

Better the Devil You Know

EVANT TAE LYAN

9118

I

Smoky flavors nearly overwhelmed his senses as a smooth amber colored liquid ran down his throat. It was just enough to take the edge off a strategy and planning marathon that had filled the day as Evant Taelyan seized a brief moment to occupy his mind with things more mundane. He positioned his round glass directly in the center of the coaster it sat on, protecting the perfect mirror finish of the conference room table he'd been at the past two hours. Hundreds of bright white lights overhead reflected off the exposed sections of table not covered by datapads and strategic maps of space. He glanced around the table at the rest of the officers still intently focused on their work, not daring to slack for a moment in the presence of a superior officer.

"Major Solon," Evant called out, correcting his own posture in his chair and habitually straightening the datapad in front of him to be square with the edge of the table.

"Yes my Lord," the Captain responded, rising to her feet. Evant watched as her chair swiveled out of alignment behind her as she stood to attention. It bothered him, but he disregarded it and met her eyes with his.

"See to it that these battle plans are packed up and ready for transport by eighteen hundred, we need everything aboard the *Warpsite* to make final preparations for the Fleet," he ordered, also climbing to his feet, ensuring his chair stayed aligned behind him. He saluted before picking up his glass and swirling the remaining amber liquid in the bottom before finishing it and setting the glass at the refresher station near the door.

"Yes my Lord," the Major announced as the automatic doors slid open to allow Evant to leave the conference room. They quickly closed up behind him with a familiar whoosh, leaving him alone in the massive yet immaculate main concourse of the Imperial Palace on Judecca.

It was business as usual for the Aedile as he oversaw preparations for the entire Scholae Palatinae military to depart for yet another stage of the Dark Crusade. This time was different from the rest though. From what he knew of their destination planet of Nicht Ka, the target of all the combined fleets of the Brotherhood, a toxic atmosphere and treacherous terrain made landing any portion of the Imperial Scholae Guard impractical. They may as well leave behind their *Acclamator I*-class assault ships.

Evant took in the rhythmic tapping of his boots on the polished floors of the hall as he strode towards his next destination. Off to yet another stop in a series of preparatory meetings. This time the Sith Warrior tucked into a private holoprojector room alone, pressing a button on the wall as he entered sealing the door tight and tinting the glass window to a smoky opaque deep gray making it impossible to see inside.

He pulled a small datapad from his robes and plugged it into an open connection in front of him. With a few finger taps to the glowing screen in the dimly lit room it was soon bathed in a bright cyan blue light as the base of a hologram came to life. After a few brief moments a monochromatic figure slowly emerged from thin air at one thirds scale.

“Good evening Praetor Taelyan,” the figure announced with a bow.

“Good evening Pendragon,” Evant responded with a curt bow of his own before falling back into the chair behind him and getting comfortable.

“I assume you want the fleet reports you asked for?” the short uniformed human asked, in a tone that suggested he already knew the answer.

“Right,” Evant responded, picking up the datapad from the desk in front of him and checking for new messages.

“Fully encrypted and on their way now, we must be planning something big if you wanted data on all the support craft as well. We don’t usually audit that but once a year,” Pendragon responded, the analyst always eager to provide information but rarely given the opportunity to understand how it would be used.

“How long have we worked together now, is it a year? You know I’m thorough in everything I do,” Evant responded with a smile. His access to data on the Fleet of the Iron Throne could easily be used by many in a wide range of ways, yet all he did was analyze trends and patterns looking for improved efficiencies in common flight paths and better utilization. Taking the suggestions to the Master At Arms for small bits of praise. Many would consider it a wasted opportunity, it was a wonder more hadn’t labeled the Sith as insane.

“Right, a year now, no time at all really to be honest, but I’m glad to fill your requests as usual,” he responded followed by a brief pause as he stood there and Evant scanned the data package he just received, “Will that be all?”

“Oh, yes of course this is all great work Pendragon, thanks again,” Evant announced as he briefly looked up from the screen at the analyst before returning again to the data.

“Very good, I’ll be on my way then, if you need anything else you know where to find me,” he announced as his hologram flickered out and disappeared leaving only the bright cyan glow of the holoprojector behind.

Alone again in the small room Evant continued to scan the flight logs and service schedules for all ships in the Navy of the Iron Throne. The Fleet had been all over on diplomatic missions, scouting trips gathering data, delivering VIPs all over the Antei System. This was all great information, what the Sith was really after though was a few important records on flights to the

plant of Nicht Ka. He intended to use the data to optimize fleet strategy for Scholae Palatinae, his own House.

As he typed away setting up a few custom filters he smiled as he watched the customized results appear, then raised an eyebrow at the results. There were shuttles and support craft flying into Nicht Ka that were months old while the Brotherhood was engaged in campaigns on other planets. Although more than capable, a *Lambda*-class shuttle had never been used on a scouting mission to his knowledge. It must be for something else. A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts as he clicked off the display on the datapad and hit a button on the console in front of him to shut down the holoprojector.

The privacy glass to the room faded back to a transparent state as the lights came up, revealing an unfamiliar officer who immediately took a startled step back when he realized who he had been sent to deliver a message to. As excited as he was to continue reviewing the data it seemed further investigation into this anomaly he discovered would have to wait till later; there were more meetings to attend.

II

Evant's eyes stung as he rubbed his temples, squinting and blinking as he glanced across the room to check the time on the clock at the side of his bed. The realization it was nearly two in the morning confirmed the cloudy thoughts and feeling that his mind had turned to mush after a full day of meetings and long night in his quarters reviewing data. Yet the unexplained records and strange activity over the past year had kept him up. Sleep was impossible.

"I have records showing support craft visiting various Sith Worlds including Nicht Ka and even Korriban spanning the entire duration of the Dark Crusade and as recently as last week, yet when I look into many of the passenger lists and mission objectives they are locked out or missing altogether," Evant spoke to nobody in particular, verbalizing his inner monologue to help drive his thought process through the tired haze.

"Then I have surveillance footage and records that place Soccora, a Dark Councilor, clearly on multiple flights. It's not inconceivable however that the Herald would be out on official Brotherhood business that I just don't know about," Evant again spoke to himself out loud. Each piece of this newly discovered information gave him cause for concern but there simply weren't enough dots to connect.

He picked up his glass from the table and held it up between him and the glow of a desk lamp, creating a visual reminder that he had indeed run out of whiskey an hour ago and hadn't bothered

to get more. He set the glass down with an exhausted sigh and got to his feet and started to pace the short distance across his quarters, the movement helping to keep his mind alert.

“I just... I don’t have enough evidence here to take it to the Master At Arms. I so much want this for myself. I can only imagine the benefits for taking information on a traitor to the Dark Council. I need more information so I can prove this one way or the other,” Evant convincingly stated to himself, as if there were no other options, and his mind raced with options for more information as he paced.

“Her staff, the Herald staff, that’s it. V’yr, A’lora, Rhiann, one of those Jedi must know something about what is going on, they are all way too close to the office not to. Time for a bit of social engineering, but it has to be convincing,” Evant said to himself, smiling although nobody was around, he pleased at his progressed line of thinking.

He had to act quickly, he knew what he had to do but the risk was worth the potential payoff for being right. He grabbed his robes and boots and began to dress himself for a trip. It might be a while before he got back. Either way, he grabbed his datapad and any sensitive information he didn’t want to leave behind before reaching for the comlink on the table and making a call.

“Roberts?” Evant spoke into the comlink, realizing that while personnel were on call around the clock in the Imperial Palace, it was possible that he may not get an immediate reply.

Soon came the static reply, “This is Private Clarmont my Lord, how can I help you?”

“What happened to Roberts?” Evant asked, realizing at such a late hour he actually didn’t care but spoke without thinking due to his inquisitive and cynical nature.

“My Lord, Sergeant Roberts shift ended two hours ago, I am his relief,” the Private answered, in a concerned tone.

“Right, very well, doesn’t matter. I need a shuttle prepped immediately for my departure. I have business off planet that cannot wait,” Evant spoke, expecting no protest.

“Very well my Lord, it will be waiting for you at the summit Landing Pad by the time you arrive,” the Private announced and with a click the static went silent showing an end to the conversation.

Evant was about to feign treasonous activities with the Jedi, but it had to look genuine, there was no room for failure and he was hardly a master of disguises. He hoped there was enough sincere mutual hate for the One Sith that he could garner some loosely connected real reason for it all. Then he would have everyone in the Imperial Palace thinking he was on Dark Council business as if nothing was amiss. His hope was to uncover the true intent behind the Heralds visits to the One Sith worlds from the Jedi, and then come clean about the whole thing to the Master At Arms. The ends certainly justified the means. With a grin he pulled his robes tight around him

and pressed a button at the door, checking his pockets and reconfirming he had everything he needed before making his wait to the shuttle.

III

Long streaks of light slowly collapsed into dots in the sky outside the viewport and the familiar sound of the hyperspace engines running down marked the end of the trip. Having only the coordinates provided to them by Evant Taelyan, the crew of six from Scholae Palatinae that operated the *Lambda*-class shuttle quickly scanned the area to figure out what awaited them in the cold vacuum of space. Not immediately visible due to the absence of light in this particular area of space, the familiar outline of a *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer blacked out from view a portion of distant stars.

“My Lord, we’ve arrived at your coordinates,” the pilot announced almost unnecessarily as he turned his head to greet Evant who stood between the pilot and co-pilot at the front of the cockpit. He had been awake for at least the past hour after short attempts at sleep during the long trip through hyperspace.

“Very good,” Evant announced, looking out into space and noticing the silhouette of the destroyer in the distance before the crew did.

“I’m detecting a transponder code from a Jedi ship in the area, looks to be the *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer *Fey’lya’s Last Stand* of House Odan-Urr,” one of the other crew in the shuttle cockpit at a station behind the pilots announced with a perplexed tone.

“My Lord, what are your orders?” the pilot asked, looking for some guidance and seeking assurance that this was expected.

“I need to get on that ship for information,” Evant announced, admitting that there was no mistake in where they were or the presence of the Jedi destroyer. He felt no need to explain his actions to the crew who he felt should trust him fully without question, in his mind they had no reason not to.

“My Lord, with all due respect, I don’t expect we can just drop you off at the front door,” the pilot jabbed, expecting that the Sith had some sort of plan as usual.

Shortly a radio in the cockpit filled the air with the mechanical tone of a traffic controller, “Unidentified Imperial shuttle, please identify yourself.”

“I got this,” Evant announced as he leaned forward into the communication control panel at the front of the ship and pressing a button to respond while looking out the viewport.

“This is shuttle *Eloquence*, I am Aedile Evant Taelyan of House Scholae Palatinae, requesting permission to land and speak with Liam Torun,” he spoke in a tone that hinted that nothing was amiss and perhaps the Quaestor was expecting him.

“Given the circumstances *Eloquence*, we need to ask you first how you found us here, and what your intentions are,” the controller quickly responded without missing a beat, obviously suspicious. Several additional beeps from a console indicated additional transponders detected in the area. Evant just sat in silence, trying to come up with an appropriate response to get him what he needed.

“Sir, we have four fighters that just launched heading our way. They look to be X-wings,” one of the crew at a console behind the pilots stated nervously. As heavily armored as they were, there was no way their shuttle could defend itself from them.

“It’s a good question my Lord, honestly, how exactly did we know where to find these Jedi and what exactly is our intent,” the pilot said, more as a restatement than a direct question.

Pushing the button again Evant finally gave his response, “I can’t discuss how I knew where to find you, but my intentions are to share information acquired by and about the Brotherhood and Scholae Palatinae Fleets to help House Odan-Urr in their battle against the One Sith.”

“Are you betraying the Empire?” the pilot asked, sitting back in his seat as a feeling of regret came over him as he realized he had just questioned the intentions of a Sith, even if it was one with whom he had served on many different occasions recently and trusted completely.

Silence followed the tense moments in the cockpit, broken up by the response from the Jedi controller, “Power down and standby.”

“It’s just, coming from you, who on more than one occasion has told us to do whatever it takes to protect the safety and security of our Empire,” the pilot pleaded with Evant, trying to backpedal and explain his earlier statement and defend it.

“Lieutenant Forte, I am doing this for the safety and security of our Empire. The ends will justify the means. I just need you to trust me on this,” Evant responded, trying to convince the pilot of his actions, knowing his support would keep the rest of the crew in line and on his side for this entire ordeal.

Breaking the silence that followed was a response from the Jedi, “*Eloquence*, you are clear to approach. Our tractor beams will take you in.”

“I’m not entirely comfortable with this my Lord, but as usual, you have my full trust and loyalty on this mission,” the pilot responded. If it was out of fear or true respect and loyalty was unclear, but his support was there either way.

“Great to hear Lieutenant, we do this for the Empire,” Evant responded with a smile on his face, glad that things were running smoothly so far, and anxious for the acting and social engineering to come.

IV

Smells of a shipyard, fresh paints and glues, poured into the small shuttle as the entry lamp slowly lowered to allow departure. Evant Taelyan slowly descended into the hanger of the *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer alone, his eyes looking all around sizing the area up. It was an identical hangar to the flagship of the Scholae Palatinae, the *Excidium II*, except all the colors, crews and equipment were all wrong. Not just different, it all felt wrong.

Approaching to greet him was a well-dressed officer, and half a dozen armed soldiers. The Sith feigned a smile and held his empty hands to either side as a gesture of peace to show he wasn't armed, which caused all the guards to raise their weapons and point them at him. Stopping in his tracks the smile left Evant's face as he spoke, “Well it's great to see you too.”

“Where is your lightsaber?” the officer spoke, his eyes and head moving around looking Evant up and down and trying to see beyond his robes to locate it.

“Back in my ship, I figured you wouldn't want me to have it, so I saved you the trouble of taking it from me,” Evant answered, his head nodding towards the ship behind him, as he did so the ramp began to raise again sealing up the shuttle, “I have also ordered my men wait here with the ship while I meet with Liam. Speaking of which...”

“He is busy at the moment, you will be meeting with him later when he has time for you,” the officer responded, then gestured to a few nearby guards, “search him.”

“Of course, I wouldn't want to interrupt his busy schedule to divulge useful information or anything,” Evant responded sarcastically, unappreciative of the greeting he had received or the frisking. He raised his hands as several of the guards padded and pat down his entire body. Another approached and waved a wand that must have been some type of detector across every inch of his body while another monitored information from a nearby droid. The entire time Evant's mind was caught up in how he was going to find one of Socorra's staff on this ship and extract information from them.

“He's clean sir,” one of the soldiers announced as he stepped back and looked Evant over again.

“He's still a Sith, he's dangerous even without a weapon,” the officer spat as he glared at Evant as if he took no pleasure in the entire conversation and wanted him dead.

“I feel like, I didn’t come all the way out here to kill a worthless officer and his merry crew of meat cans,” Evant spat back, trying to put the officer in his place and put some perspective on his misplaced fears. He immediately regretted the aggressive stance, but a combination of a lack of a good night’s rest and irritation at the initial contact in the hangar had him on edge.

“I don’t really care how you feel Sith,” the officer retorted, taking a few steps forward and puffing his chest, “I only care that you know your place aboard our ship and your stay is as brief as possible.”

“Well as long as we all know our place,” Evant responded, trying to deflate the situation while standing his ground with a heavy sigh, unamused at the officer’s aggressive stance.

“I’m not sure you know what yours is quite yet,” the officer yelled out, aggressively walking forward and pulling a pistol from his belt and holding it up as if to take a swing at Evant. Yet the Sith stood his ground and failed to even flinch, his deep emerald eyes corrupted by the Dark Side pierced the angry dull brown of the officer who stopped just inches from his face. He could feel the hot breath from the officer with his hand in the air, his teeth clenched as he desperately sought any excuse to strike. Yet none came.

“Trust me, I do,” Evant responded in a cold tone, no longer friendly.

“Your place is about to be a secure conference room elsewhere on this ship, and far from here, where you will wait until Liam Torun has time for you,” the officer spoke as he took a step back and holstered his weapon.

“Sounds cozy,” Evant quipped, an attempt to show just how unthreatened he felt by the man.

“Sergeant Cory, have your platoon escort our guest to Conference Room IWI-514, and report in any changes,” the officer responded, disregarding the Evant’s joking response and just wanting to build some distance. As he walked away, his back turned on the Sith, none of his soldiers followed as they all had strict orders to follow Evant. More than likely with shoot to kill orders. As one of the soldiers nearby gestured to him, he assumed it was Sergeant Cory and fell in step behind him for the long walk to yet another conference room.

V

A Tortuga entered the conference room alone, the first visitor after nearly an hour of waiting, appearing more like she had just finished an exploration of the deep jungle than spent time in space aboard a destroyer. Evant had heard plenty about A’lora Kituri but never met her, yet he had reached out on the long walk to the conference room, and again with the Force during the

waiting. Although A'lora wasn't much to look at physically, the Force was definitely powerful with her.

"A pleasure to meet you A'lora," Evant opened, sitting at the head of the only table in the small conference room, with an empty glass sitting in front of him and nothing else. He had conveyed his intentions and telepathically called to the Jedi as he waited.

"I wish I could say the same, the Force has guided me here for this meeting, and yet I sense no positive outcomes," A'lora responded, walking over and standing near Evant preferring not to sit down.

"We don't know each other well, yet, with time I think we can both become great allies and help each other out," the Sith suggested, hinting at the value offered the Jedi.

"I know you well enough, but even that doesn't matter. I have seen enough of what the future of these conflicts between the Jedi and Brotherhood will become, and I don't want any part of it," A'lora spoke, a sincere tone in her voice making it quite clear why she had recently distanced herself from the Odan-Urr Summit.

"You can't sit idly by and remain neutral in this, but eventually a time will come when power will shift, and you will be forced to decide for whom you are willing to die," Evant pleaded back, trying to entice interest from the Jedi.

"That decision is already made, I will always help the oppressed," A'lora responded, clinging to her beliefs.

"Like the One Sith?" Evant asked, hinting at her involvement in the suspicious trips made by Dark Councilor Socorra to various One Sith planets.

"I don't follow, they are certainly not oppressed," A'lora responded, her interest however seemed piqued.

"Not oppressed, and yet you give them help," Evant answered, accusing the Jedi now of what he assumed to be treasonous activity within the Brotherhood, "I have access to records that show the Herald visiting countless Sith Worlds including most recently to the planet of Nicht Ka where the only plausible reason must have been to visit the only establishment on the entire uninhabitable toxic wasteland that just so happens to be a One Sith stronghold. You must know something of this."

The Togruta hesitated in giving a response, an indication that gave Evant reason to suspect she was forming a calculated lie, "I have nothing but disdain for conflict on all sides, and that includes the Jedi position and beliefs of those on this ship. What the Herald does with her time is not my concern. I am merely a member of the staff with limited involvement in diplomatic relations as a Magistrate, and even that I do reluctantly."

“Tell me more than about what sort of diplomatic relations you’ve been on,” Evant asked, realizing after he said that he had overstepped his bounds and too quickly turned a debate into an interview.

“I did not come here by the will of the Force to satisfy your curiosities,” A’lora expectedly snapped back, her body language showing that she had begun to disengage from the conversation.

“I merely want to help, I have seen the reports and they indicate something I want to be a part of. I can offer my support as Praetor to the Master At Arms and give you much more freedom within the fleet. Just tell me what’s going on,” Evant asked, putting all his cards on the table with one last request.

“You are wasting your time. I don’t care what you want, and hardly need your help Sith. You can take your case to Liam but I won’t be pulled into your conflict,” A’lora responded, standing and looking concerned as she reflected on the conversation. In that brief moment her face betrayed her feelings for a moment that indicated some image from the Force.

Standing alone the Sith and the Consular were at ends of a very different journey in the Force. Before Evant could formulate a response to salvage the meeting A’lora spoke first, in a much louder tone to catch the attention of those waiting outside, “Guards!”

In the brief moments that followed Evant shifted in his seat and ran his finger along the rim of his empty cup idly waiting for what he expected was coming to actually occur. When two guards entered A’lora turned to them with orders, “Sergeant, see to it that our guest here is properly restrained and moved to the force-sensitive holding cells in Lab U5 and inform Liam of his new location for their eventual meeting. I’m not sure at this point I trust his intentions enough to leave him in this conference room.”

A’lora glanced around the room and took a step back to oversee the stun cuffs being placed on Evant as he was to be transported. He said nothing as he maintained his composure and accepted the restraints. He knew resisting would do no good, so he continued to hold his cards and await his next steps. So far he had no good news since setting foot on the Jedi destroyer and dangerous doubts began to creep into his mind that he would find any successes.

VI

A dull hum from the cooling fans in a set of equipment in the lab broke the eerie silence in the massive but otherwise unoccupied lab. Stacked in corners were boxes and pallets containing unopened equipment. It was obvious from the look of things that the entire place hadn’t yet been

put together. Given the immaculate conditions Evant wondered if he wasn't the first Force sensitive captive they held in the room. Yet the isolation, and inability to go anywhere outside the small enclosure, gave him time to dwell on his recent setback with A'lora.

He had his moment, and he had failed. Primarily due to the stubbornness of the Togruta cultural beliefs he hadn't anticipated. Yet he remained convinced by the interactions that Socorra was up to something and he still intended to figure out what. There were still several other Jedi on the Herald staff he could talk to. He just had to first get free of his cell, locate them, and have a lengthy convincing conversation. It felt like an uphill task. Considering the only interaction that awaited him was with Liam Torun, a man he actually had nothing to gain from, his mind again wandered to an escape plan that just abandoned all hope and cut his losses.

Focusing instead for now on the Herald's Jedi staff, first he considered V'yr Vorsa. As a Praetor, she would be the ideal choice, but the Neti Sorcerer was well known in the Brotherhood for her diplomacy and leadership on behalf of the Jedi. As a strong advocate for peace, there was a chance she may allow Evant in on the information, but it was a long shot. Add to that he wasn't aware of her presence on the ship and it seemed even longer.

The other option was a Sephi Assassin named Rhiann Baenre, having only seen pictures of her snow white hair Evant knew almost nothing of her, save for her presence on the Herald staff as a Magistrate. She had stuck to herself and worked alone in most cases making her a bit of an enigma, but perhaps that was a good thing. Even in this case Evant began to wonder if she even physically present on the ship. Something he should have looked into before rushing aboard but there was no time to dwell on mistakes.

As he sat there alone in his head, stuck in isolation and overthinking everything with the occasional thought of escape entering his mind as he paced back and forth in his cell, finally the sound of opening automatic doors broke the monotony. He looked up to greet the aged brown eyes of the Quaestor of House Odan-Urr, Liam Torun. Not much to look at with his plain brown robes and graying hair and beard covering a wrinkled face, through the Force however his presence was great.

A genuine smile crossed Evant's face as he met eyes with the old hermit and greeted him with a curt bow, "It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person your great reputation precedes you Liam Torun."

"Consider my surprise to find out a Sith was onboard our ship," Liam announced as he moved across the lab and took a seat in a nearby swivel chair and rolled up near Evant, leaning back relaxed as if to engage in a casual conversation among friends.

"Couldn't be that surprised, it took you hours to find the time to meet with me," the Sith jested, keeping the sarcasm thick to show he intended it as a joke.

“I am at the head of a massive movement to bring great change for the better in this galaxy, there are many moving pieces. I am glad to see you here today though, offering up your support,” he spoke, leaning forward to express his interest.

Evant took a heavy sigh, stretching against his restraints to passive aggressively point out their existence as he formed a response. His primary goal was to be free of them, and the cell, and see to it that he uncovered the truth as he replied, “Well I can’t say the welcome so far has been great. I’ve been harassed, threatened, isolated, and then drug across your ship, restrained, and locked up in here, and I haven’t done more than open my mouth and drink some caf.”

“Not everyone can see the greater good, and doing what is right to maintain peace. There is so much conflict in this galaxy now that it is always so fresh in their minds, focused on the next battle,” Liam spoke philosophically, in defense of everyone else’s actions.

“Well let’s just say I wish it had been you meeting me as I arrived on my ship, as it is now I am questioning if the Jedi truly wish for peace at the end of this war,” Evant responded, holding the behavior of his own team against the aged leader’s.

“There is a war going on between the One Sith and the Brotherhood, one of which I am sure you are well aware given your own Empire’s role in it. I’d like to think you wish to find a period of peace and security as much as we,” Liam responded inquisitively.

“I seek the safety and security of my Empire above all else. I wish nothing else and will fight towards that aim with every breath,” Evant answered sincerely, for a moment realizing that perhaps despite their methods, he wasn’t so different.

“Help me to free the people of your Empire and join us, see the Light and follow us as we seek peace and justice for the galaxy,” Liam asked, showing what his true intent was for allowing Evant to land, to convert him to a path of the Light.

“It isn’t that easy, like a square in a round hole Liam, I’m here to ensure no harm comes to the people of the Cocytus Empire by the One Sith, the Jedi, the Dark Council or otherwise. I offer only my support, but I cannot and will not walk in the path of the Light,” Evant responded, almost regrettably. If not for his own deeply engrained beliefs he may not have had such an easy time declining the wishes of the Consular Cleric. In that moment, Evant realized perhaps why so many others in the Brotherhood had chosen to walk the path of the Light in recent days.

Frowning for a moment and then reaching out and unlocking the containment cell Liam climbed to his feet and began to open the door, “I can feel the pain deep in you Evant, at the atrocities you have committed, or allowed to be committed during your watch. I just hope that they someday do not destroy you. Perhaps this day it is not the day for you to start walking a path of the Light, but know that your strategy, leadership and knowledge are welcome by the Jedi.”

Smiling Evant walked up to the door, at least perhaps he could provide some strategic help to the Jedi, if for no one else than Liam and his kindness. In the end he still had just one goal, to uncover the truth of what was going on in the Herald's staff, but perhaps there was some truth to Liam's words that even he couldn't deny. In the end though, the Sith justified all the action he had taken in service to the Empire and had no regrets. Nothing to make amends for.

"I appreciate your kindness and support. I will see to it that I have a long conversation with your fleet strategists before departing," Evant responding suggesting he intended to depart and leave eventually, taking a deep breath as Liam nodded a guard to come over and unlock the restraints on his hands.

"You will likely not find our resources quite as extensive as your Empire, but they are as ambitious and dedicated to their work as any," Liam boasted of his crew. As calm and collected as when he originally walked in, though he didn't get exactly what he wanted, he seemed satisfied with the resulting arrangement.

VII

Hot steam poured from the small cup as it filled with fresh caf and a deep aroma filled the air that perked the senses. Even the smell helped sharpen the edges of Evant's mind as he took a brief break from talking to the Jedi strategists answering questions about certain areas of Sith space. It was all mundane and declassified, in fact most of it was available in a public library if you looked in the right places, but it would pass as helpful for now while he planned his next moves.

The sound of footsteps caused Evant to turn around before he could pull the hot liquid to his lips, and he nearly dropped it when he spotted the snow white hair atop the towering figure of Rhiann Baenre. He quickly moved aside as she approached to get a cup for herself, a bit stand-offish as she worked the levers and placed her cup.

"I don't think we've ever had the pleasure of an introduction, I am Evant Taelyan," Evant decided to open with, not quite sure how to approach her. He was a bit surprised at meeting another of the Herald's staff when he had all but decided the mission was a bust and started planning some intricate explanation as to why he was even on the Jedi ship for the Master At Arms and Emperor.

"Hi, I'm Rhiann," she responded, a bit apprehensively, it was obvious that she didn't appreciate the direct confrontation.

Stepping back to give her a bit of space, Evant continued hoping to make some quick inroads to the conversation, "I'm here to help with the strategy and planning on behalf of the Jedi, see to it that we can work together to ensure safety and security in the galaxy."

"So I've heard, what's in it for you?" she asked.

"I want nothing but to protect my Empire at all costs, even if it means working with the Jedi," Evant responded, a bit defensively before continuing and appealing to her newly shown sense of selfish interest and give her a reason to befriend him, "I am Praetor to the Master At Arms, and Aedile of Scholae Palatinae in control of all the Empire's military resources, I do whatever I can to ensure the safety and security of my Empire."

"An impressive resume, glad to hear you're using it to help us," Rhiann responded, not quite sure how to reply but intrigued by the connections and interested in how she could use it in the future by continuing the conversation.

"A position on the Dark Summit provides a unique connection to a Dark Councilor that can be incredibly powerful, but you know all about that with Socorra," Evant responded smiling, implying she had used such powers before much like he had even though he hadn't.

"I assist in duties for the Herald office and as a result have gained power and access with my position," she responded, in agreement with Evant's statement.

"All those trips to the Sith Worlds by Socorra, all that access to the One Sith, all that information and access must have been a great boon to the Jedi cause," Evant commented, stating what he could not confirm as fact, waiting to see if she took the bait.

"I didn't realize you knew of that, all that information did not come easily, we have been manipulating Socorra and other Dark Councilors as opportunity presents itself for months by leaving necessary information for them to follow. She ate it up and has been feeding Brotherhood information ever since. Situations like Orv's untimely death were necessary to prevent our plan from derailing," Rhiann stated proudly, "we've been getting meetings setup with the One Sith to entice Socorra into seeking more power for herself and in turn pitting two of our enemies against each other giving them the extra push to destroy each other."

"With all that information on the One Sith, you can turn the tides of this war," Evant replied, showing he was impressed with the scheme that had just been confirmed as true.

"With your support, as Praetor to the Master At Arms, we can turn the tides further," she replied, showing interest in continuing to discuss more.

"I am here primarily to discuss some details on fleet movements with your strategists, but I could be persuaded to continue this conversation later somewhere more secure," Evant replied with a

smile as he gestured to the door where an athletic looking human male happened to have entered and began to look around, immediately spotting Evant and walking over.

“I heard there was a Sith onboard, didn’t believe it, had to see it with my own eyes,” the newcomer announced as he walked up and pulled his lightsaber hilt from his belt to aggressively show he was a Jedi.

Evant set down his cup of caf carefully and took a few steps back. He immediately began trying to defuse the situation with an honest reply, “Yes, I’m here to help you to understand the fleet movements and systems of the Sith Worlds.”

“Things seemed to be going just fine before you showed up,” he snapped back, taking a few steps towards Evant. The tone of the conversation had attracted a hand full of guards from outside the break room, and much to Evant’s disappointment the officer who greeted him in the hangar was among them.

“No reason to believe things can’t be going even better, big galaxy, lots to know,” Evant was trying to appease him, looking for whatever answer he wanted but he seemed intent on conflict.

“This Sith giving you trouble Korvyn,” the officer asked as he walked in and drew his blaster pistol.

“Well he certainly isn’t helping me as much as he claims to be,” Korvyn responded as he ignited his lightsaber, a sapphire blade humming to life. Evant looked over to see Rhiann standing in the corner disengaged. It seemed Evant was in this alone, and it was escalating quickly.

The Sentinel took a step back, pretending as if he was attacked, and then swung his lightsaber in a wide arc towards Evant’s legs. Jumping in the air to avoid the attacks and landing several meters back, the Sith Sorcerer responded instinctually by reaching out and wielding the Force as a weapon.

Korvyn took a full blunt hit to the face as if being hit by a hammer. The strike immediately broke his nose and sent him flying backward onto the ground. Following was a flurry of blaster fire in his direction as the officer and his guards welcomed the act of self-defense as an invitation to attack. Dodging the first of the blaster bolts as they buried themselves into the wall behind him the Sith for the first time since he arrived painfully missed his lightsaber.

Not wanting to inflict serious harm on any of them, still hopeful somewhere in his mind it could be seen as a misunderstanding and he wouldn’t have to fight his way out, Evant’s next action was to send a telekinetic wave across the small refresher station.

Tables and chairs went flying, interrupting the blaster fire as guards dodged them.

Blood poured from the nose of the injured Jedi Sentinel as his sapphire blade came to life again.

Bodies moved and struggled for position amidst the chaos.

Evant raised a barrier to protect himself as additional blaster shots again lit up the room.

Familiar sounds of a lightsaber blade cutting the air had the Sith rolling across the ground to a safer distance again now up against the wall.

A table flew towards the door and again interrupted the fire from the officer who ducked out into the hall to avoid it.

It seemed futile, he regretted ever coming here. The information wasn't worth his death.

Evant's mind fought to keep up in its tired state from the influx of sensory activity.

As he once again reached out with the Force to erect a barrier to protect him from harm, unsure if it would hold, he could sense a lightsaber blade headed for his torso.

A flash of blue arched through the air, followed by a flash of green.

The familiar sound of lightsabers locked.

The angry expression on Liam Torun's face spoke louder than any words. He had just saved a Sith from the unprovoked attacks by one of his own Jedi.

VIII

Elation and disappointment mixed together in Evant's mind as he stood with Liam Torun in his personal meditation chambers aboard the ship. Beautiful elaborate lines created a peaceful and harmonious space, that all merged into what seemed an impossible pattern of circles and spirals on the ceiling. It was a place of peace even for the passionate power driven soul of a Sith.

It was a long while before either spoke, in an unspoken agreement that some time was needed before words even did either man any good. For all that led the two to be in this place, and the paths that led them there together in that moment, what lie ahead for both men were very different paths light years apart.

"Liam, I may be Sith, but I have enough humility to admit I respect you," Evant finally spoke, his eyes glued to the unbelievable ceiling.

Silence again followed, Liam had it set in his mind that he wanted to take this opportunity to convert Evant to a path of the Light but recognized that chance was slipping away. Finally responding he addressed the compliment, "I walk a path to protect the greater good. That path

has sometimes resulted in others questioning my decisions, but it's a path I walk every day without reservation. You too walk a similar path."

"I don't want conflict Liam, but I do seek the power to protect those who have entrusted me with their safety. The Force will always call to me on a path of strength and passion, through the Sith Code, to achieve that which I want," Evant responded, taking a moment to defend his position while respecting Liam's decision to have his.

While Liam calculated a response, Evant realized that they would only reach an impasse on this topic and immediately changed to something much more pressing and recent, "There is a severe lack of trust and arrogance among your Jedi Liam, and among your soldiers, that threaten all that you seek to achieve."

"You must understand all atrocities that they have seen at the hands of the Dark Jedi. All that they know of what the Brotherhood and the One Sith are capable of," Liam responded in their defense. He merely added words to a perspective that Evant already knew all too well from serving his Empire.

"You know as well as I do that it is emotion, and it is ignorance, that leads them to these conclusions. It may seem odd coming from me, but perhaps they should take some time to reflect on their namesake Odan-Urr," Evant responded, he had his own conflicting thoughts but even he realized that key to his success as a Sith in following a path of the Dark Side had come from learning to control all aspects of himself. He was well aware of what a path of the Light could offer, and what it couldn't. In this case he used their own teachings against them to drive a wedge between him and Liam. He had what he needed and now he needed a reason to leave.

"I recognize that your time here has not been as productive as you had hoped," Liam responded.

"Nor as productive as you had hoped I'm sure. Perhaps another time we will meet again, under better terms," Evant responded, looking away from the ceiling finally and meeting Liam's eyes making it clear he intended to now leave.

After a brief moment, Liam simply nodded in agreement and responded, "I will see to it personally that you make it safely back to your shuttle, and you are free to go. I do hope you take this as my own sign of respect, and that I hope in the future we can one day work together to achieve peace in the galaxy."

IX

As the entry ramp locked shut into place behind him, the mechanical hiss of it locking was a welcoming sound for Evant Taelyan back aboard his own shuttle. Yet he only had one thing on his mind, moving quickly through the passenger area to the back of the shuttle, quickly making his way to the refresher station and pulling his lightsaber from a drawer on full of tools and accessories for mixing drinks. He wouldn't dare store it somewhere obvious, he was overly protective of the weapon and hadn't felt like himself without it, even more so given what had just transpired aboard the Jedi ship.

"My Lord," a familiar voice called out across the ship and broke the moment of silence.

Evant turned, looking up to see the familiar face of Lieutenant Forte standing at attention, they had spoken less than eight hours ago but it felt like days. A look of concern was on his brow, likely from spending the day onboard an enemy Jedi ship, but beneath that a mix of excitement and impatience at finally seeing the Sith again after so much waiting around.

Evant looked back to his lightsaber, clicking it on and filing the shuttle with the familiar hum of pure plasma emitting from the hilt and casting the back corner in a sapphire blue light. All the immense heat and power of the blade suspended in a force containment field crafted by Evant himself brought a smile to his face and a comfort he desperately needed in that moment. Clicking it off the Sith snapped the hilt to his belt as he looked up again to address the waiting pilot of the shuttle.

"Lieutenant, power it up and get us off this ship. I've been assured that we will be allowed to leave without resistance," Evant responded, with no sense of excitement in his face realizing they were not yet in the clear, "Let us hope these Jedi are good on their word."

"Right away my Lord," the pilot responded with an Imperial salute.

"Oh and Lieutenant, get us just clear of their long range turbolasers and await further orders," Evant responded catching the pilots attention before he could leave.

"We aren't going home?" the pilot asked, confused and looking for more guidance.

"Await further orders Lieutenant," Evant urged, making it clear he wasn't in the mood to explain why.

"Yes my Lord," the pilot turned and walked away leaving the Sith alone again, a bit defeated as he disappeared up to the cockpit just out of sight.

Evant turned back to the onboard refresher station, this time to the collection of liquor bottles at the top. His tired eyes scanned the labels but on first pass saw nothing familiar. He immediately regretted delegating the task of stocking the shuttles due to his busy schedule. It would be something he would see to personally in the future upon his return to the Imperial Palace. It was

just another of many disappointments of the day but the irritation of not finding a comforting drink was just that much worse given the day he had.

“You’ll have to do,” Evant spoke to a half empty bottle as he pulled it from the shelf, it had a green label that claimed to be a Corellian whiskey called Eldest Brother Small Batch. He had never had it but felt like he was up for something new, and being half gone someone must have enjoyed it. He poured a small amount into an empty glass.

Taking a sip he could taste a hint of mint, with a citrus overtone that he enjoyed, followed by a finish that was way too spicy for his taste. He disappointingly swirled the amber liquid in the small glass and set the bottle back in the refresher station. Somehow the whole drink experience seemed fitting for the situation at hand as the sound of the ion engines firing up followed by the repulsorlift pulled Evant back to reality.

He set his drink down and took a seat in a nearby chair to dwell on what had just transpired. First he ran back over the facts. Socorra had made hundreds of visits to One Sith planets while under their control, as recently as last month, and is definitely at least conversing with them. Rhiann admitted that the Jedi on the Herald’s staff at least manipulated or fed leads to get her involved in many of those meetings. Their manipulation of a Dark Councilor alone is enough cause for concern. It wasn’t enough to prove she was a traitor though, it was all just speculation.

Evant allowed himself a moment to fantasize in a delusion of grandeur. He knew he didn’t have enough information and he thought of how he could get it. Breaking into the Herald’s office in the Dark Hall and gaining access to incriminating holovids proving Socorra was a traitor. Imagining her show up and telling her off as he escapes with the vids to the Grand Master himself and personally handing over the evidence. Then visualizing the resulting ceremony to award him for his great service to the Empire, where a Silver Sash is being placed over him for his allegiance and service.

Sounds of the wings locking into flight position and the ion engines speeding up snapped Evant back to reality again, and his mind fell again back to the *Nebula*-class Star Destroyer that they were flying away from. To his conversations with Liam Torun, where Evant had all but left the Quaestor of the Jedi House with the impression that he was likely to provide aid in the future and may defect at a future date just to secure his escape from ship, and their own safe passage home.

Perception was more powerful than the truth, and even the perception that he was sympathizing with the Jedi was detrimental to his reputation and cause. It was a high cost for attaining such little actionable information from the Herald’s staff. He began to regret the entire thing as he sat and tried to make a decision on his next move. His mind rapidly played out the outcomes of all possible options.

“My Lord, we are clear of the destroyer’s turbolasers,” a voice announced over the shuttles radio system from the cockpit.

It was time for action.

He got up and walked towards the cockpit at the front of the shuttle, reaching down and gripping his lightsaber hilt, reassuring himself again that it was there. He had missed it. As he reached the cockpit he walked up between the pilot and co-pilot at the front and stared out to the stars of the galaxy in front of them. Another reminder he was free under his own will again.

“I came here looking for information on a traitor on the Dark Council who is working with the Jedi, I found some information, but it wasn’t enough, nevertheless it was important. The things I said and did to secure this information were perhaps too costly, but it’s a risk I was willing to make in this war and that decision as my own. I’ve thought about all possible next steps to take with this information, and there is really only one that makes sense,” Evant explained, trying to fill his crew in as best he could in short order before making the final decision, “Set a course for Antei. There is really only person I trust with the details of what happened with the Jedi, who can make use of the information I now possesses, and that’s Aabsdu Dupar.”

“Yes my Lord,” the pilot acknowledged, glad to be going just about anywhere away from the Jedi.

Shortly the stars in the sky began to shift in unison as the shuttle oriented itself for its hyperspace trajectory. Within moments the hyperdrive kicked in and all the stars turned to streaks in the sky as the ship launched forward faster-than-light speed towards the Dark Hall.

X

Deep underground, far below the offices and archives of the Dark Hall, the hectic buzz of a Brotherhood preparing for war were eerily absent. Evant had just been cleared past the security checkpoint, verifying his identity as a Praetor and entered the rotunda outside the personal living quarters of the Dark Council where each of them had their own chambers decorated and furnished to their own tastes. He reflected for a moment at how well respected he felt for being afforded access to such a place, much unlike his first steps onboard *Fey’lya’s Last Stand*.

Immediately his attention was drawn to the position symbol of the Herald, a door that Socorra’s chambers lay beyond. He wondered if she was in there, or if she was out again conversing and plotting with the One Sith against the Brotherhood. Brief flashes of his earlier fantasy crossed his mind again as he envisioned himself going inside and seeking the truth.

As his mind snapped back to reality, his eyes were drawn naturally to the massive doors of the Grand Master and Deputy Grand Master’s chambers. The polished dark colored wood was immaculate and set against the elaborate dark carvings that made up the doorway and the

detailing moving up the wall and blending into the ceiling. Flanking the steps leading up to the doorway were too many elite guardsman to count, their deep red armor contrasting against the dark architecture as they stood guard around the clock. The chambers alone were worth protecting even without their occupants.

Evant could feel the powerful yet comforting Dark Side energy of the place, as much as the first time he came here with Aabsdu Dupar upon his appointment as Praetor. It was a polarizing feeling to the way he felt in Liam Torun's meditation chambers not even half a day earlier. It filled him with the confidence to press on with his pursuit of power.

As he confidently walked towards the Master At Arms door, it opened for him as he approached, almost as if he was expected. It was truly a testament to the Dark Councilors open door policy, although with so few who had access to this level of the Dark Hall and so much in and out preparing for the assault on Nicht Ka to happen later that day it was likely not the reason it had opened. Either way he decided to appreciate the little things after a day of disappointments and walked through the doors confidently.

When he got inside it was almost too much to process, the entire chambers looked more like the office of a Headmaster than the Master At Arms, with collections of books and artifacts all over the place. The only hint to the contrary was a command chair in the corner with an array of displays and communications consoles illuminating the entire far corner. Yet the chair was empty and no sight of Aabsdu.

"Evant, just the person I needed," Aabsdu di Plagia Dupar called out from behind a pile of books in the corner, initially masked from Evant's view.

"I was actually about to say the same thing about you," Evant responded, glad to find out that his intrusion at the early hours of the morning following his night of travel wasn't an issue.

"My needs come first, and I need the hyperspace trajectories for the Antei Defense Fleet reviewed before the assault this afternoon," Aabsdu said moving out from the shadows and into the center of his chambers with a cup of caf taking a sip, "care for a drink?"

"Yeah actually, I could use something after the day I've had," Evant admitted as he walked over to the table to join Aabsdu.

"Help yourself there's plenty," Aabsdu invited as he finished up his cup and poured himself some more, handing the pot to Evant.

Evant poured the black liquid into an empty cup he found on the table, using the simple act as a distraction to push past the anxiety and finally begin the conversation he had spent the night sorting out, "So, I received some Fleet data from Pendragon a day and a half ago, and after my review discovered that Dark Councilor Sororra has been using Fleet resources to travel to meetings with the One Sith since she took her position."

“I’d like to see the data on that,” Aabsdu responded in a business as usual tone, suggesting that the revelation didn’t concern him that much.

“Of course, but, there’s more,” Evant continued almost reluctantly, “I wanted to know more about the nature of these visits, so I sought out more information from the Jedi on her staff and took a Scholae Palatinae shuttle to *Fey’lya’s Last Stand*.”

“I’ve always appreciated your dedication to data collection and results,” Aabsdu remarked, almost as if he would have expected no other response to the discovered records regarding the Herald than to inquisitively seek out more information.

Evant responded off topic, appreciative of the tone of the conversation that relieved the anxiety he was struggling with around not having a concrete position, “Yes, one day my curiosity may get the better of me but not today.”

“Well then, what did you find out?” Aabsdu asked in a tone that suggested he recognized he was going to find out either way.

“After I was frisked, held in isolation, then restrained and locked up, I managed to have a brief conversation with one of her Magistrates, Rhiann Baenre. Seems that all the Jedi on the Herald’s staff have been working together and encouraging these visits by feeding information and enticing Socorra who has been visiting them and feeding them information on the Brotherhood. It’s basically entrapment to commit treason,” Evant explained, taking a deep breath to signify the end of his accusations.

He wasn’t sure how Aabsdu would react, taking a sip of his newly poured caf as a distraction, the stimulant doing little to calm the nerves. Evant recognized it as a verbal confession, and very little to go off of, curious now what the Master At Arms take would be.

After a brief moment Aabsdu finally responded, almost as if it was no big deal, “I appreciate you bringing the data to my attention, and the extra effort you took to discover the Jedi influence on the Herald.”

“I recognize it isn’t too definitive but, if true we can’t simply ignore it we must dig further,” Evant defended himself out of instinct, not sure if it was really necessary. The response was certainly not what he expected given the topic.

“Calm your curiosities for now Evant, I meant what I said earlier when you were exactly the person I needed. Let me fill you in on some even bigger plans that are in motion even as we speak. You will forget all about the Herald...”