

Wrathus strode the autowalk alongside his ally and teacher Darth Malgus. The steady rap of their boots on the pavement; the tick of a chrono counting down the limited time remaining to the Republic.

The Sith smiled from behind his mask. This city, this planet, was covered in the wealthy trappings of peace. Lies, all lies. This place stood as a beacon to those weak minded fools who opposed them. This kind of decadence fostered only complacency and weakness.

Wrathus could smell his prey, the Republic saw itself as the protector of the Galaxy, and he would show them that there are hunters in that Galaxy.

They would all bleed.

His master had plans for this opulent pile of filth. They would leave it broken and ruined. He knew this, he had known it from the moment Malgus had accepted him as his student.

“What are you thinking of, Veradun?” Eleena asked.

Only Eleena called his master by his given name, a beating or worse awaited him if he chose to use it.

“I am thinking of fire,” The Sith Lord said, the respirator partially muffling his voice.

She walked to his master’s right, her gait a stunning display of her physique. She was beautiful and dangerous, Wrathus could clearly understand why his master had chosen her as his mate. She clucked her tongue at his answer, eyed him sidelong but said nothing.

As they walked through the plaza, Wrathus observed his master, he seemed to take in everything but not pay it any mind. He stood out amongst the citizens of the Republic, cowed, armored under his cloak, but walked with purpose.

“This is a beautiful world,” Eleena said.

“Not for very much longer.”

Malgus’s words seemed to catch the Twi’lek off guard. “Veradun...”

It sounded like she wanted to say more but either couldn’t find the words or chose not to share them.

“You may speak your mind Eleena, Wrathus is our ally.”

She wasn’t looking at Malgus, instead taking the scenery around them, before looking at the masked Sith and offering him a small smile. He inclined his head slightly and she looked up at his master.

“When will the fighting end?”

Wrathus laughed to himself. “Hopefully never.”

Malgus silenced him with a hand. “What do you mean?”

“Your life is war, Varedun. *Our* life. When will it end? It cannot always be so.”

“You choose to fight beside me, Eleena. As Wrathus has. You have killed many in the name of the Empire.”

The lavender skin of her cheeks darkened to purple. “I have not killed for your Empire. I fight, and kill, for you. You know this. But you... you fight for the Empire? Only for the Empire?”

“We fight because we are Sith, girl.” Wrathus almost hissed the last word.

“Silence apprentice.” Malgus barked. “No. I fight because that is what I was made to do and the Empire is the instrument through which I realize my purpose. The Empire is war made manifest. That is why it is perfect.”

Eleena shook her head. “Perfect? Millions die in its wars. Billions.”

“Beings die in war. That is the price that must be paid.”

“As it should be Master.” Wrathus smiled inwardly, his master’s philosophy always interested him. Malgus rarely spoke his thoughts, so to hear him speak on such matters were a pleasant gift.

“The price for what? Why constant war? Why constant expansion? What is it the Empire wants? What is it *you* want? Veradun? Wrathus?” Eleena inquired while staring at a group of children.

“Want is not the point. We serve the Force. The Force is conflict. The Empire is conflict. The two are congruent.”

“You speak as if it were mathematics.”

“It is.”

“The Jedi do not think so.”

“The *Jedi* are fools.” Wrathus spat.

He could feel the anger rising in his master. “The Jedi understand the Force only partially. Some of them are even powerful in its use. But they fail to comprehend the fundamental nature of the Force, that it is conflict. That a lightside and a darkside exist is proof of this.”

The way Malgus said that last line he obviously wanted this conversation over, Eleena had other ideas.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why conflict? Why would the Force exist to foment conflict and death?”

Malgus sighed, clearly agitated. “Because the survivors of the conflict come to understand the Force more deeply. The understanding evolves. That is purpose enough.”

Eleena stared at him with an expression that showed she did not understand. Malgus’ tone sharpened.

“Conflict drives a more perfect understanding of the Force. The Empire expands and creates conflict. In that regard, the Empire is an instrument of the Force. You see? The Jedi do not understand this. They use the Force to repress themselves and others, to enforce their version of tolerance, harmony. They *are* fools, Eleena. As Wrathus said. And they will see that after today.”

For a time, none of them said anything, and the hum and buzz of the city filled the air between them. When Eleena finally spoke, her voice lacked the conviction of before.

“Constant war will be your life? Both of you? What of our life? Nothing more?”

“We are Sith warriors,” Malgus said as Wrathus nodded in agreement.

“And things with us will always be as they are?”

“Master and servant. This displeases you?”

“You do not treat me as your servant. Not always.”

“Yet a servant you are. Do not forget it,” Malgus answered with a hardness that Wrathus knew his master did not feel.

Her lavender cheeks darkened to purple, with anger not shame. She stopped, turned, and stared directly into Malgus’ face. She authoritatively jabbed a finger into Malgus’s armored chest.

“I know your nature better than you know yourself. I nursed you after the Battle of Alderaan, when you lay near death from that Jedi witch. While your *apprentice* was off slaughtering soldiers. You speak the words in earnest -- *conflict, evolution, perfection* -- but belief does not reach your heart.”

The pair stood there staring at one another. Wrathus quickly realized that the world had fallen away around them, only each other existed in that moment. In a flash, Malgus grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to him. She did not resist and pressed herself against him. The Sith Lord slipped his respirator to the side and kissed her roughly.

"Perhaps you do not know me as well as you imagine," he said, voice unmuffled by the filter of the respirator.

"I think I do know you," she said defiantly.

They smiled at each other and he released her. Malgus replaced his respirator and checked the chrono on his wrist.

Malgus's comlink received a message. He tapped a key to decrypt it.

As he read the message Wrathus could feel a surge of energy shoot through his master. It was time.

Malgus keyed something into the device. He took one last look around, as if to imprint in his mind what this planet looked like before they lit it aflame.

"Come," he said to them, and picked up his pace. His cloak swirled around him. So, too, his anger.

Wrathus fell in step with his master and smiled behind his mask as he fed off the rage that was emanating from his master.

Moments later Malgus received another transmission. He read it before speaking. "Ninety seconds."

Ahead, they saw the four towers surrounding the stacked tiers of the Jedi Temple, its ancient stone as orange as fire in the light of the setting sun. The civilians seemed to give it a wide berth, as if it were a holy place rather than one of sacrilege.

They would reduce it to rubble.

Malgus walked toward it and hell walked beside him.

---

Statues of long-dead Jedi Masters lined the approach to the Temple's enormous doorway. The setting sun stretched the statues' tenebrous forms across the duracrete. They walked through the shadows and past them. Wrathus heard Eleena reciting some of the names.

"Odan-Urr... Ooroo... Arca Jeth."

"You have been deceived," Malgus whispered to the statues. "Your time is past."

"We kill them all." Wrathus hissed allowing his hatred to seep into each word.

Wrathus actually wished that more of the Jedi Order's current masters were here, instead of on Alderaan playing at politics or failing to stem the tide of war elsewhere. But, even with their absence, the Temple was not entirely unguarded. Three Republic soldiers, blaster rifles in hand, stood vigilant near the doors. He could feel two more on a high ledge to the left.

He could sense Eleena tense, but thankfully she did not falter.

"Fifty-three seconds." Malgus whispered.

The three soldiers, wary, watched the trio approach. One of the spoke into a wrist comlink, most likely asking his superiors what to do.

They would not know what to make of the two Sith and their associate. Despite the war, the fools felt safe here in the cradle of the Republic. They would learn of their mistake.

"Stop right there," one of them ordered.

“We cannot stop,” Malgus said, too softly to be heard by anyone other than Wrathus.

“Not ever.” Wrathus replied to his master.

---

The Sith let their anger build with each step they took toward the Temple’s entrance. The Force responded to their emotional state, caught them up in its power until they were awash in it. Wrathus could feel the seed of fear growing in the soldiers’ guts.

“I said *stop*,” the lead soldier said again.

“Do nothing,” Malgus said to Eleena over his shoulder. “These are mine.”

“I’ve got the two on the ledge.” Wrathus announced.

She let her hands fall slack to her sides and fell in behind them.

The three guards spread out into an arc as they approached them, their movements cautious, blaster rifles ready. The entrance to the Temple, a fifteen-meter-tall opening in the edifice’s façade, loomed behind them.

“Who are you?” the guard asked.

“Your death.” Wrathus hissed.

The last word hung in the air, frozen in time, as Malgus drew on the Force and augmented his speed. The hilt of his lightsaber filled his hand and its red line split the air. He crosscut the guard before him, putting a black canyon in his chest, continued the swing through the guard on his left, and with his left hand used a blast of power to drive the third guard into the Temple wall hard enough to crush bone and kill him.

In the same moment Wrathus ignited and flung his lightsaber at them in one motion. Guiding it with the Force in a

flickering red line that impaled one through the chest. Reaching out with the Force he grabbed hold of both his weapon and the second guard. With a jerk, he yanked the guard off the ledge and sent him careening to the ground with a sickening thud. In the same motion, recalled the blade to his hand. Both Sith deactivated their weapons and hung them from their belts.

The roar of a rocket pack drew their attention. On a ledge above the Temple’s entrance, the Mandalorian Malgus had hired rode the fire on her back to a high window on one of the Temple’s upper tiers and disappeared within. She’d join them inside.

“Twenty-nine seconds.” Malgus noted.

Wrathus took his position to his master’s left while Eleena took the station to his right, and they entered the Temple.

The sun at their back cast great shadows before them, inky black heralds of the Jedi’s destruction.

The Sith’s boots rapped against the polished stone floor. The hall extended before them for several hundred meters. Two rows of elegant columns reached from floor to ceiling on either side, framing a processional down the hall’s center. Ledges and balconies, too, lined both sides.

The presence of more guards and Jedi could be felt to left, right, and before them.

“Twelve seconds.” Malgus whispered.

Motion above and his right, then to the left, drew Wrathus’s eyes. Curious Padawans looked down from the ledges above. They will wish they had stayed away.

Ahead, half a dozen robed and hooded Jedi dropped from the balconies and took station in the hall. Another pair of

Jedi descended the grand staircase at the end of the hall. One's Force signature radiated power, confidence, the other untapped potential -- a Master and his apprentice.

As one, the eight Jedi moved toward the trio, and the trio moved toward them.

More and more Padawans gathered on the balconies and walkways above, sparks of light-side blasphemy flickering in the Sith's perception.

The more powerful Force signatures of the approaching Jedi pressed against Malgus and Wrathus, and the pairs against theirs, the power of each distorting the other.

In Wrathus's mind the countdown continued.

The space between the trio and the Jedi diminished.

The power and rage within him grew.

They stopped at two meters. The Jedi Master threw back his hood to reveal blond hair graying at the temples, a handsome, ruddy face. Wrathus knew his name from the intelligence briefings -- Master Ven Zallow.

But Wrathus could care less about the Jedi Master. It was his apprentice that he was focused on. The young man flipped his hood back. Red, shaggy hair almost fully covered a bony, anguished face. A blaster shot left a mark reaching from just under the right eye, running towards his left nostril and ending on his left cheekbone leaves a painful burden of forbidden love. His name is Kade Rinslow, he was one of the ones Wrathus had come to kill.

The six Jedi Knights accompanying Zallow and Rinslow spaced themselves around the trio, to minimize maneuvering room. The Jedi eyed them cautiously, the way they might a trapped predator.

Eleena put her back to Malgus's. Wrathus could hear her breathing, deep and regular.

Silence ruled the hall.

Somewhere, a Padawan cleared his throat. Another coughed.

Wrathus and Rinslow stared into each other's eyes but exchanged no words. None were necessary. Both knew what would unfold next, what must unfold.

The chrono on Malgus's wrist began to beep. The slight sound rang out like an explosion in the silent vastness of the hall.

The sound seemed to free the Jedi to act. Half a dozen green and blue lines pierced the dimness as all the Jedi Knights ignited their lightsabers, backed off a step, and assumed a fighting stance.

Rinslow's weapon leapt to his hand and its cyan blade sprang to life as he pointed it at Wrathus. The Sith responded by unhooking his own weapon and bringing the crossguard hilt to rest in a two-handed grip in front of his chest.

From behind, the whine of the hijacked drop ship's approaching engines broke the silence.

Wrathus did not need to turn. The Jedi's reactions were more than enough.

The Jedi Knights stepped back another step, looking past the Sith, uncertainty in their expressions.

Rinslow never broke eye contact with Wrathus and tightened his grip on his weapon.

The sound of the drop ship's engines grew louder, more acute, a prolonged mechanical scream.

Wrathus watched Rinslow's eyes widen, heard the shouts of alarm from throughout the hall, then the screams, all

of them soon overwhelmed by the roar of the reinforced drop ship slamming at speed into the front of the Temple.

Stone shattered and the Temple's floor vibrated under the impact. Metal bent, twisted, and shrieked. People, too, bent, twisted, and shrieked. The explosion colored the hall in orange -- Wrathus could see it reflected in Rinslow's eyes -- and the sudden flame drew the oxygen toward it in a powerful wind, as if the conflagration were a great pair of lungs drawing breath.

The Sith did not turn. They had seen the attack thousands of times on computer models and knew exactly what was happening from the sounds they could hear.

The drop ship's enormous speed and mass allowed it to retain momentum and it skidded along the Temple floor, gouging stone, trailing fire, toppling columns, collapsing balconies, and crushing bodies.

Still the Sith did not move, nor Zallow and Rinslow.

The drop ship skidded closer, closer, the sound of metal grinding over stone ever louder in Wrathus's ears. More columns collapsed. Eleena pressed against Malgus as the flaming, shredded vessel slid toward them. But it was already losing speed and soon came to a halt.

Dust, heat, and smoke filled the hall. Flames crackled. Shouts of pain and surprise penetrated the sudden silence.

"What have they done?" someone called.

"Medic!" screamed someone else.

Wrathus heard the explosive bolts on the specially reinforced passenger compartment of the drop ship blow outward and hit the floor like metal rain, and then the hiss of the hatch.

For the first time, Zallow and his apprentice looked past the two Sith, Zallow's head cocked in a question. Uncertainty entered their expressions. Wrathus licked his lips.

A prolonged, irregular hum sounded as the fifty Sith warriors within the drop ship's compartment activated their lightsabers. The sound heralded the fall of the Temple, Coruscant, and the Republic.

Wrathus took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The scent of fire and death filled his lungs. He smiled behind his mask, laughed, and activated his lightsaber.

"Now we cut out the heart."

---

Master Zallow and the six Jedi Knights near Wrathus leapt back and up, flipping at the top of the arc of the leaps, and landed in a crouch twenty meters. All except Rinslow, who only stared down his blade at Wrathus.

"May the Force be with you all," Zallow shouted to his fellow Jedi, and lit his blade.

Dozen more Jedi poured out of the hallway behind him and flowed down the staircase, the blades of their lightsabers visible through the smoke and dust, a forest of green and blue oriflammes. The Jedi did not shout as they charged, but the rumble of their boots and sandals on the floor sounded like rolling thunder.

"Remember your mission my apprentice." Malgus ordered his student.

"Of course Master." Wrathus said never looking from Rinslow.

The Sith charged out of the carcass of the drop ship. Wrathus made note of the warrior leading them; Lord Adraas, a rival of his master.

Wrathus let loose a guttural roar, like the sound of a hungry, rage-filled beast. Before closing the gap between himself and Rinslow in a single leap. Bringing his blade down in an overhand slash meant to split the Jedi in half. Rinslow brought his blade up to block the strike with one hand, but quickly had to take a two handed grip as the over seven-foot Sith's might could easily have overpowered him. Ducking out of the way, the Jedi spun around and crosscut for Wrathus's head. But the Sith brought his blade up in time to block the attack. Wrathus howled at the young Jedi, before unleashing an onslaught of hacks and slashes. Rinslow was able to parry and counter the attacks but was being forced to retreat. Wrathus attempted to split Rinslow's head open but the Jedi blocked the strike again and again.

Frustrated, Wrathus would deliver a stiff push-kick to Rinslow's chest, sending the Jedi skidding backward ten meters. Seeing an opportunity, a pair of Jedi knights leapt to attack the Sith. Sensing the attack, Wrathus lashed out with a blast of Force energy sending one of the Jedi flying into a stone column. As the other brought his blade down in a wide overhand slash Wrathus spun out of the way. Whirling around in a rapid arc, the Sith's blade flashed around and bifurcated the Jedi in half at the waist.

Standing from the strike, Wrathus began to advance towards Rinslow and the Jedi answered by approaching the Sith. Each broke into a run and closed the gap between them. Meeting in a swirling mass of blue and red light. Their blades crackling in opposition to each other. Rinslow drew on the

Force and using a trick of the blade managed to disarm the Sith.

The Jedi followed the saber hilt as it sailed through the air. This would prove to be his one fatal mistake as Wrathus never moved his sight from the young man and instead reached out and grabbed the man by the collar with both hands and lifted him off the ground. With Force augmented strength Wrathus slammed the young Jedi into the stone floor. Following through the arc of his motion, Wrathus flipped over Rinslow never releasing his grip and using the arcing motion flung the Jedi like an arrow into a nearby column with such force that the stone cracked and the entire column groaned under the weight of the floor above it.

Rinslow staggered to his feet after landing on the floor and shook his head to clear the fog of pain. He was just getting his feet when another Jedi shouted.

"Kade! Above!"

The young man looked up just in time to see the column begin to give way. He dove out of the way as the entire mass came down in a great cacophony of sound, sending shards of stone scattering everywhere and belching out a mighty cloud of dust.

Rinslow coughed and covered his eyes from the particles. In that moment he felt the Force seize around him and he was yanked off his feet. Flying through the air he fought to break free. Finally succeeding, he failed to orient himself. It was in that moment that he saw it; Wrathus leaping through the air, his blade held overhead, and Rinslow had no way to block the strike.

Wrathus savored the moment when the Jedi brought his arms up in an act of instinct to block the incoming attack.

They did little to stop the sizzling line of red as it came down in a vicious arc, splitting the Jedi in half from head to groin.

Landing Wrathus heard the Jedi's corpse hit the floor in two wet thuds. Smiling to himself he stood.

"One down."

---

Wrathus surveyed the battlefield like someone looking over a buffet. So many options. He could clearly see his master flinging Jedi left and right with the force. Eleena was ducking sabers and firing blaster shots like mad. He watched Lord Adraas leap into the middle of a squad of Republic soldiers and punctuate his landing with an explosion of Force energy that cast the soldiers away like dry leaves. As a Jedi leapt towards the crouching Sith Lord, Wrathus shouted.

"Lord Adraas!" Wrathus, harnessing the Force, leapt at inhuman speeds to reach the man and block the Jedi's saber just as it would have taken off Lord Adraas's head. Parrying the strike and countering into a whirling slash that left a smoldering 'x' in the man's chest. He turned to the kneeling Sith.

"My lord, are you alright?" Wrathus inquired while offering the man his hand. Adraas took his hand and regained his feet.

"I am fine. You have my thanks." He said no more as a pair of Jedi landed before them, blades at the ready. The Sith puts their backs together and prepared for combat. At that moment, just as he would have struck at the Jedi before him, Wrathus felt his master's rage abate for a long moment before a shout of hate, raw and jagged, rocked the area.

Power went with the shout, shattering a nearby column and send stone chips scattering like rain. Wrathus, like many others, watched as Darth Malgus leapt at the Jedi Master Zallow and engaged him in a heated duel. He tore himself from the sight as he heard the Jedi shout and charge.

He could feel the Dark Side radiating off Lord Adraas and Wrathus fed off it as the pair engaged the Jedi. Wrathus parried a wide slash from the Jedi and returned the favor by aiming a low cut at the man's legs. The Jedi leapt over the slash but was caught off guard when Wrathus dashed forward, and took the Jedi by the throat. He held him in the air, gagging, the Jedi's green eyes showed no fear, only pain. Wrathus laughed, spun around, and flung the Jedi at Lord Adraas.

The Jedi's body slammed into the Sith Lord's back causing him to stumble slightly and lose focus. He was straightening up when a searing pain pierced his chest. Looking down he stared in abject horror at the crimson line protruding from his chest. He strained to turn his head to see the limp dying body of the Jedi, being held to him by Wrathus as the Sith pulled his blade out of them both. Both bodies slumped to the floor with a thud. As the life faded from him, Adraas could hear Wrathus speak as he stepped over them to engage the Jedi he had been facing.

"And that makes two." Wrathus howled in triumph as he closed the gap between himself and the Jedi. His lust for battle so palpable that he would have slain anything, Sith, Jedi, or otherwise if they were before him. He wanted, nay needed, to kill another and to do so with his hands not his blade.

As he advanced the Jedi stepped up and aimed a crosscut at his head. He blocked the strike with his blade and drove his knee into the woman's stomach. The blow folded the Jedi in half, dropped to her knees. Wrathus brought his right foot up and slammed her head into the floor with his Force-enhanced strength. Smiling with sick satisfaction, Wrathus looked around breathing hard. The battle swirled around him and he reveled in being at the center of the chaos.

He deactivated his weapon. Hanging it from his belt he drew on the Force, and then drew on it more. The air around him seeming to bend inward and darken around him. He allowed his perception to extend out. He could feel all those around him, the blots of Sith darkness and the pinpricks of Jedi light. He sought out the nearest point of light and grabbed hold of it with the Force. Pulling it towards him, he caught the Jedi by the throat. And in one savage motion, tore it from his neck. The body slumped to the floor as he nested deeper into the Force. He felt another approach him, he lashed out with a blast of energy that hit the Jedi like a heavy mallet and sent them to the ground.

He was the Force, he was the Dark Side manifest. He turned and unleashed a wave of power that sent ten individuals skidding across the floor and through the air. Howling with rage and power he leapt into the fray determined to slaughter everything.

---