of you either side of Rylee. Focus your attention on your own side and don't forget to check behind us every so often. Now let's move out."

Rylee watched as Morton brought his rifle up to his shoulder and began to walk in the direction that the transports had gone. Despite the weapon being fitted with a glow rod, Morton did not activate the device despite the fading light. Instead he trusted in his own vision to spot any obstacles while avoiding the risk of giving away their position. In the meantime the four crewmen from the yacht surrounded Rylee, two of them standing either side of her and when she started to follow Morton they moved with her, acting as a bodyguard. Rylee would much preferred to have had more of Mott's mercenaries on hand but she knew that the crewmen had some basic training with blasters and they were better than nothing.

# THAL

The Sculptor's Blade was not designed as a cargo transport but there was still some limited space that could be used for the equipment Thal needed to get to the site of the ancient fortress belonging to Lord Hasran. Restoring power to the facility was of primary importance so the first thing he had to acquire were some portable fusion generators. These would be followed later by whatever parts were needed to replace anything that had become damaged from centuries of disuse. Without any information on how much power the facility needed to operate Thal planned to supply the maximum amount of power possible. However, he knew of only the stairs as an access point meant that there was a maximum size for any equipment he could get inside the facility so instead of a single high energy reactor Thal procured several smaller ones that could be chained together. Knowing that simply landing his ship on the mesa would be like telling the entire galaxy exactly where the facility was hidden Thal instead landed at the nearby settlement located closest to the fortress, the one Marik had deliberately piloted their air speeder around when he and Thal had first discovered it. Here he was able to acquire a basic docking bay where his ship would be secure and could be refuelled but nothing else.

Not having Marik to help him move the reactors made the work far more difficult for Thal. He was unwilling to hire anyone else to help him, just in case they attempted to turn on him as Marik had done so the only option left open to him was to use labour droids. Again though Thal had to be careful here and instead of acquiring the droids on Andromora he brought them with him. This way he knew that the supplier would not be able to include any covert program code that would allow them to monitor where the droids were and what they were doing. The only thing he relied on a local supplier for was a skiff to move the reactors to the site of the fortress and the one he acquired looked almost identical to the one that had been used by the scavengers who had attacked him and Marik there.

"So what are you doing here?" the vehicle rental agent asked as he saw Thal's labour droids loading the unmarked crates onto the skiff.

"I am an artist. My creations are all based on the culture of the ancient Sith. I'm sure that the ruins on this planet will provide me with inspiration for many pieces." Thal replied, making use of as much of the truth about himself as possible. He knew that it was unlikely that anyone on Andromora would have heard of him as an artist but if they looked him up then they would discover that what he had just said was true.

Unfortunately Thal's answer was not enough for the rental agent as he watched the skiff being loaded with unmarked crates.

"That looks like a lot of stuff just to be painting a few pictures." he said.

"I sculpt as well as paint. The crates contain a full array of materials for me to choose from. I expect to be in the wilderness for a week at least and I don't want to have to keep coming back here for something I could just take with me to begin with. Now is there anything else not on your rental form that you need to know or can I go about my business?" Thal said, his patience with the agent wearing thin.

"Sure." the agent replied, frowning before he turned to go back to the landspeeder that had brought him to the docking bay.

With the skiff loaded Thal piloted the vehicle out to the mesa. At the end of his previous visit Thal had been able to close the stone cover to the staircase, the mechanism for this obviously drawing its power from somewhere other than whatever had powered the main facility. Thal suspected that it somehow drew its energy from the Dark Side of the Force itself which was why a blood sacrifice had been required to open it. Rather than bringing someone else here to kill Thal had drained blood from Marik's body using a field medical kit before he left and stored it in a number of flasks. He now tipped the contents of one of these flasks onto the stone that covered the staircase and he smiled as it reacted the same way as it had when the scavenger's blood had fallen on it before it slid back to reveal the opening beneath.

"Take the crates down there. Go through the second doorway and down the ramp. Leave the crates at the side of the chamber at the bottom of this." he ordered the labour droids. These basic machines were incapable of speech but they would take verbal orders and obediently they began carrying the crates containing the fusion generators underground.

During the final centuries of their ongoing conflict with the Republic, the Sith had shared much of their technology and this meant identifying the original power supply for the underground facility was straight forward and Thal expected the replacements he had brought to be sufficiently compatible that he could just swap them for his new reactors. He still had to locate the original power supply though and he began by searching around the edge of the large chamber to see where it came in from. However, as far as he could tell there were no points around the outside of the chamber where the wall was broken to allow power to enter.

*"Where did the power come from I wonder?" he said to himself before he pointed his glow rod upwards, shining it towards the ceiling and considering the possibility that power for this chamber could have been supplied by the fortress that had been torn down by the Jedi centuries earlier, "It has to be in here." he added, realising that the chamber was meant to be concealed and having heavy duty power lines running down to it would tell anyone who looked where it was. Then he realised what his mistake had been and a smile spread across his face, "Of course!" he exclaimed and a pair of nearby labour droids came to a halt and turned their heads towards him. Thal realised that his sudden outburst had made the droids think he was addressing them, "Not you. Carry on with your assigned task." he told them and as the droids returned to their task of bringing the crates down from the surface Thal ran towards the structure in the centre of the chamber, reasoning that it was the only part of the huge machine that would actually need a power source. The crystals arranged around the central structure were intended to channel the Force but the mechanisms on the structure would need a more conventional power supply, "You need power," he said after climbing the structure to the control platform and standing in front of one of the consoles. Then he crouched down and added, "so let's see if I can find out where it's coming from."*

*Thal had to pry an access panel off the side of the console but as soon as he did he saw the prominent power cable running up to the control interface itself and he saw that it went straight down into the tapering structure. Returning to the edge of the structure's lower slope Thal slid straight down to the floor level and immediately began to study it again, removing one of his gauntlets so that he could run his fingers over the surface and examine it for any imperfections.*

*Sure enough Thal found a crack in the structure and as he followed this around he saw that it was rectangular. The panel it marked out had no obvious fixings though and again Thal had to pry the edge up before it came free. Then he grinned as he shone his glow rod into the cavity behind the panel and saw what was unmistakably a fusion generator.*

*"Droids!" he called out and all of the labour droids in the chamber halted what they were doing and turned towards him, "I want those fusion generators brought over here. Then replace the old units within this mechanism with them. Thal ordered and the machines immediately began to move, bringing the new fusion generators towards the structure. At the same time Thal started to make his way around it, locating more of the hidden service panels and opening them so that the droids could replace the old fusion generators. After finding the first one locating the rest of the generators was straight forwards, they were placed in a regular pattern all around the structure with two of them between each of the six crystal inputs.*

*Leaving the droids to their work Thal then returned to the surface, standing on the mesa and looking around. Night had fallen since Thal arrived with his droids and with few clouds in the sky he could easily see the stars above him when he looked up. Taking out his recording rod he activated it, turning around to build up an image of the surrounding terrain and the sky. Then once he was sure that he had recorded every detail he shut down the recording rod and swapped it for a comlink that he then held to his mouth.*

*"Turlan everything is proceeding as I have foreseen. The weapon will soon be fully operational. I intend to destroy the notes I have made about the facility's location. Should anything happen to me then I do not want that information falling into the wrong hands. Only the most dedicated can be allowed to access and control this place so I will be recording its location in an alternate manner, one that will require anyone hoping to become its master to work to find it." he said before he shut off the comlink and used it to send the message he had just recorded to the Sculptor's Blade, where its communication system would forward it to Turlan.*



"This may be stating the obvious by this point but I think you should see this." Cal said, his hologram appearing at the rear of the cockpit just after Tylo had turned the *Swift Exit* back towards the mesa where Hasran's fortress had once stood, projected from the holocron resting on the main flight console.

"What have you found?" Brae asked.

"I've been taking a look at the scans you took and while you were all focused on what was underground I've been looking at the surface readings and comparing them to the paintings Thal N'Krey created.

"Let me guess, they match up." Jayk said and Cal's hologram smiled.

"They do indeed. To an observer standing on the mesa the horizon would match what is shown in the paintings. There's no doubt about it, this is where Thal found something so important he concealed his record of it in his paintings." he said and Tylo frowned.

"Why doesn't that make me feel any better?" he said.

"There's no telling what could be waiting for us down there. The Sith were infamous for the traps they left for intruders to their places of power. I think Cal should come with us." Jayk added.

"What if he gets hurt?" Brae said.

"He could get hurt? What about the rest of us?" Tylo commented.

"We can all take care of ourselves. Cal can't." Brae pointed out.

"Brae I died thousands of years ago, I can't be hurt." Cal replied.

"But your memory could be destroyed." Brae said.

"Perhaps but Jayk is right. You may need my insight and there's no guarantee that communication will be possible once you go into Hasran's facility." Cal said.

"Don't worry Brae, I'm sure everything will work out for the best." Kat added.

"You know I could do with gearing up." Tylo said and Jayk nodded, taking hold of the control column in front of him.

"Go. I have control." he said and Tylo released his controls and got out of the pilot's seat. Then he made his way out of the cockpit and headed for the cabin that the *Swift Exit*'s occupants all shared. In here he opened one of the lockers that contained his belongings, in particular the one that he kept the weapons other than the heavy blaster pistol holstered on his belt in. As well as weaponry there was also an armoured vest in the locker that he took out first and put on. Next came a blaster rifle and a bandolier of ammunition that Tylo wrapped around himself after placing the rifle itself on the nearest bunk. Over the years Tylo had also been able to acquire several grenades that he now took from the locker before clipping them all to his armour. The locker also contained several more mundane but likely very useful items such as flares and medpacs and Tylo took out some of each and stuffed them into various pouches and pockets on his belt as well as a backpack that he pulled on before he closed the locker.

Picking up his rifle Tylo turned back towards the doorway leading back in the direction of the cockpit and was about to leave the cabin when he hesitated. Turning back towards the lockers he opened another one that he kept possessions in, this time his clothing and he delved deep into it. Feeling beneath the visible contents he took hold of a drawstring bag that he found there and removed it. Opening this he peered inside and smiled.

"And to think my only interest in you was how many credits you might be worth if I sold you." he said to himself.

Tylo then closed the bag once again before he stuffed it into a side pocket on his backpack before heading for the doorway.

While Tylo was gathering his equipment the three Jedi, who had a more minimalist approach to equipment and already carried everything they expected to need with them remained in the cockpit while Jayk piloted the *Swift Exit* towards the mesa. With Tylo gone Kat had moved forwards to sit in the pilot's seat and she was monitoring the ship's sensors while Jayk concentrated on flying.

"Jayk I think I've got something here." she said when the sensors detected several large metallic objects on the ground.

"What is it?" Jayk asked.

"I think it's those transports. They've landed here and here." Kat said and Jayk glanced at the display as she pointed to the two locations at which Carasson's force of speeders had set down.

"Ready to attack from two sides." he commented.

"Is there any blaster fire?" Brae asked.

"No, not yet. The speeders have set down a couple of kilometres from the target though. The passengers are probably still making their way to it on foot to avoid detection." Kat answered.

"There's no way we can hide our approach from them and they could have some anti-aircraft weapons." Jayk commented, "Brae I'm going to power up the turret, you'd better get on it."

Brae nodded before leaping to her feet and running from the cockpit. The *Swift Exit's* turret was located at the rear of the freighter and as Brae was heading towards it she almost ran right into Tylo as he emerged from the crew cabin.

"Hey kid, what's the hurry?" he asked.

"Kat picked up the scavengers' speeders on the ground. It looks like they're getting ready to launch an attack on where the fortress was. Dad wants me in the turret just in case they get any ideas about shooting us down." Brae told him in response.

"Then get going." Tylo replied and while he headed towards the cockpit Brae continued in the direction of the turret.

The *Swift Exit* was armed only with a single light laser cannon, one aspect of the ship that Tylo had not been able to upgrade at the expense of the Jedi Order and this was mounted in a turret on the ship's dorsal surface. By the time Brae climbed into the turret and sat down she could see that the weapon was already fully charged and all she needed to do was activate the targeting system.

"Turret ready," she said when she had put on the intercom headset draped over the controls to the laser cannon and activated them. Immediately the targeting display offered her a range of surface targets taken from the ship's sensors but for now they were all marked as being out of her line of fire because of their relative position beneath the ship's hull. If Brae was going to engage any ground targets at close range then the *Swift Exit* would need to be rotated to bring the turret to bear.

"No sign of movement," the man Carasson had sent up the slope to check the top of the mesa, "But there was a body by what looks like some kind of trap door."

"Killed by a booby trap?" Teressa suggested.

"It wouldn't surprise me. How many have died that way over the years?" Carasson said in agreement, nodding his head.

"So how do we proceed?" Teressa asked and Carasson looked towards the slope.

"We move in carefully. We'll hold at the top of the slope and see if anyone notices," he said.

"And if it doesn't bring anyone out?" Teressa asked.

"Then we'll send a few scouts to that trap door and see if that attracts enough attention to bring anyone out into the open. If it does we'll get them in a cross fire. If not then we'll see what happens if a smoke grenade gets thrown down that trap door," Carasson replied and Teressa smiled.

"Well if smoke doesn't force them out for air nothing will," she said and Carasson took out his comlink.

"Goros, take your unit up the slope. There's a trap door marked by a body that I want you to investigate. If anyone challenges you then fall back and we'll take care of them when they show themselves. If not then I want a smoke round in that hole," he said into it. Even though the order was meant only for one unit leader Carasson broadcast it to his entire force so that they would all know what the plan was.

"Copy that, we're going in now," Goros responded and a small group of gang members got up from where they crouched and headed up the slope.

Their intention was to pause when they reached the top and double check that there was no-one on the mesa but before they could get that far there was the sound of repulsorlift engines from overhead and everyone in the gang looked upwards.

"Incoming!" Carasson yelled as he took out a pair of macrobinoculars that he then pointed skywards as he looked through them. The macrobinoculars were somewhat out of date but their light amplification capability was still sufficient to allow Carasson to pick out the approaching *Swift Exit* clearly, "A YT- seven hundred," he said and he lowered the macrobinoculars.

"It must be the Jedi," Teressa said, "Carasson I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Bring down that ship. Everyone fire!" Carasson shouted, pointing up into the air towards the *Swift Exit* as it continued to descend.

The evening sky was then lit up by a massive volley of blaster fire aimed towards the *Swift Exit* but although it was descending rapidly it was still more than a kilometre in the air and by the time the few blaster bolts that had been correctly aimed hit the freighter their energy had been largely dissipated into the atmosphere and they did no damage at all.

"Shields up," Kat said, reaching for the controls to the *Swift Exit's* shields as blaster bolts began to impact the hull, some even striking the cockpit canopy itself. Even though these lacked the power to do any damage at this point the lower the ship got the stronger they would become and eventually one may find a weak point by chance.

"Hey who's shooting at my ship?" Tylo exclaimed as he burst into the cockpit.

"Don't worry it's just small arms. Nothing that can harm us from this range," Jayk said as Tylo sat down behind him instead of taking over from Kat in the pilot's seat.

"And Brae should be in the turret by now," Kat added and Tylo nodded.

"Yeah, I just ran into her in the corridor." he said.

"Brae are you ready?" Jayk said into the intercom.

"As soon as you can give me a target dad." Brae replied.

Understanding exactly what Brae meant Jayk twisted the controls in his hands so that the *Swift Exit* rotated in flight without changing its course. Now the ground appeared to be above the ship through the viewport and in the turret Brae was able to point her cannon towards the gang. With so much blaster fire coming from the ground it was difficult for Brae to pick out individual targets so instead of trying to she aimed the turret towards what looked like a flank of the gang's position before she fired. Holding down the laser cannon's trigger, Brae swept the weapon's aim point along the line to strafe as many of the gang as she could.

On the ground the stream of laser cannon fire was devastating. Each direct hit on a gang member delivered enough energy to completely vaporise them while each shot regardless of whether it struck one of the gang or not blasted a crater in the ground that sent debris flying in all directions, showering everyone nearby with fragments. Even though almost all of the gang members that Carasson had brought with him had seen combat before now this was limited to small skirmishes with rival scavengers and they had typically had superior numbers and weapons. None of them had come under attack from a starship, even a lightly armed freighter like the *Swift Exit* and as the laser cannon blasts ripped through them they began to panic. Having seen the effectiveness of the laser cannon against their fellow gang members, those units still in the path of the weapon but yet to come directly under fire broke and ran. Some still fired into the air at random but the majority ceased fire as they fled, heading for what they hoped would be the safety of the nearby woods where they could try to hide from the attacking starship.

"Carasson we have to go." Teresa exclaimed as the pair of them watched in horror while half of their force was either destroyed or fled. The *Swift Exit's* strafing run had targeted the units arranged along the other side of the mesa from the one that Carasson and Teresa were on so they were not in any immediate danger of coming under fire but the gang members around them were obviously just as unnerved as those under attack.

"No. Cease fire and get down. Don't give them a clear target." Carasson responded and around him the gang members threw themselves to the ground at the base of the slope around the mesa just as the *Swift Exit* reached the end of the line it was attacking and pulled up again, the fire from its laser cannon finally ceasing.

"I guess that's our answer as to who the Jedi were targeting." Rylee said when she, Morton and the yacht crewmen saw the dark sky light up with energy blasts.

"Maybe, maybe not." Morton replied and Rylee frowned.

"What do you mean?" she said and she pointed towards the ongoing exchange of blaster and laser fire, "The Jedi are clearly attacking the scavengers."

"Yes but the scavengers fired first. I wouldn't tell the men we left at the yacht to relax yet." Morton said, "We shouldn't relax either. The scavengers that are left could be on the lookout for a supporting attack on the ground. Everyone stay alert and stay quiet, if we do encounter any scavengers we'll try to get around them rather than engage them."

It was not only above ground that the *Swift Exit's* strafing run attracted attention. In the chamber where the ancient Sith weapon was constructed Teron was still looking around into the darkness, reaching out through the Force instead of using a flare or glow rod for illumination to enhance his vision. Through the Force he could sense the assemblies of kyber crystals all around the chamber that converged at the centre where he could just about make out the outline of the primary structure in the darkness when all of a sudden he felt the platform on which he and the others stood shake.

"I'm not sure this platform is entirely stable." Turlan said as he looked upwards.

"Those are laser blasts." Krovak said, "We're under attack."

"No, not us. Someone else." Teron disagreed, "It seems that there is more than one group that thinks they can take this place from us."

"So what do you want us to do?" Krovak asked.

"Turlan you stay here. Krovak and Mara come with me. First we'll see what we're dealing with and then we will show them the true power of the Dark Side." Teron answered and he headed back into the small chamber at the bottom of the stairs and looked up them.

With the cover stone open the energy blasts outside were visible only as flashes of light that seemed to illuminate the entire visible sky instead of individual bolts of light. Teron kept his lightsaber inactive as he cautiously climbed the stairs back to the surface and looked out onto the mesa. He had emerged just as the *Swift Exit* completed its run and the freighter was low enough for him to see its shape.

"The Jedi!" he hissed, recognising the vessel as the one belonging to Tylo Kurrast.

"Jedi?" Krovak repeated and he hurried up the stairs behind Teron so he could see what was happening for himself. By the time he reached the top of the stairs though the *Swift Exit* had gained in altitude again and he could not make it out clearly. However, as Teron looked around the mesa he did not need to be able to see see Carasson's gang to know that they were there.

*Fear.*

*Panic.*

The effect of the *Swift Exit*'s attack had left Carasson's gang in turmoil and Teron could sense the strength of their feelings through the Force.

"Yes, though in their own twisted way they may have done us a favour. They have destroyed almost half of the scavenger force. There are perhaps two dozen remaining."

"They're trash. You and I can kill them all." Krovak said and Teron smiled.

"Yes, yes we can my loyal warrior. But the jedi are not gone, they will come back and if we are caught in the open when they do then we may come under attack from the air as well." he said.

"So what do you want to do?" Krovak asked.

"This is the only way into the weapon chamber, as long as we control it then no-one can reach the weapon without coming past us. We'll deal with them when they get here. I want you and Mara to stand guard while Turlan and I check the condition of the weapon. With luck it will be working and we can summon my master to take control of it." Teron answered. Teron then turned and walked back down the stairs, moving past Mara who watched him as he returned to the main chamber where the weapon itself where Turlan still waited for him.

"Are we safe?" the gen'dai asked.

"Safe enough for now. Krovak and Mara will keep any intruders out while we take control of this place. Now how much do you know about how to do that" Teron responded.

"Thal sent me detailed information on how he conducted repairs to the systems that had been damaged. In theory all we need to do is turn everything back on." Turlan told him.

"Then let's start by finding a light switch." Teron said, striding towards the ramp that led down to the base of the main chamber.

"We can't stay here Carasson, if that freighter comes back around for another pass then we're sitting ducks." Teresa said.

"I know. Plus I doubt that attack went unnoticed even underground. The longer we delay the longer whoever's down there has to prepare. We're going to have to-" Carasson said before his comlink activated.

"Carasson there's something you need to see here." the voice of one of his gang members told him and Carasson recognised it as belonging to one of the gang who had been deployed to the other side of the mesa and had born the brunt of the *Swift Exit*'s strafing run. While most of the survivors had fled this man at least had stood his ground.

"What is it?" Carasson responded.

"I'm not sure it's probably easier if you come and take a look." the man told him and Carasson looked at Teresa.

"Okay, let's see what he's found." he said.

Leaving the rest of the gang in place Carasson and Teresa circled around the mesa. Here they came across the bodies of the gang members killed by the *Swift Exit*'s laser cannon, most burned by the heat but others obviously killed by shrapnel. There were more than twenty bodies in total but there were also a pair of gang members still alive who were crouched beside a hole that had been blasted by the laser cannon. It was too dark for Carasson or Teresa to see what was inside the hole until they got right up to it at which point they saw a damaged section of pipe.

"I think it's some sort of utility duct." the gang member who had contacted Carasson said.

"Carasson, this could lead into whatever's underneath here." Teresa pointed out.

"Yes and whoever is down there may not know about it. But we need to be sure first." Carasson replied,

"I'll go." Teresa said and Carasson looked at her.

"Why you?" he asked.

"Because I'm the smallest. It looks like any of us will fit right in here but who knows how tight it will close up?" Teresa answered and Carasson waved his hand towards the opening in the duct.

Teresa then got down onto her hands and knees to crawl into the duct, taking care not to catch herself on the edges of the hole that had been blasted into the pipe itself. With two possible directions in which she could crawl Teresa could only pick one at random before she began to make her way along it.

Morton waved for the others to get down as he came to a halt when he heard the sound of someone running towards him through the undergrowth and moments later a figure appeared, running away from the mesa. Morton watched as the gang member ran past his position without noticing him but it soon became apparent that he wasn't alone as others appeared, also running away from where they had come under attack. Morton

could tell that one of these was running in a direction that would take him right through the position occupied by him, Rylee and the other crewmen and that if that happened their presence would undoubtedly be revealed to the other gang members. Moving would also risk exposure so the only option remaining was to kill this man and again this provided Morton with a problem, using his blaster rifle would be like sending up a flare so instead he set the weapon down on the ground and drew his knife from its sheath.

Watching as the fleeing gang member came ever closer, Morton calculated his attack careful. He needed to strike only when the man came close but he also needed to do this when no-one else was watching. Looking around he saw that there were several other fleeing gang members in sight who would notice if Morton suddenly burst from his hiding place so instead of leaping up at the man coming towards him Morton waited until the last moment when instead of leaping up he kicked out with his leg and tripped the running man.

Then he dived on top of the man, clamping a hand over his mouth before he could call out a warning before thrusting his knife between the man's ribs and twisting it. The man struggled for a few moments but the wound deep and wide enough that he soon lost consciousness and Morton relaxed. He did not move yet though, knowing that any motion could attract the very attention that he had been trying to avoid so he waited until the other gang members had gone past before he returned his knife to its sheath and recovered his blaster rifle from where he had set it down.

"Okay let's move, but stay low and stay quiet. We're not alone out here." Morton told the rest of the group before he began to continue towards the mesa.

The woods continued for several hundred metres more before giving way to open ground and Morton stopped here again, crouching down just within the treeline for cover while he took out his macrobinoculars again. Using these Morton looked towards the mesa and he quickly spotted a group of beings gathered around what looked like a crater. Initially Morton thought that they may be making use of the crater as a makeshift defensive position before he noticed the exposed pipe behind them along with the hole that had been blown in it and he realised what he was looking at, an alternate way into the underground structure housing whatever it was that Rylee wanted control of.

"What's going on Morton?" Rylee said as she crept up behind him.

"Take a look over there Rylee." he replied and he handed her the macrobinoculars, pointing towards the group standing around the exposed pipe.

Rylee looked at this for herself, studying both the damaged pipe and the scavengers gathered around it.

"Scavenger scum. Mott and his men could take them apart." she said.

"Yes but he isn't here right now is he?" Morton pointed out, "Even if he's on his way by the time he gets here that lot could have got to whatever's down there and dug themselves in."

"So what do you suggest then?" Rylee asked.

"For now we wait." Morton told her, "I expect that they've sent a scout into the pipe and are waiting for them to check in. When that happens more of them will go into the pipe, probably leaving a couple as a rear guard. We can easily deal with them and then head into the pipe after the others. With luck they and Teron's people will be at one another's throats when we catch up with them."

"You'd better be right about this Morton because if this goes wrong my father is not going to be happy." Rylee warned him.

# THAL

As soon as power was restored to the underground chamber Thal began to reactivate its basic systems, beginning with the lights. About a third of these had failed during the centuries that the facility had stood empty and Thal suspected that there would be other systems that no longer functioned properly. Standing on the control platform he was finally able to see the extent of the mechanism surrounding him all at once, the twelve spokes spreading out from the core and travelling up the walls before they returned to the centre along the ceiling. From what Thal could tell though all of the consoles on the control platform at the centre of the mechanism were used for monitoring the device, not actually controlling that. Obviously in order to actually operate it, projecting waves of Force energy towards a target it would be necessary to gain access to the sphere at the centre of the platform. Now that there was power though Thal was able to inspect this more closely and he found a small panel that looked different to the body of the sphere around it and he placed his hand against it, expecting it to shift under the pressure.

Instead Thal felt a sudden sharp stinging as something extended from the centre of the panel and stabbed him in the palm of his hand. Quickly he pulled his hand back, considering that perhaps he should have been wearing his gauntlets despite the loss of sensation they imposed. Looking at the palm of his hand he saw that the wound was tiny, just a small spot of blood and moments later there was a hiss followed by a rumbling as the sphere opened, splitting around the centre as the upper half was lifted clear and the lower half unfolded to reveal a couch obviously designed for a humanoid being.

Thal considered the wisdom of sitting down on the couch. If the sphere closed again then there was no guarantee that he would be able to open it from the inside. However, if he did nothing then he may as well just pack up and leave, abandoning any idea of mastering the device and so he stepped into the open sphere and sat down in the couch.

The couch was angled so that Thal was looking up into the upper half of the sphere where he saw a cluster of crystals similar to those used in the spokes of the device only much smaller. Whereas those crystals were arranged end to end to span more than a hundred metres the individual crystals in this cluster were around the same size as those used in lightsabers and there were no more than a dozen of them. Lying back on the couch Thal could see that these crystals were positioned so that they would be right above his head if the sphere were closed and he suspected that they were intended to react to the thoughts of the Sith operator. However, other than this crystal cluster Thal could see no signs of any controls or instrumentation.

"No physical controls. Entirely thought controlled." he said to himself and he took a deep breath before closing his eyes and concentrating on the machine.

This had no effect though and Thal leapt out of the couch and spun around to face the machine.

"Why won't you work?" he yelled before he noticed that the pillars either side of the couch were not identical. One of them was flat on top while the second had a slight circular indentation in the centre and in the middle of this a pattern of several concentric circles. Thal had seen such iconography in many places, it was often used to indicate a wireless data or power point. It seemed unlikely that a Sith would want to charge up a device such as a comlink or datapad while operating the weapon so the port had to be for data instead and there was only one type of data storage device that could also form part of a control matrix.

A holocron.

Using a holocron as the core of the weapon's operating system made a great deal of sense. Not only would the incredible data processing ability allow the device to make all the calculations necessary for aiming and operating the weapon, an artificial intelligence contained within it could also restrict usage of the weapon to those whose aims it approved of. The inclusion of a holocron by Lord Hasran also offered an answer to another question.

"So you didn't design this masterpiece after all Hasran." Thal said, smiling as he touched his hand to the holocron port, "You were given the knowledge by the gatekeeper of a holocron. A gatekeeper who just used you as the focusing source for the power needed to drive it. He would have decided how it was to be used."

The chamber's central column was easy to locate even in the darkness but as Teron and Turlan made their way between two of the massive kyber crystal assemblies that Teron could sense through the Force they heard a mechanical sound.

"Back. Get behind me." Teron told Turlan and as the gen'dai took cover there was a 'snap-hiss' as Teron ignited his lightsaber blade just in time for another labour droid to come into view. The droid was clearly holding a bulky plasma cutter in both hands and as it came closer it lifted the tool and activated it, producing a bright white light between the prongs at its front. Teron knew that the plasma cutter was every bit as lethal as his own lightsaber blade, the two being very similar in form. However, he had the advantage that his lightsaber was designed specifically as a weapon and as such it was lighter and with a significantly longer reach.

Lunging forwards Teron thrust the tip of his blade straight towards the droid and his strike punched through the plasma cutter, causing it to explode as the blade moved on and pierced the torso of the droid itself. The machine shuddered for a moment before it collapsed to the floor in a burning heap.

All of a sudden Teron heard a scream from behind him and he spun around to see that a second droid had appeared. This was also a labour droid but of a different model, having a more spiderlike body than the humanoid construction of the machine he had just destroyed and this had enabled it to climb over the kyber crystal spokes to attack Turlan from behind while Teron was distracted by the more humanoid droid. Had Turlan been a member of almost any other species in the galaxy then the plasma cutter would have probably sliced him in half but his species' unique and incredible regenerative abilities meant that he was only injured, a large split having cut through his muscle tissue that was already beginning to knit itself back together.

The spiderlike droid stood over Turlan and thrust the glowing plasma cutter down at him again, slicing through his flesh once more and producing another loud scream before Teron held out his hand and sent a blast of telekinetic energy through the Force that hurled the droid back away from Turlan. The droid kept hold of the plasma cutter even as it skidded across the floor and it was quickly able to rise back to its feet, turning to face Teron as he advanced towards it.

Teron leapt over the injured but healing Turlan and charged towards the droid with his lightsaber held high. As the droid scuttled towards Teron it raised its plasma cutter in readiness to attack again but as it attempted to strike Teron dived out of the way and the droid thrust the cutter over him as he rolled. Teron then slashed sideways with his lightsaber and cut through all of the legs on one side of the droid. This caused the droid to fall sideways and Teron had to roll out of the way again to avoid it landing on top of him. Then he jumped back to his feet and brought his lightsaber down on the droid again, hacking at it several times in rapid succession and with each blow another section was cut away until the machine finally stopped working.

"Can you stand?" Teron asked, turning back towards Turlan and the gen'dai nodded.

"Yes, I think so." he answered, nodding and he steadied himself against the nearby kyber crystal spoke as he got back to his feet, "Though I am weak, I will need time to recover fully."

"You'll get the chance to rest later Turlan. For now we have work to do." Teron said and he looked towards the structure at the core of the chamber, "Come on, we need to get this working. Then we'll send for my master."

When Teron and Turlan reached the base of the structure they saw the openings where Thal had replaced the original fusion generators with newer ones and his droids had patched the two technologies together. The generator had a conventional control panel built into it and Teron simply reached down to turn it on. The cabling coming from the generator linked it to the others that had been installed and by activating one all of the others also came online at the same time and in an instant the lights in the chamber came on almost instantly.

As well as turning on the lights though, activating the generators also triggered another pair of modified labour droids armed with plasma cutters to start moving. These had been standing guard by the closed sphere at the top of the structure and they began to descend the structure together, both of them activating their plasma cutters at the same time.

The two droids advanced down the slope of the structure towards Teron and Turlan, their movements exactly in synch with one another, holding their weapons out in front of themselves in a menacing fashion. Teron was not concerned about this though and he thrust out his hand towards one of the droids to unleash a storm of Force lightning. The droid came to a halt when it was struck by this assault and shuddered uncontrollably until it exploded. The time taken for this though was enough for the second droid to continue its advance down the side of the structure and get close enough to thrust the plasma cutter at Teron who was just about able to leap out of the way at the last moment before he used his lightsaber to slash at the side of the droid, slicing deep into the side of its torso. The damage this inflicted made the droid topple uncontrolled down the

side of the structure until it reached the bottom where it lay twitching helplessly. Teron ignored the crippled machine and continued to the platform at the top of the structure where the sphere and control console stood.

When Kat turned the *Swift Exit* back towards the mesa there was no further fire from the ground. Instead of banking normally she performed a vertical half loop so that the ship ended up heading straight back along its previous course but now the right way up instead of inverted so that Brae could more easily fire at ground targets.

"Think they've all gone?" she said.

"No way are we going to be that lucky." Tylo commented.

"Agreed." Jayk added, "There was fire coming from two sides of the mesa and Brae could only target one."

"Time to set down?" Kat asked.

"I think so. Make another pass over the mesa as low as possible first though. I'd like to get a better idea of what's down there." Jayk told her.

"Okay then, here we go." Kat said and as she flew the *Swift Exit* back towards the mesa she decreased the ship's altitude to make a low pass over it. This time there was no fire from the ground as Carasson and his gang members took cover to avoid detection. However, as the *Swift Exit* passed overhead the lights in the underground chamber came on and enough of this made its way up to the surface that the entrance was suddenly illuminated.

"Looks like we've got a way in right there." Tylo commented when he saw this and Jayk nodded.

"Then that's our target." he said, "Kat put us down to the south of the mesa and we'll move in on foot."

Teressa watched Teron destroy the labour droids through a ventilation grill set into the wall at the floor of the chamber that she had reached by descending a vertical shaft. The scale of what she was looking at was staggering, she had become used to seeing small and often badly damaged Sith artefacts over the years but the machinery she was able to see once the lights in the chamber were turned on was something else entirely. She could see the numerous spokes all running into the central structure and it took her only a few moments to realise that the crystal material visible within these was likely to either be kyber or one of the synthetic equivalents that the Sith had made use of. Either of the materials was incredibly valuable and the sheer quantity that she could see would sell for an unimaginable amount of money. Now that she had seen what lay beneath the ground though she turned around and crawled back to the shaft before she climbed back up it. From there is was just a short crawl to the hole where Carasson waited with the other remaining members of the gang.

"What did you find?" Carasson asked as he helped Teressa out of the pipe.

"There's a massive cavern down there that has some sort of machine in it. That's what they came here for. It's huge Carasson, it must be more than a hundred metres across and it looked like it had tonnes of kyber in it." she answered and Carasson's eyes widened while the other gang members all stared at her in disbelief.

"Tonnes? You're joking surely." one of them said.

"It's a bad joke." Carasson added.

"It's no joke Carasson, I saw it. Crystal arrays that must be a metre across and fifty metres long each. Maybe a dozen of them." Teressa said, shaking her head.

"Then we have hit it rich this time." Carasson said.

"That sleemo with the lightsaber is down there." Teressa told him.

"How many are with him?" Carasson said.

"Just one that I saw. An alien from a species I didn't recognise." Teressa replied.

"We can take care of two, even if one of them is a jedi or whatever he is." Carasson said, "What about the duct?"

"It stays this wide all the way." Teressa told him, "You should have no trouble getting through."

"Then what are we waiting for? Lead the way and I'll follow." Carasson said before he turned to two of his gang members and pointed at them both, "You two stay here and keep watch. If the freighter makes another pass take cover but I don't want this being left unguarded. Do you understand?"

"Don't worry, we're not going anywhere." one of them replied, grinning at the thought of how much money his share of the contents of the underground chamber would be worth.

Teressa then crouched down and crawled back into the pipe, repeating the path she taken to reach the underground chamber. Carasson followed close behind and then the rest of the gang began to enter one after another.

"They're moving. They're going underground." Morton said, watching the survivors of Carasson's gang through his macrobinoculars.

"Then let's go after them." Rylee said and she began to rise.

"Wait!" Morton snapped and he pulled her back down into the undergrowth.



"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" she responded as she almost fell on top of him.

"No need to get excited princess." Morton said and then he pointed up into the sky where the *Swift Exit* could be seen circling around, "Move out into the open and you'll give us away to the Jedi. How do you think your father will react if you end up being arrested by them?"

"I get your point but warn be next time you intend to manhandle me okay Morton? In fact never manhandle me again unless you want your hands removing." Rylee responded, "But if we aren't going after them now what do you suggest?"

"The Jedi will probably land. As soon as they do we should be able to make it across there to the hole and use it to get underground. With luck the Jedi will go for the main entrance." Morton explained.

"It looks like the scavengers have left sentries." Rylee then commented and she nodded towards the two members of Carasson's gang who had been left to guard the way into the duct.

"We'll have to wait until the Jedi land to deal with them. Fire now and they'll see the flash." Morton said but he still unslung his blaster rifle and using the built in optical sight he lined it up on one of the sentries.

When Brae reached the *Swift Exit*'s cargo hold Jayk and Tylo were already waiting there for her.

"We've seen what looks like an entrance to the underground structure." Jayk told her as he handed her Cal's holocron to look after, "Kat's going to set us down a short distance away."

"Then we attack?" Brae asked.

"That's right kid. Then we attack." Tylo replied.

"If it becomes necessary. Although we will ask for Teron's surrender first." Jayk added and Brae smiled.

"I don't need my power to sense the Force to know that that isn't likely to happen." she commented.

The pitch of the *Swift Exit*'s engines then changed as Kat brought the ship in to land and there was also the sound of the landing gear being deployed before the ship finally set down on the ground.

"Okay we're down. Shutting down engines now and I'll be right with you." Kat's voice announced over the intercom and soon after the sound of the *Swift Exit*'s repulsorlift engines ceased entirely. As soon as this happened Tylo opened the access ramp and just as it was fully extended Kat entered the hold.

"Tylo seal the ship as soon as we're out." Jayk said and Tylo nodded.

"Don't worry, I don't want to lose my ride. I've got a lot invested in her." Tylo replied.

"So does the Jedi Order. Your video screen for example." Brae pointed out.

Standing on the platform Teron watched as Turlan studied the control console.

"So what does it do Turlan? I doubt that such a small panel can operate a weapon capable of laying waste to entire worlds." Teron said.

"The weapon requires no control panel." Turlan responded, "This is intended to monitor and control the secondary support systems."

"They obviously work. I want control of the weapon." Teron said sternly.

"Then you must enter the weapon." Turlan told him.

"I thought this place was the weapon." Teron commented.

"The chamber contains the weapon but it is not the weapon. This is the weapon." Turlan said and he placed his hand on the sphere beside them, "You must place your hand on the panel there to prove that you possess the power that makes you worthy of controlling the weapon."

"You mean the power to control the Force?" Teron said.

"Yes. No machine can direct the energy of the Force on its own, only a Sith can do that." Turlan replied and Teron placed his hand on the panel built into the surface of the sphere. Almost immediately he winced as he felt the stabbing of the probes in the palm of his hand but he did not remove it while it tested his blood for the midi-chlorians that would reveal his ability to sense and manipulate the Force. There was no instrumentation to feed the results of the test back to Teron but it was only seconds later that the sphere split open, the two halves separating to reveal the control couch inside.

Teressa came to a halt when she reached the grill she had watched Teron fighting the droids through and turned to Carasson who was right behind her in the pipe.

"This is it." she said softly.

"Let me see." he responded and he crawled forwards to look through it for himself. When he did he saw the numerous crystal spokes leading to the central structure and he gasped in surprise. Even with Teressa telling him about the sheer quantity of kyber crystal used to make the machine Carasson had not taken her entirely seriously until he saw it for himself, "Stang that's incredible." he said.

"I told you so." Teressa said, grinning at him.

Carasson then inspected the edge of the grill looking for a way to remove it from inside the duct but from what he could see all of the fastenings were located on the outside only, meaning that he had no access to them.

The only other choice was to force the grill out of place but this would undoubtedly alert anyone in the chamber outside to the presence of the gang members in the duct so Carasson knew it had to be done quickly and the quickest way he could think of was to use his blaster.

"Every get ready," he said, crawling a short distance back from the grill as he pointed his weapon at it. The rest of the gang immediately moved back and Carasson fired his weapon at the centre of the grill. As soon as the blaster bolt struck the centre of this the energy spread through the metal and immediately melted a large hole in it. Carasson dived through the hole, keen to get into the chamber before Teron could react to the sound of the blaster shot and behind him the rest of his gang followed.

"Okay that's it. The jedi are on the ground and those scavengers have had plenty of chance to get far enough away from the sentries for us to take them out without alerting the others," Morton said.

"Then do it Morton," Rylee told him and he squeezed off a shot from his blaster rifle that struck one of the sentries between his shoulder blades while his back was turned.

The flash of blaster fire alerted the other sentry to Morton's position instantly and even before his dead comrade had hit the ground he was bringing his own weapon to bear. Morton was quicker though, shifting his point of aim and letting off another rapid shot. This time his blast hit the scavenger in the arm only and the man dropped his rifle before Morton fired a second shot that finished him off.

"Let's move," Morton exclaimed, getting to his feet before he began to sprint towards the now unguarded entrance to the duct.

Rylee and the yacht crew ran with Morton but he was the first to reach the hole in the duct and he peered into it. Finding it too dark to see anything Morton took out his glow rod and shone it into the pipe to illuminate what was inside. He saw nothing that looked dangerous but when he directed the glow rod downwards he saw scuff marks on the bottom of the pipe that indicated the direction that Carasson and his gang had gone.

"Morton, what can you see?" Rylee asked.

"Just pipes and cables," Morton answered and he slung his rifle before drawing his sidearm instead, leaving his other hand free for his glow rod, "Follow me," and then he crawled into the pipe and turned to follow the scuff marks below him.

From the platform on which the now open control sphere stood Teron heard the blaster shot and he spun around, drawing and activating his lightsaber as he did. Almost immediately there was more blaster fire as the scavengers saw the brightly glowing blade and opened fire at the figure wielding it. Some of the fire was indiscriminate and it struck the structure of the weapon, however this proved impervious to small arms fire and the energy blasts did nothing more than leave scorch marks. Teron responded to the more accurately aimed fire by deflecting them with his lightsaber. In his anger at being attacked in a place he considered holy Teron did not focus on where the deflected blaster bolts were going and some of them struck the kyber filled spokes of the weapon. Ordinarily kyber crystals reacted explosively to being struck by the concentrated energy of blaster fire but the spokes were shielded and the blaster bolts were dissipated before they could strike the volatile crystals.

The sound of the blaster fire, as well as Teron's telepathic link to Mara alerted both her and Krovak to a problem within the weapon chamber itself and both of them came running to see what was happening. From the platform just inside the entrance to the weapon chamber they could see the flashes of blaster fire clearly and Mara fired her blaster in return, picking off one of the scavengers. On the other hand Krovak just roared in anger, his sword in his hand and he started to run down the ramp leading around the chamber to join Teron at the centre. Mara followed Krovak down the ramp but at a slower pace, still using her blaster to fire at any of the scavengers she could see. They were too far away for her to be able to consistently target with any accuracy but she was able to limit their advance and ability to fire on Teron by forcing them to take cover behind parts of the weapon.

The jedi and Tylo ran from the *Swift Exit* to the mesa and up the side. They checked over the top first to see if there were any signs of life but all they could see was the faint glow of the lights inside the underground chamber escaping through the entrance.

"Doesn't look like anyone's on watch," Kat said.

"Yeah and I've got a bad feeling about that," Tylo added, "Who doesn't leave the entrance to a secret underground super weapon guarded?"

"Someone distracted by an attack from another direction. Something that could work very well for us," Jayk said and he beckoned for the others to follow him as he climbed onto the top of the mesa and began advancing towards the entrance to the underground facility.

Jayk halted several metres short of the entrance and glanced at Brae as she also stopped.

"Do you sense anything?" he asked but she shook her head.

"No, not yet." she replied.

"Then let's see what's down there." Jayk said and he moved forwards again, holding his lightsaber in front of him just in case he came under attack.

"What do you see?" Tylo asked.

"Stairs." Jayk replied.

"Can you see where they go?" Tylo added.

"Down." Jayk said and he started to descend the stairs into the chamber at the bottom.

Kat followed close behind him and they halted at the bottom of the stairs.

"That looks like a labour droid." Kat commented when she saw the remains of the droid armed with the flamethrower.

"Perhaps left as some kind of guardian by Thal." Jayk suggested, "The design is far too modern to have been left by the Sith."

"Listen, is that blaster fire?" Tylo asked as he and Brae came down the stairs behind Jayk and Kat and the Jedi listened.

Through the door at the far side of the room at the base of the stairs came the distant sound of blaster fire.

"Looks like you were right about them coming under attack from another direction." Brae commented.

"The question of course remains exactly who, or even what is attacking who. I think we should proceed with caution." Jayk said and Tylo winced.

"Or what'? You really have to make this creepy don't you?" he said but Jayk did not answer, instead he crossed the room to the doorway opposite and peered through. On the other side he saw the platform that overlooked the main chamber that housed the Sith weapon and when he saw that it was empty he stepped cautiously through.

"It's here." he said, looking down at the weapon and the others followed him through the doorway and stood either side of him. From here they could see the crystal spokes leading to the central structure and the Jedi could sense the way the kyber crystals resonated in the Force. More significantly though they could see Teron wielding his lightsaber as he came under fire from several scavengers while both Krovak and Mara rushed to help him.

"That's Turlan." Brae said when she then noticed the gen'dai crouching by the control sphere in the centre of the chamber and trying to keep out of the line of fire from any of the scavengers.

"I guess now we know how Teron found out about this place then. He's probably old enough to have seen it being built." Tylo commented.

"Then he can witness its destruction as well." Jayk said and he simply stepped forwards off the side of the platform and let the Force control his descent.

Brae and Kat then did the same, stepping over the edge of the platform and using the Force to take them safely to the floor far below while Tylo could only look over the edge and watch.

"I guess I'll take the ramp then." he said to himself before he stepped back from the edge, turned around and started to run down the ramp.

"Sounds like the scavengers have found Teron." Rylee commented when she heard blaster fire from ahead and Morton nodded.

"Wait here while I check it out." Morton told her and while she and the yacht crew stayed where they were Morton continued to make his way along the duct until he found the grill that had been blasted open. Peering through the hole Morton caught sight of a pair of scavengers firing in the other direction before all of a sudden a blast bolt struck the duct not far from the grill and punched a hole through it. At first Morton flinched and backed away from this but then he looked outside again and he saw that it was Teron who had deflected the blaster bolt towards the duct by chance. Before another blast bolt could come his way Morton hurried forwards and crawled out of the duct then beckoned for the others to follow, "Spread out but don't fire. We don't want to attract attention yet." he told them as they crawled out of the duct behind him.

While Rylee and the yacht crew were emerging from the duct Morton assessed the situation in the rest of the chamber. Most obvious was Teron standing on the slope of the central structure, deflecting one blaster bolt after another but showing little if any regard for where these were going. At the same time the scavengers under Carasson's command were spreading out to try and surround the young man with the lightsaber, knowing that even a jedi or Sith could not defend themselves from all directions at once.

For the time being at least there were no signs of either Teron's loyal lieutenant Krovak or Mara who he had been able to take from Morton's service but Morton guessed that they were both close by, concealed from view by the machinery that filled the chamber.

However, when he looked across the chamber to the far side he saw a platform set high up against the wall there with a ramp leading down to the chamber floor. Standing on top of the platform Morton saw four figures and although they were too far away for him to pick out their facial features he could tell by the active lightsabers that he could see easily that they were jedi and from this he could deduce exactly who they and the fourth figure were.

"Well, well Tylo. Maybe now is my chance to settle our score." Morton muttered to himself and he lifted his rifle to his shoulder. The optical sight on his weapon gave him a better picture of Tylo and he could make out the man's features clearly. However, before he could fire the weapon the three jedi unexpectedly leapt from the side of the platform. Such a jump would have been suicidal for an ordinary being but Morton saw them all dropping at an unnaturally slow rate and he knew instantly that they had used the Force to somehow limit their descent. It still did not take long for them to vanish behind some of the machinery in the chamber and disappear from view though and Morton lifted his weapon so that its sight pointed back towards the platform. However, by his time Tylo had already started running down the ramp towards the bottom of the cavern and Morton no longer had the clear shot he had missed.

"So what now Morton?" Rylee asked from behind him, "This place doesn't seem very safe."

"We've not been noticed yet. When we are things will get worse so we should wait until revealing ourselves gets us something." Morton replied.

"Like settling a score?" Rylee commented.

"Tylo Kurrast is the weak link in the jedi. He doesn't have their abilities so they'll have to act to protect him. If they don't then by taking him out we cost them one quarter of their team and the only one who is likely to attack us at range." Morton pointed out as he continued to look around the chamber, paying careful attention to where equipment offered places for them to hide as they made their way closer to the central structure, "That's our path." he said, pointing towards a piece of machinery that Morton could not determine the function of but appeared solid enough to absorb at least a few blaster hits, "Wait until I say and then we move."

Morton was not the only one in the chamber to notice the three jedi as they leapt from the platform and a pair of Carasson's scavengers who had been trying to get around behind Teron turned their weapons towards them and opened fire. Sensing the attack in advance the three jedi deflected the blaster bolts with minimal effort but Brae suddenly gasped.

"Brae what's wrong?" Jayk asked.

"Behind us. Mara." Brae responded as she sensed the approach of the possessed woman and both of the Udras spun around to see Krovak and Mara now moving towards them.

"Kat can you deal with those scavengers?" Jayk said and Kat nodded.

"I've got them. Go." she said as she deflected another blaster bolt, sending it up into the ceiling high above them and Jayk and Brae began to advance towards Krovak and Mara.

Seeing how ineffectual the blaster fire from his gang was against Teron, Carasson decided that an alternate means of attack was needed and he looked at Teresa.

"Teresa I need you to keep that freak occupied. I need to get closer to him." he said as he holstered his blaster and then flexed the fingers of his gauntleted hands.

"Are you insane?" Teresa hissed.

"Do you have a better idea?" Carasson responded before he darted towards the central structure, keeping low and using one of the spokes as cover from the deflected blaster bolts that flew over his head.

When he reached the base of the central structure he paused and looked up to where Teron stood and he also saw Turlan crouching close behind him, using the bottom half of the sphere for cover and located between Carrason and Teron. Although Turlan did not appear to be armed Carasson was not willing to take the chance that he may interfere with his attack on Teron so the leader of the scavengers decided that he had to die first, intending to make one quick strike that would dispose of him and leave Teron unsupported.

Carasson broke into a sprint as he made his way up the sloping side of the central structure and the sound of his footsteps made Turlan turn towards him. Before he could shout out a warning though Carasson thrust both his hands forwards and lightning erupted from the tips of his gauntlets' fingers. This engulfed Turlan and the already injured gen'dai screamed in pain as the energy flowed over him. In turn the scream alerted Teron to Carasson's presence and he spun around to see what was happening. As soon as he saw the lightning flowing from Carasson's gauntlets to his adviser Teron thrust his lightsaber into the path of the attack and blocked it with his blade, at which point Carasson ceased his attack.

"That is not your power. Those gauntlets do not belong to you." he said sternly, advancing towards Carasson but the scavenger just grinned back at him.

"The previous owner didn't need them so he gave them to me. Just like his ship." he said.

"A lie." Turlan gasped as he struggled to breathe, "Thal N'Krey would not deal with the likes of you."

"I don't care how you got those gauntlets. I want them." Teron added.

"Then come and get them!" Carasson snapped and he unleashed another volley of lightning. This time though the attack was aimed at Teron and Carasson used one hand while he kept the other low.

Teron easily blocked the attack with his lightsaber but in doing so he had to lift his lightsaber up in front of his face and in doing so he made himself vulnerable to a lower attack. This was exactly what Carasson had been hoping for and he quickly used his other hand to unleash a separate blast of lightning while maintaining the first stream against Teron's lightsaber.

When the lightning struck Teron's legs he immediately collapsed and let go of his lightsaber, the weapon shutting off as soon as it left his grip. Carasson was going to maintain his attack but the energy flowing from his gauntlets abruptly cut out and as he stared at them he heard the sound of Teron laughing.

"As I said, the power is not yours." he said before he thrust a hand out towards Carasson and unleashed an uncontrolled blast of telekinetic energy. The strength of the impact of this energy on Carasson was enough to hurl him backwards and he rolled back down the sloped side of the central structure.

When Teron had turned to face Carasson, Teresa had considered it an opportunity to attack him from the side but when she turned to the members of the gang close by to give the command to attack she noticed another figure just as it disappeared behind some of the equipment attached to the spokes of the weapon. The clothing of the figure gave them away as not being part of the scavenger gang, instead of the basic and well worn mix of clothing they wore a jumpsuit of a pattern known for its use by starship crew that apart from a few odd marks and dirt stains could have been brand new.

"Behind us!" she exclaimed before she pointed her blaster towards the moving figure and fired, "It's a trap!"

"We've been made!" Morton said as blaster fire came towards him, Rylee and the crewmen from the yacht, one of whom was hit almost immediately and fell to the floor. Then he took aim with his rifle and fired a rapid burst towards Teresa that forced her to take cover.

"What do we do now?" Rylee asked before Morton dragged her lower.

"For starters stay low and yes I know I just put my hands on you again princess." he replied before firing another rapid burst towards the scavengers.

Rylee scowled but then she fired her own blaster towards the scavengers but her inexperience showed and the shot went wide of its target before a return volley made her take cover again. Morton and the crew of the yacht were another matter though and their fire was better aimed, even if they were able only to keep the scavengers pinned down rather than killing any of them. With only three of the crew remaining though there was a limit to the area they could cover and Teresa waved for more of the scavengers to turn their attention away from Teron and towards Rylee's group, hoping to overwhelm them more easily than the Force user.

Krovak roared with anger as his armour channelled more of the power of the Dark Side into him the closer the Jedi came to him and he suddenly broke into a run, charging towards Jayk and Brae. Brae was closer than Jayk and she lifted her lightsaber to swing at Krovak but he slammed into her before she could make her attack, striking with enough force to send her flying backwards.

Jayk reacted quickly to this, leaping in between Krovak and his daughter and positioning his lightsaber in front of him.

"Willing to pick on someone your own size?" he said and in response Krovak swung his sword at Jayk's head.

Rather than parry the attack Jayk ducked and struck back, dragging the blade of his lightsaber across Krovak's stomach. This attack would have cut any normal opponent in half instantly but the unnatural material that Krovak's armour was made of was able to absorb the energy before it could injure Krovak. The sensation of being hit by a lightsaber was still passed on to Krovak by the armour though and he let out another roar, this time of pain instead of anger.

As Brae got back to her feet she reached out through the Force and summoned her lightsaber back to her grip before reactivating it with a 'snap-hiss'. Turning around she saw Krovak launching a counter attack against Jayk while he parried each attempted blow. Brae was about to charge to her father's aid when she spotted Mara approaching with a blaster in her hand, obviously hoping to catch Jayk unawares. Even though Krovak's armour would most likely protect him from any accidental hits from her sidearm Mara still held her fire until she could be sure of a clear shot against the Jedi. However, she soon became aware of the second lightsaber wielding figure instead running towards her and she turned to fire at Brae instead, letting off three shots in rapid succession. Brae was prepared for this though and she easily deflected all three with her lightsaber before she waved her hand towards Mara, reaching out through the Force once more and using it to knock Mara's weapon from her hand.

Brae was still several metres from Mara as the weapon went flying though and this gave the possessed woman chance to draw a knife before the young Jedi came close enough to attack. Mara rolled out of the way as Brae got closer, ensuring that the Jedi's initial swing of her lightsaber passed over her. Then she jumped up and tried to stab Brae in her side but she was also able to dodge out of the way before she could be injured. However, Mara was able to quickly follow this attack up with a kick that knocked Brae's legs out from under her and she collapsed. Mara then pounced onto Brae, intending to bring her knife down on the prone Jedi. Before she could strike though she needed to make sure that Brae could not make use of her lightsaber and she reached out with her free hand to grab hold of Brae by the wrist, preventing her from attacking with it. Rather than try to free her hand though, Brae responded in kind and grabbed Mara by the wrist to stop her from using her knife and the two women then began to wrestle, each one trying to free their own weapon while keeping their opponent from using their own.

There were four scavengers firing at Kat when Tylo neared the bottom of the ramp leading to the bottom of the chamber and although she was holding her own Tylo knew that this would not last forever though so he took aim at the nearest scavenger and opened fire. Taken by surprise by this assault the scavenger had no time to take cover and he fell dead in an instant. Now alert to this new threat the other scavengers immediately retreated to take cover behind some of the nearby machinery and Kat moved towards Tylo.

"Are you okay?" Tylo asked as he rushed to her side and she nodded.

"Fine, but thanks for the assist." she said and then she quickly looked towards where Jayk and Brae were fighting Krovak and Mara, "I think we should try and wrap things up here as quickly as possible though." Tylo nodded back at her.

"Then let's do this. I'll go to the left, you take the right." he said.

The pair of them then dashed towards the scavengers, Tylo firing short bursts from his blaster rifle to try and keep them pinned down. This limited the time any of the scavengers could spend firing at either Tylo or Kat but they were still able to fire while Tylo was focused on the others and Kat had to deflect these as she ran forwards.

After hurling Carasson down the side of the structure Teron expected to come under fire from the other scavengers but when none came he looked around to see why. Most concerning were the three lightsaber wielding figures that he recognised immediately as the ones who had been hunting him since he had realised his power. For the time being Krovak and Mara were engaged against the Udras while Tylo and Kat were exchanging fire with some of Carasson's scavengers. Teron doubted that these men would last long against a Jedi knight but he had more faith in his own followers to keep Jayk and Brae busy while he dealt with any other threats in the chamber.

Although there was no blaster fire coming towards him Teron could hear it coming from several sides other than the handful of scavengers firing on Tylo and Kat and he turned to investigate these. There he saw that the rest of Carasson's gang was exchanging fire with another group that Teron did not immediately recognise. However, when Morton fired another rapid burst he revealed himself just long enough for Teron to recognise his old employer before he ducked out of sight again.

"It appears that the Force has delivered all of my enemies to me Turlan. I will deliver their heads to my master." he said.

"Something he will undoubtedly be pleased with." Turlan replied, obviously struggling to breathe.

"How serious are your injuries?" Teron asked.

"I will recover my lord. My body just needs time to regenerate its injuries." Turlan told him and he nodded.

"Then wait here while I settle my first score and take the head of the scum who would think himself worthy of usurping the power of the Sith." Teron said as he started to walk down the sloping side of the central structure with his lightsaber in his hand.

Carasson had landed heavily at the bottom of the structure and he was struggling to get back to his feet when he heard the humming of Teron's lightsaber coming closer. With the gauntlets power cell depleted Carasson had only his more conventional weaponry to rely on and he drew his blaster from his belt, aimed it at Teron and opened fire. Teron effortlessly swatted the blaster bolts aside with his lightsaber before he stood over Carasson while the leader of the scavengers remained on the floor at his feet. Extending his hand towards Carasson, Teron ripped the blaster from his hand and called it to his own before tossing it aside.

"We can do a deal." Carasson gasped, "I can get you artefacts from-"

"I don't need the likes of you to help me. My army numbers in the thousands and the Dark Side will guide me to anything the Sith have left behind that is worth finding." Teron interrupted. Then as he raised his lightsaber to strike he added, "You have nothing to offer me."

"No wait!" Carasson cried out but Teron was not interested in hearing any more pleading or bargaining and he brought his blade down on the scavenger's neck, slicing right through it and decapitating him in a single stroke.

A blaster shot hit another of the yacht crew in his side and he slumped forwards, his weapon sliding across the floor. Glancing in the direction the shot had come from Morton saw that a pair of scavengers had managed to circle around them. Then he looked back toward the platform at the top of the central structure and he saw Teron returning to it with Carasson's severed head in his hand.

"We're done." he said.

"Done? What do you mean done?" Rylee responded.

"I mean we need to get out of here while we still can. Those nerf herders to our right will cut us off from the duct if we give them another few minutes and we don't have the numbers to fight Teron and the Jedi. We need to come back with Mott and his men." Morton told her and she frowned.

"Very well, but I'm not abandoning this place. I can't." she said.

"I'm not keen on losing my payday for this either but what good's a reward if you're not around to spend it?" Morton said as he reloaded his blaster rifle then he fired it again, spraying energy blasts towards the remaining scavengers so that they were forced to take cover, "Go! Get back to the duct." he snapped and Rylee began to move, rushing back towards the open duct. The surviving members of the yacht crew who had accompanied them also fell back after her but as they ran one of the scavengers risked a shot around the machinery he was hiding behind and this struck a crewman between his shoulders, causing him to fall forwards and knock Rylee to the floor. Morton heard Rylee call out as he shot the scavenger and he looked over his shoulder, concerned that she had been hit and knowing what the consequences for himself could be if she was injured or worse yet killed. However, he was relieved to see that she was still alive, squirming to get out from beneath the dead man lying on top of her. The other crewmen moved to help her but there was another volley of blaster fire that cut them down, leaving Rylee trapped for the time being. In firing though the scavengers gave their position away and Morton fired his rifle at them, this time using more carefully aimed shots to pick them both off one after another. Then he returned to firing more randomly towards Teressa and the scavengers close to her as he dashed to help Rylee himself.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Fine once I can get out from under here." Rylee responded and Morton reached down to offer her his hand. There was just enough time to free Rylee before the scavengers fired again. This time though they missed, the blaster bolts passing through the air behind Morton and Rylee as they hurried towards the entrance to the duct.

"Get in quick." Morton told Rylee and he turned to fire another suppressing burst from his rifle, keeping his finger on the trigger until the power cell was exhausted. This gave Rylee enough time to get back into the duct and she peered back out of it.

"Come on then." she called out to Morton.

"I'm coming." he replied before he ducked down and crawled into the duct after her.

Jayk and Krovak continued to trade blows. Jayk had trained as a swordsman since childhood and his skill with a blade was far superior to Krovak. However, the armoured Sith warrior had his speed and strength boosted by the arcane armour he was clad in and as he became ever more enraged by his failure to land a killing blow on the Jedi the Dark Side channelled more of its power into him. On the other hand Jayk's skill enabled him to land several blows on Krovak but the warrior's armour prevented the hits he was able to make from harming him.

"I'll have your blood on my blade yet jedi!" Krovak hissed when Jayk parried an attempt by him to strike at the jedi's head. Jayk countered by bring up his lightsaber and the two blades locked together.

Jayk gave no response to this remark though and instead he twisted out of the way before shutting off his lightsaber. With the containment field of its blade no longer blocking Krovak's weapon he stumbled forwards while Jayk moved clear. Krovak let out another roar of anger as he steadied himself and turned around before Jayk could attack but rather than reactivate his lightsaber Jayk leapt up into the air and somersaulted over Krovak's head, forcing him to turn around again to avoid the jedi getting behind him.

Jayk dodged again as Krovak swung his sword at head height, ducking down so that it passed over his head but he still did not ignite his lightsaber. Instead he let Krovak make another two attacks, moving out of the way of each and observing carefully how the armoured warrior behaved each time. The next time Krovak attacked Jayk rolled backwards, increasing the gap between the pair and then as Krovak stepped forwards to try and close it again he performed yet another leap that took him right over Krovak's head and Krovak reacted by spinning around and swinging his sword at head height again. However, Jayk had been expecting this and he had landed closer to Krovak than he had realised, close enough that had he done nothing about the attack then it would have been Krovak's forearms that struck the side of his head instead of the blade of his sword. Jayk still did not intend to allow this though and he brought up his hand to block the swing, channelling the Force through the hand to first slow and then stop Krovak's attack just as his arm reached Jayk's hand.

*Surprise.*

*Confusion.*

*Anger.*

Jayk sensed Krovak's reaction to the failure of his latest attack but the jedi was not done yet. Instead he thrust his lightsaber forwards and pressed the blade emitter against the centre of Krovak's chest, right where a blood red crystal was embedded in his armour. Then without a word he reactivated the weapon and there was a 'snap-hiss' as the blade extended.

The sudden rush of energy as the blade extended burned a hole right through even Krovak's arcane armour, shattering the crystal. In the process the built up power of the Dark Side itself was released. Krovak died without a sound as the lightsaber blade continued on through his heart but there was a loud 'boom' as the crystal released its energy and Jayk was hurled back away from the epicentre of the blast while Krovak's body was incinerated in moments, leaving only charred pieces of armour that fell to the floor while his sword landed at the base of the central structure.

"Krovak!" Teron called out when he saw this and as Jayk got back to his feet Teron turned towards him, "You will pay for that jedi. Krovak was loyal."

"He was a puppet of the Dark Side." Jayk replied, "Now surrender to me Teron Sharr and this can end now."

"No!" Teron hissed, "This ends when the Jedi Order and your precious Republic are in flames." and he tossed the severed head he still held aside as he began to descend the central structure again towards Jayk.

The shock of seeing Carasson's head in Teron's hand had unnerved Teressa and she realised that what remained of the scavengers lacked the necessary strength to seize control of the chamber from him.

Withdrawing presented a challenge all of its own though. Teressa saw Morton and Rylee retreat into the duct and there was no telling whether or not they were now lying in wait to attack anyone who followed them so attempting to leave the way the scavengers had come did not seem like a good idea. This left only the main entrance to the chamber as a potential escape route and that meant being able to get around Teron.

The sudden and unexpected explosion presented an opportunity to the scavengers though as it caused Teron to turn away and walk out of sight.

"We're getting out of here." Teressa told the other scavengers nearby her, "This way."

She then began to lead the other scavengers away from the direction she had seen Teron head in. She could still hear the sound of blaster fire from this direction but she doubted that whatever opposition may be here would be less of a threat than Teron. However, as the scavengers rounded the central structure they saw Kat blocking their path with her own lightsaber in her hand.



The force of the explosion was also enough to push Brae and Mara back and the pair rolled across the floor, both of them dropping their weapons as they went before slamming into some of the machinery attached to a nearby spoke. The force of the impact dazed Brae but Mara was largely unaffected, the creature that possessed her was protected deep inside her body and so even a strong blow to her head would not affect it. Had she retained possession of either of her weapons she would have killed Brae there and then but she instead looked around to try and find one. Her blaster had landed far out of sight but she saw her knife much closer and she hurried towards it. Bending down to scoop up the bladed weapon she turned back towards Brae who was still lying motionless on the floor beside the machinery and the crystal spoke.

Mara grinned as she approached Brae with her knife in her hand and when she reached the jedi's side she crouched down in preparation to strike. The moment she began to move her knife into position though Brae's eyes snapped open and she reached out her hand, not towards Mara to try and fight her off but towards where her lightsaber had landed and she used the Force to summon the weapon back to her. The moment the lightsaber was in her hand again Brae ignited it with a 'snap-hiss' and the blade extended to its full one metre length in moments. Then she thrust towards Mara's abdomen, impaling her before she could react. As the blade passed through her Mara let out an inhuman screeching sound, produced by the creature lodged inside her as it was cut in half by Brae's attack and then Mara collapsed in a heap as Brae withdrew her blade. Brae could still sense life in Mara but the shadow of the Dark Side that surrounded the possessed woman was fading fast and Brae looked at her. As she watched she saw the blackness that filled Mara's eyes suddenly start to dissipate, revealing the blue eyes that were not so different from Brae's own. "Thank you." Mara gasped, looking back up at Brae as she was freed of the last influence of the creature that had inhabited her body for more than a year.

Then she let out once last breath of air and Brae felt her die.

"Kat look out! Here come more of them." Tylo called out when he saw the scavengers led by Teressa heading in their direction. The pair had just dealt with the small group of scavengers blocking their path but now they found themselves facing an even larger force.

"I see them." Kat responded before deflecting a blaster bolt aimed at her by one of them.

*Fear.*

*Panic.*

"But I don't think they want to fight us." she added as she sensed their emotional state.

"Well they've got an odd way of showing it." Tylo commented, "Maybe it's time to deploy a little more firepower." and he reached for one of the grenades he carried.

"No. This machinery contains kyber crystals, I can sense it through the Force. It appears resistant to blaster bolts but a larger explosion may be a different matter." Kat told him before there was another volley of blaster fire that she avoided by taking cover beside Tylo.

"Sure you don't want to risk a grenade?" Tylo asked.

"Positive." Kat replied before she added, "Although in this situation I think that your sidearm may come in useful." and as she shut off her lightsaber she held out her hand.

Smiling Tylo drew the heavy blaster pistol he carried in a holster and passed the weapon to Kat.

"Here you go." Tylo told her.

"Thank you. Now I'm going to show these scavengers what a decade teaching marksmanship to padawans who probably don't appreciate what the skill can do." she said before both of them pointed their blasters towards the scavengers and opened fire.

Coming down the side of the chamber's central structure gave Teron the advantage of high ground and he broke into a run to maximise the force of his assault. Just as when he had faced Krovak though Jayk had the advantage of experience over Teron and he expertly parried the rapid succession of lightsaber swings aimed at him by his much younger opponent.

*Rage.*

*Hatred.*

The one advantage that Teron had however, was his ability to draw on the Dark Side. Although in the longer term the Dark Side consumed and destroyed those who used it in the short term it was a quick route to gaining power and Jayk could feel it flowing through Teron. In response to this Jayk could only remain calm, continuing to parry and dodge the attacks aimed towards him in the hope that Teron would overextend himself or make a mistake that could be exploited.

"Dad!" Jayk heard Brae call out from behind him but he did not take his focus away from Teron, "Hold on I'm coming."

Brae then began to run towards where Jayk and Teron were battling but as she did she sensed a tremor in the Force.

*Danger.*

The blaster shot that came towards Brae was not well aimed and she did not even have to dodge or parry it as it passed by her with more than a metre to spare. Looking up to the platform at the top of the central structure she saw Turlan pointing a blaster towards her. The weapon looked like a sporting pistol rather than a military model but it was still capable of inflicting a lethal injury and as he began to slowly descend the structure towards her he fired again.

Turlan's shot continued to go wide, a mix of his inexperience and injuries affecting his aim but his continued fire did prevent Brae from joining up with Jayk to fight Teron and instead forced her to turn toward the approaching gen'dai. Jayk could not break away from Teron to stop Turlan as he walked down to the floor of the chamber close to where Krovak's sword had landed and he picked it up in his free hand.

"This place belongs to the Sith and you shall not defile it," he said to Brae.

Guessing that his intention was simply to delay her from supporting Jayk, Brae charged at Turlan rather than waiting for him to come to her. He fired his blaster again as she ran and from this shorter range Brae was forced to deflect the blaster bolts. She was able to send one of them straight back at Turlan and this hit the shoulder of the arm holding his blaster. This caused him to drop the weapon but as Brae watched the flesh hit by the blaster bolt began to regenerate and knit itself back together before her eyes.

Hoping that she could still exploit the gen'dai's injury Brae aimed a swing of her lightsaber towards it. The energy blade cut deep into Turlan's arm but before the limb could be severed he brought up the Sith sword he had recovered and used this to knock aside Brae's lightsaber. Almost immediately she saw the wound began to close.

"Neat trick," she said, "How long can you keep that going?" and then she struck again, this time aiming for the hand in which he was holding the sword, however his reactions were fast enough that he parried this attack before he could be struck again.

Turlan did not make any attempt to counter attack, he was an academic rather than a warrior and he knew that any strike he attempted would risk giving Brae an opportunity to launch another attack that he could not block. His ability to regenerate wounds was not infinite and he was already approaching the point where he would have to rest. All he needed to do though was delay Brae long enough for Teron to deal with Jayk. On the other hand both Jayk and Teron were fully committed to their duel, striking and parrying as quickly as they could. Jayk could sense Teron's ever growing frustration and he deliberately gave ground, backing away from him and encouraging him to follow him down the side of the structure. What Teron overlooked in his impatience as he did this was that Jayk was drawing him ever closer to the level floor of the chamber where he would no longer have the advantage of striking from a higher level.

Getting Teron to floor level was only the first part of Jayk's strategy though, he also needed to prevent him from retreating back up the side of the central structure and the only way to do this was to occupy this high ground himself. Therefore, as soon as Teron reached the bottom of the structure Jayk leapt upwards and somersaulted to the side, keeping just out of Teron's reach as he landed on top of a nearby crystal spoke. Then as Teron was turning towards him he carried out a second Force-enhanced leap that landed him on the side of the central structure instead.

Too late Teron realised that he had been drawn into a trap and now his Jedi opponent held the high ground. However, he still sensed an opportunity to distract Jayk and rather than attack him directly Teron drew on the Dark Side, channelling all his built-up hatred and anger into one massive blast that he released as Force lightning. However, rather than aiming this at Jayk, Teron held out his free hand towards where Brae and Turlan were locked in combat and unleashed the storm towards them instead.

Turlan was closer to Teron than Brae was and so he caught the brunt of the attack. In addition to burning the gen'dai's flesh the lightning also ignited his clothing and Turlan screamed as he was turned into a burning torch by the attack. This was more than Turlan's body could regenerate and the gen'dai toppled forwards to the floor where his life of more than a thousand years finally came to an end. As the energy flowed around the burning Turlan the remainder leapt towards Brae and she also cried out as she was hit. Instinctively she retreated, trying to leap back out of the flow of Dark Side energy but the attack had stunned her and in doing so without concentrating properly she landed awkwardly and collapsed in a heap gasping for breath.

"Brae!" Jayk yelled when he saw this, turning his head towards his daughter and in that moment Teron struck.

He thrust his lightsaber straight forwards and the blade passed right through Jayk, entering his abdomen below his ribcage and coming out of his back just beside his spine.

"No!" Brae screamed when she saw this from where she was getting back to her feet.

Despite his victory over Jayk, Teron knew that his overall position in the chamber was untenable. Shocked back into a state of alertness Brae was getting back to her feet and the sounds of blaster fire from the other

side of the central structure told him that there were more opponents that he could not see while he was now alone. Therefore, he determined that the wisest course of action was to withdraw and come back with reinforcements. He knew that his master would be angered by this set back but he hoped that the defeat of Jayk would offset this somewhat. Turning towards the ramp leading up to the main exit from the chamber Teron broke into a run, evading Brae as he made his escape.

Instead of giving chase to Teron, Brae ran towards Jayk as soon as she was back on her feet and she skidded to a halt before dropping to her knees beside him.

"Brae," he gasped, looking up into Brae's face as she cradled his head.

"Dad, don't try to speak. I'll get help." she replied before she looked towards the sound of blaster fire and called out, "Tylo! Kat! Dad's hurt."

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tylo said when he heard Brae's shout and he looked at Kat.

"Same here. Brae wouldn't call out unless there was a serious problem. Let's go." she replied.

"What about these scavengers?" Tylo asked.

"Forget them. As long as they're leaving empty handed they aren't as important as Teron and the weapon itself." Kat answered.

Tylo and Kat then began to withdraw, laying down cover with their blasters as they headed towards where Brae had called out from.

Seeing that they were pulling back, Teressa signalled for the remaining scavengers to hold their fire.

"They're pulling back." she told them, "Wait another minute and then we're out of here."

Teron paused to look around when he emerged from the underground complex. There was no-one else on the mesa but there was always the possibility that some could be hiding just over the sides and so he opened his mind to the Force and reached out, looking for signs of life. However, the only sentient life he sensed came not from beyond the mesa but behind him in the underground complex.

Spinning around Teron was just in time to see Teressa emerge from the staircase behind him. Not expecting anyone to be right at the top of the stairs, Teressa ground to a sudden halt.

*Surprise.*

*Fear.*

"Get ba-" she tried calling out to the other scavengers following her but before she could finish there was a 'snap-hiss' and a flash of red as Teron ignited his lightsaber and cut her down with a single stroke. Then he began to descend the stairs once again, cutting his way through the scavengers who in the confines of the staircase could not co-ordinate their defence or fall back without getting in one another's way. The last scavenger turned and started to run back towards the doorway leading to the main chamber where the weapon was located. However, before he could reach the doorway Teron waved his hand and used the Force to slam the door shut, sealing the scavenger in the small compartment with him.

The man turned around to face Teron but instead of attempting to defend himself he dropped his blaster to the floor.

"No please!" he pleaded, "I surrender, I'll-" but he was cut off as Teron reached towards him and he felt his throat constrict suddenly. He dropped to his knees, choking and clawing at his throat but he was powerless to escape Teron's grip before he suffocated.

With the scavengers all dead Teron returned to the surface and took out his comlink, raising it to his mouth.

"This is Teron. I need a pick up now." he said into it.

"On our way my lord." the pilot of his transport responded.

"They're coming dad. Hold on." Brae said as Jayk coughed up a mouthful of blood.

"It doesn't matter. I'm dying Brae. Nothing can prevent that now." Jayk responded and he lifted his hand to stroke the side of her face.

"Dad I-" Brae began.

"Quiet Brae. I do not have a lot of time left to me and there are things I need to say. Things I could not say without violating the Jedi Code." Jayk interrupted, "You are my daughter and I am very proud of the woman you are becoming. I have done my best to teach you the ways of the Force but from this point on you must find your own way in life, I cannot be there to protect you." he continued and then he coughed up more blood before he added, "Just remember that I will always love you." Jayk then let out another gasp and his eyes widened as the last of his life left him.

"No!" Brae shrieked, sensing the exact moment that her father died in her arms.

"Brae what happened?" Kat said as she and Tylo ran towards her from behind.

"Dad's dead. Teron killed him." Brae replied as she gently lowered Jayk's head back to the floor and then picked up his lightsaber.

"Where is he?" Tylo asked, looking around for Teron.

"He escaped. Now I'm going to hunt him down and kill him." Brae said.

"Brae no." Kat told her, placing a hand on Brae's shoulder as she started to move, "We have to destroy this weapon first. Teron can wait."

*Anger.*

Brae stared at Kat and even Tylo could tell that she disagreed with allowing Teron to escape.

"Didn't dad mean anything to you after all?" Brae said.

"Of course he did, but we came here to keep this weapon from falling into the hands of anyone not go looking for revenge." Kat responded.

"Come on kid, you know she's right. We can take out Teron once this place is destroyed." Tylo added.

"How do we do it then?" Brae said, looking at Kat.

"Well I suggest that we start by taking a look at whatever Teron found up there." she replied and she pointed to the platform at the top of the central structure.

"Yeah, come on kid." Tylo said and he placed a hand on Brae's arm as they both began to climb the sloping side of the structure.

Behind them Kat hesitated and crouched beside Jayk's body for a moment.

"Goodbye my love." she said, then she got back to her feet and followed the others up to the platform.

"So I'm guessing that the operator sits there." Tylo said and he pointed to the seat inside the open sphere.

"Makes sense." Kat replied, nodding and she walked over to the seat and began to sit down in it.

"Wait, what are you doing?" Tylo exclaimed.

"The more we know about how this thing works the easier it will be to destroy." she said as she finished sitting down and closed her eyes in concentration.

"What do you feel?" Brae asked.

"Nothing. I feel nothing." Kat answered.

"Maybe this thing doesn't even work." Tylo suggested.

"Something killed every living thing on this planet in the last war and it wasn't the Republic." Brae pointed out.

"Okay so maybe one these controls turns it on." Tylo said and he walked over to the control console to inspect it but none of the controls made any sense to him and he frowned in confusion, "I don't get it. There are hardly any controls and most of them look like they're meant to provide basic information rather than make adjustments, let alone aim or fire this thing."

"May I take a look?" Cal's voice said from under Brae's robes.

"That's a good idea. Cal has experience with Sith machines." Kat commented as Brae produced the holocron and held it out in front of her.

Cal's holographic form materialised beside Tylo and appeared to conduct a visual inspection of the control console but in reality the holocron itself was using internal sensors to analyse the console.

"Can you tell us anything Cal?" Kat said.

"There's a wireless data port. I think this system is supposed to be controlled by a holocron placed on it." Cal told her, "At the very least it should provide a way to get more information."

"Is plugging you into this thing safe?" Tylo said.

"The Sith were known for leaving booby traps." Kat added.

"Oh I think I'll be fine. Put me on the interface." Cal said and Tylo held out his hand.

"Okay kid, I'll do it." he said and when Brae passed him the holocron he set it down on the top section of the console that looked like a wireless data port. Immediately Cal's holocron looked as if he was concentrating.

"Anything Cal?" Brae said after several seconds of silence from Cal.

"I've got full access to the targeting system." Cal replied.

"What, aren't there any security measures?" Tylo said.

"I think just getting here with a holocron was supposed to be security enough." Cal told him.

"So how do we destroy this Cal?" Brae asked.

"Oh that's easy. The weapon needs a Sith or jedi gunner to channel the Force through the weapon. Then the guardian of the holocron would carry out the calculations to aim the weapon before releasing it." Cal said.

"How does that help us?" Tylo said.

"Let me guess, if the energy isn't released then it'll keep building up and destroy the system." Brae said and Cal's hologram smiled.

"Exactly." he said.

"Hey hang on a minute," Tylo said, holding up a finger, "I know I'm no jedi but sitting in that chair and channelling the Force into a weapon sounds like something that involves the Dark Side."

"If the energy was to be unleashed on living beings then yes. But simply sending it into a machine to prevent it being used to inflict massive casualties then no. I'll be fine." Kat replied.

"You?" Brae commented.

"Yes me. Brae you may be strong with the Force, stronger than most other jedi including myself but I'm more experienced. I'll sit here and provide Cal with the power he needs." Kat told her.

"Kat there's still a risk even if it isn't of falling to the Dark Side." Cal said, "When I let the power build up past a critical point there will probably be feedback."

"What sort of feedback?" Kat asked.

"A rush of the Force that could manifest in any number of ways." Cal answered.

"So it could be lightning or a telekinetic blast that will hurl me back up to the entrance to this chamber?" Kat said and Cal's hologram nodded.

"Yes. Without knowing exactly how much power needs to build up in the system to destroy it I can't say how much will feed back into whoever is sat in that chair." he said.

"Then surely someone who can channel more of the Force should sit there." Brae suggested.

"I don't think that will make much difference." Cal replied.

"Which means I'll be taking the control seat Brae." Kat added before she turned to look at Cal and added, "But you've still not told us about the full effects, have you Cal?"

"No." Cal said, his hologram shaking its head, "There will also be feedback through the connection to my holocron. The power surge could be strong enough to destroy me."

"Then we can't do this." Brae said, "We should go after Teron and then bring in a demolitions team to bring this place down. Risking you and Kat is too much, dad's already dead and I don't want to lose anyone else."

"We don't have the time Brae. If we leave this place then there's no way of knowing who could come along and claim it before we can come back." Kat said and she lay back in the control chair, "Okay Cal, let's do this."

"Stand by, I'm overriding the targeting and firing systems keep the power trapped inside the mechanism." Cal said. Then a few moments later he added, "Okay Kat it's done. Focus on the weapon like it was a lightsaber and just let the Force flow through you into it."

Kat took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she started to draw upon the Force, letting it flow through her and as more of it entered the weapon the crystal spokes began to pulse with light.

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

"We have to stop this. There's too much power building up." Brae said and she stepped towards the seat where Kat sat with her eyes still closed.

"Take it easy kid." Tylo said, stepping forwards to hold her back from the seat, "Cal and Kat know what they're doing."

It was then that an alarm began to sound and Tylo looked around for the source. The speaker for the alarm was too well concealed for Tylo to locate but he could not miss the increased brightness of the light

"Power levels approaching critical." Cal said, "System overload imminent."

"How long until it blows?" Tylo asked.

"I can't tell. Minutes possibly or maybe just seconds." Cal said.

"No point in running then. We'd never make it to the exit." Brae added.

"We could at least try though." Tylo commented.

"According to Master Yoda there is no try, only do or do not." Brae told him and he frowned.

"What the hell is that even supposed to mean?" he said before a humming sound was added to the alarm, "I guess this is it then." he said.

"Critical energy level achieved. Overload-" Cal began before the console on which his holocron rested exploded and Kat's eyes opened wide as she let out a scream of agony from the energy that suddenly flowed back through her.

The explosion that consumed the controls spread through the machinery inside the central structure and it shook as panels were blown off by jets of flame from within. The safety systems of the modern fusion generators cut in immediately to prevent critical meltdowns that would have destroyed the entire chamber but the release of energy from the weapon itself continued to spread and as Brae and Tylo watched in awe they saw the massive kyber crystal spokes shatter in blasts of light that spread out from the central structure until they reached the outer edge of the chamber at which point it was plunged into darkness.

Tylo was still fumbling for his glow rod when there was a 'snap-hiss' and Brae's lightsaber cast a pale blue light around the platform they were standing on.

"Kat." she exclaimed when she saw Kat slumped in the control chair and she rushed towards her.

At the same time Tylo found his glow rod and activated the device, using it to study the extent of the damage in the chamber. As far as he could see the machinery was wrecked and although he could only see the sections of the spokes closest to the platform he saw that the crystal that had been contained within them was now scattered across the floor in smaller pieces.

"Check her. I'll find Cal." Tylo said and while Brae verified that Kat was still breathing and attempted to determine her exact condition he hunted for the crystalline cube that was Cal's holocron.

"Kat? Kat, can you hear me? Come on Kat, I can't lose you and dad." Brae said, examining Kat closely. She could still sense the living Force within the jedi but it was obvious that she had suffered significant injuries,

"Tylo we need to get her back to the *Swift Exit*. Have you found Cal yet?"

"I'm sorry kid." Tylo replied, walking up behind her and he held out a hand in which he had a holocron.

However, instead of the bright crystal cube that Brae was used to seeing she found herself looking at the burned remains of one, its internal components visibly fused and melt, "What about Kat?"

"She's still alive but I can't wake her up. We need to get her out of here." Brae answered.

"Back to the temple?" Tylo asked and Brae nodded.

"Yes, but first we're going after Teron. I'm going to find him and I'm going to kill him. For dad, for Kat and for Cal." she said.

"I didn't think revenge was a jedi concept kid." Tylo said and Brae stared at him.

"I don't care. Now are you coming or do you want to stay here?"

"My lord are you alone?" one of the gang members Teron had left to watch his transport asked as he walked up the access ramp without any of the others he had taken with him.

"Yes. We were ambushed by the Jedi and some local scavengers." Teron responded before he was hit by a massive tremor in the Force and he staggered for a moment.

"My lord, are you injured?" the ganger asked, concerned.

"No, I'm fine." Teron said, scowling as he looked back towards the entrance to the underground chamber.

The only explanation he could come up with for such a powerful disturbance in the Force was if someone had just used the ancient Sith weapon. However, since it was unlikely that the Jedi would actually make use of it, no matter what the situation, the only explanation was that they had found a way to destroy it and that was what he had just sensed, "Get this ship back into space. We're done with this world now." he added.

Brae led the way back up to the surface just in case there was an ambush waiting for them at any point while behind her Tylo carried the unconscious Kat over his shoulder. For the time being however, they had no choice but to leave Jayk where he had fallen.

"Looks like these people ran into Teron." Brae commented when she opened the door out of the main chamber and found the bodies of the scavengers strewn around the smaller chamber at the base of the stairs leading up to the surface.

"Is he around?" Tylo asked nervously, ready to set Kat down and reach for his blaster if needed.

"No, I can't sense him. We're clear." Brae said and she picked her way over the bodies to the stairs and began to climb, "Careful, there are more bodies here." she added, warning Tylo so that he wouldn't trip over them while carrying Kat.

"Yeah, I see them kid." he replied.

As soon as Brae reached the surface she looked around, searching for any signs of where Teron had gone. She could hear the sound of a repulsorlift engine coming from overhead and she looked up into the sky in time to see a transport flying away, its engines showing up clearly against the blackness.

"That's Teron." she said to Tylo as he appeared behind her, "We have to go after him before he can make it to hyperspace."

"Then go on ahead and get the ship ready for lift off. I'll catch up." Tylo told her and she broke into a run across the top of the mesa heading for the *Swift Exit*.

When the speeder returned to the yacht Morton and Rylee saw another vehicle landed close by it. Any concern about who may have brought it here though was soon dispelled when they saw one of Mott's men standing at the base of the yacht's access ramp. Rather than trying to drive the speeder back onboard the yacht Morton brought it to a halt close by the bottom of the ramp and he and Rylee both leapt out of it.

"Where's Mott?" Rylee demanded as she walked towards the ramp and the armoured warrior standing guard there.

"Right here." Mott's voice responded as he came walking down the ramp towards her.

"Mott gather your men." Rylee told him, "We've located the Sith facility and it's more than we could ever have imagined." Mott did not issue any orders to his men though. Instead he just stared at Rylee as she continued towards him, "What's wrong? Why aren't you doing what I've told you to?" she demanded.

"Because I don't answer to you Miss Drud, you forget that I am the head of my family. I have consulted with your father and we have decided that you have been indulged more than enough."

"What are you talking about?" Rylee snapped.

"You were warned Rylee, this was your last chance. You have failed the families for the last time." Mott said.

"Are you insane? We can still come out of this-" Morton began, storming towards Mott but before he could finish the armoured warrior simply drew his blaster and there was a flash of blue as he shot Morton in the chest from point blank range.

Rylee gasped when she saw this and she looked in horror at Mott as he returned his weapon to its holster.

"Seize her and get her aboard the ship." Mott told his men, "Mister Drud has given specific orders about what is to be done with her."

The *Swift Exit's* repulsorlift engines were already active when Tylo reached the ship with Kat still over his shoulder. Rather than heading for the ship's cockpit he paused beside the intercom panel in the cargo hold to let Brae know that he was aboard before he carried the unconscious Kat to the crew cabin where he set her down and just in case the ship was forced to manoeuvre violently he fastened the safety harness over her.

As he was standing up again he felt the *Swift Exit* taking off and he hurried from the cabin to the cockpit where Brae was in the pilot's seat.

"Do you have a lock on him?" he asked as he sat down beside her and she nodded.

"Yes, he's heading out of the atmosphere now. He's got a good head start on us though," she said.

"Well thanks to the Jedi Order paying to keep the *Swift Exit* in top condition we'll catch him before he's out of the gravity well. Of course what we do then is another matter. We don't have a tractor beam to grab hold of him." Tylo pointed out.

"Then we shoot him down. Dead in space or dead at my feet, it's all the same to me." Brae replied and even though they were still in the planet's atmosphere she switched in the *Swift Exit*'s ion drive, propelling it forwards at a fantastic rate and rapidly narrowing the gap between them and Teron's vessel.

"My lord we're being followed," the transport's pilot told Teron when he saw the *Swift Exit* on the sensors.

"The Jedi!" Teron hissed, "Can we jump to hyperspace?"

"No my lord, I don't have the calculations set," the pilot responded.

"Then signal our warship. We'll need their support," Teron ordered and the pilot nodded.

"Yes my lord," he said.

"Looks like we've got another couple of contacts kid," Tylo said when he saw the two other ships appear on the *Swift Exit*'s sensors.

"Can you tell what they are?" Brae asked.

"Not from this range, no. The closer one looks smaller than us and is moving pretty slow, I think it's just a shuttle. The other is just coming around the local star and there's a lot of interference. For us to be able to see it at all though it must be pretty big and have a significant power output for us to be able to detect it from here," Tylo answered.

"A warship?" Brae said.

"That's my guess and since I doubt the Republic Judicial Department has sent us a patrol that must mean it belongs to Teron," Tylo said. Then he saw the smaller sensor contact suddenly change course, "The shuttle is breaking off. Looks like the crew are hoping we'll go after Teron and leave them alone."

"Then maybe we should disappoint them," Brae said and she turned the *Swift Exit* towards the fleeing shuttle.

"Hey kid what are you doing? I thought you wanted Teron," Tylo said.

"I do and that shuttle is how I'll do it," Brae told him, "If we go near a warship they'll blow us out of the sky. But if I can get aboard that shuttle then I can use it to get aboard the warship. The course that shuttle is taking will put it on the opposite side of the star to the warship. If I can get aboard while they are out of contact with one another then I should be able to dock with the warship without being spotted. I just need you to get us close enough and then follow as if you're chasing me."

"That's a great plan in theory kid but doesn't it mean that you'll be alone?" Tylo said.

"Trust me Tylo, I know what I'm doing," Brae replied and he smiled at her.

"Yeah kid, I think you do. Now go get suited up and I'll take over here," he said.

While Tylo took over the controls of the *Swift Exit* Brae rushed from the cockpit to a storeroom adjoining one of the freighter's airlocks where there were several vacc suits hanging on a rack. One of these was much smaller than the others and it was this that Brae reached for. Vacuum suits were designed only for short term use in the harsh conditions of space but were much easier to get into than a full space suit, needing none of the complex process of decompression. This made one preferable to Brae as she quickly undressed, changing from her Jedi robes into the tight fitting vacc suit that maintained pressure on the wearer by gripping them equally all over. To this she added a life support pack before taking the two lightsabers, her own and Jayk's from the belt she had set down and clipped them to the waist of her suit before putting on a helmet.

"Tylo I'm ready," she said into the nearby intercom.

"We're at five kilometres kid," Tylo responded from the cockpit as he looked at the shuttle through the canopy. From this range the shuttle was clearly visible by its engine plume and Tylo positioned the *Swift Exit* directly behind this, using the shuttle's own energy output to mask his approach.

"We need to be with a hundred metres to be sure. Ideally not right in the path of their exhaust either," Brae told him.

"Give me two minutes kid. We're way faster than they are," Tylo said.

"Got it. Two minutes," Brae replied and she shut off the intercom before lowering the visor of her helmet to seal her suit. Then she stepped into the airlock and closed the inner door. However, she did not begin the decompression cycle, instead she walked over to the external door and entered a code into a panel beside it. This opened a small hatch behind which was a bright red lever that was simply labelled 'EMERGENCY RELEASE' and she rested her hand on it.

With Brae waiting in the airlock Tylo continued to pilot the *Swift Exit* towards the shuttle. The simple short ranged craft had far less engine power than the *Swift Exit* and Tylo gained on it rapidly. When he got to within



five hundred metres energy readings outside became too high for him to risk getting any closer while still hiding in the shadow of the shuttle's engine plume and he pulled up out of it.

"Okay Brae we're almost there. Five hundred metres." he said into the intercom as he rotated the *Swift Exit*, aligning the airlock Brae was waiting in with the shuttle as the gap between them continued to close, "Three hundred metres. Two hundred. One hundred."

As soon as Tylo told her that the shuttle was only a hundred metres away Brae pulled the emergency release lever and the outer door of the airlock immediately slid open, triggering a rush of escaping air that blew her out into space. She reached out a hand towards the shuttle that was now accelerating away from her rapidly and concentrated on it. Latching onto the shuttle through the Force she pulled herself towards it and without the protection of an artificial gravity field she immediately felt the full force of its acceleration. Fortunately for Brae she was able to reach the shuttle in a matter of seconds, well before she was in danger of blacking out and she clamped herself to the hull beside an airlock hatch. With the inside of the airlock pressurised Brae could not simply open the outer door without waiting for it to be decompressed and she did not have the time to wait for this to happen. Instead she pulled her lightsaber from where she had secured it and used this to cut the hatch open before pulling herself inside against the rush of escaping air where the force of acceleration abruptly disappeared. As soon as she was inside the airlock Brae waved her hand, using the Force to close the outer door behind her, re-establishing a seal against the vacuum of space outside. This allowed her to easily open the inner door and with her lightsaber still in her hand she made her way towards the cockpit at the front of the shuttle.

"There was a decompression warning, I saw it." Brae heard a voice say from the cockpit as she crept towards the open doorway.

"Well it's not there now is it? You'd better go and check it out though." a second voice responded and Brae heard the sound of someone releasing a safety harness prior to getting out of their seat.

Brae promptly bounded forwards into the cockpit doorway from where she could see the two crewmen and they both turned to look at her.

*Surprise.*

*Fear.*

*Panic.*

"Hello boys. Looking for me?" she said and then as the man who had just stood up reached for his blaster she struck, stabbing him with her lightsaber.

Instead of a weapon the other crewman reached for the shuttle's communication system, obviously intending to warn Teron and the crew of the warship about her. The shuttle was still on the opposite side of the star to the warship and out of a direct line of sight but Brae could not take the chance that he could activate some kind of beacon that would remain active as the shuttle came over the solar horizon and became visible so she swung her lightsaber towards him in a horizontal arc that kept the glowing blade away from any of the flight controls. The blade sliced through both the crewman's chair and his neck before he could activate any of the shuttle's communications and his head tumbled to the floor as his lifeless body slumped in his chair. Brae ignored this, shutting off her lightsaber as she sat in the vacant seat and took the controls. To begin with she checked the status of the shuttle's systems and was relieved to see that although the crew had been pushing it hard to try and outrun the *Swift Exit* there was no damage to the engines.

"Tylo it's me." she said into the communication system, "Can you hear me?"

"Just about kid." Tylo's voice responded but the signal was heavily distorted, "But there's a lot of interference."

"It must be because we're so close to the star." Brae said, "I've got control of the shuttle. I'm going to keep going and dock with the warship. I doubt the crew will have had the chance to set up any sort of security procedure. I need you to make it look like you're still chasing me though."

"Understood kid. I'll keep after you until that warship has the chance to get a good look at me. Then I'll break off. I'll head back to the surface and collect your dad. I don't like the idea of leaving him in that place." Tylo said and Brae smiled.

"Thanks Tylo. That's all I need." she said and then she shut off the communication system just moments before Teron's warship came into view around the star's horizon.

Brae steered directly towards the warship, manoeuvring to be able to dock with it. If the crew of the warship attempted to make contact with her she would have to hope that they would believe the lack of a response was due to some kind of equipment malfunction but she kept her mind open to the Force just in case, hoping that it would alert her quickly enough if Teron's crew was about to attack.

Just as Tylo had promised the *Swift Exit* followed the shuttle around the star. However, instead of adjusting course to continue the pursuit towards the waiting warship he performed a sharp turn before reversing course and flying back around the star out of the line of fire, making sure that the warship had the chance to detect the freighter on its sensors before he vanished.

"Shuttle you need to hurry." a voice said over the shuttle's communications, "Lord Sharr is eager to leave. He was on the verge of ordering us to leave you behind. You're clear for the main hangar."

Whoever it was sending this signal did not wait for a reply and the channel was closed as soon as he stopped speaking. Brae breathed a sigh of relief at this, obviously the warship's crew had been taken in by the ruse and were expecting their own men to arrive in the shuttle. She intended to make sure that they were disappointed.

Aboard the warship Teron headed for the private communications suite that had been set up for his personal use and in here he knelt before the holographic communication pad.

"Master," he said, bowing his head.

"Why have you returned to the ship? I was expecting a relayed signal from Andromora requesting my presence," the hologram of Teron's master said.

"We came under attack from a large force of scavengers master," Teron responded, "Most of the troops I took with me were killed. Only Krovak, Mara and Turlan made it with me to the weapon. We had it in our possession when we were attacked again. Only I escaped."

"You are telling me that scavenger scum took the weapon and it is now in their worthless hands?" his master said sternly.

"No my master. The scavengers are all dead but they were not the only ones to try to take the weapon from us. Morton Crayne was there with his employer also. The Jedi as well and they now control the weapon although I did kill Jayk Udra myself," Teron told him.

"The death of a single Jedi is unimportant, there are thousands of them even in this day and age. You must get the weapon back so we can destroy the Jedi temple and the Republic Senate with it. I will tolerate no further excuses from you Teron. If you cannot carry out my orders then perhaps I should be looking for another apprentice," the hologram said.

"Of course my master. I will summon-" Teron began before he suddenly stopped and looked over his shoulder back towards the entrance as he sensed a disturbance in the Force.

"What do you sense my young apprentice?" Teron's master asked when he saw this.

"The girl, the Jedi's apprentice. She is here. She has come to take revenge," Teron responded and his master's hologram let out a brief laugh.

"Then perhaps you should go and show her what the price of revenge is," he ordered.

There was no hiding Brae's identity when she disembarked from the shuttle in the warship's hangar. She was far too short to impersonate either of the shuttle crew known to the hangar personnel so instead she opted for just walking down the shuttle's access ramp with her lightsaber in her hand and glowing brightly.

"Take me to your leader," she said, glaring around the hangar.

Almost immediately there was the sound of a blaster shot and Brae ducked out of its path so that it struck the shuttle's landing gear instead of her. After this shot was fired the hangar crew scattered. A few of them were armed and Brae dodged or parried a number of further shots aimed towards her. The majority of the hangar crew were unarmed though and these men panicked and either dived for cover behind whatever was available or ran for the exits as an alarm began to sound.

Brae began to advance across the hangar, making her way towards an exit, swatting aside more blaster bolts as she went. It was obvious that Teron was not in the hangar so she intended to hunt him down, searching every last compartment of the warship if that was what it took to find him. However, before she could reach the main exit she sensed the presence of someone strong in the Force approaching and Teron appeared ahead of her with his own lightsaber in his hand.

"Everyone out. She's mine," he called out to the remaining hangar crew before he glared at Brae and added, "Looking for me Jedi?" and she smiled back at him.

"Teron Sharr in the name of the Galactic Republic you are under arrest. Deactivate your weapon and surrender," she said.

"Did you really think I'd agree to that?" he replied.

"To tell you the truth I was kind of hoping you wouldn't," Brae said and then before he could react she leapt towards him, bringing her lightsaber down in an attempt to cleave him in two as she landed.

Teron reacted quickly to this attack, bringing up his lightsaber so that its blade blocked Brae's as she brought it down and instead of ending their fight with a single blow she found her weapon locked against his. To break the stalemate Teron thrust his free hand forwards, intending to release a blast of telekinetic energy to hurl Brae across the hangar but now Brae acted to block him and she extended her own hand to channel an opposing flow of the Force through it that counteracted Teron's attempt.

Instead of being hurled away from Teron, Brae stepped back in a controlled manner instead and levelled her lightsaber so that it pointed directly towards Teron's face. Then when Teron moved forwards to attack she moved out of his path and struck at his side only for him to parry her again. This time both Force wielders backed away from one another and Teron waved his hand again, drawing on the Force. However, instead of directing it towards Brae he used the Force to pull cases and equipment from around the hangar and hurl it towards her.

Brae had no choice but to move out of the way of this hurled debris while Teron maintained his barrage. Not all of the equipment he used to try and attack her was loose and in some cases he tore protruding features from shuttles as well as the hangar walls. Sometimes these contained live power lines or pipes for pumped fluid and these produced showers of sparks or streams of liquid as they were torn free. Seeing a large battery pack flying towards her Brae turned to face it and swung her lightsaber to cut it in half. This caused the two parts to fly apart and pass either side of her before hitting the floor behind her and bouncing across with sparks flying behind them as the circuitry inside the battery pack failed. One of these parts landed in a pool of lubricant that proved to be highly volatile and the moment the first spark met the liquid there was a 'whoosh' of flame as it caught fire. The flames followed the fluid back to the tank fixed to the side of one of the warship's shuttles and this promptly exploded, sending a shock wave and burning debris across the hangar.

A klaxon began to sound when the warship's internal sensors detected the fire and all of the doors began to close to contain the flames as well as allowing the decompression of the hangar to extinguish the fire. However, Teron had no intention of being trapped inside the burning hangar and he used the Force again to hurl a piece of debris into a doorway, jamming it open before he rushed towards it and dived through. Even without this door being wedged open the standard fire containment procedure was doomed to failure anyway, some of the equipment that Teron had ripped away from the walls left ducts and wiring exposed and when the flames reached these they spread into them, rapidly moving to adjacent areas of the ship. Teron would have removed the debris from the door frame to allow it to close and trap Brae in the hangar with the flames but she moved too quickly for him, charging at the doorway and leaping through the gap after him. Immediately he brought up his lightsaber and they began to duel again, trading and parrying blows in rapid succession.

"I killed your master and now I will kill you!" Teron hissed.

"Really, how? You've tried burning me and your lightsaber technique is barely adequate. Are you hoping to bore me to death?" Brae responded and Teron snarled at her before striking at her again.

Using the Force, Teron tried to probe Brae's mind in the hope that he could find something he could use against her and he found something that surprised him.

*Anger.*

"I can feel your anger little girl. Did my killing your master upset you?" he said as he blocked another strike from Brae before responding with one of his own and he noticed that her response seemed slightly slower than usual, "Yes your master meant a lot to you didn't he? I understand you were even related, he was your-" Teron was about to say 'uncle' when all of a sudden he sensed the word that came into Brae's mind.

*Father.*

"So he was your father. I made you into an orphan." Teron said, grinning and Brae suddenly lunged at him. Her attack was poorly planned though, executed in the heat of the moment and Teron moved out of her path. Then as she moved past him he elbowed her in the side of her head. This stunned her for a moment and she fell to the floor, her lightsaber dropping from her grip and rolling away.

Teron stood over Brae while she looked up at him and he gripped his lightsaber in both hands.

"You are beaten Jedi. Just like your father." he said and he swung the weapon down towards her. However, before the blow could land Brae plucked Jayk's lightsaber from her belt and ignited it with a 'snap-hiss' just in time to make use of it. Rather than simply parry Teron's attack though she swung the blade at his wrists and cut through them both effortlessly. Teron screamed as both his hands were severed and they along with his lightsaber fell harmlessly to the floor while he staggered backwards and Brae got back to her feet.

Brae was about to deliver the killing blow when there was the sound of a distant explosion and the entire warship shook. This distracted Brae for a fraction of a second and Teron saw an opportunity to make his escape, rushing past the young Jedi and fleeing down the corridor away from her. Brae was not about to let Teron get away though and she began to pursue him through the warship's corridors. Around her she could hear numerous sirens and through the Force she could sense something more significant.

*Panic.*

*Fear.*

Obviously the fire that Teron had triggered in the hangar was far more serious than she had realised at first and now it was spreading to other sections of the warship. Even if the vessel was doomed though she was not about to abandon her pursuit of Teron, he could still escape and she needed to be certain that he did not. The alarms continued to sound as Brae pursued Teron, guided by his presence in the Force. Although the entire crew were in a state of panic the pain that Teron was in from losing his hands along with the rage he felt at being so mutilated acted as a beacon that Brae could easily follow through the Force.

Teron was not merely running at random in an attempt to escape Brae, nor did he head towards the warship's medical centre to seek treatment for his injury. He knew that Brae would be pursuing him and it would take far too long for any medic to do anything about his hands to be of any use. The only possible source of help available to him now was his master and so he ran as fast as he could towards his private communications suite. Along the way he encountered several members of his crew as they rushed to try and

contain the spreading fire or repair the damage that it was causing across the ship. When they saw Teron a number of the crew noticed his missing hands and gasped in surprise, however none of them dared challenge him and they stepped aside to let him pass.

Although injured he was still just about able to focus his thoughts enough to use the Force to open the door using the Force before he staggered into the compartment. The door slid shut behind him automatically and he banged an elbow against the panel to engage the lock before he staggered to the holographic communications platform and dropped to his knees.

"Master help me." he pleaded and a moment later the hologram of his master appeared in front of him.

"So my young apprentice, you have failed again. How disappointing." he said.

"Master the Jedi is coming, she took my hands." Teron said, holding up the ruined stumps of his arms.

"In her place I would taken your head you worthless worm!" the hologram snapped.

"Help me master. Tell me what to do and I will do it, just grant me the power to defeat her." Teron said

"A Sith is not granted power. A Sith takes power. He calls on his anger, his hatred and his pain. You have all three in abundance yet still you come here to beg?" the hologram responded before all of a sudden the bright blue blade of a lightsaber came through the door behind Teron and he looked around in terror, realising that Brae was right outside the door and that there was nowhere left for him to run.

"Master she is here."

"Do you intend to die on your knees?" the hologram said and Teron shook his head slowly before he stood back up and turned to face the door just as Brae finished cutting through it and a large section of metal dropped to the floor, permitting Brae to step through the hole in the door. In front of her she saw Teron staring at her with murderous rage in his eyes while behind him was the hologram of a hooded figure. She could just about tell that this figure was humanoid and most probably either a human or near-human. From the height and stance it also looked to be male but that was all she could tell from a glance.

Teron then pointed his arms towards Brae and she felt the Dark Side gathering around him as he attempted to channel the Force. He had used Force based lightning many times before but the loss of his hands affected how the Force would flow through his body and when it burst from the stumps of his arms it was not as concentrated as normal. On the other hand Brae was easily able to focus on the lightning as it came towards her and she blocked the attack with her lightsaber.

"Die! Die! Die!" Teron yelled as he continued the lightning storm but Brae ignored this, instead advancing towards him while keeping her lightsaber in the path of the lightning, "No. Keep back. I'll destroy you!" Teron yelled but Brae ignored him and all of a sudden she sensed his emotional state shift as all of his hatred and anger was replaced by something else.

*Fear.*

The lightning abruptly ceased and Teron screamed before he rushed headlong towards Brae and in response she pointed her lightsaber towards him. He seemed oblivious to this though and he continued running only to impale himself on the blade, it entering through his ribcage and coming out beside his spine. Teron ended up just a few centimetres from Brae, looking down at her.

"The Jedi Order will fall." he gasped before Brae shut off her lightsaber and Teron collapsed in a lifeless heap at her feet.

"Not today." she replied, looking down at the corpse before she became aware of another sound in the room. Laughter.

"Good, very good." the holographic figure said as Brae turned towards him, "You have real power. Power I could show you how to develop to its maximum potential."

"Let me guess, all I have to do is become your apprentice." Brae said.

"Of course, a master and an apprentice. Teron had some power but not as much as I detect within you. Thal had almost none." the figure said.

"Then you aren't Thal N'Krey?" Brae asked and the figure laughed again.

"No, my name is Serroc Vann. Thal was a fool, dedicated to the ways of the Sith but his ability to use the Force was almost none existent. He could only use technology to emulate a fraction of what a true Sith can do. What you will be capable of when you are fully trained."

"Where is he? Where's Thal now?" Brae said.

"Dead. Murdered by the wretched scum of this world. Just a few days longer and together we would have cleansed this planet of all of them. Instead he lies dead in some unmarked grave. Now kneel before me my new apprentice." Serroc's hologram said.

"Never." Brae replied and she glanced down at Teron's body, "Take a good look at that because that's how you're going to end up once the Jedi Order tracks you down."

"Kill me? I can't be killed girl. I died more than three thousand years ago but my knowledge and my power lives. Knowledge and power I can share with you. All you have to do is kneel before me." Serroc said and Brae suddenly looked down at the holographic projection pad on which the figure of Serroc Vann stood. She quickly got down on her hands knees, though not in deference to Serroc as he had demanded. Instead she studied the projector pad closely until she found a panel that she could remove and she pulled it free.

Looking inside the mechanism of the projector she saw a compact pyramidal object made of clear crystal that obviously had complex circuitry embedded within it.

"A Sith holocron," she said.

"Yes. My creator died long ago but not before he made me. Time and long periods of war have not been kind to me though. My internal projection system is damaged and only by interfacing with a device such as this can I communicate with you. With access to the resources of the Jedi Order though you could make me whole again and in return I will make you more powerful than-" Serroc began but before he could finish his sentence Brae reached into the projector and ripped the holocron from where it was wired into it. The moment that the holocron was pulled free of its connections to the projector the image of Serroc Vann disappeared and Brae was left alone in the room. Now able to study the holocron more closely she saw that it was clearly damaged just as Serroc's hologram had told her. There was a crack in the outer surface of the pyramid and several of the components behind it appeared scorched. Parts from a mundane data holocron could probably be used to repair this damage but even these were rare and expensive, a better bet would be to take parts from the stocks maintained in the Jedi temple instead and Teron had never developed contacts who could gain access to these. Hooking the holocron into an external projector had obviously been the only stop gap possible.

"That's right girl," Serroc's voice said, proving that even though he could not project himself visually the holocron's audio output remained functional, "now take me to your temple."

"I don't think so." Brae replied and she set the holocron down on the floor. Then as she stood up again she added, "Didn't anyone ever tell you that the Sith are extinct?"

"Foolish girl, you don't know the power you are giving up!" Serroc hissed but Brae paid no attention to him. Instead she reactivated Jayk's lightsaber and swung it at the crystalline pyramid, "No wait!" Serroc cried out but it was too late and the lightsaber cut through the holocron, causing it to explode in a shower of sparks and destroying all that was left of the already long dead Sith lord.

Brae then felt the warship shudder again and she realised that there was probably little time before it was destroyed by the fire Teron had started. She picked up the remains of the holocron to take with her as proof of what had happened and then ran from the communications room. She had seen signs pointing towards escape pods on her way through the ship and now Brae headed for one of these, hoping that no-one else had already taken it. As she ran through the corridors Brae found that in addition to the alarm sounding she could now smell the acrid smell of burning electronics, indicating that the fire was now so widespread that the warship's ventilation system was unable to filter out all the smoke.

The signs led Brae to a corridor that ran along the outer hull and there were several escape pods in a row here, none of which had yet been ejected. Brae leapt into the first of these she reached before she strapped herself in and reached for the launch handle. As soon as she pulled this the hatch dropped shut and the cover surrounding the pod was blown clear, enabling Brae to see out into space before she felt the acceleration as the pod's thrusters fired. Brae looked at the escape pod's sensor to see whether any of the warship's crew also appeared to be abandoning ship but apart from the larger vessel itself there was nothing shown on the screen. The sensors did give her an indication of the extent of the fire though, thermal sensors showing massive excess heat in all areas. All of a sudden there was a massive thermal flare from the warship as the fire finally reached a critical point and the vessel exploded. For a moment the escape pod's sensors were overwhelmed by the heat of the explosion as well as the millions of pieces of debris that were thrown out by it. As the oxygen from inside the warship was consumed and the debris spread out more though the escape pod's sensors showed that if any others had been ejected before the warship exploded then they had been consumed by the blast, making Brae the only survivor.

Glancing elsewhere on the control console Brae saw that the emergency distress beacon was now active, sending out her position to any ship in range. Although this would be enough to guide a rescue ship to the escape pod Brae was keen to let Tylo know that she was aboard so she activated the communication system to record a message that could be added to the beacon's broadcast.

"Tylo it's me," she said, "It's over. Pick me up and let's go home."

Grand Master Ress watched as Brae, Kat and Tylo were shown into the council chamber. Around the room sat the entire council, waiting to hear the details of the outcome of the Jedi's mission.

"We await your report," he said, looking at Kat and Brae. The pair had submitted a written report already but it was understandable that they wanted to hear from them in person to make certain that nothing was missing.

"Thal N'Krey is dead, killed ten years ago by outlaws on Andromora," Kat said.

"They also stole his ship and its contents to sell," Brae added.

"And Teron Sharr and Rylee Drud? Of them tell us," Master Yoda added from beside Grand Master Ress.

"Teron Sharr is dead as well," Brae replied.

"Brae boarded his vessel and killed him after he killed Jayk," Kat said.

"Revenge for your master's death you took?" Yoda commented, looking at Brae.

"I did my duty," she responded, "He was a threat to me and to the Republic. I ended that threat by killing him and destroying his master."

"Who was his master?" the grand master asked.

"Teron was being taught by the gatekeeper of a Sith holocron," Brae answered, "When he sensed my power he attempted to recruit me to the Sith cause. That is when he told me about what happened to Thal. The holocron had been among the artefacts that he had had aboard his ship when he was killed. It seems that Thal intended to use him to activate the weapon."

"That's how Cal sacrificed himself," Kat said.

"Ah yes. The holocron you were given permission to remove from the archives," Grand Master Ress said, "It was destroyed?"

"He's dead, yes," Brae said and from beneath her robes she produced the burned out holocron Tylo had given her, "This is all that is left of him," and she walked forwards to place the ruined device on the small table beside Grand Master Ress' chair.

"Died a long time ago did Cal Udra," Yoda pointed out as she returned to her place in the centre of the council chamber and Tylo snorted.

"I'm not surprised he told me he didn't think much of you lot now. Your petty rules would have prevented him from ever being born and the same for Jayk and Brae. Where would you be then without them to have solved your little problem with Thal N'Krey?" he said.

"Our own council will we keep on how the Jedi Order is run," Yoda replied.

"Cal destroyed the weapon by focusing its power on itself," Kat explained, "I could draw the power in but it required a holocron's computational power to direct it to a target."

"We're lucky she didn't die along with Cal and my father," Brae added and the expressions on the faces of several members of the council showed their discomfort with her referring to Jayk as her father instead of as her master.

"Be careful padawan," Yoda said, "Your father he was, but Jedi you both are. Forbidden attachment is."

"And there's that oh-so caring code again," Tylo muttered.

"If Thal N'Krey and Teron Sharr are both dead and the holocron that Teron was using for instruction has been destroyed then that just leaves us with the issue of Rylee Drud. What happened to her?" Grand Master Ress asked, keen to get away from the issue of the relationship between Brae and her late father.

"Rylee Drud and Morton Crayne both escaped while we were dealing with Teron and his gang," Kat told him, "By the time Teron himself fled she was long gone. Morton Crayne with her."

"Then we must continue to watch out for her and any others of these Founding Families who are continuing in the ways of their ancestors," the grand master replied.

"What about that nerf herder Morton?" Tylo asked.

"Concerned with him we are not," Yoda said, "For the Republic's Judicial Department he is a task."

"In the meantime there are other matters to be dealt with for the three of you," Grand Master Ress added.

"You mean the terms of Tylo's plea deal?" Brae said.

"Over his term of service is," Yoda said, "Free to go he is."

"Along with all the improvements to his vessel that he purchased at our expense," Grand Master Ress added and he smiled at Tylo.

"Well I can't say it hasn't been fun but it's about time I was able to live my life again," he said.

"And that brings us to Jedi Maran," Grand Master Ress went on, turning to look at Kat, "Jedi Maran you have served the Jedi Order as an instructor for a number of years but this council has determined that that is no longer a suitable assignment for you. Instead of returning to your previous assignment you will continue to serve in the field and a padawan will be assigned to you."

Brae and Kat immediately exchanged looks, smiling to one another before Kat looked back towards the grand master.

"An honour grand master. If it pleases the council then I would take Brae Udra as my padawan learner." she said.

"I'm afraid that will not be possible Jedi Maran." Grand Master Ress said.

"May I ask why not? The code gives me the right to select an apprentice." Kat said.

"The council recognises the progress and achievement of Brae Udra," Grand Master Ress began, "and the confirmation that she was able to defeat Teron Sharr before he could resurrect the Sith confirms our belief that she should have the rank of Jedi knight conferred on her. Brae is no longer a padawan learner."

"Hey well done kid." Tylo said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"I am grateful grand master." Brae said after a moment's hesitation, "However, I must decline."

"Remain a padawan you cannot." Yoda said.

"I know and I have no wish to. I have decided to leave the Jedi Order." Brae said.

*Surprise.*

Brae sensed the reaction from everyone else in the room when she told them of her intention to leave the Jedi Order. It was not unheard of for Jedi of any rank to turn their back on the order, but it was rare for anyone on the cusp of knighthood or beyond.

"You have the potential to become a great Jedi Brae." Grand Master Ress said after a few moments of awkward silence, "You have more power with the Force than most even in this room. Once you have learned to fully control it you could easily sit on this council."

"I have no such ambition grand master." Brae said, "Cal was right about the order, it isn't what it once was.

Unlike most Jedi I was granted the privilege of knowing my father and now that he is dead I do not want to continue to be a Jedi myself, living my life apart from those I care about. I will find my own way in the galaxy instead."

"Certain about this you are? Once depart us you do, never may you return." Yoda warned Brae and she nodded.

"My decision is final." she said, "I am no longer a Jedi."

Mott's men carried Rylee down the access ramp of the yacht before placing her on the ground. The mercenaries had stripped and hogtied Rylee, rendering her completely immobile. Ahead of her she could see only barren ground covered in a coarse white sand and the moment she was dropped the final few centimetres onto the ground she could feel the sharp grains scratching her.

"My father will never tolerate this Mott!" she hissed when Mott himself stood directly in front of her and she looked up at him, "Your family isn't one of us."

"I'm more a member of the Founding Families than you are from now on." Mott responded.

"The other families-" Rylee began.

"The other families wanted you out of the way," a familiar voice said and Rylee's father walked around her to stand beside Mott, having walked past the yacht from his own shuttle that was landed where Rylee could not turn her head far enough to see it, "and I did warn you that this would be the consequence of failure. You are no longer my daughter and no-one here is ever going to take orders from you again." He looked towards the horizon and pointed, "Our scans show a city about twenty kilometres in that direction. We're well into Wild Space and if our records are correct then that city is a major slave trading hub and I'm sure they'll send someone out here to investigate our ships."

"You can't just leave me here like this." Rylee protested.

"Oh I'll leave you a set of cutters." her father said as he took a small set of cutters from his pocket and tossed them to the ground several metres from where Rylee was bound. However, it was obvious that getting to them would require Rylee to wriggle across the sharp sand.

Rylee then saw a pair of Mott's men dragging the unconscious form of Morton across the sand before dumping him on the ground as well. Unlike Rylee, Morton had been neither stripped nor bound and the lack of any obvious bruises suggested that he was unconscious as a result of Mott's blaster set to 'stun'.

"If reaching the cutters is too much to ask you then I'm sure that your friend Morton will be only too happy to assist you when he wakes up." Rylee's father added and Rylee scowled, not wanting Morton to find her in this situation, "Well I must be going now Rylee, we won't meet again." he added before he and the mercenaries returned to their ships, leaving her alone with the unconscious Morton.

"I've got to say kid, you surprised us with all of this." Tylo said to Brae when she entered the cockpit of the *Swift Exit* just as it was entering the atmosphere of the planet that was their destination. Instead of Jedi robes she wore more mundane clothing while in her hands she held the urn that contained the ashes of Jayk Udra, the pair had remained on Coruscant just long enough for the cremation before departing for the world where Brae intended to build a new life, "But are you sure about coming here?"

"My mother is the only family I have left." Brae replied nodding.

"So do you have any thoughts on what you'll do?" Tylo asked.

"I've already called ahead and make some enquires. It seems that planetary security thinks it could use someone with Jedi training, even if they technically never made it through their apprenticeship." Brae answered.

"Then I suppose I can't talk you into coming with me then? I think we'd make a pretty good team, we did for the last three years after all." Tylo said and Brae smiled at him.

"No, I need to do this. My father showed a little of where I come from and I'd like to know more." she said.

"Just like you told the Jedi Council." Tylo commented, "Have I mentioned how much I enjoyed seeing that?"

"Yes Tylo, several times." Brae said, "What about you though? Now your sentence is up what will you do?"

"I was thinking about travelling for a while. There's a big galaxy out there after all." Tylo replied.

"And illicit cargos that need getting past customs?" Brae added.

"I may help people in genuine need of getting around immoral taxation if I have to." Tylo said, "Would you arrest me for it?"

"I'd have to catch you in the act first Tylo. So will your travels ever bring you back here to visit me?"

"Will there be beer in the fridge?" Tylo said.

"Cheap and cold." Brae responded.

"Just the way I like it." Tylo said before the figure standing beside a landing pad on the ground below came into view, "Looks like your mom is here to meet you kid." he added, guessing that the figure in question was Narrell Assen, the woman Jayk Udra had had a relationship with and Brae's mother.

Tylo lowered the *Swift Exit's* landing gear as he brought the freighter in to land and Narrell waved in greeting when she recognised it from the last time she had seen it.

"Are you coming Tylo?" Brae asked when the *Swift Exit* touched down.

"I don't think so kid. I think this should be a moment for just the two of you." Tylo replied and when Brae got to her feet she leaned over towards him and kissed him on the cheek.

"I feel the goodness inside you Tylo." she said, "Try and behave yourself, okay?"

"I'm not making any promises kid. Now get going. Your mother will be waiting for you." Tylo said and Brae darted out of the cockpit.

As a Jedi Brae had few personal belongings and what she did have were all inside a holdall in the lounge that she picked up on her way to the cargo hold where she opened the access ramp and ran down it.

"Mom!" she called out before embracing Narrell.

"Brae, I'm so happy to see you." she said before they let go of one another, "I was so sorry to hear about your father. He was a good man."

"I know. Even though he wasn't supposed to I know he cared about me deeply." Brae said, nodding.

"What about Tylo? Is he coming too?" Narrell asked and she looked towards the *Swift Exit* just before the access ramp closed again and the ship's repulsorlift engines roared as Tylo lifted off again.

"No, Tylo's following his own path." Brae told her mother, "Though I have a feeling that he'll be just fine and I'll see him again one day."

Sat in the *Swift Exit's* pilot seat Tylo watched as the sky outside darkened before it became black and stars became visible.

"I told you it would work." Cal said as his hologram materialised as if he was sat in the co-pilot's seat, "Even the council couldn't tell the difference between me and Shayal Jup's holocron."

"Good job I held onto that thing then." Tylo said, remembering how he had kept the burned out holocron of a Jedi master that he and the Udras had come across, "Though I admit I was thinking it might be worth money. Now where do you want to go first?"

Cal paused for a moment before he just pointed through the canopy into space.

"That way." he said.



# THAL

Despite the avatar of Lord Vann's holocron mocking of his limited ability to sense the Force, Thal had continued the process of restoring the ancient Sith weapon. As he had expected there were numerous key parts that had not survived the centuries of neglect even protected by the underground chamber in which the machine had been built. Linkages between different sections of the machine had corroded while other components had also decayed and all needed to be replaced.

It had taken many months but the process of restoration was complete and the weapon was fully operational. Even with his limited ability to use the Force, Thal now controlled the means to deliver mass destruction to any place in the galaxy. He had also finally completed the map that would lead any future Sith disciple to the weapon even though it now seemed superfluous. At least the money he had earned from selling most of the paintings that made up the map had helped fund the restoration of the weapon.

Those final few paintings of the night sky above the weapon facility now stood in the lounge of the Sculptor's Blade while Thal prepared to take off and return home for a time. However, just as Thal was powering up the vessel's repulsorlift engines for atmospheric flight there was the sound of an explosion and alarms sounded in the cockpit. Acting quickly, Thal shut down the Sculptor's Blade's engines and got up from his seat.

Pausing only to put on his gauntlets Thal exited the ship to inspect the damage from the outside. There he saw a large hole in one of the engine modules that had obviously been caused by a high powered blaster shot and Thal turned to look for the source of the attack. It had obviously come from outside the docking bay from one of the nearby buildings but he could not determine exactly where. Wherever the sniper was located they were well hidden.

"Having trouble with your ship?" a voice called out and Thal turned towards the entrance to the docking bay where the door had been forced open to allow a group of four large beings to enter. All of them were armed but their blasters were holstered and only one held a large club.

"If you think I can be threatened, you are wrong." Thal told them.

"Oh we aren't here to threaten you at all." the same man who had spoken before replied, "We're just here because it's come to our attention that you've been paying a lot of visits to our little planet, heading off into the wilderness to plunder the ruins. We need you to come with us so you can tell our boss what you've found. Then he'll decide what you owe us for our cut."

"Tell your boss that I am an artist. I came to Andromora to paint and sculpt. Nothing more." Thal said as the four thugs began to spread out to surround him. Thal had expected this from them and he began to walk towards the man who had spoken, wanting to get as close to him as he could while getting further from the other three.

"Artist or not, the boss wants to see you so you can either come with us or-" the man began before Thal suddenly lifted one of his gauntleted hands and unleashed a blast of lightning that caught the man full in his face. Screaming, the man clutched his hands to his face and staggered back while his three comrades hesitated for a moment while they tried to figure out what they had just seen. They had expected Thal to be unarmed but it was obvious to them now that he was well able to defend himself, though what his weapon was was a mystery to them.

The man with the club suddenly charged at Thal, holding his weapon above his head. In response to this Thal spun to face him and extended his hand again. This time instead of lightning though Thal used the repulsor field generator built into the gauntlet to project a physical blast that knocked the club from his foe's hands and sent it flying from his grip. This caused the man to grind to a halt and Thal took advantage of the contusion to make his escape. Running for the forced open door to the docking bay he rushed through it into the crowded street beyond where he immediately concealed himself among the passers by.

Emerging from the docking bay behind him two of the uninjured thugs looked around for Thal, the third having remained inside the docking bay to check on their burned comrade.

"We should split up." one of them said, "Report in if you see the sleemo and we'll get some more people down here to deal with him."

Thal headed away from the docking bay at a brisk pace but did not run. Even though there were enough other beings in the street for him to hide himself among moving too quickly might make him stand out, especially if by running he caused a commotion in the crowd.

He knew that the damage caused to the Sculptor's Blade would be a problem. Whoever had sent the thugs to the docking bay would undoubtedly keep it under surveillance, waiting for him to return and there would be no time to conduct the necessary repairs to be able to take off. Therefore, the immediate problem facing him was to find an alternate way off planet. Of course there would still be the matter of the thugs who had

dared attack him. They and their leader would have to be dealt with but Thal would do that on his own terms, not be forced into action prematurely by them.

Spotting another docking bay ahead of him, Thal decided to try and get passage off world aboard whatever ship was berthed there. Like most docking bays there were several small rooms clustered around the docking bay itself where the crew of a ship could rest or meet with prospective passengers and Thal made his way towards the entrance to these instead of the hatch that led directly to the docking bay, knowing that this was likely to be sealed against unauthorised access. However, as soon as he entered the docking bay's meeting and rest area he found it unoccupied and saw through a window that the bay itself was empty.

Turning around, Thal was about to head back out into the street when he saw one of the thugs who had attacked him moving in the direction of the docking bay and so he stepped back from the doorway to hide. As he watched the thug walking along Thal heard heavy footsteps coming from behind him and he looked over his shoulder to see that a service droid had entered the meeting room and was now approaching him.

"What is your business here?" the machine asked, obviously expecting Thal to want to arrange to berth a ship in the docking bay. Not wishing to engage the droid in conversation though, Thal looked back out of the doorway to check on the position of thug, "This is not a public area. If you have no business here then you must leave." the droid added and it placed a hand on Thal's shoulder.

Without thinking Thal waved a hand towards the droid and released a blast that hurled it across the room away from him. Hitting the large window that looked out into the viewport itself the droid crashed right through it and landed in a heap on the other side. The noise that this created caused the thug hunting for Thal to turn towards the docking bay and he caught sight of the kiffar lurking just inside the open doorway. Taking out his comlink he raised it to his mouth and spoke quickly.

"I've found him! East side, docking bay four." he said before returning the comlink to his belt and drawing his blaster, keeping the weapon by his side to minimise the chance of causing a large scale panic or prompting anyone to summon what passed for law enforcement in the settlement.

Thal closed the door and rushed across the room where he climbed through the shattered window into the docking bay and looked around. By his feet the badly damaged service droid twitched, its vocal system buzzing as it tried to speak but was unable to form any understandable words. The machine was surrounded by fragments of glass and parts of the window frame that had been destroyed when the machine crashed through it. Meanwhile Thal searched for alternate exits from the docking bay. There were hatches that led directly to the street but he knew that if he used one of them then he would be seen by the thug currently watching the docking bay. There would undoubtedly be various service ducts that might allow him to get from the docking bay to some of the neighbouring buildings but he had no idea exactly where he would emerge or if there would be anyone there who would raise the alarm at his sudden appearance. However, there was still one other route out of the docking bay, a very large and obvious exit point but one that the thug in the street could not possibly be watching.

Looking up Thal gazed at the gaping hole above him.

There was a ladder leading up to the top of the docking bay and Thal used this to quickly get up onto the roof where he crouched down to avoid being seen from the ground while he decided which way to go was the best. Only one other building connected directly with the docking bay but the other was separated by a gap of only a few metres and Thal guessed that he could make the jump if he got enough of a run up. The problem was that he could only stand on the edge of the docking bay and in order to make the jump he would have to run along the front edge of the roof, from where he would be easily visible from the street below. Therefore, he decided to go the route that was also easier and cross to the adjoining building.

The roof of this was about a metre lower than the top of the docking bay and Thal jumped down with ease, ready to cross to a fire escape he could see towards the rear where he would not be seen by the thug watching for him. As he strode across the deserted roof though he heard the sound of a repulsorlift engine from overhead and he suddenly realised that his escape plan was flawed. Obviously the thug had summoned assistance and his comrades had wanted to get to him as quickly as possible. With the streets crowded that meant coming by air and when Thal looked towards the source of the engine noise he saw a pair of airspeeders descending towards him.

Thal ran towards the fire escape ladder and managed to reach it just as the two air speeders touched down so that a pair of armed thugs could get out of each before the vehicles rose back into the air and their passengers took aim at Thal. Before any of the thugs could open fire Thal leapt over the side of the building, grabbing hold of the top of the ladder so that he did not immediately fall to the ground below. Rather than then descend the ladder though he remained where he was, looking up to check the position of the airspeeders. Both of the aircraft were out of sight for the time being so Thal held his position as he heard the four thugs come running across the roof after him.

The first of the thugs to reach the edge of the roof did so at the ladder and he looked over the edge to see what had happened Thal was able to reach up and grab hold of him by his jacket, pulling on it hard enough to drag him over the side of the roof before letting go. With nothing to grab hold of, the thug fell screaming to the ground where he landed in a heap in the alleyway behind the building and lay still as blood began to pool

around him. At the same time another of the thugs leant over the side of the roof several metres from the fire escape ladder and pointed his blaster towards Thal. Before he could fire the weapon though Thal thrust out his hand and released a blast of lightning that took the thug by surprise. Although the lightning only hit the man in his shoulder it was enough to make him lose his balance and he too fell from the roof, screaming as he rushed towards the ground. Unfortunately when the lightning terminated there was a bleeping sound from the gauntlet, telling Thal that its limited power supply was now too depleted to emulate Force based lightning or telekinetic attacks. From this point onwards Thal would need an alternate means of defending himself. Startled by the loss of their comrades, the other two thugs remained away from the edge of the roof and instead pointed their blasters towards the ladder, expecting Thal to climb back up to attack them at any moment. One of them also took out his comlink to alert the circling airspeeders about what had happened and calling for them to descend once more to let them know before Thal could strike. However, instead of climbing back onto the roof Thal began to descend the ladder, hurrying down to the ground in the alleyway. Thal quickly scooped up one of the blasters dropped by the men he had sent falling to their deaths before he broke into a run, heading away from the main street and instead going deeper into the network of alleyways and side streets that ran between the blocks of buildings in this part of the city, hoping to be able to stay ahead of his pursuers. Unfortunately despite the close proximity of the surrounding buildings preventing the airspeeders from coming into land they were still able to monitor him from above, guiding their forces on the ground towards him.

The gang did not immediately rush to engage Thal though. Instead as more of their number were able to arrive they surrounded him, following parallel to his route and occasionally revealing their presence in order to guide him towards a particular location.

This location happened to be one of the buildings that the gang operated out of, a speeder repair workshop that backed onto one of the side streets. Although there was not enough room here for an airspeeder to land moderately sized ground transports could drive right up to the loading bay and transfer cargoes without being seen by prying eyes.

"Hello Mister N'Krey." Carrasson called out as soon as Thal came rushing around a corner and suddenly found himself confronted by the leader of the gang standing just a few metres in front of him, flanked by several of his subordinates, including Teresa, armed with blaster carbines and rifles. Instinctively Thal raised the blaster he had picked up and pointed it at Carrasson, a move that prompted the gang members to all raise their weapons and point them at Thal, "There's no need for that. Lower your weapons, all of you." Carrasson told his men before he looked at Thal and added, "See? We can discuss this in a civilised manner. Lower your blaster, it won't do you any good."

Thal kept his blaster pointed at the gang leader and behind him he heard the sound of more members of the gang arriving to cut off his retreat and then he smiled.

"I'll be the judge of that." he said before he pulled the trigger on the blaster.

At which point it promptly exploded in his hand.

The explosion was not large but it did cause Thal to cry out in pain as his face was showered with tiny hot fragments from the weapon and he dropped what was left of it to the ground as he staggered back several steps.

"I did try to warn you Mister N'Krey." Carrasson said, "I noticed that the gas chamber housing was cracked. It must have taken a strong blow to cause that but it did mean that trying to fire the blaster would cause it to rupture and ignite all the gas at once."

"What do you want?" Thal hissed, glaring at Carrasson.

"Merely what is mine by right. You see this is my planet, my people and I have searched the wilderness for years for anything that the Sith may have left behind. However, apart from the odd trinket that was of little worth we have found nothing. On the other hand my people have been watching you come here regularly before heading out into the middle of nowhere and it seems clear that you have succeeded where we failed. Unfortunately someone should have explained to you that nothing can be removed without first agreeing the cut that I will receive for allowing you to search in our territory."

"You are not Sith. Nothing of theirs belongs to you!" Thal hissed and Carrasson grinned.

"You aren't a Sith either though are you? The Sith have been extinct for centuries and thanks to the Jedi Order destroying so much of what they left behind, anything that remains is valuable to the right people. I'm just asking for a fair share." he said.

"Fair?" Thal commented.

"Yes, ordinarily I'd just ask for about sixty percent but since you didn't bother to ask beforehand and given the trouble you've caused here today I think that eighty percent is more like it." Carrasson replied.

"You'll get nothing from me." he said before he lunged at Carrasson. The suddenness of the attack caught the gang off guard and before they could bring their weapons up Thal already had his hands around their leader's neck and was squeezing tightly.

Teresa stepped forwards and struck Thal at the base of his skull with the butt of her rifle. The force of this blow caused him to relax his grip on Carrasson and the gang leader was then able to break his hold, pushing

him away and at this point another pair of gang members grabbed hold of his arms and forced him to his knees, holding his arms out beside him.

"That was your last mistake." Carasson said, looking down at Thal. The kiffar had his head bowed after being struck and Carasson added, "Look at me. I said look up."

When Thal kept his head bowed one of the gang members holding his arms also grabbed him by his hair to lift his head so that he faced Carasson.

"Good." Carasson said as he drew a knife with a long, thin blade from a scabbard on his belt, "I want the last thing you see to be the face of the man who killed you." and then he plunged the knife into Thal's chest. Thal let out one last gasp before he died and when the men holding his arms let go his body toppled forwards.

"So what now?" Teresa asked.

"Check his ship. I'm sure he'll have left some kind of notes to lead us to whatever it was he found and there are bound to be things aboard that we can sell. Get hold of a slicer as well, I want the lockouts on the ship's flight systems purging so we can sell that, it should bring a nice tidy amount." Carasson answered.

"And what about him?" Teresa said, looking down at the body of Thal.

"The same. We'll take anything of value and destroy what's left. It will be as if Thal N'Krey just vanished like so many others who come to this planet in search of hidden Sith treasure."

"And what if someone comes looking for him Carrasson? He's not just another vagrant. People may come looking for him. Jedi even if he left any notes about looking for Sith artefacts."

"Don't worry Teresa. The only people who will notice that Thal N'Krey is gone are the lucky fools who own his art and their only interest will be in how much their collections increase in value now that he is isn't making any more." Carasson reassured Teresa but she was not convinced.

"I don't know Carasson." she said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."