

Option 1

Khryso Mallus (15507)

[Link to Snapshot](#)

Multi-Objective Fiction: The Myrkr Crusade

***Myrkr***

***Outside the Siji Sing Temple***

**39 ABY**

“Scan complete, Lord Mallus,” the Wraith reported, “the entryway is secure.”

Warrior Khryso Mallus, Aedile of House Tyranus, stood with his arms crossed and his lips pressed tightly together as his eyes scanned the dense foliage and tree trunks that surrounded him. Myrkr was entirely unique in its presence within the Force, which had him on edge. The unique properties of some of the planet’s wildlife was not something he had a lot of experience with, notwithstanding the vornskrs he and Knight Ani had wrangled.

After a few more moments of caution, Khryso turned to address his team. They were gathered around a large stone structure with sloping gray walls and moss-covered statues. It was clearly some kind of primitive temple or shrine so the operators had taken to calling it the Siji Sing Temple. The relic that lay within, the temple’s namesake, was their target.

For this mission, Khryso had handpicked a four-man fireteam from Company Alpha 4D of the Ascendant Legion. The Chiss had worked with them before during his temporary capture of Saga Hall on Zsaldos, so he had reason to trust their ability. He had also selected two Tyrants he had worked with in the past and knew well: Warrior Ursel Jherdi and Hunter Nefilee Ath’muss. With this team, the Sith had every confidence that they could retrieve the Desired One and deliver it back to Clan Plagueis.

“Be on guard,” the Aedile spoke, drawing everyone’s attention, “we do not know what lies within.” He turned to regard Nefilee specifically, pausing to make sure the point was emphasized to her. The Devaronian woman nodded in response and Khryso could tell she was biting back a response. Usually, the two of them would share a more casual dialogue, but within the context of a mission, confabbing with her Aedile didn’t seem entirely appropriate.

“We’re ready,” Ursel hissed. The Trandoshan Sith already had her lightsaber in hand and Khryso could feel her anticipation of the hunt boiling over.

“Fall into formation,” Khryso ordered, his own hand hovering near the lightsaber hanging from his belt. The team fell in, with one of the Wraiths taking up position in front of the small, open hole in the temple that served as a doorway. Ursel moved up behind the soldier, flanked by her apprentice, Nefilee. Khryso followed behind the Hunter while one of the other Wraiths brought

up their flank. As they started to squeeze their way into the temple, the remaining two Wraiths stood by the entrance to secure it against any unwelcome visitors.

The column began to push its way through, entering into the darkness of the Temple. It was a tight fit for most of them, but even the Wraiths were able to get in without much struggle. Despite the darkness, Khryso could tell the vestibule they had entered was large and mostly empty. Lights on the Wraiths' helmets flicked on, sending beams of light through the musty air. Khryso and Ursel both ignited their lightsabers, throwing shades of red and violet into the air while Nefilee produced a glowrod from her pack.

There was nothing of note in this chamber save for the door on the far-side. The building certainly seemed larger than it had from the outside, but Khryso suspected that the dense forest had hidden the exact proportions of the temple. As they moved towards the only path forward, their footsteps stirred up dust and echoed sharply.

After examining the door's mechanisms for a moment, the leading Wraith pushed it open, allowing a plume of stale, dead air to wash over the party. Khryso's nose immediately wrinkled at the smell and Nefilee covered her mouth and nose with her arm. The group remained motionless for several moments as the Wraith scanned the area ahead with his equipment while the Sith all reached out with their senses to probe the path.

Khryso could sense that the path would be taking them down, deeper beneath the surface. He also sensed fluctuations in the Force that he was quickly learning were the fault of the wildlife on Myrkr. The creatures must know of alternate routes into the structure if they were residing within it, which could complicate their progress.

"All clear," the Wraith reported. With no signs of protest from the Sith, the party continued moving into the next room. It appeared to be some kind of gathering place, with an altar on the far side and several rows of benches and chairs filling the empty space. There were some other small structures that were less clear in purpose, but Khryso didn't want to waste time guessing at the ancient traditions this place held. Unlike the last room, there was no clear way forward from here.

"Spread out," Khryso said, speaking quickly to avoid breathing in the air as much as possible, "search for hidden doors or passages." The group responded immediately, moving carefully and slowly around the room.

Khryso stood in place near the room's entrance, his eyes carefully moving over the dark corners and shadows of the chamber. Beyond the visual scan, however, the Sith had reached within himself, becoming a conduit for the Force. His desire to leave this dank, filthy temple behind and deliver success to Plagueis lit his senses ablaze. The Force washed over the room as he sought out any minor detail that seemed out of place or unintuitive. Any clue that might lead them to the next leg of their quest.

For too long, the sound of scuffling feet and humming lightsabers were all that filled the mounting tension as the search dragged on. Khryso had a sudden epiphany as his mind worked in tandem with his senses. They were searching for some kind of hidden mechanism or passageway when they should be focused on what was visible. Hiding in plain sight. Something the ancient peasants would have never dared to defile.

Recalling his violet blade, Khryso set his lightsaber back onto his belt. Reaching out with both hands, he pulled back his senses and instead manifested the Force energy swirling around him into raw force. The large, rectangular altar slowly began to slide from its static position, scraping unpleasantly against the rough stone floor.

Mere breaths later, he felt reinforcement. Ursel had caught on quickly and thrown her own physical strength to the effort and, in a matter of moments, the two Warriors had shifted the altar far enough to reveal a trap door.

As the lead Wraith approached the trap door and cautiously opened it, Nefilee stepped up next to Khryso and nudged him with her elbow. "I guess this'll be where it starts to get dicey, right?"

The Chiss reactivated his lightsaber, frowning slightly. "I suspect as much. This was the easy part."

His scan complete, the Wraith stood back up. "All clear, proceeding." With a quick motion, the Wraith slid down into the inky blackness. Ursel didn't hesitate, following right behind him.

Khryso glanced at Nefilee expectantly. "Right," she responded with mocking enthusiasm, "let's not keep them waiting." The Hunter quickly strode forward before jumping into the hole.

Khryso paused for a moment, taking the time to temper his disgust, before making his way down into the tunnel below. With several light sources already present, the all-encompassing darkness of the tunnel was being kept at bay. That being said, the beam of the Wraith's head-light didn't cut through the dense shadow very far and the lightsabers offered much less illumination than they had aboveground.

The tunnel they were in was much less neatly constructed than the temple above. Dirt and grime coated the stone walls and floors that were unevenly cobbled together with mis-matched bricks. The air was even more stale and suffocating than it had been in the altar room and Khryso regretted not bringing some kind of rebreather to keep the dank atmosphere out of his nose and throat. Before he had much time to contemplate his situation, however, the group had begun moving, the second Wraith having dropped down behind Khryso.

They moved at a steady but meager pace, constantly scanning the walls, floor, and ceiling for potential dangers or information. They were about fifty meters down the tunnel before they came across anything notable. Several shock-ball sized rocks suddenly rained down on the lead Wraith, bringing their progress to an abrupt halt. For several tense moments, Khryso

worried that the tunnel was beginning to collapse. However, after nothing followed the initial salvo, it became evident that wasn't the case. The Wraith had taken quite a pounding, but his armor had mostly protected him from the primitive trap. It seemed even with their cautionary pace, the uneven floor paving had disguised the pressure plate from his notice.

After a minute or two of observation to assess the trap and its damages, the party continued their march. Khryso was a bit less anxious now, having seen the primitive and relatively simple design of the temple's defenses. However, his mood didn't improve as the tunnel began to slope downward, taking them deeper underground.

Moving further into the tunnel caused Khryso's neck to begin to tingle. He could sense the Force fluctuating around them, as if alternating between anxious static and silence. It was unlike any place he had sensed before. While his curiosity was certainly piqued, the Chiss could not justify staying here any longer than was necessary for the mission. That feeling was amplified when an electric sensation shot down his spine.

Opening up his senses fully, Khryso realized they were surrounded. By what, he couldn't tell, but he was clearly the first to notice. "Wait," he commanded, intending to order a scan of their surroundings. His voice died in his throat, however, as the tunnel walls began to shift and sizzle. The group came to a halt, but as the tightly packed stones and dirt in the wall fell to the floor in clumps. That wasn't sizzling, Khryso realized, it was buzzing.

As the party's lights turned to the walls, hundreds of shiny, iridescent orbs the size of chance cubes emerged from the tunnel walls. Khryso couldn't help but scowl at the swarm of beetles as they tested their wings. "We should probably keep moving," Nefilee said, her hand falling towards her armory lightsaber.

"Yes," Khryso said, giving a quick motion to the lead Wraith to issue the order. As they began moving again, the beetles began taking off in greater numbers, their buzzing beginning to reverberate through the underground passage. Khryso swatted away what insects he could, trying to ward them off with his lightsaber. From what he could tell they weren't particularly dangerous, just disgusting and numerous. At the very least, he sensed no immediate danger from them.

The swarm continued moving with the group as they pushed further into the tunnel. A beetle happened to fly into Khryso's mouth, causing him to gag before spitting it out. The Sith's anger began to mount and he had to restrain from swinging his saber more wildly. Thankfully, as they came to a fork in the tunnel, the team paused. The beetles, however, kept moving, going down the corridor on the right.

Khryso paused for a moment, tapping into the Force to scrutinize himself for any beetles that might have decided to stick around. The one he found tangled in his hair was quickly removed and crushed with a quick application of the Force.

“We go that way,” Ursel decided, pointing down the same passageway the beetles had gone. Khryso sighed, taking a moment to look down both passageways. The darkness remained, making it difficult to discern much, but they both clearly leveled out from here. Reaching out into the Force, Khryso could sense the fluctuations in the Force he had noticed earlier from the direction the beetles had gone. The left tunnel seemed much quieter and more stable in comparison.

“Of course,” Khryso muttered, pressing his lips tightly together. “I don’t suppose they would make it easy.”

“It could be worse,” Nefilee offered a sympathetic smile, “those could have been bees.”

Khryso paused for a moment to center himself. “Well, let’s not waste more time. Keep moving.”

The team continued on, and as Khryso trained his senses forward, he realized the large mass of beetles had stopped moving. They weren’t that far ahead, they’d only gained perhaps a minute or two on the Plagueians, which meant they were going to be reunited. Lovely.

The closer they got to the beetles, the less stable and uniform the tunnel’s construction became. It had already been unsteady, but the passageway was degrading. Khryso attempted to reach out with the Force to probe the area around them, but when he reached out, he realized there was nothing. He suddenly felt very hollow.

When Nefilee and Ursel paused, he knew the sensation was mutual. Ursel turned and hissed. “Ysalamiri. They are here.”

Khryso grimaced. That didn’t make their job any easier. For the time being, they would have to get by without the use of the Force. Hopefully, they wouldn’t need it. Turning his attention forward, the Chiss strained his eyes to discover what lay before them. Moving just a bit further, they came into a massive chamber. At first, he thought it was filled with vines, but, as the lights from their tools illuminated the area, it became clear that the large room was filled with a thick forest of tree roots.

The green and brown foliage was coated in beetles and created a thick net that cut visibility even further. Without much hesitation, Ursel stepped forward with her lightsaber and began to slash through the roots, creating a path for them. This kicked up beetles into a swarm again, but rather than focus around the Trandoshan, they simply found new, intact roots to settle on. Khryso suspected the ysalamiri were nestled somewhere in this forest of roots. Finding them was probably not worth the trouble.

The group moved into the passage Ursel was creating, following along in single file. Khryso avoided cutting down any of the roots himself, not wanting to give the beetles an excuse to annoy him further. Though, he was sorely tempted to disturb them for some petty revenge, but it wouldn’t be worth it.

They had been moving through the roots for a couple of minutes when Khryso realized the light-beam from the Wraith behind him wasn't illuminating the area around him anymore. Turning, the Chiss realized the Wraith was gone. "Halt!" He said, freezing in place. He instinctively called on the Force to locate the Wraith, but he was still cut off. "Our flank is gone."

Ursel cocked her head. "Perhaps we are not alone."

Khryso suddenly felt very vulnerable. Seeing beyond the wall of roots was nearly impossible, even if it wasn't pitch black. Without the Force, there was no way to know what lurked behind the curtain. "Keep moving," he decided. "Nefilee, walk backwards." With Nefilee turned towards him, everyone was in someone else's field of view. That way, none of them could disappear without someone else seeing it.

They continued moving with a renewed sense of urgency. The Wraith had finally finished a scan of the area and revealed that the chamber was massive and entirely filled with these roots. The buzzing of hundreds of beetles made the silent walk more tense as Khryso continually petitioned the Force for its return, waiting and hoping to feel its presence again. The darkness seemed even more oppressive without the presence of the Force. Khryso was able to avoid focusing on it too much, however, by keeping his eyes on Nefilee's.

His distraction tactic was perhaps a bit too effective, as the Chiss didn't notice the roots clawing around his ankles until they yanked him off balance. Khryso was able to steady himself before his feet were pulled out from under him, but more wiry roots emerged from their surroundings, moving with purpose. As they attempted to bind Khryso, he swung with his lightsaber, severing the roots that already had a hold on him.

Without warning, as if reacting to the slice, the forest of roots around them came to life, shifting and writhing like a mass of tentacles. The beetles that had been perched on the roots took flight, scattering and searching for stable purchase. "Quickly!" Khryso ordered, loudly, swinging his saber around to cut more vegetation, "let's get out of here!"

The group picked up into a full run, Ursel's lightsaber moving like a red tornado as it sliced open their path. Khryso and Nefilee kept their swords moving, severing the roots that approached them or tried to close in from the side. It was as if they were in a small bubble of air, surrounded by water. The pressure would have been suffocating if it weren't so chaotic and malleable.

Thankfully, it didn't take more than a few minutes to find their exit, a small stone door that was quickly cut down. As the group scrambled through, not even pausing to assess what lay on the other side, Khryso took a deep breath for what felt like the first time in hours.

Once they had sealed the door back into place, Khryso was able to turn and address the chamber they had arrived in. It was large, but not nearly as massive as the root room. Stone pillars had been erected almost haphazardly throughout it to keep the tunnel stable. A stone

path had also been laid that led off into the darkness. They all stood silently for several heartbeats, recovering from the scramble. Although the presence of the Force was still absent, Khryso could tell this room had an aura of import that demanded some reverence.

"I'm not looking forward to going back through there," Nefilee said, finally breaking the stillness.

That was something Khryso hadn't taken the time to think about. He wasn't sure exactly what had caused the plants to become so...mobile. The Chiss could only hope, however, that when they were leaving, the vegetation will have calmed back down. "We'll worry about that later," Ursel hissed, smiling. "For now, I sense our prey is close."

Khryso made brief eye contact with the Trandoshan, instantly understanding that her "sense" was intuition rather than the Force. He hoped she was right, the sooner they find the Desired One, the sooner he could get out of here. "Let's not waste any more time, then," the Aedile said, motioned into the chamber with his head.

They returned to their formation, making their way slowly into the darkness. The Wraith reported on the findings of his scans as they came in. There didn't seem to be any sign of life within this chamber, but there were some strange energy readings.

It took less than ten minutes for them to arrive at the far end of the hall and all that awaited them was an empty altar. Ursel sneered. "Were the Jedi already here?!" Her elevated voice echoed through the room.

Khryso approached the altar, holding his lightsaber over it as he examined the top of it. The stone surface was covered in dust and dirt. "I don't think so," he said, "it looks undisturbed. It's either hidden or it was moved a long time ago."

Ursel moved away and began pacing, her eyes scanning around them, looking for something else. Nefilee moved up to stand next to Khryso, looking at the altar. "Please tell me we didn't come down here for nothing."

"I don't think we did," Khryso said, his eyes narrowing as he noticed some kind of image on the altar. He began blowing away the silt coating. He made sure to be careful to not accidentally direct any towards himself, but when Nefilee pitched in that effort became considerably harder. He put that thought out of mind, however, as the etchings on the altar's surface were now visible.

The image was drawn in a black. Some kind of creature, it almost looked like a mass of vines, held their hands aloft. A small circle floated above them, shooting out rays of energy. Beneath the creature, a mirror image of itself, upside down, seemed to be pushing the circle into a box. Instead of rays of energy shooting from the stone, roots seemed to be spreading outward from the box. The roots spread and sprouted more boxes to either side. A horizontal line separated

the two creatures, although curiously, the line became jagged and arched downwards wherever no boxes were sprouting.

“That must be the Desired One,” Nefilee said, pointing to the circle shooting out energy.

“I think so,” Khryso muttered, pressing his lips tightly together as he tried to decipher the image. The circles above and below appeared to be the same, so it was reasonable to assume that they were both the Desired One. The image above the line depicted someone using it while the image below the line they were storing or hiding it.

The first thought that came to mind was that the box they were storing it in could be this very altar. Something about that didn't seem right to Khryso, though. There wasn't just one box, there were many identical boxes. However, as far as he could tell, there was only one altar here. What did the boxes represent? They were connected to the roots outside of this room, clearly. So were they perhaps trees or plants of some kind?

As Khryso stood pondering, a sudden flash of red cut into his peripheral vision. A lightsaber swung down from his side, cutting deeply into the top of the altar. Reflexively raising his own lightsaber defensively, Khryso glared at Ursel as she carved into the altar. “What are you doing?” he asked, not bothering to keep the irritation out of his voice.

“The One is in the box, yess?” she hissed, not bothering to look up at him, “so stop reading the picture and let's get it out.”

Khryso sighed. “Fine, just try not to ruin this image.”

Putting his own lightsaber to the task, the two carved out a large enough hole for Nefilee to poke her upper body through, shining her glowrod inside the hollow altar. After a few moments, she retreated, holding her nose. It took a moment for the stench of decay and death to reach Khryso's own nostrils and his face wrinkled up in response.

“It's not in there,” Nefilee said, “This is a coffin. There's something dead in there. It's so old I can't make it out.”

Ursel growled in exasperation, pushing her own head and lightsaber into the hole to confirm for herself. Khryso turned back to the image. So now he knew for sure the box wasn't the altar. He wanted to keep studying the image for clues, but the smell forced him to take several steps away. He began to pace nearby, waiting for the smell to dissipate. As he paced, he happened to glance out into the murky darkness. From here, the pillars scattered around the room almost looked like trees in an orchard.

“The pillars,” he realized, “it's hidden inside one of the pillars.”

Ursel pulled her head out of the altar. “Which one?”



"I'm...not sure." Khryso admitted. He had seen maybe half a hundred pillars as they walked through the room, but who knew how many more lay in the darkness beyond their field of view.

"Maybe there's another clue in the picture," Nefilee said hopefully, turning back to examine the image while she continued holding her nose.

"Let's just start chopping," Ursel said, marching towards a nearby pillar.

"We can't," Khryso said, holding up a hand to warn her away from the column. "If we damage or destroy the wrong pillar, it could bury us in here. We have to make sure we know what we're doing, we have to be precise."

Ursel grunted, approaching the pillar more calmly and examining it half-heartedly.

Khryso glanced at the Wraith, who had been mostly idling nearby. "Begin examining the pillars for any symbols or signs of a mechanism," he ordered the soldier. The Wraith nodded and marched off to follow the orders. Khryso braced himself for the stench and returned to Nefilee's side, looking over the mostly intact image on the altar. "See anything?"

"Nothing helpful," she said dejectedly, "all of these objects look the same, even their dimensions look pretty much identical."

Khryso began to think. If all the columns were the same, then perhaps their clue lies elsewhere. The other things on the image: the roots, the creature, the line that must represent the cavern ceiling. The jagged parts of the ceiling must be where it is collapsing and unsupported, as there are no boxes beneath those sections. The creature...perhaps it is the decaying corpse that was sealed in this coffin. Which leaves the roots. Whether they are more symbolic in nature, like the boxes, or more literal was hard to say. The forest of roots they had cut through to get here made him think they were more literal, but he hadn't noticed any vegetation in this room.

Crouching down, Khryso lowered his lightsaber closer to the floor so he could examine it. They hadn't paid the floor much attention other than noticing it was paved with stones. The paving wasn't perfect or beautiful by any means, clearly done more out of necessity than a want for beauty. As he continued searching, he saw something catch the light, nestled in the crack between two stones. A shiny iridescent orb. Crouching even lower, he realized it was a shell, the husk of a dead beetle.

The beetles apparently came in here, but he hadn't seen any. They had all been in the room with the roots. They had all landed on the roots in that room. Roots. Straightening up, Khryso allowed the corner of his mouth to perk up in a bit of a smile. He had an idea.

"Warrior Jherdi," he called, gaining Ursel's attention, "Wraith. Both of you, come with me." They jogged back to the entrance, Khryso explaining his thoughts along the way. Ursel seemed

dubious, but Khryso wanted to give it a try anyway. The three of them pushed aside the stone slabs that were the reconstructed door. The roots had become still in the time since they left and, luckily, the beetles were still there, crawling around on the roots in massive numbers.

The Wraith marched through into the roots, grabbing and shaking them, trying to get the vegetation to begin acting up again. The few beetles that were disturbed buzzed around, confused. Khryso and Ursel stood aside, waiting to see what would happen.

When nothing happened for several minutes, Khryso ordered the Wraith to discharge his weapon. The Wraith began shooting into the roots, and that seemed to do the trick. They began grabbing at him and undulating around him. As Khryso had hoped, this threw the beetles into a swarm again. With the doorway open, some of the beetles flew through. Soon, more. After several minutes, the Wraith was gone and his blaster fire distant, but he had successfully stirred up the beetles enough that they had begun fleeing into the altar chamber to escape the chaos.

“Keep track of them,” Khryso said, doing his best to try to follow the beetles through the darkness without the aid of the Force. The insects seemed to swarm around aimlessly for a while before they began settling onto the floor. With careful examination, Khryso realized they were forming a pattern of lines and angles as they settled. As he had hoped, the beetles were, for some reason, settling along the “roots” depicted in the image.

Following the pattern, Khryso tried to figure out where it led. Many beetles had flown in, but even then, the room was massive and there were not enough to fully cover the maze of vectors. Not to mention, the darkness and minimal light provided by the lightsaber made it difficult to see very far at all.

Thankfully, after only about twenty minutes of searching, Ursel called out. Khryso ran to meet up with her, his eyes tracing the patterns of beetles as he moved. When he arrived at her location, Ursel motioned towards the beetles around the floor of the pillar. It definitely seemed as though all of the roots led back to this specific column. “Examine the pillar,” he said, “see if there is some way to open it.”

As Ursel began to search, Nefilee arrived behind Khryso. “What’s going on?”

Khryso explained everything to her and she joined them in their investigation of the column. The minutes ticked by, the hum of lightsabers mixing with the buzzing of the beetles. They were all focused on the task at hand and eager to find the Desired One. Despite their attention, however, nobody seemed to be able to turn up any results. For all intents and purposes, this pillar seemed just as indistinct as any other.

“This is pointless,” Ursel conceded, taking a step back, “I’ll just break through.”

“No, we can’t risk-” Khryso’s words were cut off as Ursel unleashed a powerful and quick stroke, the red streak of her blade slicing cleanly through the column. Another slash made it through the column before Khryso raised his own saber to block hers. The two glared at each other, tensing for conflict. Perhaps something would have come of it if Khryso hadn’t noticed the fine dust beginning to fall on them.

Turning to the column, he realized it was beginning to crumple in on itself. They didn’t have any more time, now. Releasing Ursel’s saber from his block, the two of them each slashed the column one more time, causing it to collapse entirely. The ceiling began to cave in, dirt falling in large clumps and pieces.

They all stood still for a moment, however, as a fist-sized stone fell from the column’s rubble. It was fairly innocuous looking, smooth and gray, with some strange circular patterns. However, all three Sith knew that this had to be their target.

“Got it!” Nefille yelled, the first to break out of her trance. She scooped it up into her hands and jumped up, running away from the raining dirt. “Let’s go!”

Ursel and Khryso immediately jumped into action, running behind her as the speed of the ceiling’s collapse began to increase.

### ***Myrkr***

#### ***Siji Sing Temple Inner Chamber***

***39 ABY***

#### ***One Hour Later***

Ursel was the first one through the hole in the floor, easily jumping back up into the above-ground section of the temple. Khryso hoisted Nefilee up, making sure he didn’t strain her injured leg. He was eager to get above ground, but a few more seconds wouldn’t hurt him. He would have taken the time to heal Nefilee’s leg after the vornskrs had appeared in the tunnel, but the collapse was beginning to spread throughout the entire underground system. They needed to get out as quickly as possible.

After they had successfully cut their way back through the root chamber, they’d triggered a few traps, one of which had released the beasts, another of which had hastened the cave-in. Despite their best efforts to get out speedily, delay after delay had forced them into trouble after trouble. Finally, though, they had made it back to the comparatively peaceful gathering area.

Once Nefilee was up, Khryso jumped up behind her, stowing his lightsaber on his belt. It was a beautiful feeling to have the Force back at his beck and call, but he was still trying to shake the strange feeling of its absence. It wasn’t something he was eager to experience again. Even before the Chiss had known he was Force sensitive, the constant presence of the Force had

been a part of his life. Having his ability to connect with it taken away like that almost made him feel as if a part of his own soul had been taken away.

There would be plenty of time for introspection later, though. For now, they needed to get back to camp with the Desired One. Khryso sucked in a breath of air. Even the inner temple's relatively musty air was a pleasant refresher compared to the stale air they had been breathing underground.

Khryso led the trio back to the temple's entrance, with Ursel bringing up the flank and Nefilee limping between them. As they stepped out into the vibrant forest, however, Khryso paused. Something wasn't right. They weren't alone.

"Jedi," Ursel sneered, readying her lightsaber. From the forest, cloaked figures emerged. Five in total, Khryso could immediately tell they were soaked in the light side of the Force.

He silently cursed. He should have realized that the Wraiths they'd left up here as guards were gone. They could have come up with a plan to avoid this. He raised his own saber. The trio wasn't exactly in peak condition, but they had no choice except to fight. The Chiss gritted his teeth, his mind beginning to run through potential strategies to turn the tides in their favor.

The Jedi ignited their own lightsabers as one of them stepped forward to negotiate. "Hand over the artifact," they called in a deep voice, lowering their hood to reveal a head of white hair and a blindfold over their eyes.

Khryso opened his mouth to respond, but three more figures arrived, jumping down from the top of the temple and landing between the two groups. Khryso was relieved as he recognized the woman in the center, the Hand of Dread, Taranae Rhode. The redhead ignited her double-bladed lightsaber, spinning it casually. "Mallus, get the relic back to camp. We'll entertain your uninvited guests."

Khryso glanced over at Nefilee, who handed him the Desired One. Khryso caught it, tucking it into one of the pockets of his cape. "Thank you, Hand of Dread. I apologize for my inability to complete the mission without your intervention."

"Save the groveling for later. Just get going."

Khryso bowed his head before turning and bolting through the forest, focusing all of his remaining energy on moving as fast as he could. He felt the Force gather within him as the end of the mission finally appeared within his grasp. He heard the fighting break out behind him. He wasn't sure if anyone was following him, but he trusted in the Tyrants to keep them off of his back.

With the Desired One in his possession, the Sith was confident that the mission had been a success. He hoped he would get the privilege to hand over the artifact to the Dread Lord

himself. As soon as he returned to camp, they would start preparations to leave. The Crusade was at its end.