

It Belongs in a Museum!

The shuttle ascended into the bright afternoon sky, the glint of the twin suns off of its shining metal hull reminding Hunter Khryso Mallus not to look up at the departing vessel. The Tatooine desert stretched out around him, flat, brown, and shimmering with heat. The Chiss Sith almost regretted his choice of attire, his usual black fitted suit, gloves, and boots with a long thermal cape sporting a grayscale camouflage pattern. It was too late to change now, though, so no point in regretting something he couldn't change.

On the horizon a misshapen lump was visible. The city of Freetown, Khryso's first destination on his trip to the desert planet. "What a quaint little planet!" a breathy, deep voice intoned behind Khryso, drawing the Chiss' attention over. A tall, gray Ithorian stood a few paces behind, his neck swaying from side to side as he took in their surroundings. The Ithorian, Thorthok Om, was dressed in wrinkled brown and green robes and leaned heavily on a walking stick, revealing his advanced age in the arthritic way he moved.

"Not the word I would use," Khryso muttered, glancing down at his side. Ufie, his DUM-series pit droid servant, stood loyally and silently there, regarding Khryso with a quick glance to meet his master's gaze. With a quick tilt of his head, Khryso ordered the droid to get moving before glancing back at Thorthok. "Let's move."

The Ithorian slowly swung his head to look Khryso in the face. "Oh, alright sonny, I'm on my way." Khryso frowned and turned back towards Freetown, not bothering to take Thorthok into consideration when setting his pace.

The duo had been dispatched to Tatooine by order of the Shadow Academy. Khryso wasn't a rookie in the organization anymore, so he had been disappointed when the Academy had deemed it necessary for the old Ithorian to accompany him. Nevermind that he knew he could finish the mission on his own, but of all people, having the old geezer along would just slow him down. They were here to investigate rumors of a Sith temple uncovered by a local vagrant, and on a backwater world like Tatooine, the last thing Khryso needed was to have to babysit an old man while he infiltrated a Sith Temple.

The trek across the desert was arduously slow, made even worse when Khryso realized the gap between himself and the Ithorian had grown much too large. Forced to slow his pace, Khryso debated the merits of simply leaving the man in the dust before relenting and eventually sacrificing a brisker speed for the sake of staying together.

Eventually, they managed to make it into the city. Khryso was beginning to grow impatient, but rather than take it out on the frustratingly benign Ithorian, he channeled his feelings into the Force, closing his eyes and stretching out his awareness into the city itself. If their information was correct, the source of the rumor should be in this city somewhere. A human man named Maxis Styl. He should have a bit of Dark Side taint left on him after coming into contact with a

Sith Temple, so if Khryso's hunch was correct, he should be able to find the human through the Force.

It took him a few minutes, but Khryso did manage to find a slight pressure, something familiar yet faded and tarnished. An old stain that was faint enough to overlook at a glance, but once you spotted it, you couldn't pass it over again. Glancing towards Thorthok, Khryso pressed his lips together. "I've got him."

"Oh, wonderful. Lead the way, Hunter." The Ithorian's cheerful tone didn't help Khryso's mood, but he managed to put it out of mind as he focused on the task at hand. Grabbing a firm hold of that sensation he'd detected through the Force, Khryso began to thread his way through the city to find its source. It didn't take long for the Chiss to find his way to a small, squat building. It was the same dull brown as the rest of the city, but a sign hanging over the door established the structure as some sort of tavern.

Glancing behind him, Khryso realized that Thorthok was lagging a few dozen meters behind him. "Ufie," he said, glancing down at his droid, "Keep an eye on Thorthok and stay near the entrance of this place." The droid nodded an affirmative and moved to intercept the Ithorian. Satisfied that his companion was dealt with, Khryso turned to the door and made his way inside.

The inside of the building was quite dark compared to the bright afternoon suns outside. The atmosphere was heavy with unpleasant smells and sounds as a variety of aliens made idle conversation with each other. A few of them glanced Khryso's way, but he ignored them, taking a few strides into the main room before pausing once again to reach out into the Force. A few seconds of scanning helped him to lock down his target.

Maxis Styl was at the bar, leaning over a glass of what was no doubt some sort of alcoholic beverage. His blonde was dirty and shaggy, hanging over his face like thick, uncut grass. A long brown duster hid the details of his small frame, but with what body language Khryso could make out, he seemed barely conscious.

Khryso stepped up behind the human, earning a curious glance from the bartender. "Maxis Styl?" he asked, the hand under his cape floating at the ready next to his holstered LL-30 blaster pistol.

The man didn't answer for a moment, instead freezing in place as if he just now realized that people could see him. Then, he lifted his glass to his lips and took a quick sip of the drink before spinning to look Khryso in the face. "Who wants to know?" His words were slow and slurred, possibly due to some form of intoxication. His sunken, distant expression gave Khryso the impression that he was only half there, operating without thought.

"Maybe we could talk somewhere a bit more private," Khryso said, carefully studying the man's face, uncertain if this really was their mark. "I wanted to ask you some questions about—"

Suddenly, Maxis wrapped a wiry hand around his glass, throwing it in Khryso's face. He jumped to his feet and began to move towards the door, but his feet got tangled up in the barstool he'd been sitting on and, rather than make a quick exit, he slammed down harshly into the floor, drawing the eyes of most of the tavern's patrons.

Khryso, fuming, wiped a gloved hand across his face in an attempt to remove the excess liquid before bending down, grabbing Maxis' collar and dragging the red-faced man to his feet. "I told Wemo I get paid tomorrow, I swear I don't have-" Khryso slammed him against the bar, sneering angrily.

"I don't care about whatever personal business you have going on," Khryso muttered through gritted teeth, not noticing that many of the patrons were cautiously going for weapons. "That's not why I'm here."

A confused look flushed over Maxis' face. "So you're saying Wemo's forgiven the debt?"

Khryso growled, tightening his grip on Maxis collar and turned towards the door. "We're leaving." As he began to drag the hapless human behind him, several of the patrons, including the bartender, were now standing with their weapons pointed towards Khryso.

"Not so fast, stranger," the bartender's baritone rumbled, "Maxis still has a tab to pay." Khryso sighed, pausing for a moment to consider his options. He currently had hold of Maxis with both hands, and he didn't want to risk the cretin getting away. Even if he did release the human to go for a weapon, he might not get his lightsaber or pistol out before getting shot at. Stray bolts might even find their way to Maxis, and he needed the drunk alive.

Thankfully, he had the Force. He could probably use a Mind Trick to make the bartender stand down, although he wasn't sure if that would defuse the rest of the tavern. He could also throw up a Force barrier and simply go for the door, although that option was a lot more risky. Unfortunately, before he had time to put a proper plan into motion, the stakes changed yet again.

The door to the tavern slid open, admitting a pair of humanoids in shining white armor. They both casually held blaster rifles at their sides, although the moment they saw the situation in the room, they raised their blasters into ready position. At the site of the stormtroopers, a few of the patrons redirected their aims at the soldiers and the room instantly fell completely silent. A few tense moments hung in the air while each party debated how best to proceed.

"Maxis Styl," one of the stormtroopers eventually said in a flat tone, "he's all we're looking for."

"Hey, that's my name," Maxis replied. Khryso reflexively clapped one of his hands over the man's mouth, but the stormtroopers had heard him. Now both of their visors and blasters were trained on the duo in the middle of the room.

“Hand him over,” the stormtrooper said cautiously. Khryso could only guess that they were after the same information that he was, so they also needed Maxis alive. However, his mind was moving almost too quickly to properly gather his thoughts and come up with a plan. The First Order showing up was precisely the last thing he had expected and it certainly complicated matters.

The bartender, it seemed, wasn't interested in fighting with the First Order, so he lowered his weapon and ducked behind the counter, no doubt expecting some kind of fight to break out. While some of the patrons also made quick scrambles for cover or a hiding spot, a few still stood, some barrels aimed at Khryso and some at the stormtroopers.

“I said, hand him over!” the stormtrooper began to advance on Khryso, keeping the aim of his blaster squarely on the Chiss' chest. While Khryso's mind was still racing and his attention was focused solely on the stormtroopers, Maxis apparently decided this was his chance to escape. He bit Khryso's hand, causing Khryso to recoil in surprise and turn slightly. This loosened his grip enough that Maxis was able to wrest himself free. The drunk began stumbling towards the back of the tavern, running in wild uncontrolled bounds while pushing aside tables and patrons.

“Get back here!” the stormtroopers yelled, giving chase. Khryso couldn't risk losing Maxis in the chaos of the situation, so one hand swept aside his cape as the other drew his pistol, sweeping up to draw a bead on the stormtroopers. He knew that once the couple people who still had their weapons trained on him saw him drawing a weapon, they'd begin firing, so he dove towards the bar, doing his best to draw on his anger and frustration to channel the Force and enhance his movement.

The first couple bolts flew wide of the stormtroopers, but gave Khryso the information he needed to adjust his aim. As he landed on the bar, blaster bolts were beginning to whiz past him, burning holes in the shelves of alcohol that lined the wall. One of the stormtroopers spun around to return fire, but Khryso was already sliding down behind the bar to use it as cover, releasing another small burst of blaster fire and managing to tag the stormtrooper in the arm with one of his bolts.

As he landed safely behind the bar, Khryso swung around to face the bartender, who was scrambling to pick up his weapon again. Khryso quickly swung his pistol around, pumping half a dozen shots towards the bartender to put him down before he could do any damage.

Pausing for a breath, the Sith took a moment to collect himself and his thoughts. Grabbing his comm-link out of a pocket in his cape as blaster bolts pinged into the bar, he opened a channel to Ufie. “Was Thorthok taken by the First Order?”

A series of tweedles responded as Khryso poked his head over the bar to return fire to the patrons, who were solely focused on him. The stormtroopers and Maxis were gone, most likely

out of some rear entrance. According to Ufie, upon seeing the stormtroopers coming, Thorthok had retreated into a nearby shop and was now examining the wares they had on offer.

Khryso sighed in exasperation at the Lthorian's uselessness. "Maxis was headed towards the back of the building," he said into the comm-link, pausing to once again return fire and put down one of the patrons, "there may be a rear entrance, get back there and at least tell me what happens."

Ufie gave the affirmative and signed off. Khryso slipped the comm-link back into his cape, hoping that at least Ufie would prove reasonably useful. He couldn't risk relying on the droid, however. He needed to get out there himself. He quickly holstered his pistol and took out his lightsaber. It was still one of the basic armory sabers that any Sith trainee was permitted to use on loan, but it was a lightsaber nonetheless. Taking a moment to concentrate, Khryso took it in both hands and thumbed the activation switch. Immediately, a violet blade of light sprang out from the hilt, emitting a pleasant, electronic hum.

Khryso took the weapon in both hands and stood up, holding the blade at the ready to deflect any blaster bolts that came his way. A few did, immediately, and he managed to catch them on the blade. While his deflections didn't send the bolt back at their source, simply batting the projectiles away from his body was enough. Upon seeing the blade and the Chiss now wielding it, two of the remaining patrons through down their weapons and dashed out the door. The remaining two gave each other a nervous glance but kept their weapons trained on Khryso.

Not wanting to risk wasting any more time, Khryso took a risk and removed one hand from his blade, subtly gesturing towards one of the aliens. He put the Force into his words as he spoke. "You don't want to make this any worse."

"I don't want to make this any worse," the alien repeated, suddenly looking even more nervous.

"You're better off not meddling."

"I'm better off not meddling," the patron said, cautiously backing away and heading out the door. Khryso turned towards the remaining alien, giving them a confident, thin-lipped smirk. They seemed to debate their options before following their fellow.

Satisfied that he had dealt with the threat for now, Khryso deactivated his lightsaber and followed the clear path that Maxis and the stormtroopers had left. Back into some kind of storage room, followed by what must be some kind of delivery dock. The large bay door was open, revealing a suspiciously empty city street beyond it.

Khryso ran out, cautiously reaching out with the Force to make sure there wasn't any danger. A slight tingle was all the warning he had before turning a corner to see the street clogged with a platoon of First Order stormtroopers. The Sith reflexively activated the lightsaber that was still in

his hand, drawing the attention of the soldiers. Near the front of the group, three soldiers were restraining a very haggard looking Maxis. Standing over him was a very familiar looking human officer.

Khryso couldn't quite believe his eyes. Apparently, neither could she. "Hold your fire," she said brusquely as a dozen troopers had now turned and raised their rifles towards Khryso. The officer began to walk towards him. She was dressed in a standard light gray officer's uniform, with an insignia marking her as a lieutenant on her shoulder. Her cap was absent, leaving her platinum blonde hair tied up into a strict-looking bun. She was taller than average, although she was still nearly a head shorter than Khryso. Her angular features were attractive, but also intimidating. Her green eyes glinted with a curiosity that was reinforced by her one-sided smile.

"You wouldn't happen to be one Khryso Mallus, would you?" she asked, seemingly unafraid as she paused about two meters away from the Chiss.

Khryso deactivated his lightsaber, but didn't lower the weapon or relax his stance. "So it is you, Lora."

Lora clicked her tongue, her smile faltering. "Please, it's Lieutenant Taldrin." She adjusted her stance slightly, becoming more guarded. "I'll be honest, I never expected to see you again."

"Likewise," Khryso responded, glancing over her shoulder to take in the platoon that she was clearly leading. "You seem to have settled in nicely. Are you still in touch with your family?"

Lora nodded, frowning her eyebrows. "I'd love to catch up, but unfortunately, you've caught me in the middle of a mission." She glanced down at the lightsaber still firmly in Khryso's grip. "I hope that's not a problem...Jedi Mallus?"

"I'm not a Jedi," Khryso responded. The simple declaration immediately erased some of the tension hanging in the air. "However, it is a problem. That man," he gestured with his head towards Maxis, "has some information I need."

Lora looked back towards Maxis and paused, as if mulling over something in her head. After a few moments, she turned back to Khryso. "If only you'd gotten here a bit earlier, you could've extracted it. Unfortunately, he is now in the custody of the First Order, and we will be doing a thorough debriefing of him. It could take quite a while and," she leaned in closer to whisper loudly, "I can't guarantee that he'll survive the process."

"Debrief," Khryso pressed his lips together. "Is he some kind of First Order agent?"

The officer opened her mouth as if she was going to respond, but stopped herself. Smirking, she crossed her arms. "Unfortunately, Khryso, that's all the time I have to chat. I need to get back to business." Lora turned and made her way back to her platoon. Turning to glance over

her shoulder, she called out. "I'll let you walk away for old time's sake. However, I can't let you interfere with the First Order in the future, so this is your opportunity to walk away." With a wave of her hand, the stormtroopers turned from the Chiss and continued their march down the street.

Khryso sighed, clipping the lightsaber back onto his belt. Not only did he have to deal with the First Order, but Lora was caught up in things as well. He had never been particularly close to her while living on Minashee. They'd seen each other in passing and interacted a fair amount of times while he'd been visiting her father, Moff Tadrin. However, simply seeing her had dredged up plenty of the happier memories from his childhood. Considering his history with the Tadrin family, he wasn't sure he'd be able to kill her if it came down to that.

Pulling out his comm-link, Khryso signalled Ufie. "Where are you?"

Ufie responded with his usual whirs and tweets, confirming that he had managed to follow Khryso's orders and had been following what happened. He was actually quite close nearby. Khryso paused for a moment to consider his options. He only had a minute or so to start tailing the First Order before they got too far out and they would have to start their search all over again. However, he wasn't sure if simply leaving Thorthok behind was the best course of action. He didn't want the Ithorian around, but there were no guarantees that the old man wouldn't end up getting himself killed, which would reflect badly on Khryso.

"Get back to Thorthok," Khryso ordered Ufie over the comm-link as he began to move after the now distant platoon of stormtroopers, "I'll send a ping of my location every five minutes. Catch up with me and bring the Ithorian." Ufie confirmed the commands and signed off. Khryso pocketed his comm-link and did his best to remain out of sight while catching up to the platoon to track them.

It didn't take long for Khryso to get close enough to keep the platoon in sight as they moved. His dark clothing was fairly conspicuous in the late afternoon sun thanks to the dusty brown backdrop of Freetown, but by simply keeping his distance and sticking to the shadows, his tail proved effective. Truth be told, Khryso couldn't be entirely sure that he hadn't been spotted, but given how Lora had left him, he wasn't sure if she would have let him get away with it.

As they drew closer to the edge of the city the buildings began to grow more sparse, making the task of staying stealthy more difficult. Thankfully, Khryso could afford to give some slack and rely on his Force senses to keep track of the large cluster of soldiers.

As they drew outside the city, the platoon began to spread out and slow down. Khryso used a few Force-enhanced leaps to make his way to the top of a nearby building. With a better view, he could see that the group was about 200 meters outside the city, quickly approaching what was clearly some kind of temporary headquarters. Another handful of stormtroopers was there, monitoring the landscape around them and having set up a few turrets. A First Order shuttle

was parked in the middle of the camp, its ramp down. A few tables and tents were set up at the base of the ramp, with a couple of black-clad First Order officers doing something.

Khryso laid down on the roof of the building. While he couldn't quite make out the details of what was going on, he couldn't risk passing out of the city and into the open terrain surrounding it, lest he be spotted. Pulling out his comm-link, he gave Ufie and Thorthok a final ping before resuming his surveillance. He cursed himself for not bringing a pair of electrobinoculars and did his best to keep track of what was going on while he waited for the rest of his party to catch up.

From what he could tell, Lora had broken away from the platoon when they arrived at the camp, having a couple of the stormtroopers drag Maxis into a tent behind her. Khryso wasn't entirely sure how much the First Order knew or if they really were after the same information he was, but he had to prepare for the worst. As the suns continued to drop towards the horizon, the Sith began to think over what his options were and concoct some plans of action to get his hands on Maxis before the First Order killed him.

It was nearly an hour before Khryso heard the blustery voice of Thorthok calling for him from the streets below. Khryso rolled his eyes and crawled to the edge of the building so that he could look down on the Ithorian and the droid. Thorthok slowly turned his head as he stood in the middle of the street, calling out Khryso's name. Ufie had moved to the building Khryso was on and was cocking his head as he searched for a door.

"Up here," Khryso said, drawing the attention of both of them. "Stay quiet," he said sternly to the Ithorian.

Thorthok seemingly didn't hear him as he spread his arms wide. "Hunter Mallus, finally we are reunited." He didn't even bother to try to look inconspicuous. "Have you located Mr. Styl?"

Khryso grimaced, pulling himself forward and dropping to the ground in a crouch. "I said quiet." The Chiss motioned with a hand towards a nearby ally. "Get out of the street and I'll explain."

Once Thorthok and Ufie had successfully joined Khryso in the alleyway, he explained everything that had happened. He opted to leave out the fact that he knew Lora from his childhood, not wanting to have to go through explaining all the extra baggage to the Ithorian. When Khryso had finished retelling the events, Thorthok gave him a long, measured look. "Well I certainly hope things fall in our favor."

"That's the idea," Khryso said, suddenly realizing how dusty his clothes had gotten from laying on the dirt roof of the building. Brushing himself off, he glanced skyward at the impending night. "Once night falls, we'll make our move."

Unfortunately, Khryso would have only himself to rely on in the coming infiltration. Thorthok had a blaster, but was much too slow and big to be of any use if a proper fight broke out. Ufie had very little offer in terms of combat capability, and even less purpose in infiltrating an enemy camp. He would have to babysit the Ithorian again. Khryso tasked them with securing some transportation. Once he got his hands on Maxis, they would need to move quickly.

The veil of night descended slowly on the desert planet, and it was nearly another hour before the lights on the horizon were beginning to fade. Khryso didn't want to risk waiting any longer and determined that there was enough darkness to hopefully hide his approach. Manned turrets still sat on the perimeter of the First Order camp. If he was spotted, he didn't have much chance of getting close.

Khryso took his time, moving out into the desert while keeping his distance from the camp steady. He continued his circle around the camp until the First Order shuttle protected him from the view of most of the gunners. He carefully moved in, unholstering his pistol as he snuck towards the back of the shuttle. Each meter was a test of fortitude, with Khryso's senses turned up to eleven as he watched for any slight giveaway that he'd been spotted.

After several tense minutes, he'd closed the gap and miraculously avoided being spotted. Sliding underneath the shuttle, he managed to stay hidden. Several large lights around the camp had been set up, but thanks to the now almost complete darkness of the night and the shadow that the shuttle provided, he remained unseen.

He did his best to recall the layout of the camp and where exactly they'd taken Maxis. Just to be sure, he paused and closed his eyes, reaching out into the Force to find that same dark side residue he'd felt before. He was relieved to find the man still alive, although a little worse for wear. Maxis was still in the same tent, with a few other beings that he guessed were guards and even possible Lora.

Stalking closer while staying underneath the shuttle, Khryso waited a few minutes in order to watch how the stormtroopers moved around. He took note of any patrol routes or particularly tendencies the roaming soldiers had. He should be able to make it to Maxis' tent if he timed things right. However, the question then became how to deal with the guards. If any sort of scuffle was detected, the entire camp would descend on him.

As Khryso tried to run various plans through his head, a slight commotion started up in the camp. Several of the soldiers suddenly took notice of something in the direction of the city and began to move in that direction. Khryso couldn't see what it is they were reacting to, but this might be his chance. Holstering his pistol and gripping his lightsaber, Khryso waited until the coast was clear and quickly bolted out of his cover.

It wasn't far to the back of the tent that Maxis was in. Putting his head to the ground, he lifted up the bottom of the tent very slightly, just enough to see inside. Rather close was Maxis,

taking up a fair amount of his field of vision. The two guards were standing with their backs towards him, one looking out the entrance curiously at the commotion while the other looked at his partner waiting for an explanation.

Khryso jumped to his feet and ignited his lightsaber, pausing for a moment to channel the Force through his body. With a quick vertical slash, he cut a slit into the back of the tent and rushed in. The closer guard glanced back, having heard the noise, but Khryso was already bounding towards him, gripping the lightsaber in both hands and bringing it down in a powerful vertical slash.

“Hey!” the second guard said, turning around as his partner hit the ground. He raised his gun into firing position, but Khryso’s lightsaber was already airborne, spinning towards him. “What the-!” the guard dove out of the way of the saber and it sailed out the front of the tent.

Khryso cursed under his breath and charged the stormtrooper as they rolled back onto their feet. He managed to knock the gun out of the trooper’s hand, but he couldn’t land a solid blow on the man due to the shining white armor. “Hey, it’s you!” Maxis yelled out, jumping to his feet. Apparently, they’d only restrained his hands.

Khryso was too busy wrestling with the stormtrooper to respond to the haggard human. Maxis stood for a moment, watching the scuffle intently before suddenly having an epiphany. Glancing around, he noticed the slash Khryso had made to enter the tent and stumbled towards it in an attempt to escape.

Blaster fire suddenly erupted from outside and Khryso assumed he was made. Giving the stormtrooper some ground to buy some breathing room, he quickly unholstered his pistol and unloaded a few bursts of blaster fire towards the stormtrooper. Enough bolts hit the trooper to put him down permanently. Khryso quickly holstered the pistol and reached out with his hand, using his frustration as a lasso to pull his lightsaber to him.

Maxis was gone, but he couldn’t have gotten far. Khryso ran towards the back of the tent, deactivating his lightsaber. As he was slipping through the slit, he heard the front of the tent being thrown open. A quick glance back confirmed that it was Lora with her blaster drawn. The bolts that came from the weapon, however, only met open air as they passed through the fabric of the tent.

As Khryso had suspected, Maxis was only a few meters ahead of him. He grabbed the back of Maxis’ coat, holding the emitter of his lightsaber up to the human’s neck and turning to face the way he’d come. “Not so rough!” Maxis protested, but it fell on deaf ears.

To Khryso’s surprise, rather than two dozen stormtroopers closing in on him, Lora rushing out of the back of the tent was the only soul he saw. He pressed the hilt of his saber further into Maxis’ neck, eliciting several protests, and rested his thumb on the activation switch. Lora

paused, the same half-smile she sported earlier returning to her face. In the hours since they'd parted, she'd opted to remove her jacket in favor of a low-cut white blouse with three-quarters sleeves that was tucked neatly into her military pants. She leveled her pistol at Maxis. "Taking a hostage? I suppose that proves you aren't a Jedi, despite the lightsaber."

Khryso's expression remained neutral as the sound of blaster fire continued from the other side of the camp. "Sounds like I'm not your only problem."

Lora smirked. "That will be dealt with in short order. Just as this will be." She squeezed the trigger on her pistol, sending a blaster bolt into Maxis' gut. "Stang..." the man muttered as his legs grew weak. "I wasn't quite done with him, but we have enough information to work with. Besides, now I have someone else I'd like to interrogate."

Khryso grimaced as Maxis suddenly became limp in his arms. He wasn't dead yet, but he'd be dead soon. Khryso could stabilize him long enough to get some information, but not if the First Order managed to take the Chiss prisoner. "That would not go well for you."

Lora put a hand on her hip. "I'll leave it up to you, then. A grave in the wastelands of a backwater planet or some alone time with me?"

The sound of the blaster fire suddenly, shifted, wheeling towards the stand-off. Suddenly, a landspeeder came into view, barrelling around the edge of the camp. It had all the markings of the First Order on it, along with several smoking blaster bolt holes, but to Khryso's surprise, behind the wheel was Thorthok.

Blasterfire chased the vehicle around the corner as it raced towards Khryso. Lora stood smirking, making sure not to take her eyes off Khryso. It was for this reason that she caught the slight change of expression on his face and she realized that the two events were connected. Khryso dropped Maxis, igniting his lightsaber. As Lora began to fire Khryso worked to deflect each and every one of her shots.

The landspeeder pulled up beside Khryso, Thorthok turning to regard the Chiss with a surprisingly wild look in his eyes. "Hunter Khryso, your transportation, as requested."

"Shoot her!" Khryso commanded. Thorthok paused, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him, before reaching over to grab his rifle out of the passenger seat. Lora, upon seeing it, quickly dove for cover behind a pile of nearby crates. Khryso turned off his lightsaber as Thorthok pinned down Lora and quickly tossed Maxis into the speeder. As he followed the human in, he reignited his lightsaber.

The stormtroopers were beginning to flood into the area and resumed their fire on the speeder. Khryso deflected what he could as he yelled for Thorthok to get going. Thorthok obeyed and

pushed the throttle to maximum, careening off into the desert. Bolts became fewer and farther between as they put serious distance between the camp and themselves.

Once they were clear, Khryso slumped down into his seat, deactivating his lightsaber. He was beginning to feel some fatigue, but he couldn't waste time. Channelling the thrill of a successful escape, he poured Force energy into Maxis, assisting the body's natural healing and urging it to stabilize itself. The landspeeder began to limp and slow down after a few minutes, prompting Ufie to pop up from where he had been hiding under the dash.

Khryso glanced at him, not able to spare much concentration, and ordered him to check on the ship and keep it functional. Thorthok slowed down to a stop as Ufie climbed under the speeder and began to investigate.

"Well, that was exciting!" Thorthok proclaimed, his breath heavy, giving his voice even more gusto than it usually had.

"I didn't take you as the daring type," Khryso admitted, unable to reconcile the mental image he had with the Ithorian with what he had just seen.

"Oh, certainly not," Thorthok admitted, stroking his neck wistfully, "in my youth, though, I was quite the rogue. Did my fair share of split-second escapes and wild driving. That's actually how I got into the Shadow Academy."

Khryso gave the Ithorian a sidelong glance. He was clearly coming down from the adrenaline high, still breathing heavily and acting a bit fidgety, but his cheerful demeanor was ever present. "I can't see it," the Chiss eventually admitted, after taking a few seconds to try and imagine the Ithorian as a troublemaker.

"You'd be surprised," Thorthok replied, an odd grin coming to his mouths. "I was actually hired by some Sith some twenty-odd years ago to help him steal an artifact from an acquaintance of his on Eos. That's how I came in contact with the Dark Brotherhood. I ended up impressing my mark with my talent for mayhem and he convinced me to hone my skills at the Shadow Academy."

Thorthok chuckled, deep and throaty, before waving towards himself with a slight gesture. "It ended up having the opposite effect, surprisingly. I suppose I must still have that spark for when I need it, though."

"Eos? That really was a-" Khryso's response was cut short when Maxis had a short coughing fit before settling down, his breathing regulating. Khryso paused, leaning back and letting out a short sigh. "I need to focus on getting Maxis in talking shape. Some silence would be nice. Keep an eye out for the First Order." Khryso had to admit, he was coming around to Thorthok. The Ithorian was still obnoxious and slow, but at least he wasn't completely useless. For the

next couple of hours, the night was mostly silent save for the occasional restlessness from Maxis or the occasional sound of tinkering from Ufie.

Once Maxis finally came to, Thorthok had fallen into a loud, breathy slumber, stretched across the front seat. Ufie was standing on the hood of the landspeeder, keeping an eye on the surrounding desert. Khryso was a bit relieved the First Order never came, but couldn't help but wonder if that meant they had given up trying to catch the group. Now, however, they needed to get back on mission.

"Whoa, ow, what the frack is happening?!" Maxis said, his bloodshot eyes opening wide. Khryso let out a long breath, removing his hands from where they'd been hovering over the man's wound. "Hey, you're that guy!" Maxis winced as he struggled to sit up.

"Don't move," Khryso said, putting a hand on the human's shoulder to keep him down, "you're still wounded."

Maxis' eyes went wide as he recalled getting shot. "This really is the worst day ever. Please just take me back to Freetown..." his eyes darted towards the night sky. "How many days has it been?!"

Khryso pressed a hand against the man's wound, eliciting a yelp. "Not so fast. I'll answer your questions, but only if you answer mine."

"Frack's sake, fine, fine, whatever you want!" Maxis struggled to push Khryso's hand away. The Chiss let him be successful, but leaned in a bit closer.

"I have reason to believe that you found a Sith Temple somewhere."

Maxis' eyes immediately went wide and his lip began to quiver. "Why'd you have to ask about that, of all things?" Khryso moved his hand towards the bolt hole again, prompting Maxis to try and push his hand away. "I dunno what a Sith it, but some creepy temple, definitely. I don't know anything about it though, after Jack and Tarns died I bolted." Khryso paused, leaving the weak man to struggle against his hand. "I swear, I swear, we barely even went inside before those things got us!"

"Those things?"

Maxis sighed, his eyes beginning to water as he recalled the events. "They were like Sand People, and we really thought they were at first. Then they..." his brow began to sweat as his face contorted into an expression of terror, "they started running at us, on all fours, like beasts. They were fast and even running up the walls. I was only able to get away because Jack and Tarns were slower..."

Khryso nodded, his curiosity piqued. "Do you remember where it is?"

"Oh, no you don't!" Maxis struggled to stand up, grimacing through the pain. "I'm not going back there!" Khryso leaned forward and grabbed the man, pushing him back down into his seat.

"I don't want to have to torture it out of you, but I will." Khryso said sternly, looking the man in his eyes.

Maxis whimpered. "Why me?!" The shout was more to the heavens than to anyone in particular, but it was enough to rouse Thorthok. Khryso pulled out his datapad, bringing up a map of the area around Freetown onto its screen. He held it out towards Maxis. "Show me."

Maxis' eyes glassed over, as if he was resigning himself to his fate. "Just...don't make me go..." His plead was met only with silence until he resignedly reached up to point at a spot on the map. "It's in the side of a canyon, just over here..."

Khryso marked the spot on his datapad. "We'll bring you along, just to make sure you're not lying."

Tears began to roll down Maxis' face, but he simply nodded in silence. Thorthok was now turned around to regard the two of them. "What did you do to the poor man?" he inquired. Khryso ignored him and simply pointed to the marked area on the map and told the Ithorian to get driving. Thorthok busied himself with waking up and getting ready to leave as Ufie climbed into the speeder.

Khryso turned back to Maxis. "Was the First Order also asking you about this?"

"The First Order?..." Maxis mused, his voice becoming very wistful, "I don't really remember, it's all a bit foggy..."

They must have been using interrogation drugs, Khryso figured. Therefore, there was no way to know for sure how much they knew. He only had to hope that they had been questioning Maxis about something else entirely and he wouldn't have a run-in with them again. Finally, Thorthok put the landspeeder into motion and they rocketed off towards their destination.

It took quite a while for them to make it to their destination. They had to drive back towards Freetown before going north. A couple times they had to take sizable detours due to a cliff suddenly popping up or presenting a sheer wall. Maxis ended up falling back asleep, and rather than continue to heal him, Khryso opted to rest to try and restore some of the energy he'd expelled over the course of the day and night. He wasn't sure what lied ahead, but if Maxis' report was accurate, there was more action ahead.

By the time they'd arrived, another hour and a half had passed. Even then, they only found themselves on the lip of the canyon. Khryso roused Maxis to confirm that this was the location, although after taking a moment to stretch his awareness into the hole, he was able to confirm it himself. A stagnant and wispy darkness stuck to the canyon walls. It was old, but not particularly potent. If a powerful wind drove through the crack, the darkness might even be blown away.

"Please tell me we're not going down there..." Maxis whimpered, shrinking down as far as he could. Khryso glanced at Thorthok, who himself looked a bit weary.

"We'll wait for the morning so that we have some more light." Khryso announced, turning to Thorthok. "Let's find somewhere to bunker down for the night."

It took only a few minutes of searching to discover a small outcropping of rock nearby that they were able to park the landspeeder beneath. Thorthok and Maxis fell asleep pretty quickly after they had settled in. Khryso sat with Ufie on the hood of the landspeeder, quietly meditating in order to ready himself for the task ahead.

When dawn arrived, Khryso discovered that he, too had fallen asleep. It was only the sound of a passing shuttle that roused him. As he picked himself up and jumped onto the sandy desert floor, he could see Lora's First Order shuttle, swooping around at the far end of the canyon and settling down onto the dirt. "Thorthok," he said, putting a hand on the sleeping Ithorian's shoulder, "we've got to get moving."

All that answered him was a series of dissatisfied grunts. Khryso turned and squeezed the old man's shoulder, raising his voice further. "Thorthok!"

With a choke and a blubber, Thorthok roused from his sleep, his eyes slowly opening. "Good morning, Hunter Mallus! That certainly wasn't a comfortable nap..."

Khryso gestured towards the First Order shuttle in the distance. "Comfort isn't our priority at the moment." He certainly shared the Ithorian's sentiment; the hood of the landspeeder had made for a poor bed and he was in desperate need of a sanisteam and change of clothes, but the Chiss knew that for the time being, their mission had to take precedent.

"I suppose not," Thorthok muttered, pulling himself up into a more comfortable sitting position. He glanced in the direction of the shuttle, his eyes widening slightly. "Oh, my. It appears we aren't alone. They must want their speeder back."

Khryso turned towards the edge of the canyon, watching the shuttle as it began to spit out stormtroopers. He drew his pistol, gripping it tightly. "Be ready for a fight."

However, as he continued to watch, Khryso realized the First Order either hadn't spotted them yet or wasn't interested. They were a good few hundred meters out. The line of stormtroopers, leading the way for their officers, began to descend into the canyon proper as Lora regarded a datapad held in her hand. It was true, then. They were also after the temple and whatever it held.

Thorthok had finally moved his bulk out of the landspeeder, turning back to grab his weapon from under the seat. Khryso glanced at Ufie. "Keep an eye on him," he pointed to Maxis, "let me know if he wakes up or tries anything." Ufie saluted and confirmed the orders with a whizz.

"Do you have some kind of plan?" Thorthok asked, shuffling his way over towards the edge of the canyon.

"Not yet," Khryso muttered, walking alongside the Ithorian. "I haven't even been able to confirm exactly where the entrance to the temple will be." Fighting their way through an entire platoon of stormtroopers was unrealistic and a risk Khryso wasn't interested in taking.

Thorthok slapped him heartily on the back. "Lucky you! I've got a plan of my own!" Khryso wasn't sure he was interested in any plan the old man had, but he lost nothing from listening to it. Turning to face the Ithorian, he looked him in the eye and waited expectantly. Thorthok began to gesture out into the canyon as he made his plan. He was speaking rather loudly and exuberantly, making Khryso worry that he may draw the attention of the stormtroopers, but thankfully nobody started shooting.

"Not bad..." Khryso reluctantly admitted, his eyes now following the path of the stormtroopers as they descended into the canyon. It had its fair share of risks, but it was also a simple, sensible plan.

"Lovely!" Thorthok exclaimed, looking over the edge of the canyon. "I can't wait for things to get started."

The two began their descent into the canyon as well. Their side of the gash was much sheerer than the side the First Order was using to climb. Khryso managed it well enough, but Thorthok struggled quite a bit more. "Maybe you should just wait at the top," he suggested, trying his best to sound amicable.

"Nonsense!" Thorthok replied, "I haven't had this much fun in ages! Besides, you really don't want to go in there on your own, do you?"

Khryso debated the merits of pushing on ahead to leave the Ithorian moving at his own pace, but this was Thorthok's plan, after all. If things went south, Khryso wanted the ability to place the blame squarely on the old man.

When they were about halfway down the canyon, the sound of blasterfire began to echo across the cliff-face. Pausing to looking towards the source of the sound, Khryso spotted the stormtroopers. It looked like they were gathered around a large pair of rocks, but upon closer inspection, a large and unnaturally dark shadow was sitting just below the rocks. It was confirmed to be a hole when a few more stormtroopers rushed into it at the sound of the blasterfire coming from within.

If that really was the entrance to the temple, then perhaps they had encountered the creatures that had killed Maxis' companions. If that was the case, then Thorthok's plan was working out. Let the temple's guardians shave down the amount of stormtroopers they had to deal with, or even eliminate the threat entirely. At which point, the pair could move in and take the spoils for themselves.

The blasterfire continued on and off for the next several minutes before eventually slowing down and then stopping entirely. After a handful of minutes had passed without blasters being shot, Khryso spared another glance towards the temple's entrance. How many First Order soldiers were left was hard to tell, because three remained outside of the entrance, casually standing guard, while Khryso was just able to make out the officers, with Lora bringing up the rear, entering the hole.

It was quite a while, nearly half an hour, before Khryso finally reached the floor of the canyon. Thorthok was still quite a ways up, so Khryso took the time to neaten and brush off his clothes, smoothing his hair down before doing a quick once over of his weapons to ensure that they were ready for action. Once Thorthok finally arrived, Khryso glanced down the couple hundred meters between themselves and the stormtroopers. They were still in the shadow of the canyon, but if they moved much closer to their targets, they wouldn't have the dark on their side for long.

Thorthok was breathing heavily, pausing to rest his hands on his knees. "Oh, I wish I had my walking stick now. That was quite the workout!"

"Don't die." Khryso said firmly, turning towards the stormtroopers and beginning to snake his way along the canyon wall. Thorthok simply stood, watching him go. After moving about twenty meters, Khryso glanced back. He waved Thorthok forward. The man held up a hand, leaning his back against the wall of the canyon. Khryso shook his head in exasperation. Holding his pistol at the ready, he took a deep breath and called on the Force, allowing it to flood into his body.

Like a whip's crack, he bolted out of the shadows, aiming his blaster straight forward, towards the stormtroopers he was charging. He began to pump the trigger, pouring blaster bolts towards the trio as they, startled, scrambled to react. By the time they were raising their rifles into position, Khryso had narrowed the gap to about ninety meters. His shots were beginning to get closer, but he knew he didn't have many more left in the power cell.

He began to bob and weave in an attempt to avoid taking a hit, managing to nail one of the troopers twice and put him down. Then he was out of bolts and had sixty meters left to go. Quickly holstering his pistol, he reached for his lightsaber. As he pulled the weapon up and activated it, however, he wasn't quick enough to dodge or deflect a stray bolt that made its way through, grazing his abdomen.

Khryso snapped the blade back and forth, using the pain and the frustration from being hit to push himself past the thirty meter mark. The closer he got, the more accurate the stormtroopers shots became, making it harder to keep up with deflecting each and every one of them as he ran. He managed it, though, and as he made the twenty meter mark, another stormtrooper fell. It wasn't too a deflected bolt, however. The shots came from behind him, meaning Thorthok had finally decided to join the fray.

The final stormtrooper didn't have what it took to bring down a Sith on a mission, and so found himself impaled on a lightsaber only a handful of seconds later. Khryso grimaced as he withdrew the blade, placing a hand over his wound and reaching into the Force to feed healing energy to the spot. He turned to watch Thorthok's slow lumbering approach. He was still quite a ways off, which gave Khryso plenty of time to render the graze he'd taken a mere annoyance that didn't affect his range of motion.

"I bet you're glad I came now," Thorthok announced, still quite out of breath, as he came within earshot. Khryso simply waved the comment aside and looked towards the temple's entrance. Even this close up, the interior was an inky black that was hard to see through. Holding his lightsaber up and at the ready, though still withdrawn, he descended into the temple.

The darkness rolled over him like water, and he instantly felt it pulling at him, clawing at him. Khryso could feel the presence of the Dark Side of the Force, and it definitely caused him to hesitate. It wasn't a feeling he was unfamiliar with, of course, but the mere way it seemed to have pooled in the place, waiting for who knows how long, made it a very alien sensation. The first chamber was simply an entryway. A long room stretched out before him, with an arch at the far end that lead deeper into the temple.

More than a dozen stormtrooper bodies were strewn about, their armor ripped and torn like paper. Among them were other corpses, fewer in number but much stranger in appearance. No doubt the monsters that Maxis had worried about. A few glowrods had been tossed throughout the room, casting just enough light to make navigation manageable, but not enough to actually overpower the darkness.

Khryso couldn't bring himself to move forward for several seconds. Finally, however, his foot lifted and he began forward. With each step further into the chamber, the atmosphere grew thicker and heavier, but it also became easier to move forward. His pace slowly quickened until

he was moving at a more regular speed. He was nearly to the arch when he heard Thorthok finally coming through the entrance.

“Quite the bloodbath...” Thorthok muttered. Apparently the atmosphere of the temple was getting to him as well, as his usual cheerful, blustery tone was nowhere to be heard. Khryso, however, barely even noticed the comment. He crept closed to the arch and peered out at what laid beyond.

Stairs led down into a large, circular chamber. Three large statues of cloaked figures sat along the walls, with some kind of altar in the middle of the room. Stormtroopers milled about, mildly investigating the nooks and crannies around the edges of the chamber or simply standing in pairs and chatting. Lora, along with her two officers, were at the center of the chamber, studying the object that sat on the altar.

From Khryso’s vantage point, he couldn’t quite make it out. It looked like a mass, not too dissimilar from the masks that were on some of the temple’s guardians’ corpses. It was built of cloth wraps and had goggles for your eyes and some kind of breathing device around the mouth area. Shards of some kind of hard material were sticking out of the top, forming a circle and mimicking a crude crown.

As he studied it, Khryso found himself drawn to it. Something about the mask called to him. The cold hands of the dark side more fervently tried to grasp at him and pull him in. Khryso knew he wanted to march down there and put on that mask. He took a careful step forward, through the arch, but suddenly felt a firm hand on his shoulder. He tried to pull away from the hand, but it wouldn’t release him.

Gritting his teeth, Khryso turned and raised his lightsaber towards the hand’s owner, his thumb hovering over the activation switch. “It’s just me!” Thorthok said, raising his hands in surrender and stepping backwards nervously. “I just thought that maybe we should make a plan before you run in there.”

Khryso pressed his lips together, closing his eyes to try and center himself. Right, he shouldn’t go charging in there blindly. Glancing back to observe the room with a clearer mind, Khryso was surprised to see one of the officers picking up the mask and putting it on.

“What are you doing?!” Lora yelled, drawing her pistol. The officer didn’t answer, however, instead only drawing his own weapon and firing it at Lora. The third officer managed to push Lora out of the way, but took the bolt himself. The stormtroopers were raising their rifles as the officer turned on them and began to shoot.

Khryso turned to Thorthok and activated his lightsaber. “Here’s our plan.” Rocketing through the arch, he dashed down the steps, towards the nearest stormtrooper and slashed through him. By the time Thorthok began firing from the top of the stairs, Khryso was moving onto the

next stormtrooper. The masked officer was finally put down by his soldiers after managing to take out three more. There was enough chaos still, however, for Khryso to move on to his third kill. Just like that, the First Order's presence in the room was halved.

As Thorthok continued to fire away at the stormtroopers, Khryso made a mad dash for the mask, still on the head of the fallen officer. With a quick lightsaber strike, he severed the dead man's head, making it an easy task to yank what meat was left out of the mask.

"Don't!" Lora yelled, now standing up with her pistol pointed at Khryso as he held the mask. Khryso dove away, tucking the mask into a pocket in his cape as he brought his lightsaber up to defend himself. It wasn't Lora's blaster bolts he was batting away, however, as she had evidently ducked back down behind the altar to avoid getting shot by Thorthok.

Together the pair worked their way through three more stormtroopers before Khryso heard Thorthok cry out, his deep, windy voice echoing throughout the chamber. The Ithorian's large body tumbled down the stairs, and Khryso surprisingly found himself quite angry at the thought of the Ithorian dying now, after they were so close to finishing the mission. With a deep growl, he felt the Force bubbling within him, further prodded by the dark pull of the mask. Khryso flung his hand out towards the two remaining stormtroopers and released arcs of purple lightning into them, sending them to the floor as they madly convulsed in death throes.

As the final spark left his fingers, Khryso suddenly felt out of breath. Dropping to a knee, his lightsaber fell from his hand, and Khryso felt an immense weight on his shoulders. He'd studied the Force Lightning technique before, but this was his first time actually using it in combat. He hadn't even expected it to happen, it just boiled out of him. Now, however, he was regretting it.

"Hand over the mask." Lora stepped out from behind the altar, one hand holding her blaster's aim steady at Khryso while the other was outstretched towards him, ready to receive the mask. "I don't want to have to kill you."

Khryso looked up at her, unable to muster the energy to scowl. "How many of your men have I killed?"

Lora's expression darkened slightly, but she only took another step forward. "This is your last chance, Khryso."

"No," Khryso said, calling on the Force for one last burst of strength, "it was yours." Leaping forward, he slammed into her. She managed to squeeze off one bolt that met its mark in Khryso's left arm. They both fell to the ground, Khryso on top of her. He was exhausted, weak, and barely able to move, but Lora barely fought back as he pinned her to the ground.

"Neither of us had to die," she said dejectedly, meekly trying to bring her blaster to bear on Khryso, "why do you care so much about that fracking mask?"

Khryso struggled to wrest the blaster from her hand. "I don't," he said, his frustration causing him to grit his teeth as he struggled to get his body to overpower her. "This mask is just a stepping stone to something greater." Finally, he pulled the blaster from her hand. Slamming the barrel of the weapon into her side, he looked her in the eye. "If I ever come across a member of your family, I'll tell them your final words."

He left the invitation open, waiting for several seconds. Lora was on the verge of tears, all but given up at this point. Eventually, however, she did speak. "Tell my father that I'm sorry." With that, Khryso squeezed the trigger, emptying the charge of the pistol into her. She was dead before it was empty.

Khryso lay there for what could have been minutes or hours, waiting for his strength to return. He felt the heat slowly fade from Lora's body as she moved on to the after life. He heard the final dying croaks of Thorthok. The mask's silent urging even eventually disappeared, or perhaps Khryso simply grew used to it.

Once he finally had the strength to stand, the Chiss pushed himself to his feet. He grabbed his lightsaber off of the floor and deactivated it, placing it on his belt. With a slow, meandering walk, he made his way out of the temple. He had to wait much longer, until the late afternoon, before he could attempt to climb up the canyon again.

Arriving at the landspeeder, Ufie greeted him with a quick tweedle. Maxis straightened up, eyeing the Chiss. "What did I tell you? That place is a-" With a quick sweep of his hand, Khryso grabbed his lightsaber, activated it, and lopped off the man's head. The Sith slid into the driver's seat of the landspeeder, Ufie jumping into place beside him.

As he kicked the speeder into motion, Khryso sighed and leaned back his head. "I need a sanisteam."