

Star Wars

Death In The Catacombs

by Michael W. Barr

INSIDER #79

The alarm sounded one second after the Force had told her something was wrong. She didn't have to see the output panel of her haz suit to realize they had triggered another trap. "Ambush!" shouted Jedi Knight Jyl Somtay into her comlink. "Evacuate immediately!"

Behind her, she heard the quick footfalls of clone troopers. Just ahead, through the thick Geonosian dust, she saw a small light, flashing more quickly with each second. Backing out rapidly, she hopped out of the tunnel and shouted at the squad of troopers. "Everyone down!"

The blast threw them farther out of the cavern's mouth. They fell to the hard-packed ground as the main force of the explosion, guided by the tunnel, mostly dispersed over them. She waited a few seconds-to gather her breath, she told herself. From somewhere far away, through the ringing in her ears, a voice sounded. "Are you all right, Commander?"

"I'm fine," Jyl said slowly, picking herself up and making a futile attempt to dislodge the red dust that seemed to cling to everything. "Any casualts-oh."

Through the settling dust, she made out a clone trooper laying flat on the cavern floor beneath a boulder released by the explosion. Its wedge shape with marks of machine tooling on its surface showed that it had been deliberately placed there. A backup in case the explosion failed, she thought. I've got to be more careful.

"Just take it easy," she said, kneeling by the trooper. "We're going to get you out of here." She reached out to the Force and tried to raise the boulder so he could be moved. The rock shuddered slightly, but that was all. She motioned to the rest of the squad, who came and tried to lift the boulder.

The trooper bit off a moan then coughed harshly. A thin spray of red leaked through the joints of his cracked helmet. "Stand away," she said, reaching for her lightsaber. Depressing the activation button, an eerie turquoise light glowed in the cavern. The hiss of her lightsaber could not drown out the labored breathing of the clone. She started at the top of the boulder, cutting off portions slowly, then more quickly. The troopers raved the severed chunks to the side, until only about half of the boulder remained. "Now," she said, joining the remaining troopers as they came forward, "go."

With both muscle and Jyl's use of the Force, they managed to lift the boulder off the trapped clone trooper. Jyl quickly whipped off the trooper's helmet. "Get that med kit over here-" she began. "It's too late, Commander," said one of the other troopers, the breastplate of the trapped clone's armor had a large depression in it, and his face was still. The other clone troopers removed their helmets one by one and closed their eyes, revealing sad faces identical to that of the slain trooper.

Later, Jyl Somtay sat cross-legged on the floor of the Arena of Justice, trying to think of those who had died there rather than the absurdity of its name. A faint sheen of light from the 2roid ring illuminated the Arena, but the thirsty sands showed no trace of the blood of the Jedi who had perished there only days ago. It was as if their sacrifice held no more permanence than the curling drifts of dust that wove through the air around her.

She tried to clear her mind, tried to contact the spirit of her Master, Lura Tranor, one of the many who had paid the fast measure for their cause in this Arena. Coleman Trebor was another; she had been quite fond of the tall Vurk and already missed their conversations.

I should have been here, she thought. But she had been away when 200 Jedi were sent to Geonosis, her Master among them. She had never had a proper chance to say goodbye.

But now she was on Geonosis, promoted from Padawan to Jedi Knight after the battle in the Arena between Republic and Separatist forces. Only it was too late to do anything to help her Master.

"Master?" she said, faintly. But there was no answer.

There was no point to her meditation, but she kept her eyes closed, not trusting herself to open them.

"Commander?" came a hushed, insistent voice behind her. "Jedi Somtay?"

Jyl, finally realizing a clone trooper was talking to her, rose and turned, her long blonde ponytail whipping behind her.

"Yes, trooper?"

"Dr. Frayne has sent out a general alert for you. She wants to see you in her laboratory."

"Thank you," said Jyl. Gathering her robes around her, she walked to her Jedi starfighter outside the Arena. She stopped just before leaving, looking back one last time as if seeking something she had missed. She saw nothing but errant gusts of sand whipped about by the hot night wind.

he rode an orray from her quarters in the abandoned Trade Federation ship to the Central Laboratory. As she dismounted the beast, it drew away from her; it seemed uneasy. Jyl used the Force to draw it to her and calm it.

She felt the Force flow around her, through her, and she breathed it in. She was at the same moment its servant, its master, and its ally.

"Easy, boy," she said, patting the mount's leathery hide as the orray rumbled. "Nothing to worry about here."

As she returned the salutes of the clone troopers guarding the main door, she imagined that Dr. Frayne might use the same tone with her as she had with the orray. The scientist had not seemed pleased to have a Jedi Knight along on what she insisted was a scientific expedition, but the Jedi Council had insisted, and, after a decree canjg from Chancellor Palpatine's office, Frayne had grudgingly acquiesced.

The remaining Geonosians understandably avoided contact with the Republic invaders, so Jyl had still never seen one in person, only holos. As she entered the main lab, she felt more strongly than ever that the diminutive Dr. Frayne, constantly bent over some piece of analytical equipment, peering through a pair of macrogoggles she rarely removed, resembled one of the planet's natives.

"Jedi Somtay," said Dr. Frayne, looking up from a diagnostic reading, "thank you for coming."

"Not at all, Dr. Frayne," replied Jyl, keeping her surprise from her voice. The doctor's disdain for her seemed to have been a product of her distaste for Jedi Knights multiplied by her contempt for Jyl's youth. "How goes the search?"

The old woman sighed. "Not as well as I had hoped, but better than I had expected. Look at this." She pointed at a holographic diagnostic cutaway of their sector of the planet, much of it threaded with green trails, including Jyl's recent expedition, with several red specks flickering harshly. "The Senate has been quite clear about the need to make sure Geonosis has no technology left with which its remaining inhabitants can imperil the Republic. But today I recalibrated all scanners to scan for processed metals. Observe the result." She turned a dial, which caused one of the red lights to flash even more brightly.

Jyl's cool gray eyes narrowed in comprehension. "A major source of technology--"

"With which the Geonosians could be plotting an assault against our occupation," said Frayne, with a nod.

"Or another trap," added Jyl.

"That possibility exists, of course. Still, I think you will agree it must be examined."

"Yes, of course. When do we go?"

"First," said Frayne, "I should like to discuss with you the matter of the clone trooper you lost."

"What about him?" said Jyl, coldly.

"It occurs to me," said Frayne, "that a stronger helmet may have enabled him to survive." She handed Jyl a helmet that resembled those worn by the clone troopers, with slight modifications. "This prototype helmet has been reinforced at the structural joins and is much more resilient. I would ask your opinion of it."

Flattered by Frayne's solicitation, Jyl donned the helmet. "It seems comfortable enough..." she began.

Too late, Jyl heeded the insistent presence of the Force, which had tried to pierce her concentration. She tried to jerk the helmet off but was too slow. A stinging gas issued from the helmet's interior, and she suddenly felt as though an orray had been dropped atop her. Before she could hold her breath, she was out.

When Jyl awoke, she was dismayed, though not surprised, to find her hands bound behind her and her lightsaber and comlink missing. She glanced at the entrance to the lab and saw the armored forms of the clone troopers lying motionless inside and to one side of the main arch.

Standing beside Dr. Frayne was a man she had seen working with Frayne's people. His slightly stooped posture hid the broadness of his shoulders and imbued his simple vest and pants with the weight of a scholar's robes. He wore a goatee that accented the lines of his face and softened the angularity of his features. She couldn't distinguish the color of his eyes.

She looked about the lab. There, on Frayne's main examination table, were her lightsaber and comlink. If she could just ignore the throbbing in her head and draw the lightsaber to her to sever her bonds.... Failing that, she could release the bind-;rs telekinetically, but that could be slow going.

There was time for neither gambit. Dr. Frayne turned to Jyl, smiling as she might at a presumptuous child. She laughed, with a sound like rusty bolts being shaken in a can. "Really, Commander Somtay, you are far too naive to be a Jedi Knight, ot suspect that helmet might have been tampered /1 present my colleague, Naj Pandoor."

Jyl nodded. "Let me-" This was briefly interrupted by a coughing fit; her throat felt raw and unused. "Let me guess. You've been bribed by the Geonosians to get rid of me?"

"Geonosians are notorious for underpaying their employees," said Pandoor. His clear tenor voice gave the impression of civilized discussions in lecture halls on esoteric issues. "We're freelance."

"We?!" said Jyl, cocking an eye at Frayne.

"Pandoor originally tried to join my expedition using credentials stolen from a research assistant he waylaid. When his ruse was uncovered, I daresay I astonished him not by turning him in, but by asking to join him." She shrugged, disarmingly. "The Republic pays nearly as poorly as the Geonosians."

"It's a perfect partnership," said Pandoor. "She can identify and find the Geonosian technology that remains, and I can get it past the Republic blockade."

"So you're just another smuggler," said Jyl.

"I think of myself as a scholar," said Pandoor, in a tone of mock offense.

"Actually, Pandoor, Jedi Somtay has categorized your species with the unerring precision of a scientist," said Dr. Frayne. Jyl and Pandoor turned to Frayne just in time to see her draw a blaster from behind her back.

As Pandoor fumbled for his sidearm, Jyl tried to use the Force to jerk the weapon from Frayne's hands, but she was too late. It sounded once, and Pandoor fell. Then it sounded again.

Waking up this time, Jyl's pain was even worse. Surrounded by absolute blackness, she feared for a moment she was blind. But the Force told her she wasn't blind, and she wasn't alone. She was seated on a hard, packed surface, kept in a sitting position by someone behind her whose hands were bound together with hers. It took no Force-granted insight to guess his identity.

Using a brief Jedi meditation to tamp down her pain, Jyl turned her head and hissed, "Pandoor, wake up!" She rocked from side to side and finally the weight behind her stirred.

"Sh-she betrayed me!" His voice was harsh and raspy. "The witch double-crossed me!"

Despite the circumstances, Jyl chuckled. "I'm sure you couldn't have seen that coming."

"Neither did you, Commander Jedi."

"I didn't know what she was. What's your excuse?"

"Me? I just wanted some time alone with you."

Jyl sighed. "That's not helping."

"Neither is your fidgeting like that."

"I've been trying to untie your bonds," said Jyl. "But they're too tight."

"And here I just thought you wanted to hold hands," replied Pandoor.

"Will you take this seriously?"

"But I am, Jedi Somtay. I've decided that Dr. Frayne must have wanted to torture me."

"Torture you? Why?"

"Because she didn't tie us front-to-front."

Jyl again wished she had her lightsaber, though she had an entirely different use for it in mind.

"I wonder where we are?" said Pandoor, finally.

"Smell the air? That's soil. And it's moist. From the echo of our voices, I'd say we're in a deep cavern. Frayne must have disposed of us here."

"Yes, probably with one of those antigravity carts used for hauling large specimens. I think one of us has been insulted."

"That would be me," said Jyl, "left here tied to you."

"I wonder why she did leave us here, rather than just killing us?"

"Because she knew something would do it that wouldn't point to her," replied Jyl. "Hear that?"

"No, I don't--"

"Hush! Be ready to move when I say." She automatically closed her eyes, despite the total blackness of their pit, and concentrated. She heard a faint stirring of dirt, disturbed and pushed to one side. The scrape of appendages on the ground as something—a lot of somethings—approached. With them came the guttural sounds of a language spoken from the very back of the throat, syllables interspersed with frequent clicks and glottal stops.

Geonosians. The Jedi knew at least several thousand of them remained behind. None of the Republic forces had seen them, though the evidence laid in a footprint here, a small job of sabotage there.

Pandoor heard them then. He stirred restlessly. Jyl jabbed her elbow into his back as hard as she could with minimal movement. They could learn more if the Geonosians thought them unconscious.

Something stroked her face. She heard the faint rasp of metal, certainly weapons being drawn. That was all she needed to know.

"Now!" she shouted, and sprang to her feet. Pandoor followed her lead-he could do little else, with his hands bound to hers-and she was rewarded with a chorus of voices, frightened and startled by the sudden activity.

Something hard struck her, and Jyl accessed the Force, shifting rapidly to one side. Something heavy brushed past her in the dark, barely missing her. She swung Pandoor around, his feet striking several of their attackers, his astonished cries doing almost as much damage by startling them.

"Stop it! Ow! What are you-no!"

Jyl felt the manacle binding them begin to give and spun faster, trying to use the Force on the locking mechanism. There was a metallic clatter nearby and then, suddenly, the echoing whine of one of the Geonosian sonic blasters.

Jyl expected this and pushed herself backward, the shrieks of both Pandoor and the Geonosians remarking on the unexpectedness of the maneuver. In the brief, verdant blast, she saw the low ceiling and close walls of the cavern covered with Geonosians, and more pouring from a narrow tunnel, wings scraping against each other with a chitinous whisper.

"Oh, blast!" shouted Pandoor, seeing the odds against them. Finally there was a metallic rasp, and Pandoor flew from her, screaming like a soprano in a Coruscant opera as the manacle binding them gave. Jyl sprang forward and tackled the nearest pile of limbs. Whatever she struck had to be an enemy, while whatever they struck would likely be an ally. The clatter and ticking of the Geonosian voices were punctuated with several utterances she took to be cries of pain.

Then she felt a long, smooth shape, narrowing to a point at one end while expanding to a heavy weight at the other. She wrenched it from the hands of its wielder and began swinging. In the strobing bursts of the sonic blasters, she saw Pandoor seize a weapon, fiddle with its controls, and quickly toss it away.

From across the chamber a mechanical keening pierced the air, sounding ever higher. All movement from the Geonosians ceased for a moment, then they rushed past Jyl in a flow of whispers and clucked imperatives.

Jyl recognized the sound and, waiting until the precise moment, seized the nearest native, slammed the heavy end of her weapon against its head, and held its unconscious form between her and the mechanical keening, wing side out.

The sonic blaster overloaded, its artificial scream culminating in an explosion that sounded louder in the confined space than it was. Jyl was inundated by a spray of dirt from across the chamber.

She saw pale lights through the clearing dust. Jyl dropped her shield, crouched low and hurried toward the light.

Even the stars of the night sky seemed exceptionally bright to her. She emerged in a gully between two of the Geonosians' towering spire-hives. Behind her, she heard countless dry limbs withdrawing deeper into the spire-hive.

A pair of hands grabbed her. She whirled, jamming the sharp end of her weapon forward.

"Ow!" Naj Pandoor fell backward, left hand flying to his right forearm, from which now issued a copious flow of blood. "I'm on your side!"

"And so was Dr. Frayne," observed Jyf. "Turn around and start marching. It can't be too far to my base in the Trade Federation ship. I can cobble up a makeshift brig."

Her captive stared at her incredulously. "You're turning me in?"

"A self-confessed smuggler bearing false credentials on 3 planet filled with dangerous technology? The thought had crossed my mind. For all I know, you intended to bury me back there when you overloaded that sonic staff."

"I almost buried myself as well, you might have noticed," he replied. "But given our position, I thought the odds acceptable." More than anything else, he resembled a body excavated from a mudslide, but the moonlight softened the gauntness of his features, she noticed, and his deep-set eyes gave him an air of intrigue.

"Look," he continued, "you need me. I know what Frayne was up to. You stand a better chance of stopping her with me !han without me."

Jyl removed the ring from her ponytail and shook her hair, sending a fine film of dirt into the night air. "Just tell me what she was up to, and I'll put in a good word for you-if it's the truth."

"That'll take too long. She could be escaping right this moment. In my ship," he added, bitterly. "At least let me alert The Republic blockade."

Jyl poinited. "That way. The nearest comm station is in the main lab, just a kilometer or so away." She set off on a brisk run and Pandoor, after a moment, set off after her, stifling a groan.

As they ran, Jyf regarded the planetary ring that seemed to bind the Geonosian sky. An occasional flash of light pierced the night sky, followed by a trail of smoke and a fearsome shriek as a sizable object embedded itself in the planet's surface.

"Asteroids from the planet's ring," said Jyl, catching her breath. "That's one reason so many of the natives live deep in the catacombs."

"What's that glow on the horizon?" puffed Pandoor. "It's quite beautiful."

"And deadly. Radiation storms. They can be more or less predicted, but if you see one coming at you, dive for cover."

"Into a catacomb. With the Geonosians."

"Nice place, isn't it?" commented Jyl, dryly.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Pandoor, looking at her. "It has its attractions."

Minutes later, the lab came in sight as they topped a dune. "I wish we had the time to get fresh clothes," she said, "I'm squirting dust from every pore." She didn't want to imagine what she must look like. Then she wondered why that bothered her.

"To me," replied Pandoor, "you look like an angel."

Jyl felt her cheeks flush. "A smooth talker, too. You smugglers always are."

"I didn't set out to be a smuggler--"

"I know all the stories. Did you come from a broken home, are you a rebel against an unjust system, or are you earning the fee to buy your sister out of slavery?"

"Actually," he said, "I was a graduate student in Xenoarchae-ology at the University of Ketaris. But when the University went bankrupt, it took my academic career with it. From Xenoarchae-ology to smuggling is a more direct route than you might think."

"Especially if you cut Ethics class." They were in the main lab's shadow now. Although the main hatch was open, the place was dark. From either side of the doorway, Jyl saw various trickles of light from consoles, but no motion. Reaching out with the Force, she felt no life inside, but she wouldn't have cared to bet hers on that assumption.

After several seconds, however, Jyl lifted a few pebbles with the Force and flung them inside. The stones bounced off the floor with a clatter, but caused no other commotion. "I think it's safe," said Jyl, sidling inside. "She wasn't expecting us to return. An empty lab doesn't necessarily indicate trouble. A booby-trapped fab does."

"Beauty before age," said Pandoor.

Jyl ran to the comm board and quickly called the Republic flagship. "They report no attempts to run the blockade," she said, minutes later. "Frayne must still be planetside."

"That's something," said Pandoor. "I was worried sick she'd get herself blown up."

"I didn't think you were that concerned about her."

"I'm not-but she could get my ship blown up with her."

"You won't have any need for a ship where you're going." Pandoor had no comeback to that.

Activating the main display, Jyl quickly picked out the technology reading Frayne had shown to her earlier. "There she is."

"Not quite," said Pandoor, leaning past her and working the console. "She built a 15 percent displacement differential into the readings. You could search those coordinates for days and not find her." The holographic map shuddered, went blank, and then flickered into life again, showing slightly different readings. "That's where she is," nodded Pandoor, pointing to the brightest light.

"She'd better be," said Jyl. "That's an odd place for a cache of Geonosian technology."

"That's why you need me. I know her whole operation, but I can't do you any good from a Republic cell."

"All right," said Jyl, after a long moment. "But the first time you try anything--"

"There won't be a first time," he said. Pandoor cast a glance around the cavernous lab as they left. "This whole planet gives me the creeps."

"I know. All this technology...but it's all hidden, all underground. There's something wrong about it."

"You see?" Pandoor smiled charmingly. "We have a lot in common."

"We're both carbon-based life forms," replied Jyl, "that's all." They took a small troop transport to the coordinates indicated and found themselves standing in the middle of a patch of desert composed of nothing but drifting sand, save for one feature.

"The cache must be below that stalagmite," said Jyl, "Let's go."

"I don't suppose it would do any good to suggest waiting until some clone troopers arrive as reinforcements?"

"No, it wouldn't," she said, with a grim smile. "I don't want to give Frayne any more time."

"At least I got a smile out of you," said Pandoor, following her footprints in the sand. "Triads a start."

The stalagmite was a massive protuberance of rock created when the planet was in its-birth throes thousands of centuries earlier. Despite its age, its surface seemed as rocky and barren as the day it was formed.

"There must be an access point," said Jyl, moving slowly along the slab of rock, her Song fingers running over its craggy surface. "Yes, look here."

She moved toward a surface of rock then, seemingly, through it and was gone.

"Hey!" said Pandoor, rapidly approaching the same spot and finding nothing. "Where are you, Angel?"

"Here," came Jyl's voice, echoing in the darkness. Pandoor shone his torch on the area, and saw that what seemed to be a natural curve of rock was actually two layers, concealing a narrow cut of space between them, Jyl looked up at the beam of light that danced before her. "Come down," she said, "Frayne's got to be down here. And put out that light, it'll take that much longer for your eyes to adjust." Pandoor obliged, reluctantly. The crevice was a tight fit, even for his lean build. Once past the entrance the crevice widened, giving onto a fairly large corridor of natural volcanic rock. "A perfect hiding place," he said, his voice echoing off the walls. "You could hide anything down here." "That's what I'm afraid of," came Jyl's solemn reply. "Let's keep the lights off, and the noise, to a minimum."

"Anything you say, Angel."

"That's the kind of noise I'm talking about."

"Sorry.. Jyl." But he didn't sound sorry.

The cavern walls gave off a kind of phosphorescence in which it was easier to distinguish shapes than details. Still, Jyl hoped he could make out her frown. "You will address me as 'Jedi,'" she said tightly.

"Sorry, Jedi Somtay."

They proceeded slowly, Jyl casting ahead with the Force, hoping to sense any kind of life that might be waiting within. But trying to differentiate between native fauna and life that carried hostile intent was useless. Everything on this planet seemed hostile.

Just then came a juicy thwack, like a melon being hit. "What was that?" asked Jyl.

"Just a rock I kicked," replied Pandoor.

"Are you sure? That didn't sound like a rock, it was.. .wetter, as though it was filled with liquid, or-" Spurred by a sudden spike in what was either the Force or her native instincts, she activated her beamlight.

There was Dr. Frayne-or at least, her head.

"She was decapitated by something long and sharp," said Jyl, after a cursory examination. "That's all I can tell without a lab. Maybe her body will provide some clues."

"If we can find it," said Pandoor, cautiously, from the other side of the cavern. "There's not much else of her left."

The only other evidence that Frayne had been present was her equipment, which had been scattered all around the chamber.

Around the cavern lay splotches of blood of varying sizes. In the cavern's dim light, the surface of the blood seemed to move, as if of its own accord. Pandoor knelt to examine this phenomenon, but Jyl grabbed his wrist in an iron grip.

"Don't touch that," said Jyl. Pandoor saw the blood was covered by what must have been hundreds of thousands of tiny insects, swarming in what at first looked like a random pattern, but was too purposeful to be meaningless. "Rogas," she said, "fierce insects."

Pandoor nodded. "Yes...some scientists theorize the Geo-nosians evolved from them."

"Evolution's done pretty well by them as they stand," replied Jyl. "If they swarm over you, you won't have too long to worry about it. But they didn't kill Frayne."

"No, that was some kind of animal," said Pandoor, his beam-light shaking only a little. "She probably disturbed it in its lair."

"More likely it was put here to guard whatever the Geo-nosians left behind," said Jyl, rapidly sorting through the erratically distributed contents of a backpack. "Do you see?"

From across the cavern came a familiar snap-hiss and a turquoise radiance, eerie in the phosphorescence. Jyl turned, springing to her feet.

"I found your lightsaber, Angel," said Pandoor, his tone very quiet. He drew it back and forth before him, accustoming himself to the torsion the weapon acquired when activated. He slashed out at an inoffensive stalactite, sending its fragments showering about the cavern. "I can see why you Jedi favor this weapon," he said, in the same tone. "It's...unique."

"Give me that," demanded Jyl, striding toward him.

For a moment, Pandoor's green eyes glinted in the glare of the light blade. Their gazes met through the gloom of the cavern,

Pandoor smiled and deactivated the lightsaber. "Of course, Angel," he said, with a winning smile, handing the weapon to her.

She took it and released a breath, as Pandoor lifted his other hand, revealing his blaster. "May I keep this?" he asked, with exaggerated courtesy.

"I'm afraid you may need it," said Jyl. "Let's proceed, but cautious-"

The thing was on them like a wind with teeth. Its rush thrust Pandoor aside, where he lay, silent and still. Jyl froze, but it turned to her anyway, catching her scent.

Its teeth glinted like a rack of knives in the dim cavern light. The four eyes widened and narrowed in the spade-shaped head as its nostrils quivered. Its long claws were fully extended.

The nexu's tail twitched from side to side almost lazily as it took its bearings. Then it leaped.

Even aided by the Force, Jyl barely managed to dodge it. The snap-hiss of her lightsaber was nearly lost as the muffled howl of the predator bounced off the cavern's walls.

She feinted to the right and then went to the left, bringing up her blade. But the creature managed to alter its course, the lightsaber trimming only a centimeter or so from its coat.

The smell of burnt fur wafted through the cavern as Jyl moved warily backward, slowly moving the lightsaber blade back and forth before her.

"Pandoor?" she hissed. "Naj!" But no reply came, and she dared not take her eyes off the nexu, even to explore the warmth slowly threading its way down from the dull ache in her leg. The nexu had gotten her; she used the Force on the artery nearest her wound to slow the bleeding and anesthetize the pain.

The nexu's leg muscles bunched as it prepared to spring again, but just before it could leap, a sizzling laser blast from outside Jyl's field of vision just missed it. The beast turned, as puzzled as it was angry, to Pandoor, who fired his blaster again. "Your turn," he said, stepping forward once.

Jyl reached out with the Force, sweeping her right hand parallel to the cavern floor. The fragments of the stalactite Pandoor shattered lifted and flew at the nexu, as Jyl took two steps forward.

The nexu howled as they continued their tag-team attack, turning its head from one target to the other, baffled by their conduct.

Jyl thought quickly. All she needed to put the nexu away was one good slash with her lightsaber, but to get close enough to strike also put her in danger. And the nexu was probably faster than a Jedi-or at least, faster than she was.

Finally in position, Jyl ignited then extinguished her light-saber rapidly several times, shouting at the monster as she did so.

The nexu leaped toward the nearest, noisiest target. Jyl sprang forward and rolled in the air, landing under the hurling nexu. She kicked, her feet catching the nexu in its ribs and stomach, sending it further than it had intended to spring; and no longer in control of its direction.

Despite this interference, the nexu rolled to an upright position in midair, landing gracefully on the cavern floor. Its head swiveled from one foe to the other, and then it twitched as a shudder rippled through its supple body. It lowered on its haunches, preparing for another spring-then abruptly turned its head and began to gnaw at itself.

Even in the faint cavern luminescence, Jyl could see the darkness spreading like a shadow over the nexu. A creature of instinct, it knew what perils of Geonosis even it had to avoid, at risk of death, but Jyl's kick had changed its direction, and it had landed in a place it would never have dared go willingly.

The nexu howled again as the rogas swarmed over it, deserting the chilling blood on the cavern floor for hotter, fresher prey. The nexu threw itself against the cavern walls, rolling on the floor, taking off patches of its own pelt with its claws, trying to expel the multitude of tiny predators that had invaded it.

Across the cavern Pandoor leveled his blaster at the nexu. "No!" whispered Jyl. "Don't remind him we're here!"

The nexu remained still for a moment before shooting off through the cavern, deeper into the darkness, its agonized howls finally fading.

"Tag-teaming it like that was a good idea." said Jyl.

"We make a good team," said Pandoor. "Are you all right?"

She looked at her injury. A thin red line snaked its way down her right leg, bordered on either side by the slash in her leggings that curled away from the wound like old parchment.

Jyl examined the wound, which had already stopped bleeding. "Just a scratch," she said briskly, extinguishing her light-saber. "Let's go."

Pandoor knelt before her and gently placed his index and middle fingers on either side of the wound, slowly tracing its progress down the long curves of her leg. "Hey!" said Jyl, after a few seconds, as she took a step backward.

"No sign of infection," said Pandoor, with mock solemnity, as he rose.

"Now you're a doctor?"

"You have to do a little bit of everything in my line of work—rather like yours, I suspect," he replied, falling in beside her. "We do make a good team, you know, and we're not even on the same side. Imagine if we were."

"There's not enough time to tell you why you'd never make it as a Jedi."

"I was talking about you joining me. As a smuggler."

"You're joking," she said. "I'm a Jedi, not a thief. Being a Jedi is my life. I'd never be happy in your world."

"You don't look so happy being a Jedi. In fact, you don't look like any Jedi I've ever seen. It's a shame. That angel's face ought to smile once in awhile."

"You're everything I despise," said Jyl.

"I think I could make you feel differently," he said, placing a hand on her arm.

Jyl was unconscious of bringing up her lightsaber, of igniting it and swinging the blade so close to Pandoor's throat he could feel its heat. Her Master would have been proud. ^ "Listen," she said, through her teeth, "I'm here on a mission. Either help me or fight me, then at least then I'll know where you stand."

Pandoor brought his empty hands to shoulder-height then spread them in a show of resignation. "Anything you say... Jedi Somtay."

"Good." She deactivated her fightsaber, leaving the silence of the catacomb.

They proceeded down the corridor slowly, cocking their heads warily for any warning noise that might precede another threat. They heard nothing, and eventually came to a rough-hewn central chamber off of which five corridors split.

"Whatever we're after is this way," said Jyl, consulting a data-pad and pointing toward the mouth of the farthest corridor. "And not far, either."

"After you, Jedi Somtay," said Pandoor.

"Rogues before angels," she replied, motioning him forward.

Minutes later they stood before a boulder. "It's solid, all right, Jedi Somtay," Pandoor said, after a few seconds of probing and pushing.

"The readings are coming from behind it," said Jyl. "It's too heavy for me to move with the Force, but I don't like the idea of using explosives this far beneath the surface..."

"Neither do I, Jedi Somtay," said Pandoor. He began to poke at the perimeter of the boulder, where it met the cavern wall.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," said Jyl.

"Where's that legendary Jedi patience, Jedi Somtay?" said Pandoor. "Ah." This accompanied a crisp click that sounded throughout the cavern.

The boulder glided to one side, revealing a blast of light that hurt their eyes. They both brought up their weapons then, after a few seconds, looked at each other. "Do you sense anything ...Jedi Somtay?" asked Pandoor.

"Stop that," she said, edging in front. The boulder revealed a fully equipped lab, obviously geared toward weapons research. Indirect lighting gleamed off rows of weapons and weapon components, the latter placed near the outer reaches of the lab, the former placed in racks on a central console. To Jyl's trained eye the design of the facility, proceeding concentrically outward from the central console, unmistakably proclaimed it the product of the Genosians' ruthless efficiency.

The door slid shut behind them, perhaps on some sort of timer switch.

Jyl advanced slowly, her eyes on the central console. She looked quickly to one side, thinking she had seen a flurry of movement just outside the range of her vision. But there was nothing there. Just my eyes adjusting to the light, she thought. On the central console, beneath a cube of transparisteel, lay a bulky device composed of a handle, complex controls and several buttons about where the thumb of the wielder would fall, which expanded into several narrow tubes.

"Don't touch it," said Jyl, receiving an acid look from Pandoor. "It might be wired to an alarm or a security device."

"An odd kind of weapon," murmured Pandoor. "Looks rather clumsy, actually. And that central section has insufficient space for blast-generation."

"I don't think it's a blaster."

"Then what is-" Pandoor's voice cut off and after a second, Jyl turned.

"What did you-?" She stopped, realizing she was staring down the muzzle of Pandoor's blaster. It looked larger from this perspective.

. Before she could take any action, Pandoor pulled the trigger. She felt the hot charge streak by her head then behind her, where she heard an indignant screech.

Whipping around and bringing up her lightsaber, Jyl saw four legs, terminating in large, arced claws, trailing down behind a tall cabinet, followed by a naked tail whose forked end smoldered slightly.

"The nexu!" said Pandoor.

"It can't be," said Jyl, activating her lightsaber nonetheless. "That was too small for the one we-look at this."

Lying behind the consoles were the components of Dr. Frayne's skeleton, thoroughly gnawed, the shredded remains of her garb littering the floor. Lots of little skittering motions fled as Jyl approached. She was conscious of being watched by several sets of eyes.

Then it dawned on her, from some intuition or the Force. "The nexu-it was a female, and-"

"And what?" demanded Pandoor.

"And a mother."

From behind the consoles and counters they came, spurred on by the courage of numbers. A litter of ten nexu, a mass of gangly legs and feet, surmounted by chubby bodies, advanced slowly and uncertainly, their curiosity overcoming their fear.

"Oh, no," whispered Pandoor.

"No sudden moves," said Jyl. She powered down her light-saber and advanced slowly toward the nexu in front, crooning to it slowly, softly, reaching out with both her left hand and the Force. "Hey, little one. No one's going to hurt you. No, no one at-"

An instant later, and she would have lost her hand. As it was, it had a wide gash in it when she yanked it back.

The nexu cub lapped up the blood Jyl left behind with a long, curving tongue, then sprang.

Jyl ignited her lightsaber and swept it all around her in a defensive movement while she got her bearings. Across the lab, Pandoor was firing his blaster ineffectually at streaks of gray that circled all around him.

There was obviously another way into the lab used by the nexu, but it was just as obviously useless to Jyl and Pandoor. They'd have to leave by the way they came-if they left at all.

"One of the nexu got through her lightsaber perimeter. She kicked it back, withdrawing a bleeding foot, the Bantha leather of her boot slashed. The other nexu lapped up the blood as she retreated. They're developing a taste for me, she thought, with a shudder.

Then, as she saw two of the nexu hissing at each other over the last drop of blood, she had it,

"Naj!" she shouted. "Distract them!"

"What do you think I've been trying to do?" he replied. But he began making whooping noises and moving more rapidly, a ploy that seemed to work. The nexu cubs began closing on him.

Jyl narrowed her focus on the Force, concentrating not on all the nexu, but on only one stubborn one that lagged behind, the one with the burnt tail. As it neared her, she lowered her light-saber, presenting a better target.

"Jyl!" shouted Pandoor. She wasn't sure if he was watching her, or if he was simply in over his head. It really didn't matter. The nexu leaped, and Jyl slashed her lightsaber upward, cleaving the cub from throat to crotch. The nexu's remains plopped in the middle of the lab floor. Jyl stepped back and waited.

One by one, the cubs turned from their uncooperative human prey to the more accommodating meal waiting for them. They were all soon eating their littermate, making contented mewling noises as they did so.

"They were hungry," said Jyl. "Let's go." Pandoor nodded and made for the door. Jyl followed, on the way out cleaving the transparisteel cube with her lightsaber and retrieving the weapon within. Whatever alarm the case might have been hooked up to couldn't have been worse than a litter of nexu. She hooked the weapon to her belt-it was surprisingly light-weight, despite its appearance-and made for the exit, glancing back to make sure the nexu were still occupied with their feast. "So what is that thing?" asked Pandoor, as they made their way to the cavern's mouth. "It's a sonic weapon," said Jyl, hefting the device. "We went through all this for another sonic weapon?" "Not just another one," replied Jyl. "Lightsabers are no defence against a normal sonic blast-until you determine the blaster's frequency. But I think the circuitry on this one enables it to vary its frequency automatically."

"It'd be pretty bad if the Geonosians mass-produced those," said Pandoor, with a low whistle.

Jyl nodded. She felt suddenly weary, and eager to have the mission complete. "I'll be sure to transmit the Republic courts a copy of my report," she said. "I can't help but think that would weigh in your favor."

I'd appreciate that," said Pandoor, glumly. He sighed then after a moment, smiled. "But we are a good team, aren't we, Angel?"

I have to admit, we are," said Jyl, matching his smile. He stepped closer to her. "And I have to admit, I'll miss you

You will not" she said. "You must know lots of girls."

"None like you," he replied, softly. "You're different, Jyl."

"I am not," she said dubiously. Then she cast a shy glance at Naj. "Am I?"

"You are, too. You're special."

She met his gaze, and stopped smiling. He pushed a mass of hair back from her shoulder with one hand and put his other arm around her waist. Leaning in, he kissed her.

His mustache tickled.

Later, Naj stepped back. Jyl opened her eyes, and found Pan-door pointing the sonic weapon directly at her.

"Now you know where I stand, Angel. As you said, lightsabers are no defense against a normal sonic blaster, much less this one. And I have no desire to see how much weight a Jedi's word will carry at my trial. It'll be years before they find you here. You know, Dr. Frayne was right, you are too naive to be a Jedi Knight. What a waste."

Jyl reached out with the Force, but Pandoor's grip on the weapon could be broken by nothing less than a falling boulder. She reached out, farther.

"I think I've got the hang of this thing, Angel," he said, as the sonic weapon emitted a low hum. He looked up at her, with no trace of a smile. "I hope it doesn't hurt."

"I wish I could say the same," said Jyl, looking past him.

He started to turn, but he was too slow to bring the weapon up.

The mother nexu, driven mad with pain from its rogas infestation, slammed into him, raking open a section of his back as he fell.

Jyl dove, bringing the sonic weapon to her with the Force as the nexu hit the ground a few meters away, already pivoting to attack again. Quickly changing the settings, she hoisted the weapon in both hands and fired.

A low hum permeated the cavern, then, for a moment, total silence. A kind of concentric blur from the weapon's muzzle swept through the air, leaving both the nexu and Pan-door unconscious.

Breathing hard, Jyl examined the nexu. The sonic blast had killed the rogas, and the recuperative powers of the nexu were all too familiar to the Jedi. It would return to what remained of its titter when it awoke, a homecoming Jyl didn't want to be around for.

She grabbed Pandoor's collar and began dragging him to the cavern entrance, already reconsidering her promise of a good word to the

Republic court. But she sighed, and grinned. Whatever else Jedi Knights did, they kept their promises.

"You're different, Jyl. You're special," she said, then she shook her head and laughed. "That line's older than Master Yoda!"

Before her she could see the mouth of the catacomb, and dawning daylight.