The Garden of Fate

Thran pushed his seat back slightly and lifted the burgundy cloth from his lap. He dabbed it gingerly at the corner of his lips, wiping away the remains of a rich sauce made to pair with the meat. He deposited the serviette on his nearly empty plate. The meal had been lavish, seven full courses, each of which had been meticulously prepared.

“My compliments to the chef.” Locita said as he mirrored Thran’s movements.

The conversation over food had been dreadfully boring, filled with the hollow pleasantries of discussing the quality of travel, offering some insights into local culture and opportunities for sightseeing, and more of the like. It was bad form to come to the negotiating table with only a taste for discussing business. One always began a deal with such unpleasant pleasantries. This was customary. Thran had been analyzing Locita throughout the entirety of the meal, all while being fully aware that he himself was also under the same scrutiny.

“Chesare is an absolute master. I shall certainly inform him of your kind words.” Thran replied.

Not all duels were fought with lightsabers, but the same rules of caution and attention to detail still applied on this field. What seemed to be innocuous conversation could reveal deeper truths about a man than he could muster in his own words. Little ticks and tells pointed towards paths of weakness. Paths which could be exploited, if one were patient and cunning enough. Two titans sat face to face, deconstructing what weaknesses the other might have.

Thran noted his opponent’s angular jaw. He was handsome, by human standards at least. His slicked back jet black coiffeur was perfectly cut to accentuate a steep nose and narrow face. Thran surmised that his opponent, like himself, had at least a touch of vanity. Locita’s fingernails were perfectly trimmed, his hands not scarred by labor. This man was not a pawn on the Dejarik board. The plainness of his dress was deliberate. He wore no ornate jewelry or fanciful patterns. But the make of the garment was second to none. It appeared that his opponent was not motivated by entirely by greed and had no pageantry about him, or at least he hid it well under a mask of austerity. The Chiss’ deep crimson eyes were hard to read. Thran maintained his observant gaze.

“I wonder if Chef Chesare has prepared the chocorazz tartes for dessert...Oh, how I love those little sweets.” Rayne added.

“I should like to try these.” Tia’nah said, with the slightest inflection in her voice that lent the narrowest suggestion of curiosity.

Unblinking, the Chiss cocked his head slightly. Locita’s deep red eyes had not broken from Thran, but the slight motion had given up the hint that he too was curious about what would arrive for the final course. The pressure hiss of the door opening and the rushed footsteps of waitstaff broke Locita’s deadlocked concentration. He turned slightly to the door to inspect what the tuxedoed waiters bore aloft. His red eyes locked on a silver platter, covered by a large cloche.

The army of staff cleared the dishes, removed the unused silverware, and placed clean, chilled plates before each of the diners. The chief among the servants lifted the heavy metal dome revealing an array of small ramekins filled with custards and cremes of various colors, arranged around a sculpture of fresh fruits. As quickly as the staff had appeared, so did they vanish.

“Ah, it appears as though we are blessed with another of Chef Chesare’s fine creations. Perhaps the absence of the tartes presently will give you reason to visit again in the future...” Thran said, as he smiled and softly blinked his vivid green eyes at Locita.

“Perhaps that determination will be made after we have completed our discussions of business matters.” Locita reached for one of the small custards.

“Indeed.” Thran smiled, waiting patiently as the others gathered their desserts and tucked into them, before reaching over to make his own selection.

The chatter continued through the final course and when they had finished, until the time came where the meal was complete. It was time to speak business. As they stood, Thran tossed a single glance at Rayne. That single glance transmitted more than anything he could have said in such a short time. It was full of instructions, questions, thoughts, and feelings. She nodded slightly to him, acknowledging all of it at once.

Both had felt the lingering presence of the Force around Tia’nah, but there was something foreign about it. It was as if the Force had been painted over, made to resemble something else. It was still present, but it felt distinctly altered. While Thran focused in on Locita, Rayne would work over this mystery and see if she could glean anything relevant from Tia’nah’s mind.

The group ate the fine desserts in near silence. Only the clatter of porcelain on silver and a brief conversation regarding some local fauna filled the time. Shortly thereafter, they retired to the conservatory for drinks and private discussion.

Kamjin twitched. It was a common response to the muscular electrostimulation therapy program, but the jerking reactions still looked quite unnatural. Suspended in a cylinder of blue-green viscous liquid bacta, the Emperor more resembled a lab specimen than a living man. A tall tripodal medical droid exchanged an empty vial of stimulants for a fresh bottle of mystery medicine. The droid moved deliberately, but slowly. Spindly pinching claws ran over the adjacent panel, summoning a host of smaller orb-like droids. The droid adjusted dials and pressed several buttons. It monitored the patient’s vitals, monitoring heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen levels and body temperature. A few signs were weak, but stable.

Inspector-Commander Fitzroy Tosten nodded to the attending physician, dismissing the doctor from his presence. The status report read nominal. The Emperor would survive this attack, but the concern over the long term ramifications of such an attack left the Inspector at a loss. Imperial Intelligence had been aware of the potential threat on the Emperor’s life, but had never expected the Hutt Cartel to make the move. Not that any warning would have been heeded by the Sith Emperor. The slugs were clever, they struck as their own people were present giving them plausible deniability over the attempt. Yet, Tosten felt that ISI could have done more to prevent this.

The blaster bolt has struck Kamjin square in the center of mass. Whomever had pulled the trigger knew exactly what they were doing, but they had not anticipated the strength of his armor. Or perhaps they had known exactly what they were doing and their aim was not to eliminate Lap’lamiz permanently, but only remove him from the field. The whole thing stunk.

The only solace that Tosten took was that the Vizier had not yet made a grand statement. The implication being that this was not coup attempt. Had he done so, the Inspector might need to wrestle his conscience a moment. The specter of having inadvertently committed treason and attempted regicide had passed him over it seemed.

“Commander. What news of the Emperor’s condition?” came a growling voice from behind.

“Ah, Agent Marru, pleased you could join me.” Tosten tugged gently at his white tunic, straightening any creases from his uniform. “He is alive. His condition is stable. For now.”

“Who’s behind this attack?” Kah’ri questioned.

“The preponderance of evidence points to the Hutts. If one is to believe the evidence at face value alone.” The Imperial officer said, as he tapped his datapad again.

“From the way that you said that, sir, I am inclined to believe that there is more to the picture than just what we see.” The Firerreon replied.

“You are familiar with the activities of criminal cartels, are you not, Mr Marru?” Tosten tilted his eyes up slightly to glance at Kah’ri.

“If that is what your dossier on me says, it must be true.” Kah’ri’s tone was full of indignance.

“I believe it is the marks upon your skin, not my dossiers that reveal that truth. To be marked in such a way you must certainly be aware of the structural complexities of such organizations. Likewise, certainly you are aware of the inherent volatility of the individuals that find themselves at the top of the pyramid. Still yet, you must be aware of the overwhelming ambition of those just below the pinnacle. You will excuse the reductive explanation Agent Marru, but the Tiure Clan is presently enduring a bit of internal strife and their actions have grown unpredictable. Make no mistake, it was an agent of the Tiure Clan that pulled the trigger. A one...Dia Gida, we are told.” Tosten said, lowering his datapad to his side.

“Right...” Kah’ri said, displeased that the officer would speak down to him so.

“We have orders, Agent Marru. From the Vizier.” Tosten said, passing over a data chip.

“Are we to pull the plug on the Emperor’s life support?” Kah’ri said as he smiled. He half joking, but was wholly unsure what orders could possibly be coming down from the Vizier.

Tosten did not share in the humor of the moment. The officer tilted his black cap towards the datapad strapped to Kah’ri’s hip. The suggestion was taken and the Firrereon reviewed the contents of the datachip. His eyes scanned the document.

<<Memorandum>>

<<Office of the Director of the Imperial Revenue Administration>>

<<Date: 24/06/0041>>

<<To: ALL>>

<<Subject: Immediate Seizure Pursuant to ICPT 232-1: REF: TIURE CLAN>>

By Order of the Director, at behest of the Vizier, All agents are to move immediately to seize and secure any and all assets maintained by the Tiure Clan within the Caperion System, pursuant to Imperial Code Public Tax 232-1. Any resistance to seizure should be met with the full force of law.

“Dank Ferrik...He sent the Tax man after them...Brutal” Kah’ri stopped short of reading the entirety of the document.

“Along with the Navy, Legion, COMPNOR and the Emperor’s Hand.” Tosten paused a moment. “The Vizier has seen fit to meet this attempt on the Emperor’s life with the full might of the Empire. A fitting response, no?”

“Certainly, if one was attempting to prove their inno-” Kah’ri was cut off.

“Agent Marru, I would advise you to exercise judicious use of caution when finishing that sentence.” Tosten said curtly.

“in...exhaustable loyalty to the Empire...” Kah’ri laughed.

“And as a note, it will relieve you to know that the Vizier is not behind this attack. Truly.” Tosten added and turned his eyes back down to his datapad.

“How can you be certain of that?” Kah’ri asked.

“He hasn’t been seen anywhere near the Throneroom and there has been no boastful proclamation of his new found sovereignty.” Tosten said, hiding a smirk. “Read your orders and find this Dia Gida...Terminate her. Immediately.”

The sweet smell of flowers and earthy scent of moss and soil filled the conservatory. The room had towering vaulted glass ceilings, which during the day would let in massive amounts of natural light. By now, by the light of evening only let in the twinkling light of a few bright stars. Set off from the garden was a lounge, full of short tables and plush lounging chairs. Behind the lounge area, a towering rock wall façade climbed up the wall. In pockets up the wall, various plant species reached out from beyond the safety of the rock to display beautiful flowers. The sound of running water, cascading over a waterfall into a small pool below, made the cavernous room feel full. Carefully selected stones and artificial tree limbs gave the room the illusion of having been carved out of the wilds of some far-off jungle.

Thran stood at a small table, with his back to his guests and those of his immediate circle. He delicately placed a small trowel on a folded silk towel. He leaned over to inspect a small yellowing plant. Few had ever seen him exercise such a delicate hand, yet there was something about the environment in which he had chosen to have this conversation that

“We have found your capabilities to be most impressive. It seems that the local sector now turns to Caperion for guidance and protection. The Pendeks of Lop Sam certainly admire your progress and have begun to emulate your Imperial structure. Rumor is that even the Crannix Trade Authority has appealed to your Empire for protection and streamlining their logistics channels. Not to mention your newest Space Station. Impressive. Though, I find it curious how you could have achieved such results in such a short time, Vizier.” Locita said.

The others among them watched as the duel between two masters began to unfold. Rayne continued to examine Tia’nah, certain now that Chiss did possess what their culture referred to as “The Sight”. Several others of Thran’s closest associates had joined them. K’vin, his attorney, was customarily present at all such meetings. Ellac Conrat, a hulking but youthful Sith, was among them as well. Despite his scars and rage, Thran had seen potential in the boy. Ellac’s presence was part of his tutelage. He would dutifully study Thran.

“Building an Empire is much like tending to plants, Jloc’itaome’faottas. Don’t you agree?” Thran said, sure to recite the name he’d practiced in the mirror dozens of times. He nodded slightly to Ellac, as if instructing him to listen keenly.

“Please, We are past the point of formality. Call me Locita...I am not sure I follow. Please elucidate me.” Locita tilted his head curiously.

Thran smiled softly. He lifted a small hand-held mister pump from the table. He gently depressed the pump, spraying a fine misting of water onto the sickly plant before him. The crystalline glass pump rung out as he places it back on the table. He reached for a scalpel.

“In order to flourish, a plant requires certain conditions. There must be the right amount of sunlight. Some even require certain wavelengths of light. The soil must be rich with nutrients. There cannot be too much clay or sand. It must receive enough water, but not too much. And disease, rot...decay...” Thran lifted the scalpel to the yellowing leaves. “Must be excised, lest it claim the whole plant.” He sliced away a pair of dying leaves. “It is not the gardener that grows the plant, Locita. A plant will grow on its own. This is the way of nature. Yet, It is the gardener that creates the conditions that are best for the plant, so that it may grow to its fullest potential.” Thran said, placing the scalpel back down among the other tools.

“And you are the Gardener of the Empire?” Locita asked.

“Precisely.” Thran turned back to face him, now clutching a small pair of shears. He pointed the tool at Locita in affirmation.

“And your Emperor...where does he fit in this? Does he not tend to the Empire as well?” The Chiss asked, despite his uncomfortableness with the question.

“The Emperor is a warrior, his prowess there should not be underestimated. But, the true strengths of a warrior are limited only to war. Kamjin was necessary to unite the Caperion System. This was his duty. And despite your Damiyo’s best efforts, Kamjin’s duty to the Empire has not been released.” Thran said tapping the shears in his hand.

“You say that as if you are disappointed, Thran.” Locita said.

“I am. If only it were for the very reasons that one would expect of me based upon rumors and reputation alone.” Thran said “Alas, my disappointment is seeded in the realization that my fears are real. This is not a simple personal vendetta from an ineffectual, cowardly, and deluded crime lord. This is a duel of shadows, a test of might...but not of physical prowess, of the might of influence.” The Sith remarked calmly.

“I see. Are we to be adversaries then?” Locita adjusted his collar slightly.

Thran paused. Locita had all but admitted that he was the hand in the darkness moving the dejarik pieces across the board. He set down the shears and rested his hands upon the table, palms down. Occasus had known from the moment the Chiss stepped off his transport that these talks could go well or they could go poorly. How he responded to this question would prove which of the outcomes would come to pass.

“While I am flattered at the proposition of finally meeting such a fine rival as yourself, I suspect that there is a deeper motive to your presence on Seraph.” Thran leveled his eyes at the Chiss.

They locked onto each other. Thran’s green eyes flared, striking against the glowing red eyes of Locita. This was the grand clash in their duel, the moment their fates would be decided. The others in the room dare not move. They dare not speak. The air, humid as is may be, felt especially thick. The silence felt like eternity, though it was only a fraction of a second. It felt as though anyone of them may gasp for air under the crushing weight of these two colossal presences that seemed to fill the whole room. Rayne glanced over to Ellac, who seemed to be processing intently everything he had heard. She smiled slightly, caught in the memory that not everyone had seen Thran in his truest element.

“Motive?” Locita asked. “I might wonder what motive you have, Usurper. I might wonder what motive you must have to surround yourself with such wealth. Money, is power, is it not? Is that your motivation, Ch'ittoci'ren'musi, to gather power?”

“Power?” Thran half-chuckled. “No. I am afraid not. Of that, I assure you, I already have plenty. I do not raise monsters here, Locita. Surely if power were my aim, this room would be filled with them. I am but a simple man. I tend to my orchids because the passion I have for them fills my heart. Likewise, I tend to the Empire as the passion I have for our people compels me too. If following my passions lends me the strength to defend my people, or the power to bring justice, that is but the way of the universe. But to seek power for power alone...that is a fool’s errand. In the end, I am but a meek man and I seek what any meek man might, my friend. Freedom. Freedom from fear. Freedom from that which lies just out of our sight, but we know is there. Freedom from the real dangers from the morality stories we tell to our children. That which has no name. Void. The end.” Thran said, leaning into the table as if the weight of the galaxy rested upon his shoulders.

“I see.” Locita said.

“I suspect that you have come here with exactly the same worry. We both know of the perils that face us out here. We both know of the ineptitude of our allies to meet us in our times of need. But the weight of a man’s calling weighs heavy on the soul. I can read it on your eyes, Locita. You feel the same burden as I do. You know what lurks out there in the Unknown. So do I.” Thran said, staring directly at the Chiss.

“I think we understand each other, Thran.” Locita crossed the distance between them and stood before Thran with an outstretched hand.

“Then let us drop pretenses and stop with this charade...How might the Empire and The Thirteenth House, House Faottas, meet our combined challenges?” Thran said, grasping the Chiss’ hand to shake.

“As friends and Allies, I believe.” Locita said, smiling.