***Nihil***

**By**

**Sirrus, #6411**

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**Dark Path, Order of the Sith**

*Dedicated to Thomas Ligotti, Friedrich Nietzsche, & Werner Herzog*

The tread of heavy boots crunched the ground as a lone figure walked across the surface of the planet Assur. Assur was a dusty, craggy rock of a planet strewn with bleached bones, the cracked skulls of extinct elephant-sized beasts gaping with hollow eye sockets nearly covered in rubble. The shells of large, lifeless plants protruding in abnormal shapes from ash were as the sole suggestion of a green, verdurous past. Heavy clouds perpetually darkened the skies, with lightning and windstorms a permanent fixture. Contaminated pools of sulfuric water filled the valleys between the undulating hills.

The lone figure was Sirrus, an adept of the Dark Jedi Brotherhood, a reclusive and eccentric seeker of knowledge. A quest for kyber crystals brought him here. In his tireless study of records dating to the Sith Empire, he had uncovered oblique references to the presence of the rare, Force-integrated minerals on this remote world. The Jedi required the crystals for the creation of lightsabers; larger crystals, some sources claimed, could potentially power super-weapons that could drain stars and destroy entire planets. The obtainment of even one kyber mine would be hugely beneficial for the Brotherhood. Sirrus, of course, had come with ulterior motives. If the ancient Jedi Order or the Sith Empire had indeed used Assur to excavate kyber crystals, they no doubt had settled here. This in turn meant that potential troves of artifacts and relics could conceivably be located, and – more importantly – seized for Sirrus’ possession, to aid in his enlightenment and his thirst for even greater power. After all, if kyber crystals of substantial size could fuel a superweapon, perhaps a superweapon was here as well?

Much to his disappointment, however, weeks of searching had proved fruitless. Sirrus had traversed the better part of five continents hoping to detect via long-range scanners any sort of quarries or ruins – Sith, Jedi or otherwise – but had found nothing remarkable. Granted, he did encounter the remains of humanoid settlements, but these were long abandoned, left to crumble into the refuse and dust that made up Assur. He also on occasion came across odd, predatory creatures, beasts crafted by a malignant nature to survive even in the harshest, yet still driven to emaciation by the rarity of prey. Raptors swooped from the sky to attack Sirrus as he walked, but with little effort he used his telekinetic powers rooted in the Force to bat them away, sending them squawking in a ruffle of feathers and talons. They were quite annoying, but Sirrus detected that they were strong in the Force – not capable of wielding it, obviously, but innately corrupted. It was, he theorized, not so much their bleak environment that had made them brazen, capable killers, but the Force itself. There were some Sith-settled planets – Korriban, for instance – where the dark side was so potent it affected even the wildlife. This meant that Assur did indeed have some lingering connection to the Sith, but what? Were there hidden tombs containing Sith lords and their prized possessions somewhere? Or was it all vanished, the dark side’s present vigor a mere shadow cast from eons past?

“A waste of time,” Sirrus grumbled aloud as he stood atop a cragged ridge, watching bolts of thunder crackle on the horizon. His speeder hovered idly down the slope, an old Lhosan Duster he had borrowed from the Brotherhood for his mission. His shuttle sat just a few miles away, coated in dirt and grime kicked up by endless gales. A stiff gust kicked up the charcoal-colored hood and cloak he over his adept’s robes, and he tightened the gingham scarf wrapped around his lower face with a gloved hand. Whatever secrets Assur contained – if it contained any at all – eluded him. He had lost days searching in vain, days he would never get back, and this rankled him bitterly.

He had taken a few steps toward his speeder when he suddenly felt a tremor from beneath. The ground started to wobble, slightly at first, but quickly shuddering harder. A surge threw him backwards, flopping on his back. The once dead, docile landscape abruptly came alive, like a mad animal joggling its prey in its teeth. The earth lurched back and forth, and the air filled with wolfish, malicious noises: rumbles and roars, the splitting of stone. Cracks in the terrain expanded from narrow slivers into yawning pits, swelling outwards in waves. At first smoke billowed from the crevices, translucent and wispy, before turning into a thick roiling vapor, at last giving way to sparks, popping embers, and finally pillars of fire. Apocalypse had come in just a few fleeting moments.

And then, from the largest breach, a woman appeared.

Sirrus’ mind was screaming, but inertia quelled panic. He was frozen, afraid, even paralyzed. A scholar of the occult, he had read about – and even witnessed – such disturbing perversities and horrors that a layperson would have thought him jaded, dulled to the shocking and terrible. The truth, Sirrus knew, was that there was no becoming tired or weary to the abhorrence the universe contained. Most beings in the galaxy dwelled in serene oases of blindness amid a dismal desert of eternity. While some civilizations boasted impressive technologies, enabling them to lengthen their lives and travel throughout the stars, their conceptions of reality – and their positions within it – remained largely unchanged. If all beings possessed even a fraction of the hidden knowledge Sirrus had encountered, they would doubtless renounce science and industry, retreating into the simplicity and blissful ignorance of primitive agricultural subsistence. Or, more likely, they fall into madness from the revelations, just as Sirrus himself had done. He would be first to admit that his hunger for mystic mysteries had come at the cost of his own sanity, untethering him from soundness of judgment.

As such, the thought did occur to him that the woman emerging from the shattered earth was a hallucination, a product of his fevered mind, perhaps the subjective effects of one of the many elixirs he had consumed to gain deeper understanding of the Force. He denied this, however, as there was something about the experience more real than reality, that it somehow rang truer than the “normal” world. He felt a sensation, an awful one, as if he were trapped in the sticky dingy gloominess of some cosmic basement, or drowning in the empty frosted eddies of a refuse-filled ocean. Yet, as appalling as it was, it felt somehow familiar, as if he had *always* felt this feeling.

“What are you?” he asked, but not in a demanding tone, but instead with the pleading and big-eyed voice of a toddler entreating information from an adult.

The woman shimmered like heated air, a slender crystalline apparition. Her features were unmistakably feminine: long glimmering hair, a vertical brow, round cheeks, lush lips. Her body, however, was so skinny as to be epicene, an afterthought fading into nothingness the closer it came to her legs and feet. Her eyes, however, demanded strict attention, and Sirrus could not break free from their strong yoke.

“Lesser beings have given me many names,” she said, her voice deep, echoing. “Death, darkness, oblivion… None are truly adequate. And who are you, little thing?”

Sirrus struggled to fill himself with some semblance of confidence. “I am Sirrus, a member of the Sith, an adept in the dark side of the Force!” His words carried not so much courage as the pathetic peevishness of an embarrassed inferior being.

The glistening woman responded with laughter – low, heartless laughter. “An ‘adept,’ is it? It is good you do not call yourself a ‘master,’ for I would have killed you for that presumption.” She smiled, bemused. “You have a name, then: ‘Sirrus.’ How quaint. The natives of Assur gave up names a long time ago. They came to see that names, identities were meaningless: illusions constructed to deny they really were nothing but containers of ambiguous thoughts and desires. They accepted they were as insignificant as single raindrops in a continual rainstorm, each falling into a cold and nameless void.”

Sirrus straightened, trying to find the resolve not to shrink before this petrifying entity, whatever it was, whatever had given it birth. “What natives of Assur do you mean? The settlements I found here were deserted millennia ago.”

The woman took a quizzical expression. “Is that why you came here, Sirrus, member of the Sith, adept of the dark side? As an anthropologist? An archaeologist?”

Chewing his bottom lip, Sirrus decided to risk honesty. “I read that Assur contained rich deposits of a mineral called kyber crystals. Do you know of them?”

A vicious cackle bubbled from the woman’s throat like a geyser. “Gone, gone, long gone! Dead and gone, just as the two factions that fought and died over them.”

“You mean the Jedi Order and the Sith Empire.”

The woman shrugged. “More useless names.”

Lifting a trembling hand, Sirrus pulled the scarf from around his face. The windstorms had stopped; in fact, everything was still, eerily so. “Did the Sith make you?”

The woman frowned deeply and, with the flick of her wrist, hit Sirrus with a psychokinetic flood of energy so robust it snapped all his bones and liquified all his organs. He collapsed, a corpse, like a bag filled with sand. With another gesture, however, the woman returned him to life – mending every injury, down to the hairline fractures, in an instant. Sirrus, wide-eyed, breathed in air haggardly, like someone just saved from suffocation. He felt the pain of his death along with his resurrection; he wanted to scream, but every effort came out as a cough, each more taxing than the last.

“I have no patience for hubris,” the woman said coolly. “I am so much more than any of your ‘Sith Lords’ could have conceived, little thing.” She stared at him intently, tilting her head to one side. “I can see in your thoughts you are genuinely curious. You want to unlock the power of the secrets this planet holds. Very well. I will show you.”

Stunned, Sirrus could only expel some air with a whiff of gratitude.

The woman waved a hand, and the clouds above parted, revealing massive ancient starships battling overhead, firing at each other, exploding in eruptions of flares and metal. “Long ago,” the woman said, “your ‘Jedi’ and ‘Sith’ fought over Assur for the crystals you spoke of. Every century or so, the planet would change ownership. Through it all, the Assurian natives lived and died, alternating between casualties in a conflict irrelevant to them and working as labor, mining the crystals for whomever ruled them at the time.” The spaceships disappeared, replaced by moving images of crimson-colored aliens with spindly bodies loading vehicles laden with crystals. “The Assurians tore up their world for as many of the crystals as they could find. In so doing, they destroyed the very environment that made life possible here. They came to see their possession of this rare crystal as a curse, a cancer they had to remove. When they mined the last crystal and no more could be found, they celebrated, for it meant they would be left alone.”

Sirrus could see starships overhead again, but not attacking; rather, entering hyperspace and departing from orbit around Assur, leaving behind an empty sky.

“This did not mean that peace came to Assur, however,” the woman continued. “The consequences of the mining took their toll. The ecosystem suffered and a series of natural disasters followed. Competition between the various Assurian nations led to a series of devastating wars. Famine and plagues ensued. In time, the greatest thinkers of Assur came to a consensus: existence is nothing more than continuous suffering. There could be no solace, no lasting harmony or order, just a constant battle for survival. While the Assurians wailed and withered, time licked a finger and turned the page.”

The images changed again, this time showing some of the crimson aliens, dressed in ceremonial robes marking them as political or spiritual leaders, extorting crowds with speeches told with flat affect. The demeanors of the audiences were uniformly morose, bordering on apathy, even in the faces of the children who watched with their parents.

“A new movement spread, one predicated on a simple truth: that consciousness and self-awareness were mistakes in their evolution. They denied their senses of self, gave up their naming practices, and gradually adopted a social norm of anti-natalism.”

Sirrus arched his eyebrows. “They stopped breeding?”

The woman shrugged again. “Why sentence new lifeforms to the monstrous punishment of reality, if reality ruins everything and everyone? In a few generations, the Assurians died away until only a few hundred thousand remained across the globe. Another movement began – a revivalist form of the original – that advocated suicide as the logical next step for society. They set a date, and on that day, in their homes, the last remnants of Assurian civilization exercised their free will to escape the torment of their condition. On that day, I was born: an avatar of what you call the Force’s dark side.”

Sirrus shook his head. “The Force is either serenity and harmony or passion and strength. Suicide is the way of the weak, the choice of cowards and the defeated!”

The woman sneered. “You know nothing, little one! The Force permeates all living things, and what is the common denominator of all nature but chaos and murder?” The woman began walking, and all around her the wasteland that was Assur sprouted life. Trees jumped from beneath the soil, big gnarled roots keeping them tethered to the ground. Huge blades of grass that reached almost to the knees shot up in all directions. Insects, large and small, buzzed and chirped, flew and crawled, and soon animals – birds, reptiles, small mammals – also appeared. What had once been desolate wastelands was now a lush, thriving jungle. “Judging from your thoughts, your basest consciousness, this is how you conceive of nature, isn’t it? So many beings – ‘advanced intelligences,’ or so-called – romanticize nature, or anthropomorphize it. You let it into your hearts and try to find some special connection with it, even claim it is erotic. But, look – look!” The woman pointed to a large blue bird with beautiful plumage pecking at and choking down a plump beetle. “Nature is nothing more than survival, the crude, fundamental law of kill or be killed. If there is an accordance in nature, then it must be the accordance of overpowering and mutual blood-shedding. Yet every living thing here – everything, save you – lacks awareness of its condition, of life and death. Whatever pain and suffering that beetle experienced, it was spared fear of its own suffering.”

Sirrus pointed to the bird munching on its meal. “By the same logic, the bird derives no pleasure, either from the hunt or from the food it eats. When I draw power from the Force, I feel the strength running through my veins, might at my command. It is only through conscious awareness that I feel that satisfaction, that contentment.”

The woman laughed her acidic giggle. “Whatever delights or thrills you feel, little thing, are meaningless compared to the unthinking anarchy by which the universe operates. You must realize that you are merely eating morsels left by gorging chaos.”

Sirrus could feel the hatred boiling up in him, taking the place of his fear. He knew this peculiar presence possessed god-like power, and he felt completely at its mercy – if it had any at all. This lecture on existential angst, however, did not feel like it was meant to satisfy his inquisitiveness, but that it was a knife in his side being twisted, slowly and deliberately. He wanted to know where this discourse was going.

“I concede that life is inherently meaningless,” he said, trying to conceal the exasperation in his voice, “but that does not mean individuals cannot *choose* to give it meaning. In the absence of any higher power, any everlasting truth or values, we define our own purpose. For the Sith, our purpose is clear: freedom through power.”

Closing a fist, the woman turned to Sirrus. He felt his throat closing, the flow of oxygen cut off to his brain. His boots, in defiance of gravity, lifted from the now fertile earth and he hovered, helpless, choking. “Freedom from what? Power over what? Do you even know?” She spat the words out, glazing them with contempt. “There are none free from death, or the knowledge of death and all that entails! The Sith grasp at the power to defeat mortality, to either extend their lives or to create legacies so that their names will ring out through the future. And yet your kind always fails – *always*.”

Sirrus fell to the ground, the invisible grip released. He teetered on the brink of cognizance, but he felt an almost overpowering impulse to lapse into sleep, to succumb to the weakness that the woman had instilled in him. He felt even more keenly now the fact that, for all his supernatural skill and knowledge, there were beings greater than he.

“From your thoughts, I see you comprehend that the things your ‘Jedi’ counterparts believe in are delusions: honesty, peace, justice. Yet you yourself hold on to your own comforting, misleading narratives: the nobility of struggle, the ambition of greed, the vitality of aggression. You are nothing more than lumps of decaying flesh on degenerating bones. Just like the ‘Jedi’ you despise, you numb yourself by placing artificial limits on your own self-awareness. All Jedi, just as all beings, follow winding roads of confusion, assuring yourselves you are individuals when you are just overly-evolved organisms laughing and screaming, parading about in a forever dream.”

Sirrus could take no more; he needed closure, resolution. “So? So?” he answered angrily. “What is the point of this tedious pessimism? You want me to kill myself, too? If so, death does seem preferable to listening to this monotonous prattle! Do it, then!”

“Death is more than you deserve, little thing,” the woman said. In a flash, she vanished from where she stood, reappearing mere inches from Sirrus’ face. This close, she emanated a chill that made goose pimples appear on his skin. Her breath carried no warmth. “If I cannot open your mind, then I will break it. Ready for enlightenment.”

She forced her way into his mind, and he was impotent to resist her. There, she found the kernel of his understanding of the Force: its binding all living creatures together, the architect of every definite entity as well as the setting in which it creates. Everything emerged from the Force, he knew, whether good or evil, emitting from either the light side or the dark side, deducible to the same pervasive, spiritual energy. The dark side, he also knew, was not the mere vacancy of goodness, a void created by the absence of virtue. Some Jedi philosophers had proffered this theory, a means by which to assuage their perception of a single, omnipotent Force with the duality of good and evil; for them, only goodness was true, and evil illusory. This was, of course, a fiction.

“Good,” the woman was saying inside his head, “you at least see the truth. Evil *is* real. All beings, even the basest ones, have a visceral recognition of evil that is disclosed through our emotions. In our core, we all know we possess the capability for evil, the seeds of the dark side. When those seeds grow and blossom, there is no diminishment. No, the opposite. Evil makes you stronger, more forceful. Evil is not latent, defined by lack or deprival, precisely because the most highly evolved beings in the universe are capable of both greatness and evil – and often great evil. You are face-to-face with it.” The woman smiled a predatory smile, an act of brutal dominance, feral and primal.

“The dark side represents change, evolution,” Sirrus argued meekly.

The woman sent pangs of agony into his brain, a conflagrant migraine searing the insides of his skull. He tried to let out a scream, but it came out a miserable whimper.

“You fool! The dark side is the most rudimentary force in the universe! It is a *primal will*. It is what drives everything; it is what drove the first sparks of life from the primordial ooze. It is the passionate nature inside us, the primal drives through which we assert our existence in a cruel nature indifferent – even hostile – to life. Fear and anger are not intense emotions in and of themselves; their intensity springs from a primal compulsion intrinsic to life. All life is grounded in the dark.”

“What… What of the light side?”

The woman smirked. “I will give the Sith credit for knowing this: *The light side is a myth*. It is a conspiracy against all species, a conspiracy of fabricated optimism. Sentient beings convince themselves that they have a higher nature, turning their drives into creative forces rather than essentially destructive ones. They deny their self-will, reducing it to pure self-preservation when their true nature is to dominate and exploit. They use that great error of evolution, consciousness, to create for themselves constructs like ‘selflessness,’ ‘forgiveness, ‘compassion.’ They talk about some sort of generalizing loving that they cannot even define if their lives depend on it! They drug themselves with delusion, feed on an all-natural opiate, and believe they are drawing on something higher than themselves. Do you want to know why the dark side of the Force is stronger and more tempting than the light, little one? It is the dark and true nature of all life.”

Sirrus shook his head. “The light side is real. Its power is real.” He had crossed paths with enough Jedi to know that their connection to the Force was genuine.

“Yes, the light side is real,” the woman confessed, “but it is something that should not exist. It is a philosophical contradiction, a wrongdoing, a farce, a misrepresentation of disastrous nature. The universe is out of reach of any species’ want for purpose, and it will not supply any meaning to us. The light side, like consciousness itself, is a mutation that makes us unfit for life, not altogether different from a breed of animal that becomes immobile due to the development of excessively heavy antlers. When users of the Force fool themselves into thinking they serve some higher calling, or even that they are a person and not a puppet to biological and chemical processes, they are in effect just pinning themselves to the ground. But you I will free from the burden of intellect.”

The woman peered into Sirrus’ eyes, prepared to fry the soul behind them, to scramble what vestiges of sanity could be found there. She observed, however, that there already existed madness, the product of a thousand brushes with mayhem and mystics, a hollow space where once a pure soul had been. She had expected to find the orderly, arrogant mind of an aspiring Sith tyrant, but instead she found the bedlam and utter confusion of a frayed and frazzled psyche exposed to more than most humanoids could tolerate. She did not feel admiration, for there was nothing to admire in such a lesser being; but she did see an opportunity to create an agent of pandemonium and anarchy.

Sirrus, released, fell to his knees. He looked up at the woman with hungry, pleading eyes. She offered no more answers. Rather, she began to dissipate, losing shape and form, mixing into the air. He wanted to ask her why she had spared him, but something held him back. Perhaps it was the fear that asking would make her reconsider, and she would will him out of existence with just a modicum of effort.

“I will come to you in dreams,” the woman said, and then she disappeared.

A long time passed before Sirrus stood again, before he found some element of composure after his encounter. He had no marks, no empirical evidence to prove what had happened, nothing he could share with someone other than his words, his disjointed memories already tainted by imperfect memory and his dysfunctional mental state. When he looked around, he saw the same Assur he had witnessed when he had first landed, with the squally skies and rugged earth. Lightning bolts fell in the distance and far-off thunder rolled. He knew no one would believe him if he tried to relate what had happened, if he attempted to verbalize the impossible, the awesomely strange.

Eventually, he made it back to his ship, ready to depart, empty-handed but with a mind even more mangled than when he had landed. As the exit ramp closed, Sirrus heard the ringing of a cheerful, freezing yell of laughter. It was, in some odd way, the fitting melody to append an ephemeral rendezvous with some enigmatic nightmare.