Grand Plans

by tanxiaolian

Summary

"Through Power I gain Victory."

Failing that, the Alliance Commander was prepared to sacrifice herself in an attempt to stop the Superweapon from snuffing out all life - allies and enemies alike - on Iokath. What she wasn't prepared for (as if her uncharacteristically selfless, borderline suicidal plan couldn't backfire spectacularly, as if they weren't on a planet littered with astonishing technological feats) was ending up in stasis for an impossible amount of time.

Notes
This story contains mainly canon-typical violence and allusions to sexual activities (especially in the context of SWTOR), no gore or smut. However, the language is occasionally borderline and some of the issues discussed/depicted are quite dark. There are a few more explicit exceptions, though, so I increased the rating to Mature, but if you can handle SWTOR, this fic is hardly worse. Spoilers for all SWTOR class stories and up to the most recent content, Clone Wars Season 1-7, "Annihilation", "Darth Plagueis", and a couple of other media. Uses a mix of Legends and (a little) newCanon material, but since it diverges from any kind of canon, that probably doesn't matter much.
Prelude - Ghost in the Machine

„Do whatever it takes. In the meantime, tell our forces to take shelter.”

Zayathris Veskyâr immediately headed for the door upon hearing the grave assessment of the situation, amber flames dancing in her irises. At the door, she half-turned towards her two advisors and, in a quieter voice, added, “Be safe… both of you.” As she continued walking through the complex in powerful strides, without looking at any member of the Alliance in particular, she barked, ”Notify Major Pierce and Major Quinn to meet me at the shuttle platform without delay. Make sure Quinn gets a fully equipped med-kit.”

If this truly was to be her last act as Alliance Commander, there was nobody she’d rather have at her side than those two men. Nobody else could be trusted to bear the burden.

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The silence stretched on even after the cramped shuttle had taken off. In contrast to Quinn’s ramrod straight posture, pale face schooled into a neutral mask in an unsuccessful attempt to hide his desperation to look anywhere but at the Commander, Pierce sat hunched over, expression dark and expectant. As the landing platform of a smaller part of the control complex slowly came into view, the Commander stopped her seething and addressed the two officers.

“You got the briefing?”

“Yeah, Pubs messed up big time. Superweapon’s gonna blow up any moment, killing everyone.” Pierce gave a rather crude, though certainly not incorrect, summary of the situation.

”Quite so. However slight the chance, I shall attempt to stop it by taking control of the weapon via one of the Thrones. Given what happened to Supreme Commander Shan, it’s not going to be pleasant.” She took a steadying breath. “In fact, it appears highly unlikely I will survive. Quinn, it’s your job to improve my odds.” Their eyes locked in understanding.

“I have little intention of sacrificing myself, but if it turns out I am too weak to vanquish this technological abomination…Well, philosophical reservations aside, the last resort will be blowing the throne up, perhaps the weapon has an in-built safety routine, assuming there are no other means of control left. That will be your part, Pierce.” She nodded towards the crate of explosives.

“M’lord, while you're...and we... I mean, at close quarters, that would kill-”

“If the weapon activates, that point is moot. I am acutely aware of what I am asking of you. If you’re not capable…”

“S’not a matter of being capable –“

The Sith held up her hand. “Will you follow my orders, Pierce?”

“Without hesitation.”

“Good. I knew I can rely on you in all situations.” She turned towards Quinn. “Any objections?”
“No, milord. The plan is sound given the circumstances, though I wish it offered an alternative to the dire prospect of you dying.”

“Well, I am counting on you to keep me alive.” She gave him a small smile that was probably meant to be comforting, though it only worsened the creeping sense of dread that had settled in Quinn's chest.

Upon disembarking, he felt a massive hand on his shoulder, giving him a painful squeeze. “So, no pressure, Major. Don’t kriff this up.”

There was a degree of pained resignation hidden behind the younger officers sly grin that alluded to their strained relationship.

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Given the opportunity to run the necessary calculations, his worst case scenario would have looked exactly like the unfolding situation. Their chances were rapidly diminishing. As the Commander’s vitals plummeted despite Quinn's best efforts, it took all of his willpower not to panic. Seeing the former Empire's Wrath, one of the galaxy's most powerful being, the woman he loved – loves? – thrashing on the throne, blood trickling from her nose and a veil of tiny dark veins framing her eyes, broke something in him. Her strained grunts had long turned into tortured wailing before her voice suddenly faded.

“I can't...” she ground out. "Artyem…”

That…that was Pierce’s personal name. Quinn mused, momentarily taken aback by the implied, well, intimacy. He had never heard Wrath use that name while they’d both served under her command. In fact, even after their marriage, she had rarely called him Malavai, usually preferring his rank or family name, even in bed. Perhaps out of habit, a half-ironic wink at his sense of propriety, or had it been a conscious choice to put distance between them as a subtle token of continual reproach? It was strange and outright shameful that he never learned to really understand her true way of thinking in personal matters. If only there had been more time...

Quinn winced. He could not afford to be distracted at such a critical point. Then the realization set in, like a serrated knife languidly dragged over his chest. She’d given Pierce the signal to trigger the explosives. Mind racing, Quinn took one last look at her vitals, but all he saw was critical oxygen levels, ridiculously abnormal brain waves and an unsustainably high heart rate. No miracle had occurred while he had – irresponsibly – dwelled on the past and what he might have failed to notice back then. There was no fortuitous salvation for a worthless man like him. Nothing could exculpate his abject failure.

Focusing on the Commander’s face contorted in agony, as if to punish himself once more at the very end, he braced himself for the detonation.

It never came. As the seconds ticked away, confusion was replaced by resolve. Whatever was keeping Pierce from kriffing following orders, he would finish this. He would not fail his lord again. He rounded the throne with quick strides and stopped abruptly in his tracks. Pierce’s unconscious form was splayed on the floor. Next to him, the Commander’s advisor was kneeling in front of a small panel and fiddled with the throne’s wiring. Quinn’s hand slid to his blaster.

“Stop!”
“So…um, this is not what it looks like.” The former SIS agent murmured placating, but he kept working nonetheless.

They were losing too much damned time. “Hands off the wiring!” Quinn grew impatient.

He had no doubt that Shan had knocked the younger officer out, but why would he sabotage his Commander’s efforts to save them all?

“Look, Major, we can discuss this later. This is the only way to…” At the faint click of a safety lever, Shan’s head jerked up, eyes wide.

“Step back, now!” Quinn all but yelled.

Both men stared at each other for a moment. Then Quinn noticed the way the telltale, minute twitching of the advisor’s pupils. Mental slicing. Pathetic SIS worm.

“Traitor,” the Imperial officer hissed and pulled the trigger.

At the exact same time, a tremor from the throne shook the platform, causing the shot to miss and allowing Shan to tumble out of harm’s way, behind Quinn, who yelped in surprise as his legs were kicked out from under him. They grappled on the floor, both clearly trained in hand-to-hand combat. After a short but vicious struggle, Shan managed to gain the upper hand, putting his opponent in a side choke. Quinn’s vision blurred as a suffocating heat crept up his chest, setting his face ablaze.

“Will you just let me finish-” The traitor panted, straining to keep Quinn from slipping out of his chokehold. His efforts to continue the slicing with the aid of his implants sufficiently distracted him from noticing his opponent’s fingers edging towards the triggering device. As he felt the comfortingly cold plastoid of the button under his fingertips, Quinn squeezed his eyes shut, and awaited the scorching darkness as his consciousness faded.
Lights flickering. Fading. Re-emerging from within. Crushing her under waves, under shadows.

Lights blinding. Searing her skin.

A tentative breath.

Numbness. Silence pounding in her ears.

“Make sure the tribute lives. We can’t afford to disappoint our new allies.”

Bony, pallid faces came too close, detached eyes examined her.


Their vaguely humanoid features blended with the distorted head of the machine god that had lured her into this mess in the first place, provided that was an actual memory and not another figment of her decaying synapses.

“Raise your bloodied fist and cry triumph…”

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She was – *finally* – dying. That was the most likely explanation, if the corroding pain that seemed to be literally everywhere at once was any indication. Though it was peculiar, to say the least, that her life would indeed end hallucinating lying in damp, badly lit cavern, the worried face of a middle-aged human male in Jedi robes hovering over her. Well, it wasn’t as if she expected anything but cruel irony from the Force, given how weak she’d apparently allowed herself to get.

The Dark Side was a way to immense power, but truly harnessing it without succumbing to it was – in her experience – a path requiring a steady stream of sacrifices, a path suitable only for the strongest. The Dark was greedy and could only take, never give, unless you violently ripped what you want out of the Force and thus proved your worth. Unchecked, it would creep into the tiniest cracks in one’s control, latch onto the smallest weaknesses and devour one from within. And that was why any weakness had to purged and also why a fallen Jedi was usually so much worse than a Sith. Their previous training had simply not equipped them with the means to subjugate the Force, instead they just gave themselves to the Dark, naively inviting it in to erode them from the inside out under the guise of giving them freedom to follow all their desires. Case in point: Jaesa, but that one had been the master’s failing as much as the apprentice’s, if Zayathris was honest. It hurt, in a bad way, and that was not something she could afford feeling right now.

It wasn’t the first time that she dreamt of random Jedi lecturing her in various ridiculous settings, either, though this one seemed much more corporeal, if oddly unkempt in appearance. Hardly the paragons of the Light her mind had conjured up so far.

The new face spoke. Or rather, its lips kept moving, almost hypnotically, but Zayathris as per usual decided to ignore the platitudes it had to offer, empty words dripping with the altruistic concern that was the Jedi’s favorite self-deception. This way, the antics of the man were almost comical.

To her surprise, when she squeezed her eyes shut, her surroundings disappeared, however
temporarily. She hadn’t been able to look away before, even when the surreal imagery had become almost too much to bear.

In a complete departure from previous renditions of similar illusionary situations, something – in fact, everything – felt off. Perhaps, this time, she should listen for a change. Messing with the Jedi in her lucid dying dreams was getting boring anyway.

“Are…are you in pain?” The Jedi asked tentatively.

“Your prattling is giving me a headache.”

“Thank the Force, you’re awake! I was beginning to fear the worst.” He seemed undeterred by her jibe. “I do apologize for the talking, I tried to guide you back to consciousness. I am not healer, so…well, I guess it worked, seeing as you are awake, but I didn’t do a particularly good job. I don’t think it’s supposed to hurt.” The disheveled man shrugged awkwardly. “Unfortunately, I have run out of medical supplies. Last one to leave the ship, so to speak.”

“Ship?” She half-expected their surroundings to change in order to fit the new narrative.

“Figuratively speaking. It’s a, um, convoluted story.”

She took a steadying breath. Stuck in the cave, then. On the off chance that this was real – what exactly was real nowadays, anyway? - , she had better take precautions. It took hardly any conscious effort to sustain the technique she’d learned from Darth Marr and Satele Shan – a kind of meditation with useful side-effects for precisely that kind of situation-, but actively reaching into the Force made her want to throw up. Carbonite sickness?

“I am not pressed for time.” She remarked after the nausea had subsided.

“I can imagine you will need time to recover from whatever you’ve gone through, but as a matter of fact, we urgently need to get going. I have delayed the others long enough, though the time certainly wasn’t wasted, considering that I happened upon you.”

“Lucky me.” Zayathris snorted, still unsure where this was going. She decided to humor the stranger and slowly pushed herself to a standing position. Consciously feeling her feet was somewhat disorienting. It did not take long for the odd sensation to fade and for her surrounding to stop swaying. “Well, then, lead the way.”

“Ah, you might … need … clothing?”

She looked down only to realize that she was stark naked.

“Well, that explains why you looked everywhere but at my body. I was beginning to feel insulted.”

He gave a wry smirk. “I am a Jedi after all.”

“So you’re a eunuch?” Zayathris returned the smile, a little more feral.

“No, um, I meant,” he floundered, “that we Jedi excel at self-control.”

“Sure, whatever helps you sleep.” With reluctance, she wrapped herself in the proffered dull, dark-brownish cloak and decided not to dwell on the pathetic image she presented.
“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but how did you get down here?”

“How did you?” Zayathris shot back, struggling to keep up the pace as they scrambled over the rocks.

“Fair point, I should have introduced myself. Atreius Vaiken, Jedi Archivist.”

“Aren’t you quite far out of your comfort zone, as a librarian?” She stopped to catch her breath – get a damn grip! – and gestured around them.

“I lead the excavation efforts here on Farnas II. This place has a rich history, various groups of colonists settled here throughout the ages. We hoped to find signs of the original population below these mines – we were so close to a breakthrough!” He threw his hands down in exasperation.

“These brutes will raze everything.”

“What happened?”

“The Farnasi chose to ally with the Separatists. Which instantaneously sparked a civil war because of course not everyone agreed with that decision. The ground-dwellers – that’s the ones living down here in the mines – were never in favour of siding with the Republic. They’re a fascinating group, rather superstitious, hard-working, claim their forefathers were the original inhabitants chosen as a superior people by visiting “advanced aliens” millennia ago, but alas, they are also easy to impress with displays of power. Whereas the city-dwellers were always happy to be part of the Republic trade network. Actually, they’re the same species despite their physical differences, but don’t mention that to their faces or either side will try to lynch you. The Council was supposed to send someone to negotiate, but I am not sure what outcome they’ve reached, if any… or if they actually ever arrived here. Let’s just hope the situation on the ground hasn’t deteriorated to the point that we can’t get safe passage to the shuttles. I sent the other researchers ahead; I couldn’t just leave my research like that. The Separatists are here for the resources rather than the culture. When I tried to follow my people later, the main access route was blocked so I had to find an alternative path. My shortsightedness might have doomed them all, if they decided to wait for me. Can you imagine the hubris?” She could, easily, it was a Jedi she was dealing with, after all. “My only comfort is that I found you along the way. I shudder to think what might have been your fate otherwise.”

He turned around fully to look at her quizzically. “You didn’t know anything about the events outside? How long did they keep you in that shrine?”

None of the Jedi’s ridiculously detailed descriptions of kriffing local history and what was surely inconsequential politicking in a backwater, formerly Republic system she’d never even heard of made much sense to her. Worse still, there was no plausible explanation for her presence of a completely different planet – or, had she imagined Iokath, too? Although… “A shrine?”

“I guess you didn’t go willingly? Stars, these traditionalists are more savage then I thought. They didn’t tell you anything, did they?” He gave her a pitying look. Zayathris suppressed the urge to choke that sentiment out of him. No need to rub it in, Jedi.

“They have a custom of offering tributes - usually not people, thank the Force - to new arrivals. Makes sense, given their colonial history, to placate the newcomers. But if they left without finishing the preparations…” His shoulders sagged.
“That means a total clusterfuck awaits us outside?”

“It would seem so. Let’s not delay, we are close to the surface, just two levels to go.” Climbing a pile of dewback-sized, sharp rocks that cut her shins in several places took them to a massive man-made cavern, far more sophisticated than the small. A pity most of it had collapsed into even more huge piles of rubble, including the ceiling in one place, giving view to a bright orange sky that cast a ghastly hue over the hall.

They made their way across the room and were nearly at the opening, when the Jedi suddenly stiffened. “Oh no.” He gasped almost inaudibly, a violent shiver running through his body. Why was…Emperor's balls. She was losing her touch, how could she have missed that presence? Another mistake like that and she’d be dead. She cautiously turned around to see a bearded elderly man approaching them. His dark aura was remarkably understated, but it enclosed them like a vise nonetheless.

“Are you lost, my Jedi friend?” His deep voice reflected off the walls, immersing them in the threatening, rumbling sound. The archivist stepped in front of her protectively, a twitching hand on the hilt of his saber.

Wary eyes not leaving his opponent, he whispered to her. “Run as soon as I engage. I will try to buy you time. Emphasis on try. There is little more I can do against him.”

Bloody Jedi theatrics. “Give me your saber, then.” She hissed.

“No, we’d both die. Don’t worry about me.” As if. “Just go save yourself. I … am at peace.” Why are you trembling with blind fear, idiot? Zayathris barely kept from rolling her eyes.

Like a mantra, the Jedi repeated as he took a few tentative steps forward: “There is no emotion, there is peace.”

The essential lie which had led countless Jedi to a premature death.

The stranger ignited his saber. A Makashi opening. Zayathris gave an amused snort. Probably the oddest possible choice of lightsaber style for a darksider. Her Jedi companion had not been excessively pessimistic about his chances. He barely managed to parry – if his crude attempts could be called that - two strikes of his unimpressed opponent before he was swiftly disarmed and flung across the room, with a satisfying crack as his body hit the far wall. His lightsaber rolled uselessly between them.

The elderly man looked her up and down impassively. “A pity he delayed his departure to retrieve his whore. He was so close to safety, after all.” Detachedly, he raised his saber to strike her down.

When his red blade met with a green one instead of bones and soft flesh, his eyes briefly widened with bewilderment.

“Getting ahead of yourself, old man?” Zayathris snarled viciously as she moved into position for a counter-attack.

“It seems I underestimated you, Jedi. I shall not be making that mistake again.” He replied in that
booming, patronizing voice of his.

“Oh, you wish. A Jedi would grant you mercy.” She gave a ferocious scream as she lunged at him.

A few minutes into the fight, it was Zayathris who had to admit to a miscalculation. She should have long overpowered him by now, but his energy-conserving style was giving him a clear advantage. Coupled with her weakened state, that was a sure-fire recipe for a pointless, embarrassing death. At the same time, she was still holding back the full extent of her powers to not reveal herself as Sith. As long as she did not know what manner of shyrack’s nest she had stirred up, she had better not make additional enemies. Especially with the Jedi being her best shot at getting off this planet.

“Exhausted already, my dear? Let me end your plight.” The man almost purred in a honeyed voice, disengaging from the battle with a gracious leap.

The reprieve was short-lived as a powerful stream of Lightning poured from his outstretched hand. To Zayathris own surprise, she failed to raise the borrowed saber in time. White-hot agony racked through her body, causing her to double over. It took all her strength to keep from convulsing uncontrollably, but slowly, as the man approached to finish her off, she managed to withstand the pain and lifted her head in defiance. Two pairs of blazing amber eyes met.

Chapter End Notes

From A Dream within a Dream by Edgar Allan Poe

“I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand —
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep — while I weep!
O God! Can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?
The End of Negotiations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The cavern collapsed behind you and then you decided to overcome the minor setback of the surface elevator platform having been shot to pieces by strapping the unconscious Jedi to your back with his utility belt.” The soldier’s voice was filled with what was either utter disbelief or awe. “And then proceeded to climb down two hundred metres with this dead weight attached.” Zayathris could not help wondering who in their right mind would issue an almost completely white armour to their troops for any place that wasn’t Hoth or Ilum. As far as environmental camouflage was concerned, that was an absolute nightmare. They had not even used temporary paint to blend in better with the surroundings back on the planet. At least it had made it easier for her to spot the Republic encampment. Still, it boggled the mind. She remembered the heated discussions with her captain about the universal appropriateness of her fully black armor, who had only relented when she had proposed completing the next assignment wearing nothing but her army green training bra and shorts instead. Compared to the choice of attire of some of her fellow Sith, it would not have been particularly outrageous, though somewhat … understated. Pierce had enthusiastically upvoted the idea, and even Vette seconded it, if only for laughs. She would even have done it – maybe not on Hoth or even a place like Taris, just to see Quinn’s face. On second thought, it would have been a little too distracting, keeping him from performing at peak efficiency.

“I already explained this to your leader, the one with the colourful helmet. Twice, actually. I will let you know that I dislike having to repeat myself.”

The trooper gave a cough to cover his uncertainty. “Ma’am, no offense intended but we don’t usually have unknown civilians turning up like this.”

“You mean naked and bleeding profusely because a belt is not a suitable harness for transporting people?” She shot back acidly. These troopers were too damn suspicious for her liking, even though the circumstances were probably… fairly unique. They had mentioned another Jedi being on the ship – apparently a battlecruiser, though from her estimations significantly larger than a Harrower-class dreadnought, wildly excessive for a local conflict over resources –, so using a Force suggestion was out of the question. “Do you regularly encounter infiltration attempts that rely on brilliant plans like giving a random non-combatant Jedi a cracked skull and then going out of their way to deliver them to your doorstep? Just to get into your good graces?”

The three soldiers – what were the odds of identical triplets serving in the same unit? – gave her a perplexed stare. “Didn’t think so.”

At least they had dressed her wounds and not put her into confinement as they originally intended to. This was turning out to be a very long day indeed. It was very telling that she had to put her trust – as far as she was capable of such a sentiment - into a (battered, absolutely shitty with a lightsaber) Jedi and his allies instead of another Sith. At least the Jedi, in general, were not prone to arbitrarily stabbing you in the back, provided they remained unaware that you are their sworn enemy. Especially if they lay half-dead on a medical bed. It was a true blessing that her partial Pureblood heritage was not immediately obvious from her appearance, at least not to non-Imperialists, or that archivist would have left her to rot or put her out of her “misery” instead. Besides, whatever plans that elderly Sith they had encountered in the mining complex was pursuing, it was better to leave him alone for the time being, since technically the Alliance was associated with the Empire. It was possible – considering the oddness of that Separatist thing - that he was a rogue element, but best
not to unwittingly piss off anyone important. Lana was close enough to suffering a stroke without Zayathris adding to her burden. Though, once she’d come up with a way out of this convoluted mess, she would tell Acina a few choice words for not keeping a tighter leash on their people if they were dumb enough not to recognize the Alliance Commander on sight. If the Empress was still alive after Iokath. If not, either she had the Empire turned against her anyway or made some powerful people madly happy. Or both, actually. Sometimes she wondered how the Empire got anything done at all, giving its overall propensity to betray its own at every opportunity. As Wrath, she might have had the chance to influence the Empire’s course – if only by killing off those Councillors who’d gone off the deep end, relatively speaking – but the whole Vitiate business had prevented that. Ironically, since it had been Vitiate who had instated her as his Wrath. Technicalities.

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Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi watched the surprise guest through the medical ward’s window before entering to get an impression of her. Clad in Trooper undergarments and hunched over in exhaustion, she nevertheless was an imposing figure. Approaching even his former padawan in height and – despite the obvious state of emaciation – rather muscular, her physicality was undeniably intense. Messy neck-length black hair framed her sharp-featured, angular face. His contemplative gaze lingered on the weary, light grey eyes that formed a stark contrast to the slightly reddish, dark skin. There was something out-of-place about them, but he could not pin down what. He tentatively extended his senses towards her to get a more comprehensive assessment, but her low-key presence just slipped away. There was no doubt it was there, otherwise unremarkable and well within reach, but it was oddly… transparent, for lack of a better word. Like he could only see her clearly when he was not looking right at her. Mental techniques apart from basic mind tricks had never been exactly his forte, yet the Force apparently refusing to cooperate was just one more indication how much the war was getting to him. Well, there was always talking.

Upon entering the ward, for a brief instant, he felt utterly exposed to the woman’s measuring look, as if he was prey being sized up. However, when they made eye contact, the feeling vanished just as abruptly and a perfectly pleasant smile spread across her face, with no signs of duplicity. “You must be the Jedi General I was told to wait for.”

“Master Obi-Wan Kenobi.” He introduced himself. “Knight Vaiken owes his survival to your selfless aid and I would like to extend thanks in his stead.” Zayathris tensed and straightened. She must not have heard him correctly. She slowly inclined her head in bemused acknowledgement, but remained silent, too stunned by his decidedly Imperial accent to form a coherent reply. When she had first seen the tattoo on the side of one of the trooper’s head, she had not thought much of it; perhaps it represented a decisive victory against the Empire to which he had contributed. But then the symbol that bore a stunning similarity to the Imperial insignia of all things instead of the two-winged Republic one appeared in other places on the ship and some the soldiers’ armour plates, too. Was this some kind of splinter faction of the Empire? Then again, Jedi in front of her gave off no indication of being Dark and the armour itself looked more Mandalorian in design rather than anything else.

“So, Commander Deviss briefed me on your report already, but failed to mention how you ended up in Farnasi custody in the first place.” Zayathris could sense no suspicion in his words, only genuine interest.
She would not consider herself a particularly subtle woman by any definition, but she had spent considerable time around exceptional agents like Cipher Nine or Theron Shan. “I wish I could remember. One moment I am going about my business and the next I woke up in a mine with what feels like the worst hangover of my life.” Kenobi nodded sympathetically. Theron would be surely be proud, though his trademark innocent and long-suffering act was going to be quite a stretch for her.

“So, what does that daily business of yours entail?”

“Is surviving an adequate answer?” She shrugged nonchalantly. With everything around her contradicting the supposed status quo of the situation between the Empire and the Republic, there was no way she could come up with a cover story that didn’t risk raising alarm, so vague would have to suffice.

“If this is all you’re willing to tell me about yourself, I have no choice but to accept it. However, you need not fear judgement from my side.”

She pushed off the medical bed to stand in front of the Jedi expectantly. “What’s going to happen to me now?”

“You’ve been very supportive and the Republic has no reason to keep you from … your business. Therefore, I propose to drop you off somewhere of your choosing on the way to Coruscant.”

“In Republic space?”

“Preferably, giving the current state of war, but there are neutral worlds along the hyperspace route as well.”

She gave her assent wordlessly. So these people were Pubs after all.

“If you would follow me to my ship? The cruiser is going to jump to hyperspace soon.”

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“How did the negotiations go?” Kenobi turned around in the captain’s chair and gave her a quizzical look. “On Farnas II, Vaiken told me there was a negotiator inbound. I assume that was you?”

“You would be correct. It went about as well as you’d expect, hence the, ahem, speedy retreat. The commander told me you arrived just minutes before the agreement with the locals ran out.”

“I suppose it was for the better that I wasn’t aware, I briefly contemplated leaving Vaiken behind. Wasn’t sure if that creepy bastard would come after us.”

“Creepy- I beg your pardon?” Kenobi’s brows furrowed, emphasizing the faint lines on his forehead.

“A Force user blocked our exit. Vaiken protected me.” She had to muster all her self-control to keep from smirking at the fairly inflated description of the Jedi’s performance.

The Jedi’s shock at that revelation was evident. “And you haven’t mentioned this before,
“No one asked.” She smiled noncommittally. “They were more concerned with my identity and how we’d escaped the mines. That, and getting the transport off the ground under heavy fire.”

“Can you describe the Force user, as you call them?”

“Older human with an aristocratic air about him and a deep voice? Modest attire, unarmoured and carrying a single red saber.”


“Well, Vaiken almost didn’t, he got slammed into the wall without that guy even needing to touch him.” She embellished her explanation with what she hoped was an adequate amount of naiveté about the Force. “As for how… The complex collapsed before he got to us to finish the deed. He didn’t follow us, no idea why, perhaps he was crushed or thought we were dead.”

She rose from the co-pilots seat and took in the design of the ship’s cockpit. Definitely another model she hadn’t seen before. “So, that was an actual Sith?”

“From your description, the man you chanced upon is Count Dooku, the leader of the Separatists. He also goes by Darth Tyranus.”

Zayathris struggled to place the name. Surely not a Councillor, but even a mere Darth should not be this unfamiliar. Her lack of recognition was… disconcerting. And why a random upstart should meddle in the affairs of non-Imperial space like this, posed a mystery, too. If she had lost another couple of years… “Why was he on Farnas II? To interrupt the negotiations?”

“No, that would have ended in bloodshed.” He gave a small, almost self-deprecating smile. “I wasn’t even aware he was planetside, he doesn’t usually show up in person. I can’t believe I missed the opportunity to face him. This war has been going on for too long.”

This was a galaxy-spanning conflict instead of a local skirmish? Just how influential were these Separatists? Moreover, from which faction had they separated in the first place? Given the Sith’s involvement, the Empire seemed the most likely candidate. Was Tyranus following in Malgus’ footsteps, then? What in Malachor was going on? She needed time to process the new information … and nurse her pounding headache.

“How long until we drop out of hyperspace?”

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Zayathris had spent the previous few hours attempting to meditate inconspicuously. That had turned out rather awkward – and, in to make matters even worse, calling upon the Force, no matter how superficially, was utterly disorienting, like navigating unfamiliar space with an inaccurate map. The background hum of the Force felt both darker overall, yet not Dark enough at the same time. There were the obvious things: Major loss of life, creating countless reverberations in the Force, likely the result of the ongoing war. Conflict. Betrayal. Yet, beneath the comforting throb of the Dark existed a strange undercurrent that felt deeply unnatural, like a heavy layer of immobile dust covering everything instead of permeating the universe. The strength of the Dark Side was undiminished, but it seemed indisputably less pervasive, less … alive, for lack of a better word,
than it used to. Perhaps that was just her, though, the Carbonite poisoning after her involuntary five-year-stint on Zakuul had had somewhat similar aftereffects.

Even more disturbing, there also was something in the back of her mind that kept itching, perhaps a repressed memory, hopefully not an uninvited guest like Vitiate, but without actually using the Force properly, she was simply chasing ghosts. Or she’d gone insane after all. Which would be the most harmless explanation for just about everything and not even unlikely, given the unspeakable things she had been through. She briefly contemplated killing Kenobi just so she could meditate in peace – she laughed near-hysterically at the wording of her own thoughts -, or rather, without a bloody Jedi Master looming over her back. On a second thought, she was not sure she could fly the ship on her own. Probably should not have delegated menial tasks like that to her crew all the time.

The Jedi poked his head into the cargo hold where she had temporarily taken up residence.

“I apologize, but there has been a change of plans. We are making a detour to Mandalore. You will stay on the ship, out of harm’s way. I really shouldn’t drag you into this, but there’s no time to let you disembark before we get there.” His face was ashen.

“Out of harm’s way?” Ominous. “What happened?”

“I received a distress call from their leader…” The details got drowned out by her perturbed stream of thoughts. The Mandalorians asking the Republic, specifically the Jedi, for help? This was getting more ludicrous by the minute. Asking for the current year was a bit too obvious, however. She was shaking with exertion as she tried to keep from smashing everything in sight. Her gracious Jedi host would not take kindly to that. Kriff it. Patience.

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As it turned out, the Jedi’s plan – if there ever was one, somehow this did not seem like a well-planned operation to her – got scrapped right at the start. Staying on the ship was not an option after Kenobi had to knock out two Mandalorian patrols on inspection duty. Afterwards, disguised in Mandalorian armour – a move which would not have endeared them to the Mandos she knew, outsiders wearing beskar was an insult, a sacrilege even – they had made their way to the prison complex with no further hang-ups, suspiciously enough. However, when their ship was shot down during the ensuing rescue attempt, things had gone into full-on fubar territory. A pair of Sith – this time their commitment to the Dark Side was evident at first glance – had appeared on the scene, whatever explanation there was for their presence on Mandalore. However, nothing conformed to expectations lately. Kenobi had been elusive about what the kriffing void was going on, though who could blame the man when he was obviously worried sick about the prospect of failure, his emotional turmoil almost tangible. The two Zabraks – who had obviously been expecting Kenobi, and him only – had taken the Jedi and the women he’d been supposed to free, a Duchess Satine, prisoners. Zayathris refused to devote any brain capacity to pondering how come the Mandalorians were apparently ruled by a Duchess. Having managed to evade attention, the Zayathris sat perched on a little alcove above the throne room and watched the situation unfold with growing confusion.

All parties involved had … history, that much was clear. The Jedi’s anguish betrayed his deep attachment to the woman. The cyborg Sith on the other hand felt volatile, like a broken vessel haphazardly glued back together. Moreover, he had the borderline psychotic sadist act down to a Trill. He fully embodied the kind of unhinged Sith that, in the former Wrath's view, had no future in the Empire.
"Your fatal flaw is shared by you… and your duchess.” On cue, the red Zabrak called (Darth?) Maul lifted the captive woman off the ground, gradually constricting her airflow as the spoke.

“You should have chosen the Dark Side, Master Jedi. Your emotions betray you. Your fear, and yes —” He hissed, pausing for effect. “… your anger. Let your anger **deepen** your hatred!”

“You can kill me, but you will never destroy me.” As if death was the worst thing the one might want to inflict a Jedi. He obviously lacked creativity. And instead of crushing his enemy where he stood – the potential was certainly there –, thus saving the woman he apparently loved, Kenobi opted to spew more naive drivel instead. The Jedi brainwashing went incredibly deep on this one.

Still, in tandem with the situation escalating, the darkness had pooled around Kenobi, fed by his deeply held rage surfacing. It was pulsing off him, in ever-increasing waves, like a tempest drawing ashore. It was beautiful to behold. Kenobi, with all his self-discipline and determination, would make a superb Sith. Unfortunately, that would seriously complicate matters even more at present. If he was this close, it would not be hard to give him a little shove later on, in the right setting where this magnificent power would be hers to direct. An uncontrolled fall then and there was probably something no one present would survive, including herself. She did not trust herself to find the right words to guide Kenobi properly – he was essentially a stranger. Moreover, she was not exactly a natural at that master-and-apprentice thing.

Unbelievably, despite barely holding on, Kenobi still tried to kriffing talk the Zabrak out of torturing the Duchess, as if one could negotiate. If this were any of her people threatened like that, she would have ripped the cyborg to shreds of flesh and synthskin without hesitation. Once more, the pathetic weakness of the Jedi was getting people killed over so-called ideals that were supposed to protect them in the first place. More lies.

"It takes strength to resist the Dark Side.” Of course, but could he not see how much more power he could gain through that very strength, if he stopped limiting himself?

The screeching in the Force built to a crescendo, as Kenobi twitched in grasp of the Mandalorian guard, eyes wide with fear and horror and **oh so many delicious emotions**, before his presence all but shrivelled upon itself. He was…giving up? She would not allow him to sacrifice his attachment, not when it was such a useful tool. With such a storm of passion raging inside just seconds before, he could not possibly keep clinging to the Light. She had to act. Just wait….wait…now.

The moment the dark saber in Maul’s hand ignited, she pushed herself off the ledge, both augmenting the jump and bracing her impact on the floor with the Force. The Jedi was likely too distracted to notice something as minute as that. Using the momentum, she yanked the towering cyborg’s arm down hard, creating a lever with her thankfully armoured shoulder and smirked inwardly at the wet crunch of a bone breaking. The limp form of the Duchess flew past them and rolled down the stairs, coming to a halt at Kenobi’s knees. The dark saber dropped into Zayathris’ hand as she ducked behind the Zabrak to strike at the other Sith, who lunged towards her. Maul snapped out of his confused daze and attempted to slam his leg into her knee. She leapt backward, bringing the saber to a low rear guard. A few metres to her left, Kenobi had somehow dispatched the guards and freed himself.

“Hi there.” Her mouth twisted into a triumphantly cruel leer.

Both Sith charged at her, rage blazing in their eyes.

She purposely side-stepped them, batting one side of the dual-blade out of the way to skid past
beneath it. Immediately spinning around, she brought her saber up, slashing across the larger opponent’s lower back. That fueled the other's fury, who sent her flying across the room with a Force Push she didn't dare block completely.

Kenobi joined the fight while she picked herself up. “Get the Duchess to safety!” The Jedi roared as he blocked another strike. Zayathris decided to give Kenobi the opportunity to take his revenge. Perhaps that would corrupt him further. She dashed across the room and scooped up the lithe woman. Now, she simply had to figure out where to find a safe spot in this completely unknown place.

They hadn’t come far before encountering a group of Mandalorians who were, uncharacteristically, not shooting at them and instead helped them evade the barrage of blaster shots from those who were. The barely conscious Duchess opted to trust them, even though they also appeared to be associated with Death Watch, a faction which so far had seemed to be on Maul’s side. Zayathris had long giving up trying to make sense of the allegiances of the people in whose troubles she kept getting caught up in. After exchanging the darksaber – allegedly a traditional Mandalorian weapon – for a reinforced staff, she joined the small group in search for shelter.

*Leave. LEAVE!* A visceral warning jolted through her. Something was coming and whatever – or rather whoever – that was, she was in no state to fight them. The Dark was gradually building up, becoming so oppressive, so dense, it was almost difficult to breathe without reaching into the Force to dissipate the pressure. If she just let go, she would float in a sensation that felt like viscous liquid seeping into every pore – and probably get pulled into a maelstrom. She had no desire to test her hypothesis.

On closer examination, she realized that the presence was not inherently threatening. This was no second Ziost. It just felt so consuming, in a deeply unnatural way. As if the Force was pouring all things dark into a single vessel. The last time she’d sensed something as perplexing had been Vitiate. That was not possible. It was *not*.

She already hated the owner of that presence for causing her to doubt - however briefly - her achievements, her strength.

Pure, unadulterated Darkness. A weaker being would feel the urge to prostrate themselves and worship it. The potential for unlimited power. She was surprised by the intensity of her own craving for it. That was… new. She had to leave, immediately.

Chapter End Notes

Zayathris’ looks are inspired by this amazing illustration (the non-toothy version ;) ):
https://www.artstation.com/artwork/W2ILA3
Warning: Mentions of (Empire-typical views of) slavery/power dynamics, sexual activity and prostitution, but nothing explicit.

What's a shell-shocked, bored Sith to do?

They had lost.

A once proud, fierce Empire and its billions of people reduced to a mere footnote in history.

The magnificent Empire she and myriads of others had loyally fought for, bled for, had perished. Their nemesis, the Republic had proven victorious: A corrupt and decaying system built on stagnancy and the pseudo-democratic rule of the weak triumphing over discipline and the primacy of power. It boggled the mind. Going by the superficial historic overviews she’d been able to access on the holonet, it had been a slow expiry, not a glorious last stand-off throwing everything they had left at their arch foe. Instead, the Empire had slowly withered away until it had apparently become too inconsequential to even be recorded properly in the historical documents. What a cruelly ironic, undignified development. The Sith Purebloods, as a species, appeared to be unknown nowadays, at best amounting to fictional monsters.

Fitting, since much of what she had read ultimately belonged into the realm of legends. There was absolutely no useful information on the first centuries after the Sacking of Coruscant. Mostly scientific extrapolations that with her first-hand knowledge of thirty-four years – give or take a few years spent trapped in Carbonite – actually living during that time, seemed rather improbable. Following that, there were mentions of various iterations the Sith Order had gone through, until it simply vanished with the death of one Darth Bane. The Republic, on the other hand, had also been reformed on several occasions in the meantime, in tandem with the Jedi Order’s influence waxing and then lately, waning. Suspiciously, there was no recent information on the Sith, which she could attest to undeniably existed, available to the public.

Classified likely meant relevant to the war. Zayathris was still not convinced the official interpretation of how the Separatists tied into things was completely correct. The war provided an excellent opportunity to destabilize an ailing Republic – judging from the economic and political news, it was a veritable cesspool of corruption rotting from within, which had to be obvious to anyone capable of reading between the lines. Yet, for the Sith to expose themselves after more than a millennium hiding in the shadows, there had to be more at play; in fact, nothing less than a pivotal opening or cataclysmic event looming ahead.

Given that the Sith – though how much their views had in common with the teachings of her time was unclear – were still around, there was certainly a chance they had simply retreated into the Unknown Regions, similar to how Vitiate’s Empire had sought refuge in its early days. Perhaps Bane had been a decoy, much like Darth Revan, a necessary sacrifice to put the minds of the Jedi at ease.

Regardless of what had transpired, she had no place in that conjectural Imperial remnant. Whatever they had built up once more in secret, as an outsider, she was simply a rogue element to them, a
threat. Unless she ruthlessly clawed her way up to the very top to, mostly figuratively speaking, stand on a pile of bloody corpses – a bleak, not to mention wasteful prospect –, she would never amount to anything again. Besides, these hypothetical Imperials were not her people; she owed them nothing. Her interference would get her nowhere.

The most plausible assumption, however, was that the Empire had continued on its earlier trajectory of ceaseless power grabs and betrayals at inopportune times laying ruin to even the most reasonable campaigns. If backstabbing had been at the root of the Empire’s demise, by its own philosophies, it had deserved to fall. The Sith, and by extension, the Empire would have proven itself unworthy of victory, the lure of false power exposing a fatal flaw. In that case, she had even less incentive to do anything borne out of blind allegiance to a failed ideology.

The slow tapering out also explained the accent and symbolism, perhaps at some point, the two societies had merged instead of one subjugating the other and certain aspects assimilated into the modern Republic. Given how knowledge tended to become twisted by the passage of time or lost altogether, it was not unlikely.

It felt painfully unreal to be the only legacy of the Old Empire.

Her borrowed datapad gleamed in the dimly-lit room. A figure shifted next to her and gave off a muffled sound. “Still reading, beautiful?” When she did not reply, the man propped himself up on his elbows and looked at her with drowsy eyes. “You know, I might be up for another round. Can’t image that research of yours is more enticing than me.” She waved the offer off, eyes glued to the text, even though the words had long stopped registering in her brain.

Ever since she had found out the truth, she had been in a constant daze, drained of any ambition or purpose. It was not the allegedly serene peace of the Jedi, just a numbing absence of useful emotions. Without a clear foe, she had nowhere to direct her absolute fury. So it just burned her from within, giving her little respite to do anything productive to improve her situation. The pain, at least, felt good.

Before – before close to four millennia had passed her by –, she had always had an outlet for her raging emotions in the form of a steady stream of enemies to kill or, at times, in more enjoyably passionate ways. The latter now rang empty. Her gaze flickered to the Zeltron half-asleep by her side, his light-pink skin contrasting with the luxurious dark sheets. Sleep wouldn’t come, so she put her black tunic, tightly-fitting trousers and boots back on and headed upstairs for the roof-top bar of the hotel they were staying at. While it was difficult to get sufficiently drunk with her metabolism and learned Force techniques for purging the effects of various poisons, including ethanol, perhaps the effort would help her forget, at least for a few hours.

She had left the Mandalorian capital in a hurry – a calculated retreat, not running away, she tried to tell herself -, forcing her way onto a ship manned by positively grotesque-looking aliens, who turned out to be in league with Maul. They had reached a small refueling station before the situation went from bad to worse, resulting in the vaguely humanoids’ swift deaths by asphyxiation.
She had had weeks to come to terms with her new life. Weeks spent doing anything but that. She had gone from stowaway to manager of her own little slaving operation, or what officially passed for it. In truth, it was quite the opposite. After arriving on yet another planet populated by scum, she had taken the liberty to employ the services of a Valjeen, a Zeltron hooker, who had been elated to be booked for three consecutive days. Finding out that she merely intended to question him on the state of the galaxy – whatever little he knew – and use his personal datapad had come as a veritable surprise to him. His disappointment did not last long. His odd customer – in addition to her unusual requests, he found he could hardly make sense of her pheromones, even though she looked human enough – had grown more unhappy about her findings to the point of shaking with anger and agitated pacing. He found it difficult to ignore the crushing terror creeping up his spine in her presence, but he had no choice but to stay. She did not hurt him and instead ultimately decided to work out her frustrations with his help. Extensively. Valjeen couldn’t help being somewhat flattered by her attentions, it was rare for him to become an instant favourite with a customer despite his genetic advantages. He did not manage to learn much about her, but given her demeanor and athletic build, he surmised that she was ex-military or something in that vein. She was a dangerous woman with few scruples and clearly little to lose. It would have been entirely remiss of him not to try to use that to his advantage. When he proposed she help him kill his owner, she laughed him off at first before doing a double take and seriously considering the idea, clearly intrigued by his bold proposal.

They spent two days plotting and when the opportunity came, he was relieved to find he had not misjudged her, although the practised brutality with which she unflinchingly tore through the slaver’s guards was ... unexpected. She even encouraged him to finish his owner off himself. He took his time, exacting vengeance for years of abuse, while his new ally watched, relishing the scene with a lopsided smirk on her face. He was unsure what to make of that, but had little time to contemplate, as she revealed to him her plan of taking over the slaving operation as a cover. For what, he would find out soon enough.

They cleaned up, making it look like a gang-related feud and called in the other slaves. Those wishing to leave – the majority, unsurprisingly - were set free without further ado. Those that remained received an intriguing offer: They could either continue in their current line of work or receive basic training as assassins in order to be sold and, at a convenient time, kill their new masters if they turned out to be unjust. Preferably not before training more of their fellow slaves. Those who had been through several owners already and experienced mistreatment at their hands needed not think twice before taking the unique opportunity.

The circles she moved in nowadays, not even directly most of the time but by proxy through Valjeen, disgusted her. That wretched hive of slavers and criminals, rife with debauchery and depravity of the worst kind, had it coming. Zayathris did not believe in handing out charity, but empowering the powerless was an interesting experiment of how far the reach of the dark side went for non-Force sensitives. The slaves, above all, had the most tangible chains to break. If they managed to get fulfill their purpose, thus getting their revenge and ideally freeing themselves in the process, they proved their worthiness. Zayathris had never been an ardent supporter of slavery, until getting to know Vette more she had not even considered it a particularly contentious issue – it was simply the way the Empire operated. She had not cared much for the superiority complex of many of her fellow Imperials, instead she held the - in her time - minority view that with strength came responsibility for the lives of those weaker than oneself. Just as some were destined to rule - and how far that rule extended, depended on the individual's power-, others were only fit to serve. Anyone who was content with their lot as servant should not be forced to make their own
decisions. Nevertheless, there was no point in mistreating them, thereby breeding fear and disobedience, which in turn led to resistance. Besides, while torturing slaves was as good as any other method for fueling the dark side, one did not have to turn into a bully to harness its power. In addition to frowning upon gratuitous violence towards inferior beings, she believed that in order to truly create a society where individual strength was a basic tenet, everyone should be afforded a chance to empower themselves. Including slaves.

As she picked up her drink, she idly wondered if Nox would approve of her little endeavor.

“Aw. That’s no doubt the sweetest thing you’ve ever done for me.”

The glass shattered in her hand. A thousand pieces stained the colour of blood flew apart in slow motion. Zayathris sat frozen in place trying to make sense of what had just happened while she watched the amber contents gradually dripping from the bar counter.
Her subconscious might have valiantly tried to protect her from fully realizing the implications, but ever since her awakening in this new, disagreeable world, it had been there, like a second, oddly discordant, heartbeat. Only to manifest into a fuzzy but familiar presence, a disembodied voice inside her mind, all of a sudden while she was trying to unwind.

“What in kriffing Malachor is this?” Zayathris snarled mentally. Vitiate’s unbidden sojourn had left deeper scars than she cared to admit.

Amusement flared up. “You not recognizing me grieves my heart. It’s me, your dear friend Nox.”

“I know who you are, but how come…this…” She trailed off, thoroughly confused. “It’s just not possible. Besides, you actually have – or rather, had, I guess – a heart?”

“Certainly, what do you take me for, a monster? Anyway, it’s a riveting story, I assure you.”

“Cut the theatrics. Do you want to repeat your revelation for a grander entrance? I am in a generous mood, I might even give you a welcome cheer. Or do you require a formal request? Mighty Councillor Darth Nox, I implore you to elucidate, or something like that?”

“Nah, I’m good. I’ve had sufficient time to, um, get settled in. By the way, as for welcome presents, the last couple of weeks were thoroughly satisfying for my voyeuristic tendencies. You have excellent taste in men, my Lord Wrath, visually at least. Personality-wise however, it’s kind of hit-or-miss as per usual.”

Zayathris gave an exasperated growl. “Case in point, hooking up with you during our academy days, Roshinn.”

A small, fleeting sensation best described as a wince appeared at the mention of Darth Nox’ slave name. Clearly, these were not her own emotions. “Well, I for one have fond memories of that time.” He solicited sheepishly.

“Indeed, you might be the only one with that view. But we digress. What are you doing in my mind?”

“Make yourself comfortable, maybe get another drink first – a nice strong Absinthe, if I get any say – it’s going to be a long and fascinating tale…” He replied with exaggerated cheerfulness, causing Zayathris to roll her eyes.

“Well, I guess I should start with Iokath. After you’d gone rushing off to use the controls on the remaining throne, most Alliance personnel tried to prepare for evac. However, it seemed like the weapon was activating despite your efforts, with massive energy fluctuations in the building and a violent tempest raging outside. The lightning was deep purple, you should have seen it. It was so gorgeous!”

Nox suddenly gave off a sheepish vibe. “Ahem, back to the topic. Beniko was having a major meltdown, yelling at people to do useless stuff, when the storm abruptly ended. We already thought we’d made it, but then a massive shockwave hit the control centre. Next thing I remember is being patched up by Imperial medics. Turned out they’d been further from the blast while the Pubs got
the worst of it. Good thing you decided to ally with Empress Acina, might have been the end of the Alliance right there otherwise. That would have been a pretty lame demise, if you ask me, but admittedly, the reality isn’t particularly glorious either. Anyway, once I was no longer in danger of stomach acid dissolving my vital organs – turns out even I can’t keep healing myself indefinitely when impaled on a durasteel beam, funny that – I lead a small team to recover your body. Hey, there really wasn’t much hope at that point, the building of the throne room had been reduced to a gigantic, still smoking pile of sparkling ash. It was quite the sight. Imagine my surprise to find the throne encased in some kind of transparent crystal-like substance. With you on it, obviously, physically completely intact.” She grimaced as she absentmindedly pulled the last shard of the smashed glass from her hand, completely engrossed in Nox’ account of what had occurred on Iokath.

“Fast forward five decades and three emperors, still no progress getting you out. At least your state hadn’t changed at all, as far as we could tell. Alas, I wasn’t getting any younger. No help from our dear Imperials either. Frankly, at some point people mostly stopped caring about the former Wrath and Alliance Commander when they had more pressing matters like the economy collapsing to deal with. So I came up with a plan – don’t you dare laugh - which, on flimsi, sounded absolutely marvellous.”

She couldn’t help chuckling quietly at that. “And, pray tell, what did your brilliant plan entail?” Nox’ plans were usually the antithesis of sane and helpful. Ironically, in the end, he always emerged victorious and more powerful than ever, but had likely stumbled through every possible and impossible trap and gleefully poked every shyrack’s nest on his way there. The man was an absolute walking disaster and still managed to be a smarmy little bastard about his achievements. That he was, despite the inevitable price of his mastery of the dark side clearly visible around his eyes, unreasonably handsome – if you were into intricate facial tattoos and pale green skin, probably not a major turn-on for most Imperials, then again, power certainly was – didn’t help either. For some unfathomable reason, the Force seemed to have taken a liking to him, allowing him to get away with the craziest stuff. Or – actually far more plausible – it took sadistic enjoyment in putting Nox through edifying experiences like slavery, body-snatching attempts, near-death and sharing his head with a bunch of ghosts who were probably at least as insane as their more or less willing host.

“Remember what my lovely old master tried to do to me? I studied Zash’s rituals and, coupled with my own research and experiments, figured the only way of getting you out was to ditch your body and just transfer your essence into another vessel. Um, so this sounds a little creepy when phrased like this –”

“You what?!” Zayathris gasped indignantly.

“It was a viable idea! I won’t dismiss an idea just because it sounds a little crazy. Obviously, that’s not what came to pass, or I wouldn’t be here. I had picked the perfect body, very similar to yours; the woman was even quite enthusiastic about the whole thing. Or at least, I didn’t hear her complain. Come to think about it, I should have explained the goal a bit more explicitly. At any rate, she was probably fine. Provided nothing exploded when the ritual went wrong and she got out of the caves afterwards. Or Khem didn’t eat her out of irritation or something. Um.” An odd sensation flitted across her mind as Nox apparently made a placating gesture or whatever passed for it without a body.

The former Wrath massaged a growing headache. She idly wondered how the other members of the Council managed to sit through sessions with Nox without breaking things. She really wanted to break something right now. Accidentally smashing a glass was hardly cathartic enough. “So, what actually happened?”
“That’s just the thing! I don’t know! I spend three millennia trying to figure it out. At that level, sorcery just is very … unpredictable, you can’t just cast these things on a whim, you have to sustain all the energy flows that are part of the ritual at once. But I had cross-referenced all the texts, quadruple-checked the incantations…”

For all his unusual abilities and accumulated knowledge, Nox was ridiculously easy, not to mention entertaining, to rile up. In their current predicament, they were at each other’s mercy.

"So you failed because you were weak?" And mercy was a sentiment rarely found among the Sith.

"Are you quite finished hurting my feelings? My working hypothesis is that the throne-stasis-gizmo creates a kind of event horizon within that doesn’t allow anything out, in order to maintain the equilibrium inside or just because the Iotkathi engineers were evil. I mean, you’ve been there - it’s a death trap disguised as a planet.”

“Who cares at this point? It basically worked the other way round, with you ending up in my body instead?”

“A gross oversimplification…never mind. Essentially, yeah, that’s about it. I am glad I ordered Khem to guard your … crypt for lack of a better word, in case the ritual went wrong, probably ensured that we were left alone for a long time. I wonder what became of him. But that’s not important right now. Thanks for being so accommodating, by the way. That could have gone… very badly for my spirit. And you, to be honest.”

“That’s…” Zayathris exhaled resignedly. “…putting it mildly.”

A grin. “We have always been survivors, haven’t we? Oh, congrats by the way, we achieved near-immortality, however temporary, without resorting to planet-wide massacres.”

“Temporary immortality? Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

“So what? We even surpassed Vitiate!” Nox’ slight tendency to become overly excited about irrelevant aspects had not mellowed with the passage of time.

“Splendid. The downside being that stasis is rather dull, so I would not say it was particularly worthwhile.”

“At least you had your dreams and stuff, so you don’t get to complain. I just languished in the back of your mind, unable to do anything.”

“Luckily, you were already crazy to begin with, or you’d definitely be now.”

“That’s a … brutal assessment. But probably accurate, yeah. The only entertainment I had was looking at your memories. Got boring after a few decades.”

“You did not sift through my memories.”

“Don’t worry. Your secrets are safe with me. Literally, it’s not like I am going anywhere for the foreseeable future. Though I must say I didn’t expect your Captain to have a decidedly kinky side to him –”

“Shut up.” She snapped, aloud, causing more than a few heads to turn into her direction before thinking better of it.

“I just complimented your husband –“
“Don’t mention him.” She hissed. “Or I am going to eradicate you. Like you consumed your ghosts.”

“Huh.” Entirely inappropriate mirth was washing over her. “Ahem. I shall make an educated guess: You have no idea how to do that without seriously endangering your own life.”

“Whether I live or die is inconsequential. Don’t you realize? The Empire is gone. The Sith reduced to…what exactly, I have no idea. No one I ever … cared about … is left.” Nox made a whining sound. “Yes, yes - apart from you, but this arrangement is far from ideal. You don’t give a flying kriff about others so it’s not the same for you.”

Zayathris downed her last shot of alcohol.

“You’re wrong.” Nox replied sullenly, breaking the uneasy silence after a while. “I do miss Theron.”

“Oh come on, you’re telling me he was more than a passing amusement to you?”

“Of course! This time, I even… damn it. You are correct. They are all dead. It doesn’t matter anymore. The upside is: We have been liberated from these attachments that chained us to mediocrity. The pain of loss is a wellspring of power. Nothing left but to harness that.”

Zayathris worked her jaw. While she disliked the conclusion he had drawn, she had to admit that Nox’ view was they only one that would allow her to move forward.

"You're insufferable, Nox."

"Yep." She half-imagined him giving a slow, lascivious smirk. "You wouldn't have me any other way."

"I would literally have you any other way than in my head."

"Now you're giving me ideas."

Chapter End Notes

Roshin is Sanskrit meaning “angry”. There is little info on Mirialan naming conventions, other than the fact their surnames often end in an “ee” sound and first names are usually two syllables long, sometimes with double consonants. Title comes from C.G. Jung: 'The pendulum of the mind oscillates between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong.'
It should not come as a surprise that this story contains spoilers for all Sith storylines.

Zayathris was not ignorant of the fact that her business venture’s approach would inevitably implode as soon as a significant number of slaves began to carry out their designated task. There were of course ways of obfuscating ownership and re-routing the flow of goods to obscure her involvement. Regardless, there was no denying the planned obsolescence aspect of the whole endeavour looming in the background. Not to mention the immediate repercussions if a slave failed in too obvious a manner.

Valjeen really came into his own managing the stakeholders and taking care of the finer details. She could hardly picture him as a callous crime lord, but he excelled at manipulation, she had to give him that. She was glad not to be entangled too deeply in the operational aspect of it. In fact, she detested all the scheming involved. Building a powerbase was one thing, though even then she favored true, direct displays of strength in battle over intrigue and secretly plotting against her enemies. She was certainly not the mindless brute, the blunt tool Darth Baras had taken her for, but she preferred to leave the maneuvering to those who actually enjoyed that kind of thing.

People … were unreasonably complicated. If she had to deal with them – rather than merely fighting alongside them, bound by duty and a common objective or developing a certain sense of kinship like she had with Vette - , she usually preferred them pinned underneath her. Either in utter defeat or ecstasy, depending on the alignment and attractiveness of the person in question.

Her focus on tangible power had probably been one of the reasons why she had not seen the Transponder Station incident coming, which kept looming in the back of her head as one of her greatest failures even after all those years. Quinn certainly had never forgotten it either, since it had earned him a top grade cybernetic arm as a constant reminder of his mistake. Zayathris did not believe in forgiveness, but if she could keep her one-time enemies this close, was it not an impressive testament to her power?

Even during her time as Alliance Commander, she had always kept one of Quinn’s last letters, the one discussing their possible legacy, letting the bitterness that made her chest clench when perusing the all too familiar lines fuel her rage whenever she required it.

If she did not allow her attachments to become a weakness, they could not pose a threat to her. She refused to take the path of least resistance, the quick and easy approach that Malgus had utilized killing Eleena Daru. At least that tragic tale had turned into a popular opera soon after Malgus’ eventual demise; though the officially intended meaning was mainly a warning against fraternizing with aliens and letting one’s guard down.

Many of her peers had taken to viewing emotions relating to others as shackles, which, to her, had always seemed like a hypocritical understanding of passion. Taken to its logical conclusion, the imperative of individual freedom in itself turned into a constraint limiting your options and forcing you to discard all ties to the world. That way, the Sith could hardly claim to be superior to the Jedi.
practicing detachment. Now, dependence on others was another matter altogether. Letting concern for others influence your decisions was a major pitfall, but that could not mean always treating them with cruelty, or at best, indifference just to avoid becoming attached. Relationships were only a liability to the weak. Conversely, actual freedom came from the strength to protect what you laid claim to. Otherwise, the inevitable fear of loss would drive you mad or into the smothering embrace of the Light with its false promises of peace. A deathly peace that was arguably the worst chain imaginable.

She had trained the first generations of slave assassins, however fanciful that term was, given the mixed results, and done her best to instill ambition and a modicum of bloodthirst in them. She had planted the seed. What came after was of little concern to her. Admittedly, she could not wait to get away from the underworld.

Her meager business had not yielded her the luxury of her own ship, so she was forced to strike a deal with a group of smugglers – she would accompany them on three missions as additional muscle and they would loan her a basic, hyperspace-capable ship for a limited time. She saw no reason to trust them over any of the other – just as shady – options, but Valjeen had vetted them thoroughly beforehand. The first two runs had been a breeze and Zayathris was pleased to note that her former strength was returning gradually, to the point that having to hold back was becoming a nuisance.

It was the trip to Belsavis that turned out be ill-fated. With some time to spare until they were due to rendezvous with the intermediary expecting then, Nox had pestered her until she persuaded the smugglers to make a major detour in search of a kind of sentient artificial intelligence called Ashaa, though she had not divulged that. Apparently, despite her refusal to prolong Nox’ life after he had freed her – “There is solace in finality. A mother must think of all of her children, to protect them. Even from themselves.” – the AI had made other promises to him that he intended to capitalize on. What he had failed to take into account was how thoroughly glaciers could shape a planet’s surface over the course of a few thousand years. The smugglers’ patience wearing thin, they ultimately had to abandon the impromptu exploration. They touched down in an area not covered with ice that appeared to be the outskirts of a Republic colonization effort and waited for their contact. When he failed to show, the smugglers sent Zayathris to scout ahead. She had little say in the matter, though she colourfully threatened them should they attempt to leave her behind.

As it turned out, whatever goods the gang had intended to smuggle, the Republic was seriously peeved about the intrusion. There had been no indication of trespassing being prohibited, the settlement was not even fortified, but when she was swiftly taken into custody upon entering the site, she vowed to be even more careful next time. The military presence had certainly come as a surprise. The troopers seemed to packing up, however, so Zayathris had a nagging suspicion that she served as a distraction for the smugglers’ real plan, which undoubtedly was far more troublesome, not to mention illegal, than they had let on. Killing enough of the soldiers to facilitate her getaway would not pose a problem, so she delayed her escape to give her back-stabbing associates the benefit of the doubt, if only to gut them herself as soon as she had the ship.

Soon enough, fighting broke out nearby, but just as quickly died down again. Within minutes, she was hauled out of the makeshift cell by two of the white-armored troopers and dragged onto a small transport ship. Just when she decided to make a run for it, pandemonium ensued, with shots ringing in the distance and cannons firing every which way. The transport took off in a hurry before the doors even started to close. They had not even cleared the height of the surrounding glaciers when the transport shook violently with an undefinable impact. In the blink of an eye, part of the hull was ripped away. The vessel began to tumble, sending the men flying into the walls and
out of the opening. Zayathris gripped the security railing with all her strength as the centrifugal force yanked her outside to follow the trajectory of the other unfortunate soldiers. Battle-honed instincts kicking in, she rotated her other arm and clasped the wrist of the trooper that had held her when he, too, was flung out of the by now uncontrollably spinning transport. A jolt of pain ripped through her as he hit the side of the vessel, causing her to scream with exertion. She was too focused on manipulating the threads of kinetic energy around her with the Force in order to brace their inevitable impact to think about why she had not let go of the dead weight yet. The thought belatedly came to the forefront of her mind right before they hit the ground. Afterwards, there was only blackness.

Once more, Zayathris found herself in a Republic med bay. This was turning into an obnoxious habit. The ensuing interrogation was spearheaded by a clone officer – that was a novelty, somehow she had assumed the only cloned their cannon fodder, with their leadership recruited from, well, normal people. Nevertheless, it made appalling sense; the Republic cowards had created their own little military microcosm comprised only of expendable resources, without the ordinary citizens having to dirty their hands. Perhaps the decision makers were afraid that, when faced with the bloody reality of war, the population would discard their thin veneer of loyalty. The lives of the complacent majority lay in the hands of insignificant sentients bred exclusively for war. If they died, it did not matter, they were replaceable by design, if they won, they could be discarded anyway. Thus saving the Republic the bother and bureaucracy of having to feed a standing army, or to care about the traumata they had suffered. The Republic claimed to frown upon slavery, but just how willingly did these clones jump into the proverbial sarlacc pit, then?

It was such an efficient and exceptionally cold-blooded system, Imperial strategists would have been summarily impressed by the concept.

It was also quite spineless and, in a sense, the epitome of decadence. That was what you get for not having universal draft – or really, any draft concept at all, it seemed. The Empire, at least, had not shied away from sending its sons and daughters to the frontlines. Devotion as well as the patriotic desire to fight for the Empire until the very end had been instilled in its citizens from birth. Every man and woman had viewed it as their duty to further its reach and to lay down their lives if necessary. That “necessary” more often than not had meant “because a random Sith lord could not care less” was a different matter altogether, albeit a very unfortunate, reprehensible one.

The current war, ingeniously dubbed the Clone War by the media, was the quintessential proxy conflict: Indoctrinated beings with neither past nor future versus mindless, programmed droids. Zayathris speculated that in reality that might be the whole point – it would be delightfully ironic. Yet, how the Sith were supposedly able to manipulate both sides so thoroughly remained a mystery. As did their ultimate goal – what was the point of corrupting the Republic further and draining its resources, yet at the same time preserving its infrastructure and military capabilities? Were they simply waiting for it to fall into their lap instead of seeking to conquer it? Yet, who in their right mind would just hand over the reins to a Sith lord? Moreover, it would not automatically solve that irksome Jedi issue either.

Interrupting her musings, a trooper unceremoniously rushed into the room and skid to a halt in front of his commanding officer.

“I know her, sir.” He stated, out of breath, as if he had traversed the entire length of the ship in a sprint. “She was on Farnas II. Saved a Jedi. General Kenobi allowed her to travel with him when
he returned to Coruscant.”

His superior blinked in confusion, then turned into her direction again.

“Is that true?” He intoned slowly.

“Yes. Knight Vaiken fearlessly rescued me from captivity. And if it hadn’t been for these skilled soldiers,” she nodded towards the newcomer. “We would not have made it off the planet. I am eternally grateful.” She struggled to force an appreciative, grateful smile. Nox snickered in her mind. Why don’t you do the talking, then? Think they would appreciate the “Murder and Mayhem” speech?

The officer took a deep breath and left the room with long strides, only to return moments later after making a holo-call.

“I am taking you to the Captain.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Said captain appeared to be the only person on the whole ship, apart from from the former Wrath herself, not bred in an incubator. Unfortunately for everyone involved, that did not make him the most competent one. She truly just wanted to get off unimpeded at the next opportunity, but Force dammit was he making things complicated, jabbering on about military secrets – on an fracking hospital ship, from the looks of it. While she had always detested indiscriminate Sith interference in military matters, this particular officer would be in urgent need of a fist clenched around his neck for correcting his attitude. Too bad this was not the Empire after all. Their heated discussion of whether to trust her and what to do with her either way had been going round in circles for a while when the ship dropped out of hyperspace with a sickening, jarring lurch, sending them all tumbling to the floor. Competence at work for sure. Jumping back to her feet, Zayathris was greeted with the towering outline of a capital ship visible from the viewport. Bloody void, Nox, aren’t you my lucky charm?

The personnel scrambled to their stations just in time to bring up the shields. Unsurprisingly, in the ensuing chaos, the captain had not taken her up on her shouted offer to infiltrate the other ship and stop it from shooting them to pieces – in the absence of a more tactically sound solution.

Zayathris threw up her hands, fury rising at the sheer idiocy of trying to hold out on a medical frigate against a much larger, much better equipped ship and left the bridge. As she jogged along the corridor without anyone having half the mind to pay attention to her, she extended her senses in search for something that might offer a way out of her predicament. One of the soldiers caught up to her, his gear setting him apart from the others she had encountered so far.

“You were serious about that?”

“What, blowing the enemy ship up?” She looked at him over her shoulder, not breaking stride.

“Yeah. Can you do it?”

“If I can’t, we’re all doomed anyway. It’s not like you have a lot of options.”

“That’s why I am here. Got no choice but to trust you.” The clone briefly made eye contact, nervousness apparent, before donning his helmet in a hurry.

“Is that reason enough for open insubordination?” She all but purred.

“The lives of more than thousand vode are at stake and all we can do is send out a handful of fighters. I am grasping at straws here, but I’d be damned if I insist on following orders right now.” Perhaps these clones were not the brainwashed simpletons she had taken them for after all.

“So what can you do to help me get onto that ship?” They rounded another corner and she was beginning to wonder where exactly they were headed.

“I am one of the fighter pilots supposed to buy the Captain time.”

“For what? A stroke of genius?”

“Something like that, yeah.” He replied sheepishly. "No idea, actually. It's not like General
Skywalker or any of the other Jedi can rush in to save the day. We're too far out."

So the Jedi had a much larger involvement in this war than the anecdotal news reports indicated. “What exactly happened?”

“Hyperdrive failure. Technical malfunction or sabotage, I don’t care. Hell of a coincidence, though. Can’t have been you, you were under supervision all the time. Don’t seem like a Separatist to me, either.”

They reached the ante-chamber of a small hangar. From the looks of it, the frigate only boasted a paltry complement of starfighters.

“How are we going to do this?”

“Haven’t considered that far ahead. Sneak on my fighter and we’ll see if we can find an opening.”

“I do love spur-of-the-moment planning.”

“Got a better idea?” He scoffed half-heartedly.

“No. Anywhere is better than staying here to play sitting nuna.” Zayathris shrugged. “Let’s crush them.”

Flying was for droids, or people appreciating the technical aspects of it. Zayathris found little enjoyment in flying, all things considered. She had got used to living on a ship, but still preferred being planetside, surrounded by breathable atmosphere and with solid ground under her boots. Compared to a Fury-class interceptor, a rather luxurious vessel by Imperial engineering's standards, a starfighter was far more claustrophobia inducing. It left her feeling completely exposed to the expanse of space and the barrage of enemy fire. The unease rising in her chest was rather unbecoming for a Sith of her stature and Nox’ perpetual teasing was not helping at all.

“What are you so scared of, anyway?”

“I refuse to experience fear.” Who exactly was she trying to fool, anyway?

“Refuse all you want, it’s clearly not working. I can feel it. You shouldn’t try to overpower everything that stands in your way, sometimes fear is a great thing to harness. You’d be a fool to think yourself above it. Besides, you’ve- we’ve a good chance of surviving even if this ship goes bust.”

“How so?”

“I’d imagine you’ve been through worse. Can’t you endure the pain for a while?”

“Have you considered the tissue damage from the freezing cold, the radiation and, last but not least, the zero pressure? Or, the lack of oxygen?”

“Oh, oxygen is inconsequential if you have the Force. You are growing feeble, my dear Wrath. Expand your horizons a little.”

She sighed. “As long as that’s the only thing that expands. Well.” She no doubt had the necessary abilities, but somehow, the all-encompassing void of space was quite daunting in comparison to
pretty much everything she’d had to endure so far.

“As for the truly excruciating effects - can’t be that much worse than a lightsaber wound or withstanding lightning. Think of the others who have actually kept their wrecked, mutilated bodies intact by sheer rage. Which, I assume, should be right up your alley.”

“Thanks for the reassurance.”

“You know I am an optimist first and foremost.”

"Make that a sadist."

Zayathris decided to focus on the task at hand, one step at a time. “Situation report?”

“Staying clear of dogfights. Best chance is to sweep in through the aft hangar. Got to crash the ship, though, otherwise they’ll be in top of us in secs.”

“Do it. We’ll find another way off, I am sure.”

“Breaking formation, in 3, 2, 1 - now.” His comm channel immediately exploded with confused requests and – later – expletives.

“Hope they won’t shoot at us.”

Their plan was fragile enough without "friendly" - a misnomer if there ever was one - fire.

They skidded into the empty hangar just before its massive doors closed. The Republic pilots were exceptionally well-trained, she had to concede. The landing had been rather fiery, but they ejected in time, their safety ensured with a little help from the Force.

Hiding behind a massive support pillar, the clone surveyed their surroundings. “Won’t be easy, Ma’am.”

“Mishuk gotal'u meshuroke, pako kyore.” It was a somewhat far-fetched assumption, but his careless use of the word vode in regards to his fellow soldiers reinforced the impression she’d gained on the basis of the look of their armor. It was a good opportunity to honour what Torian had taught her with the utmost patience, even if she had callously sacrificed him to prioritise Vette’s rescue - which, in the end, had not been successful either.

It had still been one of the easiest decisions of her life, although it had complicated the Alliance’s relations with their Mandalorian allies afterwards somewhat.

He gave an impressed huff. “Ib'tuur jatne tuur ash'ad kyr'amur.”

“I agree. Let’s get to it, then. Secure a path to the escape pods while I’ll take care of the energy core.”

Avoiding the droid crew was hardly a challenge. Neither was taking the patrols out of commission.
Finding her way around the ship, however, was. Presumably, the layout had been optimized for the droids’ specific activity patterns and not for overall efficiency. At the very least, it failed to take sentients’ requirements into account, who would certainly profit from a map. Another luxury she did not have. Slicing was out of question as well, since she still struggled with the differences in the user interface and, occasionally, even input method. There was no way she could do anything besides accessing the Holo-Net, and even that was not a seamless experience. She would never have though that technology would ever make her feel this stupid.

Eventually, she reached the generator room, if the massive, almost palpapable, energy spikes were anything to go by. They had maintained radio silence thus far so as not to give away their presence – though by now, several droids not reporting in would probably have raised alarm anyway. At least she was finally properly armed, with a kind of reinforced electro-staff she had taken from one of the more agile opponents she had encountered. Without armour, unarmed combat with droids was an extremely painful endeavour. No matter how a viable a tactic for fueling her rage that was, in the long run it was bound to give her more than horrible bruises.

Faced with the (obscure) control panel she had been looking for, a little support from her Republic ally was in order.

“Still alive?”

“Yes, ma’am, managed to locate the escape pods. Should be quite close to your current position. Any luck so far?”

“I am standing in the middle of the energy control room. At least I think so. Any suggestions how to re-route the energy or overload this thing?”

“No? Thought you had a plan.”

“I’ve actually never seen a generator like this.”

“Osik. Any way to adjust the energy output?”

“Tried that already. Probably has security algorithms in place that regulate it down again every time the input parameters are out of the normal range.” The doors on both sides of the massive room opened to reveal a veritable torrent of droids. “Hold on.” She powered up her staff and charged at her foes without hesitation. The standard type once more turned out rather frail, easy to take down in a single sweep of her unorthodox weapon. The heavily shielded ones, on the other hand, proved to be somewhat of a challenge. While dodging their fire, Zayathris ended up lifting them one by one with the force to crush their circuits from within whenever she managed to concentrate for long enough, or barring that, smash them into the energy core itself. An exhilarating battle, for sure, but it had taken too long. She could not afford to delay any longer. Besides, the core had not taken well to being bombarded with droids, as indicated by the warnings popping up on the panel’s screen. And the siren blaring overhead. That one was unmissable. She turned up some of the dials for good measure. The frequency and urgency of the warnings increased. Good sign. Kind of.

“Trooper, I hope you’re ready to get out of here.”

“What did you do?”

“Solve our problem.”
Translations:
Mishuk gotal'u meshuroke, pako kyore. - "Pressure makes gems, ease makes decay."
Ib'tuur jatne tuur ash'ad kyr'amur. - "Today is a good day for someone else to die."

UI/UX is bound to have changed over time, not to mention cultural differences between Empire and Republic. Case in point: DOS vs Windows vs many Linux flavours. Western vs. Chinese or Japanese websites. I imagine that can throw a spanner in the works.

Also edited all occurrences of "hell", as Sith do not believe in any kind of afterlife, hence their general obsession with staying alive no matter the cost.

Let me tell you a secret - I am an engineer by trade and heart. As such, I mostly read datasheets and whitepapers. Fascinating stuff. Hardly get round to reading fiction. So I hope you can forgive me for the rushed descriptions. And the sciency hand-waving. Especially that. O.o" But hey, it's Star Wars. Come on, Star Wars is more Fi than Sci.
“Quite close to your position” had turned out to be an overly optimistic assessment. The light freighter they had ended up commandeering when they met roughly halfway instead was actually a tremendous improvement over an escape pod. Without haphazardly jumping to hyperspace, they might not have made it out of the blast zone of the crumbling Separatist ship in time. Who could have guessed that it would explode randomly instead of breaking apart? With any luck, it had not taken the medical frigate down with it, but even in that case, the clones’ sacrifice would not have been completely in vain. That line of reasoning seemed to placate the frantic pilot eventually.

They spent a while in exhausted silence watching the familiar pervasive glow of hyperspace before his curiosity apparently got the better of him.

“How come you speak Mando’a?”

“I…served alongside two Mandalorians back in the day. They taught me a couple of phrases. Knew it would come in handy one day.”

“You’re ex-military?”

Zayathris nodded vaguely.

“What position? Clearly a leadership role, low tech abilities, combat skills rivalling that of a Jedi general…some fancy SpecOps officer?

She hesitated, considering the implications of the proffered cover story as well as imagining herself as an actual officer, before finally replying with a dark chuckle. “That description comes closest, yes.”

“I knew it!” He grinned triumphantly. “Zoom owes me twenty creds now.”

“You had a betting pool about my background?” She asked with mild indignation, surprised by the clones’ casual camaraderie, which indicated that they did have a mind and even a culture of their own.

“Yes, about lots of things actually. Ehm, that came out wrong.” He cleared his throat. “It’s not every day we have a mystery woman on our ship who nearly tore her arm out to save a brother. No one guessed the Mandalorian ties, though. You’ve got to work on the accent a bit, by the way.”

His good-natured jibe reminded her of Vette’s attempts to teach her Ryl slang. (Well, boss, hate to break it to you, but it’s Chi’kan. The way you say it sounds like Ch’kairn, and that makes no sense, would mean “death dark” or something. Not “freak”. But it kinda suits you. I mean, with the whole big scary Sith thing you’ve got going… Yeah, I’ll stop. Sorry.) She had not humored the Twi’lek again after that disaster. Fluency in Basic as well as a functional command of both High and Common Sith had been sufficient for her needs.

“Did you just volunteer to teach me?” She stretched languidly in the seat while keeping eye contact with the pilot.

“Why not? Considering we’ve still got a couple of hours ahead of us.”
The corners of her lips twitched. “Alternatively, there are other ways of passing time.”

As the suggestive words registered in his brain, the clone’s eyes widened almost comically.

“Eh. Ma’am. Um.” He unbuckled his seatbelt and all but bolted towards the rear of the ship. “Got to check my gear.”

The woman’s husky peal of laughter caught him fully off guard. “You realize this might sound like an invitation to help you with your gear?”

He stood in the corner deliberately facing away from her, posture stiff as if standing at attention, and gave no response.

“You just can’t help it, can you? You get all moth to the flame around these military types.” Nox bristled.

What’s not to like? Sleek uniforms, athletic build, the desire to excel and submit to authority… an ideal combination. You don’t approve?

“Yawn. You forgot “boring and predictable”.”

Slowly, the former Wrath rose from her position and walked up to the pilot. She placed a hand on his shoulder and turned him towards her with a gentle pulling motion.

“No need to flee. I am not going to eat you alive. I tend to save that for the second night.” The pilot caught a playful sparkle in her eyes, which in the ship’s interior lighting had taken on a faint orange glow.

He snorted, somewhat put at ease by her flippancy, awkwardly wondering how he could be sure that she was not serious, when she continued. “What’s your name, anyway? Can’t keep calling you Trooper all the time.”

“Yeah, that’s something we should get out of the way before considering other ideas. Name’s Tumble.”

She raised a single eyebrow. “You go by your callsign?”

“No, Ma’am, we all have a designation – mine’s CC-1693, but apart from official contexts, we prefer our chosen names.”

There is something singularly empowering in naming oneself. Nox added, thoughtfully. But that particular name is unnecessarily … corny. “In that case, couldn’t you have gone for something slightly more intimidating?”

“Actually, the brothers came up with it. Tumble’s already an improvement over the first version – tumbleweed.”

“Sounds like there’s an intriguing story behind that.”

“Oh yeah.”
“Dammit.” They had dropped out of hyperspace near a small, inhabited moon.

“Trouble?”

“Nah, not yet. It’s just weird… Navigated to this outpost because it’s neutral.” He scowled as he double-checked his scanners. “And it’s where I know for a fact our ships that happen to be in the sector dock for refueling and repairs. Looks like we missed them.”

“At least we won’t get shot at.” Zayathris leaned towards the viewport to let her eyes wander over the surface. “What a desolate place.”

“Used to be a flourishing trading post before the Separatist blockade of the system. Then they left, but things haven’t improved for the locals again.”

“So, Tris-”

“That’s not my name.”

The pilot shrugged, unfazed. “Sounds good, though. Nice and short.”

“My actual name sounds even better.” She purred. “Especially once we get to those other activities.”

“This is … inappropriate…”

“You know, I get this reply a lot.”

“Maybe because it really is?”

“Fine, fine. Be like that.” She threw her hands up in mock defeat. A nickname was actually better in case she appeared in any historical records. As unlikely as that was, considering that she had not even been able to find the names of any of Acina’s successors in the woefully incomplete and watered-down Holonet History Archive. Even more improbable that a clone would care to look her up, but paranoia sometimes had its advantages.

“Anyway, your full name is hard to pronounce properly.”

“Just wait until you come across Chiss names.”

“Chiss?”

“Uh, blue-skinned near-humans who prefer cold environments and have a convoluted social hierarchy?”

“You mean Pantorans?”

She sighed. Yet another research topic. What became of their Chiss allies? She would have expected them to disentangle themselves in time before the Empire’s decline. “Never mind. I’ll get drinks while you contact your high command?”
“Requires a lot of luck to reach anyone, let alone High Command. Don't think they can be bothered to pick up a lost soldier. But yeah, the earlier we get back to the GAR, the better. Meet over there, Tris?”

She nodded with a faint smile and headed towards a dingy little bar, before changing direction once the trooper was out of sight. Now, for the difficult part. She had little desire to board yet another Republic ship. It seemed to be an emerging pattern: Whenever she associated – however unwillingly – with the Reps, getting dragged into a smoldering mess she technically could not care less about was inevitable.

The small landing zone boasted an even tinier brokering area for off-world transport. The options were meager, probably based on the routes of the freighters coming in for refueling.

Zayathris decided on Achorra, an industrial world on the fringe of Republic space, as her next destination. It was one of the possibilities that had come up in her search for a place to base herself. With its production of cheap consumer goods, the planet was in all likelihood insignificant enough to rank low on the Separatist list of targets, but still well connected due to the high export volume. It also boasted one of the largest public libraries in the sector, hosted beneath the government building. A sensible starting point for continuing her research.

For the first time since her awakening, she experienced an uneventful – if rather uncomfortable – flight. Zayathris missed her ship. Her former crew, even more, but the thought of them produced more rage than she knew what to do with at that moment. Regardless of the strange meanderings her path had taken in the past, she had always been surrounded by people on whose personal loyalty she encouraged. Now, she just felt abandoned. The very idea was absolutely ridiculous. Alas, that did not make it any less true. As a Sith in the old Empire, her place and authority had been clear. There had been laws and implicit rules as well as the sheer obligations of effective leadership to shape her interactions with others. And when it came to her subordinates, she had been the law. Even more so as Alliance Commander. She had had little agency in obtaining that position – just like becoming the Emperor’s Wrath-, a fact she resented, but nevertheless endeavored to use every opportunity to become more powerful so that she could carry out the responsibilities that came with those roles. To one day rise above these pathetic shackles of necessity and forge her own path again. Instead, she had become an insignificant speck of stardust in an unfamiliar, but just as unforgiving galaxy.

Chapter End Notes

Short filler to get to the next, more significant interactions.
Is the Sith Warrior the only female character with (technically) two crew romance options? If so, that would be quite telling.
Service is its own Reward I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The library was not as extensive as advertised – then again, what had she expected from a backwater planet like this? -, but it did beat the Holonet in terms of thoroughness on the limited topics and historical periods about which it did provide documents. At least there were no other visitors around to bother her. She did not envy Nox’ work during his time as head of the Sphere of Ancient Knowledge. It was unfathomable that someone, rather than die from boredom, would seek to prolong their life just to spend their time researching.

“We will never piece together what happened to the Empire at this rate. Not to mention finding clues as to what the Sith are currently up to.” Zayathris groaned inwardly. “How can you stand this?”

“This?” Being in her head, Nox should not have to ask for clarification, especially considering that she did not try to mask her annoyance, so he was just being difficult.

“All this torturous reading, reviewing and then backtracking again…” The source material did not comprise of well-ordered reports and systematic assessments. That, she could have tolerated – working with Quinn had certainly left a fair amount of scars in more ways than one. Reading longwinded prose and cryptic allusions to past events made her extremely restless which was hardly conducive to improving her concentration. She was yearning for a proper fight or, at the very least, a sparring match to relieve her tension.

The Meditation of Transcendence, as Sana Rae had dubbed the technique the Commander had learned from two of the greatest champions of the Force of her time, helped to take the edge off and allowed her to dissipate some of her cultivated rage into the Force without repercussions, certainly an unusual, perhaps unprecedented course of action for a Sith. Nevertheless, due to the stifling, non-competitive environment it was mentally and physically painful not to use her passions, which in turn made matters worse, because dealing with pain – of course – fed the Dark. It was a vicious cycle. The Dark Side always required fuel, and if you failed to bring sufficient offerings before it, it would feast on you to sustain its ravaging flames.

She had tried taking it out on criminal scum and random beasts in the wilderness but that it only made her feel more pathetic, more angry, which again…well, there was simply no reprieve. Even her proven technique of using sex for channeling the dark power raging in her productively had begun to fail her lately. It tended to put too much strain on her already brittle self-control and when the tell-tale yellow had bled into her irises again during a tryst, deciding what to do about her casual partner afterwards had caused her a moment of hesitation.

That, in its entirety, was unacceptable. Dangerous. A slippery slope towards weakness, with the corruption of the Light lying in wait to catch her at the end of the slow fall.

She supposed she should be grateful to Marr and Satele Shan for – unwittingly – giving her a means to preserve her sanity. Marr might still be around to hear her thanks, though he might frown upon the sorry state he would find her in - then again, she would almost welcome him taking her out of her misery. It would be an honourable end to die at the hands of a fellow Sith for whom she had always held a high degree of respect.

Zayathris wondered what had awaited the Jedi Grandmaster after her eventual death. The thought
of Satele's and Marr's Force ghosts discussing and arguing and who knows what else they had kept themselves - each other? - entertained with during their exile for all eternity was highly amusing. Unfortunately for Marr, Satele was the kind of person who would serenely choose to become “one with the Force”, whatever that euphemism actually meant and why someone would look forward to their identity dissolving, she still could not fathom. However, it was telling that the Jedi philosophy managed to portray a loss that could not be greater as a gain, turning reality on its head with their sophistry.

“It is such a marvellous feeling, satiating one’s curiosity. Knowledge is power, after all.” Zayathris rolled her eyes at Nox’ far too enthusiastic reply. “You know, if you’re so fed up, why don’t you let me take the helm for a while?”

“As in taking over my body?” An icy shiver ran down her back. “Is that actually a possibility?”

“I cannot say for sure, but we won’t find out unless we give it a try, will we? This arrangement is – thankfully – different from the one I had with my ghosts, but since it is more amicable, a temporary, consensual switch might even work.”

She hesitated. “I can’t say I like this idea.”

“I find your lack of trust disturbing.”

“There are quite a few people I’d rather trust not to stab me in the back while I’m defenseless, tucked in a corner of my own mind.”

“Really? Who?”

“Vette. Pierce.” First two names required no deliberation. “Hm...probably not Lana... But Theron, which is actually kind of surprising. Quinn is...a sore subject.” She trailed off.

“A cowardly double-crossing schutta par excellence, that’s what he is. And I am not on that illustrious - albeit woefully short, have you noticed? - list?” Her uninvited guest’s tone became harsher. “When have I ever hurt or betrayed you?”

“You haven’t, otherwise you’d be long dead.”

“Technically, I am "long dead".” He replied drily. “Anyway, why are you worried then?”

“Because you’re self-serving chaos personified. You’re precisely the kind of man who would torture a random civilian to the brink of death because your tea was brewed at the wrong temperature.”

“I prefer caf, thank you.” Nox snapped. “You wound me. You really do. I consider you my friend. My first and only friend, truth be told. And now you tell me that – that –” He wasn’t actually … sobbing, was he? “I mean, you never gave off any indication of your reservations while we both still served the Empire or when I joined your kriffing Alliance, forfeiting my chance to reclaim my seat on the Council to stand by your side.”

At any rate, she could sense his cold fury rising. The incongruent, disembodied feeling made her nauseous. She tried to push it aside, but was met with a throbbing sting of pain. “Why is that? Have you been lying to me all this time?” There was a malicious, dangerous edge to his mental voice as he continued.
“It wasn’t an issue so far, because – friends or not – I had no doubt I could take you in a fight if necessary. But while you’re in my head…when it comes to possibly losing control over my body…I just can’t afford the tables turning. It’s not even personal-” She ground out, bile rising in her throat as she realized that she was no long fully in command of her motor functions.

“Nox, what the kriffing void are you doing?”

There was no reply. The pain intensified, taking on a more physically manifest quality, the nerve endings in her chest and arms set ablaze. “Nox!” She involuntarily bent over, numb hands on the tiled floor, arms trembling as if they could not support the weight placed on them. Struggling against the sudden crippling sensation, she throw her own rage against the incorporeal pressure. When they clashed, a white-hot storm ripped from her core to the very tips of her fingers. Streaks of lightning emanated from them, tinging the room an eerie blue, before slowly dissipating.

The pungently sweet stench of burnt flesh lay in the air. Zayathris stared at the faint vein-like scorch marks branching out on the floor in disbelief while she gasped for breath. “Bloody void.” She felt heady, ethereal as if after a particularly spectacular climax or battle high.

Nox’ voice reappeared, somewhat quieter, more strained than before. “Whoa. I certainly wasn’t expecting this to happen. That was entirely unintentional, I assure you. But awesome.”

“Kriff, that felt…amazing.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

“You’ve never tried to cast lightning before?” Nox asked, incredulous.

“Apart from during training as a teen, no. Did not really work for me back then so I decided to focus on my strengths instead… Is it supposed to hurt?” Grimacing, she examined the deep crimson blisters forming on her palms.

“In my admittedly limited experience”, he chuckled in false self-deprecation, “at least not like this, but then again, you don’t usually start out with this level of intensity. The upside is: That would have been more painful for your opponent than it is for you. I have never burnt myself, though. Fine, not this badly. You might want to get some practice, in a more private setting.” She glanced around to make sure there were no witnesses to her unexpected feat.

“Preferably, yes. Can’t afford to burn the library down. That would be a category of fubar I am not willing to deal with right now.” She drew another shaky breath and rose from her knees. “I’ll get some Kolto…or Bacta, as it’s called nowadays…for my hands.”

“Good idea. I will get some rest in the meantime.”

“Rest? Why would you need to rest?”

“Turns out this wonderful little accident was quite draining. So to reiterate: Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t keep a hold over you for long anyway. Talking to you is taxing enough. Controlling your body is bound to be exceptionally exhausting.”

Zayathris made a half-hearted attempt to cover up the damage they had caused to the floor.

“Wrath.”

“Hm?”
“You haven’t answered my question.”

“What ques– Are you serious? You of all people worrying about–” She pulled the low reading table over the scorched spot with more force than necessary and straightened. “Call our relationship what you want. We have always got along remarkably well, all things considered. Don’t let it get to your head, though.”

Most of the government building was open to the public, apparently in order to give the impression that the Achorran leaders took their citizens seriously. The hallways, like the wide, empty avenues outside, were plastered with gaudy yellow-on-magenta banners proclaiming the power and solidarity of the people with jarring slogans.

Zayathris made her way up to a viewing platform to catch some fresh air after getting her hands treated by the resident med droid for free – it was adamant about that perk, repeating it incessantly, apparently some kind of new policy that needed to be shoved into people’s faces.

The bandages were soaked with a cooling tincture that was clearly not Bacta and smelled vaguely of tree resin and Tarisian rose. Pleasant, but most likely not the pinnacle of effectivity. No wonder the treatment was free.

She leaned over the balcony railing and watched the cityscape below. Dressed in almost identical simple tunics, most citizens walked at a brisk pace, rarely stopping for social niceties. From what she had gathered during the few rotations spent on Achorra, most inhabitants were labourers and factory employees with long working hours approaching almost two-thirds of a rotation. There was no nightlife to speak of and, correspondingly, no criminal scene. The government regulated all aspects of life – even more than the Empire, which had emphasized individual freedom within the confines of one’s status, as long as it did not override one’s duty -, ostensibly for the benefit of the people, a fact proudly proclaimed by the ubiquitous banners.

Off-worlders were mostly left alone, but were required to stay at special Cultural Exchange Hostels, an ironic term considering that there was little indication that the natives had any willingness or, more notably, any time to spare for cultural activities. Zayathris wondered whether the people had actually any say here and would choose such a highly regulated life, which appeared to be driven not by duty or efficiency but sugarcoated necessity, the propaganda pointing to a high degree of cognitive dissonance. Nevertheless, there was no visible poverty – basic pillars of society like healthcare or education seemed to be free of charge as well. Overall, the average citizen led a hollow life without any overarching goal, free from both worries and meaning, fiery slogans notwithstanding. Might as well be droids.

Something shrill whined in the disconcertingly clockwork-like ebb and flow of the Force. It was a sudden change; quiet, but nearby. Zayathris sensed no actual threat or even significance to herself, but curiosity won over. She headed towards the elevator to investigate. The control panel was dead.

After a few moments of patiently waiting – the planet was rubbing off on her, it seemed -, she pushed the sliding doors open with the Force. The elevator was stuck at the lowest position, but there was nothing stopping her from dropping down a few levels.

Admittedly, using the service ladder would have been the obvious option intended by the planner. Too trivial.
Although Zayathris' take on it is neither unbiased nor well-informed, Achorra’s current state is basically the result of an isolationist, work-driven, impersonal society somewhat reminiscent of Japan having a recent Communist takeover. Not everyone unhappy with the status quo would just join the Separatists.

To my mind, the Marr/Satele encounter feels somewhat contrived especially if playing as a non-Force user. It also implies that you could not hope to beat Arcann using your own strength, something Zayathris would resent. Based on the options available for that curious power, I decided to turn it into something more useful. Besides, Marr’s admonishment not to exclusively focus on the Light/Dark dichotomy at the expense of failing to defend the people is not a new outlook for a primarily lawful evil, patriotic character concerned with defending her people (crew; Alliance; Imperial(s)/military) anyway, so she had to gain something out of the encounter. It is kind of the Dark side equivalent of Vaapad, creating a conduit for the Light without being “corrupted” by it, thereby becoming neutral in the Force to (casual) outside observation.
Her senses had not misled her. That assessment was ambiguous, however, as her exploration ended abruptly in front of the muzzle of a blaster carbine. Four, to be exact, wielded by ugly miscreants. Not locals, that much was clear. Top-of-the-line weapons, but dressed like a newly formed gang of backstreet thugs, their appearance was not that of the typical hired gun.

“What’ve we got here?” A masked alien grunted, possibly a Rodian from the stature. “Shree kripped up big time. Should’ve cleared everyone out.”

“Let’s rub it into his face. Get the girl and move it!” Another barked excitedly.

Zayathris decided to humour them by complying when they roughly pushed her further down the hallway. They had signed their death warrant anyway, but could still be of use or at least, give away their associates, which meant more easy prey for her. Perhaps even an actually challenging opponent. It was worth the wait and momentary discomfort. Besides, armed off-worlders infiltrating the government building was such a gross anomaly – especially on this planet – that it merited examining.

One of the men touched his earpiece, and after a few seconds, declared ominously, “Got him. Let’s kill the little coward.” There was little doubt whom they were after, or rather, where their intended victim had holed up. The fear emanating from one of the rooms in front of them was palpable. Apparently, they had decided in that moment to get rid of their presumed liability instead, as one of the men proceeded to shove her brutally into a corner and raise his blaster towards her head.

Fools.

Zayathris caught the weapon in mid-motion, flipped it around and pulled the trigger with the Force, which due to the short distance melted off a substantial chunk of the Duros’ face. Using the stunned surprise of the other criminals to her advantage, she slammed her full weight into the nearest opponent, who dropped unconscious on impact. The remaining two regained their resolve quickly, but while one managed to fire a few easily dodged shots, she spun around and lifted the other one – a heavily armored Zabrak - with the Force and flung him into his comrade. The latter fell with a yelp that was followed by a faint snap as a kick found its target – his exposed neck. Without releasing her hold, she closed her fist and yanked out the Zabrak’s trachea, which resulted in a gushing spray of blood. The purplish-red colour clashed violently with the general colour scheme of the building.

The former Wrath took a step back as her victim slid down the wall. She did not flinch when a single shot disrupted the silence that had fallen over the hallway.

Without looking up, she allowed her lips to twist into a vicious knowing smile as she reached into the Force, creating a conduit for the rest of her fury to counteract the effects the brief combat had undoubtedly had on her features.

“Good shot.” She praised the young man who was breathing heavily, eyes wide as he took in the gruesome scene, blaster pistol trained in trembling hands at her head. Military, but not local, judging from his uniform. “Didn’t think he’d be getting up any time soon.” A lie, of course, but there was no harm in stoking the young officer’s ego a little. The rank insignia indicated that he
was a lieutenant, coupled with the young age and nervous demeanor, it was safe to say that he probably had not seen much action yet.

“Oh, stars.” He gulped. “Who- Are you- with them?”

She held her hands up in a placating gesture and slowly walked towards him, stepping over the fallen form of one of the thugs indifferently. “I mean you no harm. I’m just a visitor, got trapped on the observatory above. Who are they? That’s the better question.”

“Terrorists, I think. They interrupted a government assembly and took practically the whole Achorrnan leadership as hostages.” He replied with no small amount of caution.

“Impressive. That requires more coordination than I assumed them capable of. Why were they after you, then?”

“I tried to stop them, to circumvent the lockdown. Are you alone? You’ve obviously no mere civilian.”

“Why don’t you stop threatening me with your blaster first? Nerves, Lieutenant. One day, your anxiety is going to be the death of you.” As if on cue, the officer exhaled shakily in an unsuccessful attempt to calm himself. “Besides, you’ve just showcased your superb reflexes, while I am unarmed.”

“And still managed to take these four assailants out. Quite gruesomely at that…” He trailed off, gaze fixed on the pool of blood forming of the polished floor behind the woman.

“Luckily for you, I should say. Otherwise we’d both be dead by now.”

“Lucky indeed…” He gradually lowered the blaster. “Fine, come in. The decryption routine should finished by now. Will you help me stop them?”

Zayathris followed him into a dark, cramped room that looked like a security monitoring hub and blocked the entrance again with a desk.

“Sure. Just how are you going to accomplish that from this hideout?”

“Sliced into the mainframe. Trying to get cameras or audio on them. Working on finding a loophole to exploit.” His fingers flitted over the controls as he spoke. “Alas, no security droids in this place.”

“Intelligence?”

“Huh?”

“Your day job. Frankly speaking, you don’t seem cut out to be a field agent, though.”

“Oh.” He gave a bashful, boyish grin. “You are correct. That would be have been a most unwise career choice for me.”

“Regular military then. Which division?”

“Engineering Corps.”

“Figures.” She slowly raked her eyes over his slim form that was flattered by the midnight blue service uniform.
“I daresay this is hardly the time for nerd jokes, Ma’am.” A smudge of resentment tinged his deadpan reply.

“Actually, that was supposed to be a compliment in regards to your competence.”

“Ah. Well… I don’t get that very often. Compliments.” He paused awkwardly, a blush creeping onto his pale cheeks. “Lieutenant Phelan Mitaka.” He briefly made eye contact as he introduced himself before going back to concentrating intently on the script commands running over the screen.

“A pleasure.”

Nox gave a fake sigh. “Not this again.”

You’re just jealous. “About the prospect of you getting it on with that mousy, completely unremarkable lieutenant? A Republic one at that? Yet another pallid face with dark hair that triggers your uniform fetish? You must be really desperate, Wrath. Might I recommend a cold shower instead? Never mind my preferences, though; I won’t stand in your way. As if. Heh. Besides, I’ll surely find some memories to keep me entertained in the meantime.”

You know what, I am going to help you get a body just so I can give you the slowest, most excruciating death imaginable. She sneered.

“See, that’s the spirit, my dear.” Nox chuckled.

Zayathris turned towards another screen to keep the officer from seeing her annoyed scowl. I should have left you to rot in that tomb on Korriban.

“Perhaps.” He hummed, reminiscing. “Perhaps you should have, no mercy for the weak and all that, right? I always wondered why you didn’t just put me out of my misery on the spot.”

You seemed useful.

“For what, precisely?”

Serving as K’lor’s slug fodder. And ill-timed discussions.

Before they could continue their banter, a faint cough brought her out of her thoughts.

“Um, Ma’am?” Mitaka looked at her with an expectant look on his face. “I got the first cameras working.”

She leaned closely over his shoulder to get a better viewing angle of the screen, a gesture that made the lieutenant flinch. He visibly struggled to regain his focus. For once, she chose to ignore the delightful weakness displayed as another camera feed flickering to life caught her attention.

“Which levels are the infiltrators located on?”

“This one and the two floors above us. The hostages are in the president’s office one level up. The government building is seriously understaffed, so the attackers met little resistance when they put the entire facility on lockdown and local forces are…not exactly up to the task.”
“Why is that?”

“There was a political revolution a few months ago, which brought a hitherto minority faction into office. Achorra has been a member of the Republic for about two hundred standard years, before which they were a Hutt colony for a brief time. Recently, tensions have risen, but instead of joining the Separatists, the Will of the People movement gained momentum.”

“A curious development.” Nox remarked.

What makes you say that?

“The factories. The local economy relies on mass-production. By emphasizing self-sufficiency, they’ve declared to move away from the Republic, as is evident from the slogans, but without either them or the Separatists as customers, the Achorran economy will simply crumble. On top of that, these people are hardly the revolutionary type, are they?”

“Is that revolution why you came to Achorra?”

“What? No, I was here for a proposal of a … joint research undertaking, which of course isn’t facilitated by the increasing wariness towards the Republic. I hid here when, soon after my meeting partners not showing up, the lockdown took effect.” Zayathris sensed that his statement was true enough, but obfuscated a deeper significance. She did not press the issue. The man was far too guileless for outright deception and seemed sincere in his desire to stop the alleged terrorists.

“I’m in.” Mitaka suddenly exclaimed in triumph, but his expression faltered instantly. “It’s worse than I assumed. No visual on the hostages possible and more aggressors than expected.”

“Nothing I cannot handle.”

“You can’t just rush in!”

“Can’t I? They’ll be dead before they know what’s happening.”

“I admit I am less worried about you than about the politicians.”

“Have there been any demands, any communication by their captors?”

“None that I am aware of, but I wonder what channels they could possibly go through anyway.”

“So it stands to reason that they either simply want to wreak havoc – which bodes poorly for the hostages anyway – or are directly pressuring the politicians present into changing their decisions on something. In the latter case, they won’t kill them no matter what is going on outside.”

“That…sounds plausible.”

“They likely know something happened their cronies and they are aware of your presence. I’m sure they don’t expect you to have backup. So if we move quickly enough, we can take out their patrols. The main group won’t have time to prioritize whom to keep alive as leverage.”

Mitaka nodded hesitantly.

“Tell me, Lieutenant, are there medical droids on the uppermost level?”
“Let me check…yes, there is one, at the far end of the corridor.”

“These droids use larin acid as a wound disinfectant. Undiluted, it tends to be quite explosive. Overload the droid and you’ve got an improvised bomb.”

“How do you…never mind. Their patrols are moving towards the elevator shaft. The time to act is now.”

“Good. Prepare the droid, I’ll be back in a moment.” She ducked out of the room to search the bodies outside for weapons. Settling on a stun baton and two grenades of unidentifiable effect, she returned to check on Mitaka’s progress with the droid.

His gaze darted to her hands. “That must be agonizing.”

Frowning, Zayathris turned her palms up. The bandages were coming loose and most of the blisters had ruptured during the fight, oozing liquid.

“How can you even bear to hold that weapon?”

“Willpower. Have you finished the preparations?” She replied in a detached manner. “Don’t concern yourself with me, I can handle it.”

“Are you sure?” Zayathris shot him a withering look. “Alright, I’ll just assume you know what you’re doing.” Expression still worried, Mitaka tossed her a comm earpiece. “I’m ready. They won’t know what hit them.”

After accessing the next level, she pressed herself into an alcove to contact the lieutenant.

“How many targets?”

“Six, four coming towards you, two guarding the entrance.”

“Good. Trigger the droid on my signal. Now disable the camera feed for this level.”

“What? Why? I won’t be able to help you-”

“Don’t question me. Let’s assume I outrank you by a fair bit.” Technically even true.

“Kriff.” Mitaka seemed to take the bait. “I mean, confirmed, Ma’am.” Just a visitor. Right.

Chapter End Notes

Cameo by the presumed grandfather of a future First Order officer.
Service is its own Reward III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Zayathris ripped through the patrol with little effort while the unfortunate med droid had the honour of doing the same one level up, with the convenient addition of destroying part of the floor above the ante-chamber of the government office where the hostages were held, which maximized the confusion. Making a show of clumsily trying to overpower one of the guards, she then allowed the infiltrators to take her captive. As expected, with their numbers literally decimated, they could not afford to remain spread out, and brought her to the main office, ordering her to join the hostages kneeling in the far end of the large, elliptical room.

Her captors had failed to notice the concussion grenades rolling behind them. Seconds after the safety was pulled out, the shockwaves ripped through the room, instantly killing the thugs standing nearby and sending the others crumbling to the floor. Zayathris absorbed the brunt of the blast, shielding the hostages from most of the explosive power and secondary shrapnel. The exertion left her dazed. Defensive measures had not featured prominently in her training, nor were they part of her general fighting style, but working with her crew had forced her to learn the basic techniques. The taste of copper and sulphur filled her mouth as her surroundings blurred in waves, her field of vision tinged crimson and narrowed to a small tunnel. As she attempted to clear the mental fog, the realization slowly set in that she was not the only one still standing.

The leader of the aggressors was swaying, blood running down his face in a multitude of tiny rivulets. There was a triggering device in his hand that he held up vengefully. She hesitated, unable to tell if it had a dead man’s switch or regular trigger, which meant whatever was connected to the device was just as likely to go off whether she interfered or not. No hints from the Force, either. The man started backing out of the room, his mouth twisted in a furious, bloodstained sneer that showed all front teeth missing.

As he stepped over the threshold, Zayathris sensed his resolve, set ablaze by the desire for retribution. Time slowed to a crawl when his finger twitched. Instinctively, she threw out her hands to yank the device away and, with a terrifying scream, sent the assailant crashing into the pile of debris behind him, his body bending over backwards in an utterly unnatural angle.

The explosion never came.

Gradually, the ringing in her ears subsided, allowing Mitaka’s distorted transmission to reach her.

“What’s… status? …copy?…”

“All terrorists eliminated. But not over yet.” Her voice sounded hoarse. “Place is rigged. I say again. There is a bomb. Not sure if the triggering device-”

“Quite confident… the bomb cannot … activated at the moment.” There was a brief pause, and then the communication quality improved. “Ah, that’s the one they used. I picked up a regular signal earlier so continually broadcasted noise all over the area, which interferes with the most common frequencies for remote connections. Since the explosive is fortunately not volatile enough to be triggered by a grenade blast, I think there was no danger at all.”
“Information flow, Lieutenant. That would have been helpful to know.” She spat. “That was too close for my liking.”

“I apologize, Ma’am, tactically it made little sense to-”

“Stop groveling.” She cut him off sharply and turned towards the politicians who supported each other as they made hesitant attempts to get up. Some had mild injuries, but nothing even the improvised treatments the local droids were offering could not heal.

“You are safe now. I’d advise having a bomb squad take a thorough look at the building, though. You owe your rescue to Lieutenant Phelan Mitaka of the Republic.”

“No, no, the honour belongs to you, I didn’t…” The officer promptly launched into a panicked stream of clarifications.

“Can’t hurt to be well in with these people, considering your project proposal. It might even expedite your promotion.” She wrenched out the earpiece before the taken-aback lieutenant could argue further and crushed it under her boot.

“Have a nice day, gentlebeings.” She gave a mock bow and backed out of the room, vanishing out of sight through the damaged ceiling. As fun as that had been, it was time to leave while she still could.

If she believed in the concept of the Force exhibiting agency or even an explicit will, it would certainly seem was as if the Force was determined to throw distractions at her to keep her from learning enough about the current state of the galaxy to piece together the seemingly incongruous threads and uncover the role of the Sith in it.

Conversely, had each detour not also represented a major opportunity? Was there any other option to jumping headlong into every chance at combat? However loathe she was to continue inadvertently aiding the Republic – or extending help from the non-existent goodness of her heart in general – not acting was just as wrong. It would deprive her of the thrills as well as existential necessity of battle and instead lead her to adopt the jaded apathy of the Jedi.

Ultimately, the only alternative consisted in stagnation, the very antithesis of power. If she kept a couple of undeserving weaklings alive along the way, it actually wasn’t her problem as long as she got something out of the overall situation. They might be poor, inefficient choices, but without an intrinsic understanding of the workings of the world she had been thrown into, she was fumbling in the dark regardless. Allowing flaws to fester was a sure-fire way to erode a society; and these weren’t her people. She could do what she well damn pleased. Who was to stop her? Besides, even those actions of hers that could be construed as philanthropic tended to leave a pile of corpses in their wake, so it evened itself out in the end.

She had almost made to the spaceport, when a young woman, who had braved the uniform masses walking home from work, called from behind her. “Please, don’t leave!”

Puzzled by the sudden disturbance, Zayathris turned around and waited for her to approach.

“Forgive the intrusion, milady. The President wishes to speak to you.”

An annoyed scowl creased the former Wrath’s forehead. “I have no desire to get involved in local
politics.”

“But you already have!”

“And that’s as far as I will go,” she asserted.

The messenger’s crestfallen expression was quickly replaced by a faint, sly smirk. “I don’t not recall the Office of Off-World Relations issuing a Departure Voucher recently.” Zayathris stopped in her tracks again. “I apologize for the hassle our regulations creates for you, but proper procedure must be followed.”

*Well played.*

“Of course. I would not want to get in the way of your bureaucracy.” She made a deferential gesture to the girl. “Lead the way.” Because, of course, things could not be straightforward *for once.*

The meeting took place in the Minor Hall of the People, a smaller building adjacent to the main government building. The young aide scurried out of the unadorned room after bringing them a tray of tea and a small plate of what looked like crystallised flowers.

“Xan’athi Garoj.” The wiry, elderly woman introduced herself cordially as she took a seat on a low chair. There was a bandage on her neck, which filled the room with the familiar smell of resin. “It is my responsibility to embody and carry out the will of the Achorran people.”

“It is an honour, your … Highness?” Admittedly, Zayathris had not given the protocol followed in Republic space much thought. Military and Sith conventions were instilled from birth, and if any Republic Alliance member had taken issue with being adressed in the same way their Imperial equivalents were - or simply as "Jedi"-, they had not adressed it, at least to her face. On the other hand, it had never mattered how she addressed her foes. Nevertheless, needlessly antagonizing the local leadership would not get her the permit she needed to leave.

The minor issue of decorum was moot, as the President gave her an encouraging nod and waved her concerns aside. “Do not burden yourself with formalities; I am but the first among equals. No citizen on this planet may boast to be more important than his or her peers. What is your name?”

“Tris.” She replied curtly. Not even her own parents had called her by such a nickname. She tried to tell herself that adopting it as a makeshift nom de guerre was for the best but she still could not shake off the derogatory connotation, even if it existed solely in her mind.

“You birth planet must have a curious naming convention.” Garoj remarked shrewdly. “But it matters not. The poor Lt. Mitaka tried very hard to protect your identity and details of your involvement. His performance, however, led us to the conclusion that he in fact does not know who you are. I am puzzled as to why you would risk your life for complete strangers on a planet in whose future you have no stake, only to disappear as soon as the threat was eliminated. Please, sate my idle curiosity.”

“I killed those thugs because they attacked me, nothing more. Not seeing this path through to its logical conclusion would not have had any advantages for me, either.” Dishonesty would not benefit her here. “Gratitude is not a currency. Besides, any actual compensation you could offer me is likely taken from the pockets of hard-working people who can’t even afford Bacta. So what
would I want stay for?”

The president’s brows furrowed in bemusement. “Are you a supporter of the revolution, then?”

“While the self-empowerment of a people is an admirable goal, I am afraid that such movements are of little importance to me.”

“What is of importance to you?”

“Making sense of a galaxy that is spinning contrary to what one would expect. What, for example, were your captors after?”

The older woman peered over the rim of her glasses. “You are asking the right questions. How familiar are you with the purpose of the Revolution?”

“I could quote some of those slogans outside, but other than that, you will have to elucidate me.”

“Achorra has a troubled history. There has been not a single period of peace and growth lasting longer than a few generations. Our ancestors, desperate to ally with any power that promised protection and business, threw in their lot with any faction imaginable. Warlords in this sector, trade associations, legend has it, even the Sith Empire and such ilk before Ruusan. All conjecture, obviously, considering how much knowledge was lost in every major upheaval. Our culture values compliance and respect for our elders, so no one dared to go against such an ill-fated strategy. Two centuries ago, the Republic found us, drained of resources and qualified workers by the Hutt Cartel. Within years, our factories flourished once more. Yet at what price? Our environment is almost as polluted as the Coruscanti undercity. Our people spent the majority of their lifetime manufacturing cheap, pointless goods that wealthy people in the Core thoughtlessly buy and throw away after a few uses. What kind of existence is that? Why should we swear fealty to a Republic that merely seeks to exploit us, to waste the lives of our sons and daughters on menial tasks that serve only to further decadence?”

“Have the Separatists offered you the opportunity to join them?”

Garoj gave a bark of mirthless laughter. “With them, it’s never an offer, but outright coercion. And that’s what you witnessed today. The Separatists sent a transmission many rotations ago, promising us a bright future as producers of droid parts and armour components. We never replied as we were caught up in the aftershocks of the revolution. They do not take kindly to being ignored. Other planets were invaded, but we are probably not important enough. After all, we get the brute lowlifes that ask us to join at gunpoint.”

“They were prepared to take out the entire leadership in case of your refusal.”

“Of course, in the hopes of halting the progress of our movement. But we would have died knowing that others will carry forth the flame. The Revolution is inevitable.”

“So the Republic is unable to protect you in this war?”

“Correct. However, that phrasing implies that they would want to. In fact, the Republic has overextended itself already – it is in its death throes. It is our assessment that the ongoing war has driven the Republic far beyond the brink of bankruptcy. Even if the hostilities were to end this very instant, the Republic would still be unable to pay off the debts, fulfil the contracts with the heavy industry and keep sustaining a standing army.”

“The alternative to the latter, of course, amounts to genocide.” Zayathris suggested with careful neutrality.
“Harsh, but true. The Separatists at least do not have that particular problem. Furthermore, should the bankers waive all obligations – an impossible scenario, of course – the Republic would be pulled under by reparation demands from neutral systems and the costs of reconstructing their own infrastructure. Tell me, have you been to Coruscant?”

Zayathris shook her head. Her grandfather had died there, serving as Head of Engineering on one of the Imperial warships downed during the Sacking of Coruscant, but that hardly qualified.

“Well, I have. Corruption is rampant on every level, from the lowest cesspit in The Works to the Senate Floor, which probably does not come as a surprise. The lower districts of city have always been less affluent,” She made a face of disgust at the euphemism, “with all the unfortunate developments that come in tandem with that, but the war has made life hardly bearable. People struggle to afford the most basic necessities. And that's the situation in the very heart of the Republic. Think of what this means for all the systems beyond the Core that do not happen to profit from the war.”

“For a world like yours, siding with the Republic seems like suicide either way.”

“That is the very point. We must go our own way. We have no need for any Galactic umbrella treaties that favour the rich and discard the poor. This dynamic is almost a natural law if we continue to accept the dominance of the markets and banks. That this war started over a trade dispute is very telling. There is only one thing about which we might find some common ground with the Separatists: The whole system is broken, it cannot be reformed. But we want no part in it. At all.” The president placed a candied petal in the tea and took a sip of the lilac coloured beverage, encouraging Zayathris to do the same. “Please, help yourself. What are your views on the war?”

“So far, I have not been personally affected by it.” Aside from stumbling into it wherever she went, but she had not lost anything due to this particular war. “It might be a result of the broken system, as you call it. Hypocrisy, in my experience, is fairly typical for the Republic, yet I cannot shake the thought that there is more to this than meets the eye. I have little insight into either Republic or Separatist matters, so I am unable to give a more exhaustive analysis.”

“Good. Then you will be able to approach my proposition with an open mind.”

That was…unexpected. “I am listening.”

“It has come to our attention that the Republic is employing various means of obtaining the few natural resources we have left; your lieutenant is involved in one such attempt, this time “for research purposes”. Oddly enough, similar requests have gone through other, superficially neutral channels that we ultimately traced to the Separatists. We need someone to investigate this alarming coincidence.”

“Why me? What makes you trust me?”

“The Heroine of the Forward Sanctuary IX, they call you.”

Zayathris gave an undignified snort. “You cannot be serious.”

“It is all over the Holonet.” The president shrugged apologetically, implying they both knew how reliable that source was. “Obvious propaganda to give this war a more approachable, non-military face. But your feat still stands, that much is verifiable. Other members of my staff have theorized that you might be a Jedi. Not a single member of their order has deigned to visit Achorra in centuries, however, why now? I prefer to believe what I see – and that is not the meekness typically
associated with their religion.” Zayathris tensed and set down the cup of tea. Was Garoj suggesting that she knew more about her background?

“Do not be alarmed, I do not disapprove of your methods. Coupled with the skills and fearlessness you have demonstrated today, you are an ideal candidate. Our society has always been very passive, chained down by tradition and compliance. Conformity, certainly a useful trait while coordinating a revolution, stifles initiative. Someone, an outsider, might provide fresh insights and the ability to act where we can’t.”

“The attack could have been a decoy operation. I could be a spy.” There was no way the president had not considered this caveat.

“You could. Yet, considering your reluctance to interact with me in the first place, I believe the odds are in my favour. Someone who actually wants to work for us would be much riskier.” Garoj stood up and walked over to the holo terminal in the corner, before continuing. “We can’t offer you much, but the position does come with the usage of a ship and a simple apartment on Coruscant.”

Enticing. Imprudent. “I accept your proposal.”

The older woman turned around, a knowing smirk flitting across her lips. “Once more, the people of Achorra are indebted to you. I shall put you in contact with our representative in the Senate, Tul’amid Iskra.”

Chapter End Notes

Pah. Jedi.

The structure of Achorran names is as follows:
Class (Intellectual = Xan, Teacher/Overseer = Tul, Worker, Guard...) - personal component - allusion to (historical) profession (Garoj = mountain and Iskra = spark)
Coruscant was one of the last places Zayathris had expected to set foot on during her lifetime. Admittedly, she might have thought the same thing about Tython once.

She had been born a decade before the Treaty and barely remembered the pictures of the glorious assault on the Republic capital, but she vividly remembered the pride she had felt. The razed Temple burning, the unyielding patrols on the streets, the humiliated dignitaries kneeling before Imperial troops. Later, Theron’s descriptions of his homeplanet had added another – differently biased – facet to her mental image of Coruscant.

Four millennia were a long time for the face of the planet to change.

It was … not what she had expected at all.

Whereas Korriban had been sand and ashes - whereas Dromund Kaas had been ozone and mud - the megalopolis reeked of silicone oil, spice and cloying perfume.

From the uncountable vehicles criss-crossing overhead to the engineering marvels that kept it running, the capital was a chaotic mesh of layers, its erratic pulse beating unbearably fast. It dictated the harsh rhythm the people rushing by fell in step with. Garish adverts promised entertainment for all tastes. From above, the cityscape gave an orderly impression, certain buildings protruding like beacons for the citizens to crowd around and worship the mindless pursuit of luxury and consumerism. The streets spreading from the monumental Senate Building to the districts housing mainly media corporations and shopping malls were clean, safe and alluring. As long as one did not look down.

These observations were but superficial. Looking beyond the imposing architecture with its gleaming surfaces revealed a truly rotten world. The very idea of a significant Jedi presence here was ludicrous. In fact, their collective aura was muted to the point of being impossible to perceive unless you specifically looked for it.

Tython had emanated a profoundly terrifying atmosphere. It was like staring into the open maw of the Force, only to see your own death at the end of a blindingly bright tunnel staring back at you - and it was laughing at your folly. Facing one’s mortality should not come as a shock, especially to a Sith confrontations with death were daily business, but it was the way it made her feel completely powerless and insignificant. With regards to manifestations of the Force, only witnessing Vitiate’s obliteration of Ziost had been worse, although for rather different reasons. Tython represented everything unnatural and hypocritical the Jedi stood for – detachment, suppression of emotions, apathy.

Coruscant was not similar in any way. It was alive, very much so, but in a parasitic way. The searing excitement of drunkenly dancing and fucking above the hastily dug graves of your fallen comrades because you, too, might be dead by tomorrow. After us, the deluge, as one might put it. In contrast, billions huddled together in despair formed the underbelly, the very foundation of the
capital. Built on lies, durasteel beams and bones. It attacked the senses with incessant cries and small pops of lives extinguished in misery echoing through the Force. Even in the quietest moments, there was no solace to be found – like the ominous cracks of a frozen lake on which you have set up camp haunting you in your sleep.

The city was war.

Zayathris relished it. To see the sanctimonious Republic digging its own grave, the mask of magnanimity ripped away…

All of these considerations faded into the background in comparison to the shroud of Darkness blanketing the whole planet.

The deeply unsettling character of this phenomenon was impossible to put into coherent thoughts. The only meaningful analogy that one could make was the Dark Temple on Dromund Kaas - a twisted, dark microcosm on an already dark planet.

That the hedonistic impulses and careless lifestyle as well as the suffering and resentment festering below invited the Dark was the nature of things. Only, this particular phenomenon was not natural. There was little doubt that it had not developed organically, thus it was not merely the result of the constant influence of a nexus in the Force either. Whether it had been Ziost or Korriban - where even the flora and fauna had developed in tandem with the influence of the vergences spreading over the planets - the Dark had always welcomed her with open arms. Currently, it was more of a resentful tolerance.

Within the darkness, a faint light stood, flickering in the Force like dying embers. To see the Jedi Temple bustling with activity - a frantic activity, akin to the thrashing of someone suffocating - amongst the threads of this pervasive fabric was utterly puzzling. Zayathris being highly attuned to the Dark, the constant sensation did not bother her in the slightest, instead it was invigorating, despite it feeling rather out of place. However, for the Jedi, it had to be a persistent, throbbing disturbance. The shroud was not so dense as to cause obvious physical discomfort or even pain, yet the effect it must have on them was undeniable. Why the Jedi had not withdrawn from Coruscant long ago boggled the mind. They could probably get used to it, the way you can tune out the anguished cries of a torture victim – you can keep them from chipping away at your principles, but should not claim to be able to concentrate properly. Unless you thrive on such a thing, that is. Then it was probably the sweetest, most vitalising symphony imaginable. She resolved to ask Nox about his feelings in that regard. It was bound to be an interesting discussion.

For the Jedi to remain on Coruscant, in fact, using it as their main base of operations and teaching – it was absolute madness. There were other facilities spread across the galaxy - she had read mentions of one on Bandomeer – why not relocate? Hubris? Some kind of sick test of resolve and resilience to the Dark for the Jedi-in-Training? Then again, this constant exposure probably did little to build resilience as opposed to numbing their senses.

That would play nicely into the hands of the Sith, allowing them to operate concealed by the shadows as they could blend effortlessly into the background hum. On the other hand, to create such a phenomenon in the first place… well, everything was possible with enough power. But at what cost?

The war. Vitiate had played both sides, the Empire and Republic mere pawns to be sacrificed –
rather, manipulated into eviscerating each other - in his quest for immortality. These modern Sith were employing the same method.

There was not going to be an invasion from the outside.

They were already here, in the very heart of the Republic. The Jedi would not stand a chance.
Capital Crimes II

One of the first orders of business resulting from her new position as “security advisor” to Senator Iskra was attending a charity event held by shipbuilding giant Kuat Drive Yards. Ostensibly, the gala’s purpose was to collect donations for refugees in the Gaulus Sector, but the hosts kept extolling the virtues of technological superiority in protecting the civilians and minimizing casualties among the troops. Pure lobby work. As Iskra had explained, Zayathris only goal was familiarising herself with the networking tactics employed by the attending civil servants and industry representatives. For what purpose had remained unclear, but it was as good an opportunity as any to learn the ropes of politics in this new world.

She fulfilled her thankless task; listened in to inane conversations, small talk barely concealing ulterior motives, of which both parties seemed aware. A practised little dance to get into each other’s good graces, performed by an army of influence-hungry sycophants that would have given Saresh a run for her money. The hypocrisy of the Republic was astounding. The fates of billions decided over drinks and giggles by imbeciles clad in ridiculously ugly garments, which apparently passed for high fashion. Building a powerbase was one thing, but there was no mechanism for pruning the ranks of those in power. Besides, this was not power at all.

This was just senseless decadence.

Democracy worked exceptionally well, if the intention was to promote the most incompetent, conceited individuals to the highest positions. How brainwashed did the general public have to be to think that they mattered in the grand scheme of things, that their vote would have any impact on their future?

The Empire also had its own share of “concealed lightsabre diplomacy” as she used to call it and wasn’t necessarily more effective at optimizing the circumstances for its citizens – quite the contrary, as even minuscule details like the location of the spaceport on its capital world had attested to. Yet, they had come far in building a cohesive, working society, especially considering that the government providing trouble-free lives for those under its wing was precisely not the point. And that the Council’s main work had consisted of mitigating the damage wrought by the power struggles of lower ranking Lords and Darths and the occasional Moff or Officer – when they hadn’t been busy joining the jolly backstabbing themselves – …well, it was hard to justify Imperial politics most of the time. However, there always had been the chance of the right person assuming power and doing away with all the inefficiencies and inopportune betrayals. The key was loyalty – and the death of Vitiate, for whom the Empire had merely been a sandbox for watching a civilisation rise, a people grow, only for them to be turned into a literal sacrifice incinerated at the alter of their uncaring Emperor's strive for immortality. They could have been so much more… But the past was dead.

She wanted to kill those fools responsible twice over.

On the other hand, the Republic was, by virtue of its very concept, predestined to mediocrity.

Zayathris elected to take a seat at the bar to steel herself for more mindless chatter. Sipping on a whisky she had randomly chosen from the extensive menu, she watched the other attendees with growing disgust and boredom. What a way to be introduced into the self-indulgent pursuits of the upper class. Even the drink in her hand was not something she would normally order, but constituted a probably unnecessary attempt to blend in. Zayathris felt disgusted by herself, considering the nonchalance with which she was conforming to these social norms. She invariably preferred non-alcoholic drinks, particularly various kinds of tea – like most self-respecting
Imperials, especially those with a Pureblood background, although the associated customs could not be more distinct. Another favourite had been a fermented drink called Ksarr, a specialty of Ziost, where she’d spent her teens.

Mainly for sentimental reasons, she had even experimented with producing Ksarr on Odessen, an ill-fated undertaking because of the rather different climate. It had caused the beverage to reach the desired stage of fermentation far too quickly. After several weeks, she had improved the process sufficiently for the taste to approach the original, as confirmed by several Ziosti natives, most enthusiastically by Major Pierce, who had worded his endorsement virtually like a marriage proposal. After one of the vessels half-buried in a small patch of soil within the Alliance complex had shattered, injuring a hapless Republic pilot, she had given up the pursuit lest it create even more tension between the factions involved. It was bad enough that Theron and Lana somehow had deduced the circumstances of the accident and kept making veiled allusions to their Commander’s uncharacteristically domestic pastimes.

Nevertheless, going for drinks had often been a welcome change of pace and a bonding activity with her crew. A successful evening had consisted of a combination of the following set pieces: Pierce getting positively shitfaced, which at first made him (even more) boastful and later, the inebriation slowly subsiding and giving way to a certain degree of melancholy, had him spend the rest of the outing glowering at Quinn. Vette chuckling mischievously while she told embellished anecdotes for her rapt audience of one (Jaesa). Zayathris leaning back to enjoy the scenery, occasionally giving a stiff-back Quinn a sympathetic toast with a resigned smirk, which he returned warily. A less successful evening had usually ended with a lightsabre waved in the face (or embedded in the guts, depending on the severity of the offense) of a patron for insulting Vette or causing other kinds of trouble. Alternatively, on occasion, having to drag Jaesa out of the venue kicking and screaming. The cause for the latter scenario usually being that she had not yet mastered subtlety, namely the art of not giving your more-or-less consenting lover permanent injuries, which had tended to create a heap of flimsiwork for her master (and by extension, Quinn) if said lovers had happened to be young Imperial servicemen.

Currently, it was a chore devoid of any such excitement.

The only upside was that her new employer had send her shopping first – with Republic money, no less; apparently there was an allowance for the equipment required by Senatorial aides. For the first time in months, she was in possession of several sets of clothing not scorched and ripped in several places or practically amounting to clone trooper underwear, although it was still not particularly suitable for combat. At least she had finally overcome feeling practically naked due to the lack of armour. Then again, if her peers back in the day had managed to survive for significant stretches of time with their midriffs bared, wearing vests with plunging necklines or impractical capes – or in general, just extravagant tunics with no defensive function whatsoever – she was the one who was remiss in her overreliance on armour. Nox had already given his reluctant approval on her current attire, while stating that it could do with a few tweaks for a more intimidating effect. He had apparent tuned out during the briefing instruction her not to draw attention needlessly. For someone who should have the life experience of an 80-year-old, plus whatever insights his ghosts had given him, he was surprisingly immature, but in a disconcertingly menacing way. He probably had got along absolutely swimmingly with Vowrawn. Provided they had not at some point started trying to outmanoeuvre each other, thus embarking on an absolutely vicious downward spiral. That alone would have sufficed to topple the Empire.

“If you prefer your whisky on the smoky side, I’d recommend the Silver Falcon brand.” A familiar voice interrupted her boredom-laced train of thought. She made an inviting gesture and, without
further acknowledgment, placed an order via a dedicated datapad. Promptly, the droid bartender served two small glasses with a dark brown liquid.

“Oh.” Her companion gasped. “I didn’t mean…A vintage. That’s…”

“Inviting a lady for drinks without paying for it?” The corners of her lips twitched. “Out of your league, Lieutenant?”

Face reddening, Lieutenant Mitaka fumbled for words, before she released him of his sorrow. “Oh, quit worrying, I’ll cover the tab, of course.” Republic credits put to good use.

She picked up the glass and raised it towards him. “To synergy?”

“To-” He hesitated, before his brain caught on. “Synergy.”

Mitaka’s eyes occasionally darting into her direction like a spooked Tauntaun's, they enjoyed the exquisite drink in companionable silence, before Zayathris spoke up.

“A pleasant coincidence. Did you have any success with the Achorrans?”

“Unfortunately, no. They turned the proposal down flat, saying they couldn’t spare the resources. What with the revolution, it’s somewhat understandable, but peculiar nevertheless, as we would’ve funded…well, never mind. I certainly did not expect to meet you here. What brings you to this event?”

“Work.” Zayathris replied cryptically.

“…in what capacity? You aren’t with KDY, are you?”

President Garoj had mentioned the officer being involved in whatever odd string of events she was supposed to investigate, so the truth would actually serve as a little trap for him. “I’m Senator Iskra’s security advisor.”

Mitaka did a double take. “That explains a lot of things. But, you’re Achorran? I wouldn’t not have guessed that, considering your, ahem…exotic looks?” He quickly corrected himself. “I don’t mean to offend; it’s just that you stand out, especially in comparison to the majority of Achorrans…That still came out wrong.”

The potential inappropriateness barely registered with Zayathris, who gave an indifferent shrug. She had certainly been called worse in that regard – mixed blood, impure, even traitor. Even the accurate and seemingly neutral “hybrid” was derogatory. As a matter of fact, all Purebloods were hybrids, just as probably every single human Imperial had possessed a certain percentage of Sith genes. While the Pureblood traits were largely dominant, once the fraction fell roughly below 40%, the individual was for most intents and purposes human, with a far less extreme metabolism and lifespan, only vestiges of the typical ridges at best and skin coloured in more or less noticeable shades of red.

She just happened to come from a family with a strong history of interbreeding with human Sith. Despite that, her extended family had ridiculed her mother’s choice to marry a Navy officer – a Rear Admiral at that time, no less – as “scraping the bottom of the barrel” and “desperation”, insinuating that they had only formalized their long-running affair because Yaraeshi had fallen pregnant. That accusation was not even incorrect, but the tense relations had made Zayathris’ childhood visits to her grandaunt’s estate rather unpleasant, although most family members had come to terms with her background eventually. She had inherited her father’s dark tan skin with just a dash of red and no bone spurs. Having foregone the traditional jewellery and tattoos as they
were impractical and would only mark her as pretender in the eyes of traditionalists, passing for human was hardly a stretch. Currently, she might be in deep trouble if it were otherwise. That part of her heritage would be rather hard to explain away, if anyone happened to realise the significance.

Mitaka had no way of being aware of those issues. “Exotic isn’t that wide of the mark. Technically, I hail from what you call the Unknown Regions. Garoj simply hired me for the position. Out of curiosity, what did you take me for?”

“I had not given it much thought.” Probably just sleepless nights. “Maybe half-Zeltron, maybe a Zabrak ancestor… I honestly have no idea.”

“I think I’ll just keep you guessing. By the way, you lost a bet or something? Your snickering comrades over there watching us seem to indicate so.”

“You are very observant. And they are being jerks.” He gave a small sigh before continuing. “This is embarrassing.” A lifted eyebrow warned him that she would not let him off the hook. “Fine. It’s actually more of a dare. I, um, don’t exactly have a reputation of… success with regards to talking with… women.”

“Can’t imagine why. So you decided to play it safe and approached a familiar face?”

“With all due respect, there is nothing “safe” about you, but that was the general idea, yes.”


Mitaka choked on the last sip of his drink. When he was finally able to breathe again, he all but whispered in a strained voice, “The drink part about covers it.”

“Anticlimactic. What do you get for passing this dare?”

“Does a couple of days without snide remarks count?” He exhaled audibly, wallowing in self-pity. “Thank you for the company. And the whisky.” The lieutenant hurriedly made to stand. “I apologize for the intrusion. I shall return to the others. I wouldn’t presume to take up more of your evening.”

She playfully but firmly grabbed his wrist. “Oh, no. I’m enjoying this far too much. Why don’t we bolster your reputation a little?”

“With all due respect, you playing along out of pity is worse than the umpteenth rejection.”

“Who said anything about pity?”

Mitaka’s eyes widened, but he did not voice the thought clearly etched across his face - The alternative would be even more terrifying.

“Let me introduce you to my colleagues, then. Oh, by the way, I didn’t get your name last time.”

Zayathris chuckled. “Now, that would’ve been awkward, wouldn’t it?”
“What Tashkar – sorry, Doctor Tashkar - is trying to say is: The most brilliant minds of the Republic, assembled right before you, Ma’am!”

“Your talents would be wasted on menial research, then.” Zayathris goaded him, just for the sake of riling him up. “Am I correct in assuming that you’re all involved in state-of-the-art development projects?”

“Of course. Top-secret, though.” He gave a conspiratorial grin and lowered his voice for effect. “Could turn the tide of the war for good.”

“Hm, obviously that’s what you would say to impress someone. Too bad you can’t back up your words or it’d be treason.”

The redhead spluttered, clearly too drunk to properly think through his pathetic attempts to get her to pick him over his colleague.

The scientist named Tashkar reprimanded him. “No more drinks for you. Your successful presentation notwithstanding, the Commander won’t be happy if you show up completely hungover tomorrow.”

One of Mitaka’s peers, the only other officer instead of a civilian scientist, pulled him aside. “No idea how you managed to score a looker like that. But I feel it’s my duty to warn you, mate. She’s, like, a decade older than you and way above your paygrade.” He swayed a little as he leaned down to whisper in his colleague’s ear. “That woman’s gonna eat you alive.”

“Thanks for the concern, Riemann.” Mitaka replied between clenched teeth. Tonight his colleagues were being particularly obnoxious. He just wanted to get away, even if it meant playing along with whatever his new acquaintance had in mind - which, going by his experience, had a similar probability of being utterly humiliating for him as staying had. Somehow, though, he felt more daring than usual this time. “Tris, would you care for some fresh air?” To his continued surprise, she nodded with a chuckle and intertwined her arm with his.

Over his shoulder, Mitaka called out towards the general direction of his team, who were watching him leave with wide eyes. “In case Krennic asks, I’m retiring early for the night.”

Unlikely, though, he muttered under his breath.
Zayathris was not afforded much time to settle in on Coruscant, which was probably for the better. The capital world epitomizing everything wrong with the Republic, she was glad to leave it behind even temporarily to accompany the Senator’s other aide, Ven’yari Stava, to a summit of “fringe worlds” in an uncontented location. That undoubtedly meant another Separatist ploy, but why the Achorrans even agreed to such a meeting after the fiasco on their home was world beyond puzzling. She could not shake the feeling that Iskra was playing with fire to get to the bottom of the mystery President Garoj had alluded to.

Her research had not yielded much. She was hardly an analyst – and Garoj certainly had not hired her for that -, but all the documentation she had viewed so far indicated nothing out of the ordinary for an underdeveloped backwater planet - except perhaps for various scientific consortia and potential buyers requesting access to Achorra’s uncharted mines out of the blue repeatedly within the past year or so. According to Iskra, the mines had been depleted millennia ago. A small team of experts had begun to debate that claim roughly a decade ago, providing evidence of small deposits of crystals, but up until the revolution, Achorran leadership would not have considered pursuing this opportunity further to stay in the good graces of the Republic, which restricted trade and usage of crystals. The Jedi Council reserved the exclusive right to decide how to exploit kyber resources, if at all. Given the dire financial struggle of the Republic, it seemed highly improbably that they were trying to circumvent the Jedi in order to replicate Malgus’ stealth fleet or similar superweapons, but she would not put it past the Separatists, especially considering their reliance on technology instead of sentient manpower. On the other hand, it was hilarious how war sent people scrambling to reinvent yet another iteration of weapons whose plans were lost due to complacency of peacetime. Another piece of evidence for the superiority of rejecting peace altogether.

Deep down, she knew she had to return to Coruscant, if only because so far it provided the closest link to the contemporary Sith she still had not given up on finding. For what purpose exactly remained to be determined, depending more on their goals than hers.

What she had not accounted for was the Sith finding her first.

Chapter End Notes

More excitement coming up, I guess.
Philosophical Differences II

A droid was by virtue of its nature not a particularly trustworthy face.

Which made following it – first away from the conference, then onto a ship with an unknown destination – a rather unwise move, superficially speaking.

The inconspicuous protocol droid had attempted to pressure her into complying – of course, nobody was in the habit of asking politely nowadays –, seemingly giving her no choice by threatening in his monotonely droning voice to release poisonous gas into the assembly room, thus killing the representatives. Certainly, she could not care less about the fates of the diplomats present, her temporary ward included, but she currently did not need such a pointless massacre blamed on her, either.

The droid had clearly failed to calculate the scenario of her being willing to meet with his master, or dismissed it as too unlikely. However dangerous heading straight into the Tuk’ata’s cave was, the unique opportunity presented to her with no effort on her side required was too good to pass up.

Their starfighter attached to the hyperspace rings. There was no turning back now.

“Obviously, this has all the markings of a trap.”

You’re the expert in springing traps, so feel free to share your experiences. Nonetheless, if that Dooku wanted me dead, he would not have instructed the droid to lure me out of the room under a pretence before employing the gas.

“Depends on what manner of death he has envisioned for you.”

In combat, then? Let him try.

Having lightsabres with her would be beneficial in that case, but then again, she did not require them to defeat her opponents. Especially with her newfound talent for lightning that was the main advantage of Nox’ presence, apart from the uneasy comraderie. The occasional unnerving commentary was a small price to pay.

“Don’t underestimate him…”

No need to tell me. What’s the alternative to accepting his invitation? Shall we continue with these pointless mind-numbing endeavours, perhaps collect more Republic accolades in the process? I am a Hero already, after all. Or do you have a better approach? The trace-them-through-history method clearly hasn’t yielded any useful results. Abandon the past altogether? So what then - maybe we should open an orphanage, wouldn’t that be lovely?

“If it’s going the same direction as your slavery business, I’m all for it. Might be a challenge to find suitable orphans, though. The Jedi Order might have a bit of an issue with that.”

Kriff, you’ve actually got this thought through already? Sure, let’s start our own Order of Murderous Misfits. You’ve got to be kidding me.

“Perhaps I am just bored – not a good state for me, I admit. Humor me while I try to be supportive for once: Have you ever thought about what you personally want to do? The way I see it, you’ve
always put duty first, to the Empire, to your crew, to the Alliance. You’re practically a Jedi in that regard. A superlatively angry, possessive one, but still way too passive for my liking.”

My, you’re in a kind mood today. Well, just keep digging your own grave. Don’t come begging for mercy later, though.

“Mercy is weakness, we both know that.” Nox chuckled darkly. “My point still stands. What are your desires? You once had your path cut out for you – privileged background, make it through the Academy, survive your apprenticeship, get revenge on your master. All the while making enemies and staking out your territory as you rise through the ranks. You were constantly chained down by the dynamics and expectations of the Empire that you internalized as pragmatism and honour. It is obvious why you never attempted to rise above that on your own accord - you’ve not considered doing anything else, anything selfish, because it would serve no purpose to your mind. No wonder Marr took a liking to you. He always was too much of a realist and a politician for his own good.

“Wrath? Commander? These are just titles others granted you, pushed on you even. You lived up to them, without doubt, because you’re too stubborn for failure. But you did not actively seize the power that came with those roles and made it your own. You wore the masks, fully expecting to cast them aside when the time came. Where is your ambition? What do you need power for – especially now that everyone is dead? In fact, what do you even keep living for? Why not simply give up?”

At least I’m not a megalomaniac tyrant-

“Ah, such a negative view of power. What brought such extremism about?”

Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Vitiate proved that.

“Is that so? I see, so that’s what you are afraid of. Being too weak to handle the responsibility. Ironic, all things considered. Bear in mind, however, Vitiate’s only purpose was amassing enough power to attain immortality. We were all just pawns to him, at no time did he actually care about the subjects he was ruling. You could not be further from that. A little thought experiment: Imagine I had managed to claim the position of Emperor. How would I have fared, what do you think?”

You would have fared spectacularly once you’d shocked all xenophobic adversaries who won’t bow before a Mirialan Emperor into submission. Imperial citizens on the whole...probably not so much. Zayathris suppressed a smirk. I envision your supplicants having to wade through a pool of blood of those who dared to look at you funny. And orgies in the Council Halls.

“Oh, come on. My rule would not have been … primarily guided by benevolence and efficiency, I suppose. But it would have been mostly just and with the best interests of all my hypothetical people in mind nevertheless.” He grumbled.”Don’t you remember that young woman who wanted to crush everyone that opposed her ideas of reform? Our dreams of one day shaping the galaxy according to our will?”

To you, these dreams represent ultimate freedom. However, I’ve experienced the reality of ruling, and it’s not at all how I imagined it would be.

“Because you did not want that particular role, because you were forced to compromise by the circumstances. There’s no victory in that.” Nox retorted harshly before falling silent. When he continued, his mental voice had taken on a wistful quality. “It should have been one of us. Ruling the Empire. You were robbed of the opportunity and I … made a choice.”

A choice?
“...I failed to mention that I killed Acina’s successor, didn’t I?”

I’m not surprised by this feat or your ambition, but it’s difficult to imagine what must have transpired for you to end up trying to release me instead.

“Actually, it’s not strange at all once you know the circumstances. Acina’s rule was longlasting and pretty effective, I initially supported her ascension, but that was before being robbed of my Council seat – not that it mattered much given that I joined the Alliance soon after. You would have loved the direction she took the Empire, even though she also used you rather unscrupulously. She allowed non-humans to serve in the military and official capacities. Granted, that was inevitable because the Empire was about to run out of warm bodies to send to the front lines. Yet, with duty came exposure and respect, making the life of “aliens” much easier. The reorganisation of the Council proved very effective – especially once I replaced that weakling Anathel. Alas, Acina was killed by a Republic airstrike on Corellia when she came to dictate terms for the Republic’s surrender of the whole sector. Turns out they also developed stealth technology, funny that.”

“The Empire was in a state of shock for a few years as Acina’s reforms meant there had been barely any maneuvering for higher position among the upper echelons. There were no suitable or willing candidates that survived the chaotic situation that arose. One promising aspirant tried and failed within weeks. It was the Council and the Hand that actually ruled during that tumultuous period. Obviously, we didn’t make any progress due to their perpetual conflicts. Vowrawn declared himself Emperor eventually but was murdered by an SIS agent during his coronation. Pretty anticlimactic ending for one with such a predilection for subterfuge and scheming. A Darth Irae, member of the Empire’s Hand at that time, came out on top during the chaotic struggle for the throne afterwards.”

“Dismantled – rather bloodily – Intelligence for failing to prevent the ambush as his first act. That alone would have served to prove what kind of leader he would turn out to be. The reconstituted ImpInt under the auspices of our dear Cipher Nine as Keeper had made a complete u-turn and devoted themselves exclusively to counterintelligence, leaving recon to the military and “random assassinations to bounty hunters” as he put it once. They basically eradicated the SIS and related services, leaving the Republic floundering for decades. It had been glorious, the crowning achievement of Nine’s singleminded quest for retribution. He was already going down that path during his time with the Alliance, you surely remember the spectacular stand-offs with Theron.”

Zayathris reminisced fondly. I do. Nine tried to poison you once because you kept coming to Shan’s aid.

“Emphasis on tried, but it was a valiant effort so I did not resent him for it. Come to think of it, I’m not sure what broke him in the end, the way the Alliance went up in flames or that the SIS wound up responsible for that Aristocra’s death.”

Kriff. I’d wager it was the latter. Aristocra Saganu was like a beacon of home for Nine. I know he practically adopted the agent, although I always suspected they were in a relationship of some kind. They were very secretive about it, and it’s hard to tell with Chiss.

“That would explain a few things.”

By the way, you keep alluding to what happened to the Alliance but refuse to explain in detail.

“Considering how well you took the realisation that you’ve skipped a few millenia, I did not want to add to your burden.”
That bad?

“Very. I daresay only Nine and I came out more or less unscathed. Odessen was turned into a wasteland. But the details of it are a distraction right now. Where was I? Ah - Keeper did not escape the new Emperor’s purge, but he did give him a hideous disfigurement as parting gift. Unfortunately, Irae used that as an excuse to brand non-humans as potential traitors. His dreadful campaign broadened, harkening back to the worst days of the Empire. Relations with the Chiss soured, especially as our winning streak of the previous decades abruptly ended. They gradually withdrew their support as Irae kept using them in ill-fated battles, which in turn caused him to cut all ties altogether. If you’re not with us…and so on, you know the drill.”

Why did you not act earlier? You had your chance even before Vowrawn stepped up.

“I admit I was too engrossed in my research to care about the grand scheme of things. At that time it looked as if my most important project was nearing successful completion. Alas, that was a gross miscalculation on my part. Later, the galactic situation created by Irae’s incompetence ended up setting me back several years. But I had been so close! Meanwhile, my body was showing signs of age – take a guess, what’s the average life expectancy of a Mirialan having grown up a slave? – but we’d lost Belsavis, so I had little choice but to press on with my research. When that sorry excuse of an Emperor interfered with my affairs directly, he forced my hand. He died pathetically, a shriveled, charred husk, a fitting end for such a worthless creature. I did intend to take over the Empire at that point…however, I figured that it needed a stable, consistent rule to rise again, and with only a few good years left in my body, I had to take the risk and use my research to prolong my life as had been the goal all along. I felt there was still a key element missing, so it would have been foolish to proceed without a failsafe in place.

The only other person I trusted to have both the strength and dedication to reform the Empire.

You.

And, well, you know the rest.”

Damn.

“Damn indeed. Perhaps we’ve been given a second chance. Look around you. The Republic is crumbling, more cancer than healthy tissue already. Slavery and criminal activity is still rampant, in the Core and the outskirts alike. There is neither equality nor order and everyone suffers for it. Not saying the Empire was truly better, but it did have the potential, with the right people in charge. Who, if not us? These meddling Sith instigating a proxy war?”

Well, what can we do? We have no credits, no ship, no allies – nothing, not even a proper weapon.

“None of which Dooku is going to provide. So unless you intend to kill him and take over his operations…”

Kill him? No, that would be premature. He claims he wants to talk – that is exactly what I need him to do.
The final room was devoid of furniture except for an unadorned throne standing against the backdrop of elaborately carved, viewport-style windows. The pale, greenish glow emanating from them represented the only major light source, tinging everything in the ghastly hue. The shadow cast by the lone figure on top of the low steps extended until the entrance as if to swallow up any visitor in the darkness.

The way from the landing area had been flanked by a multitude of various types of battle droids, all powered down. Encountering another living, sentient being in this setting was as much a surprise as it was a peculiar relief, an imposing aura among the deliberate lifelessness of their surroundings.

The clanking of the protocol droids scurrying gait subsided and a disquieting absence of sound settled over them, two predators wordlessly taking measure of each other. When the dark-clad figure spoke up, the deep sonorous voice reverberated from the walls.

“So we meet again.”

Zayathris took a few steps forward and stopped short just before the bottom of the stairs. “The setting certainly is more sophisticated than last time.” She gave a mock bow, eyes fixated on the older man. “To what do I owe the honour, Count Dooku of Serenno? Or do you prefer Darth Tyranus? Shall we finish what we started on Farnas II?”

“I do not intend to press the issue. Our confrontation there was unnecessarily impulsive, but based on reasonable assumptions, given that you were in the company of a Jedi.”

“Not by choice, I assure you. Becoming a tribute did not sound like a pleasant prospect and, whatever you have in mind for me here, I recommend refraining from attacking me again if you want to keep this civilised.”

“And yet, you have followed my invitation despite your understandable misgivings. You have become quite a nuisance to the CIS. Why would you ally with the Republic?”

“Well, it did get your attention, hasn’t it? That was the very point.”

Tyranus seemed to have expected this kind of reasoning. “A wasteful approach, nonetheless. On the other hand, it does allow us to meet in this way, though you could not have planned that. As you appear to be aware of my identity, it would be courteous to afford me the same privilege.”

“I suppose it would. Zayathris Veskyâr, Wrath of the Empire. Officially “former”, but whereas the Empire has died, I have not.”

Tyranus’ eyes widened, a flash of gold setting the brown irises ablaze. “It is true, then…” He whispered to himself.

“While I enjoy your hospitality – would enjoy it more if offered tea and the like, has that gone out of fashion? – as the leader of the CIS, you are unlikely to be bored or harbouring a death wish, so what’s the occasion?”
“You should not exist.”

“Ominous. And you intend to do something about this?” Zayathris replied in a bantering tone, but her eyes darted around the room, searching for a possible weapon.

Hands clasped behind his back, the older Sith descended the stairs, remaining just beyond the typical duel range. His height contrasted with his controlled, austere demeanour, amplifying the cold, unyielding pressure from his Force presence. Having to look up to someone during a conversation was a somewhat rare occurrence for Zayathris, but Tyranus towered over her, taller by at least half a head, his fairly advanced age not apparent from his haughty posture at all. “You claim to be Sith, bearing a title that fell out of use in antiquity, a remnant of a long-forgotten dominion.”

“I am not a relic to be studied.” She snarled, much to Nox’ amusement. If anyone is a relic, it’s you. She snapped silently.

“I intended no offense. However, you cannot deny that your survival for what must exceed millennia is an aberration that bears investigation.”

“The more interesting question is why you’re not surprised by my revelation at all, but were completely shocked when we fought on Farnas. Have you grown so comfortable in your position that you no longer expect to be challenged?”

“No by a fellow Sith.”

Phrased as if it should be obvious - now that was a peculiar statement. “Just how many Sith are there, in that case?”

“Two.” The curt reply hung in air between them.

As the implications sank in, something in her shattered, and gave way to an overwhelming bubble of hysterical laughter. This extent of deterioration of her Order appeared so outlandish, even the worst case scenarios discussed with Nox had not featured the Sith nearing extinction. To hear it from Tyranus himself...

“In the whole bloody galaxy?”

The man nodded slowly, his voice taking on a lecturing manner. “Two there should be. No more, no less. One to embody power, the other to crave it.”

This incredible folly had been brought about on purpose? “Who are you quoting?”

“Darth Bane, the founder of this lineage.”

“And this … is the … only lineage still active?” She ground out. The question left the taste of ash on her tongue. Like the ash of her people on Ziost.

“Bane made sure of that, and for a millennium, no outside contenders for the title of Dark Lord have been allowed to rise.”

“How? There were almost ten thousand Sith at one point. Far more, if we are counting the acolytes and youths not in formal training yet.”
“Which timeframe are you alluding to?” The interest seemed genuine.

“The Great Galactic war, as history has come to refer to the era during which I was born.”

“Impressive.” He mused to himself. “To answer your question: Bane endeavoured to purge the Sith ways of the crippling infighting and short-sighted greed plaguing the Order, which represented the very reason for their continued failures. To that end, he ultimately unleashed a thought-bomb, killing his brethren. He took one apprentice only, and it has been this way ever since.”

“Thought-bomb? Oh, kriffing void, I don’t even want to know how that works.” Another superweapon, because why not? By exterminating his peers, he might conveniently also have committed genocide; at least it was a logical conclusion given that the Purebloods had disappeared along with the Sith Order as a whole. They might have bred the “purity” out by that point, but he still ended all those bloodlines…and reduced the Sith to this – an elderly human male and his presumed apprentice. Zayathris clenched her fists. *If we come across Bane’s Force ghost, how can we make him suffer?* “So you managed to keep going in this configuration all this time without, I don’t know, someone dying in a speeder crash along the line?”

He shot her a stern, almost disappointed look. “A Dark Lord of the Sith is not prone to dying in a speeder crash.”

“Uh. Right. They also don’t get swallowed up by lava, incinerated by orbital lasers or eaten by K’lor’slugs. Except that they do.”

Tyranus inclined his head in mild puzzlement. “K’lor’slugs?”

“Species native to Korriban. A real pest. Have they finally gone extinct or have you not ventured there?”

“I have seen Moraband.” He replied simply.

“Of course, why not rename our ancestral home which houses some of the most sacred, most powerful sites while you’re at it.” She hissed in indignation. “This is absolutely ridiculous. Infighting is a weakness, I do not disagree with that.” She thought of Baras and the countless deaths of loyal Imperials the duplicitous bastard had caused. Or the void-dammed Emperor himself turning on his people. “Certain victory has been snatched from our hands too often, countless devoted soldiers and citizens killed by selfish ambitions of Sith.” Even the egotistical, deadly games played by the myriads of lower-ranking Sith had a tendency to affect more than those willingly involved.

“Many times, we brought about more chaos instead of the superior order we should have established. Nonetheless, how would this tenet of your lineage not result in a net loss of power and knowledge? You can’t take unnecessary risks for fear of both exposure and accidentally ending the Sith altogether, making you unable to experiment with some of the more dangerous techniques and rituals. Thus, you can only scramble to preserve, never advance.

Besides, what’s to keep the apprentice from killing his master prematurely or in a fit of rage? How do you go about selecting an apprentice in the first place? You’d typically need a couple of iterations to weed out the weak, yet can’t afford to lose time either. When to start teaching the next one, anyway? If you have multiple hopefuls lined up, they might team up against you, but the alternative is having no contingency plan. Finally, not everyone has a natural aptitude for all disciplines, some are physically weaker but excel at sorcery, others have an affinity for sabre skills, yet little patience for mental techniques. What you can’t use you can’t teach, either. Sith grow strong through conflict. Even over generations, this holds true, I will not deny that. The perpetual
struggle for supremacy promotes the strong and eliminates the weak. The Order as a whole remains vibrant and lethal as a result, despite the individual’s ambitions and eventual fate. But your path limits expression of the Dark Side and amounts to glorifying decay. It’s a path of fear.”

Tyranus appeared to consider her barrage of arguments, remaining silent for longer than she had expected him to.

“You fail to take into account that the Sith’s goals and underlying dynamics could change. The intention is to foster a reciprocal relationship between Master and apprentice – a symbiotic one requiring a delicate balancing act by both parties. The obligation of the apprentice is loyalty, the Master’s is knowledge. Should either fail in his obligation, it is the duty of the other to destroy him. The Force requires it. An apprentice is unquestioningly loyal until the moment he isn’t. Both Master and apprentice know this.”

“Symbiotic? Don’t make me laugh. I killed my master because he was a treasonous prick that would discard me like a tool. He never taught me anything, except for being wary of betrayal. Most Lords and Darths had multiple apprentices who usually did not draw lots to decide who gets to kill their master. There was plenty of other competition to take up all of their attention. As for the Force requiring it, I am quite sure that most Sith that came before Bane would consider this heresy. Doctrinal issues aside – I will admit that I never cared much for that, it is usually too stifling on an individual level – what happened to subjugating the Force, make it an extension of your will? Instead you prostrate yourself before its supposed Will, allowing it to limit you. The Force should be our servant; it’s the Jedi who have it the other way round.”

For some reason that seemed to upset the older Darth tremendously, his voice trembled as replied, making an effort to word it tactfully. “You certainly provide a perspective that has been lost to history, I am afraid.”

“Young rules allow the most extreme and ruthless to advance, those who are most suited to subterfuge, but not the most knowledgeable or powerful. Qorat hadzuskayanjat châsatatul hâskemjontû.”* The phrase was an old axiom describing the plight of Imperial refugees after the Great Hyperspace War.

Tyranus drew a sharp breath as he processed the unexpected language switch and stumbled through the foreign words in his halting reply, the consonants gratingly coloured by Basic. “Zhaloksh midwankun…?”** It was a wise rejoinder, if a little ungrammatical and lacking an awareness of the cultural background.

“Kûskut tashik. How can you be more than a pretender, a Dark Jedi with a fancy title, when you don’t even speak the old language properly?” ***

“He would fail at anything but the most basic sorcery, then.” Nox remarked gleefully.

*You speak with a heavy accent, too.*

“It is not about perfect pronunciation or even being able to hold a conversation in High Sith, but confidence and ease. Both of this, he lacks sorely.” It turned out than the former Dark Councillor was more than capable of affecting the clipped quality of the standard Imperial accent, something not found his speech ordinarily. He picked up on her perplexity. “I speak and read several languages, hence - if necessary - an accent certainly isn’t a stretch for me. Learned it to wind up Theron.”

Spy games in the bedroom?
“He wouldn’t have appreciated that.”

So just to rub it in how you’ve compromised him.

“He had worked with Beniko, Cipher Nine and you long before I met him on Yavin IV, so he was well compromised already.”

Meanwhile, Tyranus had explained, among other counterarguments to her criticisms, how he was perfectly capable of reading Kittât. It was at least something.

“Yet, all of these weaknesses are painfully obvious and you even recognise some of the shortcomings. You had one thousand years to develop a better philosophy, no one forced you to stay true to Bane’s ideas. Has no one ever questioned them? You seem like an intelligent, reasonable man. Are you continuing this foolishness with your own apprentice?”

Tyranus adopted a sly smile. “Ah, you seem to act under the wrong assumption that I am the current Master.”

“Well, in that case you don’t have much time left to learn.” She gave a faint chuckle. “You probably take the record for Oldest Apprentice. Unless your master is unusually long-lived, you must’ve either really shown promise or … could you be a former Jedi? That would make sense considering the personally upset way Kenobi spoke about you.”

As if not by his own volition, Tyranus took a step back. “You have met Obi-Wan Kenobi?” Ah, an old wound indeed.

“Briefly, but amiably, gave me a lift off Farnas. He seemed rather distracted by his upcoming mission at the time.” A sloppy gloss-over, but Tyranus did not press the topic.

“For all it’s worth, he is my grand-padawan. Given that both of you are still alive, how did you mask your Force presence? You are suppressing it now, I can tell, but that would not be enough to fool a Jedi.”

“A kind of passive meditation. Counter question: How are you doing it?”

“I am not doing anything of the sort at the moment.”

“But…the eyes?”

“That does not require conscious effort. The colour change only occurs when I actively draw on the Dark Side.”

“That’s new. Don’t think it’s actually possible, unless one’s really weak, which he can’t possibly be.”

Or light-sided, perhaps, but his actions prove otherwise. Jaesa had this obsession with finding light-sided Sith. I forbade her to seek them out – figured that was a problem which would take care of itself and did not require her overzealously disrupting Imperial operations. A pity, or we might have learned more about them.

“Even most students on Korriban did sport the yellow permanently towards the end of their training. Haven’t encountered any Lords without basics signs of the Dark.”
“Would you mind indulging my curiosity, Tyranus? Why did you become Sith?”

The Separatist leader began circling around her slowly, an unnerving move even though he gave no impression of malicious intent. “The Jedi deliberately limit their usage of the Force. I sought to integrate the Light and the Dark so as to gain superior power. The galaxy is heading for ruin. Someone had to step up to rebuild it from the ground up – and I am suited, even destined, for that role. The Jedi refuse to bear the responsibility and do what must be done to bring order to the Republic. The Senate is ineffectual and deeply corrupt, but still the Order allows itself to be put on a leash by politicians like degenerate akk dogs.”°°° He stopped his pacing to lock eyes with her, challenging her. “Pray tell, Wrath, do I qualify in your esteemed view?”

“Actually, it’s not what I expected at all. But it’s the classic Revan gambit – sacrifice yourself to the Dark to save the world and have your values turned upside down in the process, thus becoming Destroyer instead of Saviour. The original premise that lead you away from the Jedi sounds slightly flawed, however. I can’t imagine a Sith opting for the Light side to supplement his skills. Your Master allows this delusion, encourages it even?”

“I suppose he welcomed it as a way to lure me away from the Jedi, but how I approach the Force is not something he overly concerns himself with.”

“Your political views are hardly typical for a Jedi, why would you consider such extreme measures necessary? Could change not be affected from within, such as a reform of the Jedi Order?”

“The Republic is beyond saving, the decadence and vice run to deep. As for the Jedi: They await the coming of a prophesised redeemer who will bring balance to the Force and restore order. Here is the truth of it: the Jedi could fulfill the prophecy on their own, if they were willing to unleash the full powers of the Force.”°°°

“Typical. I think I understand why you chose the path of the Sith, this thinking is utterly incompatible with that of your former peers, who are content to wait for the Force and delude themselves with the soothing thought that the Will of the Force will make everything alright. We know better. Passivity, stagnation are weakness. Our cautious little dance is a welcome change of pace - still waiting for that tea, by the way - but I must ask again: What did you bring me here for?”

“For years, my master has withheld vital knowledge from me.”

“What a surprise? I mean, you’d have no reason not to kill him otherwise.”

“He truly did not need to – I was convinced that we share the share overarching goal and would not endanger the grand plan for supposed personal gain. My position as the figurehead of the Separatists requires me to act independently of his guidance in many cases. Naturally, that involves the risk of unwittingly jeopardizing key pieces on the dejarik board. In an attempt to reveal more of my master’s plan in order to avoid such complications and thus, failure, I happened upon information that caused me to doubt his intentions. Already somewhat disillusioned, I delved further and found my suspicions confirmed.”

“Your idealism blinded you to the true nature of your master.”

“Alas, that is true. During my research, a peculiar sidenote in ancient documents caught my attention. The legend of a sleeping warrior, the Eternal Wrath, who would one day awake to avenge the fallen Empire. The symbolism associated with the story curiously coincided with the primitive lore of the Farnasi, who claim that they were blessed by the Patterned God of Lightning with superiority over their surface-dwelling counterparts in exchange for keeping his treasure safe
until the Great Reawakening. I convinced them the time had come - and they offered to hand you over but insisted that the removal from stasis could only take place on their planet.” He clarified.

Nox…

“Well, in my defence, it was a good place to hide the throne after Odessen was ravaged. Getting the locals to protect it was a stroke of genius.”

Perhaps. Might take a while for me to get over the “god of lightning” part, though.

“Hilarious.”

Unaware of her mental conversation, Tyranus continued. “I gave them the technology and returned later to retrieve you, to find that the Jedi had got to you first, by sheer happenstance. You were in a sorry state, but I let you live. I did not expect you to become such a nuisance, but the opportunity outweighed the risk.”

“I hope you don’t expect my gratitude. Now that you have told me of your intended treachery – not that I don’t approve – what kind of opportunity are you talking about?”

“I would offer you the same thing I once offered Kenobi – join me and help me kill my Master so that we can change the course of the galaxy according to our will.”

Intriguing. “You don’t really take your rules seriously, do you?” Zayathris scoffed. “Does needing help not imply that you’re too weak to take the mantle of Master?”

“Not if my master doesn’t adhere to them, either.”

“How did Kenobi take your proposal?”

“To my utter disappointment, as you’d expect from a brainwashed, dutiful Jedi.”

Deliberately turning her back to her interlocutor, Zayathris walked up to the windows and crossed her arms, staring into the distance. “If I am to consider this, I expect a full disclosure. What is your actual role in this war? And how would your master betray you?”

Tyranus came to stand beside her and studied her expression from the corner of his eyes. “The Separatist Alliance is a pawn.”

“I figured as much. You built it up as the Republic’s nemesis. Eventually, it will take the fall - in the wake of things to come.”

“A very astute observation. It is supposed to become a necessary sacrifice, paving the path for the new government. All this time, I assumed I would be afforded the opportunity to forswear my former allegiances and, emerging with my reputation for integrity intact, be instrumental in the foundation of a new order.”

“Instead, you’ll be cast aside, too. I understand your predicament; I was once in a similar situation.”

“I am curious as to how you arrived at that particular conclusion.”

“Firstly, your rehabilitation remains a somewhat risky wager for your master. No threads linking him to the duplicitous game he is playing, no loose ends – sacrificing you along with the Separatists would be much cleaner. You’re a former Jedi, that will always be a taint, a lingering
doubt that you have the capacity to be sufficiently ruthless and will stop at nothing – you fell once, the pendulum could always swing into the other direction. The third indication comes from that stupid rule of yours. You are old and still the apprentice. Hence a confrontation at the height of your power is no longer possible. You have little chance of overpowering him. Even if you did, you don’t happen to have an apprentice of your own hiding somewhere?"

“He made sure of that.” Came the bitter reply.

“Of course he has. Once the galaxy is in his grasp, he has no need for rules and philosophies that limit the extent of his power. If he is victorious, he will fashion himself the Sith’ari – unless this concept has been lost to history – as he is the one to ultimately bring about the culmination of generations of planning your revenge.”

“He remains a creature shaped by the Rule of Two, though. He will view the existence of multiple Sith as an inherent weakness. Can you imagine him bringing the galaxy to heel and reshaping it into his Empire, only for him to die eventually of natural causes? I know I would not allow that if I were in his place. I would have the solution to that pesky problem, too. So must he, otherwise he would not move as swiftly and confidently as he does.”

Essentially, if he expected to die so that the next generation could carry on with the fulfilment of the plan… Kriff. Instead, it’s all about him – and will always be. That belief allows him to deviate from the rules all the others who came before him followed docilely. So that can only mean one thing…

*She could vividly image Nox’ feral grin as he purred his reply. “Immortality.”*

She carefully voiced that realisation to the other Sith. “Thus, the Banite lineage ends with him. Continuing it would not be in his best interest. He won’t want a powerful apprentice who could endanger his rule. Encouraging competition amongst his servants and enforcers is not an option either because that would create a situation anathema to Bane’s philosophy. So he will be left with no successor. Who would manoeuvre for decades and instigate a war on this scale to create an Empire from the still smouldering ashes of the Republic, if only to let it plunge into chaos after a couple of decades?”

Tyranus appeared to grasp the gravitas of this line of thought, and all but whispered. “He would not. His master dabbled in such things, but…”

“But your master has not shared his insights with you.”

The older man gave his quiet acknowledgement, still reeling from the implications. It was not that he had not considered the various possibilities, but to hear it from another - another Sith - was rather sobering. His master had withheld so much from him – or perhaps not even he held knowledge comparable to that of one that had lived during one of the prime epochs of the Sith.

*Is it likely that he has already succeeded?*

“Hard to tell. Sorcery. Alchemy. Coupled with potential technological advances of this time…there are quite a few theoretical options.”

Such as?

“I’ve thought about this very topic a lot. Heh. I doubt you could find anyone with a similar expertise. If we model the Force as the underlying continuum, the fabric of galaxy, localised
changes – like death on a massive scale - create a temporary imbalance, a gradient that causes the Force to flow until the equilibrium is restored. Given enough strength or another kind of connection to the original event, one can direct this current. If handled badly, it can collapse into a singularity, like a black hole, for example ripping a wound in the Force through which it bleeds and stains uncontrollably. The precedent for this would be the actions of Jedi Exile who accompanied Revan when he tried to assassinate Vitiate. At the Battle of Malachor, she somehow drew the current into herself but was likely overwhelmed, turning her connection to the Force into a corrupted conduit. A similar thing probably happened to that pseudo-Darth Nihilus, but unlike the Exile, he has never been studied.

Barring such an intervention, the Force flows naturally to fill up the negative space over time. Vitiate siphoned that off, leched on the war between the Republic and Empire – our philosophy of progress through conflict played into his hands. Ironic, huh? I have come to the conclusion that – rather uniquely – he also developed an active method of causing this flow without requiring an external cause, case in point being Ziost.”

Void-damned Ziost. She hadn’t not expected it to cause a flare of pain still. It had not been her home world, but close enough, with it housing the Navy Academy she’d attended briefly thanks to her father’s influence. And to sense Pierce’s howling fury… To feel so helpless, so hopeless in the face of Vitiate’s overwhelming power and the inevitable machinations that had brought both Republic and Empire to the planet in the first place…

“It’s may sound like a similar concept, but it is definitely more than a far-reaching death field, more than feeding off your enemy’s energy or even reaching into yourself in order to use pain and so on to heal yourself.” Nox continued his lecture

“Living beings are tethered in the Force, which is an access point so to speak for those techniques. Your predecessor as Wrath was instead cut off from the Force and attached to an artificial source – that redirected flow, making him somewhat dependent on Vitiate. He was no longer subject to natural processes, like aging or death, but had no access to emotions either. One could theorise that all these manipulations would be difficult or impossible with a light side approach – not to mention anathema to the Jedi. Especially considering that Scourge managed to re-attach his tether with help of a Jedi, linking seems to come easier to lightsiders than separating, but that’s to be expected.

What Vitiate did to Ziost, is on a whole other level, as he ripped out these tethers by the roots to feed off them, which requires acting directly in the fabric of the force. That approach gave me an idea. Manipulate the Force to draw sustenance from it – this is the intuitive part which both of us are familiar with. However, if you take this far enough, you become a Force nexus, which makes the process self-sustaining. You still have to take the equilibrium into equation, but what this entails is not comparable to instigating a galaxy-wide war. The drain would be subtle, dispersed, with no discernible influence. It would be as if crops on a planet grow a fraction slower or everyone else dying a split second earlier.”

Immortality without the messy prerequisites or side-effects.

“Quite so.”

How close were you?

“As I said earlier, if not for a tiny detail, almost there. I suspect that Veijel’s apprentice carried on his research after his master died, but whatever he found out, it never made its way onto my desk. If these Banite Sith dabbled in this topic … well, I want their knowledge no matter the cost.”
And they cannot be allowed to attain immortality.

“I am glad we are in agreement. Actually, with that kind of power, one could likely create life itself, which opens up a lot of nasty options – think necromancy and way beyond – and some nicer ones, like solving our body-sharing problem.”

An immortal army of raised dead, who doesn’t want one? As for the latter issue, can’t you just continue body-hopping? Like Vitiate did with his Voice, or if I remember correctly, Zash attempted to?

“Technically, I suppose I could, but in my current state I am afraid it would be at the expense of the host body and I like you far too much to even consider that path. Looks like we’re in this together for better or worse.”

Definitely not a trajectory I imagined my life taking. None of this is.

“I’m sure you’ll take it in stride.”

“I will not become your enforcer, Tyranus. Nor shall I lower myself to becoming your apprentice.”

“I have no need for traditions. The new order will be a joint effort. And given your superior knowledge, I shall gladly accept your teachings. My Master has not shown willingness to teach me anything beyond the necessities, and much was lost in the dark ages before Bane’s time. I was a fool for not realizing much sooner that he harbours ulterior motives, that our goals not aligned. It appears I have no place in his vision, which makes me doubt his plans for the galaxy.”

“What do you envision, then?”

“We shall establish a government to embody authority. There will no place for political squabbling or inefficiency born from pandering to the ignorant. Instead a pure, direct rule of power made manifest to bring order - an Empire of Man with no concessions granted to degenerate filth.”°°

“I assume it is not a coincidence, then, that the Separatists consist primarily of non-humans.”

Dooku’s look was bland. “Of course not. Their wealth will serve us well, however.”°°

“Bastard.” Nox growled.

Patience, my dear. I could not care less about the CIS, but we will be there to influence the course this endeavour takes. In the meantime, let’s allow an old man to hold onto his delusions.

“Xenophobic delusions. It’s moments like these that make me question whether I can truly trust you after all.”

You’ve just described 90% of my interactions with you. In any case, I do not begrudge your automatic mistrust of normal humans, but as a kneejerk response to everything, it’s very unhelpful.

“Normal.” He emphasized dryly. “As in, being the norm, the standard for evaluating others. Looking down on them.”

You know what I mean.

“Language matters.”
Technically, as Mirialan, you are near-human…

“So?” Unhappy territory.

So there are bound to be differences.

“Such as?”

Kriff, you’re making this difficult. Let me ask you a question: Do you believe that a Bith or Talz is on the same level as you and I, species-wise? Where do you draw the line, Nox?

“Now you are the one making it difficult.”

“And what of the Jedi?” She enquired to get a better impression of Tyranus, of whether he still held a modicum of whimsical attachment to the beliefs he had grown up with.

“I do not wish to see the Jedi eradicated, unless necessary, merely expunged of the disease-like weakness which has spread through their ranks unchallenged for generations. The Order is too slow to embrace change so it will be shattered and remade according to the tenets of the Sith, and emerge stronger than ever, no longer chained down by pathetic squabbling politicians. An army of Enforcers for the new Empire.”

Zayathris pretended to consider the offer before turning towards Tyranus. “We shall make all this become reality - together. What must be done to bring your master down?”

Finally, his eyes lit up, a fiery blend of yellow and crimson. “For the time being, there is little you can do. I must first uncover his contingency plans, of which he is bound to have several. I have identified multiple leads already. The grand plan is close to culmination, so we must be able to strike without delay as soon as the time has come. For now, you must remain a mystery to him so that he does not suspect me.”

“I understand the necessity, but this course of action is rather unsatisfying. As a token of trust, at least give me the name of our mutual enemy.”

There was little hesitation.

“Darth Sidious. It is known even to the Jedi, though they are unaware of his public persona.”

Tyranus lips curved in a faint smile. “There might be something you can do in the meantime.”

“What does this entail?”

“I have learned of a Jedi Shadow, who seems to have made headway in locating an important Sith holocron. Sidious will take measures to acquire it once he is briefed on the details.”

“You haven’t informed him yet?”

“No. He has sought this particular holocron for years, it was assumed lost – but he likely already know progress has been made. Considering he has never seen it fit to task me with its retrieval, he must want it for himself. It would fall to you to extract the information from the Jedi. Obviously, I am unable to go myself. However, with your tendency to stumble into our operations, you will not arouse undue suspicion, especially if you manage to leave no loose ends, Sidious will be none the wiser.”
“If Sidious wants it at this point... We must obtain it. Please?”

I agree, no wheedling required. Pretty much everything beats the inane pastimes I’ve occupied myself with so far. Killing a Jedi even more so.

“I accept.”

“I shall send you the details and provide you with a neutral ship.”

Zayathris gave a formal nod, of the kind one would acknowledge an equal with, as she turned to leave. “May the Force serve you well.”

Chapter End Notes

° Quote/Adapted from Lords of the Sith by Paul S. Kemp
°° Adapted from Star Wars: Darth Plagueis by James Luceno
°°° Quote from Star Wars: Darth Plagueis by James Luceno

Intended meanings (in fact, the sentences are based on what info is available on the Sith language, just haven’t triple-checked the grammar, I am fine with Latin, but any other languages that have more than an ablative case and such concepts... well, then it gets messy, even my Russian is rocky at best.):

* The pathway amidst shadows will necessarily be carved by suffering.
** (But) only power will sustain (you).
*** Dreaming is lies.

(Grammar-wise, the Sith language is basically the evil-creepy cousin of Finnish. Make of that what you will ;) )
Extenuating Circumstances

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The damned Jedi was dead.

Obviously so and not just since recently, judging from the state of decay.

Now, reducing the situation to that basic fact appeared quite anticlimactic, but there was no point in sugarcoating it.

No holocron in sight, either, thought that was by no means surprising.

Technically, Tyranus’ claims had not pointed to the device being in the Shadow’s possession, but as the circumstances presented themselves to her, the failure of any indication of it to materialise was yet another item in a string of curious coincidences.

When she had arrived on the unnamed moon, passing through the blockade of a few light cruisers of unidentifiable allegiance had been a straightforward affair. The subsequent landing, if it could even be called that, less so.

Upon her entering orbit, almost as if on cue – realistically speaking, it probably was –, a CIS capital ship supported by a handful of frigates had dropped out of hyperspace. Her fumbled attempts to raise the shields were cut short when a stray volley of fire hit her vessel – by all calculations she should have been beyond their aft cannons’ active targeting range. Considering that soon after, a squadron of fighters broke formation to chase after her, the possibility that there was more to it than accidentally getting caught up in the crossfire was not to be dismissed. Shields had gone up around the damaged hull just in time to prevent the ship burning up from the velocity alone. Nearing ground, she had managed to decelerate the descent enough for an emergency exit – as in: jump ship and do not waste a thought on the debilitating idea that this time her mastery of the physical aspects of the Force would not suffice to make the inevitable impact survivable.

It turned out a close call indeed, no thanks to the unusually high gravitational pull. The problem lay less with her than with the ground itself, which did not lend itself to the application of kinetic energy, to put it mildly. Despite every single muscle in her body howling in protest, she had rolled away barely in time to evade the jet of hot and – as she found out later – caustic gas streaming from the crack in the surface her forceful landing had created. The ship crashed in the distance and was swallow up whole, a greenish flame flaring up and illuminating the cloud of gas and dust rapidly forming above the jagged crater.

The planet easily surpassed Quesh in term of toxicity and general unpleasantness. The only upside (or downside, depending on one’s outlook) was the lack of a preceding vaccination with side-effects as nauseating as breathing the atmosphere itself.

The surface was arid and unstable, as evidenced by the myriads of geysers and little steaming mounds covering the area, creating a landscape reminiscent of the bumps and sores caused by the smallpox variant endemic to Bosthirda. The dry, sweltering heat was entirely within expectations and barely worth a mention. Upon closer inspection, the sorry state of the Shadow was not terribly surprising – he had perished close to a fissure emitting noxious gas, after all. There existed no signs
of a fight, no discernible wounds on the body not inflicted posthumously, except for a peculiar smear of blood and what looked oddly like brain matter beneath his nostrils. Even the Rodian’s lightsabre was corroded to the point of uselessness, except maybe as an improvised grenade if the power had not fizzled out. His last act seemed to have been operating a makeshift communications array, but why he had not taken precautions remained a mystery. If anything, it was quite out of character, presumably, for a man that had trained for prolonged solo missions and should be resourceful in addition to being hyper-aware of his surroundings a result. In itself, the Jedi’s death was not a great loss, but if whatever knowledge he had gained of the holocron had died with him – well, that certainly was irksome.

The faint tug in the back of Zayathris mind was unremitting. There was someone or something watching her, though she could not pin down why it felt so disconcerting. If it was not abject foolishness that had killed the Shadow…

Most importantly, why had he been in such an apparent hurry? Dangerous as it was, the planet was not about to fall apart and there was a kind of settlement nearby which even housed spaceships. It had sustained some damage recently, judging from the caved-in dome and characteristic gas clouds hovering above.

No inhabitants visible.

Ships. Plural.

Things were getting more interesting by the minute.

Zayathris willed her throbbing limbs forward, cautiously making her way towards the array of buildings discernible from the distance. Even though an outpost of this size would require at least some maintenance personnel, there was no one visible. Extending her senses confirmed that there were other sentients present, filaments of pain and horror wriggling madly in the Force.

A piercing scream from one of the domes adjacent to destroyed central one caught her attention.

She peered into the room. Inside, a petite girl brandished a blue lightsabre in panicked, jerky sweeps, her back pressed to a stack of anthracite crates. In the dim lighting, her large bright eyes stood out in contrast to her soot-covered face, like stars on the canvas of the galaxy. There seemed to be a body lying next to her feet.

“Show yourself!” She yelled with the commanding tone of faked confidence. What was she so afraid of? She could not possibly have sensed her approach. No, there had to be another threat.

Zayathris took a few measured steps towards her.

The girl pointed her sabre towards her. “There’s more of you?”

Her instincts had been right. “I have no intention of harming you. Who else is here?”

A faint flicker of hope welled up in the girl. “Are you with Master Iquuno?”

“The dead Jedi up there? I was tasked with investigating the proceedings on this planet. It appears I have arrived a tad late, however.” Zayathris laced her voice with regret. In her shaken state, the girl would not suspect anything amiss.

“He contacted you? I hoped he got a transmission out, but it didn’t look that way…”
“I had no direct contact with him, all I was provided with were these coordinates and a vague description. What’s a child like you doing here?” She sensed the worry of the diminutive humanoid – the species was entirely unfamiliar, with head appendages not unlike seed pods – and her bond with the barely alive person splayed on the floor. Their dull robes gave them both away as Jedi. However, the girl seemed too young to be a padawan, at least one taken along on outbound missions.

“My master and I investigated Tjar Iquuno’s disappearance. We were too late, as well. And then, my master got injured.” Her eyes flickered towards the still form on the ground, grief welling up in them. “Someone attacked us—” There was a scraping sound from the other side of the room. “Has been hunting us— Watch out!” She raised her sabre to illuminate the ceiling, but the assailant she sensed had already dropped to the ground behind Zayathris. Having anticipated his attack, she ducked under his strike despite not seeing it and extended her arm in a Force Push. The expected feedback of the Force impacting with her opponent never came. Instead an unnatural calm settled over her, the flames of ire dancing in her being doused with a spray of water, gentle yet malevolent at the same time. By all accounts, the sensation should have been a most horrifying one, but she felt nothing except for a tender but insistent pull drawing her forward. It grew exponentially as she came closer and finally yanked her to her knees. The thought of even putting up resistance was so absurd—

She shoved the malicious presence out of her mind. Something thin and wispy, not unlike tendrils, brushed her face when she charged at where she sensed the attacker. This time, she struck true, sending him falling backwards. While she could still sense him acutely, he quickly disappeared into the shadows, his humanoid shape blending with the unlit edges of the large room.

“What the kriff was that?” She cursed as she backed towards the sphere of light cast by the lightsabre. “He killed your master?”

“No, that wasn’t him.” The girl winced, before adding indignantly. “Also, Master Rhitt-Ven still alive!”

“Barely. Could’ve fooled me.” Her ribcage touched the padawan’s shoulder, allowing her to feel the ebb and flow of the girl’s trembling while she attempted to reign in her emotions. “How long has that thing been hunting you?”

“Since we got here, I guess. Revealed himself after we had found Iquuno’s body. My master fought him off and protected me, but when the starfighters fired on the dome, the assassin suddenly ignored us…”

*That coincides with our arrival.*

“Oh, it sure does. I have a nagging suspicion, though only academically, who that attacker might be. Or at least his species. Whatever you do, stay clear of the tendrils.”

Zayathris held out her hand expectantly. “Your sabre.”

“Why? I can’t just… A lightsabre is a Jedi’s life! I need it to protect my master!”

“And I need it to protect all of us. My weapons were destroyed when my ship was shot down.” If only she had had proper weapons with her to begin with.

“But it’s dangerous for non-Jedi to wield it.”
“That’s what the Jedi would tell you in their hubris. Besides, if you think I am putting my life in the hands of an untrained padawan, you are sorely mistaken. Now give it to me.”

Reluctantly, the girl complied, mumbling sulkily, “Please don’t break it, I made it myself.”

“Glad to see you’ve got your priorities right.” Zayathris replied with an amused snort. “Take shelter. Do not interfere in any shape or form.”

She gave herself a moment to orient herself in the room. A flat, spacious dome housing many crates and what looked like maintenance equipment. Little manoeuvring room, lots of potential cover making the terrain perfect for ambushes, so engaging the opponent head-on to overpower him quickly was likely the best tactic. She located the assassin’s signature and, having identified a clear path to him, thumbed the lightsabre off, plunging them into complete darkness. Boosting her strength and speed with the Force, she dashed towards him and re-ignited the weapon just before reaching him for a surprise attack. However, his reactions were exceptional – he evaded her strike just in time and parried with his own staff. Being much shorter than the Sith, the confined space they fought in worked to his advantage. His astonishing strength became apparent as they traded strikes – she even had to switch from her favorite Juyo to Djem So in order to counter his brute physical force.

This could be over already if she could apply the full range and extent of her abilities. Once more she regretted having to put on an act. How Sidious managed to avoid exposure while at the same time having impact on the course of the galaxy was beyond puzzling. Unless he was a bloody politician or something.

The strange pull she’d felt earlier tried to lure her in once more. She resisted it effortlessly this time, but the brief distraction afforded the assassin an opportunity to knock the sabre out of Zayathris’ hand. Darkness engulfed them once more and she felt the menacing proximity of the alien. She sidestepped his next attack and shoved away his arms as anger welled up in her. Her hand shot up, fingers curling into a fist. Her opponent struggled against the incorporeal grip, but he was pinned in place, helpless as his throat constricted and oxygen flow was cut off.

Time to put an end to this.

To Zayathris’ puzzlement, the summoned sabre flew into her other hand with considerable delay - she could viscerally feel the crystal’s reluctance to serve her. It was not the first time she’d sensed this kind of fearful reaction in a Jedi’s lightsabre, but even that of Knight Vaiken had put up less of a struggle. When she plunged the blade into her opponent’s belly, it wailed, as if offended to be made an instrument of death. She dragged the weapon up slowly and with relish, essentially cutting him in half from the chest up, while ignoring the crescendo of the agonised keening from both the crystal and the her victim. When she released her grip, he dropped to the ground, lifeless eyes glazing over.

The former Wrath knelt down to examine the body. “I was not mistaken. An Anzat. They can sense someone’s strength in the force - it makes them hungry. No wonder he ignored the little padawan in favour for you. He must’ve fed on the Jedi Shadow, that’s why he was so formidable.” Nox supplied his observations.

Literally? As in...The mucus was actual brain matter?

“Yep. They are accomplished assassins by necessity, always hungry for their next victim’s Force essence -they supposedly call it soup. Though the manner in which they consume it is a little extreme. Ever wondered where the original Sith species got their inspiration for your lovely, time-honoured traditions like bloodsoup from?”
Seriously?

“It is a fringe opinion, but well backed up with literary references. Considering it’s mostly folktales, I won’t vouch for it, but it does make a lot of sense… Does that connection offend you?”

No, I always found these customs unnecessarily crass. Besides, I was raised by my mother away from a traditional Pureblood household and my father would’ve frowned immensely upon such things. I sometimes partook in it when she had a Pureblood student or with my relatives. But you should have told me if you were interested in participating in the ritual. Aunt Shayârized would have loved to host a Councillor for the occasion. There was repulsed sensation. Ah, I forgot, Mirialans are vegetarians.

“Please do forego the green skin colour jokes.”

Well, you must admit that considering your bloodthirstiness, it’s quite hilarious…

“I eat ghosts, I have no need whatsoever for eating my enemy’s physical body - or that of any being which is not a plant.”

Touché.

A high-pitched whirring sound drew closer. The fighters were circling back.

“Where is your ship? We need to get off this volatile rock.” The padawan stared at her with a shell-shocked expression, unable to reply. Zayathris had dispersed the Dark Side effects immediately after the battle and everything the girl might have sensed could be blamed on the Anzat. Still, she attempted to send soothing vibes towards the girl through the Force, which seemed to put her into a numb state instead.

Good thing I don’t have children.

“Oh, I don’t know, you would make a better parent than most Sith. If the responsibility had become too much, you always could’ve sloughed the brats off to Pierce. He did vow to train your army after all. I am sure your offspring would could as such.” The resulting mental image was as hilarious as it was bittersweet.

What did I say about rummaging around in my brain?

“To remind you - a couple of thousand years with nothing to do. For better or worse, there is not a single memory I have not seen.”

Kriff you. Oh, by the way, does that work both ways?

“Probably, though you do not want to see my memories, trust me.”

Let me be the judge of that. Even if it’s only for blackmail purposes later on.

“Don’t bother. There’s nothing in there that could hurt me anymore. And starvation, being beaten or punished by watching your friends getting tortured and killed, being raped – well, it hardly makes for good entertainment.”

That’s…

“Just what do you think happens to slaves on a daily basis?”
She let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. *I hope you made the perpetrators suffer.*

“Oh, suffer they did.” Nox replied airily with a hint of sadistic glee.

An explosion rang nearby, finally jolting the girl out of her trance.

“You actually… how?” She whispered, not quite registering the urgency of the situation.

“Where is your ship?” Zayathris repeated impatiently.

“In the hangar…” Came the slow reply.

Rolling her eyes, she grabbed the girl’s arm and pulled her towards the entrance. “No! Wait! What about Master Rhitt-Ven?!” The padawan writhed in the grip and failing to free herself, dropped to the ground like a dead weight to slow Zayathris down. “Please, help me with him.”

“He is as good as dead and carrying him will only serve to slow us down.”

“His fate will be the same as ours.” The girl stated with a finality that stood in stark contrast to her age. Zayathris stared into the bright blue eyes, and with a frustrated growl, let go of the padawan to walk back to the crates. She hoisted the limp form of the injured Jedi up and slung him over her shoulder. Thankfully, the Duros was quite short for his species, but running was still cumbersome - with the added weight, the ground gave in much more quickly beneath her feet. The lithe padawan did not have that problem. “Lead the way. I am going to haunt you personally if we are swallowed up by a chasm because you needed to be a dutiful little Jedi.”

The Jedi’s ship was still intact. Thanks to some impressive piloting on part of the young Jedi, they escaped the fighters and made it into hyperspace.

Zayathris ducted back into the cockpit after administering basic medical care and injecting the Duros with the highest dose of sedative the chart in the med-kit deemed safe for his species. Better not complicate things by having him wake up, but if he was like most masters in that he kept knowledge from his student – even about the mission – he might still be useful in the long run. “I did what I could for your master. Used up what little supplies you have on board. He is no longer dying, but in a very serious condition nevertheless. The burns on his back are horrendously inflamed, probably an infection from the surface particles. They also cover too much of his body’s surface area to be survivable without treatment. Not sure if his face can be fixed without a transplant, either, looks molten off as if he’s been doused with acid. That can’t have been the Anzat. What happened?”

“He…shielded me from an explosion. One of those fissures blew up when it was hit by a starfighter’s shot.” The padawan closed her eyes, face scrunched up in concentration. “He is in excruciating pain.”

“How can you tell?”

“Feel it through our training bond.” It was a great boon that a Sith master and apprentice pair typically did not develop such a connection, as it would complicate things immensely.
“Don’t blame yourself. He made that choice. It’s not your fault that he was too weak to shield you both properly.”

“My Master is anything but weak!”

“Then why is he lying there?”

The girl took one last look towards the prone form, then turned towards the viewscreen, her face hardening with resolve. “I set course for Shabirr. We don’t have enough fuel and stabilizing fluid for longer jumps. There is a small AgriCorps facility, they might be able to help him.” She exhaled shakily. “Thank you for saving us. We would not have made it without you. I’m Katooni, by the way.”

“You can call me Tris. What was Iquuno doing on that planet?”

“Honestly, I am not sure. He was a Shadow, a kind of investigator. He tried to get a message out, routed it to every relay station used by the Jedi – it must’ve been urgent.”

Zayathris slid into the co-pilots chair and leaning back with a stretch, placed her booted feet on an inactive part of the steering console, which earned her a stern look from the padawan. “Any idea what the intended transmission was?”

“We found a recording of it, but…my master told me not to watch it.”

“My master this, my master that – you’re beginning to sound like a slave. Has it occurred to you that with Iquuno dead and your master incapacitated, you’re the only one able to complete the original mission? If you don’t, their deaths – yes, I am still doubtful about that man’s chances,” she inclined her head towards the back, “will have been in vain.”

“I don’t even know what the mission is! I’m just a padawan. What’s your role in all of this? You arrived at the same time as the starfighters, were they after you, then?”

“If you’re trying to put the blame on me, I suggest you to re-evaluate your teachings.” The Wrath crossed her arms. “Let me get this straight. You master drags you halfway across the galaxy to come to the aid of an elusive investigator – you have no idea what he has found out – without telling you anything of use, leaving you to fend for yourself in the event that something happens to him? Is that a normal thing for Jedi, putting young children into harm’s way, on a planet like the one we narrowly escaped from, with a battle raging overhead?”

“I need to learn what it means to be Jedi after all, so how else would we do it? I turned fourteen a couple of months ago. If I hadn’t been selected by my master before they age of thirteen, I would’ve washed out of the training altogether.”

“That seems a wasteful practice, especially considering you’re at war. What happens then, you return home?”

“Younglings have no family to go back home to, we were brought to the Temple as babies.”

“…during infancy?” Zayathris inquired, aghast. Her own upbringing had not been that different from non-Force sensitive children, except for a larger emphasis on physical training and enduring hardships. Proper training in Force techniques usually begun with adolescence. Affluent families would send their children to specialized private institutes or independent tutors – like Zayathris’ mother had been – whereas children of ordinary citizen received their preparatory training at various academies attached to a more prestigious advanced one like on Zost. Slaves and unremarkable individuals discovered as adults generally got dumped on the academies’ doorsteps
with little to no preparation. At no point were children or youths sent into war. With their inferior numbers, that would have amounted to suicide for the Empire. The youngest age at which one could see real action was 19 if one entered Korriban early or was fast-tracked. Even during the incursion on Korriban, the youngest students had been sent to seek shelter instead of being wasted as minor obstacles made of flesh. The padawans she had encountered had been close to her own age, and if Theron's and the Hero of Tython's stories were representative, there had been had no propensity towards snatching little babies from the bosoms of their mothers.

“So you don’t even remember your family?”

“No. We can avoid the perils of attachment this way.” Denying such an elementary experience was incredibly cruel and unnatural, even by Jedi standards.

“Slaves, just like the clones, with self-imposed chains they wear proudly.”

_Expendable, too. No wonder they’re mindless drones spouting slogans of peace and serenity. It’s easy to be selfless when you have any sense of self drilled out of you from birth._

“Precisely. _Coupled with the empty promise of an afterlife in the Force, they have little to live for. Perfect, willing sacrifices for the Greater Good._” Nox bit out.

_They don’t have to be strong individually, they’re practically cannon-fodder by the very definition of their Order - flesh shields for politicians and the wretched, ungrateful masses alike._

“Um, Tris, can I get my sabre back?”

There was little harm in humouring her. If Katooni felt safer with it… well, most Jedi had a strangely sentimental attachment to their weapon.

She tossed it towards the girl in the pilot seat. “You mentioned that you built it yourself?”

“Of course!” Katooni replied excitedly. “I got the crystal from Ilum. It was not easy.” Pride seeped into her words.

“So you ran into trouble?” Zayathris prodded with a jovial grin.

Tension easing from her face, the padawan told the story with almost infectious enthusiasm.

Chapter End Notes

There are quite a few carnivorous species in SW, but few to no vegetarian ones. With their emphasis on spirituality, it is only fitting that Mirialans are the equivalent of Jains in my headcanon.

Bloodsoup is an actual Sith tradition that survived until Bane’s time. When you bear in mind that things like black pudding exist in our universe, it does not sound so gruesome anymore, does it? ;)


If she managed to impress even Hondo Ohnaka, Katooni is the right padawan for what's about to happen.
Second update within two days, so make sure to read chapter 17 first.

“So the question remains, has Tyranus betrayed us?”

I am loath to give him the benefit of doubt; nevertheless, it would seem like a terribly roundabout way of attempting to kill me. If he is afraid of facing me in open combat, he could have sabotaged the ship he gave me, provided me with the coordinates to a singularity... Just about any other course of action would have had higher chances to succeed. And if I was supposed to be a distraction while he procured the holocron by other means – perhaps that’s where the Anzati assassin comes into play – why lie to me about it? Provided even a single thing he told me was true, he’d be a fool not to ally himself with me, even if he would intended to discard me afterwards.

“Perhaps he had to put on a show for his master.” Nox sighed. “Well, he would not be the first Sith with trust issues.”

Obviously, but since everyone involved is acutely aware of this fact, he could have adjusted the plan accordingly.

“Thus he gave you only part of the picture.”

Possibly. He’s going to answer for his actions, one way or another. Let’s see what we can find out with the help of the girl.

She could not help her curiosity. “Are these real?” Zayathris gestured towards the tendrils on the girl’s head, who had been gently twisting them one by one with her fingers as she worked.

“Uh, you mean if the tendrils are part of my body?” The padawan’s brows furrowed in confusion. “They are. Have you never met a Tholothian before?”

“There aren’t so many a-” She corrected herself, cursing inwardly, “near-humans where I come from.” At least there hadn’t been many in a visible role, besides, the Empire’s reach had not been so all-encompassing that they had amassed slaves more exotic than Zabraks, Mirialans or Evocii. And she certainly had never paused to enquire about the species of the various Republic opponents she’d killed. In the grand scheme of things - her own survival and advancement -, there was little difference between slaying a Nexu or a Cathar Commando, except for battle tactics, obviously.

“I think I understand. I’ve been on a diplomatic mission to an Outer Rim planet with rare contact to outsiders; these people grew up very sheltered.” Katooni bit her lower lip. “They tend to react with instant prejudice.”

“Yeah, that was common in my society, too.”

“Was?”
“They lost a war and were wiped out.”

“Oh. I am so sorry.” Katooni’s heart-felt empathy was tangible, a nauseating kind of pity.

“Don’t be. In hindsight, I am sure they brought it on themselves.”

“That’s cold.” The padawan cocked her head and peered at her inquisitively. “You are telling yourself this as a protective barrier against the pain of loss, aren’t you?”

“Trying to psychoanalyse me? Are you always this nosy?”

“I apologise, I did not mean to –”

Zayathris waved her hand sharply to cut Katooni off. “Don’t bother apologising. I could not possibly blame you as an individual for the views you hold. The way I see it, you’ve been taught all your life to look to your superiors – your masters – for how to think. As evidenced by your instant backpedalling as soon as you hit opposition and your self-deprecating manner. Your capacity for empathy, for emotion, is a strength, but you’re allowing others to shape you, to restrict what you’re naturally capable of.”

“But that’s what the path of a Jedi entails! We live to serve.” The Tholothian countered.

“And did you choose this path? Are you allowed to question, to set your own priorities, at least within the confines of the rules of the Order?”

Katooni remained silent, mulling the arguments over.

“Didn’t think so. Tell me, though, what is the most basic explanation of the Force?”

“Oh, it’s kind of an energy field surrounding and residing within all beings, that binds the galaxy together.”

“So if the Jedi did not exist, what difference would that make to the Force?”

“I guess a master could give you a more satisfying answer. It’s… I don’t know. None, probably.” 
Reassuring to see that the brainwashing does not work perfectly for everyone.

“So regardless of what you do, benevolent and honourable as it may be, the Jedi are merely a religion; a codified way of accessing the Force for people who have an affinity for it. But once you can wield the Force, how do you decide what do to with it? If the Force is in everyone, just less tangible, everyone’s actions matter. You don’t have to be a Jedi to impact the galaxy, do you? Now the Jedi, being more powerful, need to be more responsible, but in the end, it comes down to your own decisions, your own morality that is entirely separate from your connection to the Force.

If you kill, conceptually it’s no different from when a soldier kills even though you turn it into a spiritual issue, your opponent is dead as a result. And if you stay your hand because you’re supposed to avoid killing, even in the case of criminals, thus allowing them to escape, are you not responsible when they go on to murder innocents? You could have prevented that scenario if you had followed through, after all.

If your moral values were absolute, you would go out and preach to everyone that they should act a certain way, to refrain from cultivating anger for example. If it isn’t, why do you regard yourselves as beings exempt from, even above the natural laws of the galaxy, and thus, the Force?”

“I had never considered that angle.” The padawan’s curiosity was genuine, though it was obvious
that she fought hard not to appear shaken by the direction the discussion was taking. “May I ask why you even preoccupy yourself with … such topics? I think most people don’t waste a single thought on why we do what we do. They are generally happy to receive our aid without wondering what our philosophy is. Let alone having opinions about the Force.”

“I’ve done … academic research with regards to the Force, though I would not claim to understand it the way a Jedi does. Still, well versed in such matters as your masters may be, non-Jedi are allowed to analyse your beliefs. Your doctrine grows in the absence of outside input, so it tends to reinforce itself. In a way, the Jedi are just as sheltered as the people you encountered on that diplomatic mission. The difference lies in what their exact confines are, what they are prejudiced against.”

“You mean the Dark side? What you said earlier about absolute morality – you think there is no real difference between the Light and the Dark side?” A fearful jolt went through the padawan, who sat up straight as a rod, her posture as tightly controlled as her emotions, causing Zayathris to wonder if she had pushed too far.

“Now, I did not say that. However, one tends to wonder where your harmony and peace are in this time of all-out war. Or whether it is healthy to deny all emotions. It makes for a very restricted existence. Don’t get me wrong – I myself claim to be free of attachments, so in that regard I would be not in any danger of falling to the Dark side.” Oh, the irony. “But to spend my life without knowing passion, or without experiencing the guidance and love of my parents – it’s unfathomable. I freely admit that we both have our respective limitations, yet I acknowledge them while striving to be free of those shackles, whereas you are forced to believe they are what defines you. You would be utterly lost without your chains, because you took what’s oppressing you and turned it into the basis of your identity.”

Eyes wide, Katooni inhaled slowly. “That’s…That sounds so harsh.” She replied in a meek voice.

“Oh, the irony.” Zayathris retorted with a shrug. “It’s supposed to. I am not trying to manipulate you – I have nothing to gain from disorienting a child –, merely show you that there is more to the galaxy than the confines of your teachings. Ultimately, you are responsible for the path you choose. Of course, you may choose to serve; nevertheless, having learned that lesson the hard way, I’d advise you to always question who and what ideals you are truly serving in the long run. Should you ever find the result of that introspection lacking, don’t forget that in the eyes of the Force – if not the Jedi – you are free to forge your own path.”

A beep from the datapad interrupted their discussion.

The girl, who had been listening to that last admonition with her mouth hanging open, spun around, took a glance on the screen and exclaimed in triumph.

“Well, at least the seed has been sown. “What are you working on?”

“I decrypted the transmission. The holomessage part of it, anyway. There’s an attachment with a stronger encryption that will take a while longer.”

“Well, at least the seed has been sown. “What are you working on?”

“I decrypted the transmission. The holomessage part of it, anyway. There’s an attachment with a stronger encryption that will take a while longer.”

“Let’s hear it, then.”

Katooni nodded and pressed a few buttons. A holorecording popped up between them.

*This is a high-priority message. To all Seekers on the attached list, your operations have been
compromised. Converge on the known coordinates to re-synchronise in accordance to protocol Aurek-7. Tjar Iquuno out.*

“Huh. Cryptic.” Not much to go by. “Aurek-7? Does that mean anything to you?”

“No, I think that’s something only a Sentinel would know, perhaps a master, too.”

“And the rest of it?”

“Hard to explain without describing the internals of the Order as well…” Zayathris raised an eyebrow poignantly. “Fine, just … just promise to keep it to yourself, ok? Like the Shadows, the Seekers belong to a special group of Jedi, Sentinels, serving under the auspices of the Council of First Knowledge. So they act independently of the High Council and thus, of the war effort as a whole. That’s why they have their own protocols and mission perimeters.”

“I read about the Ruusan Reformation, does that not contradict the principle of accountability to the Senate?” Zayathris prodded.

“Uh, politics is not my strong suit…well, I guess it does give us a bit more leeway? Besides what the Sentinels do is Jedi stuff that does not concern the Republic directly. In any case, the Seekers are responsible for finding Force-sensitive children and bringing them to the temple.”

“So if their operations were compromised … well, how can you botch snatching infants from their families?” The former Wrath massaged her scalp to alleviate the stress. “How do they identify the suitable candidates in the first place?”

“Through meditation? All I know is that there is a list of them. A bounty hunter stole the holocron used to access the list from the Temple Archives a while ago, but it was returned safely soon after, so unless it’s been stolen again…” Katooni looked away uncomfortably, giving a one-shouldered shrug. “I guess we should just try to retransmit the message from Shabirr. There is little else we can do about it anyway.”

Zayathris nodded absent-mindedly. Something about the situation rubbed her the wrong way. It was not exactly wise – not that she expected sound strategic thinking from the Jedi in general – to draw the Seekers together in one place during a war of these proportions, was it? And if Sidious had attempted to obtain a list of Force-sensitive children in the past… Just like that, she had become entangled in yet another Republic mess. But why would Tyranus sent her there under the pretence of getting a holocron? Unless this was actually a trap for the Darth, perhaps a two-pronged one that would hurt the Jedi as well? Had he already become expendable? If so, Sidious’ plot must have reached a rather advanced stage. They were running out of time, and with Tyranus out of the picture either way, having become useless or turned against her… These far-fetched assumptions were all she had to base her planning on, yet there seemed to be a kind of resonance in the Force when she contemplated them. She did not like the consequences at all. For Nox’ sake, she’d give the holocron angle of the whole thing another attempt, but if that failed, there was only one place left where she could find answers. Vitiate’s method – Screw it, let’s simply kill all of these pesky, worthless creatures – was becoming more appealing by the day, but she owed it to herself not to sink that low. And the Jedi laughably claimed the Dark side was the easier path.

Shabirr looked a lot like the holos Zayathris had seen of Dantooine and all those other agrarian planets supplying food to the Core Worlds. Such planets were a luxury not available to the Empire.
Surely, food crops could be cultivated on many worlds beyond the Stygian caldera, but due to the harsh climatic conditions, the selection and yield were generally very limited. Agriculture on Ziost had consisted mainly of livestock, with the exception of root vegetables, shrubs with a meagre yield of berries and resilient grains. There had been not a single Ziosti dish not containing meat or dairy in some form. Dromund Kaas had an ample supply of edible freshwater creatures as well as a variety of fruit, but the latter had to be rationed mainly for local consumption. Her birth planet of Bosthirda had been one of the most fertile worlds - thanks to the more temperate and varied climate ranging from mountainous to oceanic - providing, among grains and fruit, 95% of the herbs and flowers used for tea in Imperial space. Korriban…well, some spices and edible lichen had been exported from there.

A stout Zabrak with a weathered face welcomed them, bowing curtly. “Greetings. I am Krava Sajur. What brings you here?”

Katooni stepped forward and pointed towards “I’m Padawan Katooni Fiall. Master Rhitt-Ven, was wounded, he needs immediate medical attention.”

The Zabrak glanced between the girl and her tall companion, clearly puzzled that they were not a master-padawan pair. “Of course. We will do our best, but bear in mind that our facility has very limited medical capabilities. We are equipped to heal work accidents and such, not major injuries sustained during off-world missions.”

With that, she walked up the ship’s ramp towards the cargo bay where the patient lay. After examining the Rodian with growing horror, Sajur wordlessly gestured for two others to bring a stretcher. She then led Zayathris and Katooni towards a small round tent near the landing area. “Please, take a rest. Padawan Fiall, I assume you’re not trained in the healing arts?”

Humiliation flickered across the girl’s features. “No, I just learned the basics literally everyone here has.”

“There is no need to feel ashamed. We all have different strengths and weaknesses. Our unity is what makes us whole.” Reaching for a colourful earthenware jug, she poured them two cups of a thick purple liquid, which gave off a pungent aroma. “This will help you restore your strength.”

Katooni eagerly took a sip and instantly launched into a coughing fit. “Thank you, Madame Krava.” She choked out politely, tears welling up in her eyes.

After tasting the steaming beverage cautiously, Zayathris finished her cup in one draught and held it out for refilling without so much as acknowledging the older woman.

Despite the haughty attitude shown to her, the AgriCorps member complied serenely. “Imbir root and Qippali pepper. A local favourite remedy for almost all minor ailments and an effective tonic.” She turned towards the padawan again. “Rest assured, Padawan Fiall, that we will do everything in our power to heal your master. Unfortunately, he is not stable enough for further transport to another facility, so until we can call in outside help again, we must make do with what we have.”

“What would prevent you from establishing contact with other Jedi?”

“The whole sector is cut off by a Separatist blockade of all hyperspace lanes leading though it, of which there are woefully few out here. In addition, they appear to have destroyed our long-distance relay stations.”

“What?” Katooni jumped up from her cushion. “But we have a message that needs to reach the Council as soon as possible!”
“Padawan Fiall is correct. The consequences could be dire if they are not informed. Is there no alternative means of communication? Failing that, do you think military help will arrive anytime soon?” Zayathris added when the Zabrak hesitated.

“I am afraid we are not privy to the Council’s decisions and Republic strategy, Knight…”

“This is Master Tris.” Katooni supplied in a hurry before she could reply herself. “She was sent for backup.”

“I see. Well, Master Tris, the blockade was established two days ago, obviously we’ve been out of contact since.”

“What’s the goal of this blockade?” Besieging a whole sector seemed overkill even for a holocron heist, which once more pointed to the proceedings being part of a larger scheme.

“Forgive me for my ignorance, but our main occupation is agriculture. As far as I know, the Jospro System itself has no strategic value.”

A ripple went through Katooni’s head tendrils. “But it lies squarely between two major theatres of war! Passing through here would be the most efficient way to shuffle troops or send supplies.”

“Well observed, Padawan.” Zayathris praised her exuberantly, feeling a little foolish for joining the charade. “Madame Sajur, would you kindly take point in caring for Rhitt-Ven? It would be great loss for both the Order and young Katooni here if he failed to regain his health.”

“As you wish.” The Zabrak bowed her head and ducked out of the tent.

“How can you stand that level of spiciness without even breaking a sweat?” The padawan asked when they were alone. Zayathris shrugged. “I barely noticed it. Not all species have receptors for spicy alkaloids.”

“Lucky you.”

“Can’t you release the pain into the Force or something?”

“When I am eating or drinking? I don’t think that how the Force is supposed to work.”

The former Wrath gave her a grin. “Well, you tell me. Why the subterfuge, by the way?”

“I didn’t want her to question our intentions. I have no idea how to explain your role in this without raising alarm. So, um, what exactly is it that you do anyway?”

The woman sighed gravely. “You have placed a great deal of trust in me, so I shall return the favour. Officially, I am a security advisor to Senator Iskra of Achorra. In reality, the job’s more along the lines of an independent investigator.”

“What do you investigate?”

“Inconsistencies. Weak spots. Who actually pulls the strings in this war.”

“Whoa, like a secret agent?” Theron would be so proud. “But how would that lead you to Master Iquuno?”
“At some point, we followed the same evidence, apparently before he uncovered the issue with the Seekers.” Zayathris answered evasively. “Now, have you decrypted the attachment?”

“What? Oh. Sorry. I completely forgot about it.” Katooni whipped out her datapad. “Great, it has finished already.” She scrolled through the data and tilted the screen towards the woman afterwards. “See, it’s a list of names alright. Bad news is, I don’t know anyone on that list, and there is no additional information.”

The Sith let out a yawn and launched into a series of stretching movements to increase circulation. It had been a while since she had last slept. “What if you just meditated on it? Perhaps that’ll give you some insight as to what’s going on.”

Katooni looked unconvinced. “I guess I could try that, but…”

“If the Force can show you how to assemble a lightsabre, as you have told me, it can bloody well tell you something useful about that list. I’m going to have a nap in the meantime – I tend to get irritable due to lack of sleep.” At least without using appropriate Force techniques and/or stims, sleep deprivation was one of her least favourite hardships. Probably for her crew, too, who’d found regularly themselves on the receiving end of her mood swings if they’d woken her at inopportune times or if a mission had dragged out for too long.

She awoke to the ashen face of the Tholothian girl. “I think I found something, but it’s vague. And terrible.”

Zayathris made no effort to get up. “Well?”

The padawan waved the datapad in front of her face. “This name stands out. Rao Mamun. Coincidentally, his last known location according to the database is here in the Jospro sector… When I meditated, I saw him briefly, losing a battle, sensed his pain. And then there was only snow and such cold…” She shivered involuntarily.

“Is there an ice planet or one with cold poles in the sector?”

“I already checked: There are two possible places.”

“Your call.”

“You mean we should go there? But I can’t leave Master Rhitt-Ven here!”

“Do you think he would appreciate your ignoring this opportunity? What good will you remaining by his bedside do?”

“But how to determine where we should go?”

Zayathris rolled her eyes. “The same way you found out about Mamun. Good thing you’re so young, you still have much to learn.”

Chapter End Notes
Why Bosthirda? No particular reason, apart from it being about the only planet on Wookieepedia in Sith space not listed as “arid”.

Nexu are cat-like, in case that reference was not clear enough.

I am quite sure there were different titles for Service Corps members in the Jedi Apprentice series, but I have been unable to find any references. Jocasta Nu being under the authority of one the secondary councils as well, I went with Madame + first name for the time being.
They had left Rhitt-Ven in the care of the AgriCorps medics. Whether he recovered or not was not a concern for the former Wrath, but he would do as a backup plan if their current lead failed to yield results. Maybe he could shed more light on the situation than his padawan. Sajur had been most concerned about their sudden departure; however, with the relay stations gone, there was no risk of her calling in reinforcements that could wreak havoc on her investigation.

Shivering due to the lack of proper clothing – on the ship, they had found two warm robes roughly in Katooni’s size and a stiff, blanket-like contraption that served as a coat for her much taller companion - , they trudged through the waist-deep snow on the moon the padawan had felt most confident about among the potential candidates for the Seeker’s hiding place.

“I take it your vision was not particularly detailed with regards to Mamun’s *precise* whereabouts?” Zayathris could sense the presences of more or less sentient lifeforms nearby, but none of them had anything close to the aura of a Jedi.

“Sorry! It just doesn’t work that way for me. I’ve just started my apprenticeship, skills like that are really advanced stuff.” The padawan replied, yelling over the howling of the freezing wind.

“You said something about him being in pain. How about you concentrate on that part? Sometimes, clearer insight can be found in the less comfortable aspects of life.”

Moments later, the girl stopped in her tracks of all sudden, almost causing Zayathris to bump into her.

“There is something, but it’s so dim, I can’t…” The former Wrath placed her gloved hands on the Tholothian’s shoulders, steadying her.

“Focus on it. Invite it in - let it fill you, allowing it to grow, to become more tangible.”

Katooni shuddered violently now. “It- it hurts…” She whispered, her voice cracking up. “So much, I can’t…”

“Concentrate.” The harshness of the command did not register with her. “Is the vision more discernible now?”

“A trail … of blood. It glows … in the Force.”

“Good. Follow it to the source.” Zayathris coaxed, delving deeper into the meditation herself.

Eyes squeezed shut, the girl reached forward, grasping at empty air. “It’s slipping away.” She gasped.

“Grip it tightly.” The woman’s fingers dug into Katooni’s flesh, intensifying the pain she felt. “Yank it back!”

With a high-pitched scream, the padawan dropped to her knees, disappearing completely in the snow. Zayathris pulled her back to a standing position and spun her around to face her. Tears streamed down the girl’s cheeks, freezing as they dripped from her jaw. “I know where he is.” She
gestured weakly towards a hill not far from their position. “This way.”

The young Jedi leaning on Zayathris for support, they walked silently for several minutes before Katooni spoke up, still shaken from the ordeal. “Whatever that was, just be glad you can’t sense such things. It’s the worst feeling I have ever experienced.”

Zayathris chuckled quietly. Oh, you have no idea, little one. “Relax. You did what was necessary. It is over now. Out of curiosity, what was it like?”

“Horrible. Like something was lurking in the shadows around me waiting for an opportunity to strike, to rip flesh from bones with venomous fangs. Whispers on the edge of hearing, cursing me and making alluring promises at the same time. And I felt so exposed, like there was nowhere to run or hide, because it would always find me, attracted to the Light within me.” She shook her head, as if to clear the memory.

“But the strangest thing came at the very end, when I reached for the fading trail - I could feel it pulsating in my hands, as if it was a beating heart. It tried to wriggle out of my grip, so I held it with all my strength and in that instant, everything flipped upside down and I felt so… so powerful, like I could shape the world if I just pulled hard enough, made this dreadful thing obey me somehow…” A faint shadow briefly slithered over the girl’s features. “This sounds crazy, doesn’t it?”

“Not at all. I understand why it frightened you so much. Your teachings must contain some advice on how to deal with such experiences?” Ah, this was but a taste, a glance into what could be, from the safe confines of the shield I put up around you. It was easy to see why someone would be enticed by the prospect of such power – and also why it would feel like a Fall from the limited perspective of a Jedi.

“They do, but I am not sure I am doing it correctly. No matter how much I try to release it into the Force, it just bounces right back.”

“It does seem plausible that without specialised techniques, her connection to the Light will object to such a dark experience being poured into it.”

If that’s the case, they Jedi would be rather ill-equipped to withstand the lure of the Dark side.

“Hm. Inexperienced as she is, she might mistake her own suppressed guilt for the feeling of rejection.”

It’s fascinating, how easily the Dark came to her.

“With you amplifying her guileless attempts tremendously. Poor girl.”

As if you give a damn. But the fact remains, she does have a very intuitive and precise access to her emotions.

“Well, I have seen many terrifying things in my life - the only counsel I can give you is not to suppress the memory entirely. It will only fester in secret and turn into something uncontainable. Stake out a limited space within you, this way you control it instead of the other way round.”

“I will … consider it.” Katooni sighed dejectedly.
In a rather hilarious twist of fate, the presences she had sensed earlier turned out to be a small tribe of Talz. Territorial Talz rather unhappy to see trespassers on their land. With the girl begging her not to simply cut them down and the snowstorm making this a somewhat awkward idea anyway – besides, there was no telling what would happen to Mamun in that case – Zayathris decided to put her meagre knowledge of Talzzi to good use. Knowing the aggressive species, the encounter would result in a battle regardless, but at least one that constituted a primitive approach to diplomacy.

“Ka cheekee muhzmarcha. Cheepla p’zil Zetaii?”

Katooni stared at her with wide eyes, clearly impressed by the throaty buzzing that sounded nothing like talking. “You speak their language? What did you tell them?”

“That we intend peace and a really stupid way of asking whether “a Jedi is at home”.” The Sith shook her head at the ridiculous phrasing. “At one point, I had a Talz, uh, bodyguard. He was a bit deranged, though.”

“That’s a blatant understatement.”

Yeah, tough competition for your Dashade with regards to who had the creepiest servant. I would have given Broonmark to you as a gift if he had not being so infuriatingly loyal to my “Sith clan”. You could have gone on murderous rampages together by the light of the setting sun. That would have been such a lovely sight.

With a lackadaisical shrug, she went on to clarify, “I know about thirty Talzzi expressions, with most of them expletives and gory threats, the greatest marvel is that I can form a useful, if grammatically dubious, sentence in the first place.” The second biggest wonder was that the sounds she was able produce were intelligible to the furry creatures even though being a far cry from their actual speech due to the limitations of her vocal cords.

The Talz who appeared to be the group’s leader - and was almost three times as tall as Katooni -, buzzed a reply.

“What was his response?”

“No idea, but it sounded unconvinced, to say the least.” Zayathris took the knife she carried with her and carefully placed it on the ground between them and the natives like a barrier.

“What does that mean?” Katooni pried, watching the exchange with amazement.

Nosy little padawan. “An invitation.”

The Talz reached for his staff and crossed it over the weapon already lying in the snow.

“Well, he accepted. You may want to take a couple of steps back.”

Katooni might have expected a lot of things to happen over the course of the day, but not for the tall woman to swiftly shed her coat in order to engage the leader of the natives in unarmed combat. It was a messy brawl that she surmised could be a ritual way of establishing superiority. Nevertheless, one had to be quite insane to even consider taking on a massive creature like the white-furred natives. Her companion took quite a beating but it did not seem to affect her much, shrugging off what should have been bone-crushing attacks. After a vicious but surprisingly brief fight, she emerged victorious, straddling the Talz’ back in a chokehold, though how she could exert enough pressure on the creature’s airways to actually bring him to heel like this eluded the
“Talz diplomacy.” Zayathris explained as she got up, face flushed a deeper shade of red from the exertion and cold.

“Uhuh.” Katooni murmured, snapping out of her dazed state. “We call this aggressive negotiations. Unofficially, of course. You know, negotiations involving a lightsaber…” She trailed off awkwardly and helped Zayathris wrap the cumbersome coat around her body again.

“Hear-hear, the Jedi have a sense of humour.”

The Talz leader, who had risen to his feet as well, made a vaguely placating gesture and indicated for them to follow.

Rao Mamun was actually there, segregated to a small chamber in the cave dwelling of the tribe. That was the good, although by that point not terribly surprising, news. To their chagrin, his physical state was hardly better that of Katooni’s master, though he was conscious at least. Just not exactly coherent, which made extracting information from him a chore. He seemed relieved to see the face of a fellow Jedi, but his croaked warnings made little sense. The elderly human appeared feverish; a deep festering shoulder wound oozed putrid liquid. It was unlikely that he would survive – and in the harsh weather, attempting to move him was out of the question. A few hours later and there would have been no answers to be found here.

Zayathris’ patience was diminishing at a rapid pace.

“Would you please try to get some boiling water and a clean piece of cloth from the Talz?” Eager to help, the girl complied, not questioning the order. Once she’d left the small side cavern, Zayathris turned to the Jedi. “It’s time you talked, old man.”

A gloved hand swiftly covered his mouth, effectively silencing his screams.

“Belderone.” Zayathris stated flatly when the padawan ducked into the cave again, carrying the requested supplies. “That’s where the seekers are converging.”

“Master Mamun, are you better?” Katooni hurried to his side, but her face fell when she noticed his condition. His eyes were almost comically wide in horror, but he was unable to get even a single word out.

“He had some kind of seizure. I am so sorry, Katooni, but I am afraid his chances of survival are low.” The padawan nodded sadly and took the man’s hands in hers to calm him, gently massaging his palms with her thumbs. His eyes flickered towards her in gratitude but then he continued to stare at Zayathris with the abject desperation of a dying man realising that his life’s work might have been in vain.

“Is there nothing we can do?”

“The infection is too advanced - a medpack won’t suffice and the Talz are too primitive to be of any help.” Zayathris lowered her voice. “He was lucid for a moment while you were gone. I know what is going on. Take your time, make his final moments more comfortable or whatever you need
to do. I’ll be waiting outside.” Katooni poured herself into the task. She did not see the wicked grin
the woman gave the Seeker before turning around.

His breathing became laboured soon and stopped minutes later. Zayathris slowly unclenched her
fingers. It was a mercy, really.

Katooni came to sit beside her companion in the main chamber not long after, shoulders slumping.
“I wish I could have done more.” She sighed. “Tradition dictates that we burn his body.”

Zayathris refrained from rolling her eyes. Well, we could always blow him up or something. “Let
the Talz deal with the corpse. He is gone - one with the Force, isn’t it? - rituals like that won’t do
anything for him. We need to get going.”

“But you said we had time-“

“A little twist of the truth for your sake. Now he is dead, I am sure you’d rather concern yourself
with the living. I’ll give you the details once we get to the ship.”

Katooni breezed through the pre-flight checks and quickly brought them into orbit.

“Belderone is not that far from here, but with the blockade still active…” She started twisting her
tendrils again, apparently an unconscious habit that surfaced whenever she was thinking deeply.
“We could go via the Auril sector. Make our way towards Ossus - there are a few minor trade
hyperlanes nearby. That’s the easy part. The jump from there to Belderone is where it gets
dangerous. Many who ventured to Ossus to plunder the historical remains of the Jedi library have
lost their lives there throughout the centuries.”

“No matter. Set course for Ossus.”

She punched in the coordinates and then looked at the older woman expectantly.

“Right. Advance warning: You’re not going to like it.” Zayathris began her explanation. “Mamun
did receive a transmission from Iquuno, just not the one we saw. The real one that the Shadow sent
while he was still alive. I suppose he was already being hunted by the Anzat and requested help.
Mamun came to his aid, was injured and fled to this planet – all before you arrived. He seemed to
have good relations with the Talz, perhaps he underestimated the severity of his injuries and hoped
they would be able to help him.”

“Oh, he might have been this system’s Watchman then! Most simultaneously fulfil the role of
Seeker as well.”

“Possibly. There might be another factor, though. Both Jedi injured on that toxic planet suffered
from a ravaging fever, the inflammation spreading really fast – could be either a natural pathogen
or something the assassin poisoned them with. Mamun might have chosen this planet specifically
in order not to spread the infection.”

“But what about Master Rhitt-Ven?”

“I don’t think we need to worry about your AgriCorps friends contracting something – we did not
sustain major injuries planetside and seem to be fine, after all. But your master might be dead
already, if that’s what you’re asking.”
“Impossible!” Katooni gasped indignantly. “I would know.”

“Let me guess, your training bond?”

“Yes-” She hesitated. “I have not been able to sense him properly for a while, though I don’t remember when that started. After our arrival here, I guess. The connection feels strange now, muted.”

“Oh.” Oh indeed. “Ahem, maybe it’s just the distance?”

“Could be… The more experienced Jedi claim that gaining insight from the Force - especially things like premonition – is much harder than it was in the past. Or I am just too weak…”

*Interesting.* It did explain why Zayathris was able to get away with drawing on the Force in progressively bolder fashion without anyone around her being the wiser. She had assumed that the dark shroud on Coruscant would have such an effect, but to hear it confirmed was another matter. The undercurrent of the Dark side had become the Jedi’s baseline, making it more difficult to discern its usage. Having reached its present level, it would also confound their senses and cloud their judgment.

The Tholothian had calmed down again. “But who sent the other message, then, and why?”

“I can’t say for sure who - probably the assassin, assuming there was no one else in hiding. As for why, isn’t it obvious?”

“A trap? To lure in the seekers?” She bit her lip. “Targeting those who ensure the future of the Order… that’s so horrible. If whoever did this is expecting having to capture dozens of Jedi-”

“- we should be prepared for heavy opposition. Our only advantage is that they do not expect the two of us.”

“Isn’t that more like a disadvantage, though?”

“Capturing the Jedi would be messy, too risky. It would be more efficient to gather them in one spot and then wipe them out with something along the lines of an orbital strike.” Zayathris analysed, her cold tone giving no indication that she might be invested in the Seekers’ fates. “Requires them to be oblivious to the danger they’re in. If that is the plan, we can warn the Seekers since we are aware of the plot. If whoever is behind this wants them alive, we will need to improvise.”

“Sometimes you scare me a bit.”

They dropped out of hyperspace, the orange hues of Ossus filling the viewport.

“There appears to have been a major battle here recently. Wasn’t the planet destroyed ages ago by Exar Kun?” Zayathris inquired, bewildered by the debris orbiting the planet.

“The whole sector was - we actually discussed that recently in history class. Is that common knowledge?”

“No idea, but I am vaguely from this part of the galaxy. Esstran Sector.” She idly wondered what the Imperial worlds looked like nowadays, whether there was anything left of the tombs on Korriban and whether Ziost had been resettled at some point. Or perhaps a full-scale Republic
invasion had reduced everything to rubble and ash to make sure the Empire would never rise again.

“Oh, I have a clan mate from Ord Radama.” She tuned out as Katooni proceeded to regale her with the boy’s life story. Well, at least she had taken the Padawan’s mind off the unpleasant events from earlier.

“Did you know that almost none of the ghosts of the ancient Sith Lords endorsed Vitiate, whereas they did support Exar Kun? Vitiate even had many of their tombs sealed or outright destroyed during his ascent to power.”

That’s quite telling. Perhaps they were prescient of his plans. Do you draw legitimacy for your own ambitions from that fact?

“How? How so?”

Well, you have a rather unique relationship with ghosts and they seemed to give you their approval...

“I think you are overestimating their goodwill. You didn’t have to endure their rabid monologues and derogatory remarks all day and night.”

Instead, I have to listen to your complaints and crazy ideas, but I admit, you’re a rather civil ghost, it could be worse. Like, Vitiate-level worse.

“Actually, I am not a ghost.” Nox deadpanned.

Okay, I’ll play along…what are you, then?

“An intact spirit - at least I hope so. Does a holocron gatekeeper know he’s not a real, whole entity? It’s a bizarre conundrum.”

I am afraid you’ve lost me here.

“The difference lies in the fact that a ghost is a part of someone’s essence; it has lost its original Force tether and thus is dependent on either latching onto a vessel or attaching to objects or places, drawing its energy from, for example, the emotional echoes defining a tomb or battlefield, or the dark side imbued in an artefact.”

Halfway into the Void-

“-able to linger in the physical world thanks to nothing but their tenacious refusal to let go of life, no matter how wretched their existence has become. You might have noticed that most Sith ghosts are somewhat single-minded.”

Because they only have their hatred or anger to sustain themselves.

“A spirit retains its conscience and autonomous connection to the Force, it just becomes incorporeal. The Jedi claim that a Sith cannot reach that state, something about only the Light side allowing the soul to draw sustenance from the eternal conscience. Yawn. It’s really nonsensical. I dearly hope I am proving them dead wrong.” He allowed himself a private chuckle. “I am not even sure about Vitiate, he still seemed to require a vessel, or multiple ones, though he was able to act quite independently at the same time.”
But you exist through me, too.

“Yeah, because I don’t know how to detach my spirit from yours without detrimental effects – remember, I wasn’t going for this particular outcome, I just did what I could to salvage the situation when the throne thwarted my attempts of transferring your essence. In theory, it should be possible to disentangle our essences again. That’s also why, unlike ghosts, I can’t manifest myself on the spirit plane for you to see me through the Force.”

I guess Vitiate never managed to figure it all out or he would have jumped ship before I ended him.

“That aspect kind of has me worried, though it might simply have been hubris on his part. Theoretically, I could just, ah, uproot myself and kill you in the process; however, I needn’t have gone through the whole ordeal of waiting for you to be woken from stasis if that was my intention. A good sign, however, is that when you use my powers, it’s not because you feed on my essence, but because you can access my Force connection directly – it’s a bit like holding hands instead of cannibalism.”

What an apt comparison. Ugh, I did not need that image… You really have a way with words, Nox.

“Which part has you vexed so, the holding hands? We’ve done other, more intimate things together, my dear Wrath. I am not prone to forget.”

We have, with the bored horniness of adolescence. This current constellation however is singularly intimate, don’t you think? In any case, I am exceedingly curious as to what the ancient ghosts would have to say about the prospect of an Emperor Sidious.

“Won’t matter if we get to the point where we pull the strings.”

Our options for achieving this in a smooth way are getting more limited by the day.

“Well, unless he plans to devour the galaxy or something, we can act even after Sidious’ plan has come to fruition. Just means a lot more collateral.”

It’s too risky. It would probably result in the demise of most, if not all, Jedi and trillions of non-humans.

“And you care because…?”

If he has any skill in feeding on death, that would only serve to strengthen him - immensely. We have no idea how powerful he actually is. That the Rule of Two has weakened the Sith is only conjecture, after all.

“You aren’t an adherent of the Concept of Cynosure? That the Force pours itself into those who wield it according to their allegiance and thus the Dark would concentrate in the few Sith left? That’s certainly what Bane believed – The Master to embody Power and so on.”

If you want to keep it purely academic, no, I think the Doctrine of Natural Continuum approach is far more in line with how the universe presents itself to us. Generally speaking, I don’t give a bloody kriff what the Force does on a galactic scale as long as it obeys me when I use it. My point is, I am not completely convinced that a part of Vitiate has not survived somehow and is lying dormant to reap the spoils in the end. That asshole was insanely patient and had a penchant for convoluted plots comprising of setting someone up as the ultimate champion, only to overtake their body eventually.

“There would be a certain poetic beauty in that scenario.”
Head-canon: The Doctrine of Natural Continuum is an ancient philosophical (Sith) concept that is a predecessor of the greyish Potentium. According to the doctrine, the Force itself is in all natural processes/beings and not divided in Light and Dark, but when wielded, there is a Dark (active, self-centered) and Light side (passive, selfless) to how one approaches it, though neither way is necessarily associated with good and evil. See the allusions in the discussion with Katooni. The light (creating, order, altruism) is necessary, but the dark (destruction, entropy, selfish passion) is supposedly dominant and thus, the naturally superior choice for the Wielder.

Many Sith would believe it to some extent, especially the “moderate”/pragmatic ones. Pureness of doctrine is not a big concern for (Old Imperial) Sith, because might makes right – whereas it was for the Dark Brotherhood and Bane. Those who admit to/revel in their own evilness would have a more dualistic outlook mirroring that of the orthodox Jedi – and the Dark can be unnatural for all they care, because it gives them power, no matter how abnormal and twisted.

Continuum adherents don’t believe in Falling as one could theoretically choose to approach the Force differently at any time – but why would they, when the Light feels like the coldness of death to them and is inherently weaker/limiting?

Continuum and “Dark Dualism” also typically deny the Force having express agency or a will, as is consistent with the Sith only accepting their own will as driving force. The Cynosure theory is more in keeping with the Force having agency, but it is not a light-sided will of the Living Force as the Jedi would believe.

All of these theories are heresies and corrupting, as in leading to the Dark side, in the eyes of (modern, dualistic) Jedi. Especially Continuum, as it paints the Dark side as natural and non-evil (in addition to denying Falling and the Will), despite its superficial similarity to the majority view of the Unifying Force. With most (Imperial) Sith looking backwards (ancestry) and to themselves rather than forward, they would debate the conclusions the Unifying Force theory draws with regards to destiny, anyway.

Ok, I am overthinking this. So here are some fun facts.

Talz Fun Fact 1: I really disliked Broonmark. He lived (and probably died) in the cargo bay like a true warrior.

Talz Fun Fact 2: Foul Moudama is a Talz Jedi active during the Clone Wars. Foul Mudammas is an Egyptian dish made from fava beans. There are few names in Star Wars that scream anti-immersion to me as much as this one, along with “Malavai”.
As expected, there was no obvious enemy presence on Belderone, but navigating to the coordinates Mamun had provided under duress – or rather, which ransacking his failing mind had yielded - brought them to what looked like a cluster of factories. Some of them were active, emitting steam from wide chimneys. In contrast, the ones farthest from the local settlements appeared deserted from above, while a cursory scan revealed several scattered groups of energy signatures. They landed unimpeded and took care to exit their ship without being seen – not that their arrival would have gone unnoticed per se, yet it seemed wise to keep their enemies guessing.

It did not take long for them to spot a lone droid patrol unit, which they ended up following cautiously. When the droids turned into a hallway leading to a large open area, Zayathris and the padawan opted to crawl through the vents instead until they reached a dead end, a large filtration unit above one of the factory floors. It was from that unique vantage point, with only several layers of metallic mesh separating them from their enemies, that they were able to spy on the final exchanges in a conversation between a bizarre droid with a skull-like Kaleesh mask for a face and the hologram of a cloaked figure.

“At’s General Grievous! The Supreme Commander of the Separatist army.” Katooni whispered into Zayathris’ ear. The sharp look her companion gave her in return silenced her immediately.

“-of the plan. I have already killed the eight Jedi that were foolish enough to come here, my lord.” Grievous wheezed boastfully – why would a machine have respiratory problems?

Judging from the voice and stature alone, his interlocutor giving his superficial congratulations was clearly not Tyranus, so unless the form of address used was unusually widespread, that could mean only one thing. Zayathris’ suspicions were subsequently confirmed when the large creature continued briefing his superior on his progress. “Lord Sidious, there is the matter of Kenobi and the other one. What would you have me do with them?” The padawan clapped her hands over her mouth.

The clanking steps of a unit of commando droids taking position just outside of the room rendered the Sith lord’s reply inaudible.

“It will be done, my lord.” Grievous bowed deferentially before the hologram winked out. Breathing rattling, he stalked out of the room, the droids following in his wake.

“We are too late.” Katooni stated when they could not be overheard anymore, sorrow and fear welling up in her in equal parts.

Her mind racing, it did not occur to Zayathris to give the padawan a few soothing words. Tyranus had sent her into a plot actually orchestrated by his master. Since it was unlikely to result in a confrontation with Sidious himself, the most benign interpretation that he intended for her to kill the Darth – a little prematurely – was off the table. So was her earlier conjecture that Sidious had laid a trap for his apprentice, finally dangling the elusive holocron before him – there simply was not a trace of the repository of knowledge and Tyranus had to be aware of Grievous’ presence here.
Then again, there was no connection between herself and the Jedi – indicating that the plot had been in motion regardless of her involvement. Was she supposed to stop Sidious’ plan? Why not tell her directly, then? What was she supposed to find? Whatever Tyranus intended to use her for, it would be absurd to assume she would still be willing to aid him after embarking on a futile quest under such a ludicrous pretence.

Certainly, given the circumstances, the holocron should have been a ruse – but according to Mamun, the Shadow had been on the hunt for an alleged Sith holocron, albeit without success. She had not sensed a lie from Tyranus at any point, either. Having played both sides and avoiding being identified by the Jedi for such a long time, he had to be an accomplished liar, but this level of deception was unsettling. His refusal to reveal the identity of his master certainly made sense in that context – it was not an issue of trust rather than outright treachery.

Even if Tyranus had believed his story to be a sham, there was little doubt that his eventual fate would be the one he had described – tossed away as soon as Sidious had reached his goals. Failing to commit to the alliance had doomed him, rendered him useless to both Sidious and the Wrath. The elderly man might be fairly naïve in his idealism, but neither thoughtless nor rash – he would not simply reject the unique opportunity allying with her presented, unless Sidious offered something seemingly better. A chance to prove himself beyond the shadow of a doubt, perhaps. Delivering a potential enemy – or tool – of her calibre into his master’s hands would be no small feat.

Either way, Sidious was now aware of her – thanks to Tyranus’ idiocy – or he would learn about her no matter how she proceeded from here, even if the Sith apprentice had not betrayed her after all. Refusing to play along would make Tyranus assume that she had turned on him instead and send him running to his master. Thwarting this operation, however, would reveal her knowledge of either the holocron or Tyranus himself.

Gone was another option for unmasking Sidious.

The alternative was much less convenient, nevertheless she almost looked forward to the prospect – it was going to a challenge. While it played into her hands, the involvement of Kenobi made the whole situation even more peculiar - he had no actual reason to be anywhere near Belderone. According to the news reports, he acted as one of the most celebrated generals of the Republic army, which would make him a warrior, despite his moniker “The Negotiator”, which Zayathris supposed was an allusion to the kind of diplomacy Katooni had joked about earlier. He would not be required to act upon Iquuno’s transmission in the first place and probably could not, anyway, with countless skirmishes in the Outer Rim swallowing up the Republic’s resources.

Zayathris snapped out of her thoughts at the sound of the padawan’s muffled sobbing. “Get yourself together, all is not lost yet. The terminal in the corner of the room, can you access it?”

The girl sniffed a few times before responding, reeling emotionally from the sudden harshness of her companion. “I guess I can try slicing into the system, but if they catch us….” She wiped her puffy, red-rimmed eyes. “We stand no chance against him.”

“That remains to be seen. Grievous is not really a droid, isn’t he?”

“No, he is some kind of cyborg. And a notorious Jedi killer. Even Master Kenobi has faced him before and failed to bring him to justice.”

“That’s some impressive cybernetics for sure. Well, he fits right in with those under his command. Any known weaknesses?”
“I don’t think anyone has had an actual chance to find out. So many Jedi have fallen to his blade during the war, even accomplished masters. People say he keeps their lightsabres as trophies.”

“Must’ve accumulated quite a collection then.” Zayathris replied with a snort. That certainly was in keeping with the damn lizards’ customs. And Grievous had to be one of the more insane (or desparate) ones, to opt for such extensive augmentation. A cranial implant or prosthetic limb was one thing, but to replace one’s whole body… Some of her contemporaries had undergone similar procedures, rendering them more machine than flesh and bones. She considered it a great folly – no cybernetic boosts could surpass true mastery of the Force, and in her experience, those heavily modified had trouble accessing the Force as well as before, ultimately rendering them weaker. “The good news is that if their lackey is here to do the dirty work, the Sith are unlikely to be around.”

“If they were, we’d be dead already.”

“The power of inciting fear in one’s adversaries. Sidious would emerge victorious without needing to lift a single digit.” Zayathris spat derisively. “Jedi can be killed if you know how, same goes for Sith.” Unlike Pierce, she had not kept a kill count, so all bets were off, but it was entirely possible that she’d bested as many of her peers as she had slain Jedi.

Katooni’s eyes narrowed in suspicion at that callous statement. “And do you… know how?”

Zayathris gave her a wry smile. “Practically or academically?”

“Um, just assume I never asked?”

“Don’t worry, little padawan, you are unlikely to find out first-hand. The droids are well gone; let’s find out what’s going on.”

Having pried the security hatch open with the help of Katooni’s sabre, they dropped into the room beneath them soundlessly. After a few minutes, the holoterminal activated itself to display the CIS logo as a welcome message, signalling the padawan’s success.

“Good work. Bring up the recent recordings.”

A selection of previews popped up above the table. Even the miniaturized moving images showed the last moments of several Jedi in gory detail. Most appeared to have died in an enclosed, arena-like place. Perhaps one of the inactive furnaces? Grievous’ skills with a lightsabre were quite impressive for someone unable to use the Force – few would be able to defeat an opponent wielding four sabres at once that spun with astounding velocity. Katooni averted her eyes, horrified.

“Don’t look away, it won’t make it less real. What do you feel?”

“It’s so unfair. They weren’t even combatants, they never faced the Separatists directly – they were targeted for being Jedi. Being seekers, they must’ve been some of the kindest, most empathic souls of the whole Order, since they interact with the potential initiates and their parents.”

“It should not come as a surprise to you that, given the chance, Sidious would not hesitate to murder every single Jedi, including infants in their cribs and younglings - regardless of their innocence.”

“I know. I just can’t believe someone can be that cruel and… I know it really shouldn’t… it makes
me so angry. I hate those Sith for being evil. I mean, bounty hunters or pirates aren’t good people, either, but the corruption and malice of the Sith has no bounds. In their deliberate depravity, they have forfeited their right to live.”

“A natural reaction to a threat you feel helpless against. However, isn’t the goal to bring them to trial, not to kill them?”

“I guess so, but they would not afford us any mercy either. And they are too dangerous to be imprisoned. It’s not like I want anyone dead-”

“Your teachings discourage hatred and such emotions, yes? Feeling them regardless must cause you no small amount of guilt. Such weakness will be your downfall. If you want to stay alive, you must gain clarity of purpose. What drives you is up to you, but you cannot allow for doubt.” Katooni’s open-mouthed stare caused the former Wrath to sigh.

_She will get it eventually._

She did not necessarily intend to turn the young girl to the Dark side - such an inexperienced apprentice would be both a distraction and a liability. Besides, with Katooni posing no threat to her, she had nothing to gain from making her Fall just for the sake of it. As fun as messing with the minds of Jedi was, the padawan possessed an inner strength and wisdom for her age that Zayathris could respect. Given the right tools and an alternative perspective, she might be able to remove some of her chains, increasing her chances of surviving whatever Sidious had in mind for the Jedi Order. “I wonder, if the Force is with you and all that, how a pair of Sith can be so infinitely superior that the whole Order is left floundering. But let’s discuss this in a safer environment. Try to find out what Kenobi is doing here and where he is.”

Zayathris browsed the databanks, rummaging through the military records for further clues of what the Separatists’ next moves could entail. Most data was classified and thus, inaccessible to her, with the exception of low importance information like material lists, requisition orders - the boring bureaucracy of war.

An entry caught her attention.

Farnas II.

She had no particular reason to assume there was a link to the proceedings on Belderone. Yet, it was where it all started, for her at least.

One request for four autonomous, top-of-the-line Bacta tanks had been added at a later date. A peculiar demand for a droid battalion, which might have a single sentient commanding officer at the most, and an even more peculiar number....

Nox. _Tell me that this is a coincidence._

Uncharacteristically, he remained silent.

Nox! _Care to shed some light on this?_

Quietly, almost sheepishly, he replied after some palpable hesitation. “So, I guess I owe you an explanation...” Anger exploded in her chest at his veiled admission.

“Zayathris, snap out of it! You are going to harm us both.” A hint of desperation crept into his appeal.
Make it quick, or I might simply not care.

“Look, they were gone when you woke up. I assumed they hadn’t survived and did not pursue the issue. You never kriffing asked.”

He was right, she had preferred to bury the memories instead, fearing that dwelling on the possible fate of her companions would create a wound rather than fan the flames of her ire.

Still, you had no right to keep this from me.

“I was in no position to do anything while we were still on Farnas and afterwards…think about it, if they had made it, Tyranus would have used them against you, either as incentive or threat, wouldn’t he? There was no time to bring it up after the talk with him, and well, here we are. They are dead. Period. If you are still questioning my motives - has it occurred to you that I would have been prepared to set worlds ablaze if I thought there was even the slightest chance of getting Theron back?”

Her blood pounded in her ears, providing the rhythm to her vengeful train of thoughts. Make them pay…

"I think I have located Master Kenobi.” The padawan’s voice cut through the crimson fog in her mind. “I don’t have a visual on him, but the majority of the droids and Grievous are converging on that position.” Seeing the woman hold onto the control panel for support, she asked with honest concern, “What’s wrong?”

Zayathris had not noticed that she had closed her eyes. Not trusting her usual meditation technique to have the desired effect of erasing all traces of her inner turmoil, she kept them shut while she tried to get the involuntary trembling under control. She forced a casual tone into her reply. “Nothing. Go back the way we came and either hide near the ship if the Separatists have not locked it down already or procure another vessel for us to get off planet. In any case, do not let them find you.”

“Uh, okay, but … wait a second. There is something you might want to see.”

The Tholothian projected a map over the holotable. “These are all the factories under Grievous’ control here on Belderone. See these lines over there? They are the conduits used for transporting certain raw materials. They all have coolant pipes running alongside them. And we crawled past the some of the tanks, this facility is inactive, but all the stuff is still here, as if they merely shut it down temporarily.”

Zayathris hummed in agreement with the girl’s assessment. “Volatile components, it seems. And those dots?”

“I pulled this schematic from the stack of orders given to the droids. The placement at junctions and depots… I mean, it’s suspicious, isn’t it?”

“More than that. Those are the best locations for maximising the effect of explosives.” Damn. “Well, this changes little, except for the urgency. You have your orders.”

“What about you?”

“I have a score to settle. Standby for my signal.”

Ironically, the fact that she no longer flew under the radar of the Banite Sith constituted the only bright spot in all of this. She did not need to hold back anymore.
Another Sith appearing on the scene in these dire times would give the Jedi a collective heart attack. Perhaps it would shock them into going along with her plan Besh.

Let’s play.

Chapter End Notes

On hiatus until early August. (I’m on vacation.)
Part II might still get published in the meantime.
Beyond question, he was no stranger to missions turning out far more complicated than necessary. That would be an blatant understatement for the current situation.

He was supposed to rescue them, not get backed into a corner, reduced to watching as Grievous made a show of dealing the deathblow to one of the Jedi captured earlier. The knight had been marked for death already, as evidenced by the extensive injuries stemming from torture, and was carried in ostensibly just to make General Kenobi a witness of his execution.

A trap like this, as insidiously engineered as it had been, should not be enough to lure in roughly half of their seekers and even catch two experienced Jedi Generals off-guard. They really should be better than that. As if to taunt him about his failure, the Zabrak knight's empty eyes stared up at him from the floor, where the murdered Jedi's head lay, several metres from his contorted body.

Now, only his fellow Master and frequent comrade in arms during the earliest days of the war, Luminara Unduli, was left. He expected to be able to keep defending himself for quite a bit longer, even as worn out as he was, but going on the offensive was unthinkable.

The MagnaGuards prevented him from reaching the Mirialan imprisoned in an energy field, shackled hands raised above her head keeping her upright.

Getting out of this situation should have been easier.

Yet, months of constant conflict had taken their toll. It was only now that Obi-Wan came to realise how the relentless flow of battle had shaped him over the years, turned him into a blunt instrument of war. What he was attuned to nowadays was not the pure wellspring of the Force, not the gentle call of its will, but something far more primal altogether. A sinister drum of destruction he was marching to in the name of peace. And truly, it was in name only.

The Force didn't even warn them properly anymore, as if they were beyond its reach. Beyond saving.

Ironic that he would come so close to death, to utter defeat, to comprehend these glaring, mortifying truths.

This was how he had got into his current predicament:

One instant of inattention, one millisecond of hesitation, and Grievous brought one of his arms down in a strike that Obi-wan instinctively knew he would physically be unable to parry or dodge fully. He closed the distance between them instead of futilely evading it, causing his hand to be hit by the cyborg's arm rather than the green lightsabre's blade the commander had taken from Luminara. As expected, the Jedi's weapon was knocked from his hands. What happened then in the blink of an eye was the real mistake - inadvertently giving Grievous an opening to clasp the front plate of his battle-worn armour and toss him into the wall like a discarded toy.

His vision was swimming and tinged red at the edges, but he retained consciousness, though barely. Grievous' personal droid guard was on him immediately.
The Council had been made aware of irregular proceedings with regards to the members of the Sentinel division scouting for Force-sensitive children several days earlier. Luminara, happening to be near the last known position of one of the missing seekers, volunteered to investigate. The dead Zabrak had been one of her clanmates, Obi-wan recalled, perhaps she'd personal reasons for doing so. It seemed like misguided heroism now, like so many acts these days.

They had lost contact with her as well soon after. Additionally, rumours of the Separatists relocating a part of their operations to the Auril Sector had been backed up by new intel coming through the Chancellor's office. Obi-wan had subsequently been pulled away from battle, leaving his 212th in Cody's hands to fight without the support of their general. A tiny part of him had been looking forward to finally ending the terror wrought by Grievous.

Now, though...It felt strange - like being in the right place at the wrong time - that he faced the Separatist leader on his own. Especially considering how things had gone awfully downhill. Somehow, his troops had become such an essential part of his life, of his soul even, that he had not assumed he would die alone, dozens of parsec separating him and the clones under his command. He had not even taken the time to bide Cody farewell. Not that such sentimentality served a purpose in the grand scheme of things, but…

As always, the mental anguish was worse than the physical.

He wondered when he had resigned himself to expecting to die today.

Grievous sent another jolt of energy through Luminara, eliciting only a quiet whimper in contrast to her tortured screams before. Blood pounding in his ears, Obi-wan did not even register the cyborg's' jeering insults and goading to get him to make another mistake in the attempt to save her.

Tiredly batting the droids' onslaught of attacks aside with the electrostaff he had wrenched away from one of them, he nevertheless tried to get closer to the contraption holding his fellow Jedi, to be able to at least deactivate it to give Luminara a chance to escape.

Fighting at such close quarters left him little maneuvering room and much room for carelessness. A sharp pain blossomed in his back and spread out, causing him to convulse in pain with no control over his muscles. If Grievous entered the fight it would be over soon, and not in the Jedi's favour. He willed himself to reflect on his options constructively, but the thoughts lacked coherence, his synapses on fire. His resilience was wearing thin. Another attack he failed to dodge.

The electricity was now in his head, a veritable thunderstorm raging in his field of vision. He could almost taste the ozone.

The light continued to become brighter, unbearably so, until it engulfed the whole room. It bounced from the walls, creating a mesh of blue lightning strikes overhead that struck the floor where two flashes intersected.

A shadow emerged from the blinding light, and the air was knocked from Kenobi's chest as he dropped to one knee.

The figure held her hands out to the side, the air blurring around them. The lightning was taking shape over the palms, becoming fully formed above her head and proceeded to rain down on the droids. The standard clankers posted near the entrance were reduced to a shrivelled heap of metal.
The more advanced droids, fortified against electromagnetic pulses, were temporarily stunned while their shields dissipated the energy and directed the overcurrent to ground.

The lighting abated abruptly.

Only the haphazardly twitching MagnaGuards and Grievous were left standing. With a bored grimace, the figure kicked a staff up and in one fluid motion spun her body around, destroying the remaining droids with a rapid succession of precise jabs piercing their chest armour.

She came to stand in front of the commander of the Separatist forces and looked up to him, a defiant smirk spreading across her face. Obi-Wan could not have ruled out that with his pain-addled mind he wasn't just seeing things - he certainly wished it wasn't real, but, truth be told, there was little doubt. As incredibly insane as that truth was.

Longer hair bundled up in a disheveled knot and her black uniform-like attire enhanced with rudimentary armour - reinforced vambraces and extravagant knee-high boots - , he barely recognized the woman who had unexpectedly joined the battle in the Sundari palace and saved Satine's life.

The most disturbing feature, however, was the colour of her irises, which had taken on a yellow-orange hue, iridescent like durasteel alloy heated beyond the point of crystallisation. A canvas of dark shadows around her eyes and faint lines branching like veins across her temples gave them an otherworldly glow.

A sense of duty surged in his chest, a visceral, automatic reaction compelling him to attempt to end the threat she represented. The feeling did not translate into action. His limbs felt unnaturally heavy, the woman's sheer presence rendered him unable to move. She did not exude the tightly wound control of Dooku nor the unhinged erraticness of Maul, yet her presence carried enormous weight and authority, daring one to oppose and suffer the consequences.

The seemingly still intact sabre of another seeker tortured to death, whose name eluded Obi-wan, lay partially obscured beneath a electrocuted droid. If he used this brief moment of distraction to call it into…

Promptly, the lightsabre in question jerked a few times, almost awkwardly attempting to disobey the command, and flew into the woman's hand.

"I hope you're worth all the fuss, General Grievous." Her voice was huskier, darker than he remembered, sending a chill through his bones.

While Grievous split his arms, igniting four sabres from his collection, her eyes locked with Obi-wan's - a deep, penetrating look as if to challenge him. To make sure he watched her every move.

Two of her adversary's hands were gone even before Obi-wan had analysed her stance. A lesser opponent without the cyborg's enhanced reflexes - even the average Jedi, if Obi-wan was honest - would have been gutted before he could have so much as realised there was an incoming attack requiring a reaction to begin with. Afterwards, it became blatantly obvious that she toyed with the Separatist leader, dragging out an uneven fight to showcase her superiority. She danced around him with a flurry of quick and precise attacks that on the surface had no pattern to them, but there were
some similarities in which openings she tended to exploit, in how she guided her opponent into a weaker position, to Maul's style. She appeared to be used to dual-wielding, only the ferocity of the insanely fast-paced battle causing her to occasionally revert to classic two-handed Djem So movements whenever she was required, in her playful restraint, to react instead of pressing the offence. Deadly efficient and merciless, even her sabre technique betrayed her allegiance.

Watching the confrontation with a growing sense of dread, Obi-wan remained mystified as to why a Sith would assault Grievous - were they not supposed to be on the same side? Not to mention the instances reported when the stranger had directly, and rather openly, aided the republic war effort, thus risking exposure.

Following this train of thought to its logical conclusion, it was all his fault, all the deaths caused by the Sith of the past months his responsibility, for he had not sensed her true nature earlier. How could he miss something fundamental like that? It was one thing to shield oneself - but to hold back to such an extent even while fighting? During the brief battle with Maul and his brother, it was obvious that she was not untrained, but her style had been more generic, the kind taught by various military organisations that still employed melee weapons.

His assumption - or rather, Satine's - had been that she had a Mandalorian background, possibly from the rumoured groups of Mandalorians in the diaspora of Wild Space. It would have explained her desire to act at such a decisive moment which would alter the fate of Mandalore, and the fact that she had seemingly reacted to conversations of the Death Watch held in Mando'a when she handed the Duchess over to her sister.

Tyranus was still active, and in the past, acolytes like Ventress had been available to do the dirty work for the Separatists. There was absolutely no need for the second Sith to involve herself directly now. What had changed? Had Dooku fallen out of grace - or even been killed while he was stuck here? Was Grievous to be punished? But in that case, would she not deal with the Jedi present first? How could this hitherto completely unknown woman have pulled the strings of the Republic for years and corrupted it so thoroughly?

Grievous ostensibly gained the upper hand for a moment, allowing him to slice through his opponent's saber and hold her in his vise-like grip, pressed against his upper body. She thrashed against him only cursorily, before going still. A rippling scream erupted from her, sending both warriors hurtling quite some distance apart. Grievous metal-clawed feet dug into the ground, bringing him to a stop. On the other side of the room, the woman rose with a kind of languid grace and rolled her shoulders experimentally, face alight with the excitement of battle. A grim determination settled on her features. She raised her hands and pushed them apart slowly. At first, this seemed to have no effect on the cyborg charging towards her, but then he abruptly stopped, clawing at his chest, the armour of which came apart, revealing the organs beneath it. Howling with rage and humiliation he made to pounce.

He did not come any further. The contents of his synthskin gut-sack spilled on the floor. The Sith lifted his still pulsating heart up with the Force, dangled it before the cyborg's face and summarily crushed it. She wiped the droplets of blood and machine oil from her cheeks and knelt to pry the last functioning sabre from Grievous' clenched fist.
She stalked over to Obi-wan.

So that was how he would die, cut down by his own weapon, after having witnessed the return of the Sith in full.

She stood above him and raised the sabre in a vague, deliberately sloppy Soresu ready stance.

He expected a taunt. A smug monologue of triumph. A final malicious commentary on the weakness of the Light side or something along that vein.

"I guess you lost something." Her eyes snapped down to his face, her intent unreadable. "By the way, I cannot help but notice a running theme here - is getting into hopeless situations part of your usual repertoire, an act to downplay your skill?"

"No, it appears to be testament to my latent masochism, if anything." The Jedi quipped, the steadiness of his voice a surprise even to himself.

"That would explain a lot."

He held her scrutinizing gaze, waiting how their confrontation would play out.

"Something the matter, Master Kenobi? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

Without waiting for a reply or even looking towards her target, the woman threw the sabre into the direction of Luminara.

The lit blade cut through the field generator, deactivating the device, and the weapon returned, spinning in a wide arc. The Mirialan Jedi dropped to the ground, hunched over.

The Sith held out her hand in invitation. Warily, Obi-wan clasped her forearm and allowed himself to be pulled into a standing position. "Get moving, both of you, place's rigged to blow up. I'd be surprised if that piece of scum hasn't activated the countdown somehow." The whole situation still failed to make any sense to him, but compliance might improve their chances of survival, or at the very least, of informing the council of what had transpired.

His heart sank when he noticed that she had clipped his sabre back to its place on his utility belt. If it was of no concern to her that her enemy was armed...

Without sparing him another glance, the Sith walked towards the entrance and spoke into a communicator. Luminara knelt curled up on herself, robes ripped apart in places, and looked up at her fellow Jedi with unfocused eyes, not registering the gravity of the situation. That her torture was finally over, but something far more terrible had emerged from the shadows. Blood was trickling from her nose, intermingling with the cold sweat on her face. When she slung her arm over his shoulder for support, he felt her shivering. They headed towards the doorway, both swaying with exertion as they walked.

Suddenly, the Sith was beside them again, wordlessly holding out a large piece of dark brown cloth ripped off the clothes of the dead Jedi on the floor, her face unreadable. Belatedly realising her surprisingly benevolent intent, he draped it over Luminara's bare head.

Following a Sith, even supposedly to safety - the accuracy of this term was debatable -, ranked high on the list of the most foolish choices he had made in his life. It was not a particularly long list, but then again, the entries were carefully curated.
A unit of droids opened fire at them, appearing out of nowhere. A flash of lightning, and they dropped to the ground, circuits smoking.

"Limitless power." The Sith deadpanned upon seeing Obi-wan's aghast expression. "You should try it sometime." Her features twisted into something like veiled, vicious eagerness as she added more quietly, as if to herself. "You just got to ask."
The flames of the massive blaze that razed the factory complex to the ground grazed the underside of the ship as they took off.

Too bloody close for comfort. Like the blue blade hovering centimetres from her neck.

Back still exposed to her attacker, Zayathris lifted her hands to the side, fingers splayed, in what she believed was a vaguely peaceful gesture. “Intending to strike down an unarmed opponent? I expected better of you, Jedi Master.”

"One is never unarmed with the Force. And we have seen your powers. You flaunted them in all their violent ugliness." The female Jedi hissed.

“Well, there is that. Though I beg to differ about that last part – your sense of beauty is rather defective." She turned around slowly, taking care to stay clear of the slightly quivering sabre. “A flick of the wrist is all it takes.” She taunted the Mirialan, who did not move.

Eyes lighting up, the Sith bared her teeth in an almost feral smile. “Oh, you can’t? How peculiar. Perhaps the treatment you suffered at Grievous’ hands has taken too much of a toll. You should rest instead of making an enemy of me.”

“The Sith already are the enemy, no effort on our part required.” Kenobi, who had not intervened when his fellow Jedi took his sabre without his consent, joined the discussion, his dumbfounded look reluctantly morphing into one of resolve.

“Huh. You disappoint me – I expected a more nuanced argument from a Jedi. Last time I checked, there was not even a law against being a Sith. I am sure the legislators of the Republic would frown upon adherents of two religious orders clashing violently – deadly, even – over doctrinal issues.”

“You inciting a war and murdering billions of innocents is hardly a doctrinal issue.” Kenobi cut in.

Zayathris cocked her head, her expression softening to a degree. “Ah, I thought you oblivious to the details. So you know about the Rule of Two.”

“We do.” Unduli snarled. “You can drop the deception, Sidious.”

The Sith sighed dramatically and took a few measured steps towards her. “Your unwarranted hostility is beginning to make sense now. It’s all a tragic misunderstanding, really.” Unable to defend herself, the Mirialan pressed her back against the wall. Her breathing hitched. The taller woman leaning over her was now close enough that the Jedi could see the faint streaks of crimson in the amber irises, gleaming like dying embers. “Splendid deductive reasoning, but your premise is faulty. You see, I am not Darth Sidious. In fact, I am not even part of his pathetic lineage. I want him dead as much as you do. Probably more, since I actually have emotions and desires.” She
grasped Unduli's wrist, bending her hand backwards until she was forced to drop the weapon. It clattered to the floor uselessly.

She recovered pretty fast.

"Oh, she is in a lot of pain, it's just her fear that keeps her going at this point. The disorientation earlier probably wasn't just from the torture, though. Shouldn't have allowed her to cover up if you wanted to keep her a bit more weakened."

Why would that be of consequence? I thought it was a cultural thing.

"Actually, no. They didn't include xenobiology in the Imperial curriculum, did they?"

Not that I can remember, no, just Pureblood and human anatomy. Add to that a couple of grotesque comparisons intended to prove the superior genetic heritage of Imperials and you get complete cluelessness in the average citizen. On one occasion, Quinn accidentally gave Vette a huge overdose of painkillers because he'd failed to take into account the substance accumulating in the lekki rather than her liver processing it. She was zoned out for days, suffered minor psychotic breaks for weeks and was cross with him for even longer. When there was explicit mention of aliens during my education, it was to subtly fuel the rumours circulating, for example that they have crazy genitals with barbs, tentacles or highly acidic fluids to discourage fraternisation with other species."

"Huh, those might actually exist, though. Growing up in slave quarters with little privacy, you see all kinds of nether parts. Ahem, to answer your question: Mirialans have an extra-sensory organ on their scalp. The expression of it varies between individuals, and it's more sensitive in females, which is why they usually cover their heads. As a Jedi she'd be able to deal with the effects easily, but in her weakened state..."

Is that why you'd always wear a hood after Korriban? But it didn't seem like you needed it, even when you were still rather new to using the Force.

"No, that was to hide the collar scar. Being addressed as slave got annoying really quickly, and I couldn't kill everyone doing so on the spot, for various unfortunate reasons. So, let's just say slave owners can't be bothered by needs like head covering. Too much hassle. Thus, they simply forego it, have you suffer disorientation and headaches for a couple of weeks and be done with it. Permanently."

It shrivels up...? Of course. I shouldn't be surprised.

"If you think that's cruel, you should have seen what happened to members of species requiring a certain amount of moisture or trimming of their fur. One kid in my group had some kind of woolly fur, no idea what species he was, but they sheared half his arse off in an attempt to get rid of the excessive hairiness. Or, for a less unique example, ask the Twi'lek if they are happy with being everyone's simpering, compliant fucktoy."

The Jedi took her explanation with little composure.

“That’s impossible.” Kenobi gasped, horrified.

“I am pretty sure that’s exactly what your ancestors said when they found out that the Sith Order
The Sith stepped back from her victim and turned towards the second Jedi as he spoke. “It’s what we said when a Sith named Darth Maul appeared almost two decades ago and killed my master.” Kenobi was fishing for a reaction from her. So Maul preceded Tyranus? Strange for a discarded apprentice to survive. Well, he probably has been dealt with. “My condolences,” The male Jedi's eyebrow went up in disbelief. "You really were not aware before?"

"No, because we thought your kind extinct. You should know this. If you don't mind me asking: Why are we having this conversation?"

“So polite." She snorted wrily. "Because it beats mindless bloodshed? Should that not be in alignment with Jedi beliefs? I mean, I am fine with gutting both of you, but it would not be my preferred choice of action at the moment. Besides, if you're itching for a duel, you should regain your full strength first. Right now, you wouldn't last longer than a few heartbeats, occasionally impressive Soresu notwithstanding. And what a waste that would be."

Kenobi gulped, her intense gaze making him uncomfortable, but apparently decided to let the allusions slide. “What is it that you want, then?”

“To help the Jedi prevail against Sidious.”

“Help us? Why would a Sith wish to see us emerge victorious against your own kind?"

“Well, the enemy of my enemy-"

-is an effective and, most importantly, willing tool I need not have any qualms about sacrificing."

“But should you not be in support of his goals?” The Mirialan pressed. "Or is this a personal vendetta?"

“Far from it. In fact, my motivation is the least personal possible - I have nothing to gain or lose, regardless of whether Sidious wins. His ascent to ultimate power is bound to come about in a way that will eventually destroy more than the Jedi or the Republic government. You haven’t seen what horror and indiscriminate destruction such power, if unchecked, may wreak."

"And you have?" Kenobi asked, voice dripping with incredulity.

"Yes. Which is why I cannot allow him to bring his plans to fruition."

The doors to cockpit slid open and Katooni peeked out. "I changed our ship's ID, so that we don't get shot down as soon as we enter Republic space, and set course for Coruscant. Communication is a little tricky, but should be up in an hour, give or take. If you need medical attention sooner, I suggest we …" The padawan trailed off as she took in the situation. "What is happening, Masters?"

Her eyes darted between Zayathris placating pose and the desperate expressions of her fellow Jedi.

"Introductions went less than stellar, Katooni." Zayathris explained, with a lopsided, mischievous smirk.

The Jedi realised with shocked surprise who was piloting them. Unduli, now free to move again, eyed the sabre on the floor, while Kenobi moved to stand protectively between Zayathris and the girl. As if.
The latter spoke up with indignation. "Masters, with all due respect, Tris took charge uncovering the deception and rescuing you. She was instrumental in thwarting the plot, if not for her."

Kenobi and the other Master exchanged a dejected look.

"Padawan...Katooni, is it? Whatever she has told you- she has been using you. She is Sith."

Katooni recoiled. "I- I don't understand. She has been nothing but supportive and helpful and… Oh-

She looked at Zayathris as if seeing her properly for the first time. "Explain." There was a sharpness to her voice that made the Sith smile inwardly.

"Contrary to what the Jedi tell themselves to sleep soundly at night, Sith are not monsters. I have not been manipulating you all this time. Done nothing to your master, if that's what you think. I have not lied to you once. Strategic omissions aside.

"And what about Belderone? There were civilians down there! They can't all have been Separatists, the other factories had local staff! You didn't even try to defuse the bombs!" The padawan blurted out before Unduli could respond.

Zayathris rolled her eyes. "And did you? I am no demolitions expert, and containing an explosion of that scale...well, that's not how the Force works. Or maybe I just couldn't be bothered? Chalk it up to collateral; I am sure there is a column for that in GAR accounting." Ignoring the girl's disgusted face, she leaned casually against a wall and inspected her vambraces for damage. "Look, you saw the data. The CIS was planning to relocate to Belderone. How many innocent locals would have got caught up in the crossfire of a Republic incursion? How many killed in an evacuation effort? A hundred, if not thousand times as many as could possibly have been working in the factories. Not to mention the clone soldiers falling in those battles. This is war - you make a choice and live with the consequences."

"But why would you choose to help us, if not for ulterior motives? Sith are selfish by their very nature-" This woman can't help it, can she?

"Don't pretend to understand the Sith. Bloody Void, you people are practically begging for death. Not necessarily by my hands." She added mockingly, sensing the others' surging fear. "As Sith go, I am rather patient, if I say so myself. Where were we? Ah. We have established that I am not Sidious-"

"And you expect us to take your word for that?"

"Well, it's hard to prove something like that. Does it suffice that it would be incredibly nonsensical to save the two of you, kill Grievous, reveal myself in such a half-assed way and do all that other stuff I've done for the benefit of the Republic-" She shot Kenobi a meaningful look. "And the Jedi, as Katooni can attest. If I - assuming I was Sidious - wanted to get on your good side, I'd surreptitiously feed you intel, make sure you win enough battles not to become suspicious about the Sith - the Banite ones, that is - playing both sides like Togrutan shadow puppets. And then cut the strings so everything collapses on itself. Not this undignified tomfoolery."

"So, if you're not in league with them, how did you become Sith? You're not telling us there is a second lineage that has survived until now?"

"You know, I left that part out because it's actually the least believable aspect of the whole thing. Even to me, I have to admit."
"Is it? The most likely explanation is that you're Fallen and have simply assumed the mantle of Sith to give your dabbling in the Dark side more legitimacy."

Hearing this purposely insulting theory caused Zayathris to laugh harshly. "Oh, the irony! I really should make you suffer for your insolence." She took a deep breath that failed to dampen her involuntarily anger. "I have slain two Emperors and one treacherous contender; I daresay I have earned my title. If anything, Sidious and his ilk are the unworthy upstarts."

"Last time I checked, there was only a Republic - with a Chancellor in charge -, and no emperors around anywhere." That smooth little shit Kenobi had the gall to mock her speech. *Well, at least he isn't as demure as his code requires.*

"Last time you checked probably wasn't close to 4000 years ago."

Stunned silence was the only reply.

"See, I told you so."

Chapter End Notes

Back to the usual quasi-POV.

As to why the SWTOR Mirialans do not wear a head covering – well, you can, obviously, and in other cases, my head canon is that they employ a similar approach to some Orthodox Jewish women, that is, they wear a wig to blend in culturally.

Belderone was canonically supposed to become the CIS headquarters, several Jedi perished in the evacuation. Due to the opposition, the Separatists later settled on Utapau instead.
To her utter astonishment, the Jedi had agreed to humour her suggestion of discussing the matter in a more formal manner than a confused standoff replete with clichéd responses on a stolen Separatist corvette. Ironically, it had taken Kenobi’s cautious, yet well-reasoned backing – ever the negotiator, apparently – to convince the other Council members of the necessity of an in-person meeting. In the Temple, no less. They truly were desperate.

As they should be.

Perhaps there was a sliver of hubris as well, for what would a lone Sith be able to accomplish faced with the whole of the Council - of which, it turned out, only about half were present physically - and the hundreds of Jedi on site?

They would be in for an unpleasant surprise in case they managed to draw her ire acutely.

*If Kenobi and his sidekick on the battlefield-

“That youngish Jedi looking like the cover model of a fashion holomag for melancholic adolescents in all the published propaganda shots of him?”

Yeah, curious fashion choice for a Jedi and so not my type, in case you were wondering, which you probably were. Anyway, if they actually rank among the best the Order has to offer and are thus the celebrated outliers, skill-wise, instead of the norm … well, it doesn’t bode well for the Jedi to begin with.

“Sidious would not have to put in too much effort into dismantling the whole thing.”

Exactly. Distract the masters – along with the majority of Clones - with skirmishes in the Outer Rim and send in a battalion of well-trained Mandalorians to mop up the rabble on Coruscant. Maybe something along the lines of sabotage to give those too young to put up a fight less messy deaths in their sleep.

“In their cribs, you mean.”

What would I do without you spelling out the obvious?

“I am amazing, aren’t I?”

I really don’t know how Theron put up with your antics. Must’ve been true love or something.

“Don’t you find it hilarious how seamlessly our conversation flowed from slaughtering infants to domestic fluff?”

I fail to see the humour in any of these things.
“Back to business, then. Got it. It’s only guesswork, but something about Sidious’ methods so far tells me that this straightforward scenario lacks his particular flourish. You have to admit, it is a little too lacklustre to constitute the ultimate stab in the back of the Jedi, the final revenge for millennia of humiliation...”

Fair enough. You’re bringing the expertise in being a devious sociopath to the table, so how would you do it, then?

“Admittedly, I lack insight into their most acute weaknesses, but it would involve shaming the Jedi in the public’s eye, maybe a false flag operation? Something their reputation won’t recover from, ideally something to set me up as the Republic’s true saviour instead of them. I don’t think Sidious will try to turn many Jedi in the process, he seems to have little need for acolytes. If he just wants them dead…it has to be a crippling blow, then, something leaving them scrambling to survive from while he picks off the remaining Jedi. Hard to say, though, what would be the most plausible approach.”

And the GAR?

“Would it not be deliciously ironic if the Clones turned against their Generals – their masters - in a bid for freedom? Just an idea. As for the non-Clone officers and fleet, well, without a couple of Silencers up my sleeve, it would be best to get them to serve me instead – you know those military types better than I do, but in my experience, if you emphasise security and order, then tend to flock to your side, especially if it’s the winning one. Sidious probably isn’t as foolish as Thanaton was in his overreliance on the Force – it would be incredibly wasteful and imprudent to destroy all military capacity. That is assuming he doesn’t have a fleet of his own waiting in the Unknown Regions.”

Disappointing lack of imagination on your part, I expected something far more sinister and gory.

“Well, we are here for information, I am sure that’ll give me some additional ideas and pointers on how to put them into practice. The Banite Sith have had quite a head start for coming up with something suitably grand.”

And needlessly elaborate, naturally.

“I see why you were appointed Wrath. You’re perfectly suited to vetoing any overly convoluted idea with the lit end of a sabre. Should’ve been present more often at Council budget meetings. The majority of the project proposals were a waste of oxygen, at the very least.”

I feel a pang of pity for Marr.

“Why only him, I had to attend, too!”

I wouldn’t dare, knowing how much you detest being pitied, and besides, I imagine a good part of those funding requests came from you.

The Coruscanti Temple felt far more balanced - for lack of a more nuanced description - and thus, less nauseating, than the temple on Tython. As Zayathris walked along the hallways – probably the first Sith in an exceptionally long time to desecrate this hallowed place -, flanked by silent guards in golden armour that made them impossible to tell apart, a faint trace of the Dark resonated with her. An echo of the past, or an indication of something running much deeper? What did send pleasant shivers up her spine was her almost nostalgic imagination of what the place must have
looked like after the Sacking of Coruscant, coupled with pride that her ancestors had been part of the final battles securing that triumph. Seeing the serene busyness of the inhabitants, the gleaming surfaces, the peaceful pattering of the fountains, it was difficult to visualise the hallways strewn with corpses, the building mostly collapsed, parts of the library on fire.

History had an unfortunate tendency to repeat itself.

Most members of the High Council quietly bristled at the deep, mockingly formal bow she had performed upon entering the Chambers. One by one, they warily begun probing her as she stood before them - unarmed, smiling aloofly, with pale grey eyes and a face that showed nothing beyond the first signs of aging typical for humanoids in their late twenties instead of the utter corruption they'd undoubtedly expected. Even before one of them deigned to speak up, four Jedi had already made unsuccessful attempts to slip past her mental shields. Subtly, not by force, but it still defied basic manners - and common sense.

Zayathris' subsequent harsh rebuke had not ingratiated her with them. Then again, little would, their hostility permeating the air like the suffocating heat of Tattooine while she explained her background and intentions. A rather redacted version of both, downplaying her historic role to prevent alienating them from the get-go.

"To summarise," a regal-looking Togrutan attending via holo spoke up in a calm and even voice that hardly masked her opposition to the very idea of accepting even her own outline of Zayathris’ explanations as truth. "Having grown up Sith during the Cold War period of the after the Treaty of Coruscant, you wound up leading a kind of coalition against another faction backed by the Sith who was originally the figurehead of the Empire, which he had built up and then ignored in favour of…the Eternal Empire? And after your victory, your attempt to stop a weapon of mass destruction about to explode resulted in you spending more than 3000 years in a kind of stasis, only to be woken by the unwitting locals of a planet having fallen to the Separatists."

"Some minor inaccuracies on your part. It's complicated, though, so you're excused for that." Zayathris shrugged apologetically. "Look, I did consider coming up with a lie instead, but I like defying expectations a little too much."

Ever since she had stepped into the room, the middle-aged male introduced as Mace Windu looked as if he was nursing a dreadful headache, rendering him barely able to look up at her. She was suppressing her presence with the exception of a few occasional glimpses of her actual self intended to make her audience nervous, why would it affect him so? His peers appeared quite shaken by the revelation as well, but not as if they were about to pass out from agony.

"I think it is safe to say that this development couldn't be further from expectations." A Nautolan male also present only as a holographic avatar sighed with a hint of dry wit.

“So, to give us an understanding of your point of view…” Kenobi leaned forward, pensively folding his hands. “What is your personal opinion of these new Sith?”

She did not hesitate to answer their questions. “The Rule of Two? It’s absolutely insane, not to mention heretical. However, I hold a modicum of begrudging respect for their apparent ability to keep up a continuous lineage, in secret, too. These Banite Sith appear to be exceptionally patient, if nothing else. In my time, apprentices who did not wish to overthrow their masters at every turn certainly existed, as did masters who collaborated effectively with those serving them, but there
was *always* the option of betrayal from practically everyone around you.

Sure keeps you on your toes. Of course, there were laws, customs and – rarely, I am afraid – common sense preventing people from random power grabs. Imperial society had to function, after all. Speaking of which, I actually wonder where they are going with all this. Annihilating the Jedi is a fine goal–"

There was a sharp intake of breath from several council members. Her lips curved maliciously. *So fragile. So afraid.*

“…from their perspective. I can somewhat understand the sentiment, given that in my time, the Empire and Republic were at war. Yet, the question remains - and that is one of the biggest issues I have with their approach: What comes after? These Sith are, for all intents and purposes, solitary. Regardless of their manipulations of the Republic, Separatists and who knows what other organisations their powerbase consists of, they have no loyal people, no overarching culture backing their ideals. They can only destroy existing structures and erect a tyrannical rule to stay in power.

Eventually, the values of society will change, but until then, it’s pure oppression. You would have to squat down rebellions regularly and keep spreading fear indiscriminately. It is unlikely to be an effective or even long-lived rule. Is that ill-boding prospect enough to keep them going for millennia, without a particularly power-hungry or, well, pessimistic Darth veering from the plan early on?"

“Why wouldn’t it suffice? After all, the Dark Side is the embodiment of destruction and oppression.” Windu had apparently found his voice again, although it sounded rather strained.

“What a narrow view!” She scoffed, launching into a furious stream of arguments. "Does the universe not strive towards more disorder, increasing entropy with every passing second? Are not the worms in the ground destroying organic matter to feed new growth? Does a volcano eruption not leave behind fertile soil? Don't the most powerful Kyber crystals grow in the harshest conditions? Just as creation without destruction breeds degeneracy, Light without Dark is corrupt in itself. It’s stagnancy, and ultimately, death.”

“What you are describing are natural processes. The Dark side represents an entirely unnatural and twisted take on life, it seeks to taint all that.” *Four thousand years and they’re still spouting the very same ridiculous poodoo.*

“The Jedi’s suppression of the natural order of things is what’s abnormal. Passion is the major driving force. Your ideal is a static world, not a dynamic one. Bad news: That's not how life works, but you are too sheltered to realise this.” Zayathris rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. “I have had dozens of such debates, Masters. And yes, those discussions were mostly civil ones, occasionally even featuring tea, believe it or not. Do not exhaust yourself trying to sway my views. Though I am convinced you, in turn, might benefit from an alternative perspective.”

“And open ourselves up to the influence of the Dark side? How naive do you presume us to be, that we would willingly invite our own doom?” A Zabrak male exclaimed.

“Once you’ve realized how logical and empowering this path is, you just can’t *unsee* it. But unless you’re weak, at no point are you left without a choice.”

“You truly believe that one can return to the Light from a Fall?” The Togrutan enquired.

“It’s not a *Fall*- never mind. You’re too indoctrinated to understand the subtleties.”
“Tell me, Sith: Did you choose that path of yours?” Windu asked quietly, yet poignantly, a presumptuous air about him. However much his physical appearance reminded Zayathris of her own father, especially the skin tone and lack of hair, his personality couldn’t be more different – or more unpleasant in general. It was rare for her to take an instant, deep disliking to someone she knew next to nothing about, but something about him rubbed her the wrong way. As if he was somehow more of a threat to her than the others. Given the others’ deference to him, he seemed to be one of the highest-ranking members of the Council, possibly even its leader, though that would not explain the strange vibe she was getting from him that was almost dark in its fierce determination. Almost - however, still very out-of-character for a Jedi. She resisted the temptation to probe his mind back, as he would not take kindly to such an attempt.

“There were several instances in my life when could have changed my allegiances, if that’s what you’re asking. I have not yet encountered anything that would compel me to eschew my path thus far. The freedom to choose is a function of power. When you let the Force dominate you – if you are too weak or too passive -, of course the moment you let the Dark side take the reins it will swallow you whole.

What you fail to comprehend: The Force obeys me, not the other way round – unlike you, I do not have to limit myself at all. In fact, what I am doing to conceal my presence right now uses both aspects of the Force. A mere technicality, certainly-.” Something stirred in Windu, though he attempted to mask the impact her statement had on him, his stoic expression unreadable.

“Impossible!” Indignant clamouring arose in her audience, the most vocal one being a humanoid with short head-tails protruding from the sides of his large, hardened forehead. “A Sith would not be able to draw on the Light. Such nonsensical claims-”

Zayathris interrupted them, waving her hand dismissively. “Grandmaster Satele Shan understood that the Force is not inherently dualistic. After all, it was she who taught me this technique - of her own accord, I should stress.” Alongside Darth Marr, of course, but given their unique relationship, that admission would raise even more eyebrows.

The ancient-looking greenish Jedi seated on a cushion to the far right of the room had remained quiet up to that moment.

“Changed, much has. Time, a great disruptor is. Wisdom of our predecessors, lost may have been. To rediscover, up to us, it is. Learn from her, we can. But not about being Jedi. About the Sith, yes. To prevail against their machinations, crucial her insight may be.” Ears perking up comically, the tiny creature fixated her expectantly as if to take her measure. “If willing to share secrets, you are.”

“Master Yoda, it is precisely her willingness to actually help that is in question. How can we trust anything she says? She might have her own agenda and manipulate us accordingly.” An elderly humanoid with a cone-shaped head spoke up.

“A matter of trust, it is not.” Wise as he might be, he sure sounds a little senile. “Oppose Sidious, she does. Deception about this, in her I sense not. Lies, entangled in, we are. The shadow of Sidious, darkening the Force is. Truth, from within, no more can come. As an outsider, even her lies, helpful to stop him might be.”

“With all due respect-” The rest of the female Twi’lek’s protest was lost due to her hologram’s continuous glitching.

Ignoring her attempt to speak, Zayathris coughed to draw the attention of the council. “Ahem, a friendly reminder to everyone that I am present in this very room. To reiterate, I am indeed offering to help you, both with analysis and as a warrior, in the pursuit of vanquishing Sidious and his
apprentice. I will not serve you in any form or fight your dishonourable war for you, but everything I know about the Sith is at your disposal. I don’t particularly like the idea of such an alliance, though I recognise the necessity, as should you. Joining with what should be my archenemy is distasteful, but more efficient than attempting to find and crush Sidious on my own.

Remember, none of this is *my kriffing problem* in the first place. You are not the ancient Republic and, conversely, I owe these Banite Sith nothing. Technically, I could just lean back and wait for him to fulfil his plan, let him become Emperor or something, thus revealing himself, and kill him then. But I am quite sure you’d prefer an earlier intervention - and I like a challenge. As to my in fact non-existent agenda: As little as I care about the fate of the Republic, his reign will usher in a development that I cannot allow. That is all."

"If you’re actually not Sidious. I am not convinced yet. Even so, it’s still hard to imagine you don’t simply intend to use us to draw him out and then sacrifice us when we’ve served that purpose." The quality of the Twi’lek master’s holoconnection had improved slightly.

*Well, she isn’t wrong per se.* “Oh, you have figured me out. A shame.” Zayathris deadpanned. “But wait, wasn’t the Jedi path about service and sacrifice in the first place? Aren’t you all eager to become one with the Force?”

“We do not fear death like the Sith and are able to face it with serenity, since we know that, yes, *there is the Force.* That is a significant difference to eagerly walking into a blade.” Kenobi interjected.

“Considering your track record, I still have some doubts about that.” Her jab lacked the expected hostility.

The Twi’lek continued her diatribe despite the banter. "We must not forget that she served the Empire, undoubtedly killed Jedi and Republic citizens without remorse. I hear you talk about ideology. What about actions and responsibility? How can we possibly ally with her, when she has slain our brothers and sisters as well as those they swore to protect?"

Zayathris was unfazed by the allegations. "Well, I am afraid I cannot cite any extenuating circumstances. She is correct as to the death of Jedi by my hands. Both by my actions and failure to act at key moments, my hands are drenched in blood. However, that is key to my willingness to help you."

“To make restitution?” The Togrutan asked hesitantly, with an equal measure of doubt and hope.

“No, why would I? Moreover, do not pretend to believe such a thing as redemption is actually possible. You’d rather see me brought to *justice* if you did not need me. My point is this: In the past, I was unable to go against the traitorous machinations of my master, just as I could not stop the Emperor in time. This time, I am in a position to foil the plan of a megalomaniac of similar calibre before it comes to fruition."

“A threat to every single Jedi, she is. A threat to the galaxy, Sidious is. Weigh the harm, we shall. However, protect ourselves, we must."

Several councillors nodded in agreement with the elderly creature. “It goes without saying that we cannot permit her to roam freely.”

“You’re going to put me on a leash? No kriffing way.”

“If you truly want to ally with us, you need to understand that we cannot afford to take such a risk!”
Kenobi tried to defuse the situation.

“I come here voluntarily, offering to help you prevent the end of the Jedi and the Republic, and you spit on that out of fear? You’d rather sentence trillions to die because of your kriffing ideals?” Her voice shook with outrage.

Windu took the initiative, his tone authoritative. “We simply can’t allow a Sith—”

“You still think you are in a position to allow me anything?” Unbridled fury rose in her, her irises beginning to show the effects of the dark side usage immediately.

“Now you are showing your true self and intentions—”

“SHUT UP!” Her scream knocks over several council chairs, causing the occupants to land on their backs with little dignity. Windu was firmly back on his feet in an instant, sabre ignited and pointed towards Zayathris’ face, eliciting a scornful frown from her.

“I am going to make my offer one last time. Refuse it, and I will leave you to your impending doom. I will not join forces with Sidious, but of course you won’t - can’t trust my word. Just know that your hypocrisy will prove your downfall. Decide quickly, or the conversation part is over.”

“You seem to be under the impression that we would let you leave.” To underline his point, he shifted into a ready state vaguely mirroring that of Juyo, his face scrounged up in concentration.

“Ooh, threats, how quaint. Having brought me into the heart of the Order, you seem very sure of your ability to keep me in check.” Zayathris snarled as she weighed her options. “Why don’t we find out?”

Windu’s eyes narrowed at the sight of her drawing a cloak of sheer rage around herself. Whereas most Jedi would barricade themselves against the swirl of dark side energies behind their mental shields to keep up the tight control of their emotions, he was wide open to the Force, almost as if inviting her in. She recognised it for what it was – a trap. Though what purpose that approach would serve, she could not say.

“Haven’t seen much from him, but Windu is bloody fast. This might actually be a little tricky, without a weapon. Casting lightning is way too slow to work against this many melee opponents at once.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, Wrath. You just need to electrocute one of them, that brainy-looking one would be my suggestion. Then summon his sabre from his smoking corpse and you’re ready to dictate the terms of the battle.”

I’ll keep that in mind in case things go awry. I can’t believe I am going to have to talk a Jedi out of a fight, but they are too stupid for their own kriffing good. While I do love a challenge, that’s not what we came for. Don’t you dare laugh, this was your plan, too.

Despite herself, she took a deep breath, pushing her raging fury back down. It made her feel nauseous, smothering the wellspring of passion instead of sinking deep into it and letting it broaden her focus.

“Unless your goal is to prove that Peace is a Lie, I suggest you switch off your sabre. Nice colour, by the way.” Nox wanted a crystal like that, she could tell from his disproportionate excitement rippling in the background.

Windu’s eyebrows shot up in bewilderment at her restraint. “It is you who attacked us.”
“You would not listen and insulted me. If you feel assaulted because you fell out of your seats, you’re even weaker than I imagined.”

Kenobi rose to stand beside Windu and put his hand on the older man’s forearm. “Mace, I feel it is my responsibility that she is here in the first place. We have made too many mistakes already, as evidenced by the course of the war. Is this the only way forward?”

“Listen to him. This meeting can end in a bloodbath or an alliance. Your choice to make.”

Zayathris watched her challenger intently.

An indecipherable, pained expression ghosted over Windu’s face before he lowered his blade reluctantly, exhaling shakily.

A Jedi equipped with a rebreather mask strode forward, coming to a halt between Zayathris and his peers, although still at a safe distance. “You explained your motivation sufficiently, though I can only speak for myself in that regard.” He glanced around in the room, gauging his fellow councillors’ reactions.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, I guess?” Zayathris replied cockily, aware that they had not reached an accord yet. “Wise choice, Master Windu. I assume you’ve warmed up to the idea of me helping you, on my own terms? Don’t worry, I won’t demand anything outrageous.”

The gaze of everyone present was on him. After several uneasy seconds, he slowly inclined his head in assent. The three masters still standing warily returned to their seats while the masked Jedi continued addressing her.

“Having heard Obi-wan's account of your actions on Belderone, I am inclined to believe that you have little in common with the Sith he faced before, for better and worse. What is your hypothesis of how they will carry out their plans?”

She shrugged dismissively. “I don't know how Sidious will realise his goal. However, considering the direction of the war, it is a given that he acts under the assumption that he will achieve it soon. He has no other choice if he wants to keep the momentum going. What I can tell you, though, is this: If he turns the Republic into an Empire, he will have to rebuild the society from the ground up. A process so thorough and time-consuming he will hardly have any opportunity to enjoy his rule before handing the reins over to a successor - a pitiful prospect - without extending his life dramatically. Why stop at that, if immortality is an option whose feasibility has been proven in the past?”

This angle seemed to be one the Masters had not considered before and drew horrified gasps from them. “How…how would this be accomplished?”

“You are aware of Sith Sorcery?” Mostly blank faces met her, while the greenish master's hairy ears twitched minutely. “Fools. Kriff, you’re so pathetic, it’s unbelievable.” Calm down, Nox, we’re not killing them. Yet. Sidious first.

...No, not even for the purple sabre. I know it matches your lightning, but craft your own, damn it.

“Two options come to mind. Spirit transfer into a new body or sustaining oneself through the death of others. He may have found an alternative way, though that's unlikely to be less violent.”

“And are those common abilities among the Sith? Are you capable of such travesties?”

She turned towards the Nautolan, who had posed the question.
“Since I draw the line at indiscriminate mass slaughter and genocide - I guess, no?”

“How is that a requirement?”

"Arguably the fastest way to dark side power is by killing, preferably on a large scale. Fuel your rage and hate, hone your skills in constant battle. A galaxy-wide conflict is absolutely perfect. Vitiate fuelled the vengeful ambitions of the Sith, and we all played right into his hands, delivering him the continuous carnage he required to grow more powerful. Every single Imperial and Republic death fed his powers. It would be foolish of Sidious to let this rather similar opportunity go to waste, even if the initial idea of instigating the Clone War was to destabilise the Republic. Thus, you lost on all fronts the second you entered this war.” She smiled gleefully, slowly making eyes contact with one Council member after the other. “How ironic, what was that line about merrily walking into a blade? Oh, you are so doomed.”

“You’re excited about that prospect?” Windu’s stern, determined demeanour was back.

“I am just thrilled to see that the Sith are superior after all, though the way Sidious is going about proving it is questionable.”

“So why not let it run its course? Or even join him?”

“Certainly not. I killed my Emperor for that very thing, the pursuit of immortality that cleaved a bloody line through the galaxy. Do you understand now what you are up against?” The realisation drew a shudder from some of the attendees, breaking their composed façade. “Even disregarding all that, I couldn’t possibly leave him unchallenged.”

Kenobi put a hand on his forehead in exasperation, shielding his eyes, and muttered under his breath “Sith logic”.

“Well, I lost everything I knew, can’t fault me for being a little bored.” She added by way of clarification.

“If succession among the Sith is ensured through murder, would you not automatically take up the mantle of Darth if you win?” Windu pressed.

I already outranked a mere Darth by a good margin, idiot. “I got a taste of being Empress when leading my Alliance. It’s ridiculously tedious. That’s not the kind of power I care for.” It was so close to the truth that it drew a rather irritated comment from Nox.

"We should consider ourselves lucky, then."

So very lucky.

“Have I sufficiently assuaged your fears? It’s been an eventful week, I am going to retire for tonight.”

“We can assign you quarters-”

“And place me under surveillance? Thanks for the offer, but I pass. I have my own apartment anyway.”

A very basic and tiny flat devoid of any furniture except for an inbuilt refresher module and a futon she’d bought after her first night there had consisted of meditation instead of sleeping by necessity. It was situated well above the pauper levels, but still made her barracks on Odessen look positively luxurious. Even so, it was vastly superior to having the Jedi breathe down her neck, though she had
little to hide at the moment.

They stared after her as she left, making no attempt to stop her.
After the meeting, the councillors filed out in complete silence, too shocked by the events to discuss them without prior contemplative meditation. Mace caught up with Obi-wan as he made his way to the war room, where Aayla was supposed to give her briefing now that they had finally established a stable, secure connection with her for the first time in more than two weeks. “A moment, please.” His voice was but a hoarse whisper, not just by necessity.

Obi-wan turned around, forehead creased with concern upon seeing the state his old friend was in. “Are you quite alright, Mace?”

Mace shook his head as if to clear out a bad memory. It did not seem to have the desired effect. “That Sith is a walking, breathing shatterpoint. I have never seen something like this before. Most have a faded quality to them, as if they are echoes of the past. Others pertain to the present and future, but they are so intangible, the fault lines flickering in and out of existence.” He fell silent and sighed shakily. “I cannot make sense of it.”

“Is this something she would be able to influence, making herself less readable, for lack of a better word?”

“I would not claim that it's impossible, the Force works in mysterious ways, now more than ever, but it would be unprecedented.”

“She has done something monumental; that much is undeniable.” Kenobi conceded diplomatically, stroking his beard. “And might still do so. I hope it turns out in our favour.”

“I have my doubts, but I ... thank you for staying my hand back in the Council chambers. Her aura is rather... overwhelming.” He gently pulled Obi-wan aside, into a narrower hallway. “Seeing as you’re the only one who has faced Maul and Tyranus in addition to witnessing this one’s feats on Belderone, what is your impression of her?”

“Like you said, her presence is astonishing – when she does not hide it, and the ease with which she does that bodes ill for us. I wonder how we could possibly identify Sidious. I did not mention it while she was present, but she clearly held back when fighting Grievous. She could've defeated him within seconds. I fear she might be far more powerful than she lets on, possibly even surpassing Sidious as appears to be her assumption, however, it’s hard to gauge properly. Her explanation makes sense – much may have been lost due to the modern Sith’s singular focus and method of succession. Thus, darksiders of her generation likely were a lot more versatile.”

“It does, but I am not quite convinced that it is not primarily her hubris speaking - she may have killed the most powerful adversaries of her time, which does sound rather far-fetched given how she tried to present herself as generally unremarkable, yet that is no indication how she would fare against her modern brethren. They had millennia to both recover lost knowledge or to come up with new abominations. Besides, she failed to take into account that they can’t have trained only amongst themselves, it would put them at a critical disadvantage compared to the Jedi Order by definition.”

“Valid concerns. Mace, I could have expounded on my assessment during the meeting - why have you approached me specifically, in private?”
The reply came after long hesitation. “Several of the shatterpoints have threads linking back to
you.”

“How so?” Obi-wan recoiled in surprise.

“I have no explanation. Such interpersonal fault lines are a common phenomenon, yet I fail to
imagine why you of all people and no one else. If it was only because she in effect rescued you
from Grievous – well, I would expect a similar connection to Master Unduli. There is none at all.”

“Perhaps I was meant to be killed by Grievous without her interference - we’ve had close
encounters in the past.” There was more to it, but this was certainly not the time to bring up what
had happened on Mandalore.

“Still, that does not explain the active connections. There would be the remnants of a resolved
shatterpoint … but this, it’s unprecedented.”

“I see why you acquiesced, allowing us to ally with her. If only temporarily, I assume?”

“She is far too powerful to remain without observation. If we need to confront her eventually, it
should not be in the Temple. We are probably playing right into her hands at the moments, yet the
alternative would leave us with two factions of Sith fanatically dedicated to eradicating the Jedi.”

“Fighting on two fronts would surely destroy us.”

“If the current front is not sufficient for that.” Mace gave him a dejected look. “In light of these
developments, there is something I must ask of you, Obi-Wan. I know I may be putting you into
grave danger.”

“Like every time I set foot on a battlefield.” The younger master replied with a faint, wry smile.

“Worse than that.” If anything, Mace’s expression grew more stern.

“Falling? You can’t possibly be worried about that.”

“You are one of the most committed, most resilient Jedi, but I fear this assignment could put you
into a position that is too exposed even for you…I need you to report on her, befriend her even, if
such a thing is conceivable.”

There were few things that could have made this day even more headache-inducing.

Chapter End Notes

Safe to say this is not going to go the way they think, for literally everyone. Too many
unspoken assumptions.
Kenobi’s holocall had come before the break of dawn, rousing her from a fitful night’s sleep. Despite the limited usefulness, she took care to memorise the layout of the hallways he led her through without them encountering more than a handful of Jedi, who greeted them, or rather their peer, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. As if he wasn’t in the company of their ancient nemesis. They arrived at a non-descript sliding door and Kenobi cordially ushered her into a bright, functionally furbished room that didn’t appear to have seen much use recently.

“Welcome to my quarters.” He gestured around, the oddity of the situation not lost on him, as evidenced by his wary uncertainty. “Could I interest you in a cup of freshly brewed tea?”

“With pleasure. Finally someone with manners.”

“Flower or leaf?” Kenobi enquired, giving a cautious smile.

“Leaf, preferably something rich, not one of those grassy blends.”

“In that case, I believe I might have something to suit your taste.” He rummaged through several large containers before pulling out a small silken satchel from a wooden box. He gently shook a small measure of the delicate buds into a cloth mesh, which he placed in a small teapot and added hot water prepared in anticipation of her visit. Carrying the tea set over to a low table, he indicated for his guest to sit down on one of the meditation cushions. Zayathris watched him intently as he poured the fragrant tea into two identical cups.

He face lit up as she savoured the aromatic scent and then took a tentative sip from the dainty jade-green teacup. “Ah, perfect. Partially fermented, isn’t it? What is this type of tea called?”

“Sapir tea.” A flash of wistful sadness marred Kenobi’s serene countenance before he summarily squashed it. “It was my master’s favourite.”

Her eyes bore into his for several uncomfortable moments before flickering back to her cup. “It isn’t yours, though?” She took another sip.

“No, however I always keep a stash of it…in remembrance…one could say.”

“I am honoured you chose to share it with me of all people. Truly.” She swirled the remnants of the bright green liquid around gently, gauging its colour and reached for the jug filled with boiled water to refill the teapot. “About two minutes for the second infusion at this temperature?”

“That is correct. You appear to be well-versed in the intricacies of tea brewing.”

“I find it centring to go through the ceremonial motions.” She admitted. “Many Sith worlds had their own customs and rituals associated with tea. Herbal tea was typical for my home planet, but
I’ve always associated those blends with their traditional medicinal purposes. Leaf tea or infusions of spices are for enjoyment.”

“Somehow, I wasn’t expecting that.” Kenobi commented bemusedly.

“Imperial culture was quite refined, actually, a far cry from the savage warrior society you probably envision.”

“Admittedly, I imagined Sith rituals to be rather sinister - and to not typically feature tea.”

“Not everything has to be about bloodshed and feature menacing chanting. Although there are occasions that call for adding blood or bonemeal to the brew. Results in a nice lustrous colour.”

“It does not sound easy on the stomach.” Kenobi stroked his beard, an automatic gesture to hide his disgust. “Not to mention, revoltingly close to cannibalism.”

“It is cannibalism, I suppose. But it wasn’t an everyday practice, don’t worry.” She refilled her interlocutor’s cup with a cheerfulness starkly contrasting the topic discussed. “It’s a rather visceral way of thoroughly dominating your foe or of drawing strength from another being. Come to think about it, that symbolism is quite ambiguous.”

Kenobi’s usual eloquence seemed to fail him on this bizarre topic. While they drank in silence, Zayathris’ gaze swept over the sparsely decorated room. An array of potted plants on a high shelf held her interest. “You enjoy gardening?”

“Another inheritance.” He replied almost dismissively, if not for the underlying pain. “Such a special relationship. And Maul took him from you. No wonder you hate him so fervently.” She purred gently, hypnotically, a sharp-clawed caress on Kenobi’s mind, before her demeanour abruptly switched to a brighter mood as she continued, “I fear I am not suited for such pastimes.”

“Ah, the plants?” Kenobi ventured, taken aback. Zayathris just nodded in reply, clearly enjoying unbalancing the Jedi. “That not really surprising, though - I presume most plants wouldn’t thrive in a Dark side environment.”

“Not true, unless you regularly treat them with Lightning or something.” She gave a genuine self-deprecating chuckle. “I failed to keep alive kriiffing cacti from Korriban, a dark side desert planet. There surely must be a special achievement for such a feat.”

Kenobi stifled a laugh, possibly to prevent insulting her. “Do you indulge in any, uh, benign leisure activities?”

“You mean, except for murder, mayhem and torturing innocents?” She quipped, finger running lasciviously along the rim of the cup. “Why bother getting to know me? But if you insist-” It was actually a pretty difficult question. “I like crafting my own armour from scratch, guess that doesn’t count… sparring probably doesn’t, either… I enjoy experimenting with fermented foods? There are other activities I’d rate more highly, but I doubt they suit a Jedi’s delicate sensibilities.”

“Such as?”

“Fucking.” She clarified bluntly. “Speaking of which, how is that Duchess of yours faring?”

Kenobi took a few seconds to process the question, his head dizzy from the mental whiplash of the repeated unexpected direction changes of their conversation. “I fail to see how that is on topic,” he emphasised, “but Duchess Satine is well, in large part thanks to your intervention. I have not had
the opportunity to express my gratitude-

“And considering who I am, you now wish you weren’t in my debt.”

“Ah, so that is…well.” He clenched his jaw. “In what ways do you expect me to even the score?”

“Could think of a few ways, actually. Not in the mood though, this place sure is the opposite of invigorating. You Jedi are overdoing it a bit with the tranquility.” Zayathris snorted a smug laugh at his scandalized look. “No insult intended. I know you’re already taken. She’s a lucky lady, though, you’re easy on the eyes. For a Jedi.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. A disturbing one, though.”

“Look, you’ve been rather useful, convincing your Jedi friends to hear me out-

Instantly, the mood shifted as Kenobi’s brows shot up, a spark of fear surging through his presence. “Is this the part where you run a concealed sabre through me, having outlived my usefulness, and proceed to go on a killing spree?”

“Oh? Fatalistic, much?” She cleared her throat awkwardly. “Did my declaration sound that ominous? Guess I am a little out of practise, then. At any rate, I meant to say, I do not expect any payback from you personally - beyond continuing to keep such an open mind.” That minor loophole would have to suffice.

Palpable relief went through the Jedi. “That’s reassuring, I think … but rather unexpected. I’ll be frank, then: What could you possibly have to gain from saving my life - twice? It seems quite counterintuitive.”

“Not just your physical life.” She peered over the rim of her teacup inquisitively. “Do even realise how you close you were?”

Kenobi met her gaze, confusion etched on his face.

“On Mandalore. To Falling, as you call it.” The Sith added, assessing his reaction.

“I will admit no such thing. I struggled with emotions in ways I have never before, but I overcame the temptation.” His words rang hollow.

She hummed noncommittally. “Of course, deny it all you want.”

“Even if that were the case, it makes your intervention more puzzling.”

“Oh, Master Kenobi, for being such a smooth talker, you are terrible at lying. I shall give you the benefit of the doubt, though, perhaps you’ve repressed your memories. I could not help but notice that the topic of my actions on Mandalore did not come up at all during the meeting. Am I correct in assuming that you have not told them? Out of shame, perhaps?”

“It’s unfortunately rather complicated - it was not an official mission, as you might have noticed. I was not supposed to go there and get the Republic politically involved.” His lips twitched with sheepish amusement. “I forgot to file a report, as it so happens, no-one noticed.”

“Huh, devious.”

“You did not mention it either - are you intending to blackmail me with the knowledge? I daresay,
while my actions would raise a lot of eyebrows, the Council is unlikely to believe a Sith telling them that I was that close to Falling. Not that it happened like that-” At this point, it was quite clear that he glossed over his mistake in order not to give her an actual opening instead of truly being oblivious to what nearly had come to pass.

“Stop. Don’t try to fool me. It’s insulting. I could sense your anger, your burning hatred – it was a wonderful thing, so radiant and focussed. You would’ve actively tapped into the Dark side if I had not acted.”

Obi-Wan let out a pained sigh. “Why, though? Would me falling not play into your hands?”

“You were not prepared for it. A fallen Jedi is a singularly terrible thing. Just a hollowed-out vessel for the dark side. That’s not what I would want for you.”

“Now that sounds ominous. As if I somehow feature in your plans.” He gave an uneasy laugh, as if his worst fears had just been confirmed.

“I am giving you a choice. Whatever I might have in mind for you, it would be worthless without your agency. You’re no use broken. It’s probably an affront to you, but you’d make a fine Sith. We would’ve needed people with such discipline and dedication – the Empire would have been a much better place. And now, the whole galaxy, too. Do you not think it fragmented beyond repair?”

“I appreciate your thoughtful offer, but my answer is a resounding no. I can’t think of anything that would change my mind, though you are welcome to try. Besides, I do not see how selflessness, the root of the traits you praised in me, would not go against the Sith philosophy.”

“Your motivation for the pursuit of power matters little in the grand scheme of things. I am sure you’ve also experienced situation where many could have been saved, if not for adherence to a deleteriously rigid moral code or stubborn sense of duty. You might have good intentions, but you fall short of achieving lasting success as you lack the will to follow through. That is the greatest folly of the Jedi – the expectation of making a positive impact when in fact you’re forever limited to damage control. How many unnecessary deaths could have been prevented if a Jedi had not shown mercy to the wrong person? Mercy is a dangerous delusion. Breaking such chains does not mean consummate evil-”

“How many have you killed?”

Irritated by the interruption, she tapped her fingers against the surface of the table while she deliberated over her strategy. When she looked back up, she had schooled her face back into a façade of bored neutrality. “Many.”

Kenobi regarded her sternly, not satisfied with the reply.

“Jedi? Too many to count, but the number of Sith I have killed is not that much lower. Comes with the terrain.”

“Tell me, did you enjoy it?”

“Sometimes the unnecessary wastefulness leaves a bitter taste - but, yeah, mostly?”

He paused, weighing his words, before continuing with dejected quietness. “Earlier, you expressed your sympathies at my master’s passing. Is it... are you even capable of such emotion? Do you realise the Jedi you gleefully killed all had a master, or an apprentice requiring their guidance?”
“Since I pride myself on thoroughness, I usually made sure I got them both, so…”

Kenobi blanched, appalled by her callousness. “I have trouble connecting the rational woman I was having a considerate discussion with minutes ago to that vicious monster you’re morphing into before my very eyes.”

“No wonder your famed negotiations tend to go awry, if you talk to everyone like that. You see, I was born into war. The Jedi of my time had just as much blood on their hands. Remember, Imperials were people, too. People with dreams, fears, ambitions, honour, family…”

“One could consider them misguided people serving a murderous regime.” He deliberately phrased it that way to get a rise of out her.

“Sure, why not carpet-bomb them all? Don’t you enjoy the righteousness of your path?”

“We Jedi fight to protect others, to re-establish the peace.” Even as he said it, Kenobi grimaced, as if the words turned into ash in his mouth.

“So did we, in a sense. A life taken is just that. Let me ask you, if you were faced with people instead of droids in this war, what would change for you? You’d still need to defend against them.” She made a sweeping motion. “And up goes the death score.”

“One would hope that we have learned from such horrors occurring in the past, at the very least.” *He kriiffing evaded the question!* “It would be a far more honourable war than pitting expendable clones versus expendable droids while the Jedi play the heroes.”

Kenobi gaped at her for a moment. “You think we wanted any of this?” He asked incredulously.

“It’s your kriiffing army. Not that I blame you. Just don’t try to fool yourselves into believing yourselves above the bloodshed. Accept that conflict is a way of life. You of all people should understand that, what with your Mandalorian mistress.”

“Duchess Satine is a pacifist, more than even me, regrettably. You keep implying I am romantically involved with her. What gave you that idea?” The Jedi protested half-heartedly.

“So you do not love her? That means you almost fell over nothing?”

Something darkly possessive flickered behind his eyes. “You are correct. I do love her, with all my heart, but I *choose* not to act upon it.”

It was Zayathris’ turn to sigh. “Because you are afraid you’re too weak.”

She had not expected him to give an honest answer.

“Yes.”

Zayathris allowed him a minute to let the admission sink in before she picked up the strands of their conversation again.

“Are they dead?” This time, she did not need to clarify.
“Oppress? He was unable to put up much of a fight after you grievously injured him. I killed him like the rabid animal he gave himself licence to behave as.” She could see his jaw working as he processed his unbecoming choice of words. “Curiously, he vanished in a wisp of green smoke. As for Maul, I regrettably cannot say for certain. I wounded him, severed his arms, but then he attempted to escape. I pulled him back and he just…fell from the building. So there was nothing to report – anything I could have claimed on the topic of their fate would put others in danger if I was wrong.”

“It’s quite hilarious how your silver tongue seems to work on yourself, too. I didn’t take you for a void-damned hypocrite, Kenobi.” He squirmed under her look. “As a friendly piece of advice – and speaking from first-hand experience - you should have made sure. Sith have a curious tendency to defy death.”

“I know, Maul especially. I thought I had killed Maul before, on Naboo, after he slew my master. When I realised Satine had been brought to safety, I just… couldn’t bring myself to go looking for his corpse.”

“You didn’t want to continue down the path of revenge.”

“It’s a little terrifying how well you can read me. It’s true. I suppressed my emotions about what happened on Naboo for years, when they emerged again, I simply knew dwelling on Maul would consume me.”

“What is it about the dark that has you all so petrified? If I didn’t know better, I would think you acknowledge its superiority.”

He refilled their cups once more, failing to mask the slight trembling of his hands. “Most Jedi believe that the original self dies when falling completely. Not just by accident lashing out of anger, but by actively embracing the dark.”

“Why the distinction, though?”

“Well, to take the term literally, if you catch someone while they fall, there is still hope. But when they hit the bottom of the abyss, they shatter and are remade in the image of the Dark side. Have their values turned upside down. You, on the other hand, essentially… started from the ground, so it wouldn’t be the same for you, would it?”

“There is much room to fall for me, as well. I have seen depths of superlative depravity I wouldn't even consider.”

*I thought myself a monster. I played in rivers of blood and laughed as innocents quaked.* An echo of Hargrev’s words rang in her ear.

“But I am not afraid - if it was necessary to give oneself over so completely, I would do it in a heartbeat. My training is dedicated to making sure it does not become a necessity. It’s not power if it dominates you. There is a fine line between the dark side freeing you and letting it enslave you in turn.” Her determined rhetoric took on a more meditative quality, as though speaking only to herself. “Over the years, however, one realisation has stood out with utter clarity – mastering the dark side is not enough.”

*It never was.*

“For all your power, what would make such a – it’s in essence a sacrifice, isn’t it? – necessary?” Kenobi prodded shrewdly.
*A man can have anything, if he is willing to sacrifice.* An involuntary shudder ran down at the unbidden memory.

“From a certain point of view, I suppose it would be.” One I thought I made. “Contrary to what you might think, I am not a sadist. Many of my peers were in the habit of randomly murdering officers or bystanders for their own perverse enjoyment. I try to remain above such base violence. However, as I went through the motions of gaining power, from apprentice to Lord and beyond even such ranks, for all the theoretical freedom the Force gave me, someone was always yanking my chain.”

_Tremel, Baras, Vitiate, Vowrawn, Marr – even Lana. And now…_

“Actually, I am helping you reach the full extent of your capabilities.”

As if you aren’t using me for your own gain at the same time.

“How kriffing magnanimous of you.

“A chain I should not have in the first place. Pressuring me into roles I did not want, coercing me into taking approaches I considered inferior, detrimental to the Empire or went against my priorities. I will not play the victim of circumstance – I did all those things, but not because I desired them. That’s the crux: I did it because I was weak. As a result, I lost people I should’ve been strong enough to protect, took part in senseless carnage. I swore to myself that I would never be helpless against the whims of anyone.”

“And this – precisely this - is why you and I are so much alike, dear Wrath.”

Zayathris picked up her cup, only to realise that it was empty. “As for your theory: Through all that, I have not lost myself.”

*You were wrath made flesh...*

_I am not your Wrath, Vitiate. I am your executioner.

*Remember me, when your Alliance burns to ash.*

The memory dissipated as abruptly as it had washed over her.

Her grimace had not gone unnoticed. “Are you alright?”

There was no point in trying to salvage her image when she had revealed so much already. At least they were even in that regard. Brutal honesty is was to be, then. “Of course. I just did not expect our conversation to take such an intimate turn. I doubt anyone else has managed to catch a glimpse of your inner darkness. And I admittedly have never bared my mind like this to, well, anyone.”
On purpose, at least. I am looking at you, Nox. The innocuous whistling that ensued echoed through her skull, coming to a grating crescendo before she shut him out in annoyance.

“Not even the select people you claim to care about?”

“No. Too much of a risk, either to them or me. To give you an example: My own husband tried to assassinate me - he was in fact loyal to my master at that time. Granted, he wanted it to fail so at least he had the decency to face me in combat instead of poisoning me in my sleep or something.”

“That’s…messed up. I see a running theme here, though – is a Sith’s life not driven by perpetual fear? Your quest for power, the façade of strength you must keep up, the need to dominate so you can save those you’re afraid to lose…”

“Given enough power, there is nothing to fear.”

“An apex predator can still succumb to disease.” He rose from his cushion and returned to the kitchenette, taking the teapot with him. “So, have you reached that goal yet?”

“He has a robust tendency to get under your skin. Remarkable.”

Void. He would be…absolutely perfect.

“Looks like you’ve found a worthy challenge.”

“I could say, yes, of course and that it is a path available to you, as well.” The classic approach was getting nowhere, but they both knew it and had long made a game of it.

Kenobi turned around and leaned against the cupboard leisurely. “Then again, it would be a lie. Because it never really ends, does it?” He analysed shrewdly, his voice incongruously soft. “I think I understand now. That is why peace is lie from your point of view.”

“I suppose asking nicely will not convince you to consider joining me, either?”

“No, but it will yield you another pot of tea.”

“I shall content myself with that. For the moment.”

Chapter End Notes

*Lord Hargrev, comparing himself to the Dread Masters.

Your gardening attempts are as desperate as they are useless.

If Obi-Wan seems a little out-of-character here, consider the previous chapter and that Zayathris intervened before he had a chance to release all of his emotions into the Force on Mandalore, setting him on a slightly more self-aware, more disillusioned path. Given that he essentially helps Anakin keep his relationship a secret without ever addressing the issue and bearing in mind the Rako Hardeen episode, he is no stranger to
slightly duplicitous behaviour, either. I hope it does not come across as a contrived plot
device to bully him into Zayathris’ corner, which isn’t even the goal.
A bit more dialogue setting the stage for the next arc. We'll soon reach ROTS territory (3-4 chapters to go), but be advised that the timeline will be altered, with the events of ROTS (those that actually happen in some form) spanning several months instead of days.

“-and bear in mind that no one who’s not on the High Council is supposed to learn of your, well, alignment.” Obi-Wan quietly briefed her as they were about to enter the Archives.

“Not that I am complaining, but if I intended to betray you, that would be quite counterproductive. Unsuspecting Jedi are easy prey.”

“Ironically, I find myself agreeing with you, however the Council decided that the risk of discord outweighs the likelihood of you turning on us.” -just yet. The words were on his lips, but he did not say them.

“Questionable reasoning, though I suppose you have no choice but to trust me anyway.”

“Given that you tried to lure me to the Dark side just this morning, trust is a little fickle at the moment.”

“And you came out unscathed. Can’t fault me for trying.” She idly brushed her fingers over one of the busts framing the hallway leading to the inner gallery of the library.

“I admit I am a little curious – has your spiel ever worked?”

“Most of the time, actually. Haven’t had the opportunity to try my hand on a master, though, usually only padawans and knights are inexperienced enough to listen.”

Kenobi abruptly stopped in his tracks. “You twisted the minds of children?”

“No, because in my time, padawans were usually of age, not the child soldiers you’ve turned them into. This time at least, I am not the one with the questionable morals.”

“As if you care.”

“Petty. But you’re right, I don’t particularly care about the recruitment and training scheme of the Jedi Order. I just wonder why you don’t, either.” She replied, voice slightly raised.

A Jedi sitting at one the holoterminal desks looked up from this work as they approached and rose swiftly to meet them, breaking into a delighted smile.

Zayathris inclined her head in greeting. “I am glad to see you have recovered from your injuries.”

“I would not be here if not for your heroic effort. I had hoped our paths would cross again so that I
Puzzled, Kenobi glanced between them. “You have met- Oh.” He swerved around to face the woman beside him, a hilariously conflicting sequence of expressions flitting across his face. “I really must be losing my edge.” He muttered audible only to Zayathris. “So… the original retelling of events suffered a few key omissions?”

Not missing a beat, she grinned slyly. “Of course, but actually nothing of consequence transpired.”

“But if- Why- the kriff isn’t Tyranus dead, then? She added in her head as Kenobi failed to finish his sentence.

“You must really regret not filing that report now.” A perfect opportunity to rekindle his residual guilt.

“That…” He had grown visibly pale, the potential implications rendering him speechless.

The other man watched the cryptic exchange with mounting confusion. “Is something the matter, Master Kenobi?”

“No, Archivist Vaiken.” Kenobi sighed, his right eyebrow twitching. “I just realised a grave oversight.”

“Which requires no correction nor discussion at the moment, Master Jedi.” Zayathris interrupted him. “No harm will come from it, I assure you.” He flinched involuntarily when she gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“I shall hold you to your word. Another tea session in the evening?” He asked in resignation.

“I’d be delighted.” She nodded towards Vaiken quizzically.

“It seems you need little by way of introduction. Lady Zayathris,” she suppressed a grin at the term of address, “is here as an independent researcher.” Kenobi seemed to have finally got his act together again. Granted, they were all operating outside of their respective comfort zones, but at some point, the inane apprehension got in the way of productive collaboration.

“Oh, a fellow historian! That explains a lot, actually. I have been wondering about the odd circumstances under which we met.”

“Wondering, huh? Kept you up at night?” A reddish tinge appeared on the archivist’s cheeks as a result of her teasing words.

“I probably shouldn’t ask…” The younger Jedi vacillated.

“That would be for the best, yes.”

“So, what is your area of research?” Vaiken enquired, with no small measure of enthusiasm.


The archivist’s eyes grew wide, his mouth opening and closing comically.

Kenobi shot her a scathing look before hastening to salvage the situation. “She professes to be an expert on, ahem, certain eras of non-Republic history, and has kindly agreed to help us track the traces the Sith might left in recent history in an attempt to learn more about them and possibly come closer to identifying them. The Council decided an outside perspective might be of use.
Would you mind assisting her in this task?”

Really smooth, Kenobi, when I have no academic level knowledge of history to speak of, let alone anything that happened in the last 4000 years.

“We did read up on that in the Achorran library.”

Don’t think that’s enough to keep up the façade. Besides, don’t tell me you memorised all that pointless drivel?

“Nah, I’m just chilling in the back of your head- of course I did! We would have wasted our time there otherwise.”

We did waste time as it hasn’t yielded any concrete results.

“Hasn’t it now?”

“Not at all, in fact, we were informed of a visitor just before lunch and I volunteered. Admittedly, I did not expect this would be the outcome. Such a monumental task, though, perhaps another-”

“Madame Nu assured me you’re qualified. She is to be granted full access to historical documents and non-classified” The distinction earned Kenobi an eye-roll. “current data. I’ll leave you two to it. May the Force be with you in your endeavour.” Don’t make me regret it, he mouthed to Zayathris when the slightly older Jedi wasn’t looking.

“I like him already.”

Oh my.

“He is practically a younger Jedi version of Talos.”

And he has such a nostalgic name.

“It’s not impossible that it hearkens back to the glorious days.” Nox chuckled.

Odile Vaiken was not said to have had any offspring.

“No, but one of this Jedi’s ancestors could’ve named himself after the space station. A slave with no family name? An immigrant?”

It would be a blight on the Grand Moff’s legacy to have produced such a tragically inept combatant. At any rate, I wonder if Jedi are allowed to research their ancestry.

“I am sure our dear archivist would have, even if it was prohibited. He possesses that kind of irrepressible curiosity.”

At least we are in good hands in terms of our research.
“Where would you like to start?”

“How about you tell me what is known about the current generation of Sith?”

“Not much, to be honest. Supposedly, there are always two of them at the same time and about two hundred years ago, someone – presumably, a Sith – opened a rift in the Force, which enabled us to sense the dark side for the first time in the eight centuries since the New Sith Wars.”

“That’s really not much to go by.” So they essentially thought the dark side extinct during all that time?

“…not that more stupid than us blindly following Vitiate for a millennium.”

True. But for all their failings, the Jedi can’t possibly have been that naïve. I mean, I can sense it here, the dark, in their kripping Temple. The whole of Coruscant is immersed in it. Whatever those Sith were doing to cloak their work before, it does not seem to be effective anymore. Has Sidious simply become overconfident and sloppy? No way. Perhaps it has built up to such a degree that he cannot keep it under wraps anymore? I’d seriously doubt his capabilities, then. And still, the Jedi seem unfazed-

“So rather, oblivious to it. You’re right, it’s unexpectedly tangible here. Some of it is the holocrons stored somewhere nearby.”

There are Sith holocrons here?

“Yep, it feels quite muted, probably security mechanisms of some kind, can’t have the poor librarians risk corruption. There is something else, though. Perhaps…That would be really interesting…It is difficult to ascertain the specifics, however…”

What?

“During the earliest days of the old Sith Order, when they were basically a faction split off from the Jedi, they had a presence on Coruscant. Ossus, Tython – the Jedi tend to build their temples in places strong in the Light side, ideally on the site of a Force nexus.”

Obviously? There’s a reason we settled on Korriban, Ziost…

“Yes, but my point is that the Force vergence must’ve always been here.”

So you mean, the early Sith had access to it, too. They most definitely would have used it in some way.

“Precisely. A case of poisoning the well, so to speak?”

It would greatly facilitate this…I don’t know how to call it…shaping of the landscape of the Force?

“It would be easier to assess the situation if I had a body and didn’t have to rely on your perception. You know, I think we might have been underestimating Sidious and his lineage. You and I are more concerned with tangible greatness – the ability to bend the world to our will - so it is natural for us to assume they would primarily be after worldly powers as well. What if they have dedicated themselves to influencing the Force itself?”

Wouldn’t it be an immense help for keeping up their deception?
“Of course, but it's also major overkill. You fail to take into account what a monumental feat it would be, to tilt the balance of the Force like this. This goes beyond even Ziosk or Nathema.”

You’ve got to be joking.

“Unfortunately, no. No matter how far Vitiate’s manipulations of the Force went, they were always dependent on people.”

So you think they unknowingly plagiarised your idea?

“In a crude, excessive way.”

Or a more comprehensive manner. You didn’t leave a holocron, did you?

“I am neither that narcissistic nor stupid. Consider this – they already achieved what would have been an impossibility in our Empire and even the Brotherhood of Darkness - if the records described their intentions correctly - that Bane wiped out. They consistently worked together – successive generations separated by time, united by a common goal. Every single link in the chain on a quest for maximising his personal power while paving the ground for their successor instead of undermining their chances... The progress they might have made, slowly, but surely, not hampered by constant infighting... Even in our prime, the whole Dark Council could have meditated together for days and not yielded such a lasting effect on the Force.”

I don’t like this at all.

“All the more reason to find Sidious. I really wonder for what purpose he is biding his time – politically the Republic is doomed already and the war could remain at an impasse for years with no actual progress.”

“I am afraid I don’t really see any starting point for a historical analysis.” Vaiken added when she did not continue with more questions.

No longer distracted by the internal conversation, Zayathris rounded the table and leaned over the screen. “In that case, I suggest we begin by analysing their possible angles of leverage in the present, and corroborate it with historical records to assess the plausibility.”

“I see your dear husband has rubbed off on you.”
“An enemy will almost never be anything except an enemy. All one can do with an enemy is defeat him. But an adversary can sometimes become an ally. There is a cost, of course. In all things in life there is a cost. In dealing with an adversary, sometimes the cost paid in power or position. Sometimes the cost is greater. Sometimes the risk is one’s future, or even one’s life. But in all such situations, the calculation is straightforward: whether or not the potential gain is worth the potential loss. And the warrior must never forget that he and his adversary are not the only ones in that equation. Sometimes, all the universe may hang in the balance.”
— Timothy Zahn, Star Wars: Thrawn

They had wanted this.

Explicitly requested a sparring match, ostensibly for academic purposes.

In truth, as both sides knew, it was a test gauging their own skills – and thus, chances against Sidious - as much as evaluating the threat she represented.

So their complaints would fall on deaf ears if they got their collective arses handed to them.

The anticipation made Zayathris’ fingers tingle.

The only letdown was the choice of weapons. She had almost refused when they handed her the pathetic things. Apparently, they did not trust her to hold back – unsurprising, yet vaguely disappointing. In turn, she watched intently as her opponent dialled down the power output of his own sabre. Now that was a feature she would never have considered adding to her weapon, although she recognised that it could be useful in some situations – just not in battle. Although the low-power hum of the practice sabres – leave it to the Jedi to castrate an inherently lethal weapon – was grating, at least it was not screaming hysterically at her like those of Katooni and Kenobi had.

How she missed her crimson blades.

Staffs or warblades were fine for starting out with melee weapons – but even those could be deadly if one was not careful, though not necessarily for the wielder. In that way, practice sabres were safer, which was precisely what made them so boring and ineffective for learning purposes. How could one learn to fight properly without a sense of actual danger? The Jedi argued that actual lightsabres were too risky for children to use – but most Sith had started training early as well, and at such a young age, it had been in nobody’s interest to weed out the weaker ones yet. It would be irresponsible for a parent to coddle their children. Giving them a harmless weapon – a contradiction in itself - would douse their natural eagerness and deal what was could only be a blow to their confidence. How else would you teach your child responsibility, if not by trusting them to understand the obligation that came with wielding a blade?

And if an overzealous six-year-old really managed to chop his arm off while fooling around, well,
at least it was not too late for them to embark on a less physically demanding path of training - or to get accustomed to fighting with a prosthetic. If they killed someone else – a rare occurrence for all she knew, though historically it had led to a Kaggath in one instance -, that would be more problematic, but on par with the same happening during their academy education. And if the victim were a friend, it would give the child an early taste of the depths of the dark side. Then it was up to the family to direct the resulting emotions into the right channels. Never let it be said that parenting was a trivial task. Though she could not speak from first-hand experience, she had seen how much could go wrong in that regard judging from the examples the other students on Korriban had set.

Given his earlier attitude, it was only logical for her to pick Windu as her first opponent. The match started off cautiously enough, both circling each other, searching for an opening, until Zayathris’ patience ran out and she leapt towards him to deal the first strike. The fight instantly spiralled to a ridiculous, entirely unexpected intensity from there. From the outside, it had to look like a completely random blur of green and purple, devoid of discernible patterns, the individual attacks nearly invisible to the naked eye. The perfect illusion of disorder, delivered with malignant grace.

Windu was an oddity: A Jedi, playing around with what could only be described as a modified Juyo form. What was more, it appeared that he, too, became more powerful, his attacks more ferocious as she opened herself up further to her passion and sank deeper into the embrace of the Dark. As though he somehow leached off her emotions – but she could not feel any connection, any draining effect that would make this conceivable.

None of her feints seemed to catch him off guard, as if could predict her every move – which should be an impossibility with Juyo. Considering his odd technique, perhaps that was the key? Could he mirror her somehow?

The mutual escalation continued to make the fight insanely fast, so she clipped the second sabre to her belt and switched to a more controllable Djem So in an attempt to slow him down, requiring him to counter her more powerful strikes. He did not need longer than a few heartbeats to adapt to the change, still not giving her any openings.

Their sabres deadlocked at chest level, neither able to overpower the other. His eyes darkened with something bordering on anger, his previously dispassionate face a mask of aggression. If she didn’t know better, she’d think Windu enjoyed combat more than he should, his presence alight with the thrill of battle. It was less contained than she had come to expect from a Jedi, flowing seamlessly into the Force that surrounded them, his composure characterised by zeal rather than staunch duty.

“How long can you keep this up, before the dark claims its due?” She taunted him, voice strained from the effort.

“Longer than I will require to defeat you.” His lips curled in a snarl.

“Spoken like a true keeper of the peace.”

Small droplets of perspiration formed on his forehead.

She gradually shifted her weight backwards, pretending to try to overcome the stalemate by moving out of his range. When he followed her movement, she stepped to the side, half behind him, and reached over his raised arm with one hand, gripping his wrist. Able to control his motion thus, she ducked slightly and charged forward, throwing him on his back. Recovering quickly, too quickly for her liking, he retaliated by attempting to sweep out the legs under her - without success.
and pressed the offense.

Theoretically, the fight could go on forever unless she switched gears significantly. This was a confrontation not to be won by pure physical prowess. And with their fighting styles so similar, there were no inherent weaknesses of their sabreplay to exploit.

She tilted back her blade from a high parry and slammed the hilt into Windu’s temple. It caused him to stagger back briefly; buying her much needed time to reconsider her tactics.

There was a risk of her giving away too much, however, her curiosity won out, the virtual impasse lending itself to a unique experiment.

She ignited the other sabre again and, closely observing her opponent, reached into the torrent of fury again.

Noticing the concentrated effort of Windu to attain control over himself without raising any shields and subsequent shift of his presence confirmed her suspicions. He was tapping into the dark side by proxy of her emotions, apparently without it affecting him directly. Although the foundations were undeniably there, his immense power did not merely come from his inner darkness, rather he allowed himself to turn into perfect conduit - requiring her to close the loop.

That would be his undoing.

Gradually, she eased into her own channelling meditation, lessening the power output until the loop ran dry. They were now two blank slates opposing one another, with no possibility for him to draw on her power. Windu furrowed his brows in perplexity. She could feel him attempting to read her, straining to understand her radically changed state of mind. It was a strangely unsettling kind of probing, almost intimate, brushing close to her core of being.

Time to teach the impertinent Jedi a lesson.

She gathered the extreme focus needed to use Juyo to its full extent, and plunged herself into her cultivated rage, letting it ripple through her body until every fibre was satiated with it, finding a place within the eye of the storm from which to strike from, having attained mastery over chaos itself.

Windu reeled from the emotional whiplash. His eyes widened as he rushed to latch onto the avalanche threatening to wash over him, to bury him in suffocating darkness.

Thus, springing the trap.

Contrary to his expectations, it was not a focused attack to crush his mind with torturous thoughts.

Zayathris poured more and more rage and dark emotions into the conduit, employing the transcending technique to detach it from herself, letting it fill her opponent instead of putting it to use. It felt painfully draining, but that only gave her more strength in turn.

Windu delved deeper into his technique in turn, realising her goal only when it was too late. With no way of closing the loop on his own to let it flow back out of him, the flames ravaged him. Unused to dealing with so much sheer darkness, it threatened to overwhelm him, rendering him powerless against the unrelenting waves crushing against his mental fortifications.

Where before he had danced around the crater of a volcano without feeling the searing heat, he was now hanging over the edge with only one hand holding onto the crumbling ground, his resolve slowly melting away.
She jeered in triumph, a vicious teeth-baring smile marring her face - she had been right, Windu’s mysterious technique required the darksider to use the Force normally or with the intent to directly cause harm, not to overload the capacity of the circuit he created to make it bounce off him.

The veins on Windu’s forehead bulging with exertion, he tried to pull away from her, but wherever he turned, there was no solace to be found.

Blood trickling from his nose, mouth agape in a silent scream, he struggled alone against the dark trapped inside of him while his peers watched, aghast, not comprehending what was happening.

She finally gave him a little reprieve.

The Jedi master dropped to the ground and bent over, trembling hands on his thighs. He looked up slowly with watery, baleful eyes. Zayathris sank down to one knee, until their faces were on the same level, as if to soothe him.

With a smirk, she drove the sabre through his upper chest and twisted it for good measure. The pain sent him over the edge. With a desperate roar, his hand shot up to her throat, only to jerk back as if burned, and sank down limply, as Windu collapsed from the strain.

The ensuing shocked silence was deafening.

Tock. Tock.

The sound of the little greenish creature’s walking stick reverberated through the room. He leaned over Windu, brushing his three-fingered hand over the man’s face and closed his eyes meditatively.

“What done you have?”

“I’ve given him a small taste of the real dark side. He should know better than to play with fire.”

“A duel upon death, not meant to be, this was.” He chastised the Sith.

“What are you talking about? He’ll be fine.” A little traumatised, perhaps... Oh, he was going to hate her. “Besides, pain is a highly effective teacher. Much better than death.”

“Teach what, you intended?”

“It’s not my task to teach you anything, but yours to learn. I have shown him the folly of underestimating the nature of the dark. You think Sidious will not exploit his arrogance? At least Windu is not going to make the same mistake twice.”

Master Yoda used the Force to levitate his unconscious peer, gently setting him down on a stretcher, and gestured for two guards to carry him out of the sparring room.

An older human male she had not seen before – now the only one present who was not part of the Council – stepped up.

“Harsh methods, Sith.”
“And you are?”

“And you are Cin Drallig. Battlemaster of the Order.”

“Ahh, I met one of your predecessors.”

“By *met* you happen to mean, *faced in combat*?” He asked snidely as he adjusted the clip pulling his silver-grey hair back in a flowing ponytail.

“Alas, I never had that particular pleasure.” She pulled her tunic into position and passed the lightsabre into her left hand. *Ready for another experiment, Nox?* “Any terms for our duel? Don’t want to exceed the capacity of your medical wing.”

“None, no holding back. Just be aware that I possess no unique abilities that could be turned against me.”

Several minutes into the fight, Zayathris had to admit that Drallig was quite formidable, if rather annoying, but the latter was true for the majority of Jedi. Seamlessly integrating techniques from nearly all forms and combining sequences in an utterly innovative manner, he represented an invigorating challenge that was not spoiled by her opponent employing fancy, arcane powers.

Finally, she felt wholly alive again, with the aggressive rhythm of combat thrumming in her veins.

Despite his air of superiority, Drallig was calm and serene, a far cry from Windu’s fierce authority. He baited her, having lain in wait for the right moment to launch into a nimble flow of attacks that ended with a horizontal sweep across her midriff that she only barely managed to dodge.

There was a gasp from one of the onlookers, clearly disagreeing with the appropriateness of the attempted sai tok strike.

“There is no contemplation, there is only duty?” The corners of her lips twitching upwards, she added, “You know, people who threaten me have an abysmal mortality rate.”

He did not acknowledge her enigmatic comment and instead erected a Force barrier around himself that withstood even the most brutal barrage of attacks.

“You heavily favour Juyo. You will find it possesses just as many inherent flaws as all other forms.”

_Don’t you dare lecture me, old man._

“And you will find yourself screaming in agony once I am done with you!” Zayathris spat.

In a sense, he was right, however – due to the immense focus it required, Juyo was extremely draining and intended for ending a battle swiftly, its speed and unpredictability lending itself to near-instant victory. Drawing out the fight with Windu – and now, the battlemaster - as she had, was generally unwise.

Taking advantage of her brief distraction, Drallig jumped over her head and followed the acrobatic manoeuvre with a strike before his feet touched the ground. She swatted away his blade in time, but her counterattack was cut short by an impeccably well-timed Force Push that nearly sent her flying into a pillar. Boosting her grip on the ground, she merely skidded several metres back, her right hand sliding on the floor as she regained her balance. It was in that moment that Drallig rolled forward and ignited his sabre at the end, driving it through her exposed left knee. Appropriately armoured, that would not have been a problem at all. The Council having forbidden her to wear her
usual attire since it was “too menacing”, even the low-powered blade caused a jolt of agony to run up her leg. Nevertheless, that was nothing compared to the humiliation constricting her chest.

*Should’ve seen that one coming.*

The battlemaster eyed her impassively as he allowed her to get up.

She would make sure he regretted his clemency, she swore to herself, gingerly putting weight on the injured limb to test it. The pain was insignificant – it improved her focus, if anything – but the affected tendons would need first and foremost rest to recover.

*And now, for the grand finale…*

She beckoned Drallig to attack. For a few moments, their fight continued as it had before, slowed down by her opting to take a defensive approach as she deepened her focus. When her opponent overswung before an attack, she took a step back and raised her left hand, fingers shifting their position on the hilt constituting the only warning. He was lifted into the air, and a shocked gasp later, dropped his weapon as both his hands went to his throat, fumbling to pry away the invisible grip choking the air from him.

Zayathris cocked her head. “Got more wisdom to share, Battlemaster?” She asked sardonically.

When she tightened her grasp further, just short of damaging his airways permanently, a spark of resolve surged through Drallig. This time, however, she was prepared for his Force-based attack and absorbed the push with ease. In retaliation, a stream of pale blue lightning poured from her right hand into his struggling form.

“You will have to drop him if you want to hear his screams.”

Chuckling, Zayathris complied and let up the pressure on her victims neck, only to rev up the lightning. A raw, agonized cry ripped from Drallig’s throat. In tune with the bright current of pure hatred, it was almost melodic.

*You know, I always considered you quite insane, but this is surprisingly entertaining.* She remarked to Nox. *A pity I can’t see it through to it’s conclusion.*

With a sigh, she ceased the torturous attack, a few stray sparks dancing around her hand afterwards.

In an impressive display of resilience, the battlemaster pushed himself to all fours, panting. His muscles twitching, it was evidently only through sheer willpower that he managed to make a gesture symbolising the acceptance of his defeat.

The Nautolan master- Kit Fisto, if she remembered correctly - wordlessly helped him out of the duelling space.

This time, Yoda did not scold her verbally, but he regarded her with eyes narrowed in silent reprimand – *or suspicion?*

“Any more volunteers, or have you seen enough?” Zayathris crossed her arms, quickly growing bored while the other Jedi fussed over Drallig.

Kenobi exchanged a look with Yoda. It was only when the latter nodded that he approached her,
nonchalantly shaking off his cloak as he did so.

“Be gentle. I am due for deployment soon.”

Zayathris nodded curtly and ignited her sabres, arms hanging lazily by her side.

Hardly a surprise, the Jedi adopted the wide ready stance of Soresu. She began with the wide and powerful strikes of Djem So once more. Kenobi parried her attacks almost effortlessly, even routinely as if he regularly trained for precisely such a scenario.

To her frustration, she already felt the first hints of fatigue setting.

She hadn’t slept properly for several days and not yet overcome the crash from the high of the lightning usage against the Separatist forces. To channel such energy without much in the way of practice was unexpectedly taxing. It took a toll in the form of all-over soreness and heart palpitations, which Nox had assured her were temporary and always happened to him, too, when he needed to heal others under strain. Still, it felt like it could easily bring her to brink of death, if she overdid it.

Kenobi was keenly aware of her exhaustion and all too eager to exploit it. She decided to play along, giving him such openings to lure him out of his almost impenetrable defence. To her astonishment, one of his swift counterattacks was successful; landing what would have been a critical cut on her inner thigh. Crippling with a real sabre, utterly deadly with a warblade unless the blood flow was suppressed in time. Having dominated her other challengers, she saw no harm in humouring the Jedi, which gave her an opportunity to learn more about him.

She allowed Kenobi to drag out the match, migrating it onto his terms as he levelled the playing field by exhausting her – which was a major strength of Soresu anyway. He deflected her weary attempts at conjuring more lightning easily. Weaving unexpected Ataru elements into his style, he kept her on her toes with rapid direction switches. It was obvious he had had ample opportunity to analyse her bladework. They moved across room as their fight gained intensity once more. She transitioned from a low parry into a spinning attack, and finished with a sweep towards Kenobi’s exposed back. The sabre nicked his hip, but failed to have the intended reach. She leapt up and brought both blades down in an overhead blow. Again, her opponent was prepared. Kenobi’s riposte turned out to be a ruse and when he batted both of her sabres to one side, her evasive reaction to an actual upward slash came a fraction too late. She ignored the brief sting of pain of what would have cut her left arm off at the shoulder. Now standing behind Kenobi as he spun around, she feinted a low thrust.

There.

Directing the movement of her opponent, she forced him backwards with staccato attacks from both sides. Blocking them left his core area wide open, so Zayathris pulled back briefly to follow up with a final broad sweep. Not meeting any resistance from Kenobi’s blade, she overswung but continued on the same trajectory, surging forward and bringing her blade to his throat.

“You’re dead, General Kenobi.”

The cocky smirk on his face was unexpected. “At least I meet my demise in the knowledge of having taken my opponent with me.”

It took her longer than it should have to notice the hilt of Kenobi’s unignited sabre pointed towards her solar plexus.
The Jedi’s smile broadened with roguish mischief.

The Force telegraphed a warning.

All she saw was before the world grew mute was a bright flash of blue.

Pain bloomed in her stomach much later.

Her mind short-circuited as Kenobi’s stunned face morphed into Vaylin’s and then, Arcann’s, a dark red tinge crawling into her vision.

Automatically, as if her body was not her own, both her hands shot forward, sending Kenobi hurtling towards the wall – with such velocity that most bones in his body would been crushed upon impact.

Only the quick reflexes of his peers saved him.

The red turned into black and then she knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, no endless dialogue this time. I found this little experiment necessary for everyone involved, but writing satisfying fight scenes is quite difficult, despite (or because of) my (limited) experience with Jiu Jutsu and Karate. I even dabbled a bit in lightsabre combat, heh. So in my non-professional opinion: If Makashi is fencing, Juyo is Escrima on steroids.

I haven’t played a SI in a while, but wasn’t there an ability that increased Force powers at the cost of health? I remember getting chewed out by the tank for using it too much.

A while ago, I met with elderly people who had participated in the Hitler Youth as children and listened to their rather chilling accounts. Long before WW II, to toughen the kids up “like Krupp steel”, they had them go on excursions and play games that defied any notions of safety. Many went home with broken arms or legs or a concussion, and it was considered normal/an edifying experience. Obviously, they weren’t trying to get the kids killed, but while not exactly surprising, the callousness towards their own people...well, it's odd. At any rate, I am writing this note because for all the differences (sic!) to the real-life Nazi regime, the Empire would have rather similar views in that regard.
"You discern a fraction of reality. Beyond these stars exist other galaxies, other worlds, other beings. I will experience or ignore them as I wish. I will spend eternity becoming everything: a farmer, an artist, a simple man. When the last living thing in the universe finally dies, I will enjoy peace and wait for the cycle to begin again." - Vitiate

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“- and he forgave me! What more do you want? Never before have I apologised to a Jedi.” Zayathris hissed resentfully.

“Master Tiin, she has-”

“You saw what she did to Mace and Master Drallig!” Much to Obi-Wan’s consternation, the Iktotchi master interrupted him, his voice raising. “She would have killed you on the spot, if not for Master Yoda’s and Plo Koon’s reflexes!”

“It was not intentional!” The Sith rolled her yellow eyes indignantly.

“That does not put my mind at ease at all!” She pushed herself off the medical bed. “You know what, kriff you. I am leaving. Go meditate on this or something, but I am not entering into a screaming match with a wimpy bunch of void-damned Jedi.”

Tiin stepped between her and the door. “You’re leaving? Where to? To orchestrate our impending doom?”

The Sith threw her head back in exasperation and stared at the ceiling. “This is another very out-of-character thing for me to say, but if you continue down this panic-crazed path, you’re doing Sidious’ job for him. Fear leads to the Dark side and all that.” She enunciated slowly as if speaking to a group of spooked crèchelings. “Well, I sense a lot of fear. It’s getting really infuriating. Seriously, your rampant irrationality is driving me crazy – and I have always valued my relative sanity rather highly.”

“If you’re one of the sanest Sith, I am rather glad we won’t get to meet so many others.” Obi-Wan muttered.

“Pardon me?” She balked, yet a faint smirk tugged at the corners of her lips. “Give me a holocall once you’ve calmed down. And send Windu my regards when he wakes up.”

Obi-Wan coughed politely. “I honestly don’t think he wants to be reminded of you so soon.”

“That’s the point.”

“Well, I am thrilled to see the two of you getting along so splendidly”, Kit Fisto deadpanned, “but Master Tiin is right to be cautious. If your intent is to get us to calm down, as you put it, it would
be immensely helpful to know where you’re about to go.”

“To my day job.” *That is … unexpected.*

His lekku rippled with surprise as well. “You hold down a job.” Fisto repeated sluggishly, disbelief colouring the statement.

The woman shrugged innocently, which – coupled with the burning eyes – projected the harmlessness of an acklay and looked virtually as terror-inducing as her angry face. At least one knew to expect to enter a world of pain in the latter case. “Since I have not yet mastered the art of drawing sustenance purely from the dying screams of my foes, it’s an unfortunate necessity.”

“Let me take a guess - gardening?” Obi-Wan could not help but quip, which drew a simultaneously long-suffering and utterly confused stare from the Nautolan. Surely, it would be something along the lines of bounty hunting…

“Now that would be the epitome of evil.” She purred with a chuckle. “I am part of the Achorran senator’s security detail.”

“There’s…a Sith…working…in the Senate-” Master Tiin ground out, struggling to get his uneven breathing under control.

“I am a senatorial employee. Hardly the springboard for galactic domination. But you’re right, it wasn’t exactly hard to get in - and I know next to nothing about present-day affairs of the Republic and admittedly still struggle with your inefficiently fancy tech interfaces on occasion, even the damned fresher controls, who thought it necessary to innovate something like that - ” She stopped her rant when she noticed the Jedi looking at her strangely. “Anyway, ahem, if I can blend in, I would not be surprised if Sidious has embedded countless loyal agents in your political system – and the military. Perhaps he has already taken over the Senate without you noticing.”

“We serve the Senate-“ Fisto protested.

“See the problem right there?”

“Are you here to provide malicious commentary while we walk towards our own funeral? I don’t see you helping at all. You have injured some of our most proficient swordsmen-”

“Not this again. Out!” Her sharp command rang through the small room.

“The arrogance! You are a guest in our Temple, you can’t order us around.” Saesee Tiin complained.

“Well, you’re still standing in my way, in case you haven’t noticed.” *There is no point in antagonising her,* Obi-Wan thought, slowly backing towards the door, *postponing this discussion would be for the b- “Kenobi, you stay.”* He abruptly stopped in his tracks.

Making eye contact with his fellow council members, Obi-Wan spread his hands in a reluctant, apologetic gesture. “Perhaps I can help to defuse the situation.”

“I don’t know why I put up with you people.” Zayathris flopped back onto the medical bed when the other two Jedi had filed out of the room, burying her face in her hands.

“I wonder about that as well, but find great comfort in the fact that at least no one has got killed
yet.”

“You’ve got rather low expectations for successful diplomatic relations.” She peered out between her spread fingers.

“Stemming from years of experience, unfortunately.”

“It’s only been two days.” She stressed with indignation.

“I’d wager that must be a new record of restraint for you.”

“Um. Damn it.” The Sith muttered as she abruptly sat up. “Fine.” … and started removing her tunic.

“Is this-” Obi-Wan didn’t know what to make of her action. “There seems to be a misunderstanding-“

“Yeah, yours.” She lifted up the simple black top she wore underneath, baring her upper body without hesitation. Below her sternum, there was a pale, round scar, undoubtedly from a lightsabre. A fresh purple bruise with an angry red edge overlapped it, shifted slightly to the left. She let the realisation set in before covering her stomach again.

Obi-Wan blinked in horror. “You’re lucky to have survived that.” Especially considering that Qui-Gon had succumbed to precisely such an injury.

“I have survived worse – but this…has left a mark. When you stabbed me - what were you thinking, by the way? - it triggered unpleasant memories.”

“I am truly sorry.”

“You could not have known.” She dismissed his apology. “But I am pleasantly surprised you possess such a vicious, vengeful streak.”

“More like reckless stupidity.”

“That, too.” She snorted a good-natured laugh.

“While we are at it, could you refrain from trying to squash me like an insect next time?”

“No, I have learned my lesson.” He was not sure what to say to keep the conversation going. She really had a knack for derailing him every single time. “I didn't know a Sith could suffer from PTSD.” Ok, that was probably the wrong thing.

“I am not ill! This is just something I had... compartmentalised, I guess. You Jedi release your feelings into the Force, right? Well, alternatively one can turn them into a source of power, but that requires facing them first. Analyse your situation, identify the emotions and turn them into something you can harness. I mean, you could probably do without the analytical step, though that usually results in aimlessly hating everything and everyone, thus, becoming a creature of mindless malice. Taking responsibility is much more effective, more targeted - it's also more painful. There was so much going on during that time and I wasn't ... My mind wasn't quite my own, it was easier to forget than to risk exposing weaknesses.”
“What happened, if you don’t mind me asking?” He realised he was threading on thin ice, but she was being unexpectedly forthcoming with insights into her psyche, manipulative as it may have been.

“I do, but...I also want you to understand. Contrary to what you might think – there were enemies I couldn’t obliterate just like that.” She flicked her wrist in an imitation of snapping someone’s neck with the Force. “I ended up imprisoned in carbonite for years, while they wrecked the Empire and the Republic alike.” The woman supplied reluctantly.

“Hence the Alliance?”

“Yes. The scar I got because I refused to be twisted into becoming the Emperor’s loyal underling. He tried to lure me with the promise of power, but his true intent all along was moulding me into a vessel for his spirit. It was all a big charade, orchestrated at the whims of a man so drunk on power, that we were all dejarik pieces to him - and then he flipped the board just because. In a sense, my foes were his victims as well, but their biggest mistake was making it personal by murdering people who mattered to me. One was like...the little sister I never had."

Was that genuine care he sensed?

“I consider that one of my greatest failures, even though I killed them in the end, the whole wretched family of psychopaths.” She concluded darkly.

Now that description failed to make sense to him, but fortunately, those events of the past would have no bearing on the present. The more interesting question was...

“Why though?”

She furrowed her brows. “Why I failed?”

“No, why tell me this? Does it not constitute weakness?”

“Perhaps I am just bored?”

She held his gaze, and the world around him lurched, a booming voice slithering into his head. *Remember me, when your Alliance burns to ash.*

“What was that?” Obi-Wan gasped after the fleeting sensation had disappeared.

“A memory.”

*Don't ask, just don't*... “I am glad you seek to relieve your boredom by talking, the alternative options could be much worse.”

“Oh, definitely.” Her sudden exuberant smile felt not quite sincere.

Not that he complained.

He would pick a falsely cheerful Sith over a maliciously scheming one every day.

Chapter End Notes
For good measure, here Vaylin killed both Torian and Vette, the former on the battlefield, the latter in front of the Outlander.
"One is born with a unique set of talents and abilities. One must choose which of those talents to nurture, which to ignore completely. Sometimes the choice is obvious. Other times, the hints and proddings are more obscure. Then, one may need to undergo several regiments of training and sample several different professions before determining where one's strongest talents lie. This is the driving force behind many life-path alterations. There are few sets of skills that match only one specific job. More often they are adaptable to many different professions. Sometimes, one can plan such a change. Other times, the change appears without warning. In both instances, one must be alert and carefully consider all options. Not every change is a step forward."
— Timothy Zahn, Star Wars: Thrawn

Also, minor gore warning.

Senator Iskra had been less than thrilled about her abrupt disappearance and remaining out of contact for more than a week. Fortunately, he had bought her excuse about following a lead, which wasn’t exactly untrue, but- well, it didn’t matter if she got paid for her time. There was always petty crime as a backup plan.

The Achorran senator had a mission prepared for her already. Though he was sparse on details on the how, as per usual, he had found a rather promising paper trail. Just when an increase of funds had been granted to the Strategic Advisory Cell, hints of a shipment intended for delivery to a Republic research facility appeared, the lack of documentation indicating military, not commercial – however, thereafter, nothing came through sanctioned channels at all. Iskra had traced the actual delivery operation to a minor smuggler ring. In itself, it was not peculiar, experimental tech for classified projects could plausibly take such an unofficial route during wartime. In the end, the Senate would be clueless, the details glossed over in the budget reports they got to see.

What was conspicuous about the procedure was the timing, which had triggered Iskra taking a closer look. He had been coerced into signing exploration contracts of the defunct mines on Achorra – which he claimed had been shut down after the precious metals precisely because of sporadic findings of crystals making further digging impossible with the technology available to Achorra at that time. And not only that. The trail abruptly ended. The Republic had never received the mysterious shipment, but again no official attempt to recover it was made – the affair could only be reasonably be explained by involvement of Republic Intelligence, if at all. This in particular was what raised the Achorran senator’s heckles – he feared their meddling on his homeworld.

Iskra was suspiciously well-connected, especially for an insignificant senator of a backwater planet. For all his borderline seditious intentions, associating with the criminal underworld still seemed repugnant to him – yet he navigated the terrain with ease, displaying extensive knowledge about it. Zayathris had long assumed that the so-called revolution was not an isolated phenomenon.
limited to Achorra – perhaps it constituted a general popular uprising in the making. It was a certainty that people dissatisfied with the Republic existed who would not run into the open arms of the soulless corporate and financial conglomerate that drove the success of the Confederacy.

This, she could work with.

The ramifications of Iskra’s theory were significant – the sudden requirement for kyber crystals could only one thing.

Safe to say, unless someone was planning to covertly construct a whole lot of lightsabres, they had more far-reaching plans.

Zayathris couldn’t shake the thought that this war was gratuitously expensive. Establishing an adequate army after a millennium of peace was a daunting task – but the way the Republic went about it arguably well-nigh maximised their spending. Researching kyber-based weapons – how they could have lost all the scientific progress achieved long ago, while the Archives were full of political speeches and philosophical drivel dating back as far as the Je’daii, was a conundrum - would swallow up enormous funds. Then again, the creation of the Clone army certainly hadn’t come cheap, either.

The theory neatly explained why the shipment had to take a clandestine route, with the de facto embargo on kyber imposed by the Jedi Order, about the only manifestation of the meagre political power they still wielded.

Getting to the bottom of this was going to take a while, so she wished she had jotted Kenobi a brief message informing him that she would drop off the radar for a bit, lest they think she was going to bring Tyranus down on them or something.

Eventually, her investigation led her on board a smuggler’s ship as a stowaway. This way of travelling was not her first choice – the crew did not present a challenge, but the thought of the utter helplessness in case they got in trouble was disquieting. This was something she had always disliked about ships, the way they limited her options, rubbing in vulnerabilities a Sith should be above having in the first place. What was worse, it was an embarrassment, with one half of her ancestry consisting almost exclusively of proud members of the Imperial Navy for generations.

Her relief upon landing - the long journey had gone without a hitch - was short-lived. Wariness replaced it immediately, when she sensed the utter emptiness surrounding the landing site.

The smugglers were just as confused, venturing into the complex with their weapons drawn.

Zayathris followed at a safe distance. A few steps into the underground building, the scenery changed abruptly, turning into a landscape of twisted metal and debris. The surfaces glistened with a slowly drying substance; the bubbly texture indicated that it had been a kind of foam before degrading. The second fact that stood out was the extreme cold, which caused Zayathris to use to Force to keep from shivering.

Despite the horrendous scale of destruction, the facility’s high technological standard was obvious. It must have served as a lab of some kind, instead of the mere storage facility Iskra had assumed it to be. The floor was ripped away in places, revealing the completely scorched levels below. Zayathris ducked into the next room, careful not to slip on the slimy residue and climbed
down to assess the damage. When she stepped on the blackened floor on the lowest accessible, the duracrete crumbled beneath her boot. Only ridiculously high temperature would render the material so brittle.

Fire had ravaged the labs further up, but everything in this room was completely pulverised. The uppermost level had remained largely unaffected by the inferno thanks to the fire containment system kicking in, as evidenced by the foam. Down here, there was merely ash.

While she could not directly perceive radiation, its damaging effect on the body would be easy to feel. There was none, yet a sense of acute danger remained. During her climb back up – the extreme destruction rendering further exploration attempts absolutely futile – it went from a malevolent whisper in the Force to a rather real, piercing cacophony of screams coming from above.

*Looks like someone was more successful in their search.*

It did not take long for the nightmarish noise to taper out, and when Zayathris finally reached the area it had originated from, only silence and the grisly mutilated corpses of the smuggler crew greeted her. Blood pooled on the ground, a thick layer of various shades ranging from bright scarlet to dark purple.

*Huh. Got to hand it to whoever did this, at least it was quite efficient.*

“And they even took the time to sever every single tentacle of that Nautolan guy in a precise manner.”

Damn… *Look at the Togrutan captain. I didn’t know that unlike lekku, montrals were hollow on the inside. Didn’t want to know, actually.*

“Getting squeamish?”

I’ve seen worse. It’s just- the meticulousness of it is astonishing… *Looks like they methodically removed every body part that isn’t found in baseline humans.*

“Then again, the assailants don’t like humans, either, at least not enough to leave them alive.”

*Yeah, no survivors here.*

The faint whirring sound of servomotors announced that she had company, causing her to duck underneath a contorted meeting table. Several assistance droids hovered into the room, their mechanical limbs clicking excitedly. They descended upon the bodies, scanning them. One of them beeped in alarm.

It activated a little tool, not unlike a surgical saw, and began cutting off the solitary horn left on the skull of a burly Zabrak.

*“Probably missed it on its first round.”*  

*Guess we found the culprits. Murderous tech droids, who would have thought.*

Another droid floated down and began scanning the floor, emitting a high-pitched signal when he found a shoeprint he could not identify.
This is where the fun begins.

Zayathris jumped up from behind her cover and slammed the flipped-over table into the droids, squashing all but two. Waves of blood splashed on her when the heavy piece of furniture landed on the floor and skidded on the sticky liquid due to the slight tilt of the room. They promptly attacked her, targeting vital spots of her body with amazing dexterity and precision. The Sith froze the one to her left in mid-air, and used her right hand to crush the other’s circuits with the Force, before cutting the immobilised droid with the vibroblade she’d found on one of the corpses.

These smugglers were really pathetic, to lose against a handful of droids that needed their wiring checked.

Even as she formulated that thought, the buzzing noise resurged, and the room was flooded with myriads of the small droids, rushing towards her like a swarm of hornets.

“Might’ve spoken too soon?”

A volley of lightning provided an opening that allowed her to retreat to a larger room providing more space to evade the barrage of tiny cuts and slashes the droids favoured. One of them slammed into her from behind, its talon-like implements hooking into her belt and dragging her over a desk before she could disentangle herself. Slamming more droids into wall and picking off those left with lightning, the onslaught finally stopped. Zayathris emerged largely unscathed, apart from a few minor nicks on her arms and her blood-soaked clothes sticking to her skin.

This smells worse than that Sand Demon slick on Tatooine. Iskra’s going to have to pay for upgrading my shower to a water-based one. Sonic’s not going to cut it. Void, I want to shower for days on end. Weapons that don’t cauterise wounds are so damn uncivilised.

“Reminds me of taking a dip in that bloody pool on Korriban. Fun times.” He reminisced fondly.

Yeah, what a pity we don’t have time for splashing around a little to see what pattern the blood will make on the wall. Force, I always thought you’d grow out of it…

The Sith cautiously searched the adjacent rooms for more would-be adversaries, but when she found none, she ventured towards the other side of the facility. While it had sustained much less damage than the laboratories, the stench of decay worsened as she approached what looked like a lodging area. The doorway leading to the quarters was blown open, allowing a glimpse inside that revealed more corpses. This time, of people in lab coats who had obviously been rotting here for a rather long time.

Zayathris lowered her head in concentration. Reaching into the Force yielded no indications of survivors nearby, but there was indeed something a little further away, a faint pulse.

She found a detainment area on the lowest level. The presumed explosion had wreaked havoc here as well. Zayathris hand slid along the distorted walls searchingly as she continued her exploration.

“Um, hello? Is anybody out there?” A muffled voice came from one of the cells.

You’ve got to be kriffing kidding me.

“Please, I am trapped here.”
She peered through a crack between two durasteel tiles and jerked back in surprise at the sight. The most startling part about this was not the sheer coincidence itself – they had first crossed paths on Achorra, after all, so there was a plausible connection – but that it had taken a mousy Republic officer to make her believe in the Force having agency. Given the state of the facility – and the hostility of the droids - there was no reason any sentient should still be alive, leaving her none the wiser as to what had actually happened here.

*The Force is a paradox. It empowers and imprisons. It destroys and unites. It binds the galaxy together and tears people apart. It has a will, but needs a commander.*

*Guess Marr was correct in that regard, too.*

The door controls were unusable, the electronics destroyed by the wall caving inwards. The overall structural deformation jammed the sliding doors, preventing them from being opened by physical force short of another explosion.

A minor obstacle, then.

She focussed her will on the door, slowly bending the metal with the Force until a hole appeared in the middle, just large enough to allow a human to step through.

“Ok… that’s … unexpected.” The man imprisoned inside muttered as he clambered out of his cell warily, into the flickering light of the hallway.

He jumped with fright when she addressed him from the side. “Hello, Lieutenant.”

“Stars!” He exclaimed weakly, stumbling backwards while his eyes gradually adjusted to the brightness. “Tris? How…?”

She pulled him over a pile of debris, steadying him when he almost fell. “This… Can’t tell you how … Please…” He rambled feverishly, his teeth chattering in the cold.

When she saw him struggling to stay upright, she bent down a little and put his arm over her shoulder for support. “You look like crap.”

Mitaka clung onto her, pressing his violently shivering body into hers without hesitation, desperate for warmth. He had not had much in terms of superfluous body fat before, although the uniform tended to pat out his silhouette a bit, but now the sharpness of his hipbones and ribcage was rather obvious.

“Feel like it too.” He gave a feeble smile. “Live support systems failed couple of rotations ago.” He buried his face against her shoulder as he launched into a violent coughing fit. “Was wondering- what would get me first- hypothermia or dehydration-?”

“Have to get you out of here either way. There’s a ship on the upper floor-”

“What? No-” He coughed up a fine spray of blood. “Can’t leave- need records. What I came here for.”

“You’re dying.” It was obvious from the pitiful state she’d found him in. A superficial look aided by the Force only confirmed how bad it was. “You’re in no condition to retrieve anything.”

“Please-” the Republic officer ground out haltingly, “Could decide- The war-”

Getting to the bottom of what was had happened here was more important than his life, but then
again, he did not seem like he would be able to slice anything more complex than a vending machine before checking out.

Zayathris clenched her jaw. “Are you familiar with the layout of this place?”

Mitaka nodded faintly, eyes rolling back into his head briefly.

“Point the way, then. I’ll carry you.”

As far as she had been able to gather from his incoherent explanations, he had infiltrated the lab somehow and managed to make a copy of the relevant data before security had caught him. The data was hidden on one of the emergency servers – a positively prescient move, considering what had happened afterwards. Now it was only a matter of retrieving it and downloading it physically, but even that proved too much for the injured man.

She gave a frustrated huff as she propped Mitaka up on the chair when he had slid off for the third time in a row and knelt beside him.

Ok, so how do I do this?

“What exactly, pray tell? I can’t help you with slicing when he-.”

Not slicing. Healing.

“Ooh, is the famed compassion of the Jedi getting to you?”

Save the taunts, Nox. Without his help, we came here in vain. If the lightning works, you can teach me your other skills, too.

“As long as you don’t try to bind ghosts...fine. I am in no way an expert, though, inflicting pain comes more naturally to me than alleviating it.”

Doesn’t surprise me at all.

With Nox’ guidance, she placed her hands on the officer’s chest, touching his essence, tracing the intertwined filaments of life until she reached the source of his agony. Flames began lapping at her, the sharp throbbing pain of fine shards of glass fluttering over her skin. She knew what Mitaka’s body needed, without understanding what exactly she was sensing, an instinctual perception of wrongness rather than an actual diagnosis. The brightness of his being was distributed unevenly, dimming further by the second. Zayathris approached the largest darkened spot, getting a sense of putrefaction-

Decay. Anguish. Death-

Hunger-

The shards bore into her flesh abruptly, as if suddenly pulled towards her core by a kind of magnetism. A craving for her blood – *her* pain.

It would not do to turn back now. She reached out and concentrated her intent on the weakly pulsating life under hands. To take away the affliction–
The Force howled viciously around her, draping her in shadows.

They tore at her, digging into her innards with claws of smoke and yanked her forward at inconceivable speed, through a tunnel of screams and fire.

Dragged her on until all she knew was anguish.

It only stopped when her back hit the cold duracrete.

The effort it took to even roll on her stomach afterwards was absurd.

After what felt like several minutes, she managed to shift to a kneeling position. A wave of nausea washed over her. Eyes squeezed shut, she rocked back and forth on her knees while struggling to subdue the pain.

“...had to overdo it.” Nox chastising voice fluctuated mutedly in unison with the pounding of her own heart echoing in her head, the only consistent rhythm she was able to feel at that moment.

What happened? Even the concentration required to hold a mental conversation proved too much, causing her to throw up on the floor.

“Congratulations, it seems you restored his health fully.” Nox commented irritably. “While almost killing yourself.”

How…? She asked feebly when her stomach had stopped clenching.

“Strictly speaking, the Dark side cannot heal, not in the way a Jedi would, by applying Force energy against the damaged tissue. That would only make things worse. While stopping a bleeding is just like telekinesis, just more refined, rebuilding the cells, encouraging the body to fight an infection is another matter entirely. The Dark can preserve, certainly, bind the fragments of something broken together with searing strings of hatred, fill the cracks with anger. Never will it mend the fissures in a lasting manner. You have practised something similar already to invigorate yourself – or keep yourself alive through unspeakable hardships. It requires perpetually drawing on your emotions, sustaining yourself by sheer will.”

Then what...

“Healing another...there needs to be a sacrifice. Going beyond temporarily closing a wound, you need to transfer your own life energy into the patient. For light side users, their empathy makes this action consistent with the way they access the Force, allowing them to be replenished continually. For a Sith, weakening oneself goes against our every instinct. We can still subject the Force to our will, but the strength to do so, much like everything else, comes from our darker passions – only this time, not with the intent to destroy. If you’re lack experience in channelling the Force in that specific manner, it will fail, the attempted healing turning into a Force drain on yourself.”

Her head was still spinning. I didn’t ask for a lecture.

“No, but at least you won’t interrupt me in the state you’re in. Admittedly, I have only ever healed in battle – it’s a lot easier if you have a unceasing fountain of fear and suffering of others to draw on instead of your own resources. I believe healing, much like sorcery, is an ability requiring a
You couldn’t have told me what to expect beforehand?

“Would you have done it, then? You will recover, don’t worry, though how long it will take, I cannot say.”

Mitaka’s worried face appeared above her. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, just give me a moment to- Never mind.” She looked up to him with a crooked smirk. “Just ignore the eyes.”

He gaped at the sight of her face, either wisely deciding to comply or too shocked to speak. “How do you feel?”

“Apart from having just watched a seemingly never-ending sequence of rather traumatic, disjointed imagery of carnage and sorrow in my head while I thought I was dying? Absolutely great, better than I have in months.” He took a shaky breath. “It’s terrifying. What was that?”

“I healed you. Don’t ask.” The drying blood itched on her skin, making her irritable.

“Yes, ma’am.” He muttered miserably. “I’ve downloaded the data. Um, do you need help getting to the ship?”

“I set course for the nearest refuelling station in neutral space. We’re not going to get far otherwise.” Mitaka called out from the pilot’s chair.

She paced back and forth behind him, meditating to regain her strength. “How long is it going to take?”

“Three hours, unless we’re delayed the solar activity around the Nasrik nebula. It’s a detour, to be sure, there are no hyperlanes to Coruscant from-”

“We are not going to Coruscant.”

“We aren’t?” Mitaka’s high-pitched voice gave away his nervousness. “Ultimately, we still might. That depends on your findings.”

“Oh.” His brows knitted in confusion. “I am sorry, but it’s actually classified-”

“You know, I am in no way obliged to get you home. The airlock is right over there.”

“You’re joking.”

“Am I?” Zayathris shrugged indifferently. “You tell me. I like you, but when I’ve risked my life helping you uncover some abstruse plot, about the last thing I want to hear is that’s classified.”

“Fair point.” He hesitated briefly, but then self-preservation instincts won out. “I really, really can’t
give you more details, but we – that is, my research team, well, not mine, you’ve met some of them - have been looking for an energy source with very specific properties. Xianjin Shui-Jing R&D was an independent lab, rumoured to be experimenting with suitable technology. We thought they were neutral until intel pointed to them preparing a shipment for the CIS-“

Zayathris held up a hand to silence him. “Wait. This doesn’t make sense.”

“Ah, why?” He cocked his head.

“Because I went to investigate the lab under the assumption that the smugglers I came with intended to fetch cargo for the Republic.”

“Impossible. It’s only our group, we were not scheduled to receive anything. I mean, perhaps a superior pulled some strings, but for Krennic to send me out without that piece of information-”

Zayathris gave up her pacing and plonked down on the floor beside Mitaka, stretching out her limbs. “Regardless of what went wrong on your end, the whole thing implies that both Republic and Separatists are after the same thing – or in the case of this being a setup, at least both sides know about the tech. So your project is either not as secret or as unique as you believe.”

“Uh. So…” He stuttered. “Are you sure you’re approaching this from the right angle?”

“No, we both just know what the higher-ups tell us, but unless either of us is inadvertently working for the Separatists… Let me tell you a secret: I can tell you’re hiding something. What exactly is your job? No reason for a lowly Engineering Corps member to dirty their hands like this when you should be sitting in a lab crunching numbers.”

“Well, I am quite harmless, aren’t I?” Mitaka asked sheepishly.

“Can’t deny that, but at this rate you’re going to end up killing two councillors and fuck a third, regardless.”

Nox gave a polite cough.

Oh come on, I know you enjoyed the subtle sense of danger, which you couldn’t get in other ways...

“Eh, what?”

“Inside joke, forget I ever said anything. I don’t think it’s a façade though. You’d break at the mere suggestion of torture.”

“You’re not really considering- I’m really just a data analyst. Crunching numbers is what I do. The implementation of the findings my analyses happened to yield require resources… and since this is highly advanced research, we lack suitable people for the task, hence the need for a hands-on approach. You have no idea how much I am looking forward to sitting at my desk again.”

“You’re military, how can you have insufficient personnel for such tasks?”

“Well, you need personnel with the appropriate project clearance and the expertise in a rare field which narrows down the number of suitable drastically…”

“Now I am curious: Megalaser, ultrasonic shock waves, lightspeed cannon? What is it?” Zayathris prodded.

“Must you give him ideas?”
He’s an engineer, if there’s anything he’s not short on, it’s ideas.

Mitaka looked up in alarm. “Ahem, why would you think-”

“You’re at war. Might be a technology facilitating reconstruction, might be a shield, of course, but with the war dragging out needlessly, the only research you’d get grants for these days is some kind of superweapon.”

“I can’t talk about it-”

“-but I’m not wrong.”

Mitaka shrugged helplessly. “Ok, now that you’ve brought me perilously close to committing treason, would you mind telling me who exactly you are? Not a Jedi, that’s for sure.”

“What gave it away? The spectacular sex?”

Mitaka blushed and cleared his throat awkwardly. “If I’d have to pick one thing, it would be the casual cruelty? Or your creepy-” He gestured to the area around his eyes, “-whatever that is.”

“I operate independently from the Jedi.” The Sith purred. “Does it bother you?”

“Given that you saved me on multiple occasions and have contributed to the Republic war effort? Not really. Besides, I don’t think the Jedi are the heroes they’re cracked up to be, anyway.”

“Oh, why is that?” She asked, intrigued.

“Some people practically idolise them as saviours. That’s too high a burden, we can’t expect them to live up to that. They are peacekeepers. I understand that, but then they have their place in peacetime, and we must do our duty during war. When people place their hope in the Jedi, and not the military or technology…”

“It’s bad for morale.” She finished his thought.

Mitaka nodded eagerly. “And it causes bad decisions, makes the Republic too reliant on them. I don’t have any problem with them, per se, but haven’t seen any miracles from the Jedi Generals in the war, either.”

“You don’t consider their Force powers impressive feats?”

“On the whole, nothing you couldn’t replicate with technology, if you only devoted the resources to research. Get that: The Jedi had several opportunities to kill General Grievous. You know why they failed? Because they prioritised the rescue of one of their own over destroying him with his ship.”

“Well, he is dead now.”

“Killed in an explosion.” Mitaka smiled gingerly. "My point exactly.”

Zayathris snorted a laugh. At least they didn’t take credit.
"That, I have to revolt!" - Chancellor Palpatine
Or: I have come up with a way that does not require me to alter the ROTS timeline after all, which would have caused a minor plothole. Funnily, the realisation of the inconsistency hit me while watching Backstroke of the West - a dubbed version of ROTS machine translated from the Chinese translation. It's absolutely hilarious, even more so when you try to imagine what the original Chinese bootleg subs might have attempted to convey. A gem: Jedi is (re-)translated (actually, transliterated) as hopeless situation warrior.

The name of the lab Xianjin Shui-jing is a nod to that, meaning "Advanced Crystals" in Chinese.
"The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge."
— Stephen Hawking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"...furthermore, their simulations yielded a maximum energy output of … That can’t be right… But the parameters are correct and the model is a conservative one." Mitaka looked at her and gulped. “253.72 Yottajoules. That would be more than sufficient to disintegrate a whole planet.”

Zayathris sat up from her relaxed position on the floor where she had spent the last two hours staring at ceiling in exhaustion while the officer analysed the data retrieved from the destroyed lab. “And they knew how to utilise all that energy?”

Mitaka bit his lower lip while he considered the numbers. “A week ago, the answer would have be a resounding “no”. Now… I still don’t think so. The main focus of Shui-Jing’s work appears to have been moderating the output of kyber, a highly experimental field – and you don’t start with a crystal of that hypothetical power.”

“Given that lightsabres don’t tend to blow up randomly, what would be so hard about containing the energy? Have you even had the chance to look into that?” She interjected.

“We’ve got one in the lab. They're... surprisingly hard to come by, considering how many Jedi are running around with them. We had two at some point, but the second one, um… exploded.”

“Highly experimental field, huh?” She asked with a mocking lilt.

“Early stages of research.” Mitaka shrugged sheepishly. “But those lightsabre crystals are tiny. In contrast, we are talking about monocrystals the size of a speeder or more. The larger a kyber, the more volatile it is because they possess the peculiar property of supporting multiple spatial modes. To produce a diffraction-limited coherent beam, you need more than a simple emitter matrix to keep it in-phase, otherwise the moment you apply external energy, due to the higher-order transverse modes, the lattice randomly starts emitting in all directions.”

“Let me guess - and then it blows up?” Zayathris struggled to wrap her head around his explanation.

“That’s correct. We tried antiguided arrangements with resonant leaky-wave coupling, and while that works to some degree, it limits the output drastically to the point that any proton-based energy source would be far superior.”

“So, now that we have established you're attempting to build a kind of superlaser—” Mitaka cringed inwardly. “How far you come in your research?” She silenced him with a look when he opened his mouth to protest. “No details required. I just need to know if it can be weaponised already to assess the threat it represents.”

The engineer put a hand to his face as he squeezed his eyes shut, making up his mind, before he
replied with a heavy sigh, a pleading tone to his voice. “Promise to sweep in with your powers before they put me against the wall when I end up being court-martialled.”

“I’ll be there.” She gave him dark leer that did little to put his mind at ease. “The Republic still has the death sentence, though?”

“It got reintroduced recently in one of the war-time Emergency Power Acts. And for something of this magnitude? Most definitely.”

Zayathris got up and put an arm around Mitaka’s shoulder, bringing her lips close to his ear. “Don’t worry, your secrets are as safe with me as mine are with you.” She purred.

“Understood.” He whispered shakily. “The applications are still very limited. We have not gone beyond the research stage yet. And even if we had, designing and actually building the infrastructure for such a weapon is a daunting task. Especially with our already straining capacities. So if the CIS gets ahead of us…I mean, they could theoretically vaporise Coruscant. The biggest issue is finding a suitable crystal, though.”

“Like the Shui-Jing one. Considering that this crystal would have destroyed the whole moon and taken a chunk out of the planet nearby for good measure, it can’t have been on site, can it?” Zayathris mused.

“No, I think what caused the explosion was a much smaller kyber they conducted their experiments on. The majority of the data pertains to that one. While its maximum output is still quite destructive, it is consistent with the damage the facility sustained, especially if the explosion was successfully moderated to some degree.”

“You were already imprisoned when it happened?”

“Yeah, just my luck.” Mitaka confirmed. “I held on to hope that someone would free me, because the detention wing wasn’t destroyed, there was a good chance some of the lab personnel survived. But the murderous droids explain it, of course.”

“Why would they in behave that way? Loose wiring usually doesn’t cause tech droids to leave a bloodbath in their wake.”

“I have no idea, to be honest.” The younger man admitted. “Perhaps the droids were sabotaged which would shed a different light on the accident. It looks like their heuristics were tampered with. Wasn’t me though, I swear.”

“Not even accidentally? Perhaps you intended to recalibrate their friend-or-foe recognition.” She insisted.

“I wouldn’t have assumed Class-I droids to even possess that kind of matrix, to be honest. Maybe their machine learning algorithms were retrained with a human template. Would explain the horrific…” He retched a little, clearly perturbed by the memory of the mutilated bodies of the smuggling crew. “-injuries. I really wish I hadn’t seen that. The head scientist of Shui-Jing is - was, probably – a speciesist. Only employed humans, even if there were better qualified ali- eh, non-humanoids.”

“Guess he rubbed off on the droids, then. With no one around to tell us, we might never learn. One question remains, though: Where is the big crystal?”

“I could try to correlate the timestamp of the simulation with their business activities…” Mitaka trailed off, concentrating on the documents. “They must have had access to it here, that's for
certain... But only for a brief amount of time. The parameters factor in more uncertainty after this date…Oh. But… Why would they give it to the Sugis? They’re major arms dealers.”

“Of the independent, selling-to-the-highest-bidder-even-if-it-dooms-everyone kind?”

“Is there any other?” Mitaka deadpanned.

Chapter End Notes

Actually, the amount of energy required to blow up a planet (depending on whether you’re in geosynchronous-orbit distance to drill into the core, amongst other things) with a laser is probably more in the $10^{32} – 10^{35}$ J range, but that reads a bit clunky. The (Earth’s) sun outputs about $3.9 \, YJ \ (3.9 \times 10^{24} \, J)$ per year.

So yeah, Starkiller Base (a pocket OP Dyson sphere, I guess) probably would have to kill a couple of stars (a much more effective skill for destroying a solar system, actually) or they did something fancy, sciency handwavy with all that energy to amplify it.

The fact that silicon is a semi-conductor with a crystalline structure combined with research into supersymmetric semi-conductor laser arrays form the real-world basis for Mitaka’s explanations.

I liked the book Catalyst, but it is a bit lackluster from an engineering POV.
She could sense Tyranus’ presence on Utapau - it bled into the Force with the vigour of battle.

Why was it that the Jedi always managed to be one step ahead of her, logistically at least? This was not the first time they had taken a completely different path from hers, but arrived at the same place. Analysing various major battles, it had occasionally seemed as if Sidious was somehow in position to whisper directly into their ears, feed them poisonous morsels of intel – information that was not exactly incorrect, but served to manoeuvre them into positions that gave him an advantage. Regarding incidents like the one on Belderone and even in this case, however, Sidious stood nothing to gain from alerting the Council, thus giving them the chance to retrieve the precious kyber and possibly reveal his plans.

Mitaka weaved their ship through the blockade above the planet, greatly aided by the fact that the Separatists were distracted by what appeared to be an internal problem, judging from the scorched hangar bay of their capital ship. He had found a way to intercept decrypted messages from Republic forces and learned that a Jedi investigator had been dispatched to Utapau earlier and subsequently called for reinforcements – citing Sugi involvement.

The ship touched down in a discreet location on a civilian landing pad. “I fear this is where we must part ways, Lieutenant.” Upon seeing his alarm, she clarified. “Acquire another ship and return to Coruscant. Give them your report. I think you’ll know exactly what to say.” She placed her hands softly on his shoulders. “Remember, I trust you.”

Zayathris took a moment to observe the confrontation from her vantage point. A Jedi had engaged Tyranus in combat, her moves bearing striking similarity to Windu’s strange twist on Juyo.

“You made a mistake coming here, Count.”

“I am afraid it is you who has miscalculated, my dear Depa.” The familiar form of address made Zayathris remember the name of the councillor.

A hint of regret snuck into the sonorous voice of the elderly man. “Your sacrifice will be in vain.”

“Even if I died by your hand, you would have lost.” The Jedi stated coolly, launching into a flurry of chaotic strikes that forced Tyranus to go on the defensive. A well-aimed thrust upset his perfect balance. Realising this, Depa Billaba feinted a high strike, causing Tyranus to give her an opening for a forceful kick to his side. He staggered, his impeccable footwork disturbed, allowing the Jedi to subsequently bash through his defences and disarm him.
Immediately, a barrage of lightning flashed towards her which she caught with her blade just in time.

“What an exciting display.” Zayathris said by way of greeting and remained at a distance, watching with her arms crossed.

“You?” Billaba called out without turning around, accidentally reflecting the lightning towards the ceiling when she took a step towards her opponent. It hit the glass canopy above, its shards raining down a few metres away from them.

“I came to see how you would fare against him.” Zayathris explained loftily while she summoned the other Sith’s sabre buried among the debris.

Tyranus’ eyes darted between them, as realisation dawned, his expression morphing from utter incredulity to unbridled rage.

The Jedi master struggled to hold up against the renewed vigour of the lightning. “Then help me detain him!” She cried when the sheer force of the onslaught caused her to slide backwards gradually. “This is your chance to show your true allegiance!”

Billaba’s back hit the wall, the hateful electricity spread out from her quivering sabre, threatening to engulf her. In a last ditch attempt, she ducked out to the side under the blade and threw out her hand. The invisible shove caught Tyranus off guard and sent him tumbling. Another flick of the Jedi’s hand caused his face to hit the floor with a resounding crack. He quickly pushed himself to all fours again, looking up with burning orange eyes from his pitiful position. The blood trickling from his nose got soaked up by his beard, creating a savage look that contrasted with his noble bearing.

“Indeed.” Zayathris’ eyes locked with the Darth’s, disgusted by the unbecoming fear she saw in them.

“You have not yet defeated me, Depa.” Tyranus growled without breaking eye contact with the other Sith.

“Oh, don’t stop on my behalf.” She gave a hollow laugh before adressing the master. “He is right, Master Billaba. Be careful.”

Billaba approached her crouching opponent with extreme vigilance, masking her exhaustion with an air of authority. Zayathris held up a hand, stopping the Jedi in her tracks and gently pushed her backwards.

“What do you want?” The Chalactan master grit out warily, her composure serene despite her growing impatience.

“I could kill him for you, as proof of my alliance with the Jedi.” Zayathris whispered coyly in reply, igniting Dooku’s sabre and pointing it towards his head. Billaba promptly took another step back to stay clear of the combat about to ensue. Although her chagrined expression made it obvious that she would have preferred to bring in the Separatist leader alive, she did not dare get in the way at this point.

A dark, husky element slipped into Zayathris’ voice. “However, I will have far more options if I
simply execute you.”

She flipped the sabre around into an underhand grip and drove it into Billaba’s abdomen. “Alas, you underestimated the dynamics of treachery among the Sith.” She commented, switching off the red blade when the Jedi’s body went slack and sank to the floor.

Zayathris picked up the Billaba’s sabre and stepped over her prone form without sparing her another look. “So, Tyranus.” She purred, twirling both sabres idly. “How do you wish to die, in combat or on your knees?”

Darth Tyranus had risen to a standing position and dusted off his robes, glaring at her in silent defiance.

“Combat it is, then.”

He nodded, still too calm for a man about to die. “I shall grant you the opportunity to listen.”

“In that case,” a vicious smile split her face when she tossed Tyranus his sabre, “keep it brief. I am afraid you won't last long against me, old man.”

“Judging from your unwarranted hostility, I can only assume you believe I turned on you.”

“Smart. There was no holocron. And your minions shot me down over the planet you sent me to.”

Dooku effortlessly parried her first strikes, defending rather than actively attempting to create and exploit openings for a counter-attack.

“Then we both sprung the trap laid by my master. He must have intended to goad me, test me. The information that let me to determine the location of the holocron came through neutral channels, so it would not arouse suspicion. The Jedi Shadow had access to the same sources. They are well connected, and finding Dark artefacts is what they do. He fell for the ruse as well. Sidious played us all.”

“You’re lying.” Zayathris snapped, her voice betraying more disappointment than she intended. “The Shadow’s involvement couldn’t have been an accident, when the whole point was to lure his peers to Belderone.”

“Where you killed Grievous! He was an important asset. A neutral one, his loyalty easy to sway, his only motivation the desire to eradicate the Jedi. Such a wasteful approach.” Cold rage washing over him, Tyranus lunged forward, thrusting his blade towards her hip.

“He followed your command! How could this have been be a test for you?” Zayathris retaliated for the near miss by pressing the attack, forcing her opponent backwards until he stumbled and fell. Surprisingly nimble for his old age, Tyranus rolled to the side, evading her wide slashing strike, and jump to his feet, putting enough distance between them to briefly stall the fight.

“An unfortunate convergence of two disparate threads. You see, this plan had indeed been long in the making. With the Shadow’s inadvertent involvement, we were in the perfect position to execute it. I could not refuse carry it out. It was only after you left that Sidious informed me of the proceedings – and that more Jedi had started investigating the matter, forcing me to send a ship. For obvious reasons, I could not order them not to shoot you. Nevertheless, you were not supposed to cross my operations, either. We had an agreement!”

Zayathris shifted into a ready stance again, but remained where she stood. “I made the rather natural assumption that you betrayed me. It is still more plausible that you are simply seeking to
manipulate me.”

“Then Sidious has already triumphed, having managed to thwart our tentative alliance even without knowing.”

Zayathris laughed harshly. “You expect me to believe that he isn’t aware of me?” An unrelenting invisible grip wrapped around her opponent’s throat.

“I have not told him.” Tyranus croaked, fighting the pressure that threatened to cut off his breathing. “I could not. Cannot allow- even suggestion- of dissent. He- already suspects- previous acolytes I trained- threat to him- could be apprentices.”

Although she did not trust the older Sith, his explanation made more sense than him just randomly changing his mind after striking a promising alliance. “You expect me to just take your word for it?”

A bright yellow flash lit up in the atmosphere above them, rippling out to the sides. The capital ship in orbit exploded, the resulting magnetic shockwaves cleanly taking out the other vessels surrounding it. The sky was suddenly inundated with flames and falling wreckage.

Zayathris marvelled at the display. “Looks like you lost on another front as w-”

A searing pain shot across her lower back, making her release the pressure on her opponent’s airways.

Crimson rage colouring her field of vision, she spun around to see Billaba looking up with her hand outstretched, tear-streaked face shining with resolve. A large, bloody shard cluttered to the floor. The lightsabre nearly slipped from her grasp when she felt a tendril of the Force insistently tugging on it. Tyranus suddenly appeared beside the two women, swinging his sabre in a small arc. Zayathris brought her weapon up to block, but the angle was wrong-

The red blade swiftly cut through bone, cartilage and flesh, beheading the Jedi.

Tyranus jumped backwards and thumbed off his weapon. “I admit that I have no proof.” He snarled. “However, I hope you do are not foolish enough to ignore the fact that in your moment of abject weakness I could have easily given you the same death Master Billaba has received.”

Zayathris fingers ghosted over the deep wound stretching across her hip, blood covering them in a steady stream that lessened as she willed the wound to close to some extent to stop the haemorrhaging, stitched together by raw fury fuelled by the pain and humiliation. “It appears I misread your intentions.” She grudgingly admitted, lips pressed into a fine line.

“You overconfidence has made you careless.” Tyranus chided her.

Zayathris sneered, “Says the man who just lost his battle cruiser.”

He seemed rather unfazed. “A minor, anticipated setback. A far larger blow to the Republic has been dealt - and if everything went according to plan, to the Jedi and Sidious alike. Thankfully, this time your intervention was not to blame.”

She wiped her sticky hand on her trousers. “Will you finally reveal his identity to me now?”
“Regrettably, this is one dejarik piece I must cling to. However, there is something else I can offer you. A gift to show you my willingness to work together beyond my master’s defeat.”

“What do you think I could possibly want?” Zayathris snorted in disbelief.

“Something I believe you have sought for a long time.” Tyranus held her gaze, brows arching haughtily.

Nox, who had remained unusually silent throughout the whole exchange, failed to offer his advice here, as well.

There was a long pause before she nodded her acceptance. “Very well. This had better not be another trap.”

“Return to your ship at your leisure, I shall send you the data.”

The elderly man’s voice rang through the cockpit. “As promised, the coordinates have been uploaded to your navicomputer. I would recommend you to hurry, however. It seems the Republic has been made aware of the facility I directed you to as well.”

“…what did I say about sending me into another mess?” Zayathris sighed.

“Now, I did not imply it would come without a challenge.”

“This is the last time I will allow such insolence.” She spat with outrage. “You will pay for your arrogance, Dooku. You clearly have become too complacent in your position, with no one daring to challenge your authority.”

“Hm, perhaps.” The Darth hummed. “Such is the way of the Sith. I am confident, however, that you possess the foresight and restraint to refrain from propagating the culture of back-stabbing that surely was to blame for the fall of the Empire you ser-.”

Zayathris vented her frustration on the holoprojector.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Kanan.

What happened in the background was a variation of the scrapped Clone Wars season 7 arc "Crystal Crisis". What this means and what Grievous' absence and Depa Billaba's (RIP, I do enjoy making Windu suffer) presence changed will be explained in a later chapter, no need to watch the unrendered episodes. We won't venture into ROTS territory before chapter 36 at the very least.
“Each person has goals. Some goals are open, visible to all who care to observe. Others are more private, shared only with one's closest friends or associates. Some are dark secrets that one hopes will never see the light of day. But eventually, inevitably, those deepest goals must be made manifest if they are to be reached. They must be opened for someone to hear, or see, or offer assistance. Everyone who brings those goals into the light must be prepared for either acceptance or rejection. And he must be ready to bear the consequence. All of them.”
— Timothy Zahn, Star Wars: Thrawn

The entrance slid open as soon as she'd punched in the last digit of the access code.

It was a comparatively small station, in total perhaps thrice the size of the hanger of a Harrower-class dreadnought. The few droids maintaining it scurried out of her way as she cautiously explored the rooms to find out what Tyranus had in store for her.

Empty.

At first glance, the place was devoid of life and anything useful. It was impossible to determine what could have been the purpose of the station in the first place.

Doubling back to continue her search, she found herself in a small med bay which she had ignored earlier. Her wandering gaze fell on the three upright slabs of carbonite standing in a corner beside a bacta-tank.

A boundless chasm of absolute wrath opened in her chest.

Damn you, Nox.

“I can explain.”

No, you won't get to spoon-feed me more falsehoods. You told me they were dead. All this time, you must have at least suspected that Tyranus had them-

“I didn’t want you to assume he had leverage against you. It would have altered your course of action. When he didn’t bring up the topic during your meeting, I sincerely thought they had not survived the stasis – which was pretty likely since they’re not even force-sensitive! And when we thought he’d betrayed us, the point was moot anyway.”

I did not give you permission to speak, Roshinn. You wretched-

“Come on now, that is low.”
Worthless scum. If you had told me of the possibility, I could have done something-

“Exactly!”

I thought I knew you better than that. What about Theron, would you not have set worlds ablaze to get him back?

“That I would have, after it became clear that getting the four of you out of stasis was not a trivial task. However, I had fifty years to come to terms with the fact that he was gone. I was not going to sacrifice the opportunity of rising to power again on the off-chance my one-time lover survived impossible odds.”

And by lying to me, you took agency away from me. You- you betrayed my trust!

“Zayathris, I do admit it was a mistake to keep you in the dark-”

Your last bloody mistake!

Sirens started blaring overhead.

“Phew, execution postponed I guess.” Nox commented, mostly unperturbed.

Hands trembling with barely supressed rage, Zayathris snatched a medkit from the supply closet next to the door and deactivated the freezing mode on all three carbonite frames.

Just no hibernation sickness, she pleaded inwardly.

Pierce dropped out first, followed by the other two men. They were naked except for briefs, as if they had been frozen coming straight from a bacta tank treatment. She felt for his pulse, it was abnormally slow but strong. From what she could see, Quinn and Theron appeared to be in no danger of dying, either. She opened the medkit and fished out a hypo-stim and a bacta injector. As much as she hated to risk it, Pierce was physically more robust than the others were, he probably could take it. Theron was the youngest by a few years, but the side of his face looked rather bad, with cauterised skin around his implants, which had turned into shrivelled pieces of scorched metal. She injected the contents of the stim into Pierce’s thigh.

While she waited, she brushed her hands over his abdomen and chest, feeling for inner injuries. Although she had accepted having little aptitude for healing – and not knowing what else awaited them there, she was loath to repeat the bastardised version performed on Mitaka – she could at least make it easier for him by boosting his natural resilience. There was no shortage of fury to fuel her powers, either.

“Hngh.” Her patience was rewarded with a muffled groan.

Zayathris gently tilted the man’s head up. His eyes were unfocussed, rolling back into his skull repeatedly before they settled on her face. “Hey.”

“M’lord,” came his shaky whisper.

She slowly helped him up to a standing position, his eyes darting around the room in confusion.

“Can you walk?” She demanded.

Pierce took a few tentative steps. “Yeah, best keep the pace slow though.”
“I’ll take Quinn. Are you able to carry Shan?”

Pierce cracked his shoulders and nodded, giving Theron a condescending look. She draped the limp form of the agent over the Imperials’s broad back.

“Figured you’d be even less happy the other way round.” Zayathris teased. He stumbled a little, almost dropping Theron, but caught his balance again without help.

“Damn right.”

She pulled Quinn up to carry him herself. “Now move it, Pierce. These sirens probably aren’t just malfunctioning.”

As they reached the hallway leading to the hangar, there was movement before them. They sought cover in a secondary corridor.

Theron let out faint grunt when his back touched the cold metal, causing Zayathris to place a hand over his mouth to muffle the noise.

The distinctive sound of armoured boots rang in the distance. With Pierce far from fighting shape and the other two still out cold, she could not risk an altercation, even though she would very much have preferred to keep a low profile this time.

“Listen.” She climbed over Theron’s body and knelt down next to Pierce, hand fisted into the short hair on the back of his neck to keep his attention on her. “I need you to follow my lead, unquestioningly. No sass, no bravado. Best no talking at all. Understood?”

“Ever disappointed you?”

“No, but circumstances are a bit bizarre at the moment.”

“Since when does normal win a bloody prize?” Pierce slurred. “But noted, m’lord.”

“No titles either.” She stressed.

“Got it.” His head slumped on her shoulder.

“Just…get a grip, Pierce.” She sighed and propped him up again before ducking out of cover. She carefully made her way towards source of the noise.

“Hello?” The marching troops abruptly changed direction, if the sound getting louder was any indication.

“I need help.” Bile rose in her throat for admitting weakness, even though it was a façade.

She stood in the middle of the hallway, completely exposed, and raised her arms above her head in surrender.

A torchlight shone into her face. After a moment of stunned silence, one of the soldiers exclaimed.

“It’s her!”

“Her?” A murmur went through the unit of clone troopers.
“The heroine of the Forward Sanctuary IX?” *What a clunky title.* Zayathris affected what she hoped was a relieved smile.

Their CO stepped up. “Ah, what are you doing here, ma’am?”

“I came to rescue my friends from the clutches of the Separatists. Please, you must help me get them out off here!”

She suspected her plea sounded a little too shrill, but then again, she had never needed to beg like that.

They lowered their rifles with little reluctance. *Well, having a good reputation pays off at last.*

Aboard the Republic ship, the medic scanned the still form of her companions.

Without looking up from his patient, he enquired, “Carbonite?”

“Yes,” Zayathris acknowledged. “How can you tell?”

“Typical slowing of life signs. Must’ve been frozen for several weeks at the very least.” The clone stepped away from the bedside to give his report. “Well, these two are stable. However, the younger one’s cybernetics don’t look good at all. Need to check for brain damage. The arm on the other one – not sure even the socket is salvageable. We should take you to Kamino, closest advanced healthcare facilities.” He gestured towards the implants. “No guarantees though. Never seen those before.”

“Why are they still unconscious?”

“They were sedated before freezing. Takes a while to wear off because of the decelerated metabolism. Upped the dose so they stay under until we reach our destination.”

“In the future, don’t do that without my consent.” Zayathris reprimanded him.

“With all due respect, ma’am, as their medic I am responsible for such decisions.”

“And as their commanding officer, I bear the ultimate responsibility for their lives.” The clone gave her a thoroughly confused look, but seemed to accept her explanation regardless.

She inclined her head towards Pierce expectantly, who sat slouched over on a bed, fidgeting with his legs, eyes narrowed in dismay as he watched the exchange. “He’s in good condition, although his heart rate is on the high side. Looks like a stim overdose.” The clone explained. “How much did you give him?”

She gestured to a similar vial in the medic’s arsenal.

“The whole thing?” He blanched a little. “Yeah, that’s not for direct injection though, we normally add it to the bacta when required. It’s compatible with the Hypo-1C syringe; you’d just have to adjust the dosing algorithm.” He held up the injector. “For his mass? A third of that amount would have sufficed.”

Zayathris furrowed her brows, steeling herself against a flicker of guilt. “Is he going to be ok?”
“Luckily, the medkits only carry the least potent variant. Taking this much is more like drinking a lot of caf.” The clone shrugged apologetically. “A whole pitcher of strong caf, to be honest. Expect headaches and trouble sleeping for at least forty-eight hours. He’s probably going to be pretty keyed-up for a while. I could give him a tranquiliser to counter the effects, but I’d advise against it, as that would put even more strain on his heart.”

“You can toughen it out?” She addressed Pierce questioningly.

“Sure.” He grunted in a low voice, making his aversion to talking in the clone’s presence clear.

It was not long after that Pierce joined her in an adjacent room where the Kaminoans had told her to wait. Zayathris gave him an enquiring look.

“One of the longnecks took them elsewhere. No point sitting in the med bay alone.”

She beckoned him to sit beside her on the elongated settee. “Sorry about the stim. I was in a hurry.”

“Had worse.”

“Quesh comes to mind.” They shared a meaningful smirk. “Once Theron and Quinn are done with their treatment, you can all recover in an environment with more privacy.”

She knew Pierce well enough to see that he was biting back a question. “Out with it.”

“Right, so… Any reason we’re friendly with the Pubs now? Doesn’t look like an IntOp.”

“Wish it were one.” She clenched her jaw. “You’re not going to like this.”

“Can handle it.” Pierce huffed in response.

“I know. What’s the last thing you remember?”

His brows furrowed in concentration as tried to make sense of the jumbled memories. “… Iokath. Throne room. You screaming.”

She looked away from his face as she summed up the events. “Long story short: The weapon didn’t raze the planet, but that throne put us into stasis.”

His eyes widened in shock. “For how long?”

“Almost four times the length of Vitiate’s reign.”

“Bloody void.” He groaned after a brief mental calculation.

“It’s just the Republic now.” She added bluntly.

The officer jumped up from the bench, his clenched fists shaking in anger, and yelled, “We fucking lost?”

“That about sums it up, yes.”

Face going slack in defeated acceptance, he slumped back down. “Never been an ordinary post with you, got to say.”
He squeezed his eyes shut in pain and started rubbing his temples.

“Let me.” Zayathris commanded softly while she casually slid off the settee. When she stood behind him, he leaned back, until the back of his head came to rest on her stomach and relaxed into the caress of her hands.

“Strange times.” Pierce murmured. “Didn’t think I’d ever see your eyes in another colour. Looks good too. Bit plain though, all things considered.”

“Well, now you’ve literally seen all facets of me.” She chuckled.

“Wouldn’t mind getting a reminder of some.”

“There’s an appropriate time and place for everything, Pierce.” She reprimanded him, the harsh tone contrasting with the indulgent smile she gave the Imperial.

“Noted. Wasn’t suggesting here, with those bucketheads next door. What did you do to get them get all puppy-eyed about you?”

“Saved one of their medical frigates. It wasn’t my primary goal, but it unarguably worked in my favour, as evidenced by the warm welcome we got here.”

He hissed when Zayathris touched a particularly sensitive spot. “That’s all going to take some time getting used to.”

“It wasn’t easy for me, either. I’ll fill you in on the details later, away from prying ears.”

“We’re officially rolling with the Pubs now?”

“For the time being, yes.” Her lips brushed the shell of his ear. “Maybe it helps if you think of it as a prolonged covert operation.”

Of all sudden, a commotion ensued outside.

“Speaking of which…” Zayathris interrupted the massage with an annoyed sigh and walked towards the door. Pierce followed on her heel.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Nox…What were you thinking?

Hooray, finally got the boys back. It's been a bit of a slow burn if you've been waiting for that reunion.

The SW’s class ability “Unnatural Might” does boost party healing ¯_(ツ)_/¯
"I used to believe that being a good soldier meant doing everything they told you. That's how they engineered us. But we're not droids. We're not programmed. You have to learn to make your own decisions." – Captain Rex

The sight greeting them when they stepped into the corridor could not have been further from her expectations. On one side of the hallway, the Togrutan master whom Zayathris remembered from the Council meeting stood flanked by several troopers, on the other side a single clone wearing a dark red tunic held a blaster to Quinn’s head, an injured Kaminoan crawling on the floor in front of them. A med droid hovered behind them, holding a small case.

“Stop!” The clone yelled with a desperate expression on his face.

“Stay back, please.” Shaak Ti implored her quietly. “Fives, let him go. I will hear you out.”

Quinn looked dishevelled, face deathly pale and his hair peppered with more grey than she remembered from the last time she had a proper look at him. He stood ram-rod straight, not daring to move, while his eyes briefly flicked into her direction without any trace of recognition flaring up in them.

“…Tup’s chip malfunctioned, that’s what made him lose control.” The clone explained, with growing irritation.

*A clone with behavioural issues?*

Careful not to alert the soldier, Zayathris angled her body slightly and repeatedly made the hand sign for *report* on hip level. Quinn’s pupils widened imperceptibly. While his captor was focussed on his discussion with the Jedi, he gave his reply in the same fashion.

“Otherwise, the entire Republic army could be compromised.”

There. The access point for Sidious machinations, hidden in plain sight. She had assumed it might be a genetically selective virus, engineered to cripple the GAR, perhaps even a more outlandish feat like large-scale mind control similar to what Vitiate had performed on Zost – but a behavioural implant was the perfect vector to gain control over the Republic forces. It required no contact with the clones beyond somehow influencing the details of their technological conception. The existence of a chip, ostensibly fulfilling that very purpose, would not raise suspicion: The clone troopers being the only viable soldiers of the Republic, apart from minor local forces, it was actually obvious that they needed an inbuilt failsafe, possibly even a way to shut them after the war.

"Or to make them turn on their Jedi Generals.” Nox supplied. “Great minds think alike, it seems.”

*You’re really comparing yourself to Sidious?*

“In an abstract sense-"
You can die alongside him, too, if you don’t start being more useful. You have a lot of idiocy to make up for.

It was only then that she noticed Theron peering out from one of the wards behind the rogue clone, ready to engage, his fingers wrapped around the hilt of a scalpel. Zayathris faintly shook her head, urging him not to act – there was no telling how the agitated soldier would react. He sounded incoherent, as if he had been drugged. Theron furrowed his brows, flinching as the motion pulled at the bruised, partially bandaged skin around his temple, but complied by withdrawing out of sight.

The clone dragged Quinn with him as he walked backwards, eventually rounding the corner into another corridor, while the Jedi and her troops stood motionless. The seconds ticked away, Zayathris mind racing as she went over the options, until she lost her patience. “You’re not going after him?”

The Togrutan shook her head. “Not yet. I do not think he intends to harm the hostage, but without the inhibitor chip we can’t risk it. Rest assured that the fugitive won’t come far. All units have been alerted.”

“Master Ti, forgive my bluntness, but I lack faith in your ability to resolve this.”

“Please, do not involve yourself. There is too much at stake here.” The Jedi was visibly afraid of what Zayathris might do.

“You expect me to lean back and put the life of the hostage in your hands?”

“This is an internal matter. The repercussions-” The comm on the master’s wrist chimed, signalling reception of a transmission.

Pierce pulled Zayathris aside. “Shan’s gone, too. Wasn’t in the ward when I checked.”

“He tends to wander off to play the hero. Just what I needed right now.” She groaned quietly.

Shaak Ti pressed her lips together in a thin line, unhappy about the conclusion she had come to. “I concede. Come with me.”

Zayathris motioned to Pierce to follow when the Jedi and four clones broke into a hurried pace.

“It stopped being a Republic matter when my people got caught up in this mess. What is going on?” She demanded harshly.

“Another clone, Tup, murdered a Jedi. He died after an examination was carried out. It appears that Fives continued investigating and in the process removed his behavioural chip to compare it to Tup’s, claiming that the other’s was corrupted.”

“That’s a valuable observation, don’t you agree, Master Ti? What would prompt him to flee?”

“I promised to take his case before the Chancellor, but the emotional stress of the circumstances and our initial mistrust has apparently made him paranoid. Understandable, however, he poses a danger to himself and others, which makes it paramount to capture him.”

Several intersections later, they almost collided with Theron. “They reached the hanger.” He explained breathlessly. “Couldn’t risk stopping them from taking off, so I put a tracker on them. We can find them, if they pop out of hyperspace near a Republic relay station. Depends on the
range, though."

“Good thinking… but how’d you obtain a tracker this quick?”

“I had some time on my hands earlier, checked the equipment around here. Having something to do helped with the pain.” Theron gestured towards his head.

“Hasn’t it only been a few minutes?” Zayathris asked, a puzzled tone to her voice.

“Eh-” He furrowed his brows at the Jedi. “Figures. She hasn’t been forthcoming with information—actually no one here has, so if you could fill me in, I’d appreciate it, because things don’t add up at all. They’ve been chasing after that trooper for quite a while now. I think he actually left the facility and came back, guess he still didn’t have all the data he needed. He used one of the operating rooms next to the one where Quinn was recuperating—ran some advanced scans, I think. When security found him, he grabbed Quinn and made a run for it.”

Shaak Ti looked scandalised. “You were without supervision? This a highly secure facility—”

“I wouldn’t have guessed.” Theron shrugged innocently, taking the Jedi’s stern look in stride. “Besides, no one told me to stay put.”

“Now what?” Zayathris demanded.

“I believe Fives intends to reach Coruscant,” Ti hesitated before continuing. “He was adamant the situation required a neutral investigation.”

“It is quite telling that he does not trust his creators.”

The Jedi did not deign to reply.

They dropped out of hyperspace over the Republic capital.

Theron jumped from his seat and leaned over the controls to stare out of the transparisteel windows when the planet came into full view, jaw going slack. “Damn…”

Their pilot smiled warmly. “First-time visitor, sir? I daresay yours is quite a common reaction.”

Fists clenched, Theron gave a perfunctory nod and rushed towards the back, interrupting a discussion between Zayathris and the other Imperial. “You’re aware they added quite a few levels since the last time I was here? Like, a couple of hundred? I wasn’t drugged, was I?”

“Unfortunately, it’s all very real.” She lowered her voice. “Do you have any theory why Quinn signed _situation under control_ and _follow_? It does seem to imply he is willingly going along with the clone.”

“Not really. What is he doing?”

“I have no idea. What I can say for sure is that Major Quinn does not act impulsively.” Zayathris pointed out.

“Then again, he’s always been a deceitful little shit.” Pierce growled.
“So…” Theron looked between them. “Are we going to talk about the bantha in the room?”

“No.”

“No?” He repeated quizzically.

“The imperative word being privacy. Fried your brain alongside your implants?”

“It sure feels that way.” The agent threw up his hands in defeat. “You know what, have it your way. I am used to being kept in the dark. Just don’t throw me on the sacrificial pyre this time.”

“I just got confirmation that they indeed are on Coruscant.” Their pilot called out from the cockpit. “Good call, sir.”

When he had got their landing underway, Zayathris approached him. “Where would you go if you were Fives?”

“Hard to say. I certainly wouldn’t set out on my own, I’d always go to the vode I trust.”

“Maybe he’d try to find someone of his unit to rely on, then?”

“Let me check…” The pilot made a few calls. “The 501st is on R&R on Coruscant, some of them often go to 79’s - that’s a cantina.” He added when he saw the woman’s quizzical look. “Perhaps that would be a good starting place”.

“Hail a speeder for us and wait for further orders from your superiors.” Zayathris instructed.

“General Ti's orders were to-” He started to protest.

“General Ti is a Jedi who has no reason to care about the life of the man who was taken hostage - or, for that matter, Fives. We’ll do this our way.”

The pilot had been right, the main clientele at 79’s was clones, rather drunk ones, with a few Twi’leks – professionals? – interspersed. One could not blame the soldiers for wishing to blow off some steam in various ways. Their existence was bleak enough.

Zayathris leisurely sauntered over to a table near the bar, and tapped one of the occupants on the shoulder.

“Hey, Tumble!”

“Tris?” His eyes darted around searchingly around the table until he found a mostly full shot glass containing a white, opaque liquid, which he thrust into her hands. “Rigs is too drunk already anyway. What brings you here? Missed me?”

“Is that the alcohol talking?” She returned his jovial grin. “While I am glad to see you in one piece, I am afraid it’s not a social call. I’m looking for a trooper called Fives.”

“Fives of the 501st? Know him.”

“Has he passed through here this evening?”
He shrugged. “Didn’t keep eyes open for him. Wait, Slither? What was it you said about the odd pair?” He gave one of his fellow soldiers a tentative shove. “Damn, he’s out. Sparkles, get him back to the barracks before he pukes all over a girl again. Not paying for his mess this time.”

“Nice callsigns.” Theron commented.

Tumble clapped him on the back, causing him to wince. “Yeah, pilots usually get the fancier names. You’re?”

“Old friends of mine. Pierce and Theron.” Zayathris replied in their stead.

“Good to meet you, sirs.” The clone hiccupped a little and narrowed his eyes, spotting someone on the other side of the room. “Oh, he’s 501st, too. Gimme a second, your orders are on me.”

“Thanks, I’ll pass.” Theron muttered when the clone was out of earshot.

Pierce leaned over the back of the couch. “Me too.”

“Know the feeling.” Zayathris sighed and downed the drink with a grimace. “Not bad, though. Whatever this is.”

“Clones, huh? Just when I thought the day couldn’t get any weirder. By the way, why do I get introduced by my first name?” The agent asked in mock offence.

“No need for a fake identity. Also, you’re Republic, your culture is less formal. Besides, are you overly fond of your surname?”

“I was wondering more about him.” He tilted his head towards Pierce, who sniffed at the alcohol and made an unimpressed face. “I mean, you’ve known each other for 10 years or so?”

“During which I’ve always been his superior.”

“Hm, strictly speaking, you’re almost everyone’s superior by default. That is, as long as they do not succeed in killing you. Makes no sense, but okay. It’s not my place to pry.”

“I am quite sure you thoroughly researched my private life, Agent Shan.” She commented with a wry smirk. “As early as Manaan. You don’t trust anyone you don’t have dirt on.”

“What makes you think-”

Tumble returned at a rather hurried pace, visibly pale. “Up for a tour of Coruscant? It would be my pleasure.” His exaggeratedly cheerful voice gave away his nervousness.

They exited the bar and walked a good distance before the pilot hastily dragged them into a corner.

“The brother I saw went outside to contact Captain Rex. With you asking around, that means things are going to go fubar real fast.” He explained in a conspiratorial whisper. “What’s this about?”

“Huh, he knows you quite well.”

Zayathris ignored Theron’s light jibe. “We need to find Fives before anyone else does. Though I don’t know the details, he uncovered something of major importance, something that affects all the clones.”

“All the clones?” Tumble asked incredulously.
“Yes. He fled from Kamino, fearing it might get covered up, taking a friend of mine hostage.”

“But then…your goal isn’t killing him?” He worried.

“No, but in his panicked state, he might make mistakes and get himself or my friend killed.”

Tumble didn’t take long to think. “Kix mentioned coordinates for a meeting place. I am coming with you. Can’t leave a vod to fend for himself like this.”

There was no one at the coordinates Tumble had led them to. The scorch marks, indicative of stray blaster shots, were the only tell-tale sign that someone had been here earlier.

Pierce traced his finger over the blackened duracrete. “Fresh. Guess they got him first.”

Zayathris let her gaze wander. “This place looks like it’s privately owned. Do you think there is a control centre of some kind?”

“Has to be. At least for surveillance purposes.” Theron mused.

“Good. Get there, slice into the system and find them.” The Sith tossed him a comm-unit.

“Bit of a stretch to think I can-” The agent protested, cutting himself off with a curse when she gave him a hard stare. “Fine. I’ll try my best.”

Several minutes later, the comm-piece in her ear buzzed to life. “Got a visual. Half a click to the north, one level down. It’s not Fives, though. Wait-” Static filled the connection. “Two levels up straight, circular room. There are two people approaching it, one with a fancy helmet, the other – dark robes or something. Really poor lighting up there. Can’t find Fives anywhere.” Zayathris relayed the information to the others.

“Fancy helmet, huh? Could be Captain Rex.” Tumble surmised. ”Could be any other CO, but they don’t tend to walk around here at night.”

Zayathris extended her senses, fumbling for a grasp on the disparate emotions swirling around them. Fear. Cold duty. Betrayal. Pain. So much fear. Heading towards the presumed position of the clone captain would be the natural choice but -

“We split up.” She decreed. “Tumble, find that Rex, make sure he understands what’s at stake. Fives had trouble articulating when we last saw him. Give me your frequency, I’ll patch Theron through to you. Pierce, with me.”

They reached a kind of warehouse. A lone figure stood out against the rows open rows of stacked containers.

It was Quinn. Alone, leaning against a smaller crate, breathing coming in ragged bouts. His hands pressed on his stomach, where a blaster shot had hit him. She had seen such injuries many times before. Judging from his state it probably meant a ruptured spleen, or worse. Thankfully no major artery, seeing as he was still alive despite the long time it had taken to get to him.

“Kriff, Quinn, are you actively trying to get yourself killed?”
“Just wanted it to stop,” came the whispered reply.

His whole body trembled as he inhaled slowly. Zayathris slapped him across the face, tensing as his pain and horror flowed back into her.

It still wasn't enough.

She slammed her fist into her lower back, hitting the healing flesh there, and hissed when the pain flared up. “You have no idea how much I hate you right now.” She muttered darkly, immersing herself in the Force, tracing along the trails of blood his agony left in its wake.

The claws were on her again with a vengeance, tearing right through her, ripping flesh from bone -

A firm hand pulled her out of the twirling, cruelly sniggering shadows.

“What the void, Pierce?” She protested against the unbidden intervention. The metallic taste on her tongue made her ill.

“Could ask you the same thing. Won’t let you destroy yourself over scum like him.” He wiped the blood off her lips with his thumb.

Zayathris took a moment to collect herself before examining the results of the healing attempt. “It should be sufficient if we get some bacta soon.”

“Isn’t bacta overkill?”

“It’s ubiquitous nowadays.” She explained. “Cheaper than kolto was, even. One of the very few improvements of this age.”

Theron’s voice chimed in. “Quick update, Commander. Fives tried to explain the whole spiel to a Jedi and his captain, I guess. Situation went haywire when a SpecOps looking unit joined them - had orders to shoot on sight. Tumble distracted them, allowing Fives to slip out, but got shot in the shoulder. Regardless, he managed to follow Fives because the Jedi had everyone stand down briefly. The SpecOps guys are in pursuit, but I jammed some doors to give the fugitives a head start. Can’t do much else, though, would even know where to begin decrypting that virtual network’s firewall.”

“Good work.” She saw Shaak Ti approach. “Theron, is the surveillance off?”

“It’s not recording at the moment, just the live feed. Do you need me to switch it on again?”

“Cut the feed completely for the next hour or so,” she stressed. “And make a clean exit. Don’t come to our position. I’ll send you the rendezvous coordinates later.”

The agent answered in the affirmative before the transmission ended abruptly.

“What happened? Have you found them?” The Jedi enquired breathlessly. “I sensed you.” She added, making her displeasure about what she had felt clear.

“No, only Quinn.” Zayathris pointed towards the injured Imperial. “We found out Fives was going to meet with a clone called Rex here, but chanced upon him instead. Whether he was shot by security or Fives, I don’t know.”

“Captain Rex?” Master Ti asked in surprise. “Perhaps Knight Skywalker is aware of the situation, then.” She turned around and made a holocall.
“Fives got away. Apparently he had help from another clone.” She summarised after the terse conversation had ended, her voice filled with regret and worry. “Commander Fox is on it.”

“Quinn was injured due to the actions of your troops, making it your responsibility. The least you can do is heal him.”

The look the Togrutan shot the Sith was a rather reproachful one, soon to be replaced by serene compassion as she opened herself to the Force, complying with the request.

She rose from her kneeling position beside Quinn a few minutes later, a thin sheen of perspiration covering her montrals. “I healed his physical ailments the best I could. However, I discovered that his mind is, for lack of a better description, broken. A visit to a healer would be advised.”

“Broken?” Zayathris stared at the unconscious form of the Imperial. But he seemed normal on Iokath, didn’t he …?

“Perhaps the effects of severe trauma? I am not an expert. His mind feels fragmented to some extent. That is all I can say.”

“Can you determine if it is Force-based?”

“Unfortunately not. I am sure we can arrange for a full examination in the Halls of Healing—”

Zayathris interrupted her harshly, waving the offer away. “No. You will not inform anyone of this. In fact, leave my involvement out of your report altogether. If you have to make one at all.”

“Of course I do. With the involvement of the Coruscant Guard especially.” Shaak Ti snapped.

“If these chips become public knowledge, you’ll greatly weaken your position. The clones will be seen as a liability, undermining the Republic’s war effort.”

“But they are a weak spot – and as Commander-in-Chief, the Chancellor needs to hear of it. I cannot possibly lie to him. And the Senate will likely have to be informed of the malfunction as well. They need to agree to funding a complete examination of all clones if required.”

“Malfunction? That’s not the only thing you need to worry about.” Zayathris took a step back and crossed her arms. “You’ll be playing into Sidious’ hands, if he isn’t involved in this conspiracy in the first place. For the sake of the Order, you have no choice but to lie.”

“Do you expect me to so nonchalantly to subvert my values?” The Togrutan’s reply left no doubt of her opposition to the suggestion. “My commitment is to the Republic, to democracy. This is a decision I cannot make.”

“I see.” Zayathris replied darkly.

The Sith’s grey eyes flashed towards Pierce, orange bleeding into them. He understood immediately. Now that was the kind of order he did not need to hear the words for. He casually walked over to the clone next to Quinn under pretence of checking up on the injured man. The trooper was too surprised to put up resistance when his rifle was yanked away from him.

Pierce got three well-aimed shots in before the clone wrapped his arms around him in an attempt to wrestle him to the floor.
The Jedi crumpled to the ground, smoke rising from the charred flesh on her back.

When the other soldiers raised their blasters a fraction later, the utter shock delaying their well-trained reflexes, they flew from their hands. Zayathris charged into one of the men, holding another by the neck, his feet dangling in the air as he gasped for oxygen in vain. Pierce fired a blast into his downed opponent for good measure and took on the third clone left, who had dived for his dropped weapon. After a brief struggle, a nasty snapping sound was proof of the clone’s cervical vertebrae fracturing. Panting slightly, Zayathris got up and slammed the lifeless body of the asphyxiated trooper to the ground. She wordlessly gestured towards one she knocked out, sensing he was still alive. Pierce shot him at point-blank range.

They were alone.

Zayathris' smirk widened when she sensed Pierce’s bloodlust being replaced by a different kind of passion just before he roughly pushed her against a container, body flush against hers, his arms caging her on either side.
The future is not a river to carry us, it is the ocean in which we drown if we are not prepared.
- Vitiate

“Nice place.” Theron quipped, commenting on the condition of her apartment. “I thought the SIS was stingy, but this definitely takes it to extremes.”

“I didn’t expect guests.” Having peeled off her partially ripped tunic, Zayathris pulled her undershirt over her head and tossed it into a corner. “Would’ve had to murder too many people to get a spot on the waiting list for a 500 Republica apartment. It got boring after the first couple of dozen.”

The agent scratched his head, trying to figure out—or rather, hoping—that her remark was supposed to be a joke. A rather tasteless one at that, since the Coruscanti housing market was indeed known to be rather cutthroat—not necessarily literally, though—on all levels except for the lowest ones, where no one without suicidal intentions ever ventured. “It’s not like I mind—the design choices, that is—it just seems very, uh, incongruous with the grandeur of the Empire. I know you’re not one for opulence, but it looks very different from the interior of your ship at least.”

“I was going for a minimalist style this time for a change. What, you expected me to recreate the Citadel out of nostalgia? Paint the room in black and reds and adorn it with the skulls of my enemies?” She replied in a deadpan tone while shimmying out of her pants.

“Something like that, yeah. Although skulls would be a little over-the-top. Collarbones, perhaps?” When he noticed Pierce watching her indifferent display with a barely suppressed, startlingly possessive grin instead of showing a hint of decency, Theron rolled his eyes and settled on looking out of the smudged window.

His intent had not gone unnoticed. “Prude.” Zayathris chuckled. “The advantage of the low-key location is that nobody frowns upon people lugging bodies around as long as it doesn’t become a daily occurrence.” She nodded towards the futon. “Pierce, put Quinn on my bed, will you? Dumping him on the floor like that doesn’t help at all, even if it gives you some petty satisfaction. Undress him first, though, there’s only one bedsheet. And that reminds me: We’re going to need more beds in general.” She muttered a curse under her breath. “Kriffing void. This is ludicrous.”

“I’m taking a shower.” She explained, as if it wasn’t obvious from her state of undress, and wagged a finger in an exaggerated gesture of admonition. “Behave.”

“He has woken up, m’lord.” Pierce’s aloof statement greeted her when she stepped out of the refresher.
“Something's... really off.” Theron added, observing Quinn apprehensively from a distance. The older man knelt on the futon, head bowed submissively like a condemned man awaiting execution.

“…Quinn?”

“My life is in your hands.” He replied monotonously. “I implore you. Stop this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have recognised my error. What more do you want?” He looked up with red-rimmed eyes. “I deserve punishment. But this is a farce, a perversion of justice—Kill me.” Spittle flew from his mouth as he screamed. “Kill me!”

Nose wrinkling with disgust, Zayathris took a step back and assumed a somewhat more imperious posture. “State your rank and unit.”

“Lieutenant Malavai Quinn, 128th Regiment, IntCorps—” He droned on.

“Lieutenant?” She stared at him, struggling to keep her composure.

He flinched and forced himself to sit more upright. “Yes, ma’am?” Her eyebrows knitted together in worried confusion.

“Where did you serve after Druckenwell?”

What little poise he had regained broke apart before her eyes, desperate laughter bubbling from his throat. “I will never serve anywhere again! I have understood this!”

Quinn unthinkingly ran hand through his matted hair, giving him a thoroughly disorderly look.

“You forgot Balmorra? Baras? Me?” Zayathris turned around, slamming a fist into the wall, restraining herself just before testing the sturdiness of the duracrete— or the bones in her arm. The Imperial regarded her with a blank expression.

“Have you ever served attached to a Sith Lord?”

Instantly, his fearfully docile babbling started again. “That is an honour I could never hope to—”

“Oh Force.” She groaned. Pierce observed the scene with a mixture of smugness and pity on his face.

“Give me your age?” She sighed dejectedly, brushing pieces of the crumbling layer of plaster from her bloodied knuckles.

“Twenty-two, ma’am?” Quinn replied, appearing closer to crying with every question.

Zayathris turned toward Theron, biting her lower lip. “This doesn't look like an act to you?”

“No, I'm afraid not. Would this be a good time to ask what the heck is going on? I mean, not just with him.”

“You haven't figured it out, agent?”

“I'm a bit fuzzy on the details.”

“You remember Iokath?” Theron nodded slowly. Zayathris was about the launch into a full
explanation when she realised the incongruence. “Wait...why are you here?”

“You told me to come here earlier?”

She had worked with the agent long enough to recognise his deliberately innocent face. “Not in this room. In this era. You should never have ended up in stasis in the first place. I went with Pierce and Quinn. You were remotely plugged into the framework, attempting to slow down the activation of the weapon.”

Theron schooled his face into careful neutrality. “Which wasn’t working as desired. I realised you needed help, so I went to the throne room, only to be greeted by an explosion. The next thing I know is waking up on an operating table on Kamino with the worst headache of my entire life, and that’s saying something.”

Something felt strange to Zayathris about his demeanour – she could make out a strand of suppressed guilt - , but it might simply be the shock of the drastic change in direction his life had taken. Where is Jaesa when you need her... Whatever it was, they had more pressing issues at hand. “Just your luck, then, that damned piece of Iokathi engineering froze us, similar to Carbonite, but less damaging it seems – though I am not sure about him. We woke up 3634 years after the Treaty.”

He recoiled in horror. “I was actually holding out hope for something like an elaborate Force trance or mind-trick thingy, but that's...”

“It seems congratulations are in order, Agent Shan,” she sneered in a borderline acerbic tone, “your Republic won, eventually. It has enjoyed more than a millennium of your fabled peace. Got complacent, however, so it’s currently in its death throes. A Darth Sidious, one of only two Sith in existence other than me, is about to give it the final shove-”

“My lord!” Of all sudden, a sobbing Quinn launched forward to prostrate himself before her feet. “I beseech you, end this!”

“What do you think is happening?” She ground out slowly. His behaviour made it seem as if he was experiencing a completely different take on reality.

“My lord, I believe it started after the court martial following my … insubordination during the Battle of Druckenwell. If this at least is real. I have been trapped in an endless stream of nightmares ever since. Is this a test? A punishment? I tried my best. I died, repeatedly, but it never ends. What more do you want? I will do everything, just say the word... Please grant me mercy at last, my lord.” The tired whisper died on his lips.

Oh kriff.

“Kneel.” Quinn promptly shifted his weight backwards and dropped his head, gratefully exposing the back of his neck, expecting a swift strike. A single relieved tear fell to the floor.

The way he welcomed death was proof that he had long given up. The realisation clamped down on her throat like a vise. There had been times when she had doubted the wisdom of staying her hand after the incident – and keeping Pierce from beating him to a bloody pulp. The satisfaction from killing him would have paled in comparison to his continuous efforts to redeem himself in her eyes and fearful loyalty she enjoyed instead. He had been either too stubbornly perfectionistic or too hopeful to realise the futility of that endeavour. It was why she had not bothered to annul the marriage – simultaneously providing a cruel spark of hope for him and driving the knife deeper into his ribs, reminding him of what he had thrown away. Pierce had been very obliging in that
latter regard, although their dalliances predated even her ill-fated relationship with Quinn. To see her traitorous husband on his knees again, begging for an execution-

_Not like this… “No, I mean, sit up. Look at me.”_

She sank down, mirroring Quinn’s posture, and placed a tentative hand on his shoulder, tilting his chin up with her thumb to force him to look at her. “You are safe now. This is not a vision. I am real. You served under my command for five years. After Druckenwell”, he flinched involuntarily, “you were relegated to a dead-end post on Balmorra, languishing there for ten years until Darth Baras called on you to spy on his apprentice.” She took a steadying breath, smothering the rising anger. “Me. Eventually, Baras went against the Emperor and I was appointed Wrath. I killed Baras but kept you in my services.” Pierce grunted under his breath. “The Emperor later betrayed us all. As a result, I spent five years trapped in carbonite, so I don't know what happened to you during that time.” Sitting completely motionless, Quinn stared at her, his mouth slack.

Pierce abruptly pushed himself off the wall he had leaned against casually. “Not going to watch this sob reunion.” He slammed the refresher door closed, nearly breaking the lock mechanism, which caused Zayathris to roll her eyes in irritation.

“Rest. Perhaps the Kaminoans’ treatment went wrong.” She walked over to a small case containing medical supplies and inserted a tranquiliser vial into a hypodermal injector.

The occasional hum of the sonic shower broke the ensuing silence. Staring out of the window, Theron had resumed his ill-fated attempt to make out more than distorted shapes, as if the microcosm outside could tell him more about present day Coruscant as a whole.

After a few minutes, he cleared his throat. “So, Commander, I have a theory.”

“Indulge me.”

“When we first met on Manaan, I was puzzled by Cipher Nine’s outright hostility to me. I mean, going above and beyond the antagonism that is expected when you belong to opposing intelligence services. He brought you into that Revanite mess, and if a Sith can cooperate in a constructive manner, I’d expect a Cipher agent to be able to do so as well, even if it’s just putting on a façade for the sake of the mission.” He explained, with no small amount of cynicism.

“Naturally, I did some digging. Found – ok, more like sliced into – internal documents. At one point in his illustrious career, he infiltrated the SIS, pretending to defect when in reality he was a double agent. I guess his superiors didn’t trust him enough, so they put him through a kind of mind control before that.” He paused for effect. “Castellan restraints. Which the SIS learned of and liberally used against Nine.”

Pierce left the refresher, now somewhat less disgruntled, a towel casually slung around his hips. Theron gave a sardonic chuckle. “Guess you’re hogging the only towel? Anyway, I am not suggesting this is what happened to Quinn, but maybe something similar. Considering how he fully expected to be in Imperial hands being tortured, there’s little doubt your guys did something to him.”

“It was actually at the Dark Council’s behest. Nine killed Darth Jadus, after all. They were scared of him, but didn’t want to lose such a useful tool at the same time.” Zayathris elucidated.
“You knew?”

“Not in so much detail, but Nine came to offer his… sympathies, I suppose, regarding Vitiate’s unbidden presence.” She mulled his arguments over. “It might well be something like that. But if it happened right after Druckenwell, as Quinn’s account suggest, why didn’t any of this surface earlier?”

“Seen several soldiers go that route during the war, without extravagant schemes in the background. Simply couldn’t take the heat.” Pierce offered. “The lucky ones got some nice, boring desk job. The others were culled real fast. Could be he’s following in Moff Broysc’s footsteps, mentally. Wouldn’t that be ironic.”

She shook her head disapprovingly. “Hard to imagine him traumatised like that. I don’t think you could find someone more dispassionately analytic and detached.”

“I don’t know, being manoeuvred into impossible situations and eventually having your arm taken off by your wife seems plenty traumatising to me.” Theron interjected, earning himself a stern glare.

“Pierce, you know what Quinn was doing after Marr and I disappeared?”

“Apart from freaking out about the whole thing? Nah. Met him once, asked him if he found out anything about you. Told me he’d made no inroads. No way to find out, short of going to Zakuul. Heard he worked under Minister Lorman later on. Must have been useful, to get promoted somehow.”

Zayathris laughed humourlessly. “Lorman? Puts a new spin on that theory.”

“Would’ve had to be Acina herself. Heard couple of rumours about her.”

Theron agreed. “This sounds quite likely, actually. I imagine it would’ve been very useful to have a spy in the Alliance, but guess given his, um, history…”

“I always assumed Acina would not completely trust me – she’d be foolish to do so. But to send such a poisoned gift… Well, fortunately for her, she died long time ago.”

“Speaking of a long time ago, I gather you’ve been, uh, busy settling into the life of an upstanding Republic citizen?” Theron inquired, switching the topic to something that had clearly been bothering him.

“You wish.” She snorted.

“I didn’t think so, but you must’ve got out of stasis much earlier than we did, to make friends among the clones and Jedi. I’m surprised by that, to be honest.”

“Well, I am a people-pleaser.” She gave a wry, lopsided smirk. “In all seriousness, no one is more astonished by how things played out than I am.”

“That’s a curious development for sure. What took you so long, by the way? We could have been…useful?” He made a somewhat helpless looking gesture with his arms. “A friendly face among the weird future stuff going on?”

“Do I get permission to speak again, oh mighty Wrath?”
“Assuming Sidious knows about you, they are a liability. You can’t deny that.”

At least now I am in a position to do something about it. So are they. If he so much as touches them, he will feel my rage.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that. The question is rather, is either side ready and willing to let it escalate? And until it eventually happens, what amendments will he have made to his plan? Killing Sidious is one thing, turning the after into something useful for us, quite another.”

I imagine it would speed up his machinations.

“I am not sure that this would actually work in our favour.”

“I would have come for you much earlier, but Nox apparently decided your existence was an obstacle to his grand designs.” She motioned subtly towards her temple.

“Huh…Nox? How?” Theron asked, stumbling over his words. “He…is…in your head?”

“Not literally in my head, but yes.”

“Okay…that’s…whoa.” He sighed. “I mean, just one question: Why can’t things ever be normal?”

“Normal as in, you’d rather he died instead? Because I would.”

“Um, no, not that necessarily.” Theron backpedalled. “Why the hard feelings, though?”

“Probably the usual bizarre Sith crap.” Pierce interjected with a one-shouldered shrug.

Zayathris rolled her eyes. “No. He deceived me, preventing me from learning about your fate sooner.”

“See?” Pierce grinned smugly, despite the dirty look she gave him. “Sith crap.”

“Nice to hear how much he values me.” Theron deadpanned, keeping the disappointment out of his voice with practised ease.

“Not as much as his own ambitions, I am afraid.” She gasped, a spark of electricity running down her spine. “Oh kriff you, Nox, lay off, will you? Or jump into Theron’s body if you want.”


“Wouldn’t that be romantic?”

The agent raised a single eyebrow. “Nox? Romantic?”

“I can see your point.” Zayathris conceded. “I find it quite hard to picture the two of you together.”

“They fucked on Yavin IV. Must’ve been love on first sight or something.” Pierce chimed in, clearly enjoying Theron’s growing embarrassment.

“Major Pierce is more observant than he appears.” The Sith flashed a toothy grin. “Though I really wonder why you keep taking such an interest in other people’s sex life. Paid off with Hurdenn, but
at some point you’re bound to step into some mess you’d rather not get entangled in. Anyway, Theron, how did that happen?”

The younger man shook his head, stunned into mortified silence.

“I guess I’ll just ask Nox.”

Theron cleared his throat. “You think you can trust him not to embellish our, uh, courtship?”

“Because you are perfectly innocent, agent… Besides, does he need to embellish anything?” She taunted him.

Well, first he couldn’t keep his eyes off me during the inaugural joint meeting. Then there was that exploration mission of the temple I went on with him. We encountered several puzzles, centring on various passions. As it happens, I required his help in a rather hands-on fashion, allowing me to discover how good he is at-

“Alright, upon further thought, I don’t want to know. No, Nox, I really don’t.”

Theron had already slipped away into the refresher room, humming loudly to himself until the whirring of the sonic unit was loud enough to drown out potential jibes directed at him. The shower really is due for replacement, Zayathris thought glumly.

“M’lord. Glad we have a moment. Got something to discuss.” Pierce approached her. “What’s your plan? Doubt you got into the Jedi’s good graces just for the heck of it.”

“True. Working with them should enable me to uncover the identity of the other Sith. I have encountered one of them, it’s the master, a Darth Sidious, that remains elusive.”

“From my experience, Sith are hard to overlook.”

“These new Sith are a different breed. Cunning and manipulation instead of ostensible displays of power and straightforward slaughter. I am going by the assumption that he intends to take over the Republic, and rebuild it in the worst way possible. Like Vitiate, with no consideration for the actual citizens, expendable at a whim.”

“Hard to do it any other way.”

“But not impossible. Marr proved that, and so did Acina.”

“And you, m’lord. The Empire must change. And if we must stand on the precipice of death to do so, then so be it.”

“Didn’t know my impromptu speeches were so memorable.”

“That Sidious, does he know about you?” Pierce wondered.

“His apprentice has no reason to inform him and I haven’t done anything monumental that would draw his attention. However, considering his manipulations of the Force, he probably sensed me the instant I set foot on Coruscant – he must be here, I am sure of it. Whether he is aware of my identity, I have no idea.” She made a heavy pause. “It won’t be easy. As soon as he does know, you’re a target. Do with that what you will.”
“You want me to leave? Because you promised I’d be yours until I fall in battle or you dispose of me. Neither has happened so far.”

“In hindsight, that sounds more like a threat.” Zayathris admitted. “With the Empire gone, you are free from the chain of command. I have no right to keep you here.”

Pierce shrugged. “The way I see it, you’re Sith and the embodiment of the Empire. Guess that makes you my Empress.”

“In that case, I probably should punish you for your habitual irreverence.”

Pierce gave a formal salute, grinning as he did so. “Better? Otherwise, I look forward to any punishment you deem necessary, your Imperial Highness.”

“The bootlicking doesn’t suit you. Technically, I already was an Empress when I took the Eternal Throne – which turned out to be ironically short-lived –, but I appreciate your…devotion.” Her warm smile was summarily chased away by her next argument. “Sidious is going to debate that claim to supremacy.”

“Kriff him. Like there’s any pseudo-overlord you couldn’t crush.”

Chapter End Notes

A little reunion fluff and (well-deserved) angst.
Fault Lines

Chapter Notes

“There is satisfaction in defeating an enemy. But one must never allow oneself to become complacent. There are always more enemies to be identified, faced, and vanquished.

All warriors understand the need to face and defeat the enemy. Both aspects of the task can be challenging. Both can require thought, insight, and planning. Failures in any of those areas can cost unnecessary time and irreplaceable lives.

But a warrior may forget that even the task of identifying the enemy can be difficult. And the cost of that failure can lead to catastrophe.”

— Timothy Zahn, Star Wars: Thrawn

“I just came from a Council meeting. CorSec found the bodies of Master Ti and the unit that was with her. She was shot in the back.” Kenobi solemnly explained, the weight of the statement heavy on his tongue.

“By someone she trusted, then.” Skywalker concluded with a quiet exhale. “It is my fault. I was too unfocussed after Fives’ revelation. I just wasn’t thinking. I informed her that Fives had got away, but when I couldn’t raise her comm later, I didn’t connect the dots. She believed in him…”

“Anakin. You should not try to take responsibility for everything. It’s not your fault.” The words rang empty, promises of solace hanging uselessly between the two men, ever reaching out but not quite touching. A jump from cliff to cliff, once light-hearted, now weighed down by duty.

“How? The disasters keep piling up these days. Do you know who came to speak with me this morning? Padawan Dume, asking how his master died. Ahsoka…she once helped him with his sabre training. That’s the only thing I could think about when he approached me.” Skywalker gave a high-pitched bark of laughter. “I had to look him in the eyes and explain why we – we of all people – failed to protect Master Billaba. She should not have been out in the field in the first place!”

“I understand- I agree with you, but investigating Master Tu-Ahn’s death on Utapau was supposed to be a fairly easy mission, one the Council deemed her ready for.” His former master emphasised.

A hand, stretched out. Failing to grasp the edge.

“No, Anakin. You cannot blame this on the Council, either. If anything, I made the decision to go after the crystal with you and told Depa to remain planetside. How should I have known that Dooku wouldn’t be on his ship, guarding the valuable cargo he was after? Or that she would...
engage him?” Refusing to be goaded into further defending his actions, Kenobi drew a calming breath.

“We of all people, you say? This war has made us – you and me both – utterly reckless, with complete disregard for the Living Force! We are prone to jumping headfirst into situations while forgetting about threats to other people because we have become accustomed to being able to solve everything. We expect danger to follow us and spare the others, but we’ve deluded ourselves into believing we can bear it all—”

The younger Jedi’s eyes snapped towards the doorway, giving Zayathris a suspicious, almost threatening look. It disappeared from his face quickly, replaced by a quizzical expression directed at Kenobi.

“Are you expecting anyone, Obi-Wan? There’s a, well, not a Jedi, I guess, in your doorway.”

“I noticed, Anakin.” Kenobi flashed her a tired smile by way of greeting. “Please, come in.”

Skywalker cocked his head, assessing the situation with narrowed eyes. “Okay, I’ll make my exit then,” he murmured gruffly.

Displeasure and disappointment rippled in the Force around him. When the other Jedi failed to reply in time, he skulked out of the room, glancing warily at Zayathris when he passed her.

“Is this a bad time?” She asked and pointed towards the door through which the younger Jedi had vanished in a huff.

“I can’t claim it’s ever a perfectly good time. I am confident that Anakin will be fine. He always needs a little time to deal with his emotions. The last weeks haven’t been easy on anyone.”

“It would appear so.” She agreed amicably. “I couldn’t help overhearing parts of your rather loud discussion.”

“Oh, I am sure you couldn’t. I wonder when necessary caution turned into let the Sith walk around in the Temple freely.”

“In your Temple Guards’ defence, Archivist Vaiken accompanied me all the way to this level – and since you left him in the dark about me, he didn’t make the assumption that there was any risk of me murdering the inhabitants of this wing in their sleep. Don’t worry, Kenobi - that would be beneath me.”

“I am impressed by your tendency to give the most alarming reasons for your relatively restrained behaviour. Your mind must be a truly terrifying place.” He remarked sardonically.

Zayathris threw her hands up, a gesture of playful arrogance. “The long version is of course: No, I mean you no harm, since we are allies, but even if we weren’t, I’d rather slay a Jedi in combat than slicing their throats while they are helpless. I haven’t killed a single Jedi since I awoke, and frankly, it’s not like my life is emptier for it.”

“The old one does not count; he was halfway to the pyre anyway. If anything, it was an act of mercy.”

“Likewise, the two females don’t count because you did not deal the killing blow personally? Well, whatever makes the lie roll off your tongue more easily.”

“You had hoped I had a complete change of heart?” She steepled her fingers and rested her chin against the tips of the index fingers. “In that case, would you agree to a compromise? I shall
venture as far into the Light as you are willing to tread into the Dark. If you’re so sure of yourself, you should not come to harm. And I promise not to let you Fall. I just want you to understand.”

“That is a demonic bargain.” Kenobi stroked his beard in guarded bewilderment.

“… I agree I just sounded a bit like a holocron gatekeeper.” She smiled, all teeth and sarcasm. "Spill your own blood in exchange for knowledge, that sort of rhetoric. The offer stands, though. At worst, you’ll suffer some nightmares, at best you get to redeem a Sith Lord.”

“Aside from the fact that this is not how the Force works – and I daresay you are patently aware of this – even if I were willing to take such a risk, I have no shortage of nightmares recently.”

“Oh?” Her interest was perked.

“The mission my former padawan and I were just discussing. It was a close call.” He dismissed the emotions rising up, accompanied by a wave of his hand, as if to translate the psychological into the physical. “Let’s not talk about it. What happened? You dropped out of contact. A couple of people were beginning to, ah, worry.”

“For my safety? How sweet.” She gave a lopsided smirk. “Oh, you mean they panicked? The reason for my sudden disappearance was perfectly benign – Senator Iskra gave me a task that turned out unexpectedly…out-of-the-way and time-consuming.”

“What kind of task?” Kenobi prodded.

Zayathris gave a thoughtful hum. “If I’ve understood the relevant statutes correctly, the Senate is not accountable to the Jedi.”

“That’s rather ironic, coming from a non-Republic citizen who happens to be a Sith.”

“Tread very carefully, Master Jedi, that statement could be construed as harassment on grounds of religious affiliation.”

“Are you serious?” Kenobi shot her a baffled stare. “You’ve clearly spent too much time around politicians.”

“You have no love for them, huh?”

“Not particularly, no.” He admitted.

“You would have liked the Empire, then. No squabbling senators around. Apart from the moffs, there were just the local governors and civil servants whose necks you could snap with relative impunity if they annoyed you.”

“My dislike for politicians doesn’t quite go to such extremes.”

Giving a faint chuckle, she nestled a small package out of her jacket’s pocket. “By the way, your favourite not-a-Jedi brought you a little present. Tekunyin spice tea, the closest I could find to the blends I enjoyed in my youth. It was quite a challenge to match the taste profile, but the expertise of the tea vendors in the Chandrilan enclave on level 4895 is astonishing.” She licked her lips at the memory of the tasting sessions she had enjoyed. “No, it’s not poisoned, I assure you.”

“I wasn’t going to question it.” Kenobi accepted the package and carefully nestled apart the paper wrapping, exposing the clear mesh sachet containing the tea. “I’d descend into utter paranoia sooner than later if such things were at the front of my mind whenever you are concerned.”
“Well, one could say you afford me the same privilege you give Sidious.” The Jedi looked up with a rather taken-aback expression. “He’s obviously well connected and exerts great influence over the major players in this war. And whatever the Senate tells you to do, you accept unquestioningly, even though it might come directly from your enemy, who has for certain infiltrated the Republic political scene.” She spelled it out for her interlocutor, with no small amount of smugness.

Kenobi hummed ponderously. “Dooku claimed something similar a few years ago. Hundreds of senators are now under the influence of a Sith Lord, if I remember correctly.”

“Tyranus exposed parts of his master’s plan to you?”

“I believe he attempted to get me to join him.” The Jedi admitted.

Such a principled, yet sentimental man. For all his faults, it would really be a shame to lose Tyranus.

“I dislike him.”

I am sure he’d be far easier to work with than you, seeing how predictable he is in comparison.

“I’d simply murder him, if he became a rival.”

You don’t need to prove that in some regards, you’re just as predictable.

“Surely you’re not still cross with me, at least not to the degree that you would choose him over me?”

Cross does not quite cover it, but I guess I should thank you for the reminder that trust on the basis of past reliability is of little worth, unless accompanied by constant measures to ensure the other’s unwavering loyalty.

“Lots of words for I won’t ever expose my back to you again.”

Zayathris exhaled sharply, astonished by the naïveté of the Jedi. “You’ve known this for years without coming any closer to revealing Sidious’ identity?”

“Let me put it this way: We were all rather wary of accepting the words of a Sith as truth.”

“And look where that got you.” She gave him a patronising smile. “You make it really hard to help you. You’re so deluded, you could probably sit in a meeting with Sidious without you recognising him.”

“Past failures coming to haunt us.” Kenobi sighed in defeat. “Shall we have tea?” He asked to lighten the mood, receiving an eager nod in response.

“What was it that you said about Dooku to Skywalker?” Zayathris called out to him while he was in the kitchenette preparing the beverage.

“Well, I suppose you should be informed of such developments if you are to help us.” Kenobi conceded. “Dooku was on Utapau, attempting to purchase a kyber crystal.”

“Kyber? Presumably not to build a lightsabre.” She quipped.
“No, we fear the purpose may be much more sinister. Master Yoda claims ancient Sith weapons always had a kyber at their heart. Would you know anything about that?”

“In the earliest days, perhaps. Later, they had become too hard to find, so the Empire diversified its technology. I mean, we didn’t use synth-crystals in our lightsabres just out of vanity. The attempt to gain control over a reliable supply turned Ilum into one of the largest battlefields of the post-Cold War period.” She took the proffered cup, filled with the golden, slightly pungent infusion of leaves and spices. “What happened to upset Skywalker like that?”

Zayathris refrained from pointing out the obvious - that Kenobi had failed to train him properly, considering the younger Jedi’s negligible control over his emotions.

“Master Depa Billaba was killed by Dooku. She was investigating a trail that let us to the discovery of the Separatists’ plan. Anakin and I were dispatched to deal with it. Dooku tricked us – he stayed on the planet instead of protecting the crystal on his ship. It was a trap, one that Master Billaba fell victim to, but was probably intended for either me or my former padawan.”

*A far larger blow to the Republic has been dealt - and if everything went according to plan, to the Jedi and Sidious alike.*

His explanation of the events added another layer of complexity, making her realise why Tyranus seemed to have expected, even welcomed, the destruction of his ships. Then the actual trap was the capital ship, which Tyranus obviously couldn’t be on if his plan was to sacrifice it all along.

“You assume he wanted you to split up? How would either of you fare against him?”

“Yan Dooku is one of the best swordsmen the Order ever produced. He was considered a true prodigy of the Order. When Anakin and I faced him before... let’s say he effortlessly had the upper hand a lot of the time.”

He could have faced them personally, then. On the other hand… The crystal – if it was as potent as Mitaka claimed, Tyranus would not have handed it off to his underlings or even forfeited it. Perhaps it did in fact remain planet-side, with him protecting it, while he used the ship as a ruse. And would the damage not have been far more devastating, if the kyber caused the explosion?

The brilliance of this plan would be convincing the Republic, and, if he played his cards right, Sidious, of its destruction. The Jedi weren’t necessarily the priority – but their perishing along with the ship a great bonus. Two popular war heroes taken out with a single blow would be bad for morale.

“I gather Billaba didn’t stand a chance?”

Clenching his jaw, Kenobi shook his head. “In hindsight, she should never have been put on the case, or at least I should have made sure she had a chance of getting out of harm’s way. While she was trained in Vaapad by Master Windu – the technique he used in your disastrous sparring session -, going up against Dooku was suicide in her state.”

“Her state?” Zayathris wondered. The Jedi Master had seemed quite capable, displaying incredible willpower for overcoming her lethal injury to deal a final attack. She might have had a greater impact if not for Tyranus' interference. In all honesty, the surprise attack with the shard could have given her a critical wound if the Jedi had had her wits together and aimed better – it was hard to mitigate the immediate effects of, say, a cut carotid artery quickly enough to remain conscious, let alone in fighting shape.
“She spent months in a coma after she nearly fell to the Dark side.” His brows furrowed with sadness. “So what you did to Master Windu has an added element of-”

“Cruel irony?” She supplied.

“I was going to say bitterness, but this works, too.”

“How is Windu, by the way?”

“He has made a full recovery as far as I can tell, nevertheless, I’d advise you to stay out of his way for the time being and refrain from such shenanigans in the future.”

“Duly noted.” Next time, I’ll simply follow through. “Would not want to upset him. If you do face Sidious, make sure to send him - he might even last a minute or more.”

Kenobi tapped his fingers on the table, deliberating about his next question. “Why did you ask me about Dooku’s skills, when you have faced him before, on Farnas II? What happened there?”

“We fought. Disoriented from the stasis, I could not hope for more than a stalemate. So I retreated when the opportunity presented itself. There is nothing more to it.” She gave an idle shrug. “Impossible to tell if he expressed the full range of his powers.”

Kenobi nodded his reluctant acceptance of her words. “That means he knows who you are. Hence, it is safe to assume that Sidious does as well.”

“Not necessarily. Tyranus could have withheld that piece of information from him - to cover up his failure to kill me, or as leverage.”

“Leverage? I don’t think I’ll ever fully understand your way of thinking.”

“The moment you could, you’d join me.” She shot back, the corners of her lips curling up.

“I shall make a concerted effort not to understand, then. Would you be able to identify Sidious if you stood before him?”

“Unfortunately, I cannot say for sure. I am warrior first and foremost – I just don’t have the patience for all the esoteric knowledge required for sorcery. Not being blindsided like you with your reliance on the Light, I have a distinctive advantage, but undoubtledly, he projects a false aura on top of keeping his public persona spotless. Conversely, though, with the faintest suspicion he would sense something was off about me practically immediately so I do hope I have not met him yet. Considering I don't know anyone of significance, that’s hardly an issue so far.”

“It’s a good thing, then, that Master Yoda shielded the venue during our…combat practise.”

“Hmm, I bet sensing another darksider in the Temple of all places would have thoroughly confused him. Admittedly, considering the control he has over the Force itself, he is bound to have noticed an oddity already. I actually expected him to make a move by now, so either he very sure of his plan, or afraid to expose himself.”

“Would it be a viable approach to draw him out by revealing your identity, in order to derail his plan?” Kenobi suggested. “With the Rule of Two, he must have focussed on the Jedi and keeping his apprentice in check, but would not have accounted for another Sith appearing out of nowhere.”

“It’s an avenue worth exploring. Although I believe it would merely speed up things – and likely create enormous collateral damage. Besides, depending on who he is, he might be able to turn my
involvement against you. For example, fabricate evidence that I was the Sith pulling the strings, and collaborating with the Jedi to cement their power. The general population is unlikely to distinguish between Force users adhering to different philosophies.” She got up and walked over to the window, watching the hypnotic pattern of the airspeeder traffic against the backdrop of the darkening skyline. “I really wonder what he is waiting for. The Republic is drowning in debt, ruled through emergency powers, the war itself could go on for years…it will take a while for it all to collapse naturally, without the overall situation shifting drastically.”

While the Banite Sith had waited patiently for several hundred years to put their plan into motion, their ostensible passivity at such a crucial point in time was out-of-character. There had to be a decisive element lacking – a suitable replacement for Tyranus? The completion of that hypothetical superlaser? Whittling down the number of Jedi? A ritual to increase Sidious’ powers? Maybe he simply got sadistic enjoyment from toying with all those lives, but with his having his hands in nigh everything, he would needlessly risk the exposure of his machinations. If an outsider like her could discover several vital threads, even though the key information allowing her to piece them together into a coherent narrative still eluded her… The Jedi at the very least must have come into direct contact with people – or situations – influenced by Sidious. Then again, they were not particularly observant, as evidenced by the fact that even the spur-of-the-moment cover up of her involvement in the escape of the rogue clone had not roused suspicions. It would have been quite difficult to give a compelling explanation for that.

“Tell me about the other Jedi who died.” She asked, keeping her voice level.

“You overheard that too?” Kenobi rubbed his eyes with his palms. “Tup, a clone trooper of Anakin’s regiment, murdered Master Tiplar, prompting another clone, Fives, to investigate. Fives came to Coruscant claiming to have found evidence for a conspiracy and eventually shot Master Ti during his escape. Apparently, the clones are implanted with a bio-chip to reduce their propensity toward violent behaviour, which malfunctioned.”

“Even non-engineered combatants sometimes snap under pressure.” She interjected, already having heard the details. “How come you were not aware of the chip or its purpose? It’s your army, shouldn’t you have full control over the properties of the clones?”

“The way we came into possession of the clone army is somewhat, uh, peculiar. It was commissioned thirteen years ago without the Council’s or the Senate’s knowledge—”

Zayathris turned around and silenced him with a glare. “Wait. The clones are actually thirteen-year-olds. They were ten at the start of this war. Are you out of your mind?” She had always found it strange that the Chiss operatives she had encountered tended to be much younger than herself, apparently due to their species reaching maturity faster, but in the case of pre-pubescent humans … this was really pushing it. “And here I thought sending young padawans on the battlefield was morally questionable… What possessed you to engineer children to die as cannon fodder in place of your wretched, decadent citizens?”

“The Kaminoans accelerated their aging process…” Kenobi trailed off meekly, clearly as disturbed by the circumstances.

“Still, they don’t have adequate life experience, what little they have is pitiful. So much for the moral high ground. Revolting. Building the foundation of the Republic’s survival on the corpses of teenage slaves.” Zayathris scoffed. “And speeding up their development – doesn’t that conveniently allow you to get rid of them soon after the war, once they’ve done their duty? No need to dirty your fingers, they’ll just have an early natural death. How did Sidious manage to get the Order as a whole violate your own damn teachings?”
“In our defence, we didn’t plan it that way. Tyranus had a hand in their conception, though to what degree, has remained unclear.”

Her jaw went slack. “Your enemy commissioned an entire army for you? And you simply used it unquestioningly?”

“We had no choice! If we had refused, the Republic would have lost before the war even began. By the times we realised our folly of fanning the flames of this war of attrition, designed to reduce our numbers on top of plunging the Republic into economic ruin, it was too late. You said it yourself – we lost the moment we stood up to protect the Republic. We learned of Tyranus’ actions only months ago.”

“Let me guess, you covered that discovery up so that the Senate would not learn of your weakness – and the major design flaw in their army?”

Kenobi nodded weakly.

“Your dependence on the Senate will be your undoing. You just carried on as if nothing was wrong for three years?”

“During which we fought side by side with these men, who have shown nothing but devotion and competence. The Kaminoans assured us the clones were engineered to be fully loyal to the Republic…”

Then again, they conveniently failed to inform you of the bio-chips.

“…and we have had little reason to doubt that until two of them were infected with a parasite native to Ringo Vinda, making them aggressive.”

That’s the first time I’m hearing that particular explanation. Didn’t Fives say his chip was normal, while his brother’s chip had degraded due to a tumour?

“How did you find out about the parasite thing?”

“After the Kaminoans failed to provide a believable hypothesis, Chancellor Palpatine’s personal medical staff investigated the tissue samples left behind by Fives.”

Zayathris froze.
In his lavish apartment in the upper levels of the Republica 500 complex, Chancellor Palpatine jolted awake. The glossy sheets of Cyrene silk felt clammy on his skin. He silently cursed himself for taking an unacceptable long time to orient himself in the room, the slowly fading memory of his dream a heavy weight that made him sluggish. Stretching out his senses without moving from his seemingly vulnerable position, he detected no immediate threat.

The abstract nightmares – disjointed images, nonsensical emotions, inexplicable pain - disturbing his sleeping schedule had started only recently, after decades of having purged his mind of susceptibility to such weaknesses. At first, he had dismissed them as the demands of both the office and the preparations for the culmination of his plans exacting a physical price. They reoccurred sporadically, even in more quiet times or after another success, disproving that theory. Ultimately, he had settled on another preliminary explanation – that his dabbling in the manipulation of dreams and visions of others had somehow backfired, even though his rituals fulfilled their intended purpose each time without fail.

The indicator lamp on his holo-terminal flashed, prompting him to get up and reach for his robes. Sleep, at least, was a luxury he was well above, the anticipation of his impending triumph sustaining him more effectively than physical rest.

“Ah, Doctor Se.” He greeted the blue hologram of the Kaminoan congenially. “I trust all is well?”

“Your Excellency, I wished to complete my report on the other sentients present during the incident.”

This aspect of the unfortunate premature activation of Order 66 had been a source of bewilderment for Palpatine, as the Jedi had not reported the involvement of outsiders at any point. Considering the immediate willingness of the Jedi Council to cover up the issue of the malfunctioning clones, despite – or because of? – one of their members dying during the failed capture of CT-5555, he expected such duplicity towards his person, as well.

But certainly, Anakin would not have been complicit in keeping such vital information from him? Fanning the young man’s anger had been child’s play – oh, how far he had come already, to harness such emotions without second thought. Yet for all the conflict raging within him – bringing him closer to the truth only the Dark side would reveal, that the nature of the Force was perpetual struggle instead of lasting peace –, Anakin had not seemed conflicted at all over his loyalties with regards to the Jedi’s involvement in the incident.
Thankfully, the Kaminoans always endeavoured to give the most complete account possible, their dutiful meticulousness and different moral values keeping them from glossing over the actually important details.

“I have spoken to the physicians and the medic involved in their care. There were three human males, two of which received intensive treatment to restore functionality to their neural access points, as their implants had sustained severe damage for reasons unknown to us. The implants themselves have not been replaced. The third was in good physical condition. I have just sent you their medical documents.” Nala Se explained.

“As for the humanoid female, unfortunately, she refused a medical check-up. One of the clones testified that she claimed to be the commanding officer of the three males, although she did not specify which to armed forces they supposedly belong. A number of clones appeared to be familiar with her; however, there was no indication of her having any actual connection to the GAR. General Shaak Ti also appeared to be aware of the female’s identity, although the relationship appeared superficial.”

A curious development. He folded his hands behind his back. “Is that all?”

Nala Se tilted her head in negation, the motion emphasising the grosteque proportions of her species. “If you are interested in the analyses of the blood samples we took from all four individuals-”

“Four?” Palpatine questioned. “You just stated you had no chance to examine the woman.”

“Indeed we did not, Your Excellency. However, she must have sustained a wound recently. A droid found bloodstained bandages in the waste disposal unit before they were incinerated. The amount of blood indicates an injury of medium severity which would be treated by the application of bacta after sutures; however, there were no traces of bacta or similar substances on the dressings. The fabric used is not the kind found in standard-issue GAR equipment.”

“Would you kindly give an overview of your findings regarding the blood test, Doctor Se?”

“Of course. Judging from the telomere capping, she is likely in her early thirties, although there is significant DNA damage. I have not pursued this issue further, but it might stem from prolonged exposure to radiation.”

“Is the damage life-threatening?”

“I do not think so. However, the likelihood of surviving the causative event was extremely low in the first place, to have had such an effect. The acidity level and elevated amount of free radicals in the individual’s blood suggest a rather unhealthy, stressful lifestyle. The lipoprotein panel results point to a predominantly carnivorous diet-”

Palpatine interjected. “Have you by any chance carried out a midi-chlorian test?”

“I am afraid not, Your Excellency. It is no longer part of our standard test array for humans after we succeeded in purging the clusters with deviations of this parameter from the clone lines. We shall rectify the omission immediately.”

He nodded and indicated for his interlocutor to continue.

“Most inflammation markers are extraordinarily high, as well, although her body appears to have adapted to this. The response to such stressors varies among the species, that might explain the deviations, at least partly.”
Patience, he reminded himself. “What is her species?”

The Kaminoan looked down to consult her datapad, reading out aloud the findings. “Primarily baseline human. Alas, we are unable to determine a predominant heritage. What is remarkable that there are no influences of near-human species, with one notable exception: The mitochondrial DNA suggests ancestry of an extinct species known as Red Sith.”

Palpatine’s right eyelid began to twitch involuntarily.

“An extinct species? Could this possibly be an error in your databases?”

Nala Se bristled at the allegation. “We have fastidiously maintained our databases for more than 18000 standard years. I cannot rule out a rare inaccuracy, especially with such fringe cases, but it is highly unlikely.”

“Would such an individual not stand out?”

“I am unable to say whether it was a well-known species, we do not store historical data, only medical information.” The Kaminoan explained. “The attachment I sent you earlier does contain images of the four individuals from the security cameras in the hallways as well as an extract of the relevant parts of our database for your reference.”

“Thank you. The clone staff that came into contact with the unknown individuals will have to be terminated.” He did not have to explain the rationale to her.

There was no hesitation from Nala Se. “I shall see to it.”

The holo winked out.

As Palpatine scrolled through the medical documents, it took an inordinate amount of willpower to refrain from screaming in frustration.

He had a long day ahead of him.

Chapter End Notes

Despite their relative isolation, the Kaminoans have applied cloning technology since after 19,000 BBY. Coupled with their drive for scientific improvements, they would have archived millions of DNA sequences in hopes of improving their own genetic make-up and that of their "products”.

And no, the Lost Tribe of the Sith is not known to Sidious and only becomes a thing in 41ABY in the EU.

Gratuitous medical babble, sorry ;) But being a Sith is not exactly healthy.

Turns out killing Shaak Ti was pointless. Oops. It's the little things.
The dark side will devour those who lack the power to control it. It's a fierce storm of emotion that annihilates anything in its path. It lays waste to the weak and unworthy. But those who are strong can ride the storm winds to unfathomable heights.

– Darth Bane

Kenobi had been too absorbed in his own wallowing – or perhaps she’d misread him and it was a rather pathetic Jedi technique of contemplative meditation – to question her abrupt departure.

Zayathris sat in the library and tiredly watched a small, rotating holo-image of Chancellor Palpatine, her chin resting on her intertwined fingers. Nox’ hysterical laughter following their realisation had given her a jarring headache.

So. Him? No wonder Tyranus kept his mouth carefully shut.

“The threads all come together, weaving an extraordinarily intricate web of deceit. Worldly and Force powers concentrated in one hand, the effort of a millennium – a veritable work of art which is almost too uniquely beautiful to destroy.”

He could be a puppet, though.

“Considering the incredible complexity of the whole plot, it makes much more sense for Sidious to be the Chancellor instead of controlling him. If it is him, he wins points for originality and resourcefulness.”

There is practically no way for us to take over his operations and powerbase. It’s all tied to his person.

“Would you even want to rule the Republic?”

Not like this, no. The same way I never wanted Zakuul - I’d inherit all that is wrong with it in the first place, and anything short of razing the corrupt parts to the ground won’t be enough to get rid of the stains. In the end, it comes down to simply killing Sidious at an opportune time and then finding a way to work with the pile of rubble that is the galaxy. I don’t care for his finesse. Let the world tremble and tear itself apart. I am Sith, and I endure. To build up something new. To make it our own.

“Hm, it’s blunt but I admittedly like this. I suppose there’s a reason why the Sith’ari is supposed to destroy the Sith before making them more powerful than ever.”

Sith’ari? I am surprised you haven’t choked on your ambitions yet.
She returned to scrutinising the holo, as if it could somehow reveal the essence of the man depicted.

*The physique of an aging politician. Benign, but astute, grandfatherly face. Not a trace of corruption.*

“You don’t get laid when you’re as hideous as the amount of power he probably holds would make you in the long run.”

*I don’t think Sidious shares your pleasure-seeking streak.*

“Well, nor would someone looking like Malgus or Darth Malora get elected Chancellor. Wait, you didn’t meet her—“*

Malora of all people managed to become a Darth?

“Counsellor, even. She was quite a sight, probably the closest a human get to being a Tuk’ata. Anyway, as you know there are ways of masking the Dark side effects reliably instead of using your hit-or-miss approach of suppressing or avoiding their permanent manifestation by sporadic, controlled use – oh, yeah, and good, pure genes.” Nox scoffed. “Generally, it’s the experimental stuff that has the worst effects. High risk, high reward, as per usual.”

You didn’t look that bad, for all your crazy research.

“Belsavis helped immensely and I did use the masking, to a limited degree - though after Iokath... happened, I simply had no reason to care, apart from not wanting to end up looking like Zash.”

Which you probably did, in view of your advanced age.

Nox sighed. “Let’s just say I am looking forward to obtaining a younger body again. There is so much more to experience—”

…and you sound a lot like Vitiate.

“Only, I have no intention of being a farmer for even a fraction of my future lifetime – that’s a fate only marginally better than slave work.”

“Ah, you’re back!” An excited voice called out behind her. The archivist circumnavigated a smaller shelf and a statue, precariously balancing the stack of books he was carrying, and sidled into the seat next to her, cluttering the whole surface of the desk with the ancient-looking tomes.

The infectious smile, brighter than the one he usually wore when engrossed in his work, withered instantly upon seeing Zayathris’ sombre expression. “What about—” Vaiken squinted at the miniature figure, raising an eyebrow when he recognised the person depicted. “—Chancellor Palpatine put you in a bad mood?”

She tapped a button far harder than necessary to collapse the holo-image, biting back a caustic remark. “What happened to put you in such a good one?”

“One of my contacts claims to have found pieces of several artefacts.” Vaiken’s face lit up again. “If he is right about their provenance, they could point to a Republic research excursion to Rishi almost two thousand years ago. The original records and excavated relics were lost during the New Sith Wars. Their discovery would be quite a breakthrough.”
“For what purpose? Hard to imagine this could be useful in these times.”

“Isn’t the pursuit of knowledge enough reason? If we lose even that, we might as well surrender and die.” The Jedi softly brushed the dust off one of the books. “But your objection has merit. Normally, I would go on such a retrieval mission on my own, but the war has complicated matters. My contact is quite…distrustful. Never ventures into Republic space, either, so he proposed to meet in Hutt Space. Due to-”, he exhaled bitterly, “recent events, the secondary councils are on high alert. Strict requirements have been imposed for recruitment missions and outbound research. Which means I am in a quandary now.”

His smile shrank to a nervous smirk. “Technically, I am senior enough to get the authorisation, but as you’ve seen, my combat skills are, ahem, not exactly top-notch. I don’t have a padawan and I can’t ask another knight to accompany me because that would be poaching from the ranks of those needed on the frontlines. Actually, pretty much everyone who is a better fighter than me has already been dispatched to a battlefield or is obligated to stay in the Temple regardless, so everything considered, the situation is really inconvenient.”

“Why don’t you meet in a safer location?” Zayathris enquired.

“Legal reasons. He’s a smuggler, with a penchant for ancient works of art. More like a grave robber, to be perfectly honest, or at least the people he works with are.”

“And the Order doesn’t frown on that?”

“Most archivists involved in the retrieval of Force-imbued items tend to get a lot of leeway – much like the Shadows who actively search for relics. Preventing them from falling into the wrong hands is too important and since were dealing with objects that predate Ruusan, their reclamation does not fall under the jurisdiction of the modern Republic. Given that the Jedi Order is several millennia older, it is up to us to take responsibility.”

Zayathris snorted in derision. “Convenient. So you claim everything related to the Force for yourselves?”

“Who else would?” Vaiken replied with a sullen frown. “You make it sound like a bad thing.”

“Weak argument. Your fellow Jedi devote their lives to making sure there can’t be others.”

The archivist was unperturbed by the accusation. “True, if they are a threat to peace. However, while I don’t have a problem with the existence of alternative philosophies – there a few harmless examples of renegade Jedi forming their own schools of thought, or even worshippers of the Force – it’s undeniably for the better to concentrate all the knowledge here, lest the Sith get access to it.”

“On the other hand, you will have made it easy for them to use or destroy it altogether if they win.” Zayathris countered.

“You do not sound optimistic about our chances.”

You have no idea.

“Perhaps…” Vaiken’s eyes snapped to hers. “I was wondering if you’d like to come along. We are making good progress, aren’t we, and I am not sure if you’d be allowed to continue your research here in my absence…probably not.”

“Why do you consider this mission to be risky in the first place? Merely because it will bring you to Hutt Space?”
“No, that’s not it, I’ve been there before. But if it goes sideways, I am either left to my own devices or need to call for reinforcements. I have a bit of a reputation for misadventures. A couple of years ago, I found myself imprisoned on a non-Republic world for allegedly trespassing and had to be rescued, which caused a minor diplomatic incident – still haven’t lived that down.” With a sheepish grimace, he nodded towards a group of archivists busy rearranging data records. “To make matters worse, with the ongoing war, there’s a chance that simply nobody is available to help.”

He suddenly shook his head and groaned, a short strand of hair that was more silvery than blonde falling into his face. “What am I thinking, involving a civilian researcher in this-”

“I’d be honoured to join you. With one caveat.” Zayathris lowered her voice. “There are people I am responsible for – they’re part of my original research group. They would have to come with us, otherwise I can’t leave at the moment. Don’t worry, they can pull their weight.”

The archivist considered the offer. “Well, it would have to be unofficial anyway… If you’re sure? I do feel guilty about dragging you along on something that could be dangerous.”

“Don’t. It’s definitely more thrilling than sitting in the Archives all day.”

Or waiting for Sidious to make the first move.

“I don’t know about this … you should try to contact Tyranus. The approach Sidious has taken with regards to the clones and the kyber-based weapon is obviously a multifaceted one. Plus, it reeks of an interest in alchemy and similar disciplines with a more scientific view of the Force. Because of the political implications and the risk of exposure, these can’t be the only things he relies on, so uncovering his contingency plans as Tyranus intended to do is absolutely vital. Sidious seems pragmatic enough to pursue only immediately useful avenues of research – but that is exactly what makes him so dangerous. Everything he does has a purpose. Who knows what else he has prepared.”

It is of no consequence to me whether he puts his plan into practice. We just discussed this. All his preparations are completely useless to me, and once I’ve killed him, his scheming will lose its value. The Republic is not going to crown me Empress even if I expose everything Sidious has done. At this point, the most I could hope for is either using the Separatists or taking over a remnant of them. Contacting Tyranus would risk his exposure, and with him, any link to the CIS.

“Fine. What good will leaving Coruscant do?”

If anything, it gets our friends out of Sidious’ range.

Nox groaned. “Here we are. Your decision-making is influenced by their existence.”

They are assets-

“Of course. The crippled, amnesiac traitor, your trigger-happy loyal fuckbuddy and a … heartbroken Pub agent. Assets. Why don’t you invite that scrawny lieutenant along, too? He’d complete the set.”

What is your kriffing problem?

“Distractions. We are going from one side mission to another, and while they have yielded important insights, I am permanently at your mercy, only able to talk but not act. My will used to be done the moment I thought it. Being reduced to this… it’s grating.”
Did you even listen? He was talking about artefacts.

“Of which I’ve handled hundreds. Rishi, though... Well, I can’t talk you out of it, anyway.”
"...The fleeing Sith care nothing for the natural order of the universe—Indeed, the Sith sorcerers believe the order of the universe belongs to them. [He] considers the death of a star system a small price for his own survival."

- about Nada Sadow

The trip to Nar Shaddaa was a painfully awkward affair, with Quinn refusing to talk in general and Pierce pointedly ignoring the Jedi while tinkering with a blaster he had apparently obtained in some back alley deal. Only Theron tried to make small talk that eventually turned into somewhat of a friendly, but overly direct interrogation before Zayathris had him join Quinn in analysing the ship to familiarise themselves further with modern technology.

The timing of their little excursion left a lot to be desired, but with Sidious likely in a position to find out about her companions and, since she was on the Senate’s payroll, her whereabouts as well, it was good to get some breathing space. She had already begun to feel somewhat paranoid, as if the disembodied eyes of a shadow were watching her. It was hard to tell how much of this was her own imagination instead of an actual warning from the Force, being intertwined with Nox’ increasingly intrusive presence made meditation a confusing, disorienting affair. He seemed to have grown more comfortable while her body was taking a toll, forcing her to deal with insomnia, constant pain and the occasional self-electrocution whenever his temper flared up. It was chipping away at her patience – and sanity. Although it would constitute a great risk, both in the process and by losing control over him, she longed for the day when he decided to inhabit another body.

Without the possibility of testing whether she could shield her mind from him at all, she tried very hard not to wonder whether that development was a natural one or if he was taking up more space on purpose. Perhaps out of spite after their falling out, or Nox being Nox in that he always had more far-reaching plans than he let on. He was uniquely advantaged – unless he actively communicated with her, his presence was mostly silent, with the exception of his emotions bleeding into hers at times. Then again, she should probably be grateful for that. The thought landscape of someone void-bent on torturing and killing his foes in the most artistic ways imaginable could not be a particularly edifying one.

Vaiken’s trusted contact was an entertainingly gruff Ugnaught smuggler. The archivist had opted for decidedly un-Jedi-like clothing, giving off the vibe of a bounty hunter barely scraping by, the emphasis on barely. As such, he blended in perfectly with their surroundings, although a cantina – despite the private booth affording them a little discretion – was probably not the best location for handing over dusty artefacts in an even grimier box. Case in point: The discreet, but far from friendly pairs of eyes on the three of them.

The Ugnaught gave a drawn out, suspicious grunt and pulled the unopened case back. Vaiken sighed and tried to placate him. “I know you do not tell tales. It was not my intention to insult your integrity and by extension, that of your mother. I deeply respect Sava Korin Pers and closely follow
her publications.” The unsightly porcupine humanoid placed the heavy, pyramid-shaped case into a larger cushioned box already containing two badly eroded statuettes, letting out a snort-like squeal that passed for acceptance of the apology.

The Jedi turned towards Zayathris, explaining, “He refuses to open that metal case, citing an inscription near where he found it, which he quite conveniently failed to take a recording of. I know it sounds terribly clichéd.” He shrugged the concern off. “However, we’ve worked together long enough that I am confident he would not to trick me, and I can actually sense that there is something inside the case, so together with the other items, it’s already worth it.” Zayathris almost laughed out aloud at his naiveté. Anyone with a shred of Force sensitivity should be able to sense that – and if one paid attention, also why one would not want to open it carelessly. Nox was giddy with excitement, making it a nauseating chore to suppress the dark swirls of his emotions. What remained was an unpleasant tingling sensation all over her body that put her even more on edge than the hostility emanating from their dodgy audience already caused her to be.

She slid over to the archivist and put her arm around his shoulder in a jovial half-hug, causing his body to stiffen in surprise. “You are aware that we are being watched?” She whispered, half-amused by the situation. Contrary to expectations, Vaiken’s fears had not been unfounded.

The Jedi blanched. “Who?”

“At least four individuals. Cloaked guy at the bar, Rattataki female in the corner, the two shifty Rodians. The bouncer of this place is probably in on it as well.”

“Are you sure you weren’t followed?” Vaiken asked his contact in a low voice, who bristled at the perceived slight, the ends of his moustache curling up.

“Stay civil. Does it matter who brought them here? Get the transaction over with.” Zayathris commanded impatiently. “Do you have a plan, Vaiken?”

The archivist slipped the Ugnaught a credit chip and reached for the package.

“Sithspit.” He cursed quietly, the Rattataki murmuring into her com as if on cue constituting proof that their attention really was on his actions. Hearing the expletive, Zayathris gave a brief chuckle – the etymology of that expression was bound to be a weird one - , which earned her a funny look from her companion.

“Well. This could go badly either way, depending on what they’re after. It would be best if we split up to divide their forces.” The Jedi suggested. “Would you get Kowel to his ship?”

“Oh course, but are you sure you can take them on?”

“No. Still I must do my duty – and putting you in acute danger over Jedi artefacts is unacceptable.” He reached under his tattered vest, fingers brushing over the hilt of his sabre. “May the Force be with you.”

Once the three of them had left the establishment and gone their separate ways with the supposed bounty hunters nowhere in sight, Zayathris activated her wrist com. “Pierce? Meet me on the way to the landing area, near that row of food stalls beneath the giant floating ad with the mostly naked Twi’lek dancer. Hurry, but watch yourself in the Nikto sector. And if you managed to get that blaster operational, make sure to bring it.”
Kowel, the diminutive smuggler, was still likely voicing his displeasure at the course of events, an agitated stream of grotesque noises bubbling from his snout, when Pierce fell into step next to her.

“Blaster works.” He stated simply when Zayathris eyed the rifle slung over his shoulder.

“I hope it won’t blow up in your face when it overheats.”

Pierce gave a derisive snarl in reply. “Not military-grade, but better than it looks. Got an idea for an additional tweak, too.”

“I am glad to hear it, at least one of us has an actual weapon now. You might even need it, if you’re lucky.” The Ugnaught glanced between them, his snout wrinkling in apprehension.

“Get the smuggler to his ship unharmed and make sure Theron gives it a sweep for unpleasant surprises before take-off. Might have a few bounty hunters on his trail, but I think they’re after the goods instead of him personally. They haven’t attacked us so far – which doesn’t bode well for Vaiken.”

“Got it.” Pierce jerked his head impatiently, indicating for the smuggler to follow him. “You’re off to save the Jedi?”

“He’s useful …. and well, he has the artefacts.” She gave the Imperial a sharp nod and turned on her heels to head back towards the cantina.

Vaiken was indeed in dire need of saving. He had not come far before being cornered by the assailants, his back against the wall of a dilapidated droid workshop, sabre in a guard position in front of his body. The container was on the floor behind him. Four enemies in melee range, one sniper across the chasm, several levels above them. Zayathris briefly considered waiting to see how he would fare against the bounty hunters, but the risk of the artefacts sustaining damage was too high for such experiments.

She moved to a position that afforded her line of sight with Vaiken and concentrated on the sniper on the opposite building. Vaiken deflected a volley of blaster shots. The action left him open to the wire that shot out of the cloaked human’s bracers and wrapped itself around the sabre’s hilt, which was subsequently ripped from his fingers and rolled towards the edge of the level.

Her cue.

She pulled on the sniper's form, who was hauled over the window sill and plummeted towards the distant ground with a bloodcurdling screech. Distracted by the expected fall of their associate, the others were taken by complete surprise, realising their situation only after smoking, cauterised holes appeared in their chests. The last surviving Rodian attempted to raise his blaster, but could only stare at the scorched stump of his arm, the sudden pressure on his throat announcing his impending death.

Vaiken scrambled backwards in panic, his palms catching on the sharp ridges of the rubbish on the ground. The pain did not register with him as he gaped at his companion, the sight of her blazing
orange eyes imprinting itself on his mind. His back made contact with a garbage container, and
even in his confused daze he realised that putting up a fight would be futile. “There is no death,
there is the Force.” He repeated the whispered mantra, cowering before her, resigned to his demise.

“You don't look particularly grateful for the rescue.” Zayathris stretched out her senses, feeling for
more threats in their vicinity. The sniper appeared to be dying slowly, her pain bleeding into the
Force until it abruptly disappeared. “By the way, what did you expect me to do after taking care of
your contact? Did you think your plan through?”

The Jedi opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out.

“My, you took quite a beating. Can you walk? I’d rather not have to carry you all the way to safety
again.”

“Safety?” He sputtered, a disbelieving huff of laughter dying in his throat.

Zayathris thumbed off the sabre and clipped it to her belt before picking up the box containing the
artefacts. “Your ship. The Ugnaut made it off Nar Shaddaa in one piece, so all that's left is
getting back home.” She clarified, dangling the box in front of his face. “And I'm sure you can't
wait to analyse the contents of this.”

In the end, it was utter terror rather than trust that compelled him to comply.

Once they had returned to the ship, Vaiken slumped in a corner as if to hide from it all. Zayathris
ignored him and sought eye contact with Pierce, who nodded, indicating the success of his task.

“Quinn, I hope you’re ready to get us off this wretched moon. The Jedi is in no state to pilot.” The
Imperial stiffened, but immediately went to work instead of voicing his nervous protest.

“Went that well, huh?” Theron commented upon seeing the colour of her eyes.

“When is a trivial mission ever just that?”

“My lord, should I set course for Coruscant?” Quinn enquired when they had passed the moon’s
orbital defences.

“Enter hyperspace. I don’t care where to, as long as it’s not Rim-ward, takes more than a few hours
and doesn’t require us to drop out in CIS-controlled space.” She turned towards Vaiken with a
smile and lowered her voice to an ominous purr. “We have a lot to discuss.”

“Ah, of course, my lord. I shall analyse the options first to avoid the blockades.”

Zayathris waved his prattling off and hauled the Jedi up, who had apparently mustered the courage
to glare at her in defiance.

“There are two ways this can go, Archivist Vaiken. Either you can overcome your preconceptions
and cooperate with me, or you will die like those thugs, with your own lightsabre through the
chest, leaving you none the wiser as to what’s happening.” She held the sabre between them, as if
to offer a truce agreement. “The second option will put you out of your misery much quicker, but
there’s little opportunity for academic exploration. Choose well.”

Eyeing her dubiously, the Jedi slowly stretched out his hand, palm upturned. He gave a terrified
wince when the cold metal of his weapon touched his skin and almost dropped the sabre in
“Good.” In complete disregard of the fact that her potential enemy was armed while she was not, she turned her back towards him and went to fetch the case. “Obviously, I am Sith. Your Council knows this. We have established somewhat of an alliance to end Darth Sidious. These are the basic truths.” She explained over her shoulder to Vaiken, who stood completely unmoving except for the violent trembling of his legs. “Oh, before you ask whether I am disgruntled former apprentice out for revenge – no. I am from the past, in a manner of speaking.”

“So all your historic knowledge…” Vaiken trailed off, unsure if he should believe the outlandish explanation given.

“Is actually based on first-hand experience.” She finished the sentence for him. “If you need further proof, my friend Theron Shan here is the biological son of Grandmaster Satele Shan, I am sure you could verify this somehow with the help of your Archives.”

Theron groaned exasperatedly. “Must you bring this up?”

“Why not? It is a positively delightful titbit that highlights Jedi hypocrisy to its fullest. Now, let’s have a look at these wonderful relics.” Zayathris dismissed the statuettes after brief scrutiny – Nox could have his fun with those later - and turned her attention towards the case. She opened it without further ado, unceremoniously scattering the contents on the floor. Vaiken responded with a scandalised gasp and dropped to his knee to take a closer look at the parts.

“I am baffled by your ignorance.” She commented while the pieces lifted into the air, spinning and coming together to form a much smaller pyramid.

“Because this-”, the capstone hovered into place, “is a holocron.”

The relic’s core began to emanate a dim crimson glow. “A Sith holocron, to be precise.”

Vaiken immediately regretted his decision to inspect the item and made to stand in an instinctive effort to put physical distance between himself and the holocron. His legs failed to cooperate, causing him to stumble and collapse again. He curled up on the floor, hands pressed to the sides of his head and took deep, calming breaths.

“Think this is bad? It’s not even active yet.” Zayathris examined the pyramid-shaping casing. “The fragments were inert, and it appears the material of this container muffles the Force somehow, which is why its presence was so faint before.”

“It has been a while since I encountered a Dark side artefact. Especially one suffused with so much wrongness. It’s not just dark, it feels twisted. Corrupting.” The Jedi shuddered a little.

“The Dark side is a path to abilities many would consider unnatural, when in fact the underlying principles – passion, the pursuit of power – are the most natural instincts. Perhaps this is the unnerving call you feel, its attempt to show you how much you limit yourself.”

“Ah, I…really…don’t…think so.” Vaiken ground out, having regained some of his self-control and calm. “Surely you don’t consider using it? Please tell me you’re giving it to the Order for research, in light of your alliance. Legally, it belongs-”

“You cannot be serious. Did you not say the modern Republic is not the direct legal successor of the old Republic? As Sith, I have a legitimate claim to it regardless.” She gave a haughty smile. “But don’t worry, I am feeling particularly generous today. How about we have a look at its wisdom together?”
“My lord, if I may, is this…wise?” Quinn commented meekly, still engrossed in the hyperspace calculations.

“She knows what’s she doing. Don’t be so pessimistic. It’ll affect team morale.” Pierce chastised him, fixating the holocron with an uneasy glare.

Quinn swivelled around in the pilot’s chair, indignation twisting his features into a petulant scowl. “And going out in a blazing inferno won’t, sir?”

“Only for a brief moment.” The younger Imperial deadpanned. “Damn, I like it when you call me sir.”

Zayathris raised a single eyebrow and smirked wryly. “Not in that way, I presume? If I thought there was the slightest chance this holocron could be too volatile, I wouldn’t suggest opening it on a ship. But doing so in hyperspace is much preferable, unless the plan has changed to luring Sidious out in the open. Are you finally done, Quinn?”

“My apologies, my lord. I am still unfamiliar with the mass shadow avoidance routines. It is vital to validate the parameters of.”

“Need someone to lend you a hand, lieutenant?” Pierce commented, his snide tone proof enough that he was not actually offering to help.

“Low blow, Major. We could go through the coordinates together.” Theron suggested, throwing his hands up in defeat when Quinn shook his head fervently. “Alright, your funeral.”

The Jedi watched their exchange with a mix of fear and nausea on his face, torn between his interpretation of duty and the entirely inappropriate curiosity growing in the back of his mind.

Theron, who also looked rather queasy, gave him a pitying look before speaking up. “You know, Commander, I second Quinn’s concerns. In my experience-”

“Your experience with Dark side artefacts is limited to that … thing on Yavin IV.” Zayathris dismissed his objection.

“And that was mentally scarring enough.” He countered.

“Good came from it, too. You wouldn’t have hooked up with Nox later without that incident.”

“Parade example. Mentally scarring, as I said.”

A sardonic smile ghosted across her face. “He wants me to pass on his protest and disappointment.”

“In those words?”

“More of a feeling … like sad kath-puppy eyes.”


The ship gave a sudden lurch and they were surrounded by the glow of hyperspace.
What do you think?

“The dangerous ones are either degraded or those without a gatekeeper – or a particularly sadistic one. This one is in a good condition, despite looking quite ancient. If it was excavated two millennia ago, they probably did something to preserve it. As for the inherent risk, there’s only one way to find out, but I am confident that no holocron poses a threat to a Sith of your calibre.”

As long as it’s not a trap.

“Well, there is that. However, it’s obviously not Rakatan in origin, so we can rule out a mind prison. The holocron that imprisoned Dramath was designed specifically for that purpose, to hold him individually, so unless someone expected you personally to open it, this holocron is pretty safe from that perspective.”

Says the man who wanted to become a Colicoid and has no issues with letting strange machines wreak havoc on his body.

“Well, relatively speaking, there are safer ventures…”

Ah, you’re always so encouraging.

Zayathris levitated the holocron with the Force, feeling for the mechanism that would allow her to activate it.

“Please, stop.” Vaiken exclaimed, horrified by his own courage when he caught her annoyed look. “I don’t understand – how could you shield yourself like that? We worked together for days. You said the Council knows, does that mean Master Kenobi…” He clasped his hands over his mouth, his expression one of shocked disappointment. “No one deigned to inform any of us? They let you walk around without more than cursory supervision? I don’t believe this!”

The relic floated to the floor as Zayathris sat back, arms crossed over her chest. “Apparently, I made my case quite convincingly. And I assure you, I have no intention of hurting you.”

“I am not afraid of being personally harmed. But giving you access to our Archives – and to our Temple, our sanctuary! - is absolute madness.” He argued resentfully.

“It was a necessary compromise to ensure the survival of your Order, because your enemy already has complete control over most Republic resources, including the Jedi to some degree. Even if I wanted to, I could hardly make your situation any worse. It is only a matter of time before the blade falls. Literally.”

“But we are still fighting - and winning decisive battles! There is no way he could dispose of us easily. Besides, giving another Sith the opportunity to strike at us - from the inside, mind you - is not exactly an improvement. What’s to stop you from exploiting our trust for your own gain?”

A sly grin spread across Zayathris face. “Nothing at all.”

Vaiken squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his jaw, apparently sending a silent prayer to the Force, willing reality away. When he opened them again, they glittered with tears forming. “What were they thinking?”

“The Council? Do you think the responsibility for your downfall is theirs alone? What were all of you thinking when you accepted a clone army of children? When some of your own committed war
crimes? When you go out and kill on the Senate’s behest? When you listen to the treacheries Palpatine feeds you?”

“The… the Chancellor?” Vaiken asked in a choked voice.

“Also known as Darth Sidious, yes. Or at least, that is what I have come to believe, based on how he has influenced the course of events at pivotal moments.”

“It… it makes a terrifying amount of sense, considering his emergency powers… or control over the Banking Clan… and with him being Commander-in-Chief… Force, so many intelligence reports came through his office – the number of Jedi he has sent to their deaths already by giving false information…” With each damning item added to the list, the Jedi grew more disheartened. “It fits our findings perfectly. If this is true, there is no hope for the Republic at all. Or the Jedi.”

“He controls the banks?” Zayathris mused. “That’s a new one. Void, he’s already a dictator in all but name-”

“Doesn’t that mean the CIS cross-financed the Republic war effort?” Theron cut in.

“Huh. It would seem so. Ironic. Now all that’s missing is the extermination of the Jedi. After all the Jedi are gone, then the galaxy is his and no matter whether he rules openly as Sith or continues on this charade, he will have won.”

Zayathris picked up the glowing pyramid again.

“We need every advantage we can get. That also means keeping Sidious from gaining access to this holocron - and using it, in case it contains anything helpful. So let’s not delay any further. I confess I am curious myself and so are you, don’t pretend otherwise.”

Despite his reservations, there was an excited sparkle in Vaiken’s eyes. “Well, yes, this is an extraordinary find, but I am not above admitting that I am afraid exposure to it will overwhelm me.”

“I can shield you from the worst. However, the holocron will detect your weakness, so do not only rely on me. There is only so much I can do to convince it not to obliterate those it deems unworthy.”

Hyal. Crave.

A whisper resonated in her heart.

Tsawak. Embody.

A flash of lightning snaked around her outstretched hands, binding her to the artefact.

Zharakottoi. Eternity.

The holocron emitted a brightly pulsating, scarlet light which illuminated the whole room. The others shielded their eyes, while the Jedi doubled over, sweating and quivering.

The light gave way to a translucent humanoid figure, its form fraying at the edges.

A silky voice slithered into her mind. *You are powerful. Let me see you.*

The scarlet lightning crawled up to her chest before it enveloped her completely, chilling her flesh and slowing down her heart rate so much she struggled to stay conscious. The tendril wriggled
their way into her skull, as if to pry it open to reveal the contents.

*You are not the one, although you come before me bearing his shadow,* came the final verdict.

"Give me control. Just for a few minutes. I ... have a feeling."

It was truly reckless, but there was not denying that she sensed it too, the strange anticipation radiated by the device. *Don’t make me regret this.*

She had expected to feel powerless, helpless, being shoved to the back of her own mind. The tormenting needles of pain were an unwelcome addition. She heard Nox’ voice – or rather, her own with the man’s familiar inflection – pouring from her mouth, like through water, muffled and distorted. Judging from the expressions of the others, ranging from professionally awed to exceedingly terrified, they could see and hear the gatekeeper as well.

*I have waited for this day, my lord.* The unfamiliar Sith, a Twi’lek with a weathered, veiny face and exceptionally pointy teeth, spoke in unusually deferential tones and bowed at the waist. *It is you, the One reborn and twice transmuted, the Master of Spirits turned spirit himself, reincarnated in pure wrath.*

*Oh dear. A kriffing prophecy.*

"About me, it seems. I mean, I am special, but ... What are the odds?"

Reincarnated in... agh. After waking up in this era, nothing surprises me anymore. I hope he has not lain in wait to kill you, though. Made any weird friends after returning to the Empire?

*Generations have sought to uncover the secrets of the Rishi maze, as you decreed, my lord.*

“You have good news for me, then? What is your name?”

*My name is of no consequence. I am but one of the last in a line of loyal servants dedicated to continuing your legacy and glorifying your name.*

Ah, you’ve always been a magnet for those grovelling sycophants.

“I take it you continued Lord Veijel’s research?” Nox enquired, barely keeping his excitement at bay.

*Yes, my lord, you assume correctly. It has been my life’s work, as it was for many that came before me. We have been able to conduct our studies independently of the Sphere of Knowledge, thanks to your generous advance funding. Even when the Empire lost Rishi, we persevered, remaining steadfast in our conviction that one day you would return. I am truly honoured you chose to reveal yourself to me, my lord.*

“As you should be.”

Vaiken gasped in horrified confusion at this turn of events, feeling utterly betrayed. The gatekeeper turned his attention to the Jedi. *What is this pathetic creature? Surely this knowledge is not intended for the ears of a Jedi?*

“W-who are you?” Vaiken whispered, as if seeing Zayathris for the first time.
Nox gave him a toothy grin and asked in a saccharine tone, “Oh, wouldn't you want to know, little Jedi?” Finally in complete physical control, he allowed himself a self-indulgent moment to scan the pale faces of Zayathris' followers. Eventually, his gaze settled on Theron. He winked seductively, causing the agent to furrow his brows in puzzlement and mouth “Nox?”.

“All of this is ... wrong! Perverted!” The Jedi exclaimed. “How could you have known about this holocron? You fooled us all!”

“Liked me before? Well, meet my other personality. Now, kneel and shut up.” He rolled his eyes in an exaggerated way before turning his attention to the holocron again. “His presence matters not. Stop testing my patience and tell me what you have found.”

*Very well.* The Twi’lek acquiesced. *I must preface my explanation with a word of caution as I do not wish to give you false hope. We have been unable to fully replicate the functionality of the Rishi machines, but we came very close to understanding their underlying mechanism.*

“You failed, then, because you relied solely on technology?”

*No, my lord. That may have been the main focus in earlier stages of research. I agree that this was an erroneous decision, which is why I endeavoured to find a way to influence the Force in the required manner without relying on such crutches. The final step could not be done without you, however. Thus, I created this repository of knowledge so that it may fall into the hands of the rightful recipient.*

“Fortunately, it only took a couple of thousand years.” Nox observed drily.

*I beg you to indulge me in the tale of how you endured all this time. Now, as you know many have got a taste of immortality. The fate of Darth Nihil characterises one part of the equation. Being a wound in the Force, he drained the life energy of those around him, but it flowed into him as much as out of him, corrupting everything in his vicinity. The method was very much circular, which created a self-sustaining conduit. Unfortunately, it also completely eroded him from the inside, turned him into a husk devoid of life, wearing an echo of his identity as a mask.*

“He had become hunger itself. Not an appealing prospect.”

*Indeed. For Emperor Vitiate, the process was just as incomplete. He drew massive amounts of energy into himself through his rituals but could not maintain the flow. The solution must lie somewhere in between, by going beyond using the energy of other individuals. One of my predecessors, Lord Skjaral, hypothesised that this endeavour could be aided by directly influencing the Force on the physical plane, possibly on a molecular or cellular level. How something like this would be achieved in practice remains unclear. My apprentice, Yarveen, has discovered a kind of parasite that is apparently found in all Force sensitive individuals. She succeeded in enlarging and then draining these organisms, but that came at the price of the subjects losing their connection to the Force, even though their lifespans were extended tremendously.*

“Perfecting such an approach would give mastery over life itself.” Nox breathed in wonder.

*Isn’t it different from actual immortality, though?*  

“I suppose you are right – it is likely a discontinuous process like Vitiate’s rituals, hence the loss of Force powers. He took the life that already existed. By exercising local control over the Force itself, you could shape that energy into new life sporadically within yourself and for all intents and purposes, make you invulnerable. Coupled with essence transfer, it’s a viable method. I refuse to accept that my original approach was wrong, however.”
“So you do not know what became of her research?” The Sith enquired.

*I am afraid I perished before she completed her investigations. She was instructed to record her findings in a similar manner, however, so her holocron or that of her successors will hold the answers you seek, my lord.*

*Perhaps there are several paths leading to the same result. There have to be.*

“If it is possible at all, yes. I wanted something more sustainable. The experiments the gatekeeper describes would be rather messy.”

*I would imagine so. How much does his explanation help you?*

“If I have no idea – and this holocron only points to another that might contain the solution. But there is already so much knowledge here to study … You know, it would be for the better if we finally resolved our little situation. Me being able to act independently will help in a battle against Sidious, as well.”

*Are you absolutely sure?*

“We have no time to waste. This is monumental. Luckily, we have a more or less suitable body at hand. I cannot delay out of vanity.”

*But this is far from the ideal-*

“There has always been a debate about whether power is channelled mostly through the body or the essence. I guess I am about to find out first hand.”

*So typical of you, becoming utterly excited by what is an insane personal risk to take.*

“Nothing worth aspiring to is ever easy.”

Chapter End Notes

Kowel inherited his mother's interest in antiquities and ancient cultures, but he took a decidedly less academic path.

For some reason, this chapter was a real pain to write.
"I need to know you're in this to win a war, not to crush my old home into the dust."
- Theron Shan

Also, allusions to events in Annihilation by Drew Karpyshyn.

Exhausted.

A single adjective describing his state of mind perfectly.

That an insanely long stint in stasis constituted the only time off in recent memory – actually, since joining the SIS, come to think about it – was probably quite telling, but of what remained worthy of an in-depth look. Bad decisions regarding whom he worked for? A terribly faulty sense of self-preservation? A near-pathological desire to prove himself?

Theron decided he could explore that line of thought later, with a glass of Corellian Ale in hand, whenever he managed to go on a proper vacation. Nox had promised to take him somewhere nice and relaxing after Iokath and while he had been a little wary of the Sith’s definition of those terms, it had made the weight of reality back then a much heavier one.

Given Nox’ basic personality, Theron wasn’t sure if he would have laughed off his betrayal, being slightly impressed by him keeping up the façade so well, or tortured him for days before handing him over to the Commander so that she could have the due privilege of lopping off his head. The latter possibility alone should make him question his choice in partners, but then again, it was not as if he himself would win a prize for Being a Good Person by any metric. Having a lower body count and less of a vicious, vengeful streak than a Sith was a rather low standard after all. There were quite a few moral considerations he was prepared to ignore, unflinchingly, to do the right thing, although nowadays, his perception of right was likely more than a little warped.

It did not help that he had slept very little after Kamino. Well, none of them had, but in the case of the Commander – he steadfastly refused to use her more Imperial titles, except for a somewhat tongue-in-cheek Wrath, to which she tended to react just as well as Lana had to being called Lord Beniko – it was voluntary. In as much as paying the price exacted by the Dark side or whatever her antics were about could be called a voluntary act. Besides, she unarguably got more opportunities to unwind than him, if the muffled sounds coming from the hotel room’s sleeping quarters – which were positively luxurious compared to their previous accommodation - were any indication.

The ambient noise did little to improve his concentration, let alone his mood, but the ray of hope was that Pierce was not in his twenties anymore and would approach his physical limits sometime soon. Probably. Unless the Empire had had genetic enhancement programmes in place to improve that kind of stamina as well. In fact, he would not put it past some Imperial scientist to try to impress his superiors with a way to create all-around satisfying soldiers, considering the proclivities of many Sith. He had probably just been lucky with Lana and her complete disinterest in such matters… Okay, he was getting very off-track here.

The agent congratulated himself for sending Quinn out earlier to get some supplies – and lunch.
Whether whatever food he brought back would be palatable, was another issue. Theron had spotted some authentic-looking Mirialan-run curry stalls in the area, but doubted that the Imperial would opt for the usually rather rich and spicy fare. At least he would not be able to find ration bars or those annoyingly bland Imperial MRE packages.

Although the Commander was bound to be in high spirits afterwards, as well as more terrifying - there undoubtedly was some truth to passion fuelling the powers of a Sith – Theron decided it would be for the best if he finished his task as soon as humanly possible. It was getting a little embarrassing, how much time he had already spent on decrypting a single file. With the help of his implants and more computing power than a datapad leeching off the whole neighbourhood’s HoloNet data throughput, he would have made quick work of it instead of struggling for hours. If he had not got through the first layer of encryption already – a pretty standard one at that - he would have assumed the data had become corrupted, which was not even unlikely, given the dubious way they had procured it.

~###~

Zayathris' first act after their return to Coruscant - well, second, after finding a nondescript hotel for them to stay, the trashy-fancy kind popular with secret couples because the clerk wouldn’t ask for identification - was to check in with her employer. To Theron's mind, that she'd managed to land that kind of job either pointed to rampant insanity within political circles, or the Force really wanting her to succeed in taking down Sidious. While she did inspire loyalty in others, often regardless of faction, it was largely by a combination of unparalleled battle prowess and mostly fair, level-headed leadership – for a Sith, at least. Qualities not immediately apparent, or even relevant, when applying for a position as a senatorial aide.

The halls of the Senate building exuded a very familiar atmosphere - architecturally it had changed significantly, of course, but the stuffiness, the simpering lobbyists standing in line outside the senators’ offices, were constants that apparently spanned millennia. The idea of planting bugs in the rooms used by Senator Iskra had been a sound one. His connections would have made anyone suspicious. The fallout of that plan was a different beast altogether.

When Theron followed Zayathris into the office of the Achorran senator, his hand automatically went to his hip, to his non-existent blaster, even before the faintly metallic smell registered in his mind.

The senator was not present. However, who was very present was the still slightly warm corpse of one of his staff members slumped over a desk, a male by the name of Ven’yari Stava, according to his badge. His ostensible manner of death could only be described as gruesomely efficient. The decorative fan behind the desk was missing one of its feather-shaped slats. The rather spiky item protruded from Stava’s inner thigh, creating a rather large, gaping wound exposing the bisected femoral artery. There was some blood pooling around the body, enough to not immediately arouse suspicion of foul play – although who would consider committing suicide in that way? –, yet not enough for him to have died from the blood loss. These circumstances lead Theron to take a closer look at the corpse. He noticed the man’s oddly caved-in throat area. Since there was no visible exterior damage, no trace of the typical lesions or bruises associated with having been choked to death, the Commander agreed with his theory that the victim’s larynx had been crushed with the Force.

So, a cover-up of an assassination to hide the perpetrator’s Force abilities. Now who would want a
mere senatorial aide dead? Had he uncovered a case of corruption or witnessed something he should not have? The data chip they found under his tongue pointed towards a completely different explanation.

Needless to say, they subsequently hightailed it out of the Senate.

Said chip contained a single, encrypted file, which had quickly become the bane of Theron’s existence over the course of the past few hours. His lack of progress had made him desperate enough to listen to Quinn’s suggestion of giving simpler algorithms a try. Even so, he was limited to brute force decryption attempts. And those took time.

The Commander, face flushed a darker shade of red and lips swollen, exited the bedroom and threw him an inquisitive look. “Figured it out?”

“Firstly, I feel I should inform you that these walls aren’t nearly as soundproof as the gaudy interior of the hotel would indicate they ought to be. Should have opted for the premium rooms.”

“So?” She stretched languidly, like a predator preparing for an extended hunt. “Are you jealous? Too bad Nox isn’t around to help you out.”

“Um, actually, I was wondering if I could speak to him for a moment. Not sure if you can switch at will...”

“I am afraid that’s not possible. Nox has made alternative arrangements.”

“Alternative- Is this...is this why we ditched the Jedi?” He gasped. “Oh, stars. Tell me you’re joking.”

“I'm not. You will get to meet Nox in the flesh soon. Why wouldn’t you be happy?”

“Because hijacking bodies is...never mind. No point arguing morals with a Sith.”

“Huh. Feeling antagonistic, Theron?” She chuckled. “The moment you start walking around in your underwear and wave a faulty blaster at me, I should become suspicious of your loyalties, right?”

“I try to keep my methods fresh. No point in attempting the same manoeuvre twice.” He retorted dryly, keeping the conversation light.

“Are you going to arrange a, I don’t know, train accident for me or simply sneak up to slice my throat open while I sleep, then?”

“Uh, nothing of the sort?” Theron took even breaths, lowering his heart rate deliberately as to not arouse suspicion. Where was she going with this?

“I wonder why you’re still here. Are you afraid?” Still no trace of suspicion in her voice.

“I didn’t know I had the option of retiring.” Nope, the Commander would not have seen it coming. Apparently, it was hard to lose her trust once you had gained it. Not being as paranoid as most Sith was one of her better characteristics, since it made her less prone to randomly lashing out at allies. It had also made his job much easier.

“Well, you could say I’ve learned my lesson – I don’t want anyone near me who isn’t 100% dedicated.” In all honesty, more than actual trust it was hubris, a misguided arrogantly sense of invincibility. Now that was a typical Sith trait. “Ultimately, you’re Republic. So, what’s keeping
He did have a reply prepared, but her line of questioning still took him off-guard. Making up for past digressions hardly counted as an argument, especially if those were not public knowledge. He could not afford to become sloppy now. There was no way he could live down betraying the Wrath, even for a good cause. Especially considering her treatment of Quinn, who might – in Theron’s humble opinion – not have survived Iokath if the superweapon hadn’t constituted a major distraction. If Quinn had returned on his own accord, he could have done so earlier, so there was a good chance he had thrown in his lot with the powers that be, namely the Empress, just like he had sided with Baras.

Theron had taken up the burden of becoming a double agent regardless of the risk, fully aware that even if he succeeded in protecting the Alliance, the mission was unlikely to end well for him. In hindsight, he would feel much better about his treasonous acts if he had not kripped up so thoroughly on Iokath. As it turned out, he had made Atrius’ wildest dreams come true and taken the Commander out of the picture for good.

These thoughts were shoved into a little compartment in the back of his mind where they belonged. While he could not force himself to forget, his spy training continued to prove useful. “Same reason I stayed by your side during the glory days of the Alliance. To be your conscience – someone has to do it.” The flippant reply earned him an amused snort. Comic relief to the rescue. A tiny, but vexingly vocal part of his brain kept taunting him that receiving some sort of punishment would provide a welcome relief from his own persistent guilt – there was no denying that his actions had doomed the Alliance. The downside was that this reprieve would be rather short-lived on the whole, only to be followed by protracted suffering.

Being deadly afraid of one’s boss rarely made for a productive working relationship. A fact that neatly explained why, for all their emphasis on strength and efficiency, the Imperial military had suffered a large number of setbacks in their time. “Anyway, back to the chip. I’m still working on it.”

“What’s taking you so long?” The Commander groaned.

“Replacing my implants is not currently within our budget? They would’ve sped things up considerably.”

“We have a budget now?”

“Fair point. When you inevitably end up reigning over the galaxy, please remember to set aside funds for my augmentations, though.”

“Of course, only the best of the best for the future consort of my court sorcerer.” She winked at him. Theron decided not to comment on her choice of words.

“I am not quite convinced the two of you are not going to end up killing each other. I mean, that’s how it usually goes, isn’t it? Anyway, I’d love to work faster, but there is only so much I can do with a commercial datapad.”

“Can’t you slice into some cluster for more computing power? Vette was fond of that approach.”

“The issue is not cracking the network – that’s the easy part, the technical principles haven’t changed much. The hard part is not getting caught while doing so, especially without the help of pre-written routines. Pretty sure I can even get into some of the more vital systems, planetary waste processing, for example, but I’d trip every security heuristic on the way. Bringing law enforcement
down on our heads would complicate things even more. I guess your Jedi friends won’t be willing to help you evade justice.” Theron explained apologetically. "While we’re waiting for the results, here’s what I found out so far. Perhaps you can make sense of it. The primary encryption was based on HAS-169, a very basic algorithm favoured by, but not limited to, the Separatists. I mean, most of their tech is allegedly encrypted with a variation of that approach, so I am quite sure no one else would use it, at least officially, lest they get associated with the CIS. So it’s pretty safe to say either someone wanted to shift the blame to them or it is in fact them.”

Zayathris considered the information. “Iskra has many obscure contacts, I wouldn’t rule out him having some sort of connection to CIS-aligned figures. But why kill his aide?”

“Wrong time, wrong place? Or the chip is supposed to be a message. The crime scene does seem to indicate that.” The datapad’s screen flickered to life, displaying a test log. “Oh. We’ve got a result. Damn, Quinn was right, it was a simple permutation. They used a six-character password, not even hashed.” Theron looked up, almost disappointed. “All this for just…two words? Kill Skywalker. Isn’t that the Jedi Hero-with-no-Fear or whatever the HoloNet calls him?”

A threat? An instruction?

“…what was the password?” Zayathris asked dubiously.

“Assuming it uses the standard Aurabesh encoding… Ch-w-u-s-a-r?”

She recoiled, eyes widening in horrified surprise. “Kriffing void.”

“Does that mean anything to you?”

“Chwûsar. Wrath.”

“What the…?” That could not be a coincidence. “Who knows about your identity, apart from the Jedi Council?”

“They don’t.” She snarled as she began to pace agitatedly. “I conveniently failed to tell them who exactly I was, only that I led some kind of rebellion against Vitiate. I am not aware of any historical records giving details about the Alliance, so they can’t have figured it out on their own. Besides, did Stava’s death look like the work of a Jedi to you?” Theron gave a helpless shrug in response. Of course the killer wasn’t a Jedi, but that left the two Sith as the sole candidates. Zayathris hadn’t mentioned anything about other Dark side acolytes or whatever form the Sith’s less organised cousins took nowadays. The whole execution of the murder was too careless, which ruled out Sidious, and his apprentice was unlikely to simply waltz straight into the Senate, wasn’t he?

“Only Darth Tyranus is aware of my title. He has even less reason to betray me now than he had last time…” Right, it seems I am missing crucial pieces of the story, Theron thought to himself, almost afraid to ask. “That’s a weird way of getting my attention. He contacted me in less convoluted ways before. And why would he instruct me to murder a high-profile Jedi? It hardly gets less subtle than that, no way I could pull this off without being blamed for it-”

The Commander abruptly stopped in her tracks. “Something is happening. Around us?” She lowered her head, eyes closed, and murmured, “Fear. Panic. Resolve? … and death.”

Theron grabbed the datapad, opening the CoruscantToday news feed. It failed to load. In fact, the whole network was down. “I can’t access the HoloNet.” Before he got to finish his sentence, a high-pitched siren began blaring in the distance, soon followed by a monotone, droid-like voice.

“Orbital attack imminent. I repeat, attack imminent. Citizens of Coruscant. Seek shelter
immediately. If outside, proceed to the lower levels, if possible. Otherwise, stay inside. Attack imminent. Seek shelter. Attack-”

“Wait, where are you going?”

“To find Skywalker.”

The door slammed shut behind the Sith.

*Well, kriff.*
Smoke rose from one of the atmospheric control towers. An act of sabotage from within? The planetary shields had not been breached yet, though not for lack of trying on part of the CIS bombers.

How could they have reached the Republic capital undetected, especially with such numbers?

_Inhale._

The air on the mid-levels was acrid. The burning sensation in the lungs made breathing an ordeal.

_Exhale._

Zayathris forced her way through the unyielding flow of people scrambling towards the elevators. The frenzied, apparently city-wide stampede alone was sufficient to cull the weaker inhabitants, the physically frail, the children, the aliens of smaller build. Without a single shot fired towards the planet itself, the death toll was already skyrocketing. She could feel it, the apathetic _snip_ in the Force when another life was extinguished, a continuous rhythm without reprieve, like the rapid-fire clicking of a ravenous laigrek’s mandibles. Quinn would be able to give an estimate of the expected percentage of citizens left dead in this first wave of carnage—

_Quinn._

He was still outside.

Keeping up her pace, she tapped her wristcomm, selecting his contact frequency.

No reply.

Neither Pierce nor Theron answered when she commed them. Perhaps all forms of communications were down, possibly even jammed. Sensing them in the Force in this pandemonium? Not a chance.

The heavy, fleshy tentacles of a large purple creature gliding past her slammed into her back, knocking the air out of her lungs. Having momentarily failed to pay due attention to her surroundings, she was caught off-guard. It was enough to unbalance her, sending her tumbling to the ground. Something hard hit her head on the way down. Her vision blurred as her hands and knees hit the cold floor.

A flicker of blue moved below her, the warmth of a small thing crawling under her chest, seeking shelter from the chaotic, unrelenting current of bodies streaming past in the other direction.

_Steadying herself against the onslaught, Zayathris looked up, locking eyes with a Twi’lek woman lying prone across from her on the grimy duracrete. Face frantic, tears streaming down her cheek,
torn between attempting to push herself up weakly with one arm and reaching forward with the other - she bore a striking resemblance to Tivva.

The unbidden memory of Vette’s older sister forced itself to the front of her dazed mind right before Zayathris understood. A rather foreign emotion, a kind of connectedness, welled up in her and bloomed into a blaze of searing heat spreading through her back. The echoed pain was the only advance warning the Force granted her.

There was not enough time to react.

A sickening crack.

The sound itself was drowned out by the terrified noise around them, but it resonated in her head regardless.

The Twi’lek went limp, her neck and spine twisting unnaturally. Her body rolled a few steps whenever the booted feet of other fleeing citizens hit it, until it was swept out of sight by the merciless current.

With a furious scream, Zayathris jolted upright and jumped to her feet, instinctively grabbing the tiny being curled up under her stomach in the process.

She weaved through the masses, the child slung over her shoulder, and finally spotted a row of elevators connecting the mid-levels with the uppermost ones. Only a handful of citizens joined her on the ride up.

They emerged at the edge of the Palace district, near the esplanade leading to the Jedi Temple, the entire area almost devoid of life.

Suddenly, the few people around her stopped in their tracks and looked up, pure horror etched into their faces. The atmosphere crackled above, dense spidery lightning meandering across the sky before it shifted. A volley of blasts from an ion cannon passed through where the protective shield should have been and penetrated the layered ecumenopolis in a confined area. The planetary shield was restored shortly after, the energy of later shots dissipating, drenching the city in a greenish light.

For several breathless moments, nothing seemed to happen, except for a few tall buildings near the strike site slowly tilting, their spires converging towards the centre.

Without warning, a fountain of energy shot straight up, incinerating anything in its way, followed by a kinetic blast rippling out from the site of the explosion of an energy relay station. The resulting crater was enormous, giving view of thousands of scorched levels.

The chasm went deep into the underbelly of the capital, where the noxious gases were visibly pooling.

People across the planet were going downwards, as the public safety message had instructed them to. Obediently running towards their demise.

“An Empire of Man with no concessions granted to degenerate filth.”
Tyranus’ words rang in Zayathris’ ears while she witnessed the bloodshed from above, heart racing from the adrenaline. The Twi’lek toddler on her back buried his face in the crook of her neck and whimpered feebly.

The majority of non-humans inhabited the lower, poverty-stricken levels.

This was a *purge*.

Chapter End Notes

The Wrath: "Empathy, you say? What a strange concept."
Chapter Notes

“The Jedi... The Sith... You don't get it, do you? To the Galaxy, they're the same thing: Men and women with too much power, squabbling over religion, while the rest of us burn!”

— Atton Rand, KotOR II

War.

It is the epitome of Sith beliefs, conflict turned into a way of life. The most fundamental ritual, a tribute to the Dark side.

More than that, a law of the universe, driving the momentum of change and growth.

Without strife, there is only stagnation.

This applies to individuals as much as it does to societies. Darth Marr’s vision for the Empire was that of a people ready to fight across the battlefield of life.

The blood spilled in the trenches was the lifeblood of the Empire.

War.

It is markedly different when you are surrounded by non-combatants clamouring for protection from an unseen threat, an enemy within.

When there is no crimson sabre in your hand cutting a bloody swathe through your enemies.

Instead you feel fragile finger bones crushing beneath your boots while you are trying to make your way out of a stampede.

An orphan is weeping in your arms and you do your darndest to ignore the confusing emotions warring in your chest.

This, too, is a conflict.

War.

It is a hunger, the gaping maw never satisfied. It growls, amplifies your hate and rage to a roaring crescendo, until all other emotions are drowned out.

The inevitable dance on the fine line between the looming threat of death and the ecstasy of victory, your life sustained by your own shear will alone - it gives a particular brilliance and joyous
sharpness of impression to everything that happens in those moments.*

And then, unheralded, the unceasing battle cry falls silent.

Carnage used to invigorate you, but when you have neither something to fight for nor against -
You struggle not to feel strangely empty instead.

Zayathris refused to acknowledge such traitorous thoughts.

She sat at the feet of the stairwell leading up the Temple’s entrance, absentmindedly stroking the lekku of the shivering little boy on her lap. Dried blood matted her hair. It was not her own, but she failed to remember how it had got there. Lungs throbbing, she could practically feel her body scrambling to repair the damaged tissue.

There was no sense of urgency. Even the Force was silent on the matter – or perhaps everything else was too loud.

No point delaying the inevitable, though.

As she walked up the stairs, the toddler clung to her, tiny arms wrapped around her neck, head resting on her chest. Strangely at peace amidst the horrors surrounding them, he embodied the Jedi ideal better than many followers of the Light she had met. She found that she could not muster any revulsion for his natural attunement, his infantile need for protection.

The guards refused her entrance at first, perhaps under orders to do so, perhaps spooked by her glowing eyes, the anticipation of the unknown burning in her heart. Minds cleansed of individuality, the anonymous sentinels were the only ones the Council had informed of her identity. Brainwashed guards didn’t spill secrets, so it was a rational choice: They were always around to keep an eye on her and protect the other Jedi if necessary – as if they would stand a chance – without the expected fallout of admitting that die Order had grown so weak as to require the help of their nemesis.

The masked Jedi felt like colourless, blank slates in the Force, closer to death than to life in their utter detachment, uniform and terrifying in their single-minded dedication. In that, they were more like a cross of the Zakuulan Knights - without the passionate patriotism -, and Vitiate’s puppets - without the suffocating darkness. Compared to the guards, the clone troopers’ presences were always positively vibrant and diverse.

Considering what was going on outside the well-protected microcosm of the Temple, it was natural for the sentinels to be on edge, but it certainly wasn’t helping in the grand scheme of things. Threats proved useless and instead had the opposite effect, that of fostering hostility – in fact, their extreme beliefs led the guards to assume she was using the Twi’lek as a flesh shield. Zayathris wanted to slaughter them for that ridiculous insinuation alone. Alas, burning all bridges with the Order just to find Skywalker – who might not even be there or need to be killed in the first place – was uncalled for at the moment. The guards eventually relented when she specifically asked to be escorted, with whatever level of security they deemed necessary, to Master Windu.

Their procession towards the War Room was an odd sight, a single woman shepherded by a dozen
silent guards moving at a vexingly slow pace. They only passed a few Jedi on their way, who did their best not to pay attention to the affair.

Even more impressive was the range of emotions, all summarily suppressed as soon as they surfaced, flickering across Windu’s face when she entered the room. He finally settled for an irritated scowl, and barked out, “What do you want?”

“Where is Skywalker?” Zayathris asked, no hint of emotion betraying the purpose of the question. If she at least had an inkling of what role the celebrated Jedi played in Sidious’ plans...

Windu glared at her, eyes widening as if it was only now that he realised who he was talking to.

“Do you realise that there is a battle raging in Coruscant’s orbit?”

“Oh, I do. I imagine it is a little overwhelming for you?”

The Jedi did not reply to her taunt and instead returned his attention to the holo-table in the centre of the room, leaning over the glowing map to study the patterns of the space battle.

Zayathris came to stand beside him. “Unlike you, I have seen the terrified masses clambering for shelter with my own eyes. Which is why I don’t appreciate your evasiveness.”

“How are Skywalker’s whereabouts of concern to you?” He muttered, closing his eyes in exasperation – or something else? Once more, a peculiar sensation washed over her, like radiation seeping deep into her flesh, prodding, analysing, dissecting her.

“I need to talk to him.” Amongst other things, Zayathris added silently, a trap for Windu in case he was trying to breach her mental fortifications. However, it still did not feel like that at all.

“What about? You have no business talking to any Jedi who is not on the Council.”

“Hm. Legalistic details. Don’t you have more important things to worry about at the moment? For example, your capital being under attack? Answer me and you can return to playing Keepers of the Peace.”

Windu’s hand curled into fists as he reluctantly spilled the facts. “Skywalker and Kenobi are currently on board the Separatist flagship to rescue the Chancellor.”

“The– rescue him?” The irony was not lost on her.

“Yes.” He confirmed impatiently. “He was abducted by Dooku during an official meeting with representatives of the Citizens for Peace taking place on the grounds of the University.”

“By Dooku himself?”

“No, a droid strike force prompted an evacuation attempt, which subsequently failed. Dooku killed all the Jedi tasked with the protection of the Chancellor. The attack was synchronised with the appearance of the Separatist ships and several acts of sabotage on the lower levels, so we were completely blindsided and learned of the abduction only after they had left Coruscant.”

Zayathris’ response consisted in a burst of harsh laughter which made the other Jedi present flinch.

Unless her theory about Sidious identity was wrong, there was little doubt that the kidnapping was a joint effort of both Sith. If Tyranus had made a little detour earlier to murder Iskra’s aide, he wanted Skywalker out of the picture – why would only he put his plans at risk? Surely Kenobi
would be as much of a threat.

On the other hand, ruling out that the message was a trap would be foolish, although she found it hard to imagine anyone else profiting from it, Sidious included. If, for whatever purpose, he did want to pit her against Skywalker – to test her or have her killed - this was a strange way to go about it.

Both scenarios forced Tyranus’ hands, that much was clear.

In any case, the message came too late. There was little she could do about his situation. Now, proving his legitimacy as Dark Lord of the Sith was up to him alone.

Zayathris gently pried the soft blue fingers off her neck and unceremoniously thrust the Twi’lek toddler into Windu’s arms. The Jedi’s jaw clenched while he gingerly held the squirming child who did not seem willing to part with his involuntary protector.

“His mother died in the chaos outside. Didn’t see any other family.” She explained. “You’re pride yourself on your compassion, so you will manage to take care of him, yes?” It was not the safest place for him, but she could hardly take him with her, either. At least he would only be collateral here instead of being targeted directly.

“I don’t think we can keep him here…” Windu murmured, his eyes flickering towards the pleading face of the child. “Besides, there is no indication that he is Force sensitive-”

“Your sabre.”

“What?” He stared at her aghast at the non-sequitur.

“If you’re considering to toss him back on the street because you can’t mold him into an obedient little Jedi, I might as well kill him right now to spare him the suffering.”

She turned on her heels. “Actually, along with everyone in this room. Goodnight, gentlemen. Notify me when Sidious is at your door. I’ve got better things to do than watching you cower in fear.”

The little boy started sobbing again.

Coruscant was engulfed in flames.

Scattered debris, the remains of several fractured battlecruisers hurdling towards the planet’s surface, was burning up in the atmosphere - fiery, deadly shooting stars.

It appeared that way in the Force as well. It was saturated with fear, the terrified cries of trillions – and above all sounded a deafening, triumphant roar.

Zayathris’ wrist comm chimed.

“Are you done admiring the sun setting over the Republic?” The familiar voice of Archivist
Vaiken greeted her. “Why don’t you come down to the library?”

*What a day.* “Can’t say I missed you.” She sighed. “I’m on my way.”

“You’re back already?” Zayathris commented when she took a seat next to the Jedi, who had pulled his hood into his face.

“Of course. I would not want to miss out on the action.” He replied cheerfully without looking up from his work. “Besides, I hit a standstill or rather, a point where the time spent outweighs the results. All the pieces are in place, though, on my end for what is going to be a large-scale effort. It won’t be subtle, so unless we’re banking on giving Sidious a heart attack from shock and confusion, we’d better not give him a chance to find out what I am up to.”

Zayathris gave an impressed nod. “And here I thought you’d press on regardless and leave the dirty work to me. You’re actually less selfish than expected.”

“Wisdom of old age, I guess.” He chuckled. “You should have taught me that handy thing you do. Projecting an Aura of Light is singularly awful. I practised the Tsasaarai’Jen beforehand, but keeping it up is driving me insane, first time I lasted half an hour before I ran out of the temple. I made it as far as one of those elevators leading down to CoCo Town. I hope there is no recording; it is rather undignified for a *Jedi* to throw up in the middle of the city. Well, even if there is, it’s unlikely to go viral, seeing as there are far more pressing issues for the general population. The masking is working a little better now, but I don’t think I’ll be able to get any sleep like this…” He sighed theatrically. “On second thought, I can’t meditate to rest, either. Ah, these circumstances are so awkward.”

“We are staying at a hotel, assuming it hasn’t been reduced to rubble - you can share with Theron, actually. He seemed keen on some *privacy.*” He gave a knowing chuckle in reply before she continued. “Any progress here?”

“So much knowledge.” The older man gushed ecstatically. “I would need several lifetimes to go through it, heh – and the Jedi claim they aren’t selfish. Even a cursory glance over their treatises on healing reveals astonishing insights that could even help non-Force users. There are some holocrons being studied in the chamber over there, but you need to be a master to enter it. The ones in the Vault are accessible only to High Council members, unfortunately, that’s way above *my* station.

Anything short of brute force would prove insufficient – maybe Pierce has insights on how to blow up the door without damaging the repositories inside. Oh, and I already experimented a bit. Don’t berate me for taking unnecessary risks - the Jedi have such a high threshold when it comes to sensing Dark side usage, it’s ridiculous. I am convinced the average Jedi wouldn’t take notice if I tortured someone in the room next to them.”

“Assuming the room is sufficiently noise-proofed.”

“Naturally.” He raised his head a little, revealing a faint smirk. “The planet feels like a raging inferno. Feeling nostalgic already?”

“Actually, I find it rather disconcerting - we are running out of time. Which such a bold incursion, Sidious is going to make his final move soon.”

“And still, no openings for us, no weaknesses to exploit. Exposing him…” The archivist vacillated,
lost in thought.

“...will do little good. He is extremely popular, so he will find a way to spin it to his advantage. Remember, we can’t prove his involvement with the Separatists, and for the average citizen, the Sith are just another faction of religious fanatics – it makes little difference to them. And even if public opinion were to turn against him on that basis, it would not be good for us in the long run, either.”

“Ultimately, the Jedi will have to confront him... and take the fall for treason.” He muttered. “That probably what he is waiting for. It would destroy their reputation, give him a reason to brand them traitors, a danger to public security – and eradicate them.”

“With the help of the clones.” Zayathris added. “Why attack Coruscant now, though?”

“To sow fear?” Her interlocutor shrugged apathetically, as if the explanation was perfectly obvious.

“He already has complete emergency powers, and the war hasn’t been going in the Republic’s favour recently. Looks like Tyranus has begun to vie for actual victory instead of stalling.”

“Hm. Perhaps that is why? Sidious doesn’t need, nor want, the destruction – but Tyranus does. He isn’t deluding himself that he can take the high road afterwards, so he has no reason to hold back if he’s planning to overthrow Sidious anyway. Besides, he can blame it on him once the CIS takes over.”

“And now he has forced a confrontation. It’s a great opportunity, but there’s no turning back for him. By going along with the plan of abducting the Chancellor, Tyranus has placed himself in a precarious situation if he has already outlived his usefulness to his master.”

“Abduction? He certainly has a flair for the dramatic. Well, two can play that game of deceit. But you are right, I guess by tomorrow we will know who has prevailed. To be honest, I would not bet my credits on Tyranus. Have the Jedi sent someone after them?”

“Yes, Kenobi and Skywalker. I believe Tyranus tried to get me to kill Skywalker for him. It doesn’t make sense for Sidious to instruct me to do so.”

“Skywalker, huh?” The archivist narrowed his eyes in suspicion, before his expression became vacant for a moment. “There is a Jedi prophecy about a Chosen One. Vaiken claims it’s widely believed to apply to Skywalker.”

“...he is in there with you?” Zayathris asked in puzzlement.

“Yeah, this is a bit of a Khem-Zash situation,” Darth Nox gave a light chuckle, “though by my choice.”

“I am truly surprised you kept him.”

“It would have been the height of wastefulness – so much delightful knowledge stored in his brain. I couldn’t risk the process erasing the memories.”

“How are you getting along?”

“We have established a tentative truce.” He replied airily. “He’s stopped his incessant recital of ancient lyrical prose, at least. In return, I assured him that this arrangement is only a temporary one.” He became engrossed in another internal conversation, before suddenly giving an annoyed
groan. “He still doubts me. Me! I am but a step away from achieving immortality and he doesn’t believe that it’s possible to get his body back.”

“Pretty sure he doesn’t trust you to honour that agreement rather than doubt your ability.” Zayathris remarked drily.

“Well, you know me best, what do you think?”

He received a pointed stare in response.

“Always so judgemental.” Nox yawned exaggeratedly, his hood sliding down to reveal the rest of his face. While his complexion and eye colour gave nothing away, it was obvious that keeping up the pretence of being a Light side user was far from effortless. “He and I both profit from this situation, actually. I might not be immortal yet, but this is arguably the next best thing. He can revive us – rather, the body, but same difference – in case we are fatally wounded.”

“Unless he’d rather become one with the Force instead… tough luck.” She quipped, eliciting an eye roll from the other Sith.

“I don’t think he actually can. As long as I get a say about it.”

“If I had known about the handy side-effects, I would have preferred to keep you around.” Zayathris mused.

“It wouldn’t have been the same. Our essences were intertwined too much.” Upon seeing her puzzled expression, he added, “come on, you really didn’t pay attention during the ritual?”

“No, it was ridiculously confusing and admittedly, I was busy holding on to my body while you did your … stuff.”

“There’s a little caveat.” Nox smirked with the cruel excitement of a mad scientist, a strange look on Vaiken’s usually gentle face. “Technically, the Jedi is dead. I thought, why not try something different this time? I get the body and the ghost. And it paid off, as you can see.”

“What I can see is why Vaiken would rate the feasibility of actually surviving this ordeal as rather low.”

“A mere triviality.” He waved off the concern.

“If you say so…How’s the body holding up anyway?”

“Only time will tell. Physically, he’s quite fit for his age. Force affinity…while it could be better, I am sure it’s enough for my purposes, but I can feel the difference distinctly.”

“I am really looking forward to seeing Theron’s reaction.” She winked. “Just don’t start referring to yourself as we. That spleen of Nine’s Joiner friend was enough weirdness in that regard for a lifetime.”

“Don’t worry, not being quite alone in here is something I am used to.”

“That’s why…never mind.”

She noticed an incoming call.
“Pierce! Are you alright?”

“Yes, m’-.” He stumbled over the title. “Yes. Gone pretty quiet around here, everyone’s holed up inside. Battle seems to be over, looks like a win for the Republic.”

“Kriff.” That likely meant Tyranus’ failure. “What about the others? Did Quinn make it back?”

“No. Wasn’t sure if I should head out to go looking for them-”

“They?”

“Yeah, about that…” Pierce sounded rather peeved. “Shan’s gone, too. Jumped up and left without a word just after the HoloNet was back online. Took both blaster pistols.”

“Any clues where he could have gone?”

“There’s an active tracking marker on his datapad. I’ll send you updates on the coordinates.”

Well, that day could have gone better.

Zayathris resolved to take a speeder this time, even if she had to hijack one.

Chapter End Notes

1. “[About mortality] So, if he does not think it, every man who finds himself within sight of an enemy, and this feeling gives a particular brilliance and joyous sharpness of impression to everything that happens in those moments.” War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy

2. It is interesting to compare the role of war for the "old" and the Banite Sith, as evidenced by the quotes below. Both prioritise order in a society, but the Old Sith never got to think beyond the actual ongoing struggle against the Republic. They had no explicit plan for what was to come after victory, whereas the Banite Sith approach the question from the other side – having won, how to use the theoretical threat of war/conflict efficiently to stay in power. The pre-Banite Sith would likely end up devouring each other in absence of an external threat, whereas the Banite Sith didn’t really have a visceral understanding of what conflict means, it remained somewhat abstract for them. They could manipulate it, but hadn’t experienced it personally. Which is (in part) why Sidious’ Empire underestimated the Rebellion. Oh, and unlike Marr, Plagueis et. al. were afraid of death.

“The Empire exists to war against chaos. We pit armies against life, and death is our solace. The Emperor forgot that.” - Marr

“Once the Republic has fallen […] and beings have nowhere to turn but to us, we will provide them with a sense of stability and order: a list of enemies, weapons capable of decimating entire star systems, durasteel prisons in which they can feel secure. Look how they hunger for the dark.” - Plagueis
3. Assuming a conservative estimate of 1/60th of the population density of Kwun Tong (57,000/sqkm) in Hong Kong on average per level, the explosion (radius 2km, depth 3000 levels) in the previous chapter would have killed at least 35 million inhabitants of Coruscant. Chirurgical precision.

   Much harder to pass for Jedi than to appear neutral. Darth Zannah succeeded in keeping up the Aura for mere hours, so I don't think Nox would fare any better.
“From what I have seen these past years, the galaxy has not become all that bright a place.”

- Obi-Wan Kenobi (Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith, by Matthew Stover)

Pierce’s assessment had been accurate. The streets were swept empty, the citizens of the Republic capital huddling inside, poring over the HoloNet news, dreading what other burdens the war would place on them.

As if they knew what war truly meant.

“So, the Chosen One? What does this mean? Some kind of Jidai’ari?” Zayathris asked Nox as they neared the location the Imperial had selected as a meeting place.

“Close, but not quite. Such an inversion wouldn’t be in tune with the Jedi doctrine, after all. He supposedly will bring balance to the Force.”

“Balance?” She gave a thoughtful hum. “Doesn’t sound like a good fit, either. Either he’s got to murder like ten thousand fellow Jedi or bring the number of Sith up accordingly. Ambitious goal.”

Nox snorted. “I think you should not merely approach this quantitatively.”

“I was actually joking, but still, any semblance of equilibrium would not be desirable from the fanatic point of view of the Jedi. If both sides continue existing, it just means conflict – which proves the accuracy of our understanding, not theirs.”

“They take it to mean he will bring an end to the Sith.” He clarified. “Such folly. Of course that would shift the Force towards the Light, which does not constitute a balanced state, either. And even if that worked, their peace would be rather short-lived, since there will always be individuals who desire more…”

“True. You can't expunge passion. Interpretations aside: How could the Jedi be so obtuse? This prophecy paints an enormous, glowing crosshair on Skywalker’s back.”

“Yep.” Nox agreed readily. “I’d have killed him when he was still a padawan, if given the chance. Risky to apprentice someone of his level of power – and doubly so with such a prediction looming in the background. Regardless, having failed to dispose of Skywalker so far, Sidious is probably leaning towards using him.”

“If Tyranus is unsuccessful in overpowering his master, Sidious will be left without an apprentice prematurely. Perhaps he even arranged the whole abduction to make Skywalker complicit in Tyranus’ death – a fitting way to introduce him to the principles of succession among the Sith.”

“…I see your point. Imagine twisting the Chosen One to your purposes, turning the Jedi’s saviour
“I really hope it is not something exclusively available to his persona as Chancellor Palpatine this time.” They shared a dark smirk, before Nox continued. “Still, he’d be a fool not to put a leash on Skywalker the moment he is in his grasp. For a Jedi, he is extremely volatile, halfway into the Dark side’s service already, but that makes his loyalties fickle. Considering how we all are forever cursed to groom our own replacements…”

“It need not be that way.” Zayathris countered.

“Really? Is that what you told your own apprentice? I had a bet going with Ashara when Jaesa would make her move, she always struck me as rather hungry. Ashara won, though…” Nox grumbled. “Unless you want to go the way of the Brotherhood of Darkness – which, to remind you, failed precisely because someone too powerful entered the picture - only absolute power will put a stop to the vicious cycle. There needs to be a supreme being, exempt from the infighting by virtue of rising above everyone. Untouchable.”

“I’d argue we had precisely that. Few people had concrete aspirations, and skill to back it up, to become Emperor, after all … with notable exceptions.” A smug grin twisted Nox’ features in response to her jibe. “If anything, your Sith’ari, especially one so far removed from the plane of mundane reality, would inspire more internal power struggles. I guess that’s why that particular prophecy requires the temporary end of the Sith in the first place, to eliminate the backstabbing potential.”

“Funny, how both concepts point towards the eradication of our order.” Nox observed.

“Surely you don’t mean that our core beliefs are flawed.”

“Flawed? Probably. However, contrary to what you think, this realisation actually gives more legitimacy to our claim. We are the future of the Order, destined to reshape it in our image. The Galaxy and the Sith belong to us.”

Zayathris wrinkled her nose. “One could say we are guilty of perpetuating the exact same mechanism that caused the Empire’s fall. The revenge of the Sith is nigh at hand, a revenge that has been a thousand years in the making – and we are risking all that progress because those responsible are the wrong Sith. Because the power won’t be ours-”

“I am perfectly content to indulge in the occasional hypocrisy, especially if the potential payoff is so monumental.” Nox licked his lips suggestively. “But you are right, our interference could kriff this up for them to the point that the Republic wins, and who would want that? Alas, Sidious hasn’t given us much manoeuvring room. He has made himself indispensable to that Grand Plan of theirs.”

They ducked into a corner and waited for Pierce. The most benign explanation for the absence of her two companions was that Theron had gone to help Quinn make his way back if he had got into a tight spot during the attack on the planet. Both men arguably had a history of poor decision-making, as recently evidenced by Quinn going along with Fives to investigate the bio-chip
conspiracy. It had given them a strategic advantage by exposing a weakness of the Republic, but Quinn had succeeded – and survived - despite acting on completely skewed premises. Assuming that he had nothing to lose coupled with an overzealous sense of duty had overridden all rational objections, a tendency that was without doubt fairly typical for him.

Theron, on the other hand, enjoyed diving headfirst into absurdly reckless heroics far too much, although he aptly hid it beneath a mask of humility. Preferring to play a lone hand had got him into trouble countless times, but somehow he seemed resistant to change. Zayathris didn’t begrudge him for not relying on others – trust was hard won – but open communication, at least when it came to the people he worked with, was usually better than the convoluted spy games he was so fond of.

As it began to rain, the city turned into a glistening gem, vibrant signs and streetlights reflecting off the ubiquitous plasteel and permaplas surfaces.

Nox pulled back his hood and turned his face towards the sky, his lips parted in delight as he relished the feeling of the droplets falling on his skin. “I’ve long accepted that we will need to start over as soon as Sidious is dead. The more of the existing structures he destroys or sends into disarray before that point, the better for us. Fortunately, time won’t be much of an issue afterwards.”

“If your pet project succeeds and you are still willing to share by then.”

“Of course. We simply need to figure out how to work together, whether as equals, or... Contrasting the fact that I killed an incumbent emperor with the intention to take over, to you having execut an absentee one…” Eyes still closed, he lifted a single brow, his demeanour entirely too cheerful for the direction their conversation was taking. “You really want to have this discussion now?”

“Better now than with a knife in my back.” Zayathris deadpanned.

“It would not be a knife, you know…” He trailed off ominously.

“Barrage of lightning, then. Same difference. Your empty promises aside, perhaps I should remind you that wouldn’t stand a chance against me. Lightning can be deflected - you’d be missing all your limbs and your head before you got a single spell in unless you’d prepared a surprise beforehand.”

“I am always prepared.”

“Right now as well?” Zayathris prodded playfully.

*He opened one eye* and squinted at her. “Aside from being the only one with a lightsabre?”

“Little good it’ll do you.”

“Hm…and just how are you going to deflect my lightning without one, Wrath?” Zayathris pouted disdainfully, to the sorcerer’s obvious mirth as he continued. “Admittedly, I am not prepared, at least not for killing you, but then again, I am sure Sidious could be persuaded to do the job in my stead. Or at least, sufficiently distract you for me to play out my strengths. That reminds me, we should spar more often. It was so much fun.”

“As soon as Sidious is a smoking corpse at my feet, sure.”

“Ah, our delightful banter makes me feel young again. Just like old times.”
“We used to joke about how we’d kill each other?” She snorted. “That must’ve slipped my memory.”

“With all due respect, m’lords, maybe you could skip over the deadly rivalry part?”

“Ah, Major, I am so glad you found the time to join us.” Nox replied haughtily and turned towards Zayathris, lowering his voice in reproach. “I wonder why your people have so little sense of self-preservation. Talking like that is usually not conducive to survival.”

Pierce eyed the Sith warily. “Know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“I am not so sure about that claim. Don’t worry, you’re Lord Wrath’s favourite, I won’t treat you to any reminders of your place.”

Zayathris snorted in derision. “I wonder when you became such an elitist. Too few people bowing to you and feeding your narcissistic streak nowadays?” Without bothering to wait for Nox’ miffed reply, she strode over to Pierce and took the datapad he was holding out.

They were close enough to Theron’s tracker signal, just a dozen levels too far up. She motioned for the others to follow her.

“The Jedi clearly didn’t rub off on him.” Pierce muttered when he fell in step beside her. “Liked him more when he was still in your head.”

“Yeah, because you didn’t have to deal with his antics then.”

“Pity you had to get stuck with the poster boy for typical Sith madness.”

“What makes you think you can ridicule Sith like that?”

“Wasn’t including you in that description.” The soldier rumbled, taken aback by the sudden hostility.

“Tread carefully, Pierce. You are forgetting there is a difference between us. You would indeed do well to keep that in mind.”

“Noted.” He grit out, feeling his airways constrict slowly. “Prefer me to lie? Grovel before you like some insignificant worm you can squash on a whim? Will do that if necessary, but I don’t think you want that. Can’t tell, though, because I’m getting very mixed signals.”

Zayathris let out an exasperated growl and relaxed her grip.

Pierce rubbed his neck to ease the discomfort. “At the risk of getting choked again, why does all this put you on edge more than usual,” he asked, belatedly tacking on the honorific to make sure he didn’t tick her off again, “m’lord?”

“Than usual?” She glanced at him sideways in disapproval.

“Yeah, usually you don’t take your anger out on me. Not like this, anyway.”

“You want to know what my problem is? Fine. It’s a long way down from Wrath and Alliance leader to chasing a shadow in a world that’s entirely foreign to you. Feels like the first days on Korriban. You have no idea what’s going on, everyone’s your enemy, but you’re not supposed to kill any of them. You just try your best to survive, pushed way out of any semblance of a comfort
zone, while the whole time, there’s a blade dangling above your head that could drop at random. And when you’ve overcome that helplessness, still, no matter how much power you gain … it just isn’t … enough. You keep failing, people keep dying, things go fubar… I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“Been always like that. One way to make it and a hundred ways to screw up. You’re alive, your enemies aren’t – won’t be.”

Zayathris sighed quietly and turned towards Pierce, reaching for his throat. To his credit, he did not flinch at her touch. “Thank you. For defusing my mood.” He locked his dark eyes with hers, silently regarding his superior while she ran caressing fingers over his throat and clavicle.

“I sense something.” Nox’ comment jolted them back to the present. “It’s vaguely familiar. I can’t quite put my finger on it….”

“Down there?” Zayathris came to kneel next to the other Sith and peered over the ledge. Several levels below them, an intricately layered industrial complex stretched out until the horizon. “The area looks deserted. Feels dead, too.”

“Precisely. That’s the point.” Nox nodded with an anticipatory smirk and pulled Vaiken’s sabre out of the folds of his robe. “You will need it more than me. Taking a shortcut?” He lackadaisically beckoned Pierce to follow him. “We’re taking the longer, safer route, won’t we, Major? Plunging right into a trap is not my style.”

The Force cushioned her jump as she landed on the ground, in a predatory, crouched position. The dull grey darkness stood in stark contrast to the garish brightness of the upper levels. A layer of grime covered most surfaces and made the ground sticky rather than slippery. Only a fraction of the raindrops made it this far down. The air was suffocatingly dense. It tasted of machine oil and metallic sloughage, the pollution a constant reminder that this area was the domain of machines rather than sentients. A place of fleeting shadows.

The tracking marker flickered, as if to taunt her, before the signal was lost.

Zayathris crept forward, hand on the lightsabre hilt, ducking from cover to cover. Whatever she was approaching, it felt decidedly closer to death than to life, in an unnatural way. It wasn’t the presence of a dying being, rather that of one that had already crossed that threshold – and persevered, stubbornly clinging to the known parameters of their existence.

Humiliation.

Agony.

Hatred. So much pure hatred.

Unsurprisingly, there was fear, too, muted by a thick cloak of vicious darkness, little pinpricks in the Force lost in the noise.

She stepped into a kind of hangar, one side opening towards a wide vertical tunnel.

A low, inhuman growl greeted her from the twilight.
“Took you long enough.”

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