**Playing with Fire**

The mottled blue backdrop of hyperspace was considered to be unsettling to many people in the wide universe. There were people who travelled the lanes of hyperspace who would never gaze out the viewports of their transports—content in the fiction that they were simply on a windowless shuttle on a planet, and not hurtling through the darkest depths and mysteries of the abyss. For the man standing at the fore of the bridge of the Bothan Assault Cruiser *Dark Prophet II*, the whorls of icy colours had never represented anything but comfort and solace. However, by the set of his shoulders and his bowed head, it was clear that he was not drawing any comfort from the endless chaos he so normally embraced. He was a large and well-built man, towering above what would be considered average height for a human male. His hair had passed beyond the realms of greying, and there was now more silver than brown in it, his face weathered by hours exposed to the elements and covered by a prodigious beard. There were worry lines creasing his eyes and forehead. An observer would look at the man and be forgiven for thinking that he appeared to be broken, if they could not see the smouldering fire that still burned in his crystalline green eyes.

A woman in black uniform, sporting two stars on her shoulders slowly approached him from behind, careful to not interrupt his reverie abruptly. On seeing his raised eyebrow, she spoke quietly, "Admiral, we're five minutes from reversion to real space in the Dromund system." Not waiting for a reply, she nodded respectfully and returned to her duties. Even today, after having left Imperial service almost two decades earlier, Taldryan's military still felt more comfortable referring to him by his old rank than by his station within the Brotherhood. It wasn't something Keirdagh Taldrya Cantor had ever bothered to try to correct, regardless of the fact that it gave him additional authority in the soldiers' eyes; it called to mind memories of simpler times, before his life had been dominated by the power struggles of the Dark Jedi Brotherhood.

In the early days of his career in the Brotherhood, Keirdagh had been blinded to the perils he'd constantly faced, rising quickly in power and influence throughout the clandestine organization. Looking back on his past now, at the dangers he'd overcome, and the close calls he'd blustered through during his career, calling it a miracle that he had survived this long would be unkind to miracles. Now though, looking back on his career, every close call and every pushed boundary stood out sharply in his memory, just one more withdrawal from his bank of luck. Given how many battles the Dark Council had thrust them to in this past year, he'd begun to wonder whether or not there was anything left in that particular account. He'd already barely survived an assassination attempt at the beginning of these troubles. After his recovery he'd been on the fore of every assault that Taldryan had made, refusing to allow his brothers to go into battle without him, and they were ever approaching stiffer resistance by nearing the centre of the One Sith's power. Perhaps he'd finally be called to account for cheating Lord Nyax of his due, after all of these years.

*You're just feeling the years, you old nek,* thought Keirdagh, reprimanding himself for his moment of weakness. *You're still one of the deadliest men in the galaxy, and you're damned pretty beyond that. Get your game face on, and prepare to lead your men. They still need you.* Nodding to himself Keirdagh straightened to his full height, and turning his back to the view screen walked to stand next to the Rear Admiral in charge of the *Dark Prophet.*

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Years of commanding starships in battle had never robbed Keirdagh of the steady build-up of nerves he felt before heading into battle. There was something daunting and completely mysterious about warfare fought in the cold vacuum of space that all his power and experience could never quite steal from him. In all the years he'd waded into battle like some sort of avenging spirit, the unease never left him. The navigation officer on the bridge triggered a warning klaxon and began an audible count down for immersion into real space.

"Five…" Keirdagh took a deep breath and steadied his feet. Admiral Arundel, standing next to him, did the same.

"Four…" Clearing his thoughts, Keirdagh began to reach out with the Force, and gathered his will to sense incoming threats.

"Three…" Opening his eyes, he began to scan the view port in front of him, preparing himself for spotting enemies.

"Two…" Closing his eyes, Keirdagh took one last moment of peace before the inevitable chaos that was to follow.

"One…"

As the brilliant blue vortex extended out into the white pinpricks of space, Keirdagh extended his senses outward into the system he'd just entered. The cold and menacing presence of the Dark Side was nearly omnipresent in the Dromund system. Having been home to the second Sith Empire, and the nigh immortal Emperor, it was not surprising that the Force would be in so much turmoil throughout the system. Brotherhood scouts had reported that a Dark Side nexus could still be found upon the surface, in the ruins of the ancient Dark Temple, and it was near these ruins that the One Sith had focused their efforts upon the planet.

Voices rang out from the assembled bridge crew in front of Keirdagh, joining in a glorious cacophony of information. There was something singular about the ability of a good starship commander, in being able to listen to the shouted reports of many individuals, read the mountains of information splashing on their screens, and make decisions based on everything they'd heard. Rear Admiral Shalla Arundel was one of the most capable commanders Taldryan had in its service, and the same confusion that was filling his brain was evidenced on her face. "Wing Commander: task a flight from ValkyrieSquadron to scout the far side of the planet and report back. Comms: get in touch with the *Justice* and confirm our orders. Sensors: begin a full sweep of the system for any anomalies synonymous with cloaked vessels."

Arundel's confusion was understandable at this point. Though they had largely been facing opposition in the form of antiquated vessels that had been bought, borrowed or stolen from various fringe groups, including mercenaries and slavers, they had always been at least faced with the threat of battle, at least always been faced with formidable, if out gunned opposition. The reports that had been flowing from the sensor stations on the bridge of the *Dark Prophet II* had reported anything but. There was the report of a single modified frigate guarding the system.

"It must be a trap…" muttered Arundel, only loud enough that Cantor could hear her.

"Unless, Admiral, we finally broke them", Keirdagh whispered back, without a great deal of conviction in his voice. The veteran beside him only responded in a dissatisfied grunt.

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The bridge of the *Cotelin*-class Star Destroyer *Justice* was also gripped with tension at the apparent lack of resistance being presented in the skies above Dromund Kaas. Of the planets that the Dark Brotherhood was launching operations in this phase of the invasion, it had been assumed that former throne world would be host to the highest levels of resistance due to its spiritual value, as well as the tactical advantages it had, in being a perfect staging area for the One Sith capital of Korriban. Admiral Chaf'arha'nuruodo was adjusting to the updated situation with cool determination. Taldryan had tasked its entire Battle Group I for the operation, and the smaller elements of the group could deal with pacifying a single frigate, while the *Justice* kept the door open, if there was an ambush lying in wait.

"Admiral, open a private channel to the *Dark Prophet*, when you are able," asked a quiet voice at his left arm. Farhan gave a short appraising glance at the Quaestor of Taldryan who was standing stoically beside him. In his time in Taldryan, Farhan had seen leaders come and go, and though Rian Aslar did not have the military training and background of some of his predecessors, what he did have was brains, and a quiet resolve about him. Under Rian's leadership, the armed forces had begun to move away from the depressingly inefficient standard of Dark Jedi meddling in the realms of warfare. He'd begun the process of transforming the Taldryan military into an organization worthy of its name, trusting the officers to lead their men with as little interference as possible from the mystics of the House. "Of course sir, right away," nodding briskly at the communications officer, Farhan vacated the command area and went forward to more closely observe the search for any ambush, and leave the leader of Taldryan to his conference.

Rian's image floated in miniature next to the command chair, and from his bearing Keirdagh knew that the younger man was feeling tense. Rian's rise through the ranks of Taldryan had been as implacable as the tides, but he'd come to leadership in the midst of a war. Since becoming Quaestor, he had known no times of peace, and Keirdagh was beginning to wonder whether or not the constant pressure of leading one of the Brotherhood's great Houses and helping lead a war, was beginning to grate on the man. "I am ill at ease with the lack of resistance Master Cantor," Rian began "have you had any premonitions about this being a trap?"

Shaking his head slowly, Keirdagh replied "I honestly don't know Rian. This whole damned campaign has been clouded by both my own feelings on the matter, as well as..." he paused to consider his words more carefully. "There's something about this sector, Rian. The Dark Side is so prevalent here, even after all these years. It's a fleeting presence, but it's been hiding details from me. I feel almost blinded."

"Truly?" asked the blue skinned man, an eyebrow raised in disbelief. "I haven't felt anything out of the ordinary. Can you really tell me nothing of what we can expect?" Keirdagh knew that he wouldn't have; there was nothing concrete to feel, it was no single flash of warning that the Equite would have been able to detect. It was a subtle, yet omnipresent feeling, much like the underlying buzz of a room filled with heavy electronics. Keirdagh had long been known for his ability to sense and predicts the paths of the future. It was one of the reasons he had excelled as a starfighter pilot before he'd come into his power. Keirdagh's natural inclinations just leaned toward it. It was a frustrating weakness that the old Master was not used to having to adjust for, and it made him feel particularly vulnerable.

"All I can say Rian, is with no fleet to defend us, this may finally be a bloodless battle."

"The skies are clear Keirdagh; the ground will not be abandoned. The One Sith would leave these grounds over their bodies, and for nothing less."

"So we do what we should have been doing this whole time, Rian," Keirdagh replied bitterly. "We assume a synchronous orbit, and we turn the surface to glass. Then we go collect whatever relics survive."

"Our orders were to secure the planet with as little damage to the ruins as poss..."

"Damn our orders, and damn the fools who gave them to us!" interrupted Keirdagh, his green eyes flaring with rage and pain. "Haven't we sacrificed enough of our brothers in this witless enterprise? How many more men and women must die in the name of Taldryan so we can sate the murderers' heedless ambitions? We have a responsibility to our men, Rian. We answer to them. We exist to protect them. How many more of their lives must we sacrifice at the behest of a madman and his pet monster before you'll realize this?!"

Keirdagh was obliquely aware that the bridge around him had gone deathly silent, but for the mechanical sounds of the equipment. He didn't care. Rian had spent too much time preaching patience and acceptance to the old Master, and it was a familiar debate between the two of them, though rarely did it spill out of their private counsels. The silence continued on unabated, as Rian was clearly waiting for an apology from his Aedile. The heat in those emerald green eyes did nothing but smoulder in hot rage, and only vaguely did Keirdagh hear a crew member in a hushed tone report to the ship's commander that the One Sith vessel had been destroyed.

Rian knew well enough by now that Keirdagh would never back down from his stance; it wasn't even a stance that he disagreed with, but questioning his authority in front of the crews of both ships was not a challenge Rian could simply ignore. The stony silence stretched onward, and Rian began to fear that a line had been crossed between the two that may never be uncrossed, when the *Justice*'s own sensor officer called out from the crew pits below. "Contact! Two flotillas entering the system along our port flank!"

Rian used the emergency to disengage from his quarrel with his Aedile without losing face, and preventing an open confrontation. "An ambush? Admiral, what's happening?"

"There's no cause for alarm, sir, sensors indicate that it is Scholae Palatinae's Third Flotilla, and a small gathering of Odan-Urr's forces. It would appear that our erstwhile allies have arrived in support of our operation." Knowing the Chiss Admiral as well as he did, Rian could plainly recognize the mocking contempt in which Farhan held these other pretenders. For a man lacking an ounce of Force ability, the Admiral had a fanatical devotion to Taldryan.

Glancing back at the image of his Aedile next to him, Rian relented. "Fine Yacks, we'll do it your way." Nodding Farhan back to his side, Rian laid out the plan of attack. "Admiral, you'll bring the Battle Group into orbit above the designated target areas, and proceed with a sterilization of the surface. Ensure that only our finest gunners are used in the operation, but make sure that you pour enough fire into the surface to steal the air from the lungs of any beings below." Farhan knew that these were orders in violation of what the Dark Council had requested of Taldryan, and his glowing red eyes lit up with a malicious joy.

"At once, sir!"

"Oh, and Farhan? It would be courteous to inform our 'allies' that they'd better not be on the surface below the *Justice* when the sky starts falling*.*"

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No sooner than Keirdagh heard the warning from the *Justice* about Taldryan's plans did the communications officer look back to him and nod gravely. "Who?" he asked simply.

"Hypercomm signal detected from the *Indomitable*, based off a preliminary triangulation, directed toward the Ziost system."

"And am I right in assuming that Intelligence's recent reports on the *Suffering* indicate that it is supporting and overseeing the invasion of Ziost at the moment?"

"You would be sir."

"Those kriffing cowards. Contact the hangar bay to prepare my fighter. I'll need to be aboard the *Justice* for this." Strictly speaking while in combat, Taldryan's military doctrine required the two leaders to be on separate ships, preventing a possible catastrophic loss of its commanders. However, if the *Suffering* had indeed been the target of Scholae Palatinae's message, Rian would need his support soon. "Arundel. Prep fighters and the ship for battle. Our allies may be turning dangerous soon. I would suggest getting *Hyperion* into space immediately.

The woman's eyebrows twitched slightly, and began typing commands into her console.

By the time he'd made it over to the Taldryan flagship, the contact he'd known was coming was already underway. Rian had retired to his private quarters and the holo-projector was fired up, portraying the Grand Master, Deputy Grand Master and Voice of the Brotherhood. The Grand Master and his Shadow Hand were standing somewhat in the background, their faces brimming with barely controlled anger, as Darth Pravus dictated their wills to the Quaestor of Taldryan. "You will not lay waste to the planet as you have threatened to do so," hissed the Voice. "There are artifacts worth more than every life in your fleet to be found on that planet, and the Dark Council will have them, Prelate."

"My Lords," began Rian in a glacially calm voice, "we have bled and died for the Council's war. The crew on the *Justice* can demolish a speeder in the driveway of a domicile and leave the grass un-scorched. There is no need to risk so many lives in a pointless ground assault."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me Quaestor," responded Pravus, his tone dripping venom. "You will lead your troops to the surface, and you will allow the forces of Scholae Palatinae to land on the planet unmolested. This is not a request." It was simply too much for Keirdagh to take in. He'd nearly been killed; the war had already stolen his friends. Shadow had not been heard from since disappearing on the assault on Rhelg. Countless soldiers and pilots of Taldryan, people who Keirdagh considered friends had died on behalf of Ashen's vendetta against the One Sith, and these… these…

"Murderers!" exploded Keirdagh. "You pompous clowns sit there in your ivrooy tower, and leave us to die. You stand behind the corpses of people who you've pledged to protect, all in the name of some mindless war which you yourselves began. This has to end!"

"Master Cantor, tread carefully before you accuse us of cowardice again," spat out Pravus.

"But you are cowards Pravus, you and the murderer and his pet animal. None of you or your damned prizes are worth a single drop of Taldryan blood, and I will not let you savages risk my men any more. Chaos take you all, this is madness!" Stabbing a finger down on the comm button on the desk in front of him, Keirdagh began barking orders to the bridge. "Farhan, glass the entire damned planet. Leave nothing standing. Leave nothing alive!"

The image in front of him erupted into a burst of static and suddenly the image of three men was replaced by the furious face of Ashen alone. "I have destroyed men for less than that, Cantor. You will rescind those orders immediately, or I swear by the Force, your only fond memory will be the sweet pain of me tearing you limb from wretched limb, but for the horrors I will inflict upon you."

Keirdagh snarled in defiance, but before he could say anything, Rian's voice cut through the room like a lightsaber. "KEIRDAGH, ENOUGH OF THIS! I command this fleet, not you. Stand down, immediately!" Tearing his eyes away from Ashen, Cantor looked at Rian Aslar and saw both genuine fear and anger mixing in his eyes. Growling incoherently, the bearded Dark Jedi Master rolled his shoulders and began to stalk from the room, not trusting himself to stay any longer.

"You'd do well to listen to your Quaestor, Cantor. You will learn your place. I have it within my power to steal whatever hope you have left in you away. I know for which you fight, and I will see to it that Taldryan never ascends again." The threat was possibly the one thing that could have stolen the anger from the old man's soul, but it likely did not have the effect that the Grand Master was hoping for. Taldryan had been stripped of the right to call itself a Clan in the Brotherhood's hierarchy. It was a slight against their illustrious history that personally weighed on Keirdagh's heart, and it was a fact that the Dark Council had been using as a hammer against him for far too long. It was a lever they'd used to try to keep him compliant, and Ashen's threat crystallized the rage into something far more dangerous: Steely, volcanic resolve. The Dark Master turned slowly, squaring his shoulders to the projection. As his eyes flicked over Rian's, he could see quite clearly that the rage had turned to terror over what his Aedile would say next.

In tones so low it was sure to have trouble carrying through to the comm unit, Keirdagh responded simply, "If that's how you want to play it Muz, fine. Just remember one thing: I'm also a murderer." With a gesture, before the Grand Master could respond, Keirdagh closed the transmission. Turning his eyes to Rian, Keirdagh gave a bow of apology. "That's twice today I stepped on your toes, Rian. I'm sorry."

Compassion is not normally seen as a valuable trait in Dark Jedi, but the brotherhood that was Taldryan transcended the dogmatic rules and selfish beliefs that were so common amongst the Sith sects. Rian simply nodded his forgiveness and said simply "You were looking out for Taldryan, Yacks. I'll never fault you for that… but you know we have to carry out the ground assault, right? We've fought too long and hard to regain our place, and I won't risk it falling apart." Rian paused, considering his next words carefully. "If you can't accept that, I'll understand if you want to take the command of the fleet while I'm planet side."

A bitter laugh escaped the old man's throat. "No Rian, you know as well as I do… the Grand Master chose his weapon wisely. I can't let the men go down there without me. I have to do everything in my power to protect them, even if it means dying alongside them."

Aslar sighed and then gave the Elder a crisp nod, "I know."

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The sounds of starfighters maneuvering in the atmosphere and the howl of laser cannons filled Keirdagh's ears as he exited from the *Sentinel-*class landing craft. The One Sith had built a small town out of collapsible structures in the swampy marshland that surrounded the entrance to the Dark Temple. The air reeked of scorched flesh and burning peat, calling to mind terrible memories from Keirdagh's past. Reports from the constant over watch of Taldryan's fighters which were strafing the valley in front of the ruins had reported that though some of the enemy had been taken unawares, indications were that they had retreated within the Temple walls themselves.

Standing silently for a moment, Keirdagh watched in envy as one of Taldryan's Chase-X fighters tore through the skies above him, its blasters spitting coherent light onto the ground, keeping the enemy pinned back and protecting the troops landing from space. For now, the area was completely controlled by Taldryan's fighters and soldiers, a judicious use of threats had kept the warriors from Odan-Urr and Scholae Palatinae away from the ancient Dark Side nexus. Keirdagh knew that they would come eventually, but for now, assaulting the Sith Academy and combing the ruins of Kaas city itself would likely seem a more hospitable target than approaching the army under Cantor's command.

A sudden blast of air from the *Sentinel's* maneuvering thrusters brought Keirdagh back from his reverie. Behind him, the assembled might of Taldryan had been prepared, Force user and professional soldier alike. Motioning forward the Dark Jedi, Keirdagh spoke in quick, decisive tones. "Brothers, break into groups of four. Elders: spread yourselves out amongst the teams. Once we advance on the temple, we're going to lose our cover. They're going to come out for us. Slow advance forward. We'll unleash Hell on them, and then rush them to clean up the rest. After that, take a Squad with you and start combing the temple. We want these rats cleaned out before anyone else gets here." Keirdagh got several nods from his friends and comrades, before they began to start dividing themselves amongst the younger members. "Chaos, Tarax, and Inferni: you're with me."

Unclipping his saber from his utility belt, Keirdagh took a moment to feel the wood panelling familiar and strong on his fingers, before raising it to the sky and igniting his blade. A golden corona seemed to emanate from it, making even the blazing fires near them seem dim by comparison. In response to his signal the warriors of Taldryan began a slow march forward, as one. One last strafing run from the fighters in *Grey* squadron preceded the troops, and as they shot upward into space Keirdagh noted that the pilots took a moment to waggle their wings in salute to their comrades in arms; even surrounded by the spectre of the battle that was yet to come, Keirdagh felt a genuine smile spreading across his face.

As soon as the starfighters roared away from the Dark Temple, the One Sith came boiling out of the Dark Temple like angry piranha beetles, screaming in defiance. As they came, the troops from Taldryan ground to a halt, dropped into firing positions and came together in a line to absorb the enemies charge. Keirdagh smiled grimly and keyed his comm-link. "Major, open fire, prepared coordinates." The concussion of the artillery batteries opening fire behind him sent tremors through his feet, only to be replaced by a blinding flash of fire as the heavy munitions tore into the ground in front of him. Between the assembled Dark Jedi, the thrown debris and shrapnel was largely deflected away from his soldiers, but Keirdagh saw one of Taldryan's young Journeymen get crushed by a massive boulder. The losses would have been greater had they met the charge head on.

The effect that the barrage had on the One Sith was magnitudes worse. Where close to two hundred enemies had been charging them, now only sparse pockets survived, all of whom were clustered around men and women in flowing robes and holding red lightsabers. With a shout of defiance all their own, Taldryan's forces swarmed them.

The battle that followed was short, and creatively brutal. Keirdagh saw more of his Equites fall under the blades of a particular One Sith Elder, before she was dispatched by the emerald haired Halcyon Rokir. Another sorcerer had laid waste to a squad of Darkfire battalion soldiers before being bisected upon Kir Katarn's blade. Cotelin had waded into the thickest cluster of the One Sith, his golden sabers flaring in defiance, and the Force boiling off him like lightning in a storm. Nobody would later be able to report what they'd seen the Grand Master doing, but when the dust settled, the four One Sith Warlords he'd closed upon were nothing more than a pile of charred meat and bone.

All told, taking the entrance to the Dark Temple had cost Taldryan close to eighty lives; eighty more souls and lives to mourn once the battle was over.

Elements from the 11th Spacebourne regiment took up guard positions near the entrance to the Temple with members from Taldryan's Wardens as Taldryan's commanders pulled up for a short conference before diving into the ancient Sith stronghold. Panting from his exertions, Cotelin fixed Keirdagh with a level gaze. "For all the damage the starfighters and artillery have done, you may as well have bombed this place from space." Between two men who had served with each other for so long, the disapproval in the former Grand Master's voice was evident. He wanted the relics and artifacts of the Dark Temple nearly as much as Ashen did.

"You're right," began Keirdagh grinding his teeth together, "Except that if I had, we wouldn't have 80 men and women to bring home in boxes." Fire flared in his eyes, before he turned away from the assembled group of Dark Jedi. "Stay in your teams, and fan out through the structure. Take no chances. I don't want to lose anyone else.

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The atmosphere within the Dark Temple left Keirdagh feeling permanently breathless. Though his chrono told him they'd only been exploring the crumbling ruins for slightly over an hour, the brooding presence seemed to be extending the minutes into hours, exhausting his small team, and fouling up their electronics. Each of the members seemed to be affected differently; young Inferni's eyes were unfocused and listless. Chaosrain Taldrya was largely the same, though his normally dour expression seemed to be transforming into something darker. Most worrying however was the effect that the Temple seemed to be having Tarax Eosphoros Kor. The man who had always had rage issues seemed to be coming unhinged in the presence of such a power psychic pressure. He kept falling behind and having conversations with himself. "Chaos: take point. Nero, watch his back."

Walking backward to where Tarax had paused again, Keirdagh could begin to hear what the prematurely white haired man was saying. "Shut up you old ghost, I'm not going anywhere. No. Shut up." He seemed to belatedly take note of Keirdagh standing in front of him, and started. "I'm fine Yacks," he spat out. As Keirdagh opened his mouth to ask a question, Tarax shouted in anger "I'm FINE. Just get on with it!"

Whether the One Sith operative had been tracking them for a while now, or whether the yelling had drawn out their presence was unclear. Regardless, shadows seemed to slither off of two One Sith agents between the two pairs of Taldryan's Dark Jedi. In a release of berserker fury, before Keirdagh could even react to their emergence, Tarax flung himself bodily on the nearest of the enemies and bore him down, seemingly forgetting that he had weapons available to him. In a flurry of Force assisted attacks and head-butts, Tarax simply beat the One Sith to death. Elsewhere, Chaosrain and Inferni were working in concert to fend off the other foe. With a grunt of will, Keirdagh simply threw his lightsaber end over end, igniting it mid throw, and buried the blade in the remaining assailants back.

Tarax was still straddling the corpse of the One Sith, still hammering its now featureless corpse with bestial grunts with blows from his fists. "Tarax, it's dead. Get yourself together." Blood smeared his face as Tarax looked up at Keirdagh, making the whites of his eyes stand out starkly.

"I told you," Tarax growled quietly "I'm fine."

As they wended deeper into the bowels of the Dark Temple, the attacks grew more and more rare, and just as Keirdagh was preparing to call their mission to a halt, the buzzing hum of activated lightsabers reached his ears. Signalling for quiet, the quartet stalked forward through the dank tunnels, and stalked into the room that was lit with a clash of red and green sabers. Doing battle before them was a pair of Jedi, recognizable as the leaders of the disciples of Odan-Urr. Crossing blades with Darth Esoteric himself was a man old enough to make Keirdagh feel young. Dressed in loose Jedi robes, he fought back to back with a young female Togruta wearing a dark jump suit.

It was clear to Keirdagh that the two Jedi from Odan-Urr were overmatched by their opponents. Esoteric himself would likely have been enough to destroy them, but he was working in concert with another Elder, and they seemed to be taking great delight in toying with the Light Siders. The entrance of the four warriors from Taldryan though, seemed to rob them of their distraction. With a decisive surge of motion, the One Sith Lord bore down upon Liam Torun, and the weight of the blows sent him stumbling into A'lora Kituri's back, disrupting her balance costing her a vital moment of concentration. The Adept she'd been facing battered aside her green blade with contemptible ease, and stabbed her through the gut.

A haunted look stole upon to Torun's face, and with deceptive quickness and startling finality, he sacrificed his flank to cut down his Lieutenant's attacker. As he exposed his back to Esoteric and cut down the Adept, Keirdagh would have expected some sort of expression to be present on the old man's face, instead all he saw was the serenity of a dead man accepting his fate. Esoteric responded to the opening with brutal efficiency, bringing his saber down in an arc that would have cut the Chronicler from shoulder to hip. Indecision seized Keirdagh; here was a man who led effort during the entire Crusade to stymie the Brotherhood's efforts. They would harry both the One Sith and Brotherhood forces with impunity, protected by the Grand Master's aegis. In every respect the man who was about to die was his enemy, but Keirdagh saw in him great honour, and honour was to be respected.

Lashing out with his mind, Keirdagh bodily threw Esoteric across the small chamber just after his blade had started to cut into Torun's shoulder. Motioning to his brothers, the four members from Taldryan stalked forward, readying themselves for the kill. Though outnumbered, the outcome of the showdown with Esoteric was anything but decided. Keirdagh was one of the most powerful Dark Jedi in the Brotherhood, but in Esoteric he recognized a power that was similar to a few of the Brotherhood's Grand Masters.

What followed was a deadly game of cat and mouse. Esoteric would bombard the quartet from Taldryan with Force assaults, and some of the most refined physical combat that Keirdagh had ever experienced. Early in the fight, Esoteric began focusing his attacks on the Primarchs and Knight, noting that if Keirdagh was focused on defending his allies, the most powerful foe he faced would be distracted. It was a tactic that Keirdagh knew would succeed. He spent as much time deflecting force assaults levelled at the others as he did trying to mount his own attacks, and he felt his reserves draining from him steadily. The longer the fight went on, the sooner the harrying attacks that they were laying down on the mysterious One Sith would become ineffective.

It required a change of tactics.

As the thought entered his mind, Keirdagh's stomach churned and his mouth soured.

It would require the right timing, and it would require sacrifice.

Despairing that his opening would never come, Keirdagh finally sensed it materializing before him. In a blur of speed that made Esoteric appear as nothing more than a shifting shadow, and lashing out for a killing blow on Nero Inferni. Waiting until Esoteric was fully committed, Keirdagh gathered his will, and threw a telekinetic blast shaped like a hammer in his mind at the Dark Lord. Surprise suddenly emanated from the One Sith as he flew across the room like a projectile. Along his trajectory, Chaosrain Taldrya was sprinting forward, and dropped into a slide along his knees, thrusting his saber straight up.

As Keirdagh rushed to check on the young Knight, he was dimly aware of two meaty thumps hitting a wall nearby. Inspecting Inferni's wounds, the bearded Dark Jedi Master felt his stomach rising into his throat. He'd left men to die in combat, he'd ordered men to their deaths for the greater good countless times, but it would never get any easier. He knew before the end that he'd need to order more good men and women to their deaths, but the toll it was beginning to take on his soul was becoming too much even for Keirdagh to bear.

A guttural scream of exploded into the room behind him, and Keirdagh whipped his head around to see Tarax, eyes focused on Nero Inferni's prone form, begin to lose all self-control. His wild eyes began scanning the room for something to kill, to avenge his wounded brother, and when they locked onto the pair of wounded Odan-Urr, it was like seeing a predator catching the scent of prey. Tarax meant to kill them, in what was sure to be a horrifyingly disgusting way. "Tarax, stand down" growled Keirdagh. The younger man took no heed of him, stalking forward slowly, his zhaboka gripped tightly in his hands.

Since the fight with Esoteric began, Taldryan's Aedile hadn't spared a second's thought to the wounded Jedi in his midst, looking at them now; he could see that the woman was still on the ground, hanging onto life. Liam's saber arm was useless, but still he rose to put himself in between Tarax and his Lieutenant. "I will not allow you to harm her, sir" said the Odan-Urr High Councillor in placid tones. "We fight on the same side this day, and I desire no quarrel with you."

It was remarkable courage to witness, but the spectacle didn't reach past Tarax's berserker rage. "The likes of you," he hissed, "will never be on the same side as me." Steady steps continued to bring him closer, and Keirdagh stood once more, to intervene, leaving Inferni to Chaosrain's care.

"Tarax! Calm down. This fight is over. There's nothing you can do." For all the notice that Tarax took of his Aedile, he may as well not have even been in the room. Projecting the Force into his voice, Keirdagh shouted "STOP!" while stepping into Tarax's path. Fully focused on his rage, and perhaps still hearing voices, all the Primarch seemed to realize was that something was getting in the way of his kill, and he took a snarling swing at the older man. Keirdagh had expected his intervention to come to blows with Tarax, it had happened before, but despite the well of rage that he'd sometimes go into, Tarax had never tried to decapitate him before.

Years of combat training overrode the surprise, and taking the blow from his zhaboka on a durasteel armguard, and quickly snapped a Force enhanced blow into the Obelisk's face, dropping him like a sack of tubers. Staring at his friend's unconscious form next to his feet, Keirdagh could only shake his head. Movement to his side showed Liam standing silently, useless arm dangling at his side. The Jedi opened his mouth and began to speak: "Than—"

"Enough," interrupted Keirdagh, "I didn't do it for you. I didn't do it for her. I've had enough killing in the name of Ashen's crusade. Odan-Urr, as misguided as you are, have been opposing us this whole time. Maybe you've had the right of it this whole time."

"Yacks! Nero's still alive! He must have been dodging the blow at just the right time!"

Relief flooded the Corellian's mind and soul. "Chaos, get him out of here. Bring the Jedi with you. I'll take care of Tarax."

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The long march back to the opening of the Dark Temple went completely without incident, making it abundantly clear that Taldryan's forces had done their jobs well. It had been inconvenient dragging the Primarch's prone form behind him, Tarax was tall and heavily muscled, and the effort of carrying the man was exhausting. As the dim light from the entrance started to filter down toward him, Keirdagh pulled to a halt, and slapped the white haired man awake. Groaning groggily, Tarax surprised the older man by speaking in a pained voice, "I can't believe you punched me Yacks."

Keirdagh grunted in frustration and bodily hauled the younger man to his feet, steadying him. "Get on your feet, Tarax. We've got company outside, and I might need you to watch my back." Taking a moment to make sure that the Primarch would stay upright on his own power, Keirdagh strode forward into the waning light of the Dromund Kaas sky.

The congregation that awaited him outside didn't come as a surprise to the Dark Jedi Master, as he'd sensed the arrival of some extremely powerful people as he was ascending from the bowels of the Temple. The tension of the air very near crackled as he looked down on the Grand Master and his Voice, standing next to Rian Aslar and Jac Cotelin. Thumping down the stairs toward them, Jac's eyes bored into Keirdagh, warning him without words to tread carefully. Clearly the contents of his conversation had reached the elder Grand Master's ears.

The fires of rage that had been burning in Kyataran's eyes when Keirdagh had cut the comm-transition had been replaced by something much more cool and calculating, which made perfect sense. In the meritocracy that was the Dark Brotherhood, Ashen couldn't so quickly move on the Aedile of Taldryan after he'd killed Esoteric. There might even be a hint of doubt in his eyes, given that the One Sith leader had been one of the few peers Ashen had in terms of Force ability. Obviously, it meant that Keirdagh needed to be dealt with, but the politics of the matter did not allow such a move to happen so quickly after he'd gained glory and in essence delivered the former Sith throne world to the Dark Brotherhood. As Keirdagh approached, Muz spread his hands in welcome, and opened his mouth to speak. "Master Cant—"

"Save it Muz, I won't believe it and you don't want to say it." Nodding back over his shoulder at the temple Keirdagh continued "there's your Temple. Every precious, bloody inch of it… I hope it was worth it." Brushing past the group, the bearded man waded forth into the still burning swamps, his red armour blending in with the flames until the gathered smoke obscured him from view.

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Back aboard the *Dark Prophet II,* Keirdagh walked out of the refresher, wearing a pair of light pants, and running a towel through his hair, when he looked up and saw Rian and Jac were waiting for him in his quarters. Looping the towel over his neck, Keirdagh set his shoulders to wait for whatever lecture the men had prepared for him. They traded a significant glance, and Cotelin's mouth curled up into a small smile, as though to say *I told you so.*

"Yacks, I'm getting worried about you" began Jac kindly. "You're starting to pick fights with people against whom you may not win. You're losing your head too easily. You're making too many enemies, too many for even me to help you with." From anyone else, it would have enraged Keirdagh to hear those words, but Cotelin was one of his oldest friends, and he knew the former Grand Master only had his best interests at heart. "You need to be careful."

"Why Jac?" asked Keirdagh. "Why should I be careful? You know what's coming next. You know what Muz is leading us into. His ambition has grown too large. I fear he begins to think himself immortal. Look around us. Look at what we've done in the past year." Pacing over to his desk, the Elder stabbed down on a few keys, bringing to life a list of reports glowing above the wooden surface. "You see these? They're updates from the SIS. Almost none of these reports deal with happenings in Brotherhood space. They're all warnings that the Galactic Alliance is starting to take an interest in what’s going on." Keirdagh let that little bit of information start to sink in. "We've always been protected by our isolation, hiding from the notice of the galaxy at large. I know the Star Chamber works on keeping our presence hidden, but we're over stretching."

Pacing over to stare out of the viewport, and down at the dreary surface of Dromund Kaas, Keirdagh continued in a quiet whisper. "We both know what comes next, Jac: Korriban. Dromund Kaas is practically a short hyper jump from there; the ancient home world of the Sith." To emphasize his point, the bearded man turned and locked gazes with the Grand Master. "Do you honestly believe the Jedi Order has forgotten where Korriban is?"

"We don't know that's what is coming, Yacks, don't borrow trouble."

A snort of derision escaped the Dark Jedi Master's lips, causing Jac to frown slightly. "It doesn't matter what the Brotherhood does next, Yacks. It's what's happening now that you have to worry about. He won't have forgotten what you said to him, and he'll be coming for you."

"Let him try." Both elders snapped their eyes to Rian, who had been completely silent up until this point. Straightening to his full height, Rian's voice shook with conviction as he continued. "Keirdagh Taldrya Cantor is the second in command of this House, and a Son of Taldryan."

"I know all that Rian, but—" began Jac.

"But nothing. He is Taldryan, and Taldryan takes care of its own."

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DJM Keirdagh Taldrya Cantor (Sith) / RHoJ-AED / House Taldryan [ACC: I] [GMRG: I]

GLS / DS / SB / GC-PoDP / SC-SoR / AC-ToSC / DC-DP / GN-PL / SN-AuL / BN-GL / Cr:1D-2R-4A-4S-4E-1T-7Q / PoB-BL / CF-PF / CI-PC / DSS-AgL / LS-GL / SoL-BE / S:4M-2D-2Dk-6P-14U-33Dec-5Aff

{SA: MVC - MVF - MVH - MVL - MVPH - DPE - DPV - SGL - SVLC}

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