

# STAR WARS

## DARKNESS RISING

### 1-05: DEAD & BURIED

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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When people on a newly colonised world start to vanish Jayk and Brae Udra are ordered to investigate. What could be just the natural hazards of attempting to settle a new world turn out to be something far more sinister...

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# 1.

The two figures, a man and a woman, made their way from the speeder that was parked under cover a cluster of trees up the hillside.

"There's nothing out here Jace." the woman said.

"Just bear with me Sona." Jace replied as he checked the portable scanner he carried, "I'm telling you I picked up something here the other day."

"Oh come off it Jace. Do you really think that the colonial surveyors missed something this close?" Sona asked and she looked back in the direction they had come from where the construction of a new city was well underway and scaffolding reached hundreds of metres into the air just a few kilometres from their current location.

"Yes as a matter of fact I do." Jace said and then he halted and a smile spread across his face, "Got it." he said.

"Got what?" Sona asked as she moved close enough that she could see the sensor readings for herself and she frowned, "Metallic mass? But how?"

"My guess is that there's some sort of energy field that's masking whatever's beneath this hill from long range scans but because we're right on top of it I can still pick it up where it gets closer to the surface. Why do you think I left the speeder down there? The field might disrupt the repulsorlifts."

"Really? I just thought it was because your driving's bad on level ground let alone uphill." Sona replied with a smile.

"Never mind that now." Jace said as he set down the scanner and unfolded a lightweight digging tool, "Give me a hand in finding out what our claim is worth."

Sona sighed before unfolding an identical tool of her own and the pair started to dig, getting down to a depth of about twenty centimetres before they struck something solid.

"This is it!" Jace exclaimed, "Quick, let's get the dirt off this thing." and working quickly they moved enough dirt from the object they had found to be able to see that it was a flat stone surface that was heavily marked with hieroglyphs in a language that neither of them recognised.

"This can't be." Sona said as they swept away more dirt to expose more of the writing, "This planet's never been settled."

"No by anyone the Republic knew of." Jace commented, "But who knows who could have been here before the Republic expanded into this region of space? Now let's get this thing out of the ground so we can take a proper look."

Uncovering the stone revealed it to be about a metre square and apart from an ornately decorated border it was entirely covered in the hieroglyphs. Carefully, so as not to damage their find Jace pushed the tip of his tool under the stone and began to lever it out of the ground. But as he lifted it he heard the sound of small grains of dirt falling and hitting something.

"It's a cover stone!" he said excitedly, "Sona there's something under it."

"Quick, slide it over here." Sona replied and she wrapped her fingers around the stone so that she could drag it aside to reveal the hole that it had covered, "Stang." she added as they both stared down into the pitch black below, "How far down does this go?"

"Let's find out." Jace replied and he took a glow rod from his pocket, turned it on and then tossed it down the hole. The glow rod spun as it fell until it struck the bottom of the hole several metres below and the beam revealed that it widened out deeper down, "Looks like about four or five metres." he added and he smiled.

"Don't go down." Sona said, "Jace I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Seriously? This could be our ticket off this world. Now let's get that syntherope and you can lower me down there."

The hole was narrow enough that Jace could climb down without the syntherope but he still kept it tied around him as a safety line just in case. When he reached the bottom of the hole the first thing he did was pick his glow rod back up and shine it around.

"What can you see?" Sona called out from the surface.

"Stang Sona you should see it down here." Jace said as he started to walk away from the hole and all that Sona could see of him was the beam of the glow rod as he looked around, "This stuff is amazing. We're rich."

"But what is it?" Sona asked, "Tell me." then she waited for a reply. But after several seconds there was nothing and she noticed that the glow rod beam was no longer moving, "Jace?" she called out, "Jace are you okay?" but once again there was no reply, "Jace cut it out. Answer me."

When no reply came Sona looked back towards the speeder, considering heading back to the city to fetch help before she looked back into the hole and screamed as she was dragged head first into it.

"You're kidding." Tylo Kurrast said as he sat opposite Jedi Knight Jayk Udra in the lounge of the YT-700 class transport *Swift Exit* on its way back to Coruscant from the planet Jesrex, "You seriously aren't going to tell me?"

"There is nothing to tell." Jayk replied, "I walked her home."

"Yeah and came back about three hours later than that should have taken." Tylo said, "Come on now, I just want to know whether she was any good. You never know when we may end up going back there and it's always useful to know of the good."

"The good what?" a female voice asked as a young woman entered the lounge. Like Jayk she wore Jedi robes and carried a lightsaber at her waist.

"Never mind kid." Tylo replied, "I doubt you want to hear about your uncle's-"

"Tylo was just accusing me of taking full advantage of Vallani's occupation Brae." Jayk interrupted.

"Well you've got to admit that all the signs point to you having done it." Tylo replied.

"Jedi are not driven by their emotions." Brae said.

"But you're not celibate either and Vallani comes free of any attachment." Tylo said, smiling.

"Perhaps you should look her up if we return to Jesrex." Jayk said, "You sound a lot like her."

An alarm from the cockpit then made Tylo look around.

"We're coming out of hyperspace." he said.

"Are we at Coruscant already?" Brae asked.

"No." Tylo answered as he got up, "This is just a stopover to refuel. Should take a couple of hours if you feel like getting off the ship to stretch your legs."

"I'm fine thanks." Brae said as she headed for the kitchen units and started to make herself a light meal while Tylo headed for the cockpit, ready to take over from the ship's autopilot when they came out of hyperspace.

Jayk watched Brae come over to the table and sit down in the seat vacated by Tylo before starting to eat.

"So you're not going to quiz me about what may have happened between me and Vallani then?" he asked.

"Why should I?" Brae asked in response, "You're my uncle and my master but you don't owe me any explanations about something as private as who you sleep with." and Jayk smiled.

"Very good my young apprentice." he said.

"Even if she is a whore that could be rife with infections for all you know." Brae added and Jayk's face fell.

"Obviously we still have a way to go." he added.

"Jayk!" Tylo called out suddenly from the cockpit, "You've got a call coming in from the temple."

"I better go and see what they want." Jayk told Brae and he left her eating while he made his way to the cockpit and sat down in the co-pilot's seat before activating the *Swift Exit's* subspace receiver, "Jedi Udra here." he said.

"Jedi Udra." a voice responded, "I take it that your mission to Jesrex is complete?"

"It is. We were unable to locate Thal N'Krey but we did uncover some disturbing information about him from-"

"Your report is going to have to wait Jedi Udra." the voice of the other Jedi interrupted, "A situation has arisen on the colony world of Shonat."

Jayk glanced at Tylo who had opened up the *Swift Exit's* navigation files as soon as the name had been spoken.

"It's pretty far but I think we can make it." Tylo commented.

"What's the situation?" Jayk asked.

"There have been several recent deaths as well as more disappearances." the other Jedi told him, "The nature of them has horrified and stumped the local authorities as well as sector rangers sent to investigate. The Judicial Department has requested our assistance and you're the nearest team."

"Understood." Jayk said, "Inform the government on Shonat that we are on our way." and he shut off the subspace communicator.

"Okay I've got the co-ordinates from the nav computer." Tylo said, "Here we go." and outside the *Swift Exit's* cockpit the stars stretched and deformed as the ship jumped straight back into hyperspace.

The *Swift Exit* had just landed on Shonat when Jayk joined Brae by the access ramp.

"So tell me about Shonat." he said to her.

"Colonised about a century ago." she replied, "There are about a dozen large cities and numerous smaller settlements. It has a population approaching ten million."

"Correct." Jayk said, "And there are no local lifeforms known to be dangerous."

"What about the colonists?" Tylo said as he approached them, inserting his blaster into the holster on his hip, "One thing I've learned is to never underestimate the depths one sentient being will stoop to to inflict harm on another." and then he reached out to open the access ramp, "Now let's see what sort of welcome we're attracting this time."

At the bottom of the access ramp there were two individuals waiting for them on the tarmac of the starport and both wore uniforms that clearly identified their roles. The first was a senior local law enforcement agent while the second wore a sector ranger's uniform.

"Jedi Udra." the sector ranger said as the jedi and Tylo disembarked from the *Swift Exit*, "Thank you for getting here so quickly."

"He seems pleasant enough." Brae whispered as they walked down the ramp.

"I always get a bad feeling about law officers who are happy to see me." Tylo replied, "It normally means they've got enough evidence to prosecute me."

"I'm Inspector Varrs." the sector ranger said.

"And I'm Superintendent Lorrent." the local officer added.

"I'm Jayk Udra." Jayk said, "Allow me to introduce my padawan Brae Udra and Captain Tylo Kurrast."

"How much do you know about the deaths we've suffered?" Lorrent asked.

"Only that they remain unexplained." Jayk answered.

"Then if you'd like to come with us we've set up a command post over there." Varrs said and he pointed his arm to a small hangar not far from where they stood.

Inside this structure there was a holographic map set up as well as numerous free standing displays, each of which showed an image and biographical information about one of the victims. A mix of organic law enforcement officers from the local police as well as a handful of droids were waiting for the jedi.

"Those marked in red are the people whose remains have been found." Varrs said, indicating a nearby display where the information was surrounded by a red border.

"And those in blue?" Brae asked.

"They are being who have disappeared in the area affected." Lorrent told her.

"Area?" Tylo commented, "So whatever's going on it isn't affecting the whole planet?"

"No." Varrs replied, "So far every death and disappearance has been in the region of the city of Sterrat's Point."

"It's a new colony." Lorrent said, "The government is looking to open up the whole region to new settlement so the city is being built to act as the core of this."

"So what can you tell us about what happened to all these people?" Tylo asked, "Apart from the fact that they aren't here right now."

"There is no common thread that even our best analysis droids have been able to determine." Varrs answered, "Either among the victims as a whole or by separating them into the disappeared and the dead."

"How did the ones you've found die?"

"Violently." Lorrent commented, "All of them died as a result of wounds suffered in close proximity to their attacker, no blasters, no slugthrowers and nothing that could be mistaken for an accident."

"The wounds aren't consistent though." Varrs added and he walked over to one of the displays, "This woman was sliced open from throat to stomach with what could have been a bladed weapon or a claw. While others display obvious bite marks."

"But there are no species of animal on Shonat that have such claws or teeth." Lorrent pointed out.

"Doesn't mean that someone couldn't bring them here deliberately." Tylo said, "I've encountered more than a few crime bosses who think it's a good way of keeping people in line by using wild animals to kill their enemies. I even heard of one or two that toss people into sarlaccs."

"We've never had much trouble with organised crime here on Shonat." Lorrent said.

"And that could be your problem." Tylo replied, "There's no power players in the underworld to keep outsiders away."

Brae snorted.

"So criminals are useful for controlling crime?" she commented.

"I'll need copies of all this." Jayk said as he looked around at the various displays and Lorrent nodded.

"We've prepared datapads for each of you." he replied and at the same time a droid approached to hand out the devices.

"Excellent." Jayk said as he and the others looked at the information they had just been presented with, "Now there's just one thing left I suppose."

"Here it comes." Tylo whispered to Brae, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"I want to see where the bodies were found and also the last places where the disappeared people were known to be." Jayk said.

"I knew it." Tylo said, "Someone or something is running around hacking people up and you uncle wants us to go the places it likes to hang around."

## 2.

A small convoy of speeders was used to transport Tylo and the Jedi to a small construction camp near to the incomplete Sterrat's Point. A single vehicle would have been enough for the trio but both Varrs and Lorrent accompanied them as well along with a dozen local law enforcement officers. Given the deaths and disappearances in the area people had taken to travelling in groups and arming themselves as best as they could.

The camp was typical of those that could be found throughout the Republic. A small collection of prefabricated buildings provided housing for workers as well as storage for all their equipment. With no main power grid active in the area power was supplied to the camp by a portable fusion generator set up next to one of the buildings.

"Five beings disappeared from here." Lorrent said as they disembarked and started to look around, "Plus the remains of a sixth were discovered in the barracks while the seventh was found at the top of that transmitter tower." he added, pointing to the top of a ten metre mast that was obviously part of the camp's communication system and one of the horizontal antennas was stained dark red, "Impaled on it."

"I take it that a forensic examination found nothing?" Jayk asked.

"Whatever happened here happened fast enough that no distress signal was sent." Varrs said, "We estimate that the time of death was two days before the bodies were found by a supply driver. In the meantime every scavenger able to smell the blood had wandered in and had a taste."

Brae walked towards the largest of the prefabricated buildings where coloured tape was strung across the entrance. Tylo was following her closely and when she suddenly let out a gasp and stumbled he leapt forwards to catch her before she could hit the ground.

"Whoa kid! What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's cold." she said.

"What do you mean? It's the middle of summer." Tylo said.

"The Dark Side is strong here." Jayk said and he looked around, "I sense it all around us. Brae is more sensitive than I so its effects are stronger on her."

"Are you saying that these people were killed by a Force user?" Lorrent asked.

"No. But I am saying that it is fortunate that you summoned us here. The construction of the colony may have disturbed something far more sinister than you can possibly imagine." Jayk said, "There could be a nexus of Dark Side energy somewhere close by."

"A what now?" Tylo said.

"It's a powerful concentration of the Force." Brae explained while she continued to hold on tight to Tylo for support. Then she looked at Jayk and added, "Uncle, I don't feel well." and then she vomited suddenly down Tylo's front, causing him to leap back in alarm.

"Stang kid!" he exclaimed.

"Jedi Udra, perhaps we should take your apprentice back to your ship to get cleaned up." Varrs said.

"So she can get cleaned up?" Tylo responded.

"I think that may be a good idea." Jayk said as he walked up to Brae and offered her his hand to support herself on instead of relying on the uncomfortable looking Tylo. But as soon as he took her hand in his he was struck by a vision through the Force.

Jayk saw himself with his lightsaber in his hand in a chamber filled with massive machines, duelling with another individual armed with a lightsaber. But unlike him this person did not wear the robes of a Jedi and their weapon was not the typical green or blue blade. Instead they wore a form fitting black bodyglove and the blade of their lightsaber was the bright red of the Sith. But what stood out was that the person he was duelling against was Brae.

*She will turn on you.*

"Hey are you about to barf as well?" Tylo asked when he noticed that Jayk was staring at Brae.

"No, I'm fine." Jayk replied, "Just the effects of the nexus. Now if you don't mind Tylo, I'd like you to take Brae back to the ship. I'll join you both there later."

"Sure. But if she pukes in my ship one of you two is cleaning it up."

Taking one of the police speeders back to the starport, Tylo and Brae left Jayk to finish looking around the camp. Two people had been killed here and six more had simply vanished without trace. Taking out the datapad he had been given Jayk called up a list of the victims. All of them had been construction workers so they had been in good physical condition and for a group of them to be attacked meant that their attacker or attackers had to be incredibly confident in their own abilities. For a moment Jayk considered the possibility that the workers had simply turned on one another because of the subconscious influence that the Dark Side could have had on them but the physical evidence did not match this theory. Such incidents could easily

explain the violent nature of the known deaths According to the reports Jayk had been given but no trace of the other six workers had been found. Had they been driven to kill one another then there would undoubtedly have been traces left behind of the others as well, so the unavoidable conclusion was that something from outside the camp had attacked it.

Behind the tape marking it out as a crime scene the barracks was covered with blood where one of the victims had been torn open. The blood had had plenty of time to dry on the floor and preserved in this Jayk could see the tracks left behind by the local wildlife and there were scuff marks left over from when the coroners had removed the remains but nothing left behind by whoever or whatever was responsible for this. All of a sudden Jayk heard a 'crunch' from under his boot and when he looked down at the fragments of broken glass on the floor that had obviously come from the barracks' broken illumination tubes he was struck by a flash of inspiration. Looking upwards he saw the ends of the smashed illumination tubes still in their mountings and he realised how the killer had been able to tear a person apart and yet not leave any tracks in the massive pool of blood that this created.

The killer could fly.

There were numerous technologies that could give a human sized being the ability to fly short distances. Rocket, jet and repulsor packs had existed for thousands of years but all had their drawbacks. Both rocket and jet packs not only carried limited amounts of fuel, being more suited to short hops through the air or use in zero gravity and also were unsuited to use in the confines of a building while repulsor packs were very expensive.

"Superintendent Lorrent." he said without bothering to look towards the doorway where Lorrent and Varrs waited on the other side of the tape, "Are there any large avian species on this world?"

"Yes, though they aren't native to this part of the planet. Why?"

"Because I think that one of them could be responsible for what happened here. From a certain point of view."

"A certain point of view?" Varrs commented, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means he doesn't know what he's talking about. No bird or flying lizard did this." Lorrent said, "Even the biggest species has a wingspan of about a metre. There's no way that one could kill an adult so quickly and quietly that they wouldn't have the chance to raise the alarm."

"It means that someone re-engineered a native life form to turn it into a weapon." Jayk said.

"But who would have access to that sort of knowledge and technology?" Varrs asked.

"He's right Jedi Udra." Lorrent added, "Shonat has its fair share of biologists but they're all concerned with cataloguing the native life. No-one here has the sort of skills and equipment needed to undertake the sort of genetic engineering you're talking about."

"Not now perhaps." Jayk replied, "But if I'm right then you are not the first colonists to come to this world and the previous inhabitants were experts at perverting life for their own ends."

"Who?" Varrs asked.

"The Sith." Jayk replied and both law officers stared at him open mouthed.

### 3.

Aboard the *Swift Exit* Brae sipped at a glass of water as she tried to get the sharp acidic taste caused by her vomiting out of her mouth. She could hear the sound of the *Swift Exit's* shower stopping as Tylo finished cleaning himself up and a few moments later he appeared in the lounge with a towel wrapped around his waist. Looking sternly at Brae he walked over to a chair and sat down, prompting Brae to turn away.

"Stang." she said, wincing, "I may just be sick again." and Tylo snorted.

Just then there was the sound of footsteps on the access ramp and Jayk arrived.

"Find anything interesting?" Tylo asked.

"Possibly." the jedi replied then facing no-one in particular he added, "Cal I need your advice." and in the corner of the lounge a fist sized cube started to glow as a holographic image of a human man in jedi robes appeared.

"Of course." Cal replied, "Ask away." then the hologram appeared to frown and look at Tylo, "Are pants optional today then?" he asked.

"Blame her." Tylo said, pointing at Brae.

"It's not my fault." Brae protested in response.

"Cal I need serious advice." Jayk said, ignoring this, "What do you know about Sith alchemy?"

"The Sith?" Brae exclaimed when she heard this.

"I thought they were all dead." Tylo said.

"They are." Jayk said, "But as you know their knowledge lives on in some of the artefacts and temples they left behind and I think that we could be dealing with such a thing now."

"The nexus?" Brae asked and Jayk nodded.

"If the Sith came here then they would have found it. Alternatively the presence of the Sith could have been the cause of the nexus in the first place."

"Whoa hang on." Cal said, raising his hands, "Yes, I do know a thing or two about the Sith, their science and nexuses of Dark Side energy. The first and most important of which is avoid them all at all costs. The real me lost a lot of good friends and family to them."

"We can't just pack up and leave." Brae said.

"Oh, I think the only one of us here with experience of all this Sith stuff has just said yes we can." Tylo responded.

"We can't." Jayk said, "The people of this world are relying on us to protect them."

Cal gave the impression of taking a deep breath.

"That Jedi Code can be annoying at times can't it?" he said, "Makes me glad it wasn't followed so rigorously in my day. Especially the part about not having a family."

"Are you saying you ran away?" Brae asked.

"When the other options were worse yes, you better believe I ran." Cal said, "Dying for what's right may be all very noble and such but trust me, living to carry on the fight is a much better way of getting results in the long run."

"I can call for back up but the time it would take for it to get here could result in more people dying." Jayk said, "I need to know what we can do."

"Okay, first of all where is this nexus located?" Cal asked.

"I don't know. I only suspect that such a thing exists from Brae's reaction."

"Her reaction?" Cal said and he looked at Brae.

"She lost her breakfast all over me." Tylo told him.

"Ah, hence the casual fashion choice." Cal said.

"Well proximity to such concentrations of the Dark Side can have physical side effects on people whether or not they are Force sensitive. Of course those who aren't won't be as aware of what is happening to them. Frankly the disturbance that a nexus creates is the best way of tracking them down. Just let the Force guide you." Cal explained.

"The nexus is protected." Jayk added and Cal glared at him.

"And you didn't think to mention that until now?" he said, "Now what sort of defences are we talking about?"

"Some sort of winged creature that I think was created by Sith alchemy." Jayk answered.

"You think that's what's been killing the locals?" Tylo said and Jayk nodded.

"Well all I can say is that if you are confronted by anything created by the Sith then make sure you don't stop shooting until it's dead. In fact put a few more rounds into the corpse just to make sure. Remember that the Dark Side is a path to the unnatural and hitting Sith spawn in places that you'd think would bring them to an instant halt may not have any effect at all. Though the head is generally good. Grenades are better mind you."



"Great, pity we don't have any." Brae said.

"We would if he'd sign off on my request." Tylo added, looking at Jayk.

"What about the local military?" Cal suggested, "Don't they have weapons they can lend you?"

"There is no standing army on this planet." Jayk said, "Just a lightly armed police force. They may have some grenade launchers but I doubt that they'd have lethal rounds available for them."

"Well take my advice and get whatever you can. There's no such thing as being too heavily armed when dealing with the Sith." Cal said, "But the key thing is to remember that you are dealing with a heavy concentration of the Dark Side and it may seek to tempt you so you need to be alert for this. Drawing on the Dark Side will be all the easier close to a nexus so make sure that you aren't acting on hate, anger or fear. Once you start down that path it will dominate your life forever."

"Go and get ready both of you." Jayk told Brae and Tylo, "Every moment we spend here talking is more time that whatever is protecting the nexus could use to find another victim."

"Yes master." Brae replied as she got up from her seat and hurried out of the lounge, closely watched by Jayk while Tylo moved at a more leisurely pace.

"Just mark my words Jayk," he said, pointing a finger at the Jedi, "if your niece pukes again I'm going to make sure it goes over you this time."

Then as Tylo left the lounge Cal turned towards Jayk.

"What aren't you telling me?" he asked, "There's something about Brae that's bothering you."

"I didn't think that you could still read me through the Force." Jayk said.

"I can't. I've no more ability to use the Force than a droid. But I've got a lifetime of practical experience stored inside me and I know the look of someone who's worried about an apprentice. I've seen it in dozens of Jedi knights and masters over the centuries."

"I had a vision." Jayk said, "When Brae was momentarily overcome by the Dark Side I touched her and I saw us fighting."

"Fighting?" Cal commented, "I take it that you mean more than just an argument." and Jayk nodded.

"There was a large room filled with machinery. I was there as I am now but with my lightsaber in my hand while Brae wore black and fought using a Sith lightsaber. Then there was a message, a warning I think."

"She will turn on you." Cal said before Jayk could tell him and Jayk frowned.

"How did you know?" he asked, "Surely you can't have read that from my face."

"I didn't." Cal replied, "But I heard the message too. Thousands of years ago just a few months after my sister Lara was assigned to me as my first padawan. We uncovered a powerful concentration of Dark Side energy in an abandoned underground city and I or rather the original Cal Udra saw the same thing. Only I was fighting against my sister. The Dark Side tried to get me to kill her."

"I take it that she didn't turn against you and you didn't kill her." Jayk said.

"I didn't act on what the Dark Side was telling me, no." Cal said, "Though I do have to admit that the whole thing disturbed me somewhat. Especially considering the prophecy about-"

"You Jedi dealing in fortune telling now?" Tylo's voice said as he returned to the lounge, now fully dressed and armed with his blaster.

"The Jedi Order has maintained vast records of prophecies based on visions received through the Force since the dawn of the Republic." Jayk replied.

"Really? So how come your sorcerer's ways haven't given you clairvoyance enough to lead us to the people who hired me or recover the artefacts they stole?" Tylo asked.

"Because the Force isn't just some 'how to' manual that will give you all the answers on a plate Tylo." Jayk replied, "Many visions are cryptic in their meaning and the message they are trying to convey can be misread."

"Also they can be rendered irrelevant simply by the passage of time. The future is always uncertain and the chain of events necessary to lead to those in a prophecy can be broken." Cal added.

"So in other words they're about as much use as horoscopes?" Tylo said.

"Where is Brae?" Jayk asked, changing the subject.

"Right here master." Brae said as she also returned to the lounge, "So where are we going first?"

"Back to the investigation command centre." Jayk replied, "But first we need to contact Superintendent Lorrent. Given Cal's advice I'm going to ask what additional weaponry he can provide to us."

"And if you need anything else don't hesitate to call me." Cal said, "I'll make sure to stay linked to the communication system."

"That won't be necessary." Jayk said.

"It won't?" Cal responded, a confused expression appearing on the hologram's face.

"No because you're coming with us as well." Jayk said, "The guardians of holocrons may not be able to manipulate the Force but the structure of a holocron can be used to detect concentrations of both the Light and Dark side to enable them to determine worthy users."

"You're using him like a compass attuned to the Force?" Tylo asked as Jayk walked over to the holocron itself and picked it up.

“Precisely.” Jayk replied and he picked up the holocron, causing Cal's image to disappear before he turned towards Brae and tossed it to her, “You can carry it.” he said, “Hopefully Cal will be able to give you sufficient warning to avoid you being overcome for a second time.”

## 4.

"This is the best I could come up with." Lorrent said as some of the droids in the hangar removed numerous plastic bags from the back of his speeder. Each bag was transparent and inside a variety of weapons could be seen.

"These don't look like police issue." Brae commented when she noticed the diversity of the weapons.

"They aren't." Tylo added, "I recognise evidence tags when I see them."

"Correct Captain Kurrast." Lorrent replied, "All of these weapons were seized as evidence during criminal investigations. Thankfully Shonat has a policy of retaining evidence even after convictions have been secured unless there is a specific reason to dispose of it. All of this is surplus to requirement so it doesn't matter what condition it is returned in."

"Or if it's returned at all?" Tylo asked as he took a bag holding a military pattern blaster rifle from one of the droids.

"The only requirement we have is that you take all necessary precautions to make sure that none of this weaponry is able to get back onto the black market." Lorrent said.

"So don't lose it." Jayk added as he picked out another rifle for himself.

"Are we to take blasters as well master?" Brae asked.

"Ordinarily I'd say 'no', our lightsabers ought to be enough." Jayk told her, "But on this occasion, without having any knowledge of what we are facing I am inclined to go along with Cal's advice."

"Who's Cal?" Lorrent asked.

"An advisor of sorts." Jayk told him, "He has experience in dealing with situations like this."

"Really?" Lorrent said in surprise, "I didn't think that anything had been heard from the Sith for about seven hundred and fifty years."

"Oh he's been around much longer than that." Brae commented while she inspected the weapons being made available to them.

"You know how to use these kid?" Tylo asked and Brae nodded.

"The temple provides training in the use of all types of known personal weapons." she told him, "Though it focuses on lightsabers and using the Force to avoid combat where possible." and Tylo let out a brief laugh.

"Trust me kid, hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side." he said.

"We'll need transport as well." Jayk told Lorrent, "We have a lot of ground to cover and doing it from the air is the most efficient method I can think of."

"I can arrange that." the law officer replied with a nod, "But we've already conducted extensive searches from the air ourselves."

"Yes, I saw that in your reports. But you were trying to track down missing people and what killed them. We'll be hunting for the source of what is happening here."

"Which is what exactly?" Varrs asked from across the room, "I've heard you mention a 'nexus' but you haven't explained why that would be causing any of this now when it's not been a problem before."

"It is my belief that the Sith came here many centuries ago," Jayk told him, "whether they were drawn here by the nexus or if their actions created it I do not know. But they left behind a guardian creature or creatures that have been awoken by the expansion of your colony. If we are going to put an end to the deaths and disappearances then we need to locate this nexus and destroy its guardians."

"But what about the nexus itself? Can we destroy that?" Tylo asked.

"No." Jayk said, "But the Jedi Order can send people to ensure that it is properly sealed to prevent anyone else from gaining access to it. All we need to worry about is finding it and its guardians."

"You make it sound like a hunting trip." Tylo commented.

"In a way that is exactly what it is." Jayk replied and Brae sighed.

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

The airspeeder was designed to transport a full squad of police officers so there was more than enough room for the occupants of the *Swift Exit* and their equipment. All three sat in the cockpit while Cal's holocron was taped to the top of the control console and his image projected towards the back of the cockpit.

Sat at the speeder's controls, Tylo piloted it directly towards Sterrat's Point with the intent of establishing an expanding spiral search pattern from this point. As far as any analysis had shown the deaths and disappearances had not followed any pattern and Jayk was guessing that whatever guardian creatures had been unleashed were making forays at random from a lair around the nexus before returning to it to hide.

"Keep watching the skies as well." Jayk said as the partially constructed city appeared over the horizon in front of them, "Catching one of the guardians in flight would be an effective way of following it back to the nexus."

"Would we not intervene if it was about to attack someone though master?" Brae asked.

"Of course my young apprentice." he answered, "But hopefully our arrival would be enough to drive the creature off."

"Hey!" Tylo exclaimed suddenly, "Did anyone mention anything about any other air traffic in the area?"

"Not that I am aware of." Jayk replied, "The area is supposed to be locked down."

"Okay, so what the kriff is that?" Tylo said and he pointed through the speeder's forward viewport to where what looked like a dense, dark cloud could be seen drifting low in the sky. Significantly the direction of its movement did not match that of the other clouds higher in the sky that were being carried along by nothing but the wind.

"That's no cloud." Brae commented.

"No it's not." Jayk agreed as he produced a pair of macrobinoculars and aimed them towards the cloud.

"It feels cold." Brae said softly.

"You mean you can pick it up from here?" Tylo asked.

"Be careful Brae." Cal warned her, "Stare too deeply into the abyss and the abyss will stare back."

"Well it looks like its staring at us right now." Tylo said as the cloud suddenly changed direction, now moving straight towards the speeder.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Jayk said, "Tylo, take us down. Get us as close to forest cover as you can."

"What for?" Tylo asked.

"Because that could be too big to be just a single creature that can fit inside a building without smashing it open and being undercover will prevent them all from swarming us at once." Jayk explained. Then he looked at Brae, "Brae we must be ready to disembark as soon as we touch down. Gather the weapons." and then he and Brae got out of their seats and hurried into the back of the speeder where their equipment was strapped in place.

Tylo brought the speeder in to land about twenty metres from a small forest and as soon as the vehicle touched down Jayk and Brae leapt out of the primary hatch with rifles in their hands that they aimed towards the approaching dark cloud.

Tylo rushed from the cockpit to join them and he scoped up his rifle and a bandolier of extra ammunition for it.

"They're getting closer." he said when he looked up at the cloud, "Whatever they are."

"Go." Jayk said, "Get under cover. I'll cover you." and without doing more than nod in reply Tylo ran for the nearby woods, "You too Brae." Jayk added.

"But uncle-" she began.

"I am your master Brae, now do as I say. I'll be right behind you." Jayk interrupted and Brae ran after Tylo. Meanwhile Jayk lined his weapon up on the cloud. Even through the macrobinoculars he had been unable to make out any details of what lay within the darkness and he had hoped that as it came closer the optics of his rifle would be able to pick something out but it remained as impenetrable as ever. As it came within range he squeezed his trigger once to send a bright red blaster bolt into the cloud and watched it vanish. From inside the cloud Jayk thought he heard a screech and the blaster bolt did not come out of the other side but apart from this there was no other reaction. Jayk was certain that the shot had got the attention of whatever was inside the cloud, however and he broke into a run as he headed after Brae and Tylo into the woods.

"Over here!" Tylo called out as Jayk appeared and he waved the jedi towards a spot he had picked out as being more easily defended against something that possessed wings to keep it aloft thanks to the higher density of trees that would obstruct them.

"Get ready." Jayk said as he lifted his rifle back to his shoulder ready to fire, "And may the Force be with us."

The first indication of the cloud approaching was a strange buzzing sound from all around before the woods around them started to darken ominously.

*Rage.*

*Hate.*

Brae shuddered.

"Master." she said, "I can feel them."

"Yes, I feel them too." Jayk added.

"What's happening?" Tylo asked as the cloud seemed to descend into the woods themselves as the buzzing grew louder and it became more difficult to see more than a few metres ahead. Then Tylo thought he saw something moving in the shadows and he fired a rapid burst from his rifle that blasted splinters from the trunk of a tree and left it smouldering.

"Hey!" Brae said, "Be careful where you're firing that thing."

"You're behind me." Tylo pointed out.

"Maybe, but you didn't manage to hit anything so the Force only knows what would happen if I was in front of you."

"Don't worry kid." Tylo said, snarling, "I'm not going to shoot you by accident."

"Quiet the pair of you." Jayk said and all of a sudden he slung his rifle over his shoulder and drew his lightsaber.

"What are you doing?" Tylo said as Jayk began to advance cautiously from there position to where the trees were not as dense but the jedi did not respond.

Jayk came to a halt and waited, opening his mind to the Force around him. Everywhere he could feel the presence of the Dark Side with the exception of the presence of both Brae and Tylo who both stood out. Neither was completely light though, given Tylo's history of criminal activity it was no surprise that the Dark Side had some sway over him but this did not worry Jayk. The former smuggler may have been a career criminal but the mere fact that he was not Force sensitive would protect him from the worst of the Dark Side. There were still questions about Brae however, Jayk had been warned that she had been having difficulty in manipulating the Force without drawing on the Dark Side when the council had assigned her to him and Jayk could sense this inside her.

*She will turn on you.*

*Kill her first.*

The same message came to him from within the Force, only this time without the accompanying vision. Instinctively Jayk started to turn towards Brae but he was snapped back to reality by a warning shouted by his niece.

"Lookout!" she shouted just as he sensed something in the Force as well.

*Danger.*

"With a 'snap-hiss' Jayk's lightsaber came to life, producing a highly visible pale blue glow in the darkened woods and he swung its blade upwards just at the moment when something came swooping down out of the air towards him. The blade sliced a foot from the creature that let out a screech as it pulled back suddenly and Jayk finally saw what they were facing.

## 5.

The creature was humanoid in structure, suggesting that the original of its kind may have been created from a humanoid as well. Wearing no clothing, the creature's body was covered in a black exoskeleton that was filled with holes and as it moved through the air a dark cloud that was heavy with the Force leaked out to create a trail behind the creature. This told Jayk where the cloud that concealed the creatures came from, it was emitted by them perhaps as a defence mechanism while for attack the creatures hands bore vicious looking claws that were over ten centimetres long with shorter claws at the ends of the prehensile looking feet. The head was a strange mix of insectoid and aquatic life, with multifaceted eyes above a mouth that was surrounded by short tentacles while the wings that Jayk had correctly guessed the creature would possess were definitely insectoid in appearance and vibrated rapidly. But the wingspan was barely two metres across, not enough to keep a human sized creature aloft under normal circumstances and Jayk guessed that the strange Force imbued cloud that was being emitted from the holes in the creature's exoskeleton also created a form of repulsorlift field that kept it in the air while the wings were there to push it in the direction that it wanted to go.

The creature dived towards Jayk again and the jedi thrust his lightsaber out directly ahead of him, taking his attacker by surprise and impaling it through its chest. The corpse of the creature slammed into Jayk, knocking him backwards to the ground and as he pushed the body from on top of him two more of the creatures swooped down to attack.

But with Jayk on the ground both Brae and Tylo had a clear field of fire at the flying Sith creations and they opened fired at the same time. Brae fired individual shots towards one, watching it jerk as the bolts struck its torso but apparently failed to penetrate the thick exoskeleton. On the other hand Tylo had his rifle set to fully automatic and he sent a stream of blaster bolts into the other that ripped through its wings and caused it to tumble towards the ground before another blaster bolt caught it between the exoskeleton protecting its torso and head and decapitated it. Separated from its brain and main sensory organs the creature ploughed into the ground and lay still, even its unnatural physique able to survive such damage.

With his lightsaber held in front of him, Jayk backed towards Brae and Tylo and looked up, keeping watch for the next attack. It was easy to tell that not all of the creatures had been dealt with thanks to the strange buzzing sound they produced as well as the cloud of darkness they created around themselves that still hung over the area, blotting out much of the light.

"Three more!" Brae called out.

"How do you know?" Tylo asked.

"Because I can feel them. Their hatred and anger." Brae told him and then she pointed up into the trees, "There! There and there!" she shouted.

Tylo lifted his rifle and fired another burst upwards, keeping the trigger held back as he put one shot after another into the air where Brae had indicated one of the Sith creatures was located. A sudden loud screech indicated that one of the energy blasts had hit something and moments later this was followed by an almighty 'Crash!' as another of the creatures fell through the treetops, smashing its way through branches to land heavily on the ground below. But even the combination of blaster wound and fall was insufficient to incapacitate the creature and it rapidly got back to its feet, uttering a hiss as it stared towards Tylo.

"Oh poodoo." he said as he ceased fire and was about to lower his line of fire to deal with the grounded creature when all of a sudden Jayk charged in from the side and decapitated it.

"The cloud," Tylo said as he looked around and saw a sudden ray of sunlight appear between the trees, "it's lifting."

"Not enough of them left to maintain one of this size." Jayk commented. Then he looked at Brae and asked, "Where are they now?"

Brae looked up into the trees. She could sense both of the creatures in the air above her but they were moving about rapidly and she could not pick out their exact locations. On the other hand the creatures had noticed that it was Brae that had guided the blaster fire that had brought down the last member of their pack to have been killed and in unison they suddenly both swooped down towards her, diving straight through the forest canopy to plunge down on her at an angle too steep for her to be able to raise her rifle in time to be able to defend herself.

Brae instead attempted to use her rifle like a club, swinging it at the creatures as they clawed at her with their feet. One of the creatures was able to grab hold of the rifle as Brae swung it and the weapon was torn free of her grasp before the other swooped in to grab hold of Brae herself and started to lift her off the ground, prompting a scream from the teenage padawan.

"Brae!" Jayk exclaimed as he charged to her aid just in time to grab hold of her legs to stop her from being carried off.

"Uncle! Help me!" she cried out.

"Tylo!" Jayk shouted, "Shoot them!"

"I've got no shot." Tylo replied as he tried to take aim but found the two Jedi in his line of fire.

"Brae, use your lightsaber." Jayk said and Brae fumbled for her weapon but in her panicked state she dropped it and it bounced off Jayk's shoulder as it fell.

"I'm on it." Tylo called out as he ran towards the Jedi and slid to a halt before scooping up Brae's lightsaber. However, before he could try to pass it up to Brae the other creature struck at him, kicking him from above and knocking him backwards. Tylo dropped both his rifle and Brae's lightsaber as he landed and with the creature attacking him moving in for the kill while he lay on the ground he reached for the blaster holstered on his waist.

At the same time Jayk felt Brae slipping as he continued his tug of war with the creature holding onto her shoulders.

"Brae take my hand." he called out, releasing one arm from his grip on her legs in an attempt to get a better grip on her arm. Reacting quickly, Brae reached down and gripped his hand tightly in her own and in that moment Jayk felt the Force rushing through him and passing into Brae just as she let out an almighty scream.

There was a brilliant flash of light centred on Brae and a shock wave that hurled Jayk backwards. But the effect of the blast of Force energy was even more dramatic on the two Sith creatures and as the light Brae released touched their flesh they screeched as they burned and Brae fell to the ground when the creature holding her in the air was incinerated by the power she had unleashed.

"What the kriff was that?" Tylo said, blinking as he looked up and saw that the dark cloud was completely gone.

"I would say that Brae just unleashed a wave of Light Side energy." Jayk replied as he got back to his feet and turned towards where his apprentice had landed, "The Sith creatures were saturated with the Dark Side and so when they came into contact with the wave they burned up from the inside."

"How did I do that?" Brae asked.

"I can't say. It is not a power I am familiar with." Jayk answered before he noticed the tears in the shoulders of her robes and the blood soaking through them, "You're injured." he said.

"How bad?" Tylo asked as both he and Jayk moved closer.

"I'll be fine." Brae said.

"Look kid we're in the middle of nowhere right here. If you ignore a wound like that it could get infected." Tylo said.

"Tylo is correct." Jayk added, "We need to dress them properly."

"I guess you'd prefer privacy for this." Tylo said, knowing that Brae would need to partially undress to give Jayk access to her wounds, "I'll go back to the treeline and keep watch for any more of those things flapping about."

When the trio returned to the airspeeder they sat down in the cockpit and Brae winced as leaning back in the seat put pressure on her wounds.

"So now what?" Tylo asked, "We can't follow any of those things back to their nest now."

"Quite." Jayk replied, "It appears that we will have to try and locate another group of the creatures. Hopefully the next time we will be able to make use of our new found experience to deal with them more efficiently and allow one or two to escape back to their lair."

"Or maybe you don't need to bother with all that." Cal said as he reappeared, "I take it that since all three of you are back here your fight went well."

"About as well as can be expected for three people who didn't have a clue what they were facing." Tylo commented.

"So what were they?" Cal asked.

"Some sort of flying humanoid." Brae answered, "They looked insectoid mainly."

"I think they used the Force to create some sort of repulsorlift field to achieve flight." Jayk added, "Are you familiar with the creatures?"

"No." Cal replied, "That's the problem with Sith spawn. Every Sith alchemist had a different idea of how to build the perfect war beast which makes it somewhat difficult to catalogue them all."

"Hang on, what was that you were saying about us not having to fight another load of those things?" Tylo commented, leaning towards the hologram, "Because I'd like to avoid that if I can."

"You spotted the creatures before they spotted you." Cal pointed out, "That means you have the heading they were originally following."

"Of course." Jayk said, "We can just track them back along it to find out where they came from."

"But what if they were heading home rather than out to hunt?" Brae asked.

"Then we turn around and fly in the opposite direction kid." Tylo said, "The heading is just reversed."

"Precisely." Jayk added, "Tylo if you wouldn't mind getting us back into the air, I'd rather locate the nexus

before nightfall if we can.”

“I guess it becomes more powerful at night huh?” Tylo replied as he started up the speeder.

“Actually it makes no difference.” Cal told him, “However, darkness provides far more places for whatever other Sith creations got left behind to hide in.”

The airspeeder then rose up off the ground and Tylo piloted it along the course that the Sith created creatures had followed except heading in the opposite direction. This took them away from Sterrat's Point and into the neighbouring hillside .

“There, that looks good.” Tylo said as he looked down through the cockpit viewport.

“You don't even know what to look for.” Brae said.

“No but I know how to hide things kid.” he replied, “Take a look at the terrain down there. Uneven and dotted with clusters of vegetation. In my previous line of work that is the sort of place I'd use to stash something until I needed it. All that uneven ground and obstacles mean you could hide an army down there and no-one would find it.”

“What about you?” Jayk asked and despite Cal's holocron being mounted on the console in front of him he looked around at the holographic projection behind him, “Can you sense anything?”

“Not from here no.” Cal replied, “I can sense the pair of you and an underlying current of the Dark Side but it's not like there's a big flashing arrow pointing out the enemy's top secret hideout. The last time I went looking for something like this it took me and my sister almost three years to find it.”

“Well we probably don't have that long.” Tylo said, “I'm taking us in closer.” and he angled the airspeeder downwards to reduce its altitude.

“Closer?” Brae asked, “But is that safe with all these hills around?”

“Don't worry kid. I know what I'm doing.” Tylo said right before the airspeeder shook violently and the cockpit was filled with the sound of alarms.

“What's happening?” Brae exclaimed, “Are we under attack?”

“General power loss in all systems.” Jayk said, “We're going down.” but just then the engines suddenly came back on line and the speeder ceased its shaking as power and control was restored.

“We're back.” Tylo said, “But what the hell was that?”

“I don't know.” Jayk admitted, “But I've got a bad feeling that it has to do with the nexus. Take us down, we'll search on foot from here.”

Tylo landed the airspeeder on top of one of the larger hills so that when they disembarked they had a better field of view from which to survey the surrounding area, which they did using macrobinoculars. The problem was that despite having the advantage of high ground they could only get a line of sight to the hillsides that faced their position while the area was littered with sheltered dead spots that were hidden to them. In addition the jedi's senses as well as those of Cal were limited. There was a general aura of the Dark Side almost everywhere but no noticeable concentrations of Force energy were anywhere to be found.

“We need to retrace our flight path on foot.” Jayk said as he lowered his macrobinoculars and returned them to his belt, “Brae, let me know the instant you sense any changes in the Force around us.”

“This whole place feels cold anyway.” she replied.

“Yes, but it should get worse the closer to the nexus we get.” Jayk said, “Now let's move. Brae, bring Cal.”

All carrying their borrowed rifles and making sure to watch above as well as around them, the trio began to walk back the way they had come in the speeder. But as the two jedi focused on the ever present shadow of the Dark Side in the Force, Tylo could only rely on his ordinary senses and it was him that first noticed something out of the ordinary.

“Eleven o'clock. Just in the trees.” he said suddenly before dropping into a kneeling position and took aim with his rifle.

Jayk and Brae both turned to look in the direction Tylo had indicated and they saw that the light of the setting sun was reflecting off something located just inside a wooded area at the base of a hill. Whatever the object was it was out of sight from this angle but there was no doubt about its presence.

“Master, could that be the nexus?” Brae asked.

“No.” Cal's voice said without his usual hologram appearing thanks to the holocron currently being in a pouch on Brae's belt. But she promptly took the crystalline cube out and the hologram appeared, “A nexus is centred around a place, not an object. It is however, not unknown for such places to become regarded as sacred by those who have fallen under the sway of the Dark Side and they could chose to mark it in some way.”

“And are you picking anything up?” Jayk asked.

“Only the same general presence of the Dark Side I'm guessing you two are.” Cal replied, “I suggest you go and check out whatever it is that's over there. But be careful. I've got a very bad feeling about this place.”

“You don't need to be a jedi or a ghost to get that.” Tylo commented.

“Actually it's incorrect to refer to Cal as a ghost.” Brae pointed out, “While there are legends of the spirits of dead jedi returning to communicate with the living nothing like that has been reported in centuries. Cal's a-”

“Don't care.” Tylo interrupted, “Let's just do what he says and get out of here as fast as possible okay?”



"I'll lead the way." Jayk said, "Tylo behind me and Brae bring up the rear."

"Are you sure putting the kid at the back is a good idea?" Tylo asked.

"It is necessary." Jayk replied, "Someone Force sensitive must be at each extreme to make it less likely that any Sith spawn could surprise us and I don't want to risk putting her on point."

"Good point." Tylo said, "Nodding. Okay I'm right behind you."

Cal's hologram vanished as Brae returned the holocron to her belt and the trio moved quickly towards the source of the reflected light. Jayk slowed as he came to the hill that hid the source of the reflection from sight and advanced more cautiously. He could not sense any specific threat anywhere close by but given the powerful presence of the Dark Side in the area he took no chances.

"This is it." he whispered as he came to a stop and swapped his rifle for his lightsaber, "I'll go first. Be ready to cover me." then all of a sudden he ignited his blade and charged around the hill until he saw the abandoned landspeeder parked just under the trees where it would be almost invisible from the air.

Remaining motionless he looked around, hunting for any signs of the vehicle's owners whether alive or dead. But there was nothing to suggest what had happened to them.

"What's out there?" Tylo asked quietly from where he and Brae were still concealed.

"A speeder." Jayk replied, "Abandoned by the looks of it."

"Think it belonged to some of the people who've vanished?" Tylo said and Jayk nodded.

"I do." he answered, "We should investigate."

Still moving cautiously just in case there were enemies hiding in the gloom of the woods beyond the speeder the trio advanced toward the speeder. Jayk tried one of the doors and found it to be locked but a single swing of his lightsaber solved this and he and Tylo began to search the interior of the vehicle, neither of them noticing Brae coming to a sudden halt and turning to stare up the hill.

"Datapad." Tylo said suddenly as he found one of the devices under the driver's seat. The datapad was not encrypted in any way and it activated as soon as Tylo tapped the display, "Recognise these two?" he asked holding up the datapad so that Jayk could see the background of the basic working screen that had been customised with the image of a smiling human couple.

"Jace and Sona Kerat." Jayk replied after checking his own datapad, "They were among the first to be reported missing."

Tylo smiled.

"Think maybe they came across something out here that they really should have left well alone?" he suggested and Jayk nodded.

"We need to search this entire-" he began before he noticed Brae stood motionless close by, "Brae!" he called out, "What's wrong?"

"Stang kid, are you okay?" Tylo added as he and Jayk rushed up to her and looked her in the face.

"Up there." she replied, pointing up the hill, "I can feel it."

"Feel what?" Jayk asked.

"Death." Brae said simply.

"I think we just found this nexus of yours." Tylo said, looking at Jayk.

## 6.

Advancing up the hill the trio rapidly found the cover stone and the hole in the ground that it had been used to block and Tylo aimed his carbine into this while Jayk shone a glow rod into it.

"I'm guessing it's down there, right?" Tylo asked.

"It appears so." Jayk said.

"Which means we have to go down there as well, right?"

"Definitely so."

"Oh I had a bad feeling that you were going to say that." Tylo said and he sighed, "Oh well, at least since it's underground it doesn't matter whether it's getting dark up here or not." then he looked at Brae, "Will she be okay down there?"

"I'll be fine." Brae replied.

"Good." Jayk said, "Then you can go first. We'll drop a flare down there for light and lower you down."

Brae's eyes widened briefly at the thought of being lowered into a hole in the ground that was the location of a Dark Side nexus.

"Okay." she said.

"What happened to not putting her on point?" Tylo said.

"Would you rather I went first and you and Brae had to pull me up in a hurry?" Jayk responded as he began to unreel a length of syntherope.

"I get the picture." Tylo said.

After tying the syntherope around Brae and dropping a flare into the hole, Jayk and Tylo proceeded to lower the teenage padawan into it.

"It doesn't look very deep." she called out as she looked down and saw the flare burning away on the floor of the chamber at the bottom of the hole, "And I think it opens out at the bottom."

Letting out more of the syntherope Jayk and Tylo lowered Brae all the way to the bottom and she crouched down to release the line from around her with one hand, holding her lightsaber in the other. Then she looked around and when she saw what was right behind her she gasped.

*Surprise.*

"What's wrong?" Jayk called out when he sensed the disturbance.

"Those people who owned the speeder." Brae responded, "They're down here. Or at least I'm guessing it's what's left of them."

"No more of those creatures though?" Tylo asked.

"No. But I think this was their nest and I'd say that there are more of them somewhere."

"Then we need to deal with this before they return and make our task more difficult." Jayk said and he looked at Tylo, "Climb down. I'll secure the line up here and follow."

Tylo groaned as he slung his rifle and took hold of the syntherope line again, using it for support as he climbed into the hole and carefully lowered himself down to the chamber below where Brae waited. Jayk on the other hand opted for a more rapid descent and simply jumped down into the hole, using the Force to slow his fall and land safely.

"Now let's see what else is down here." he said as he activated his lightsaber.

The trio spread out, searching the perimeter of the chamber. It was circular and as well as the heavily mutilated remains of Jace and Sona there were the bones of other beings scattered around.

"There's no blood." Tylo commented.

"What?" Brae asked.

"All these bones." Tylo said as he gently kicked one of the piles of bones with his foot, "There's no blood around them. Even if those creatures ate them and drank their blood there ought to be something left to show."

"He's right." Jayk agreed, "There is something more going on here than just a few Sith spawn being released to terrorise the locals." then he noticed an alcove and as he moved closer he saw that there was a doorway set into it that led away from the chamber, "Over here." he announced, "I think I've found something."

Beyond the doorway was a passageway that was wide enough for two of the winged creatures to walk down side by side, making it wide enough for Tylo and the two Jedi to all advance in a single line across it with Tylo in the centre to cover ahead with his rifle while both Jedi held their glowing lightsabers out in front of them.

After a short distance the passageway opened out into another chamber and it became apparent immediately what had happened to the blood of the creatures' victims.

It had been used to fill a pool more than twice the height of a typical adult human in diameter located in the centre of the chamber. The pool was not completely filled though and in the sides glowing hieroglyphs could be seen carved into the stone. Beyond this was a raised platform on which lay the mummified remains of a

humanoid figure that was clutching what looked to be a very ornate lightsaber over its chest. Meanwhile statues of armoured soldiers holding swords and cast from metal circled the chamber.

"What the kriff is this?" Tylo exclaimed as he tried to take this in.

"This is the nexus." Jayk said, the strength of the Dark Side almost overpowering him as it tried to push its way into his mind.

*She will turn on you.*

*Kill her first.*

Jayk scowled, recognising the warning for what it was.

"Yeah, I get that." Tylo replied, "But what is actually going on here."

"It's Sith magic isn't it master?" Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"Possibly some sort of necromancy." he said, "The blood could be a means by which the Sith sorcerer entombed here would attempt to pull his spirit back from the dead. My guess would be that it requires the pool to be filled all the way up to be completed."

"So what are we waiting for?" Tylo said, "Let's make sure that there's no Sith to bring back." and he raised his rifle and pointed it at the mummy.

"Tylo wait! No!" Jayk snapped but it was too late and Tylo fired a burst from his weapon that blasted the centuries dead Sith apart.

"See? Easy." Tylo said. But his face fell as there was a sudden grinding sound from all around them.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Brae said as they looked around. Then she added, "I think the statues are moving."

"They aren't statues." Jayk said, "They're Sith war droids and I think Tylo just woke them up."

In unison the droids all took a step forwards, the sound echoing around the chamber.

"They're just droids." Tylo said, "And their boss won't be waking up any time soon either."

"Actually Sith droids are extremely effective combatants." Jayk said, "And shooting the body of the Sith is unlikely to have any effect on the ritual. We need to get out of here and seal this place up again. Then the Jedi Order can deal with it properly."

"Running away. Sounds like a plan I can get behind." Tylo replied as the droids took a second unsteady step in unison as their systems adjusted to being awoken, "Let's move."

Moving towards the doorway behind them the trio suddenly found their escape route cut off as a droid stepped into their path.

"I have it!" Brae exclaimed as she lunged forwards, aiming her lightsaber for the centre of the droid's torso. But the ancient machine raised its own sword and Brae gasped as the solid blade was able to parry her lightsaber without breaking.

"Sith swords." Jayk said, "The products of their science. We can't count on our lightsabers to disarm them." but then he jumped forwards, coming to Brae's aide by slicing the head off the droid she was facing while its blade was still locked against hers.

"Let's see how they like blasters." Tylo said before he fired a short burst into another nearby droid. The machine staggered under the impact of the first two hits, its armoured body protecting its internal systems before the third hit punched a hole in it and the droid slumped forwards, striking the floor with a 'Crash!' Jayk swung his lightsaber again as another of the droids tried to block their exit. Once more the droid was able to protect itself with its own weapon but Jayk had anticipated this and he angled his lightsaber so that he was able to slide it down the side of the droid's sword and sever its arms at the wrists. The droid staggered back as its hands were both cut off and it was rendered defenceless before Jayk impaled it through the chest with his lightsaber.

"Move!" he yelled and the trio started to fall back to the exit.

Behind them the droids formed into a column that started to march after them and Tylo fired one blast after another into them. A handful of his shots managed to find a weak spot in their armour but most of them failed to inflict any significant damage.

"This isn't working." he said.

"Just run." Jayk said and all three of them headed for the first chamber they had encountered as fast as they could manage with the droids marching along behind them. However, just as they burst into the other chamber they found themselves confronted by another group of six of the winged creatures they had already fought in the woods., apparently returning with fresh kills to be drained of blood before being devoured.

"Now what?" Brae asked.

"Keep moving!" Jayk snapped as he extended his arm out in front of him and unleashed the most powerful telekinetic blast he could manage. This spread out in front of the jedi knight and was so powerful sent all of the Sith creatures flying backwards into the chamber walls.

*Yes! Use your power!*

Jayk shuddered as he felt the Dark Side trying to worm its way into him.

"Brae be careful." he warned her, "The Dark Side will try to use any use of the Force against you."

"I understand." she replied and Jayk hoped that she would be able to control herself until they were clear of

this place. One mistake now and she could fall to the Dark Side in one fell swoop. Reaching the syntherope line in the middle of the chamber, Brae took hold of it and began to climb. "There isn't enough time." Jayk told her, "Just jump."

"Up there?" Brae asked, looking up the shaft that led to the surface, "But I'd have to use the Force to make it that high."

"Then do it. Just focus on what you need to do and keep all negative thoughts from your mind. Don't give the Dark Side a way in."

"Okay, I'll try." she said.

"No, there is no try. Just do it." Jayk told her and then she stood beneath the shaft and jumped straight up, vanishing from sight.

"Uncle!" she called out from the surface, "I made it."

"Good. Now I'm coming up too." Jayk replied.

"Hey!" Tylo exclaimed as he fired another burst from his rifle at the droids, "What about me?"

"Don't worry. We'll bring you up after us." Jayk told him before he too jumped up the shaft to the surface. Tylo looked around, reloading his rifle as he did so. The droids were now filing into the chamber and the buzzing sound from the opposite side suggested that the winged creatures were starting to recover. All of a sudden the buzzing grew louder and Tylo turned to see one of the creatures dive right at him with its clawed hands outstretched. However, before the creature could rip Tylo open he felt himself suddenly dragged from the floor and up the shaft as both Jayk and Brae acted together to bring him to the surface.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed as he came flying out of the hole and landed between the Jedi. Then he looked around and added, "One of those things was right behind me." he warned the Jedi just in time for Jayk to activate his lightsaber and bring it down on top of the creature that flew up the shaft after Tylo, sending it back to the bottom in two pieces.

"The cover stone." Jayk said, "We need to get it back into place." and Brae reached out towards it, "No!" he warned her, "We can't be sure how it will react to the use of the Force on it. We need to do this the hard way."

All together, Jayk, Tylo and Brae rushed to the nearby cover stone and grabbed hold of its edges before dragging it slowly back towards the hole. There they started to push it across to seal the tomb shut once more. But before they were done there was a buzzing from beneath the stone and a clawed hand reached up around the stone and raked at Tylo. As he fell backwards Brae lashed out with her foot to pin the clawed arm against the side of the hole before she drew her lightsaber and cut the hand from the arm.

"Push!" Jayk called out as Brae took hold of the stone again and they were able to push it right the way across the hole, feeling it drop into place just as another of the creatures came flying up the shaft only to slam into the stone and the buzz became a brief screech.

Jayk and Brae then slumped backwards gasping for breath as they tried to recover from the physical exertion.

"So that's it then is it?" Tylo asked as he started to pick himself up off the ground, gasping for breath himself and Jayk nodded.

"As long as the cover stone remains in place the creatures and the droids are trapped." he said, "The locals should be able to keep a watch on it until the Jedi Order can send someone to deal with the tomb and its nexus permanently."

"How will they do that?" Brae asked.

"With explosives most likely." Jayk said, "Collapse the tomb and the creatures, the droids and the nexus itself will be buried under tonnes of rock forever."

"So explosives could be useful huh?" Tylo asked as a smile returned to his face, "In that case don't you think?"

"No Mister Kurrast." Jayk interrupted, "I am not going to sign off on you being issued with any grenades."