Two ships faced each other in the void. A silent standoff between Leviathans. One clearly outclassed the other, making the fact the smaller ship was the aggressor all the more absurd. A Jack Russell barking at a wolf.

Aboard the BAC *Shadow*, the crew worked diligently, maintaining a battle ready status, every weapon tracked on the weakpoints of the far larger vessel ahead of them. Though there was an impending fight laying heavy in the air, calm suffused the bridge. The thought that they would lose was there, to banish the concept would be foolish arrogance, but it was suppressed, pushed away into a dark corner while duty took over, turning all the members of the crew into one cohesive unit.

At the hub of the biological machine a man stood imperiously. He gazed across the bridge, calm radiating from him to his crew. A metal hand tapped a console, the idle tattoo focussing his thoughts on the here and now. He needed to think about now, not the past.

"Prepare comms for a transmission to the *Preeminence*." Nikola Valtiere ordered curtly. Within the time it took for another tap, a light flicked green, indicating a link had been set up. A holo-image of the opposing commander, proud in a white uniform regarded him with eyes that would be red, but were instead a synthetic blue from the projector.

"Seabr'imsto'nedansr. You are ordered to stand down immediately and submit to questioning." The tone of voice seemed to allow nothing for even the concept of refusal, dripping with disdain and authority in equal measure. The other face regarded Valtiere levelly, no sign of guilt or even a flicker of any emotion. Valtiere respected that at least. Though it was easy to be brave when one had the bigger stick.

"For what reason...?" He trailed off, the unknown name meant to be a snub. Valtiere's mouth quirked upwards in one corner. The posturing before actual battle. Always something Valtiere wanted to do away with, but since time immemorial man had been grandstanding. He was never going to change that.

"In relation to conspiracy against the Brotherhood. Now, if you submit willingly, I can reduce your punishment. I can reduce it further if you give me the names of those who set you on your path." Valtiere stated calmly.

The Chiss sputtered before reasserting control. "I would never turn against the Brotherhood, and I will not stand here and listen to these accu-" Valtiere raised a hand, stopping him.

"I'm sure you see yourself as saviour of the Brotherhood, restoring lost honour, or somesuch. That's how it has been sold to you. A lie, to be sure, but one to grab at your mind and take root. A string for a puppeteer with less scruples to make you dance with. I just want to know who is pulling your strings." Valtiere could see from the Chiss' face he wouldn't agree and remorse gripped him.

There was no response. The holo simply cut out. "Negotiations have faltered, It seems." Valtiere muttered. He turned about to the crew, mask of an officer back on. "Onto war footing." An innocuous phrase, something said by an Officer or politician, far from the front lines from actual war, from the strife their decisions made. But here, the phrase had a new meaning. Weapons cycled online from standby, targets fully locked instead of simply eyeing up the prize.

Valtiere strode back and forth, now animated, the tempo of a flying citadel preparing for war replacing the tapping of his cybernetic hand. As he cleared his mind of thought, sinking into the mindset of battle leader, he cast back to how he had gotten here.

\* \* \*

Rows of screens lit the small room, the normally unnoticeable buzz of their activity amplified by the volume of electronics, giving the air a frenetic air, like a fly trapped against a pane of glass. A face stared at them all, comprehension making the normally eternal calm turn to shock. He had checked over and over. Rumours of whispers of half-grabbed snatched sentences had added up into a statement. A terrible statement.

There was to be a coup.

The One Sith had been guided by another, not even they realised such, but no one expected a member of the Brotherhood to distrust their own kind enough to check. Someone paranoid enough to comb the fringes of information, to scrutinise them for too long to be healthy, to piece them together seemingly at random, until they became something.

Someone wanted to gain power, for sure. Someone within the Dark Council. Someone who had enough influence to turn the nose of the One Sith against the Brotherhood, then ensure the Brotherhood was always on the back foot. But also someone who isn't directly responsible for those areas, that would be too obvious.

A profile began to form, a concept of the conspirator in his mind. Obviously, the evidence never pointed directly to them, but a tangled chain. Not a web, it was a chain, a hierarchy of villainy. He put his finger out, touching one of the images of brotherhood members on the screen. Seabr'imsto'nedansr. He wouldn't turn against the brotherhood. But he could be misguided by one he trusted...

Maybe a former Consul of Plagueis. A former consul that had moved on. Brought a House into the rarefied air of the Clans, then stepped aside to let them swing their weight. But how to draw Montresor, Valtiere's own former superior, out?

Knock on his door. Show him you knew. And rattle the chain, all the way to the top.

To Darth Pravus. Deputy Grand Master.

\* \* \*

"SIr, the *Preeminence* is powering up weapons systems! Locking!" A sub-lieutenant called out. Valtiere smiled, a predatory grin stretching his face, as if the expression had never sat there, and was trying to break in his face like anew shoe.

"Show them the error of their ways." He replied, gripping the rail in front of him. Four bolts of searing light slashed across the bows of the *Preeminence*, knocking out their shields. A precisely modulated attack, a signal of power.

The *Eye of the Abyss II* decloaked, the power drain dragging into the optical spectrum from behind the Stygian power field. That had been the hard part of his mission. Convincing his Consul to allow him to take not only a Bothan Assault Cruiser but the flagship and heart of Arcona on a mission based on hearsay and rumour.

"Open a channel to the *Preeminence*. I believe our Chiss friend may want to reconsider." Valtiere drawled, grin still fixed on his pale face.