

Cello slowly regained consciousness. Immediately his training allowed him to snap back into focus. He pushed himself into a stance, ready to fight, but immediately settled as there was no one around.

To ask, "Where am I?" seemed oddly trite, so he recalled what he could. He had been drawn to a presence on an uncharted dwarf planet in the Outer Rim. Once there, he found what could best be described as a cave, however when he entered he felt his body lengthen and his speed increase in a microsecond, then all was black, and he awoke here. He surmised a stable wormhole. If it was unstable, he had no hope of getting home.

An image of a stagecoach with a young woman and perhaps her parents entered his mind, and he drew on the Force to mask his presence behind a large tree covered with a strange, dark vine. The coach drew slightly beyond him and stopped, waiting. Perhaps it was a regular stop for the coach, because the two women he had foreseen stepped out to stretch, along with a man.

He unmasked his presence and stepped forward, noting as he did how out of place he must look here. The three humanoids saw him and were clearly frightened. The women held out something they were wearing on their necks, speaking in a strange tongue toward him. He was fortunate to have been trained, or he would have had no hope of understanding. "The dead travel fast," was the translation he was getting.

He projected his thoughts as he spoke, hoping that if they didn't understand his language at least the intent and the meaning would be clear. "Where might I find shelter, young lady?" He saw at first a perplexed look, then understanding on her face as the younger woman responded, "The Castle. But, if you go there, you will not return, or worse, return to prey on the living."

"Why are you here, if I may ask?" Cello said. "And where is 'here' exactly?"

The young woman replied, "We go to our home in Varna. You do not know where you are? Strange. You are in the Carpathian Mountains, alone and unarmed, which is foolish.

Cello drew his lightsaber and ignited it. While the couple backed away, the young woman was fascinated by it. She smiled and spoke, "I have never seen something so brilliant, so beautiful. Perhaps you are the one the gypsies told us would be coming. When we were in the village at the base of this mountain they spoke of a time soon when the dark one would come and with his light, destroy he who lives in the castle. It made no sense."

"My lady, true this is a weapon, but I too am trying to find my way home," Cello responded. To which she moved close and handed him her necklace, repeating what they said earlier, "For the dead travel fast." Then, into the coach they went - the driver made sure to leave Cello's presence at twice the speed at which they arrived.

Cello sensed a dark presence, but not a Force-sensitive one, more of a malevolence, an evil that feeds without end. Rather than fear it, he thought perhaps such a being might have the answer to why he was brought here, or even have been the one responsible. He followed the path with which the presence drew him closer, through a strange blue field of dancing lights, and toward an ancient castle, similar to fortifications he had once heard about on Yavin IV but far more ornate, with strange, gnarled faces staring at him from the sculpted buttresses.

He instinctively checked his weaponry, and noted that his Shadowbat had not made the trip with him. Furthermore, he could have used his familiar right then, as the door at the end of the drawbridge opened, and the source of the malevolence stepped into view.

In an accent that reminded him of a twisted version of the speech used by the young woman, he spoke, "I have been waiting for you, Cello. We meet, at last. You will of course, enter? Of your own free will. Enter, and be welcome, we shall dine," he paused, "and drink."

Entering, the man guided him, led only by a candelabra, whereas Cello sensed where to go without any conscious effort. Soon they were in a fine dining room, where three women sat at the far end of the main table. They all had similar features to the family he had met, however, their every move was like that of an animal - lithe, graceful, and most ominously, seductive.

"My brides," the man spoke. "On this planet, one may have as many as they wish."

"Ladies," Cello spoke. "The pleasure is mine. However, before we begin," he now engaged his Force training to trick them into answering, "perhaps you three can tell me why I am here?"

A voluptuous brunette immediately answered, clearly influenced. "You are here for the master, the one who made all of us. You came the same way he did, no?"

Immediately the man sternly spoke, "Silence. I shall answer the questions. First let me explain to you that I alone know exactly how you came to be on this planet. Three have made the journey. Many years ago, on a distant world I saw a strange cave and upon entering, awoke here. Only six months ago, a strange being came to my castle as you

did. They had been badly wounded, I suspect by a weapon much like the one you no doubt hold under your robe. Upon," he paused, "questioning, he told me much. He confirmed what I already knew, this was a wormhole. Here I can feed at will, these people are nothing to us. I awaited someone with your," another pause, "skills to come through as my species is far weaker in the sun of this planet, and I must usually sleep then. You, I shall have as my protector, my guardian. The gypsies are unreliable. And while you cannot go back, for you are many thousands of years into our future and far, far away from our galaxy, I will make you quite comfortable here."

Cello listened, the entire time engaging his Force skills. He determined this strange species was not human, yet fed on human blood. The three women were human but somehow changed to be like his species. He also sensed uncertainty or a lie when he said no one could go back. And he also felt this being could not be trusted or controlled, and had to be destroyed. He decided to show him what real power was.

During these exchanges, gypsy servants had brought a very rare roasted animal out along with other dishes. Glasses had been filled. Cello first carved pieces of the meat and placed them on the ladies' plates, then his host, then himself, without physically touching any of them.

While the three brides were rendered speechless by this, Cello sensed both an apprehensiveness as well as a desire for power - his power - in his host. "I would speak to you alone," he said to his host drawing on the Force to push him into agreeing. He dismissed the three women with a wave of his hand, and sat nearer to Cello.

"You have many questions," he began. "I am Vlad Tepes, of the planet Carpathia, which was completely unknown to your Republic. Since my arrival here, I have seen hundreds of the natives of this area war, rejoice, grow old, and eventually die. I will confess some of them were hastened in this process by my needs. In fact, I led their armies in one of these wars against barbarians from the east. I impressed my own men by placing those convicted of crimes in army uniforms, then impaling them on stakes throughout the countryside. When the armies of the east saw that I would do this to what they presumed were my own men, they turned and ran. I say this impressed my own men, but perhaps that is inaccurate. What impressed them was the victory."

"Since then I have lived comfortably in this castle, accumulating wealth, providing through my own methods for the villages in these mountains which were named by me after my home, and thus keeping a healthy population thriving here. If I should require several of them to give their lives so that I and others may live, this is fair."

Cello sensed what was about to happen and his body reacted in a flash. He spun from his chair and rolled right, as the youngest of the brides brought a sword down with a

fury, cleaving the chair in two. Seeking the other two, he sensed them rushing from two other directions, in what was a coordinated attack. He slowed both of them with little effort then forced all three to sit on the floor, motionless, and unable to speak.

His host was concerned now. Cello spoke, "Someone as resolutely demonic as you surely would never have kept me as a guardian. I have heard of creatures like you. Undead, they call them. They feed on blood as they have none of their own, and the strangeness that makes them undead corrupts those upon which the creatures feed. I had hoped to one day face one of you, and test myself. I am disappointed."

At that moment, Cello sensed five others coming from behind Tepes. Somehow, Tepes also sensed them, though Cello could tell it was not through the Force. As he turned, the tallest of the five, with a strange hat thrust a large knife into his host's heart, shouting, "This is for my precious Lucy, Count!"

The Count then staggered back but was strangely less affected than he should have been. He turned to Cello. "You see how pathetic and weak those of this planet are? How uncivilized? You must surely help me, or those of this region will all die."

"Like Miss Lucy I suppose," the most scholarly of the group said. As the large man charged the Count again, the demonic creature crashed his hand across his face, sending him through the air and lifeless onto the floor beyond the table. The Count flashed a disgustingly malevolent smile back at Cello and turned toward the other men, all no doubt natives of the planet. Having seen enough, Cello ignited his lightsaber and gracefully launched through the air, impaling the Impaler from behind.

Still on the saber, the surprised Count spoke, "You would kill one of your own kind, in order to save humanoids on a planet you don't know? Even though you have powers that could make you the master of this entire planet?"

"Tell me, Count," Cello said, how is it that your species is able to survive my saber through where I can only surmise your heart once was?" Surely you must be vulnerable, or you would move off my lightsaber." He moved the saber left and right, incinerating more of the Count's flesh in the process.

The shocked men looked at Cello, and the more refined looking one spoke, "Sir, I am Arthur Holmwood, Lord Godalming. I can see we have the same goal, if I may?" He motioned to the most nondescript of the group, who held a large stake made of a strange wood that Cello had not seen, perhaps also indigenous to this world.

Cello foresaw what would happen next, and timed the moves with the Force, ensuring that as he withdrew his saber, the man with the stake replaced the glowing light with

the stake itself. As it sunk deeper into him, Tepes' strength left him, and Cello hastened this by forcing every muscle to fight against his slowing.

The Count fell. The one called Arthur looked to Cello and spoke. "I do not know from whence you came, but I am grateful for your help, sir. We had hoped to arrived before nightfall, and we were delayed. With me are Abraham Van Helsing, Jack Seward, Jonathan Harker, and," he paused, fighting back tears, "Quincy Jones." Jones was the man lying lifeless on the floor as Seward and Harker tended to him.

Van Helsing approached Cello and spoke calmly, "You are not of this Earth, no?"

"I am not," Cello responded. "I came here only today, and I wish to return to my home. I do not belong here."

"But you do," Van Helsing continued. "You have saved this region and indeed this entire world from his malevolence. Now we must finish it. Would you?" He pointed to what he wanted Cello to do, and Cello beheaded the Count with his saber as Van Helsing stuffed his mouth with strange wafers. Harker came over and lit the stake on fire as well. The folk of this planet were superstitious, Cello thought, or was it perhaps knowledge born to natives of this planet?

As the men talked, Cello overheard one mention passing a strange sight as they rode up the mountain to the castle. It sounded like something akin to the blue lights he saw, but in a strange circular pattern. Cello sensed this could be the portal. The men had finished off the vampire brides. Cello again obliged in helping to end their undead existence. He then slipped out unseen and made his way toward the portal using the minds of the men as a guide. They were weak minded compared to his adversaries from home, but they had a resilience Cello admired.

As he stepped into the portal, presaging that it would safely deliver him home, Cello told himself he must advised the brotherhood to either avoid this planet Carpathia, or perhaps it required the destruction of this chaotically evil species.

He again had lost consciousness, this time for a moment, and as he stood this time he saw his starfighter on the ridge where he had landed. A familiar chirping brought a smile to his face, as his familiar, his Shadowbat, glided and alit on his shoulder. He knew he was home.