

# STAR WARS

## DARKNESS RISING

2-06: FUN & GAMES

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A series of killings by lightsaber brings the crew of the *Swift Exit* to Arkania, hoping not only to find the killers but also to advance their search for Thal N'Krey...

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# 1.

The streets were dark in this part of the enclosed city on the frozen planet of Arkania. The authorities had long since stopped attempting to maintain the illuminator units after they were repeatedly vandalised by beings intending to strip them of their internal parts to sell or just for the supposed thrill of causing damage to public property. Despite the dangers this presented there were still a considerable number of beings in the area though, primarily those who wanted to remain somewhere that their actions would not be monitored by the authorities thanks to the police avoiding the area almost as much as other ordinary people after dark. One individual, a large devaronian studied the others present in search of his next victim. His method of operating was straight forward, he would pick a target physically smaller than he was and use the threat of violence from a brandished blaster to intimidate them into handing over valuables. So far his threats had always been enough to get his victims to comply and in over a hundred robberies he had not once found it necessary to use the weapon, fortunately for the devaronian since it meant that his crimes remained minor enough that the police were not making them a priority but more importantly because the blaster did not function. Normally the devaronian's targets were other beings who made their home in this area of town but on this night he set his sights on something different.

Normally he would pick a single target but on this occasion he saw a group of four beings that clearly did not belong in this part of town. Everyone else, the devaronian included, wore clothing that was old and patched or holed where it was most badly worn. But these four figures all wore cloaks that may have hidden their features but could not hide the fact that they had obviously spent a great deal of money on them.

Smiling, the devaronian crossed the street and followed the cloaked figures for a while so he could watch their movements. He noticed that they moved slowly and even though he could not see their heads under their hooded cloaks he knew that they were looking around a great deal and this suggested to him that they did not know the area at all. The obvious conclusion was that they were not from the local area and had accidentally wandered into this part of the city while trying to get somewhere else.

"Excuse me!" he called out to them, rushing around them so that he stood in front of them and from what little he could see of their faces under their hoods he guessed that they were all either human or some similar species such as the native arkanians. The devaronian considered this a stroke of good luck, many humans found his species intimidating thanks to their resemblance to malevolent supernatural beings from the religious beliefs that they held and this made them easy to intimidate, "You look lost." he said, "Perhaps I can assist you."

"Thank you yes," one of the hooded figures, obviously a male from the deepness of his voice, "I think you have it in you to be most helpful. If you could just find us a way out of this area then you will be rewarded." and from beneath his cloak the figure produced several coins. It was only then that the devaronian saw the clawed digits of the figure's hand and he knew that he was dealing with a pure bloodied arkanian rather than one of the offshoots or another alien visitor like himself.

"Very generous." the devaronian said as he took coins, knowing that the hooded figures would be carrying far more than he had just been given. Then he looked around, considering where the best place to lure his victims to was, "If you'd like to come this way," he said, waving at the hooded figures to follow him, "I can get you off these streets."

The devaronian led the four hooded figures into an alleyway where he saw no other beings to witness what he did next.

"Is this the right way?" another of the hooded figures asked and the devaronian grinned as he drew his blaster and then spun around and aimed it at the head of the nearest figure.

"Oh it's the right way alright." he said, "Now hand over the rest of your money. I'll take jewellery and-" but before he could complete his demand there was a humming sound and a flash of red as the figure he was pointing his 'weapon' at drew a weapon of his own. This was a long blade that had been concealed under his cloak and he brought it upwards to slice effortlessly through the devaronian's wrist, sending his hand and the blaster dropping to the floor.

Too stunned to cry out, the devaronian clamped his remaining hand over the stump of his wrist and he staggered backwards and stared at the hooded figures as each of them produced a blade that hummed as it glowed red and advanced towards him.

"Yes," the lead figure, "you have been most helpful. Now here is your reward."

On the street the alleyway led off few of the beings present even bothered to turn towards the sound of the scream before they continued on their way, anxious to get to where they were going before anything unfortunate could happen to them.

The YT-700 class light freighter *Swift Exit* was dark and empty as Brae Udra crept aboard in the middle of

the night while it stood unguarded in the main hangar of the Jedi temple on Coruscant. Knowing the layout of the ship she had spent the last six months travelling the galaxy on by heart, the padawan was able to make her way into the lounge area without needing to turn any of the lights on and begin to make herself a drink. "Trouble sleeping?" a male voice said and a pale glow illuminated the lounge as the hologram of a man in Jedi robes appeared behind Brae, projected from the fist sized crystalline cube on a nearby shelf.

"Cal!" she exclaimed as she jumped, "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"I'm a hologram. I can't sneak up on anyone." Cal replied, "So how about you tell me what's keeping you awake if not the stimulant properties of that hot chocolate you're making."

Brae sighed as she finished preparing her drink.

"Dreams." she said.

"Ah, dreams. The bane of a Jedi's life." Cal said, "I can remember having a number of them that it was difficult to determine whether they were a message from the Force or just the result of a meal that hadn't settled well. They all passed in time of course. The dreams that is, as the meals – well that's something my creator didn't provide me with much information about. So how about you tell your great, great, great whatever Grandfather Cal about your dreams?"

"There was a man." Brae said, sitting down at the table, "I think he was supposed to be my father. All I know for certain is that he was angry about something, being lied to I think. But I can't help but wonder whether I'm remembering what happened when the Jedi Order came to take me away. Did my father try to stop them? I think it was them that he was angry at in my dream."

"Ah yes, you've raised such fears before." Cal said, "During that little incident with the youth whose mother kept him hidden from the Jedi Order."

"You knew your father didn't you Cal?" Brae said and Cal smiled and nodded,

"Yes, in fact I served under him for a time. My mother as well and of course with Lara as her instructor for a time."

"Did you have to calm Lara's fears over bad dreams?"

"Actually my sister preferred to confide in our mother rather than me for that sort of thing." Cal answered.

"A shame she didn't create a holocron then. I'd have liked her input on this." Brae said and she took a quick sip of her drink, lowering the mug when she found it too hot still, "Why was that? If you created a holocron then why didn't your sister?"

"She never had the opportunity." Cal said after a brief hesitation.

"Something happened to her didn't it?" Brae asked and Cal hesitated again.

"She died." he said, "Alone and afraid, waiting for me to come and save her but I was too late."

"How?" Brae said, frowning.

"A man I had considered a friend for a long time betrayed us both. I was lucky to escape with my life but the Force wasn't with Lara that day and it cost her her life. If ever I was at risk of turning to the Dark Side then it was from the anger I felt that day. Fortunately I had others to turn to and I was able to get her the justice she deserved without giving in to the temptation of the Dark Side."

"That's why the Jedi Code forbids Jedi to marry isn't it?" Brae said.

"Yes, the fear of loss is a path to the Dark Side and many Jedi that have fallen have done so because of having something in their life that they could not bear to lose. Of course if the Code had been taken as literally in my day as it is now then none of us would be here. Mind you there were still some Jedi who took the Code as seriously back then as well. I even worked with some. In fact I met one purely because he thought I had let my affection for Lara go too far."

"What, after she was killed?"

"No, well before that. Lara was accused of killing someone and I refused to see her dragged off to prison for a crime I didn't think she had committed, even just while the murder was being investigated so I freed her and we both went into hiding. A man called Tarris Blake came to hunt us both down. Fortunately when he finally caught up with us he could tell that neither of us were being influenced by the Dark Side. We also had another witness willing to testify on our behalf soon after as well so we were able to" Cal explained, "But right now I'm interested in why you'd rather be here than in your bed or even getting a drink of hot chocolate from the refectory. Are you perhaps also seeking to avoid your fellow padawans?"

"Kind of." Brae replied, "There are always some awake. It's not like they want me around either."

Cal's hologram smiled.

"Then I suggest you leave that hot chocolate on the table where it is and instead sleep in your bunk here. If your dreams continue to trouble you then I'll be right here to discuss them with you." he said.

"Thanks, I'll do that." Brae said, pushing the mug to the centre of her table as she got to her feet and started to walk towards the single cabin that made up the *Swift Exit's* crew quarters. However, before she could even get to the door leading out of the lounge area she heard her comlink chirping and she reached for the device, "Hello?" she said.

"Brae, I'm sorry to wake you." a man's voice said.

"Uncle Jayk?" Brae said, recognising it immediately, "What's wrong?"

"I've just been told that we're being deployed to Arkania as soon as possible." Jayk told her, "How soon can you meet me and Tylo on the *Swift Exit*?"

"Actually I'm already aboard the ship. I was having trouble sleeping and came here to try and relax."

"Very good, I'll locate Tylo and meet you there soon." Jayk replied and then the channel went silent.

The stars outside blurred into the bright tunnel of lights of hyperspace and Tylo turned in the pilot's seat to look at Jayk.

"Okay, so how about you tell me why I was woken in the middle of the night to head out into the Colonies Region?" he asked.

"I think it's better if I brief everyone at once." Jayk said, "How long until we reach Arkania?"

"About a day and a half. I don't see how letting me sleep in a little longer would have hurt."

"The request was made by the Arkanian government and was marked highest priority." Jayk replied, "I'll brief everyone in the lounge."

Brae was reading from a datapad when Jayk and Tylo entered the lounge.

"I'm just saying that if it was so urgent then the Jedi Order could have sent you on one of their consular-class ships. It would knock a good half a day off your travel time."

"Our travel time." Jayk pointed out, "Even if we were sent on a different ship you would still be accompanying us."

"What is the urgency master?" Brae said as she lowered the datapad.

"Cal are you there?" Jayk said, looking at the holocron and Cal's hologram appeared.

"Of course." he said.

"Cal what can you tell us about Arkania?" Jayk asked and in addition to the hologram of Cal, an image of a planet almost totally covered in ice appeared in the air inside the lounge.

"Arkania is a largely frozen planet that is rich in diamonds and it is the trade in these that brought the planet a great deal on contact with the outside galaxy. The arkanians themselves are a near-human species, many of which can pass for human with little effort. But they are known for the arrogance and sense of superiority over other species. Aliens on their world generally belong to the lower social classes."

"Excuse me, but did you say 'many' of them can pass for human?" Tylo said.

"Did you just say 'excuse me'?" Brae commented.

"The Arkanians are known for the skill at genetic manipulation," Cal explained, "and it should also be said that historically their researchers have had few, if any, scruples about experimenting on their own people. Now there are many offshoots of the baseline arkanian species. The purest have plain white eyes and clawed hands with four digits whereas human DNA was used to create the offshoots and therefore, these are far more human like in their appearance."

"What about their world's history?" Jayk asked, already knowing what to expect in reply.

"Initially the planet was discovered by scouts from the Republic about twenty thousand years ago. But during the course of the Alsakan Conflicts all contact was severed and it was during this time that most of the more blatant abuses of genetic manipulation occurred. Then about six and a half thousand years ago the planet was rediscovered, only this time by the expanding Sith Empire. The Sith of course occupied the planet and exploited not only its mineral wealth but also its scientific knowledge, establishing a great library of their own on the planet that was destroyed at the end of the Great Hyperspace War."

"Let me guess." Tylo said, looking at Jayk, "The Jedi Order carried out a purge of the planet to remove all Sith influences but now it looks like something got missed."

"Correct." Jayk replied, "One of the planet's law enforcement bodies has reported what could be a series of events perpetrated by someone making use of Sith knowledge."

"So why us?" Brae said.

"Because in addition to clues pointing towards the involvement of the Sith, Thal N'Krey has also been implicated." Jayk replied, referring to the missing kiffar artist who was known for his depictions of the Sith in his art and had come into possession of numerous Sith artefacts before his disappearance.

## 2.

Most of the Arkanian city was built under a large ferrocrete dome but there were several clusters of towers that extended upwards from this and it was towards one of these that Tylo piloted the *Swift Exit* as it entered the planet's atmosphere. The weather was poor as Tylo piloted the ship and he was forced to rely on the city's navigational beacon until he saw the powerful external lights mounted on the towers to prevent approaching craft from crashing into them during the frequently bad weather.

"The is *Swift Exit* calling traffic control, requesting permission to dock." Tylo signalled.

"Confirmed *Swift Exit*, we have been expecting you. Proceed to tower trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight. Bay door opening now." the controller responded and Tylo saw another light appear as a hangar set into a tower opened to permit the *Swift Exit* to land.

The hangar was clearly meant for government vehicles and as Tylo set the *Swift Exit* down inside it he saw several well armed gunships as well as a number of search and rescue craft.

"Looks like we have a welcoming committee." Tylo announced over the intercom when he saw a pair of arkanians stood beside the main exit from the hangar, neither of whom were dressed in the overalls of the ground crews visible working on the other craft present.

These two arkanians, a male and a female, approached the *Swift Exit* and were waiting at the bottom of the access ramp as the crew came walking down it.

"I am Jedi Udra." Jayk announced, "This is my padawan learner Brae and Captain Kurrast."

"Greetings Jedi Udra." the female arkanian responded, "I am Captain Durrin and this is my deputy, Detective Kath. We are grateful that you could come so quickly."

"Could you explain exactly what it is that you need us for?" Jayk asked, "The information provided to us on Coruscant was limited."

"It's perhaps easier if I show you." Durrin replied, "Come with me and I'll take you to the investigation room."

"Of course. Please lead the way." Jayk said.

The arkanian law enforcement officers led the newly arrived group to a turbolift cluster that then took them all further down the tower to where their offices were located. This was not a police station every type of minor crime was handled and there were no crowds of uniformed officers or criminals being processed. Instead this set of offices was dedicated to managing the investigations of more serious offences. There was also an entire section dedicated to laboratories equipped to carry out the most detailed forensic analysis on site. Durrin showed the crew of the *Swift Exit* in to one of these offices where one wall was dominated by a display screen on which details of the case under investigation could be displayed. As the jedi looked at the wall mounted display it initially appeared as if several different cases were all being investigated in the same room before similarities in the notes accompanying the images made it clear that the investigating authorities were treating all of these as parts of a much larger investigation.

"What the hell is going on here?" Tylo said while he stared at the images of bodies lying in pools of their own blood, their bodies all cut wide open.

"Over what period of time did these killings take place?" Jayk asked, briefly looking away from the display towards Durrin.

"This was the first one." she replied, walking over to the wall and pointing to the image of a dismembered duros, "He was a labourer found dead in his apartment about ten weeks ago."

"Ten weeks?" Brae said, "Why weren't we called in sooner?"

"Because until yesterday we didn't think that we were dealing with anything more than a group of sick weirdos." Durrin said, "We found another victim every week or two on varying days until yesterday we were called to the scene of this killing." and she walked all the way along the wall to where a devaronian was picture, "This guy was some petty street thug who locals say made a living out of robbing beings that he thought wouldn't put up a fight."

"Is that blaster his?" Tylo asked, pointing to the image of a blaster close to the body and Durrin nodded.

"His fingerprints were on the weapon, though it wasn't functional. The plasma accelerator coil was split and the power cell was depleted." she replied.

"So what made his killing so much different to the others?" Brae said.

"Two things." Durrin replied, "Firstly we had an eye witness. A local heard our victim scream and looked out of a window to see a group of hooded figures set upon him with what were described as weapons possessing glowing red blades."

"Like Sith lightsabers." Brae commented, glancing at Jayk.

"Secondly," Durrin went on, "there was physical evidence left inside the body."

"Inside?" Tylo said and he winced.

"Yes. The devaronian, like all of the other victims was killed by multiple stab wounds from weapons that cut

easily through flesh. But the other mutilation you can see here, the removal of the eyes and heart were all carried out using a more conventional curved blade. Not only was our witness was able to give something of a description of this but part of the tip actually broke off against one of the devaronian's ribs. That led us to your artist."

"How exactly?" Jayk asked.

"Well the blade wasn't made of the hardened alloy you'd expect it to. Instead it was manufactured from something much more lightweight. In addition the description matched that of an ornamental dagger stolen from a private residence about six months ago. The dagger was one of several items commissioned from Thal N'Krey. As soon as we put his name into the Republic's Judicial Department database it was flagged and we were instructed to inform the Jedi Order."

"So Thal N'Krey was here?" Brae said, "When?"

"We checked and found no evidence of his having received an entry stamp at any starport. But then when we checked further we found a record of a purchase in his name at a starship repair workshop. It seems he needed parts to repair a vessel so we're working on the assumption that he had his own ship and landed it at a private facility. Possibly one owned by his customer, the man who reported the dagger stolen."

"None of the victims were arkanian." Tylo said, pointing at each of images of the victims' bodies.

"No," Durrin said, "all of the victims were born off world and-" then before she could finish her sentence another of the investigation staff came hurrying over to her.

"Captain," he said, "we've just got a call about another body."

"I think we should see this." Jayk said.

The body had been found in a turbolift car inside an office building, the interior of which was now splattered with blood.

"Cause of death was multiple stab wounds." an arkanian detective said to Durrin when she and the crew of the *Swift Exit* arrived.

"Do you know who she was?" Brae asked as she looked down at the remains of the dead woman, a human female who looked not much older than Brae herself. But rather than answering the question the detective turned towards Durrin again and frowned at her.

"We are here by the request of your own government." Jayk said sternly, sensing the hostility of the detective towards them as aliens to the planet.

"Answer the question." Durrin told the detective.

"Her name was Geena Fortin. Her immigration visa was as a student but she's not enrolled at any colleges. On the other hand we did find the keys to a speeder in her pocket and the speeder in the parking lot downstairs had a permit marked with the name 'Ice Beam Club'."

"That place across the street?" Durrin commented and the detective nodded.

"It looks like she worked there." he said.

"She was a dancer." Tylo commented, crouching close by the body, "Look at her shoes." and he pointed to the shoes the victim had been wearing when she died, now covered with blood just like almost everything else around her, "Those are dancing shoes and they're well worn."

"An expert on dancers are you Captain Kurrast?" Durrin said and Tylo smiled.

"He's an expert on getting them to do some rather more horizontal movement." Brae said and Jayk glared at her.

"True." Tylo said, "I've chatted up plenty of dancers in cantinas all across the galaxy and along the way I've heard a lot of them talk about their shoes. They're pretty important things to someone that makes a living on their feet."

"Or their backs." Brae added.

"Brae." Jayk said. Then he looked at Durrin, "Did any of the other victims have any connection to this club?" he asked.

"I don't think so." Durrin said as she took out her datapad and started to browse through the details of the victims.

"Wait!" Tylo snapped when he noticed something in one of the images, "Can you zoom in on the hand?"

"Why?" Durrin asked.

"Just do it, okay? I've got a hunch." Tylo said and Jayk nodded in agreement.

"Tylo's experience in clubs and bars may be of use here captain." he said and Durrin sighed.

"Okay." she said and she zoomed the image in on the hand of the victim, causing Tylo to smile.

"I knew it." he said.

"Knew what? A tattoo?" Brae said as she looked at the coloured mark on the back of the victim's hand.

"Not a tattoo, a door stamp." Jayk said.

"I'm surprised you know about those things." Tylo said and now it was Jayk's turn to smile.

"When I was a padawan a group of us used to sneak out to a club near the temple while claiming we were heading to the local university instead." he said, "Then we'd try as hard as we could to scrub the stamp off

our hands before we went back so the temple guardians wouldn't realise where we'd really been."

"Did it work?" Tylo asked.

"No. In fact the guardians were sometimes waiting right outside the club when we left it." Jayk said.

"So our victim had been to a club." Durrin said, "It shouldn't take much to check on which one."

"I'll bet twenty credits that it was the Ice Beam." Tylo said, "In fact I bet that if you look hard enough you'll find a connection to that club from more of the victims."

Durrin stared at Tylo.

"Thank you captain but I do know how to do my job. I'm familiar enough with the idea of serial killers picking up their victims from the same places over and over again."

"Perhaps Cal could look at that master." Brae suggested to Jayk, "You know how good he is at picking out obscure patterns." and Jayk nodded.

"Yes, I think you're right." he said.

"Who's Cal?" Durrin asked, "I thought that there were just the three of you."

"Cal is an advisor of sorts." Jayk told her, "If you could copy all of the case files to our vessel then he should be able to go through them while our attention is focused elsewhere."

"Elsewhere?" Tylo said, "Where?"

"I want to speak to whoever that dagger was stolen from." Jayk told him.



### 3.

Unlike most of the private residences in the enclosed city, where space was at a premium, the home of Karst Morrunda occupied a large area of ground and even included a small and neatly maintained lawn all around it. Jayk had insisted that Karst not be informed beforehand that the crew of the *Swift Exit* would be coming to visit him so their arrival at his home came as a surprise.

"Mister Morrunda is very busy." the servant, a member of one of the arkanian offshoot species said, "Could you come back?"

"You will take me to your master now." Jayk said, using the Force to push the idea into the mind of the servant.

"I will take you to Mister Morrunda now." the servant replied, stepping aside to allow the group to enter the house.

Karst was sat at a desk reviewing a scrolling feed of financial information when the servant showed the group in to see him and he scowled.

*Anger.*

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, "I said that I was not to be disturbed."

"Mister Morrunda." Jayk said, producing his datapad, "My name is Jedi Udra and I believe that you reported this item stolen some time ago." and he held out the device to show Karst a picture of the stolen dagger that accompanied his original crime report.

"Yes I did." he said, his mood lightening, "One of my staff must have taken it. That's why I fired them all and hired a new one. Has it been found?"

"Part of it has." Tylo commented and Karst frowned.

"Not exactly." Jayk added, "I'm sorry to inform you Mister Morrunda but your dagger has been used in a series of murders in the city."

*Surprise.*

*Fear.*

"I hope you're not here to accuse me of-" Karst began.

"You are not under investigation Mister Morrunda." Jayk interrupted, "But we are interested in the circumstances surrounding your acquisition of the item."

"Oh it's not real if that's what you're insinuating Jedi Udra. I'm well aware of the restrictions placed on the ownership of Sith artefacts. But some time ago I commissioned an artist to produce several works based off Sith creations."

"Why would you do that?" Brae asked.

"Because young lady one of my ancestors was killed by the Sith when they controlled this world and my family has maintained something of an interest in that period of our history." Karst answered.

"And the artist you hired was Thal N'Krey?" Jayk said and Karst nodded.

"It was. I paid him several thousand credits as a deposit and then he vanished for a month. I was thinking I'd been cheated when all of a sudden he turned up on my doorstep again with what he'd promised and more and demanded the rest of his payment."

"So did you pay him?" Tylo asked.

"Of course, I'm not a thief. The work was rather good as well."

"You said that he created multiple items for you." Jayk said, "What happened to the others?"

"Oh they're upstairs." Karst replied, smiling, "Allow me to show you."

*Pride.*

Jayk and Brae exchanged glances, sensing that Karst was eager to be able to show off the art that had been created for him. The arkanian led his unexpected guests upstairs to a hallway that was lined with paintings and alcoves that contained sculptures mounted on plinths, one of which stood empty. In total there were just over a dozen pieces of art on display in the hallway.

"This is where the dagger was kept." Karst said, pointing to the empty plinth, "There were no signs of a break in so it had to have been an inside job. But even after having the homes of all my former staff thoroughly searched it has not been found. I've been trying to locate the artist so that I can commission a replacement but he hasn't responded to any of my requests."

Tylo snorted.

"Common problem." he said, "That's become a hard man to find. We've been hunting him for months."

"I don't sense anything strange about any of these other items." Jayk said as he looked along the hallway.

"Neither do I. None of them are original Sith artefacts." Brae added and Karst frowned.

"Of course not. I already told you that." he said.

"I'm sorry Mister Morrunda." Jayk replied, "Unfortunately Thal N'Krey came into possession of an unknown

number of Sith artefacts and some of these became mixed up with his own creations. That is why we are so interested in his activities.”

“Thal may still have put other interesting things into these.” Brae pointed out and Jayk nodded.

“Quite so my young apprentice. Thal's habit of including fragments of Sith knowledge in his own work means that there could still be some aspect of these works that makes them dangerous.” then he looked at Karst, “We'll need to inspect them more closely.” he said, “It would be easier if you just gave us your permission.” “You won't need to take them away will you?” Karst asked.

“No, we can examine them here. But if any appear to be covered under the prohibition on Sith lore then we will have to impound them.” Jayk answered.

“Very well. I'll see to it that you are not disturbed.” Karst said and he turned around to walk back down the hallway towards the stairs. As he descended them he encountered his son who as just about to leave the house.

“Guests father?” the young man asked.

“Of a sort Tarmas. Jedi.”

“Jedi?”

“Yes, they're here to inspect the artwork that kiffar created for me. Apparently the missing dagger has now been linked to a series of murders. As if having it stolen wasn't bad enough. Now even if it's recovered I may never get it back and according to the jedi the artist has just disappeared completely.”

“That's a shame father.” Tarmas said, “Anyway I must be going now.”

“Off to meet your friends to work on that university project again Tarmas?”

“Yes father, we're not far off completing it now. We just need a few more things and then it's all done.” Tarmas replied, smiling. Then he left the house and made his way towards the garage where his personal speeder was kept. Along the way he took out his communicator and called up one of the contacts listed in its database, “It's me.” he said as soon as the call was picked up but before the person on the other end could say anything, “We may have a problem. There are jedi at my house now asking about the dagger. I've got a very bad feeling about this.”

“There's writing on this one.” Tylo said as he looked closely at a silver coloured statue of an armoured warrior wielding a lightsaber.

“Let me see.” Jayk replied as he moved away from the framed drawing he had been looking at to see what Tylo had found.

Meanwhile Brae stepped from one painting to another and found herself looking at a representation of some sort of Sith ritual with a circle of hooded figures surrounding an altar. The image was split however, with the ritual being shown in the bottom half while at the top there was a depiction of a structure silhouetted against the horizon and Brae frowned.

“what's wrong?” Jayk asked, looking towards his padawan when he sensed her reaction to the painting.

“These figures.” she replied, pointing to the painting, “They look like the way the killers were described. Cloaked, hooded and all carrying lightsabers. While the one in the middle is carrying a knife.”

“Seems pretty standard to me.” Tylo said, “I've seen loads of movies about cults with scenes like that. Minus the lightsabers of course, but there's nothing novel about it.”

Brae kept staring at the picture though, focusing on the figures standing in the circle.

“I don't know.” she said, “I just get a very bad feeling about this. As if it means something important.”

## 4.

Surrounded by other hooded figures in the ancient chamber, Tarmas lowered his hood and looked around. Immediately in front of him was a simple stone altar on which stood a row of jars containing the hearts and eyes he and his associates had removed from their victims while in the middle of all of these was a badly damaged book that lay open on a page that mixed bizarre diagrams with strange writing and beside that a strange device consisting of a multi-sided lens held in a metal frame that also connected to an organic eyeball.

"Our time approaches," he announced, "According to the text we need just one more heart saturated with the pain and fear of death to provide us with enough Dark Side energy to complete the final ritual. Then all of us will be able to tap into the same power that gave the Sith an empire."

"But what about the Jedi?" one of the hooded figures added, "Won't they try and stop us?"

"They will but they will fail." Tarmas said, "They still have no idea that our group exists and we will be finished with our work before they can find out. Remember that I actually spoke to Thal N'Krey and without him I would never have found this place. On the other hand the Jedi don't even know where he is, let alone even suspect that this place exists even if they have noticed it in that painting. After we are done with the ritual there is nothing they can do about us. We aren't babies who can be ripped from their mothers' arms and taken to their temple. The Republic itself guarantees our liberty."

"They can still attempt to try us for murder." another of the hooded figures added.

"The Jedi don't care about murders and no-one on Arkania cares enough about a few aliens to keep an investigation going for long. As long as we're careful about not using our power to do anything obviously illegal the Jedi Order won't be able to touch us and we'll be able to get anything we want." a third figure said, "We need only one more victim and then we can proceed. This time next week we'll be on our way to ruling this entire sector."

"So what do we do about the last victim we need? Where do we find them?" the first of the hooded figures to have spoken asked.

"We'll go back to the club." Tarmas said, "That's been our best hunting ground so far and I don't see why it shouldn't be again. I'll handle the choice myself, I just need three of you again to make sure it goes right."

"Did you come up with anything interesting?" Cal asked when the *Swift Exit's* crew returned to the ship.

"Not unless you consider staring at paintings that don't depend on nudity for their artistic appeal interesting."

Tylo responded as he sat down and put his feet on the table. Then he looked at Brae as she walked towards the kitchen unit, "Hey kid, how about you toss me a beer?"

Frowning, Brae removed a bottle of beer from the fridge.

"Tylo was hoping for some more images of Vallani Mellet I think." she said before tossing the bottle towards him. However, when he reached out to catch it she used the Force to bring it to a rapid halt and leave it floating in mid air while she smiled at his attempts to reach it.

"Brae, that is not a suitable use for your powers." Jayk said sternly. Then he also reached out through the Force and summoned the bottle to his own hand, smiling at Tylo as he opened it and took a drink.

Scowling, Tylo got up again to fetch himself a drink.

"So what about you?" he asked, glancing at Cal's hologram.

"The arkanians sent me everything they had on the murder victims and the circumstances surrounding their deaths." Cal responded.

"And did you find anything to connect them to the Ice Beam Club?" Jayk asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes. Though if I hadn't known to be looking for it I wouldn't have. The most recent victim didn't have a direct connection but he was found so close that I'm inclined to believe that his killers chose him after they failed to find a victim at the club itself. Then we have a taxi driver who wasn't logged as picking up any fares that night but whose associates said it was common to evade laws on picking up passengers without a prior booking and that he frequently worked the club area. After that we have a sixteen year old girl."

"Isn't sixteen too young to gain entry to a club?" Brae asked.

"I would expect so." Jayk said,

"It is." Cal agreed, "I checked. But on the night that she was killed her friends said that she was with them when they tried to get into the club. They all succeeded but she was turned back at the door. Her killers probably saw her heading off alone and followed her. Then I found purchases of drinks inside the club logged against all of the other victims. My guess is that they met someone inside who arranged to meet them at a later date only for them to be ambushed and killed."

"Obviously we need to look more closely at this club." Jayk said, "Which presents us with the obvious

problem of how much any of us is likely to stand out there.”

“What if we asked the owners to be able to place surveillance equipment inside?” Brae suggested but Tylo shook his head.

“The club owners have to be high on our list of suspects.” he said.

“They are.” Jayk agreed.

“Mind you,” Tylo said as a smile appeared on his face, “there is one of us who could go in there and mingle with those hip youngsters.” and he turned his head towards Brae.

“No.” Jayk said.

“How am I supposed to blend in wearing jedi robes?” Brae added.

“Change.” Tylo said.

“And what happens when I get asked for ID?” Brae asked and Tylo waved his hand.

“You do this and say 'you don't need to see my identification'.” he said.

“I said 'no'.” Jayk said again.

“So what's your idea then?” Tylo asked and Jayk frowned.

“I don't have one.” he admitted.

“What about you Cal? Did you ever have to do something like this?” Tylo asked.

“Well I did have to infiltrate the strip club where my sister earned three hundred and two credits.” Cal answered and the others all stared at him, “She kept the outfit as well. What little of it there was.”

“Do you think I could do it?” Brae said to him.

“I don't see why not.” Cal replied.

“But I don't know anything about going to clubs.” Brae pointed out.

“It's easy. You go in, you go the bar and buy your first drink. Sip it slowly and with any luck by the time you need a refill some guy will be offering to pay for it.” Tylo said.

“But what about clothes? Or make up?” Brae said.

“Oh that's easy. Just look it up on the local public data network. There's bound to be hundreds of amateurs offering tips.” Tylo said.

“Amateurs?” Brae commented.

“Yeah, professionals will be pushing what corporations want you to wear. Look for reviews and virtual personal profiles to see what ordinary people think.” Tylo told her.

“I've got a bad feeling about this.” Jayk said.

“And you are right to.” Cal said, “But I don't see any other way.”

“Very well.” Jayk said and he produced a credit stick from his robes, “Brae here are two thousand credits. Use them to purchase what you need. Tylo and I will remain just a comlink call away at all times.”

Brae smiled and dashed over to Jayk, grabbing the credit stick off him.

“I won't let you down I promise.” she said as she then ran towards the *Swift Exit's* access ramp.

“Brae you haven't looked up what you need yet.” Jayk called out after her.

“Brae are you ready yet?” Jayk called out from the lounge towards the crew quarters where Brae had gone to get changed.”

“Err, kind of.” she replied.

“So get out here.” Tylo shouted and moments later Brae appeared in the doorway wearing her jedi robe.

However, her face that was usually devoid of make up now sported brightly coloured lips and eyelids while there were several streaks of colour in her normally blonde hair.

“I thought you were getting changed.” Jayk said.

“This doesn't feel right.” Brae replied and she staggered towards the table.

“Are you drunk?” Tylo asked.

“No, it's these shoes. How am I supposed to walk in them?” Brae said and she lifted a foot to reveal a high heeled shoe in place of the flat boots she ordinarily wore.

“Carefully.” Cal said, “At least that's what my wife told me when she wore them. Of course there were several times that she ranted about how she never would again.”

“I think we're still missing the obvious here.” Tylo said, “How's the outfit?”

“Like I said, it just doesn't feel right.” Brae said.

“Brae if you can't do this-” Jayk began.

“No, I can do it master.” Brae interrupted and she removed her robe to reveal the outfit she wore that consisted of a short skirt and a top that left her shoulders and stomach exposed, “But this skirt feels too short. It looked fine in the holographic simulation in the store, but now I'm wearing it I'm not so sure.” and she began to tug at the bottom of the skirt.

“One piece of advice Brae.” Tylo said, holding up his index finger, “If you keep tugging like that you'll pull that skirt down around your ankles and then you really will attract a lot of attention.”

Cal sighed.

“Just like when Lara became a stripper.” he said.

"I am sure you'll do fine Brae." Jayk said.

"Yeah," Tylo added, "just remember not to bend over and keep your legs together when you sit down."

"Thanks." Brae said sarcastically.

"I know you can't take your lightsaber with you in case the club bouncers find it, but what about your comlink?" Jayk asked and Brae brushed back her hair to reveal the device clipped over her ear.

"Tylo found this for me." she said, "It's easier than having to try and find an ordinary hand held type in a hurry."

"A little something I acquired on an older job where I needed both of my hands free." Tylo commented.

"I shan't ask about the nature of it." Jayk replied and he turned to Brae again, "Very well, let's get you to the club." he told her.

## 5.

Jayk and Tylo dropped Brae off a short walk away from the Ice Beam club but she found the final part of the journey difficult thanks to her being unused to walking in the shoes she had chosen. However, it was still only a few minutes before she found herself standing in the line of young beings waiting to gain entrance to the club. The overwhelming majority of these were arkanians of one form or another and they looked to be a few years older than Brae. Those in the line immediately ahead of and behind Brae ignored her presence there and it was not until she reached the front on the line that she was spoken to when one of the bouncers glared at her.

"Identification." he said, holding out his hand.

"You don't need to see my identification." Brae replied, waving her hand she used the Force to push the idea that she was old enough to be admitted to the club into the bouncer's mind. Employed for physical strength over the ability to reason, this turned out to be rather easy.

"We don't need to see her identification." the bouncer said to the other three standing behind him.

"I can go inside." Brae added with another subtle wave of her hand.

"Go inside." the bouncer said, pulling open the rope barrier that was all that blocked the way into the club and Brae hurried inside before any of the other bouncers could realise that something strange had just taken place.

The inside of the club was darker than Brae had expected with only a few bright light sources scattered around the large dance floor. Set below ground level, Brae had to descend a flight of stairs to reach the dance floor and she did so slowly so that she could use the height advantage as a means of surveying the layout of the club. Right near the bottom of the stairs was the main bar, positioned to allow the club's customers to start spending their money the moment they arrived. Meanwhile at the far end of the club Brae could see a brightly lit booth where the club's DJ was controlling the music that came from the speakers set all around the room at such a volume that Brae was not certain whether or not she would be able to concentrate enough to be able to make use of her powers if she needed to.

Just as had been the case in the line outside, Brae also saw that the overwhelming majority of those present were native arkanians and that most of the members of other species present were clumped in small groups together.

Brae decided that the best thing to do would be for her to go to the bar and obtain herself a drink before circling around the outside of the dance floor. This would allow her to cover the maximum possible area while she searched for anyone present whose thoughts suggested that they were there for anything other than enjoyment. The bar was operated by droids and Brae was uncertain about the wisdom of asking for an alcoholic beverage from them. If they were programmed to accept that anyone who had been admitted to the club was of age then there would be no difficulty. But if they were used as a second line of protection and carried out identity checks then Brae could not use the Force to influence them and she could be ejected from the club. Therefore, she decided to err on the side of caution and when she reached the bar she instead ordered a soft drink.

"Driving?" a voice asked as she took her first sip of the drink and Brae turned to see a male arkanian now standing right in front of her.

"No." she replied, "I'm just not used to drinking a lot so I try to limit myself." and the arkanian smiled.

"Tarmas." he said, holding out his hand and Brae reached out to shake it. However, the moment she touched his hand with her own she felt a sudden tremor in the Force and she had a momentary vision of a group of hooded figures stood in a circle in a darkened chamber exactly like the one represented in the painting in Karst Morrunda's home that had so attracted her attention. The shock and intensity of this vision was such that she dropped her drink.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed.

"Clumsy alien nerf herder." a nearby arkanian girl hissed, glaring at Brae.

*Hatred.*

Brae frowned, not expected such a strong reaction to her presence.

"Ignore her." Tarmas said as a droid rolled out from behind the bar to clean up the mess on the floor, "Here, let me get you something." and he beckoned another droid closer before ordering Brae a drink. Brae noticed that Tarmas kept his voice low when giving the order and when the droid handed over two large glasses they both looked the same, "Take whichever you want." Tarmas said, "They're not alcoholic."

*Deception.*

Brae smiled, now more certain than ever that Tarmas was involved in the killings. Furthermore it appeared that he considered her a potential victim. Despite the level of background noise Brae focused her mind on the drink as she took her first sip, concentrating on the idea of rendering the alcoholic content inert before it

could enter her system. If she could do that then Brae would be able to consume as much as she liked without ill effect.

"Come on." Tarmas told Brae, "I'll introduce you to my friends, it's better than being stuck on your own around that lot." and he glanced that the group that included the young woman who had insulted Brae.

"Thanks." Brae replied and she allowed Tarmas to lead her to a table at the side of the room where four other arkanians, two male and two female, were gathered.

"This is Brae." Tarmas told the others, "She's agreed to join us." and the arkanians smiled back at her, "Brae this is Arken and Krellus," Tarmas said as he pointed to the two male arkanians present before he moved on to the two females, "and Hanna and Elizie."

"Hi, glad to meet you." Brae said before Elizie stepped forwards and hugged her. Once again as soon as she made contact Brae had a sudden vision of a chamber filled with hooded figures. However, although she staggered momentarily she avoided spilling her drink all over the arkanian woman.

"Are you okay?" Elizie asked.

"Fine." Brae answered, "I'm just not used to these shoes."

Brae remained with the five arkanians, waiting to see whether they would do anything that would conclusively reveal their involvement with the killings, but nothing came of this until Tarmas stood up and looked at the others.

"Well I think it's time we were going." he said. Then he looked at Brae, "Can we offer you a ride?"

"Thank you, yes." she replied and she got up as well.

The group headed for the stairs and it was when they were about half way towards them that Brae noticed the arkanians she had spent the last two hours with had formed a circle around her.

Once outside the club the group maintained this formation while they led Brae away from the club but Brae smiled as she sensed the nearby presence of Jayk and she knew this meant that he and Tylo had observed her leaving the club and were staying close.

"Our speeder's down here." Tarmas said, pointing down a side road and the group turned the corner into an empty narrow street.

"I don't see a speeder." Brae said, "Have we come the right way?"

*Danger.*

"There' no right way for you alien." Arken hissed and Brae spun around in time to see a flash of red as he drew a blade from under his jacket and it started to glow. This close Brae could see that fortunately it was not any sort of lightsaber type weapon. Instead it was an ordinary vibroblade that had been modified so that it lit up when the power was activated.

Before Arken could strike Brae reached out and grabbed him by the wrist, holding on to the arm wielding his weapon with both of her hands. A humming sound from behind her alerted Brae to the presence of another vibroblade and she pulled on Arken's arm hard enough that she dragged him forwards. Then as she turned she thrust his arm forwards so that the active vibroblade stabbed Hanna in her stomach before she could strike at Brae with her newly drawn weapon.

Hanna screamed as blood flowed from the wound and she fell to the ground. Meanwhile Brae took advantage of her grip on Arken to throw him over her shoulder. As he landed on the ground the other arkanians also drew vibroblades and Brae realised that she was surrounded. Fortunately it was at that moment that a speeder came racing around the corner and ground to a halt, its headlights shining straight towards Brae and the arkanians. Jayk and Tylo leapt out of this and Jayk hurled something towards Brae. "Brae! Catch!" he shouted and Brae used the Force to draw the thrown lightsaber to her grasp. The moment the weapon was in her hand Brae activated it and there was a 'snap-hiss' sound as the pale blue blade extended. At the same time Jayk drew and ignited his own lightsaber while Tylo drew his blaster.

Intending to face a single unarmed opponent with a five to one advantage in numbers, the arkanians now found themselves suddenly facing an equal number of opponents with far superior weaponry to their own.

*Fear.*

*Panic.*

"Run!" Elizie cried out and she started to run down the street away from the jedi.

On the other hand Krellus lashed out at Brae with his vibroblade only for her to parry his strike with her lightsaber. The blade of her weapon cut through his without any resistance and before he could stop himself, Krellus saw his arm follow it and the limb was also severed midway between his wrist and elbow. Brae then kicked Krellus's leg out from under him and the screaming arkanian fell to the floor beside Arken and the body of Hanna.

Now alone Tarmas chose to emulate Elizie and turned to run, dropping his vibroblade as he went. Meanwhile Brae waited for Jayk and Tylo to reach her.

"Why didn't you go after them?" Tylo asked, pointing along the street.

"In these shoes?" Brae exclaimed, "I'd break my neck. Besides, I already know how we can find them."

"How?" Jayk asked.

"The painting, the one I saw at Karst Morrunda's house. I think it's of a real place."

"Morrunda did say that Thal vanished for about a month." Tylo pointed out, "Maybe he went off somewhere to paint and painted a picture of where he was."

"That seems possible." Jayk said, nodding in agreement, "In that case we need to return to Karst Morrunda's residence to see that painting again. If the image is accurate enough then we may be able to use Arkania's satellite system to locate it."

Karst was in his lounge with his wife when a servant entered the room to announce the arrival of the Jedi.

"What is the meaning of this?" Karst demanded, "Haven't you already inspected my artwork without needed to burst in here so late at night?"

"Who's that?" Brae said before Jayk could reply and she pointed to a portrait hanging on the lounge wall that showed Karst along with his wife and Tarmas.

"My son. What does he have to do with any of this?" Karst responded.

"He and four of his friends just attempted to kill my apprentice." Jayk said, "Two are in the hospital under guard while a third is in the morgue. Your son and a girl called Elizie managed to escape. We think that there is a painting in your collection that could identify where they went."

"Looks like it was your son that stole your precious knife." Tylo added and he grinned, "I guess now you need to give all your old staff their jobs back. Or at least tell them all that you're sorry for accusing them of committing a crime they had nothing to do with." and Karst glared at him.

"We need to see your paintings again Mister Morrunda." Jayk said, "We'll show ourselves upstairs." and then he, Brae and Tylo left the lounge while Karst and his wife begin arguing about what to do next.

Hurrying up the stairs to the hallway lined with Thal N'Krey's artwork, Jayk quickly located the painting that Brae had reacted so strongly to and he took out a recording rod to capture an image of it.

"There, it's done." he said, "Now let's get this image back to the *Swift Exit*. We'll have Cal interface with Arkania's satellite system and locate this structure."



## 6

Tarmas brought his speeder to a halt outside what remained of the ancient Sith tower, now partially ruined and covered by snow.

"What do we do now?" Elizie asked as she and Tarmas got out of the speeder, "The Jedi will be coming for us."

"I know that." Tarmas replied angrily, "But we'll be ready for them."

"Are you insane?" Elizie exclaimed, "How can we be ready for the Jedi? We have hardly any weapons here and we're not trained warriors like they are."

Slowly a smile spread across the face of Tarmas as he looked Elizie directly in her eyes.

"The ritual." he said, "There is still time."

"But we don't have the last heart." Elizie pointed out.

"Oh that's where you're wrong my dear Elizie. The final heart is right here." Tarmas said softly.

"What do you-" Elizie began before Tarmas swiftly pulled the dagger crafted by Thal N'Krey out from under his jacket and plunged it into her neck. Elizie collapsed instantly, her blood pumping out onto the snow and even as she put her hands pressed over the wound in a vain effort to stem the blood loss Tarmas knelt beside her and pushed the blade into her chest.

Well practised by now, it took Tarmas just a few minutes to remove Elizie's heart and carrying it in one hand while wielding the dagger in the other he ran towards the entrance to the ancient structure in front of him.

"Tarmas, what's happening? Where are the others?" a figure just inside the structure asked as Tarmas came running up and pushed past him.

"The others aren't coming." Tarmas responded without pausing, "The Jedi got them."

"The Jedi?"

"Yes the Jedi. Now gather what weapons we have. I'm going to perform the ritual. I just need you to buy me enough time to complete it."

"There is a structure that could be the one we're looking for a hundred and twenty kilometres west of the city." Cal said as Tylo flew the *Swift Exit* out of the hangar, "Interestingly the live satellite feed suggests that there is a vehicle parked nearby that has been used recently enough that the snow hasn't had chance to cool the engine down yet."

"That's it. The cultists are there." Jayk said.

"Cultists?" Tylo commented, "Those sickos are a cult now?"

"I can't think of a better way of describing them. Can you?" Jayk replied and Tylo nodded in agreement.

"Okay, they're a cult. Now hang on. The weather's not great so this could get pretty choppy." and he turned the *Swift Exit* towards the location Cal had identified.

Accelerating the ship to its full atmospheric speed, Tylo covered the distance between the city and the ancient structure in just a few minutes and Jayk pointed at the ground.

"There's the speeder." he said, "Set us down next to it."

"Taking us in." Tylo replied and Jayk looked around at Brae.

"Come on," he told her, "we need to be ready to disembark." and the two Jedi both got up and rushed from the cockpit.

As soon as the *Swift Exit* touched down the access ramp opened and Jayk and Brae came running down it with their lightsabers already active.

"Master! Look!" Brae called out when she saw Elizie's body lying next to the speeder and the Jedi ran for a closer look.

"She was one of the Arkanians that attacked me." Brae said, "Her name was Elizie, or so Tarmas told me."

"What's going on?" Tylo then called out from behind them as he charged out of the *Swift Exit* with a rifle in his hands.

"Tarmas appears to be turning on his own friends." Jayk replied.

"Huh? But why?" Tylo asked.

"He cut out her heart." Brae said, "Just like with the others."

"But he didn't take her eyes." Jayk said, "Perhaps he thinks that her heart can help him escape us somehow whereas he has no immediate use for her eyes."

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

*Danger.*

"Master look out!" Brae snapped and she suddenly threw herself in front of Jayk and swung her lightsaber to deflect the blaster bolt aimed towards him. Then more blaster fire followed and both Jayk and Brae acted to knock it aside.

"Tylo get behind us and return fire." Jayk ordered and Tylo did just that, standing behind and between the two jedi so that he could fire past them. The blasters being used against the jedi were firing single shots only, suggesting that they were civilian sporting weapons. On the other hand Tylo carried a military issue rifle and when he fired back he did so using rapid bursts of fire aimed in the general direction of the source of the incoming blaster fire. This caused a pause in the incoming fire and Jayk saw their chance to advance. "Forward!" he exclaimed and the trio ran towards the structure.

*Danger.*

"Stop!" Jayk snapped when he sensed the blaster fire about to restart through the Force before it did and he and Brae went back to deflecting it with their lightsabers. Tylo fired more bursts from his rifle and this time there was a scream as he hit someone who was too slow to take cover before the incoming fire ceased again.

"Go!" Jayk yelled and they charged forwards again.

This time the trio made it all the way to the entrance to the ancient Sith structure, an arched doorway that no longer had an actual door to block their way. A startled arkanian stepped out of the door with the intention of firing his hunting rifle at the jedi again but Jayk first sliced the weapon in two and then did the same with its owner before he could reach the vibroblade on his belt.

Brae was then the first one through the doorway and she found herself facing a pair of hooded arkanians armed with long barrelled sporting blaster pistols. One fired at her and she deflected the shot into the second before cutting down the shooter before she could get off another shot. Meanwhile three more arkanians simply turned and fled at the sight of the two jedi in the doorway.

"Will they be running towards Tarmas or trying to draw us away master?" Brae asked.

"Somehow I don't think they think tactically enough to try and trick us." Tylo said before Jayk could reply.

"I agree." Jayk added, nodding as he spoke, "If we follow them I sense they'll lead us right to Tarmas and whatever he is attempting to do."

Held over what remained of the pages of the tome of ancient Sith knowledge the lens device allowed Tarmas to read the long dead language as if it was his own. It had taken a great deal of trial and error for him to even get that far after he found the device here in the long abandoned structure but once he could read the pages of the book he had realised just much power it offered even in its degraded state. The pages that had interested Tarmas described an alchemical means by which an ordinary humanoid being could be turned into something far more powerful and the text went on to describe how just a small number of such warriors guided by the Dark Side itself had been able to overcome an entire army.

The various chemicals required to trigger the transformation had been easy to obtain but the key to the process was the infusion of Dark Side power to guide the process rather than simply allowing the chemicals to consume the subject of the ritual and it was for that reason that Tarmas had taken the hearts of his victims, using the fear and pain of their deaths to create a focus for the Dark Side as he dropped the hearts into the vat of freshly mixed chemicals. There were no grand flashes of light or claps of thunder as Tarmas did this, inside the hearts simply dissolved into the bubbling mixture and he checked the book again to confirm what he was supposed to do next. There was no indication of how much of the chemical mix he needed to consume and so Tarmas dipped a large cup into the mix before lifting it to his lips. Then he began to drink, gulping down the mixture until all of a sudden he felt a sharp pain in his abdomen and he dropped the cup on the floor, spilling the remainder of the contents. At that moment two of the other young arkanians came running into the chamber in their hooded robes and carrying weapons.

"Tarmus!" one cried out, "The jedi are coming this way. What should we do?" then she noticed that Tarmus was doubled over as if in pain, "Tarmus, what's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing." he gasped, "I completed the ritual and now I'm changing. I can feel it. The power of the Sith will be mine."

"The Sith do not share their power with anyone." Jayk announced as he entered the chamber with Brae and Tylo by his sides.

"I can take them all from here." Tylo said, staring down the sights of his rifle but Jayk shook his head.

"No. We should at least give them the chance to surrender." the jedi knight said.

"Uncle," Brae said nervously, "I can sense the Dark Side."

"Yes, I sense it too Brae. It would seem that we are too late to prevent young Tarmas from making a very big mistake."

"No. No, no, it is you that has made the mistake jedi." Tarmas hissed and he pushed his friends out of the way as he advanced towards the two jedi and Tylo.

"I've got him dead centre of my sights." Tylo said.

"Go ahead and try. The book has shown me the way." Tarmus called out as he continued to advance, his joints cracking as his bones and muscles changed inside him, "Guided by the Dark Side I shall become all powerful."

"But who is there left to guide you Tarmus?" Jayk asked as he raised his lightsaber, uncertain of exactly how

long it would take the rapidly mutating arkanian to reach them if he broke into a sudden run.

"What do you mean jedi?" Tarmus said.

"Somehow you've read the words in that book Tarmus," Jayk said, looking towards the altar where he saw both the book and the lens device, "but you haven't understood their true meaning. You aren't becoming a Sith, you're becoming a puppet to be guided by them. Only there are no Sith left to control you."

"No. No I am the master. I will-" Tarmus hissed and then he coughed and raised his hands to his throat as he struggled to produce words as his vocal chords changed. Dropping forwards onto all fours Tarmus looked up at the jedi and just snarled, revealing his teeth as they grew longer. Then what had been Tarmus lifted its head and let out a roar before it bounded forwards towards the jedi.

"Brae now!" Jayk commanded and both of them ran forwards to meet this charge, splitting apart at the last moment to strike at the Sith spawned creation from both sides at once. Protected by Sith alchemy, the Tarmus-thing was not killed instantly by the two deep gouges in its flesh from the lightsabers but it did howl in pain and rose up again. Tylo took this opportunity to open fire, sending a sustained burst of fire into the creature's exposed belly but once more the damage proved to be less than lethal and the Tarmus-thing glared at him as it dropped back to all fours.

"Oh kriff." Tylo said as the creature charged forwards again. Fortunately for him Jayk saw what was about to happen and extended his hand towards the former smuggler, using the Force to suddenly lift him off the floor of the chamber so that the creature ran beneath him.

"Hit it again!" Jayk shouted as he lowered Tylo back to the floor and then ran towards him, "Brae make sure he gets clear."

"Yes master." Brae responded as Tylo opened fire at the creature that had now turned around and was charging back towards him.

Jayk reached Tylo just moments before the creature and he came to a halt right in front of the smuggler. At that moment Brae threw herself at Tylo as well and knocked him out of the way to leave just Jayk in the path of the charging creature. The Tarmus-thing opened its jaws wide, wider than would have been possible before Tarmus had consumed the Sith potion and this gave Jayk a target to aim for. The jedi extended his lightsaber directly out in front of him so that the creature's own momentum sent the blade into its mouth and out through the back of its head, killing it in an instant. The creature's corpse then crashed into Jayk, knocking him to the floor where he quickly kicked it away and leapt back to his feet. Then as the corpse of the thing that had been Tarmus began to dissolve he looked at the other two dazed arkanians who were only now getting back to their feet.

"I will be taking that book." he told them, "As for you two you have a choice. I do not believe that Arkania currently has the death penalty for murder so you can either surrender your weapons and come quietly or alternately my friend here can act in self defence." and he looked at Tylo.

The two arkanians exchanged glances and then both kicked their dropped blasters away from themselves before raising their hands over their heads.

"Do you know where this book came from?" Supreme Grand Master Ress asked as Jayk, Brae and Tylo stood before the Jedi Council.

"No master," Jayk replied, "not for certain. I believe that Tarmus Morrunda discovered the location of the ancient Sith temple from Thal N'Krey and then explored it for himself, discovering the book and the means to translate it in the process. Fortunately the damage to the book prevented him from realising what he was doing."

"Common for those who use the Dark Side that is." Master Yoda said from his seat in the council chamber. Then he looked at the other members of the council, "To this temple a team of jedi we must send. More left behind by the Sith there may be."

"I agree." Master Ress said, "Jedi Udra you have done well. The book will be destroyed, as will any other dangerous artefacts we discover there. You are dismissed."

"Thank you." Jayk said, bowing to Master Ress and then he looked at Brae, "Come along." he told her but Brae did not move.

"Something more there is youngling?" Yoda asked.

"No." Brae said, "Nothing more master." and then she and Tylo followed Jayk out of the council chamber.

"Trouble sleeping again?" Cal asked, materialising as Brae crept aboard the *Swift Exit* in the middle of the night again.

"I haven't been to bed yet." she replied, "I wanted to speak to you about my vision."

"The one you think is a memory of your father?"

"Yes. Only I don't think it's a memory and I don't think it's my father any more." Brae said.

"Go on." Cal told her, "I'm listening."

"I think it's a vision of Uncle Jayk. I think that the council is either hiding something from him now or will hide something from him later on and when he finds out what it is he's going to be very angry with them."