

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

3-08: ANGELS & DEMONS

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Stranded on a remote planet where the primitive population is controlled by pirates, Jayk and Brae find themselves cast in the role of demons and sentenced to die. Their only hope lies with Tylo and they have no idea whether or not he is even still alive...

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1.

As soon as his passengers Jedi Knight Jayk Udra and padawan Brae Udra were clear of the *Swift Exit* the ship's captain Tylo Kurrast increased altitude and began to search the surrounding jungle from the air. The planet below was unknown to the Republic, being located very close to one of the hyperspace anomalies that divided the galaxy. All indications from remote observations were that although a habitable planet likely existed in this system it was not home to an advanced civilisation. However, as soon as the occupants of the *Swift Exit* had arrived in search of a band of pirates preying on Republic shipping they had detected signs of advanced technology that were too widespread over the surface to all come from a hidden pirate base. Now the two jedi were conducting an investigation of the main source of the emissions while Tylo remained aboard the ship and searched from the air.

The *Swift Exit's* sensors registered numerous energy emissions from a source just a few kilometres from where Tylo had dropped the jedi off and he began to circle around this location, doing his best to keep out of visual range when all of a sudden an alarm began to sound in the cockpit.

"We've got incoming." the hologram of a man wearing jedi robe said as it materialised behind Tylo. This was Cal Udra, a distant ancestor of Jayk and Brae who had lived more than three and a half thousand years earlier. During his life he had stored his experience in a holocron, including a virtual version of himself to act as a gatekeeper to the knowledge it held and it was this that spoke now. While alive Cal Udra had trained his own sister as a jedi and so when Jayk was ordered to instruct his daughter Brae, although she had been presented to him as his niece, they had also allowed him to remove Cal's holocron from the archive so that he might be able to offer advice on instructing a close family member. Able to interface with the *Swift Exit's* computer system Cal also made a useful co-pilot to Tylo and while Tylo had been conducting a visual search of the planet below Cal had been watching the sky above.

"What have we got?" Tylo asked.

"Looks like three ships. One medium transport and two faster moving contacts." Cal told him, "Stang, those are starsaber XC-oh-ones."

"I take it you know those ships then." Tylo said and Cal's hologram nodded.

"The original me flew them. They're damned fast but they can't turn for poodoo. They're good interceptors and a really good pilot can dogfight in them but most prefer other designs." he said, "They're closing on us, entering the atmosphere now."

"Are they well armed?" Tylo said.

"For their time, yes. But our turret has more firepower than their cannons and I doubt they'll be carrying any missiles. No-one's made compatible ammunition for their launchers in thousands of years."

A flash of red laser fire streaked past the *Swift Exit* at that moment and Tylo flinched.

"Stang." he hissed, "I can't fly the ship and man the turret at the same time."

"And I can't fly well enough to handle the ship in combat." Cal added, "Point aurek to point besh is about all I can manage."

"So what do you suggest?" Tylo said as another burst of laser fire flew past the *Swift Exit*.

"I think evasive action might be in order. Perhaps if you can get us low enough we can lose them in the terrain." Cal suggested.

"Oh great. I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tylo said as he angled the *Swift Exit's* nose downwards and began to descend.

The fighters followed after the *Swift Exit*, continuing to gain on the freighter and Tylo turned sharply to avoid another burst of cannon fire from each of them. Just as Cal had said the starfighters lacked manoeuvrability and they both overshot, their pilots forced to circle around for another pass while Tylo used the opportunity to head towards some distant hills.

"Tylo we need you now." Jayk's voice said over the communication system all of a sudden.

"Hang on Jayk, I've got company up here." Tylo responded, "Several ships just dropped out of hyperspace and they've seen me."

The hills were right up ahead and Tylo turned the *Swift Exit* sideways so that he could fit in the narrow gap between two of them where a fast flowing river had carved out a gorge over thousands of years. By this time the two starsabers had completed their turn and they were on the tail of the *Swift Exit* once again, firing just as Tylo flew the ship into the narrow gorge.

All of a sudden there was a massive flash and boom from behind the *Swift Exit* as something exploded.

"What the hell was that?" Tylo exclaimed.

"Remember what I said about starsaber's being good interceptor but lacking manoeuvrability? Well one of the pilots just failed to follow us into the gorge." Cal replied.

"What about the alarm? I didn't feel us get hit." Tylo said as the *Swift Exit* shot out of the other end of the

gorge.

"Shrapnel. The short range communication antenna is down." Cal told him, interfacing with the damage control computer to determine what had happened.

"That means we can't contact Jayk and Brae." Tylo said, "Looks like they're on their own as well."

"We're no good to them with that other fighter on our tail anyway," Cal said, "and I wouldn't count on the pilot making the same mistake as the first did. He's already gained altitude to avoid the terrain."

"Then we need to get as far away from him as we can. Do those starsaber's have hyperdrives?"

"Yes. For their day very good ones, though this ship is almost three times as fast as them in hyperspace. But are you really going to just abandon Jayk and Brae?" Cal said.

"Like you said, we're no good to them with a fighter on our tail but I've got a plan to deal with him."

"Really? What?"

"We execute a micro jump to the outer edge of the system. We saw several planets out there and they had small moons. The pirates will pick up our exit from hyperspace and I'm betting that they'll send that other starsaber after us. That means we'll have as long as it takes to make the jump to set down on one of the moons and for me to get in the turret. Then we just wait for the fighter to come within range and 'blam' I shoot him down before he can shoot at us."

"It's a plan full of holes like the ones we'll be shot full of if it goes wrong, but I don't have anything better." Cal replied.

"Then start running the numbers now. I want us ready to jump as soon as we clear the gravity well." Tylo said before pulling back sharply on the control column in front of him and the *Swift Exit* shot skywards.

The starsaber stayed on the *Swift Exit*'s trail, forcing Tylo to dodge and weave as the pirate continued firing his forward facing laser cannons. Fortunately the pirate was not a properly trained starfighter pilot and he was unable to match the freighter's manoeuvring even as he closed to near point blank range. Tylo's sudden turns also prevented the pilot from making the most of his superior speed and acceleration, if he pushed his fighter as hard as it could go then he would simply overshoot and have to waste time bleeding off all the excess speed in order to turn around for another pass.

The transport ship that had launched the two starfighters remained apart from this engagement, its crew unwilling to risk their own vessel in a combat that had already cost them one of their fighters and this enabled Tylo to fly the *Swift Exit* past the transport unopposed until it was clear of the planet's gravity well.

"Are we set?" Tylo called out.

"Jump co-ordinates set." Cal told him, "Punch it Tylo." and as Tylo triggered the *Swift Exit*'s hyperdrive the stars outside the cockpit blurred into the bright tunnel of light of hyperspace.

"I think the *Swift Exit* was hit." Jayk said as he looked up into the sky in the direction the freighter had flown off in, with the two starsabers chasing after it, "Tylo could be dead."

"No." Brae replied, shaking her head, "I'd sense it if he was, I'm sure of it."

"Tylo do you read me?" Jayk said into his comlink but there was no reply, "He isn't answering." he said to Brae and in the distance the sound of engines grew quieter as the ships now too far away to be seen with the naked eye gained altitude.

"They're heading into space." Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"We can attempt to find out what happened to Tylo later on but for now we must change our plans. We can't go back to the Republic and tell them what we have found here so we'll have to deal with the situation ourselves." he said before he turned in the direction of the primitive city he and Brae had been observing, looking towards the modern structure they had witnessed natives carrying a shipment of precious metals to, "We'll start there." he said, pointing at the structure.

"Connell!" a voice shouted out from the hallway.

Connell ignored the shout, continuing to kiss the neck of the scantily clad woman who was with him in his luxurious quarters.

"Connell!" the voice shouts again and this time the shout was accompanied by a banging sound on the door. "Stang." Connell hissed as he looked towards the door, still retaining his hold on the woman, "What the kriff is it?"

"Connell we've got company. The *Centurion* just dropped out of hyperspace and picked up a ship in the atmosphere. Not one of ours." the voice from the other side of the door told him.

"Kriff!" Connell exclaimed, finally disengaging from the woman and reaching for his shirt, "I expect you to still be here when I get back." he told her as he put his shirt back on.

"Fine." the woman said, "But I charge for the time spent waiting." but Connell just snorted as he picked up his blaster and hurried to the door.

"Okay Mitt, tell me what we have." he said as he opened the door.

"A small ship. At first the *Centurion* thought it could be a Republic scout and launched its fighters but now it looks like it's just a freighter." Mitt explained.

"Seriously? You disturbed me for a kriffing freighter?" Connell said, "Shoot it down."

"You think the pilots haven't tried? One of them flew right into the ground trying to keep it in his cross hairs and the other failed to stop him from getting out of the gravity well."

"Kriff Mitt, he got away? We could have the Republic down around us within a day." Connell said.

"Hey don't worry Connell. The *Centurion* picked up a hyperspace exit in the outer system. Whoever it is our fighters must have damaged his hyperdrive and now he's stuck here. The other fighter is going to go after him just as soon as the jump can be plotted."

Connell frowned.

"So get after it. Why bother me?"

"Because the *Centurion* picked up comm signals between the freighter and someone on the ground." Mitt said, "We're not alone down here."

Connell scowled.

"Hang on," he said, going back into his quarters to fetch a set of macrobinoculars. Then when he reappeared he and Mitt hurried to a nearby set of stairs that led up to the large open rooftop of the palace they had had constructed here. This offered an all round view of the area around the city and lifting his macrobinoculars to his eyes Connell began to survey the jungle.

"I don't see anything," he said, "Go grab some guys and organise a search."

"What about the natives?" Mitt asked.

"Keep them out of this for now. The last thing we need is them figuring out that we're not gods and that's more likely to happen if they meet some Republic agents." Connell replied.

"What do we do when we find them?"

"Wipe them out. All of them." Connell ordered.

2.

When the *Swift Exit* dropped out of hyperspace Tylo scanned the local area for any space body suitable for him to land the ship on.

"There's a moon half a million kilometres from here. Think we can make it before that fighter catches up with us?" he asked Cal.

"Easily." Cal answered, "Assuming that transport was fully functional it will have already detected our exit from hyperspace and informed the fighter pilot."

"So he could be here in a minute or so." Tylo said, "How can we make it to that moon by then?"

"Because neither of those ships carries a modern nav computer. It'll take them time to calculate the jump through hyperspace. Time you can use to land us on the moon if you don't waste it all here."

"Okay we're moving." Tylo responded, bringing the freighter's ion drive up to full power and accelerating towards the moon.

Measuring less than a hundred kilometres across, the moon was little more than an asteroid caught in the gravitational pull of the frozen world it orbited but it was perfect for Tylo's purpose and he flew the *Swift Exit* just into its shadow before setting down on the surface. Normally he would shut down the engines after landing but on this occasion he left them active, radiating energy that would be detectable from the other side of the moon as it escaped into space and also heated up the surface of the moon itself.

"Cal watch the sensors." Tylo said as he leapt out of the pilot's seat and hurried from the cockpit. He ran to the rear of the *Swift Exit* where the ship's sole gun turret was located and climbed in, donning the intercom headset so he could stay in touch with Cal in the cockpit and then he waited.

Exactly as Cal had warned him it took some time for the pirates to calculate even the short hyperspace jump from the planet their base was located on to this part of the system but as soon as they did it took just a few seconds for the starsaber to complete the jump itself. Returning to realspace just a few thousand kilometres from where the *Swift Exit* had appeared, the pilot of the starsaber immediately began to scan for the freighter.

"Tylo he's here." Cal told Tylo from the cockpit, "He's scanning now."

"Has he seen our trail yet?" Tylo asked.

"No, not yet. It shouldn't take him long to - Wait, he's on the move. He's turning this way and accelerating. angle the cannon at seventy five degrees with flat elevation and stand by."

Tylo turned the turret to face the direction specified by Cal and waited, watching the targeting display in front of him. This time he did not have long to wait, however as the starsaber came racing around the moon. As soon as the fast moving craft appeared over the horizon Tylo opened fire and the burst of laser blasts clipped the starfighter's port wing, ripping it off about half way along its length.

The starfighter spun at this point but the pilot quickly regained control and turned his craft towards the *Swift Exit*. Tylo fired again while the fighter was making the turn but this second volley went wide of the mark and the starsaber was able to line itself up on the grounded freighter for an attack run. The pirate angled the nose of his starfighter downwards and opened fire before he was in range and twin volleys of energy blasts ripped up the surface of the moon between the starsaber and the *Swift Exit*. This created a shower of debris that helped mask the approach of the starsaber but it did not prevent Tylo from opening fire anyway, letting loose a sustained burst of laser fire that lit up the space between the two ships and cleared out some of the larger pieces of debris.

"I have you now." Tylo said to himself, smiling as the starsaber appeared clearly on his targeting display once more and he fired again, targeting the rapidly approaching pirate vessel directly with no need to compensate for its motion. The first blast struck the tip of the fighter's nose and split it wide open, destroying its primary sensors and communication antenna in the process. The next shot was aimed slightly higher than the first and it skimmed over what was left of the fighter's nose section to strike the cockpit directly. Despite being made from toughened transparisteel intended to protect its occupant the cockpit canopy could not block a direct hit from a modern light laser cannon and the blast filled the cockpit with flames, incinerating the pirate before he could even cry out.

What was left of the starsaber burned as it now tumbled through space, caught in the moon's low gravity and still heading for the *Swift Exit*.

"Oh poodoo." Tylo said as he watched the fireball heading towards him, "I've got a bad feeling about this. Cal is that going-"

"It's going to be close. Do you want me to lock down the ship?" Cal interrupted and Tylo nodded.

"Do it." he said and then he heard the sound of doors throughout the *Swift Exit* sliding shut to prevent a catastrophic decompression if the hull was penetrated.

Tylo flinched as the fireball that was all that remained of the starsaber passed just a few metres over the

Swift Exit and he heard the clattering of debris falling onto the upper hull but there was no decompression alarm and he breathed a sigh of relief in the knowledge that his ship had survived.

"We're okay." Cal announced over the intercom, "The wreck hit about two thousand metres from here."

"Great. Now release the lock down and let's get back for Jayk and Brae. If I know those two then they'll be getting themselves into trouble without us." Tylo replied and the hatch to the turret promptly slid open again. Returning to the cockpit Tylo sat down again and immediately took advantage of having left the ship's engines active to lift off the moon.

"So how do you want to do this?" Cal asked.

"Well a hyperspace jump could have us back there in seconds but that transport would pick us up right away and the pirates could just call in more ships. I think we're going to have to make the trip at sublight and try to slip around them." Tylo said.

"That's going to take some time." Cal said and Tylo nodded in agreement.

"Yeah I know. I reckon about eight to twelve hours depending on how their transport is positioned."

"Then let's just hope Jayk and Brae can stay out of trouble for that long." Cal said.

Jayk and Brae held their lightsabers in their hands ready for use but did not activate their blades, this serving no purpose other than to give away their position in the jungle. The weapons would have made penetrating some of the thicker undergrowth much easier but neither of them considered the time that would have been saved compared to going around these areas worth taking the chance. Heading for the pirate structure on the far side of the native city Jayk and Brae kept to the jungle, hoping to avoid all contact with both the pirates and the natives themselves. However, as they were making their way around the city they realised that they were not alone in the jungle.

"Brae do you sense that?" Jayk asked.

"Someone's coming." Brae replied and Jayk nodded.

"Quick, over here." he said, beckoning Brae to follow him towards a dense clump of trees surrounded by plants that consisted of clusters of vines that moved about on the ground. Several of these had small native animals tangled up in them and it was obvious that the plants were feeding on these animals.

"We need to get up there." Jayk said, pointing up into the trees themselves.

"Do you think the pirates will avoid the vines?" Brae asked.

"That's what I'm hoping." Jayk said and then he clipped his lightsaber back on his belt before he jumped up, using the Force to boost him high enough to be able to grab hold of a thick branch he hoped would take his weight. The branch held and Jayk made his way to the trunk, watching out for whoever it was that was approaching, "Come on Brae." he said and Brae copied him, returning her lightsaber to her belt before leaping up into another tree with the help of the Force.

Both Jedi watched in silence as a group of about a dozen mainly human pirates armed with an assortment of blasters appeared out of the undergrowth soon after and one of them began to head for the cluster of trees they were hiding in.

"Hey come away from there." Mitt called out to the other pirate before any of the moving vines could grab hold of him, "Those things will liquefy your flesh and drink your insides if they get hold of you." and the pirate backed away, staring down at the ground when looking up into the trees instead might have enabled him to spot the Jedi above him.

The Jedi waited while the pirates continued past them, disappearing into the undergrowth and then Jayk looked at Brae.

"Okay I think we're safe now. But I think we should reconsider staying in the jungle." he said.

"You think we can get through the city?" Brae asked.

"Yes, the natives look like a near human species so if we keep our hoods up we may be able to blend in well enough to get to the pirate headquarters." Jayk answered.

"After you then father." Brae said and Jayk performed another leap from the tree, landing beyond the area covered by the flesh eating vines. As soon as he landed he drew his lightsaber and looked around, checking for any signs of pirates still in the area.

"We're clear. Come on down." he said and moments later Brae landed beside him, drawing her own lightsaber as well, "This way." Jayk added and the two Jedi began to head directly towards the native city.

As they got closer to the edge of the jungle Jayk and Brae both raised their hoods to cover their faces, trusting that the native species would have such clothing for at least some of the population.

"Try and keep out of sight just in case." Jayk warned Brae, "The closer we get to any of the natives the more likely it is that they'll realise that we aren't their own people."

Brae nodded and looked up into the darkening sky.

"At least the sun is setting." she said, "Night should give us some cover at least." then she paused and her eyes widened before she added, "Unless the natives are nocturnal when they aren't offering gifts to phony gods."

"I think we saw enough of them about in the streets to discount that idea." Jayk reassured her, "However, we

should also avoid speaking to one another. We can disguise our bodies but we can't make our voices sound like whatever language these beings speak."

The jedi then came to the line where the jungle ended, finding themselves standing by a river that ran around the city. Whether this was a natural feature or not was impossible to tell but the defensive wall on the opposite bank was obviously artificial. The combination of water and wall would have presented a formidable barrier to an attacking army that had yet to develop gunpowder weapons but to the jedi it meant little. The wall was barely three metres tall and with another pair of well executed leaps enhanced by the Force Jayk and Brae both found themselves standing on the battlements on top of the wall. Their elevated position made the jedi easily visible both along the wall in each direction and also for some distance into the city itself and so they quickly jumped down into a darkened street below that was in the shadow of the city wall before they began to make their way deeper into the city.

3.

Although the natives lacked motorised transport the streets of the city were still wide enough to permit the movement of carts drawn by animals in both directions simultaneously and this meant that there were few places dark enough for the Jedi to make themselves invisible if the need arose. The best they could do was keep to the sides of the street, positioning themselves so that they could turn towards the buildings beside them to hide their faces from anyone they passed by.

As was to be expected the city had all the signs of a civilisation that was just about to shape basic metal compounds such as bronze and steel but here and there the Jedi saw anachronistic items such as battery operated lamps and objects made from modern plastics that had obviously been brought to the planet by the pirates. This smattering of galactic standard items also extended to some of the signage in use and the Jedi were able to read signs written in Aurebesh that pointed out various public buildings and most importantly what the Jedi took to be the headquarters of the pirates themselves.

"It would appear that the pirates are not shy about advertising their presence to the general population." Jayk whispered, checking around them first to make sure that there was no-one close enough to overhear his use of Basic.

"But what do you think the population think of them?" Brae asked in response.

"You mean are they adored or feared? A good question and one that could offer us an advantage if we need local knowledge. From the look of the signs there must be enough people in this city with at least a working knowledge of our written language. Perhaps some can speak it as well. Of course that is another good reason to keep quiet." Jayk said and then he suddenly stepped right in front of Brae and looked down at her as a native drove around the corner on a cart, barking orders at the animals pulling it along as he went past the two Jedi. Brae noticed that the driver stared at the two of them as he passed by but if he was suspicious of anything about either their presence or their appearance he gave no obvious sign and his emotions remained calm.

"That was close." Brae said softly after the cart had gone past and she turned to look in the direction it had gone, "That driver was staring right at us."

"Then we should get moving." Jayk replied, "If he does decide that we are not who we want to appear as then he may come back here with others. We need to be as far away as possible by then."

The two Jedi hurried along the street, turning off when they reached a sign in Aurebesh that pointed to 'The residence of the gods' and following the signposted route.

This route took them close to an area of the city characterised by buildings that were basic even by the standards of this city, obviously constructed from whatever materials came to hand all modified to fit together. This included a number of parts that obviously came from off world such as one that was made almost entirely from a shipping container with holes cut in it for doors and windows and others that used sheets of rolled plastic for windows in place of glass. These improvised structures were all residences and groups of natives could be seen clustered outside many of them as they cooked evening meals above natural fires.

"Do we go through or around?" Brae asked when she looked at the random collection of structures that was not even organised into streets like the rest of the city and saw the outline of the pirate headquarters silhouetted against the darkening sky.

"Around I think. There are too many pairs of eyes here for us to fool them all." Jayk said and he and Brae moved on. However, as they circled around the shanty town they heard the sound of marching feet and a unit of native soldiers carrying spears and shields and wearing armour of shaped metal plates covering their heads and torsos came marching towards them.

"I think a change of direction is needed here." Jayk said and Brae nodded.

"I agree." she said and they both turned around to face the shanty town beside them, only to come face to face with a group of young natives, "Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Brae added before one of the children that did not even come up to two thirds of Brae's approximately one and a half metre height turned and ran off shouting something in its own language while the others just stared up at the Jedi.

Fear.

Panic.

"Soldiers closing behind us. Just go." Jayk said, looking back in the direction of the patrol and the two Jedi broke into a run. Rushing around the native children who just watched as they ran by them.

All of a sudden Jayk and Brae found their way blocked by a crowd of natives that assembled in front of them and dropped to their knees, lifting their arms up and crying out in unison.

"I think our cover's blown." Brae said.

"I agree." Jayk agreed before they heard a scream from behind them and turned around to see the patrol of

native soldiers had now reached the edge of the shanty town and they were knocking over cooking pots and smashing some of the less sturdy structures whether or not the occupants had had time to get out.

"Please stop them." one of the natives suddenly said in Basic, "We do no harm."

"Time to use our godly powers master?" Brae asked, looking at Jayk.

"Just this once." he replied and the pair of them lowered their hoods as they looked directly at the soldiers who were still smashing everything they could, "Stop!" Jayk yelled and the soldiers instantly looked towards the source of the shout and froze when they saw the two jedi glaring back at them.

The leader of the unit of soldiers barked an order at them in their own language and the entire unit dropped to their knees, bowing their heads.

"Command us." the unit leader then said in Basic.

"Tell me what you are doing here." Jayk said, walking towards the soldiers and halting when he could tower over at the kneeling soldiers in an intimidating manner.

"Searching for your forbidden treasures my lord." the soldier said, "Anything that is forbidden to them."

"Forbidden by who?" Jayk asked.

"By the elders my lord. Your treasures are not for them."

"Sounds like the locals aren't up for an equitable sharing of what they're being given." Jayk said, looking around at Brae.

"Those in power are keeping the benefits to themselves." Brae replied, "An old story."

"But all too common." Jayk said and he turned back to the soldiers kneeling in front of him.

"Return to your barracks." he said, "You will not search anywhere tonight."

"But my lord-" the leader of the soldiers began and he looked up at Jayk, but as he did so the jedi knight used the Force to pluck his lightsaber from his belt and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated it before holding the humming blade to the soldier's throat.

"I find your lack of faith disturbing." Jayk said as Brae also drew her lightsaber and activated it, drawing gasps from the crowd behind her.

Fear.

The soldier continued to look up at Jayk, unfamiliar with the weapon held at his throat but realising that its function.

"Yes my lord. Forgive us." the soldier replied and Jayk stepped back, pulling his lightsaber away from the soldier's throat. At this point the unit leader looked at his men and called out to them in their own language.

Confusion.

For a moment the soldiers just exchanged nervous glances, uncomfortable at being told to abandon their duty even if it was someone they regarded as a living god issuing the order. Then their squad leader spoke again and they began to get back to their feet slowly before they turned around and walked away from the jedi, leaving the shanty town entirely as they made their way back to their barracks.

"Thank you lord." the native who had asked for Jayk's help cried out, "I knew you had not abandoned us. I told other to keep faith in you. Please come, we have offerings."

"What do we do?" Brae asked and Jayk looked at the native beckoning for the jedi to go with him.

"We go with them and see what they have to offer." he said.

"Okay but I hope we're not expected to perform any miracles." Brae replied.

Connell was stood looking at a holographic representation of the area surrounding the city, a comlink in his hand that enabled him to listen in on the signals between the three search parties that were out scouring the jungle for signs of whoever the freighter had dropped off when a duros pirate entered the room.

"What is it now?" Connell said, sighing, "Don't tell me an entire battlegroup dropped out of hyperspace in orbit over us."

"No, there's a priest here to see you." the duros told him and Connell frowned.

"Stang." he hissed, "Back home I could just tell all the religious nerf herders to shove their pamphlets where starlight can't reach. Out here I actually have to listen to all their poodoo. Who's idea was it to pretend to be gods to get some dumb natives to do whatever we want?"

"Yours I seem to remember." the duros said and Connell sighed again.

"Okay Kando. You stay here and make sure all three search teams are being co-ordinated properly. I'll go see what sort of holy intervention the locals are looking for now." Connell said and as he walked out of the map room he tossed the comlink to the duros.

In order to maintain their image as gods to the natives the pirates made sure that their style of dress was suitably alien whenever they appeared in public and before entering the audience chamber where the native priest would be waiting Connell stripped off his clothing to put on a silver coloured vacuum suit instead. he did not put on the life support pack or helmet but he did carry the latter of these with him as he then entered the chamber where the priest knelt on a low padded stool while supposedly watched over by a dozen figures in vacuum suits identical to the one worn by Connell only with the helmets fitted and heavily tinted anti-glare visors lowered to hide their facial features. In fact these were nothing but mannequins posed to hold toy

blasters that had been painted black, thus avoiding the need for any actual pirates to stand motionless for an extended period of time.

"Speak mortal." Connell said, standing in front of the priest, "Why do you disturb my thoughts?"

"Lord why do your angels leave the palace to stop my men carrying out their duty?" the priest asked in Basic.

"Explain yourself further priest." Connell said, not wanting to give the impression that he was anything other than omniscient.

"A patrol of my men was stopped by a pair of your angels when they tried to search the outcasts for any of your treasures that they may have acquired."

Connell frowned. he knew that occasionally some of the pirates would go out into the city to take advantage of the locals' worship but as far as he knew no one had left the palace for several days to go anywhere other than out into the jungle.

"Tell me more about these angels." Connell said, "If your men angered them in some way then there will be retribution."

"My lord all the guards did was search the slums but two angels were present and they intervened, ordering the patrol leader to take his men back to the barracks. You have always told us that we are free to police the outcasts in the slums as we wish." the priest protested when Connell had finished speaking. Believing the pirates to be gods meant that the natives never dared to interrupt them.

"I want to know more about them, these angels. Did they tell you that they were executing my holy orders?" Connell said.

"My men said they did not. They attacked the patrol." the priest said.

"Attacked?" Connell said, concerned. All of the pirates were under orders to avoid violence against the natives. The last thing that was needed was for one individual getting trigger happy and sparking a widespread revolt against the pirates' presence here. That was one reason why Connell and the other pirate leaders had gone to the trouble of bringing a wide range of recreational items and even prostitutes to the remote world to provide the pirates with entertainment while they were here, minimising the need to leave the palace at all.

"Yes my lord. They used a sword that glowed like lightning." the priest said and Connell's eyes widened when he heard this and he recognised the description of a lightsaber. A lightsaber could mean only one thing, the Republic had called in the Jedi Order to deal with Connell's band of pirates and they had managed to track them to this planet somehow.

"Look at me priest." Connell said and the priest lifted his head."

"Yes lord." he said.

"Explain as you see it how I came to this world." Connell told the native.

"You came from the sky in thunder my lord, the highest among the gods who came to bring us wonders." the priest replied.

"Yes, that's right. But there are other powerful beings in the universe. Beings from an underworld of pure evil that will stop at nothing to destroy everything we have worked for here. They are known as jedi and I had hoped that our presence would enable us to hide this world from their wicked gaze but it seems that this was a false hope and they have found you. Now they walk your land and are gathering followers among the lowest scum of your society. Warn your people to be wary of these demons priest. They possess powerful sorcery and can bewitch a person's mind if they get the chance." Connell said, thinking quickly of a good way to describe a jedi's powers.

"Can these jedi be killed lord?" the priest said and Connell smiled. He had been thinking of how the pirates would be able to deal with a pair of jedi, most likely a master and an apprentice. However, it now occurred to him that he could manipulate the natives into creating enough of a diversion that his men would be able to strike while the jedi's attention was focused elsewhere.

"Yes but the jedi are strong and it cost the lives of many of your guards if you are not careful. Even we gods must be careful how we approach them."

"Then what can we do my lord?"

"Attack in large groups using ranged weapons. Do not let them get close, that is where they are strongest. Tell your warriors not to be afraid to run away. The jedi will be too strong for you to defeat in hand to hand combat without taking heavy losses. While you attack them from a distance send a runner for us, we will be waiting for your call. Now go, every moment the jedi spend at large in your city is another moment in which they will be able to spread their wickedness."

"Yes my lord. Thank you." the priest said, getting to his feet and bowing to Connell before turning around and hurrying out of the audience chamber.

Connell waited for the priest to leave and then did the same, turning around and rushing out of the chamber.

"Stang!" he hissed as he ran back to the map room without bothering to change out of the vacc suit.

"Connell what's wrong?" Kando asked when Connell came rushing back into the room.

"There are kriffing jedi in the city." Connell exclaimed as he ran up to the duros and snatched the comlink from his hand, "All units this is Connell, fall back to the city. The jedi have found us. We need to do

something about them before they bring the whole Republic down on us."

"Kriff." Kando said as Connell lifted the comlink to his mouth.

"Mitt, I want all the search teams back here as soon as possible." he transmitted.

"Why? What's happening?" Mitt responded.

"I've just been speaking with that native head priest and he just gave me the perfect description of a pair of jedi when complaining about one of his patrols being attacked. I've told him that they're some sort of demons from the underworld and he's bought it. His warriors will attack the jedi on sight and let us know where they are but I need troops to be able to deal with them." Connell explained.

"Okay we're heading back now. It was getting too dark out here to keep searching effectively anyway. We should be with you in about an hour."

"Good. I'm going to alert everyone here. Those jedi obviously know about our presence here so they're bound to want to get inside the palace and we need to stop them before they can."

4.

The outcasts of the native society did not have much but they still welcomed the jedi into their homes and provided them with food gathered from numerous different households. While Jayk and Brae ate the food the native from the shanty town explained to them how the pirates had come to their planet.

"They arrived a season ago with thunder from the skies as they brought one of their great flying chariots down to the ground. They presented our leaders with a demand for land, tribute and worship in exchange for their treasures but the nobles did not want to surrender their power so they refused and ordered their warriors to attack the newly arrived gods. Many of them were struck down by lightning before they turned on the nobles themselves and they were put to the flame in your name. After that the priests took over, ruling in the gods' name. Some of the outcasts dared to hope that this would end their persecution but it was not to be and the priests continued the old way of rewarding those who kept them in power and ignoring the rest. Now when the priests offer up the riches demanded by the gods they are rewarded with your magic and they decide how it is to be distributed. Sometimes some of the gods will leave their palace though and they will bring more of their magic with them. They will trade this with anyone who serves them regardless of their station but the priests do not tolerate this and they send their guards out to confiscate everything we have." "What about you?" Jayk asked, "You've obviously been able to learn our language so where do you fit into all of this?"

"You've learned it quickly as well." Brae added, "A single season?"

"Our own spoken language has many similarities to yours. The gods told us this was because they gave us a language at the start of time and our version changed over the generations." the native said.

"Sounds like these people could be descendants of one of the lost pre-Republic colony missions." Jayk whispered to Brae before he looked at the native again, "That explains how rapidly you were able to learn our language, but not the circumstances of it. From what we've seen it is a skill that only a few of your people possess."

"I was a priest." the native said, "I learned your language with the other priests but I had always specialised in teaching to the poor and dispossessed and I thought that I could continue to do this. However, when I tried to bring the magic of the gods to these people I was exiled to live among them." then he frowned, "Forgive me for asking my lord but why do you ask this? Surely you must already know it all."

"The inhabitants of the palace are not gods." Jayk said abruptly and the former priest just stared at him.

"They're very naughty beings." Brae added.

"No. I have seen their miracles." the native said.

"You have seen machines. very simple machines." Jayk told him, "The flying chariots they arrived in are just that, vehicles built from materials dug up from the ground. The heat and light their gifts provide are nothing but a similar form of energy to the flames of your cooking fires."

The former priest continued to stare at Jayk, obviously unwilling to accept the truth and so Jayk got to his feet.

"You obviously need more proof." he said, picking up the knife he had been using to cut his food and wiping the blade clean. Then he walked over to the nearby cooking fire and as the natives whispered among themselves he held the blade in the flames to sterilise it before hold up the palm of his free hand for the gathered natives to see and dragged the blade across it. This drew gasps from the natives as they saw blood come from the wound and they looked at one another in disbelief, "Yes, this is blood. My blood, just like the blood that flows within your own arteries and veins."

"I have witnessed their power." the native said and Jayk exchanged looks with Brae.

"Brae, would you mind offering a demonstration while I dress this wound?" Jayk said and Brae smiled.

"The people claiming to be gods are criminals." she said as she got to her feet as well, "They have no special powers at all. On the other hand-" and then she just reached out towards an empty plate on the other side of the room. Drawing on the Force she summoned the plate to her hand and it flew through the air towards her, prompting more gasps from the crowd.

"So have you seen them do that?" she asked.

"How can you say you are not gods?" the former priest responded.

"There is an energy field that surrounds every living thing." Jayk explained, "It is called the Force and a very few intelligent beings such as Brae and I can call upon it and channel its power. We are called jedi and it is our task to be the defenders of justice in the world. The beings presenting themselves to you as gods are nothing but criminals who steal what they pass to your priests in exchange for the precious metals they can then sell and we were ordered to hunt them down and put a stop to their actions."

"What do you want of us?" the former priest said, looking back and forth between Jayk and Brae.

"We need a way into the palace without being seen." Jayk said, smiling, "Can any of your people tell us the

best way to do this?"

The density of trees blocked most of the starlight as one of the outcast natives led Jayk and Brae, also accompanied by the former priest to act as a translator through the jungle around the rear of the palace. Torches and glow rods could have been used to light their way in the dark but using either ran the risk of detection by the pirates and so the group moved in near total darkness until they reached a clearing from where the palace could be seen over the treetops, at which point the native guide pointed and spoke in his own language.

"He says that part of the palace is where the flying chariots are kept. His brother helped construct it before he died." the former priest translated for the jedi and right on cue there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine from overhead as a shuttle descended out of the night sky to land on top of the palace. Then moments later it began to descend as it was lowered into an internal hangar.

"I think we just found our way in." Jayk said and Brae smiled.

"Yes master." she said as Jayk turned to the former priest.

"You may go back to the city now. Brae and I will find our own way from here." he said.

"Yes my lor-" the native began before remembering that he was not addressing a god, "Yes Jedi Udra." he corrected himself and after he told their guide that their task was complete the two natives turned around and headed back the way they had come, leaving Jayk and Brae alone.

"Do you think the landing pad will be guarded?" Brae asked as they started to continue towards the palace.

"Possibly. I doubt the pirates will totally trust the natives to stay away so they'll have posted sentries. Also we can't totally rule out the possibility that after shooting down the *Swift Exit* they may suspect that someone survived.

"Do you think that Tylo survived?" Brae said, "I didn't feel him die."

"He may still be alive but we cannot afford to spend our time scouring the jungle for the wreck of the *Swift Exit*. After we have dealt with the pirates, then we can try to find Tylo and Cal."

"I can't believe I forgot about Cal." Brae said, "If he's gone then-"

"Then the Jedi Order has lost everything he experienced and we have lost a good friend." Jayk interrupted before he sudden came to a halt and dropped into a crouching position. Brae did the same as Jayk waved at her and both jedi drew their lightsabers as they stared into the jungle where a pair of lights could be seen moving about as they came closer.

"A patrol?" Brae whispered and Jayk nodded.

"If they go past we'll let them carry on and slip by behind them." Jayk replied.

"And if they don't?"

"Then I'll take whoever is carrying the nearest light, you take the other." Jayk said and Brae nodded in agreement.

As the lights came closer it became possible to make out the outlines of the beings carrying them as well as two others following behind. Being outnumbered two to one did not concern the jedi, it was common for the numerical odds to be far worse but having to deal with multiple opponents did mean that it would be harder to overpower them before they were able to warn the other pirates. The pirates turned slightly as they approached the jedi and this new heading meant that instead of walking right up to Jayk and Brae they walked by a short distance in front of them and it was here that their lack of professionalism showed. The two pirates carrying glow rods kept the beams pointed directly ahead of them so that they could see obstacles in their path, however this meant that when any of the four looked in any other direction their eyes were not adjusted to the darkness and they could not make out the two jedi crouching motionless in the undergrowth. Just as Jayk had said he and Brae watched the pirates walk right by them without making a move on them. Then after waiting a few minutes for their eyes to readjust to the darkness Jayk stood up and waved for Brae to follow him before they both continued to creep through the jungle toward the palace hangars. Only a narrow area of jungle less than a hundred metres across had been cleared around the hangars at the rear of the pirate's palace had been cleared, indicating that the pirates were not concerned about an enemy getting close enough to attack their headquarters with man portable heavy weapons. This gap still represented a long way to cover on foot to get beside the wall and even though there were no spotlights to illuminate this area that did not mean that there were no security monitors that would be able to pick up the jedi in the dark.

"Those walls look about thirty metres tall." Brae said, looking at the four cylindrical hangars that each had a landing platform on their roof large enough to handle a large shuttle or light freighter such as the *Swift Exit*. There were no entrances at ground level that were visible from where the jedi observed but there was a dim glow coming from the tops of two of them.

"That should be easy enough to scale providing we can reach them." Jayk replied.

"Together?" Brae said and Jayk nodded.

"When I say." he said as he took a final look around before he suddenly exclaimed, "Now!" and both jedi charged across the band of open ground between them and the hangars until they reached the walls.

No alarms sounded from anywhere and so the Jedi moved onto scaling the wall, throwing compact grappling hooks attached to synthrope lines up to the landing pads at the top of the walls and then using these to grip onto as they rapidly climbed up the wall.

As expected the landing pads themselves were simply flat surfaces large enough for spacecraft to land on before the pad descended into the hangar below. The hangar the Jedi had scaled had its landing pad in the raised position but now that they were standing on one of the landing pads they could see that the glow they had seen from the ground was a result of two of the landing pads being lowered and light from the hangar illumination shining up out of them. This also revealed a means by which Jayk and Brae could get inside the palace. Each of the open hangars featured a ladder running all the way down the inside of the wall.

"We'll take the nearest ladder. I'll go first and you follow when I give you the signal." Jayk said before he darted across the landing pad to the adjacent one that was in a lowered position. The wall was wide enough to provide Jayk with a path that he could easily run around to reach the ladder without worrying about falling off either side and it took just a few seconds for him to reach the top of the ladder. Looking down Jayk saw a shuttle of the type he and Brae had witnessed arriving not long before however, this craft was dark and silent and had obviously not been used recently. Jayk was unfamiliar with the exact class and he suspected that the shuttle was another of the four thousand year old vessels that the pirates had stolen to create their fleet. Brae followed her father around the wall and she kept watch while Jayk climbed down the ladder. All the while he was descending into the hangar Jayk looked around, searching for places that pirates could be lurking out of sight. The most obvious of these was beneath the shuttle itself where not only could a technician be working on the shuttle but there could be a unit of armed pirates lying in wait for him. With this possibility in mind Jayk jumped the last few metres from the ladder rather than climbing all the way to the bottom and turned in mid air so that he landed facing towards the shuttle instead of with it behind him. This enabled Jayk to inspect under the shuttle simply by crouching down low enough to see beneath it before he then checked the alcoves and adjoining compartments for pirates. Then when he was satisfied that he was alone in the hangar he took out his comlink.

"Brae you can come on down." he said softly and Brae climbed down the ladder, also jumping the last few metres instead of climbing all the way to the floor.

"Where now?" she asked.

"The pirates may deploy their vessels according to a plan. If we could find that then it would make hunting them down a lot easier." Jayk answered, "We should look for an operations planning centre."

"We're coming up on that transport." Cal's hologram said and Tylo sat up straight in the pilot's seat where he had been resting while the *Swift Exit* continued towards the system's only inhabited planet.

"Any indication that they've seen us?" Tylo asked.

"No. I'm picking up active sensor sweeps but we're too far away for them to be able to get a good return. Sensor technology has come a long way in four thousand years and our passive sensors are better than their active ones. As long as we don't do anything stupid like fire the main drives while they have a direct line of sight to us we should be able to stay invisible." Cal explained.

"Okay, what about our current heading? Are we still lined up to enter orbit?"

"Of course. We'll pass close to the planet and get caught in its gravity well. That should put us into a low orbit but it will decay after just a few orbits."

"That's okay. We only need to get behind the planet and I'll take us into the atmosphere where that transport ship can't see us and we'll fly the rest of the way to where those energy emissions are centred." Tylo said, "Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

5.

Although signs written in Basic could be found in the city outside the pirates had not bothered to place any inside their headquarters, all of the structure's occupants having been around since its construction and thus familiar with the internal layout. This left the Jedi wandering somewhat at random as they searched for the command and control centre.

"Brae I sense a large concentration of people above us." Jayk said, "So you agree?"

"Yes master." Brae replied, nodding, "Do you think that is where the command centre will be?"

"It makes sense for the pirates to be clustered near it. If not then perhaps we can locate it by following one of the pirates." Jayk said and the two Jedi began to search for a way to reach the uppermost levels of the structure.

If the pirates had installed any turbolifts to their headquarters they were located far from the hangars and the Jedi instead came across a spiral staircase that headed upwards. Cautiously they began to climb these, hoping that they would take them directly to the command centre. However, instead of this they ended in a large lounge area that had a transparent wall dividing it from an equally large balcony that overlooked the jungle.

Despite the late hour there was obviously someone on the balcony sat on a chair with their back to the lounge wall. However, the strong artificial light inside compared to the darkness outside made it impossible even for the Jedi to see exactly who this was.

"Careful. We can't afford for them to raise the alarm." Jayk whispered before he and Brae darted from the stairwell to behind a nearby column and Jayk peered around it before quickly pulling back behind it again, "They're coming this way." he hissed.

Brae then peered around the other side of the column just as the individual who had been on the balcony came back inside and she saw that it was not a pirate, instead it was a young woman wearing a very revealing dress and a great deal of make up.

"I think it's one of the women from the shadow port." Brae whispered to Jayk, referring to the prostitutes that the pirates had recruited to keep them entertained.

"Hello?" the woman said suddenly and both Jedi remained still and silent, "I know you're behind the column waiting to jump out and scare me. I can see you reflected in that statue." she added and Jayk and Brae both looked towards a polished native statue that showed the pair of them reflected in its surface. This was distorted enough that they could not be identified but it was enough to give away their presence.

"Go." Jayk exclaimed and both he and Brae burst out from behind the column.

Surprise.

Fear.

The startled young woman drew in breath to scream but before she could manage it Jayk dived at her, tackling her and knocking her to floor. Reaching out his hand at the same time he used the Force to summon a cushion from a nearby couch and as soon as he caught hold of it he pressed the corner into the woman's mouth as he pinned her to the floor.

"I'm a Jedi knight. I'm not going to hurt you." Jayk said to her while Brae looked around, her lightsaber in her hand as she watched for any signs that the brief struggle had been overheard by anyone and the woman stopped struggling, "Good. Now can you point us in the direction of the command centre?" Jayk asked and the woman extended an arm to point. Smiling Jayk looked at Brae and added, "We go that way."

"What about her?" Brae asked, "She could give us away if we take her or leave her."

"We'll have to tie her up. Can you handle that Brae?" Jayk asked and Brae smiled.

"Of course. Give her to me." she said.

Taping the woman's mouth shut first, Brae pulled her into the stairwell to bind her with synthrope while Jayk waited outside and kept watch. When the door to the stairwell opened again Jayk spun around and activated his lightsaber, noticing that the figure who emerged was not wearing the robes of a Jedi but the dress that the captive woman had worn.

"Father it's me." Brae said as she turned to face Jayk and he frowned as he deactivated his lightsaber.

"Brae what happened to your clothes?" he said sternly as he looked at the dress Brae now wore and her bare feet. Although Brae was somewhat shorter than the other woman the dress still did not reach as far as her knees and above her waist it barely covered her chest while leaving practically all of her back as well as her arms exposed.

"I thought a disguise might be in order." she said, "This way I can go ahead and there's a chance I won't be recognised."

"Brae even if you were not my daughter I would not approve of you dressing like that." Jayk told her.

"Master Yoda says that sometimes Jedi must do things in the course of an assignment they would not

normally do in their private lives. Or at least that's what I think he said. Most of the words were jumbled up." Brae said, "Besides, I don't think that there's time for me to change." Jayk frowned again. "Lead the way." he said.

Peering around a corner Brae saw a pair of pirates standing outside a large open doorway and through that she could just about see a control console.

"I think this is it. Here take this." she said softly and she handed her lightsaber to Jayk.

"Brae what are you planning?" Jayk asked as he took the weapon.

"I thought I might take a look around so we know how many pirates we're dealing with here and this outfit doesn't provide anywhere for me to hide my lightsaber." she said and Jayk frowned once again, still not happy about what Brae was wearing. However, Brae's idea of scouting ahead did seem sound and Jayk put his objections aside.

"Be careful." he said and Brae smiled before she calmly wandered around the corner and headed towards the guarded doorway.

Both guards turned to look at Brae as she approached and stared at her.

"What are you doing here?" one of them asked as he lifted his blaster.

"Hey there's no need for that." Brae replied and she lifted a hand and waved it in front of the guards, "I can go past."

"You can go past." the guard said as both armed men relaxed and lowered their weapons.

Stepping through the doorway Brae saw several pirates gathered around a central table while others sat at control consoles around the outside of the room. Clearing her mind Brae drew on the Force and willed the pirates to pay attention to their work rather than to her as she began to walk around the command centre, studying each console as she came to it. The group around the table included Connell but to Brae he looked no different to any of the other human pirates and it was only when one of them spoke she realised that he was most likely their leader.

"We should call in our ships." one of the ones at the table said, "If the Jedi report our position then-"

"And how long do you think it will take for our ships to get here?" Connell interrupted, "If the Jedi had reported our position then the Republic would already be on their way and their ships are three to four times faster than our best." then he noticed Brae in the corner of the room, "Hey, this area is restricted." he called out and Brae looked towards him, surprised that he had been able to focus on anything other than what the other pirates were telling him long enough to notice her.

"I'm sorry I was bored and just wanted to take a look around." Brae replied, "I'll get going." and she hurried towards the door, all the pirates in the room now watching her close enough that there was no chance that she would be able to manipulate them all using the Force.

"Just one thing young lady." Connell called out as Brae stepped back into the corridor and she turned back towards him, "I know all of the women we brought here." he added as he drew his blaster and fired it at Brae. Jayk's eyes widened as he saw the bright blue stun blast come from inside the command centre to strike Brae and as she collapsed in a heap to the floor he activated both of the lightsabers he was holding and charged down the corridor towards the command centre. He had seen the blue colour of the stun blast and could sense that Brae was still alive but Jayk was unwilling to leave her at the mercy of the pirates. Both guards opened fire together and Jayk began to use both lightsabers to deflect the energy blasts that came towards him. Another pirate emerged from the command centre and also raised a blaster but before he could fire Jayk was able to send one of the deflected blaster bolts in his direction and the blast hit him in the chest. Connell also burst out of the command centre but unlike the previous pirate he did not attempt to engage Jayk as he continued to swat blaster shots aside. Instead he dropped to his knees and pressed the muzzle of his blaster against the head of the unconscious Brae.

"Jedi!" he shouted and Jayk came to a sudden halt while the pirates ceased firing at him, "Drop those laser swords or my next shot into your apprentice isn't going to be set on stun."

Jayk hesitated. While he had no reason to trust Connell he could not overlook the fact that the pirate could have killed Brae with his first shot if he wanted to.

"Do it!" Connell snapped and at the same time footsteps from behind Jayk alerted him to the arrival of more armed pirates that aimed their blasters at his back.

Heavily outnumbered and believing that Connell would indeed kill Brae if he did not do as he was ordered, Jayk shut off the lightsabers he held and raised his hands. The pirates behind Jayk then rushed forwards to disarm him and pulled his arms behind his back before locking binders around his wrists.

"What do you want doing with this nerf herder boss?" one of them asked.

"I say we just shoot the pair of them." another pirate commented.

"No." Connell replied, smiling, "I think our devout followers need to be rewarded with witnessing the destruction of a pair of demons."

Brae groaned as she regained consciousness and as she opened her eyes she found herself looking down at a crowd of natives. Surprisingly she was in a standing position with her arms stretched out either side of her.

"Brae." Jayk said from beside her and when she looked towards him she saw that her father was also stood with his arms stretched out to either side. Both jedi were secured by their wrists with chains to large vertical pillars made of stone while native priests piled bundles of sticks around them.

"What's happening?" Brae said.

"I'm afraid the pirates are about to give their followers a demonstration of how to deal with demons." Jayk replied as Brae tugged at her chains.

"Quite so." Connell said as he moved to stand in front of the jedi, "Your deaths will demonstrate the protection that we bring to this world and when you return to the underworld I suggest that you warn your kind not to darken this world with your presence again." then he looked at the nearest priest and added, "You may continue."

The priest nodded his head and while Connell retreated away from the execution pyres he turned towards the crowd with his arms outstretched. He began to address the crowd in the native language and although they could not understand his words the cheering of the crowd made it clear that he was denounced the supposed evil of the jedi. Then another native walked up to him and handed him a lit torch.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tylo said as he looked at the monitor showing the feed from a forward optical sensor. Although the *Swift Exit* was still too far from the city for him to be able to make out exactly who was about to be burned to death he guessed that it was likely to be Jayk and Brae.

"Perhaps we should increase speed." Cal suggested.

"Not we. You." Tylo replied, "I need you to take over."

"I'm no combat pilot." Cal reminded him, "Point aurek to point besh and that's it."

"Well this is aurek and where Jayk and Brae are about to be barbecued is besh. Get us there while I get to the turret and flip the ship over." Tylo said.

"Flip the ship over? Are you insane?" Cal asked.

"Never ask me that." Tylo answered, "Do you have control yet?"

"Yes, I'm patched in. Get going." Cal said and Tylo leapt from the pilot's seat and ran to the turret.

Cal flew the *Swift Exit* low over the city and natives looked up and pointed the ship out to their children, believing that it was another of the vessels operated by the pirates they had been tricked into worshipping as gods. As the ship drew closer the palace where the execution was about to take place the jedi AI rolled the freighter so that its upper hull now pointed towards the ground. More significantly though so did its turret.

6.

"Dad look!" Brae exclaimed when they heard the sound of engines from overhead and Jayk looked into the sky to see the familiar shape of the *Swift Exit* flying towards them upside down, "What's Tylo doing?"

"I think it's called a rescue." Jayk responded right as the ship came to a halt about fifty metres over their heads.

Taken completely by surprise by the sudden appearance of the freighter the pirates did nothing and this gave Tylo the chance to attack. His first shot was aimed at the pillar between Jayk and Brae and both Jedi flinched as the laser cannon shattered it. He followed this up with two more rapid shots that destroyed the other two pillars, leaving the Jedi standing freely with the remains of their chains hanging from their wrists.

"Cal get us the right side up and take us down. Get that ramp open too." Tylo ordered over the intercom and the *Swift Exit* rolled again and began to descend.

"Brae we have to jump." Jayk said as the pirates finally came to their senses and began to advance towards them while the native crowd as well as the priests just looked on dumbfounded. Brae nodded and both Jedi leapt up into the air, channelling the Force to give them enough of a boost that they were able to reach the now open access ramp of the *Swift Exit* and they both ran up into the hold. Jayk slammed his hand down on the control to close the ramp behind them and then activated the intercom.

"Tylo we need to take out the pirates' communications." he said.

"Fine. But you may need to take over. I've got Cal acting as pilot right now." Tylo responded from the turret.

"I'm on it." Jayk replied and he and Brae ran from the hold to the cockpit.

"Thank goodness you're both okay." Cal said and then his image frowned when he saw Brae, "What happened to your clothes?" he asked.

"Long story." Brae replied as she and Jayk sat down.

Taking hold of the controls Jayk accelerated the *Swift Exit* forwards before banking sharply. This brought the antenna array on the roof of the pirate headquarters into Tylo's field of fire and with one rapid volley of fire from the laser cannon he destroyed it, cutting the pirates on the ground off from their fleet.

"Excellent shooting Tylo. Now are there any pirate ships in orbit?" Jayk said.

"Just one." Tylo replied from the turret, "A transport but it's unarmed."

"We still need to destroy it." Jayk said, "It can't be allowed to leave or send word of our arrival to the rest of the pirate fleet."

"What are you planning exactly?" Tylo asked.

"Simple. If the pirates can't warn any of their ships in other systems then they can't call for reinforcements to defend them against a Republic anti-piracy squadron. Then as their ships return here with their stolen cargoes they'll have no warning about the ships waiting to intercept them."

"It's a trap." Brae added.

"I'm taking us up now." Jayk said, pulling back on the controls and the *Swift Exit* began to gain altitude.

"Coming up on the freighter now." Cal said as they left the atmosphere, "Looks like she's turning away from us."

"Well we're faster than she is." Jayk said, "Tylo are you ready?"

"Sure. Lining her up now."

Bright red blasts of laser fire shot from the *Swift Exit*'s cannon as it overtook the freighter and the ship was wracked by explosions along its entire length. Then there was a brilliant flash of light as the ship exploded behind the *Swift Exit*.

"Cal are we ready to jump?" Jayk asked.

"Co-ordinates to Coruscant locked in. Ten seconds until we clear the gravity well." Cal replied and he waited until the ship was free of the planet's gravity before adding, "Now!"

Jayk immediately triggered the hyperdrive and the *Swift Exit* jumped into hyperspace, bound for Coruscant at which point he allowed himself to finally relax.

"Now it's up to the Republic." he said to Brae.

"So," Tylo said as he then appeared in the doorway behind them, "Who's going to thank me for saving your lives first?" then before either of the Jedi could respond he looked at Brae and frowned as he added, "Hey kid, what happened to your clothes?"