“Set it down in the clearing beyond that ridge,” Kir pointed, “it should shield us from view for a time.” The pilot was already silently complying; he had been in Kir’s service for a decade and could anticipate some of his thoughts. The Lambda-class shuttle touched down smoothly, and the former Justicar motioned for his guards to join him as he exited the shuttle. The Dark Prophet stood at the base of the ramp and gazed out at their surroundings.

Kir smirked and spoke aloud, seemingly to no one at all, “Unless you’re planning some entertainment for all of us, why don’t you put that blaster away and come chat.” The area was still for a moment, until two of the guards spun to see an aged, hooded figure emerge from a shaded crevice.

The man grunted, “After the last couple times I ran into you, I wasn’t exactly looking forward to another meet and greet.” He walked up to Kir, stopped, and tossed the cigarette he has been smoking.

“I’m not the Justicar any longer; you have little to fear from me,” Kir said, “…unless, you intend to be, well, unreasonable again.”

The man shook his head. “I knew it. You’re always poking around where you aren’t needed or wanted. I can see what’s going on here, and all I want to do is leave.” He turned and started to angrily stride off.

“Come now,” Kir said, and ever so slightly raised his hand. The man in front of him stopped dead for a moment, as if he’d hit a wall. Then he turned and glared at the Dark Prophet.

“I’m not getting involved in this little…well, whatever you guys are planning here. The last time I helped you out, I ended up–"

Kir cut him off, “You ended up attempting to strand me planet-side while you escaped with the holocron we’d discovered…”

The man was indignant. “I discovered! Me! You just nosed your way in and tried to stake a claim with that Dark Covenant nonsense, but I’m not beholden to that crap and you know it!”

Smirking again but with darkening eyes, Kir took several steps toward the man. “I know you’ve found something, and I sense it will become important in our very near future. You can continue to argue, and you can attempt to leave – but I warn you, my guards are more than a match for your abilities, and your tricks and concealments will not work this time. I grow impatient. Help me now, and I will let you leave and will repay you handsomely. Defy me again, and I will be less lenient than I have been previously.”

The man’s dark brown eyes looked up into Kir’s, almost daring the Sith Lord to smite him where he stood. “Fine, but you’re not going to like what we find.”

“Oh my friend Connor, I most certainly believe that to be true.”

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“There,” Connor pointed, “is what you’re looking for.” His hand was extended toward a group of ruins. At least, on first glance they appeared to be ruins, but closer inspection showed the academy pyramid, hidden from plain view by one of Darth Bane’s minions on a previous visit.

Kir nodded and motioned for them to move closer. The group slowly worked their way forward, careful not to draw any attention from anyone who might be watching. Several hundred meters away from the structure, Kir raised his hand, which brought the group to a stop. “We’ve been beaten. Someone is already here.”

“Not even a Knight yet, I spotted him earlier,” Connor said, now standing beside Kir. “He’s got a small force with him, all soldier-types, only a couple lightsabers in the whole group.”

Kir’s eyes were closed. “Yes, I can sense fifteen total, only five are touching the force – small presences, all.” He turned to address his four guards. “Move in from the west. We will approach from the east and wait while you initiate your attack and draw their attention. I will do the rest.” The soldiers nodded and moved off to their objective.

“I signed up as a tour guide for this venture,” Connor said to Kir. “I didn’t say I’d be fighting in your little war.”

Kir smirked. “You aren’t needed for this. My guards and I are more than capable. Go and hide… it’s what you do best.”

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“Did you feel that?” the journeyman said, turning to look at Skybender.

He nodded. “Cold. A brief presence.” His hand was unconsciously thumbing his blaster rifle.

“Was it coming from in there?” the journeyman nodded toward the academy.

“No, I don’t believe it was, we should —” Skybender was cut off by an explosion from the east. Three of his guardsmen had been hit and dropped, and he could make out moving shapes now pouring blaster fire onto their position. One of his Acolyte allies had already dashed off toward the fighting, but Skybender held back with two loyalist guardians, waiting to see how the situation developed.

A voice coming from behind him startled the young Jedi Hunter. “Allowing others to die for you? An admirable strategy in some circles.” Skybender turned to see an older Dark Jedi standing no more than five feet behind him, blue eyes boring into him, and a golden lightsaber lit in his hand. Kir continued, “You can surrender now and become useful to me, or this will end quickly.”

Skybender responded by jumping to his left while firing several bolts from his blaster rifle. Kir deflected the bolts into one of the loyalist guardians who had moved too slowly, dropping him on the spot. Kir calmly walked toward the retreating Jedi Hunter. The second guardian had been advancing from cover, and seeing his comrade under duress, he charged Kir with lightsaber lit and held aloft. The Dark Prophet may have appeared somewhat aged, but his Obelisk-honed reflexes were quick. He sidestepped the reckless attack, pushed the man slightly off balance with the Force, and drew the golden blade of his lightsaber up through his torso. The man fell to the ground, in two pieces.

Skybender had taken this opportunity to counterattack himself, with his red-bladed lightsaber lit. He sprinted straight at Kir, then actually threw his lightsaber at the Prophet as if it were a spear. Kir stepped aside to let the blade pass; he then turned to find Skybender right on top of him. The Jedi hunter was quite proficient in jakelian, and his quick, firm footed attacks were a surprise to Kir, who had not been attacked hand-to-hand in years.

Unluckily for Skybender, Kir’s echani was a direct evolution of his form, and the younger man quickly found himself being outpaced. As he attempted to land a crossing blow, Kir brought his deactivated lightsaber hilt up and struck Skybenders right forearm, creating a loud crack as the bones within shattered. The Jedi Hunter fell to his knees and yelled in pain. Kir reignited his lightsaber, and Skybender turned to look as the blade slowly moved toward him.

Suddenly a blaster was heard from their side, and Skybender had just enough time to be confused, before the bolt from an Enforce Pistol hit the side of his head, and killed him.

Connor lowered his weapon and looked up at Kir. “Toying with the kid wasn’t necessary, let’s move on.”

Kir smirked. “Indeed.” The others of Skybender’s group had been dispatched by his guards, who had rejoined him. “Let’s move on.”

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They reached the academy doors to find that they were not the first to enter the sacred structure. Tools were strewn around the opening, and the previously sealed entranceway had been opened through a mix of slicing and brute force. Kir looked to Connor. “Your work?”

“I am not so crude; it was open before I arrived.”

“Let us move on,” Kir said, and lead the group forward. His goal was to reach the tomb of Darth Bane, where he assumed he would find the mysterious objects the holo-vid had spoken of. As the group moved forward, it was clear that more than one person had arrived before them. Tracks on the dust-covered ground seemed to originate from at least three different individuals.

The group moved through the large main hall, now eerily quiet, which once had swarmed with eager dark side initiates. They passed a narrow stone monument at the center of the chamber, on which was carved numerous faces, presumably past members of the Sith Order.

“I’ve got to hand it to you guys, you really have a flair for the dramatic,” Connor said, looking at Kir.

“The pillar had meaning to the ancients. They believed this to show that to climb to the pinnacle of power,” Kir pointed to the very top of the monument, “meant crushing all of those who strive for the same goal,” as he indicated all the faces.

“Lovely philosophy.”

 “Flawed, ultimately,” Kir said, pointing to the top of the monument. “The pinnacle is quite precarious to occupy alone the way the Sith believe. Our Brotherhood is stronger for ignoring this principle.”

They moved on, to the back of the room and up the massive staircase which lead to the summit of the pyramid, toward the more valuable and sacred rooms. The further up they travelled, the more uneasy Connor seemed to become. Kir looked over at the man and asked, “What is troubling you?”

“They’re here, the two of them. And you clearly know it, as you’re taking us directly toward them.”

“They have a role to play in today’s events,” Kir said, continuing to move up the stairs. “Regardless, it is not they that worry me, it is the other, with his playthings.” The staircase ended, and the group was suddenly faced with an enormous statue of Darth Bane looking down upon them from the center of the room. Smaller antechamber doors could be seen on the periphery of the chamber. Kir stepped toward the statue, laid his hand upon it, and closed his eyes.

“Speaking to the dead now, are we?” Connor remarked, standing among Kir’s waiting guardsmen.

Kir remained quiet for several minutes, then spoke, “I have a suspicion as to what lies here, and another as to how we will access it – but now it is your turn.” The Dark Prophet turned to look at Connor. “I am in need of your abilities. It is time for your study of the ancient Sith magics to become useful.” Kir walked to the side of the statue and motioned Connor forward, pointing toward a small, incomprehensible engraving upon the stone.

Connor brushed the dust off the markings and examined them more closely. He let out a heavy sigh, then placed his hand upon the center of the marking. Moments later, wispy green and blue tendrils began to dance upon the skin of his arm, slowly making their way toward the monument. When they touched the stone itself, the markings under Connor's hand were suddenly alight with a crimson light all of their own, and an entirely new set of symbols, unseen before, appeared before their eyes.

“Ancient Sith,” Kir said. “You’ll have to assist me with the translation, it has been some time since my days of study with the Krath.”

Connor nodded, and began to excitedly pour over the text – clearly this was the reason he had sought out the academy. “It starts with a proclamation of Bane’s greatness…yada yada yada, then it says there are objects that might interest you in the outlying antechambers.” Connor pointed to the side of the room.

Kir’s patience was waning, “What about the sarcophagal chamber. How do we access it?”

Connor continued, “Right, yes, that’s what it gets to next. I believe it says…no, no you’re not thinking of...they aren’t here for anything more than…”

“Read the passage aloud,” Kir commanded.

“*These inner chambers are sealed against the unworthy – only those who have proven themselves by shattering the light and spilling it upon my altar, will gain entrance therein.”* Connor turned to argue again with Kir, but a movement caught his eye and a he used the Force to cloak himself, before two blurs of motion incapacitated Kir’s outermost guardsmen.

Kir spun and raised his hand, casting a blinding light toward the commotion. Darkening the light down a moment later revealed two Twi’lek females shielding their eyes. The one on the left looked up at him.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the former Justicar,” she said.

The second Twi’lek chimed in. “I believe the Voice would be very interested to know you’re here…all on your own? But who is your friend?”

Kir smirked. “I don’t think dead men pay that well – I doubt the Voice is even still alive. Or did you not know that?”

They didn’t even miss a beat. “Voice or not, the big boss always pays for good information,” the first Twi’lek said.

Kir took several steps toward the sisters. “Unfortunately, I don’t think Muz is going to be our sovereign much longer – seems like you two are out of a job.” Kir ignited his lightsaber, casting a golden glow across the floor. “But maybe you can still be of use to me.”

Rightly judging Kir’s intentions, the sisters both called upon the Force to create illusionary images of themselves and made off toward the exit. While the guardsmen and Connor still stared at the illusions, the Prophet didn’t need his physical eyes to see the Twi’leks, they glowed as bright as a star in the Force. Growing weary of wasting his time, Kir reached out his hand and a devastating blast of Force Lighting issued forth, enveloping the first Twi’lek. As she screamed in pain, she fell to the ground, completely incapacitated.

“Nooo!” screamed the second Twi’lek, dropping her illusion and igniting her blue lightsaber. She rushed back to defend her unconscious sister, but the Prophet was waiting for her. She slashed and hacked with her lightsaber, enraged – but not practiced in channeling her rage with the dark side, she was undisciplined. Kir blocked, parried, and maneuvered her until she was between him and the outer wall – then he lashed out with a viscous, full-powered hammer blow of the Force which slammed the Twi’lek like a rag-doll into the opposing wall. She collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

“Bring them,” Kir ordered his guardsmen, and he made his way back to Bane’s monument. Connor was waiting, an untrusting but curious air about him. “I don’t want to hear it,” Kir looked at him. “Their destiny was decided the moment they stepped foot in this place.” The guardsmen dropped the two Twi’lek next to Kir. The Prophet bent, picked up a sharp piece of stone from the floor and made a small nick in the first Twi’lek’s skin, drawing several drops of blood. This he dripped onto the monument’s engraving, and waited.

For a moment there was nothing. Then, slowly, the floor panel beside them slid back to reveal a short staircase. Kir and his guardsmen entered, carrying the Twi’lek, with Connor cautiously in tow. There was only one room at the base of the stairs, and at the far end of it, an unadorned raised platform. Kir motioned for the Twi’lek to be laid atop of the platform.

Connor’s weakness gave way. “This still doesn’t need to happen – the relics here can be unearthed without this…”

Kir cut him off, lashing out. “You think I’m searching for trinkets? You believe I seek magical objects with which to trick and entertain? No, Connor, as always you think too small. The knowledge of Darth Bane can save Taldryan, maybe even the entire Brotherhood! Sacrifices must be made.” Before the other man could argue, Kir turned, placed one hand on each of the sisters, and let lightning course out through his hands and into them both. Their bodies twisted under his hands until life left them both, their essence in the Force fading out of them…and into the platform. The raised stone, clearly the altar the inscription outside had told of, began to hum, and a small opening appeared in its side.

Kir reached into the alter and pulled out a small pyramidal object. Connor moved to his side, his curiosity completely overcoming his caution, and gazed down at the object. “A holocron?”

“Hopefully, yes. Let us see if it is what I seek,” Kir said, and brought the holocron up while closing his eyes for a moment. Seconds later, a red holo blinked into existence in the air above the object. It stuttered in and out of existence for a moment, and then settled.

An orbalisk-clad figure stood and looked up toward Kir. “*What is it you <ztttt> seek?*” The object stuttered mid-sentence.

“Hmmph, broken,” said Connor.

Kir tipped his head. “In a way, yes,” he turned to the holocron. “Master Bane, tell me of the Ritual of Nathema.”

“*This Ritual < issssszt> beyond you, pretender to my throne – you have no greattttt congregation with which to join. Immortallllllllzzzzz,”* the image blinked out, then returned, “…*no longer attainable.*”

Connor laughed. “Doesn’t seem like he’s too keen to help you, or the programming is just too old.”

“Not too old,” said Kir. “This is an early attempt, one of Bane’s first experiments with making a holocron. That is the only reason it is still here – Darth Krayt and his One Sith have already taken all the intact holocrons, but they left this one thinking it useless.”

“Still seems useless to me,” mumbled Connor.

“Master Bane,” Kir spoke again to the holocron, “why can the ritual no longer be completed?”

The holo blinked in and out several times. “*No multitude available…*zzzzpht…*failure….certain, consequent destruction...but power.…temporary….uncontroll-zzt….insan-“* suddenly the light faded from the holocron.

Connor looked to Kir. “I hope you got more out of that than I did.”

“I believe I did, but we should leave, we are no longer alone,” said Kir, and he turned and walked out of the chamber. He was making his way to the large stairs which lead toward the academy’s exit, when a shout came from behind him.

“We can’t leave now!” Connor hissed. “What about all these other chambers?” he demanded, pointing toward the numerous antechambers lining the hall.

“You are welcome to any of the novelties you might find here, but I must leave,” said Kir, who stopped and turned for a moment. “Here, you can even keep this, it is no longer of use to me,” Kir said, tossing the holocron to Connor.

Catching the object, Connor examined it warily and turned to walk away. “Fine.”

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Kir and his guards had passed down the lengthy staircase and had almost crossed the great hall when a long shadow was cast before them from the hall’s entrance. It was soon joined by three others. A low cackling could soon be heard as they approached the doorway.

A voice from the shadow spoke. “Mmmm, heh heh, Katarn, mmmm, we have not seen you in a long time. Errr, thought you dead, maybe? Hehehe.”

Kir stopped, motioning for his guardsmen to back into defensive positions. “Synin.”

The disheveled Bpfasshi stepped forward, flanked by his three constant droid companions. “Yes, yes. Lord Krayt believes I may have left something behind last time I was here…have you found it for me? Heh heh, Katarn, give it to us, and we shall allow you to go.”

Eager to leave as quickly as possible, Kir still knew better than to mistake this man for anything other than utterly deadly. “We have been given the same mission, Synin. But as I have beaten you here, so I was preceded by another.”

An inquisitive smile crossed the One Sith’s face. “Ahh heh, the relic hunter? Yes, yes, we sensed his presence as well, always where he should not be, that one. But Katarn, why have you left him without your prize?”

“He is full of tricks and deceits, I believed I could make him cooperative…but it was not so easy…”

“Hah! For you!” cackled the Bpfasshi. “Too difficult for the pathetic Brotherhood! That will be our message for you today, Katarn, take it back to your masters. The One Sith take what you can never have!” He continued to laugh as he and his droids moved passed Kir and began to make their way up the staircase. Kir made his way to the academy’s exit with his guards, as quickly as possible.

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“Lord Cotelin,” Kir said, nodding his head. The shuttle’s pilot had just closed the ramp and was beginning to lift off the planet as the Grand Master’s holo appeared on the console.

The small image of Jac looked up. “What news, Kir? Have you secured the academy?”

“No,” said Kir, “it will soon be taken by incoming loyalist forces now in orbit – although there will be several surprises waiting for them when they land. I was able to find our secondary objective.”

“The holocron?” Cotelin asked. “Krayt missed it?”

“Only a first attempt at a holocron, buggy, but it did manage to give up an incredible piece of information.” Kir smirked. “Muz messed up.”

For a moment Jac smiled. “How?”

“The Ritual of Nathema , or Rite of Immortality as they continue to call it, can only be completed with a large group of high level dark side users, possibly more than even exist today” Kir said. “If you attempt it alone, the holocron says you will cause destruction and gain temporary power, but then…”

“You find you can no longer control it, your own thoughts overcome you, and you lose your mind,” Jac finished. “I’ve touched that danger several times myself, luckily I have never embraced it.”

“What does that mean for Muz?” Kir asked.

“It means the Brotherhood is in even greater danger than I originally thought,” Jac said. “Return immediately, I need you here.” The holo turned off, and Kir was alone with his thoughts in the rear of the shuttle.

“Hyperspace in one minute, sir,” reported the pilot.

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*Epilogue*

“Again? Damnit!” Connor exclaimed, not for the first time today. The third antechamber he had managed to coax open was empty, just as the first two had been. He knew there was something wrong, he had *felt* the objects earlier, he had *known* they were behind these doors. “Katarn…” he said, suspecting the Dark Prophet had somehow tricked him.

Reaching into his satchel, he pulled out the holocron, now dim and inactive. “At least I got this piece of junk,” he said, “maybe I can convince it to point me in the direction of something actually valuable.”

“Heh heh heh, I am thinking not, little conjurer of tricks.” Connor spun around toward the voice, to see Synin standing behind him, with his YVH-1 combat droid armed and at his side. “I believe you have something, heh heh, that does not belong to you.”

Connor decided not to stay and chat, using the Force to cloak himself he made for the doorway, only to be immediately caught in a vice-like stasis grip, as Synin cackled with his hand outstretched. “Oh no, heh heh, you will be staying with us. We have some uhh…questions, for you, heh heh.” The Bpfasshi continued to laugh as he motioned behind him, and his IT-O interrogator droid began to move forward…