

## I – Precision Strike

The shuttle lurched as the magnetic clamps tightened their grip on the drab grey durasteel hull cladding of the target vessel. Their approach had been masterful, slipping cleanly between the baffles of the ship's pulsing sublight engines. The pilot of the craft had rendered them invisible to the sweeping sensor packages dangling at the ends of stalks jutting from the prominent bridge section. There was no doubt he was skilled. It took a special talent to make a landing craft as large as this vanish as he had done.

"Where did they find this guy?" remarked a voice from behind a polished black plastoid helm

As the creaking settled, the Demolitions Special Operations team took their positions around a circular portal in the boarding boat. Each soldier knelt to access the task in front of them. Aside from the unique stripes of red paint decorating their helms and the various weapons and tools slung over shoulders, they were indistinguishable from one another. This was an elite force, far from the faceless masses of Stormtroopers that made up the army regular contingent. A cylindrical piece of machinery manifested in the center of their circle, pulled from a nearby stowage system by one of the strike agents. Without prompting, the got to work. They were a well-oiled machine, pulling on stabilizing bars and power cables in a choreographed ballet. In a matter of seconds, the laser breaching drill was ready to carve their entry point from the hull of the target. The portal's mechanical iris actuated, rotating as it pulled into itself, leaving enough room for each saboteur and their kit to slip in one by one.

"I mean it. He's good." The soldier chirped, raising his voice over the crackle of the breaching laser that was now chewing away.

The durasteel hull took a moment to show color, black, then red, then orange and finally burning white. Little droplets of slag spat from the growing abscess appearing behind the beam's directed energy. In a moment's time, a disc of solid durasteel armor fell into a darkened void. It clanged off the grated flooring of a mechanical catwalk deep in the ship's guts. A faint red light was the only thing illuminating the corridor below.

The puerile soldier spoke again, directing his words towards the Shuttle's cabin and the faceless pilot. "You better be here when we get back, new guy."

A deeper voice hushed his commentary. "Stow it, Pogo. It's work time."

"Sorry, Cap. You're right." He replied, in submission to the Captain's order.

"In and out boys, we're not here to make any new friends. Doc, on point. Wiz, Doors. Hammer, you're the mailman. Pogo, you're silent. I've got the rear. Let's do this." The Captain said, tapping each on the shoulder as he doled out orders.

One by one, Each soldier dove through the hole in the floor. Doc first, Then Wiz, Hammer followed, and then the talkative Pogo. The Captain tossed a quip of his own towards the cockpit before chasing his team into the dark halls of the vessel.

"Kid is right. You better be here." The voice trailed off as he dove.

The pilot nodded a silent acknowledgement.

The corridor they had found themselves in was dark, dimly lit by service lights every twenty or so feet. Each slung their weapon to their shoulders. Their loadouts were different from the standard Storm Trooper, they carried customized E-11R blasters, an array of sidearms, and a DLT-19H Heavy blaster among them. They leveled their weapons and pressed forward. The vessel was quiet, aside from the groans and pops of hull as it adjusted to the endless stress of space travel.

So far, everything was going as planned. Doc, who stood a hand taller than the others, led them forward deeper into the ship's innards. The soldiers only paused to let their expert slicer open the blast doors that isolated the maintenance levels of the ship into air tight compartments. They were constantly scanning and stepping forward with the parcel they had been tasked with delivering in tow. Within a matter of minutes, they had arrived at the structural base of the vessel's Hypermatter reactor.

Such a large ship had an awful thirst for energy, and the reactor fitted here output enough to rival the miniature suns nestled in the belly of the venerable Imperial Star Destroyer. When prompted with enough thermal detonators, the reaction would become unstable and breach the containment fields. The result of introducing such a violent catalyst would be a rapid plume of fifty-million-degree fusion fire consuming everything in within the immediate space that the vessel was occupying. It would deliver the message that the Empire wished to convey to the TRF with punctuation. The message was simple: Die.

The tight corridors opened into a cavernous chamber. Before the strike team was the reactor, quietly droning away like the snuffles of a slumbering dragon. Each member of the team cleared one of the cardinal directions and scanned the gantries and catwalks that snaked around the hollow void in the heart of the ship above them. The coast was clear.

"This was too easy." Hammer said, slipping the weighty sack from his shoulder.

It hit the ground with a rattle.

"Careful with those Ham. You're right. Something is wrong here." The captain whispered.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end with the sound that broke his thought.

*Snap-Hiss.*

A calm voice, feminine but stern, brought them around on their heels.

"We weren't expecting visitors." She said.

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The pilot sat in stone silence in the jump seat of the boarding shuttle. His quintet of wards had been gone longer than expected. Behind the tinted eyes of the slightly modified TIE Pilot helmet, his eyes were shut. He bathed in the silence, projecting his mind beyond the confines of the self-contained life support system of the vacuum suit into the passenger compartment behind the cockpit. His arms propped up his posture, as his vision slid down the hole like a serpent. In flashes, it jumped to the next corridor junction, following the path of open doors. They led him in bursts, through the arterial maze to the heart of the ship. Even in the washed-out color of his astral vision, there was no doubt of the color of the weapon. It was the shocking green that only a high quality kyber crystal could produce. He

stood, pulling his bunched flight suit down to better fit his form. His form slipped from the shuttle silently into the dark below.

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Doc had hit the deck as soon as the first exchanged volley of blaster fire ceased. He'd been hit, struck in the shoulder. The blast knocked him off his feet, but hadn't put him out of the fight just yet. He leveled the black carbine from the ground and let loose a trio of bolts. The first found no purchase, zipping off to find a distant wall in the reactor chamber. The second and third found a pair of adjacent soldiers, dropping each and leaving a hole in would have otherwise been a contiguous formation.

Hammer had leveled his heavy repeater, laying out a hail of crackling red flares with a single squeeze of the trigger. Some found their marks, but the volume of fire found more effect in suppressing the advance of the Jedi and their forces. Behind the roar of the blaster, he stepped forward to his downed squad mate. With his free hand, Hammer grabbed Doc by the collar. He dragged his compatriot back to the structural pillar that held up the massive reactor containment cell where the rest of the team had taken up defensive positions. Both soldiers picked off an additional dozen or so TRF soldiers in transit. Their bodies were starting to pile up on the cold durasteel floor, but the horde was growing with each passing second.

"We're toast! There's too many of them!" Pogo screamed.

"Keep shooting! Aim for the Jedi!" The Captain replied as calmly as he could.

"She keeps deflecting my shots! We need to get out of here!." The nervous soldier quipped back.

"Standfast, soldier. Wiz, tell me you have a link to Command or at the very least our bus driver?" the veteran queried of his communications operator.

Wiz, silent as ever, just shook his head. He gestured to the Holographic display of the ship's interior, it showed their route in, which should have been displayed in green, had changed to red. All of the doors in and out of this room had been closed. They were trapped.

The fire fight continued for what felt like hours, but was likely only a matter of a couple minutes. Perceived time often slowed in tenuous moments such as this.

Their combined years of operating experience would not be a match for the numbers they were facing. Intelligence had indicated that the vessel would be operating on a skeleton crew, not transporting hundreds of soldiers. Intelligence was always wrong. The group continued to fight, even against the odds. Hammer readied the satchel of explosive charges as they huddled in close to the structural pillar. None among them had failed a mission, and they would continue that streak into death.

Hammer passed the detonator to the captain. A small red button flashed behind a transparent safe toggle. The Captain held the baton to his chest and breathed deeply. His thumb found the hinged cover, flicking it open, and his finger came to rest on the illuminated button.

"Ten seconds. Let them get closer. It's been an hon..." he was cut off by Pogo

"CAP! THE PILOT!"

"If he hasn't left already, Pogo, I'm sure the Empire will compensate his family appropriately." The Captain sighed, rolling his eyes in his helmet.

His first thought was disappointment that he'd die dealing with Pogo's dim-witted understanding of their expendability, and by extension the expendability of a single pilot. Yet there was something about the inflection in the boy's tone gave that thought pause. It wasn't concern for the pilot, it was an imperative, directing him to look. He rolled to his side to peer around the side of the pillar. Sure enough, their pilot casually strolling into the chamber. He parted the growing sea of soldiers as he made his way directly towards their Jedi lead. They were either too amazed by the fortitude of courage it required to engage them in such a manner or more likely, they were close enough to see that he held a detonator trigger of his own.

The Jedi took shelter in the center of the swarm, letting the bodies of the soldiers stand between her and the infiltrators. The way the pilot moved was like a shark, and each soldier a small fish scattering away from him. The Jedi stepped forward, waving her fingers as she spoke inaudible words. The pilot didn't falter. Even from such a distance, the captain could see her eyes widen. He raised his fist and actuated the detonator.

In harmony, the infiltrator squad instinctively grabbed onto the pillar they clung to. Something had told them to hold on as if a voice compelled their fingers to constrict around the piping. In the distance, a series of rhythmic thumping like a far-off war drum shook the floor. In an instant, a towering blastdoor split open shorn as if it were made of paper or cloth. They pulled themselves close to the durasteel pillar.

Explosive decompression was violent, even when you were expecting it, but the inhabitants of the vessel clearly had not been. What followed was pure pandemonium. The soldiers that had settled in their advancing ranks had been tossed around the room, as if each was one of the flecks in a snow globe. Likewise, the Jedi general had been cast about the room. The vibrant emerald blade she had been brandishing, disappeared into the siphoning pull of vacuum. The air in the room funneled through the blast door in a maelstrom of squirming bodies. The TRF forces were drawn, bouncing off metal bulkheads and crates, free of the reactor chamber. In the blink of an eye, the room was empty, save 6 souls clad in black.

In the midst of the chaos, the Captain swore he'd caught a glimpse of another lightsaber flashing. But the color was unlike anything he'd seen before, not quite red, not quite orange or yellow. He could only describe it as all the colors of a sunset. He was more concerned with how the pilot had managed to remain stationary, bound to his position as the others around him were ripped into the cold abyss of space. The whole experience felt surreal. He shook off the thoughts; he'd have time to process later. As the pressure normalized in the room to the exterior vacuum, they loosened their grips. Being special operations teams, their missions may include the odd void excursion, so their armor contained a short-term life support system. It kicked to life and each of the Stormtroopers drew in the stale bottled air.

The ship's automated catastrophic response system kicked on. The gaping hole where a blast door once sheltered the innards of the vessel blinked a chilling blue as a vacuum shield came to life in its stead. Streams of gas flooded into the room, quickly equalizing the pressure in the chamber. Wiz pointed to his holographic projection, indicating to the captain the recent changes to their departure plan. Their path back to the shuttle illuminated in streaks of green. The way was open.

“Ham! Get those charges spread out. Pogo, help him. Wiz, help me with Doc. It’s time we move.” The Captain said, raising to his feet.

“WAY TO GO FLYBOY! THAT WAS GRANKIN’ AWESOME!” Pogo screamed to the anonymous pilot, scooping up a charge of Thermal Detonator packages and rushing to task.

In a matter of moments, all six members of the assault team were rushing through the labyrinthine corridors they had traversed to arrive at the target. The pilot had a head start, and seemed to open up the gap further as they followed back to their vessel. The Soldiers chalked that up to carrying an injured team mate. In the Captain’s experience, pilots weren’t that athletic, nor were they that brave. Soon, they were hoisting each other up into the shuttle’s hold. Pogo followed the pilot up into the shuttle, Hammer lifted Doc through the iris entry hatch, Wiz helped and followed. Looking back over his shoulder the Captain took one last glance into the vessel wondering to himself what exactly had transpired here. He shook his head and hopped up into their departure craft.

The iris portal snapped shut and before he could sit, the shuttle’s magnetic clamps released and the ship was moving. The ion engines roared, and the dull thud of objects bouncing off the hull could be heard. Through the small portholes, the captain caught glimpse of limbs sliding past the windows. They were clad in the off mottled white of TRF soldiers and they were numerous. Their pilot was vicious, he seemed to have steered the shuttle through the peppering of corpses intentionally. The team pulled off their helmets. Wiz and Hammer were attending to Doc, pulling bits of bandage and a bacta spray from the medkit hung on the bulkhead. Pogo hooted and hollered, bouncing around the shuttle. It was obvious how he’d earned the designation. After 30 seconds, the Alert light flashed in the cabin, indicating they had reached sufficient distance to light the charges. Fingering the small silver baton, the captain depressed the red plunger.

A Hypermatter fusion reaction, when introduced to a violent and explosive catalyst, takes a parabolic growth curve. There is a brief period where the hypermatter is being super-heated and the growth of the reaction is still containable, most ships have these systems built in to prevent such catastrophic events from happening. However, if separated from the ship control, the reaction would run away in short order. Strategically placed detpacks had cleanly excised the reactor’s connection with the ship at large and lit the proverbial match to start the destructive reaction.

The Acclamator Class Assault ship was a relic of the Clone Wars. It was an excellent vessel in it’s time, but nearly 60 years of war, modification and refitting, had rendered it structurally weak. As the reaction inside the belly of the beast grew more violent, the TRF ship dubbed The Epsilon, began to crack. In a matter of moments, the hulking delta shape of the craft was split from stem to stern. Broken along the keel, the roaring fusion reaction had broken the shackles of its containment fields. It consumed the vessel, rupturing the highly pressurized fuel tanks adding additional plumes of fusion fire. The Acclamator had been known for its robust armor, but the intensity of the explosions had shred it like tissue paper. Within seconds, the reaction reached critical mass. Like the stars that they replicated, it collapsed on itself. The gravitation disruption generated by a micro black hole had scattered the ribbons of the vessel throughout the local sector. The resulting plasma burst shook the shuttle and tipped off a series of claxons and alert lights.

The rumbles faded and the Captain peered out of the porthole, keen to see that their target had been eliminated. Command was hoping that at the least, they could delay the arrival of The Epsilon. They would consider an incapacitation of the vessel a rousing success. The complete destruction of a sizable tonnage of the enemy starship contingent would make them war heroes. He could finally retire. He stood, wiping his brow processing the events that had occurred. They were up against insurmountable odds, and from the ether, a simple pilot changed everything.

He turned. He needed answers. The Captain pressed forward into the cockpit. The Pilot sat silently, reconfiguring the power management system to help recharge the shields that had been sapped by the stellar energy they had untethered. He rested his arm on the vacant co-pilot's chair.

"Good work back there. You really saved our asses." He remarked quietly.

The pilot looked up from the ship's management screen, staring at the trooper behind darkened lenses. He nodded in acknowledgement of the compliment. His eyes turned back down to the data flowing over the screen, swiping instructions for the power allocation. The concentric red circles around the silhouette of the shuttle began to flash yellow, then solidified, then began to flash green.

"Not the talkative type. I get it. I just have two questions. How did you not get sucked out into space with the rest of them?" the Captain asked, spinning the chair to sit.

The pilot didn't answer. He pointed to his boots. They were slightly more robust than a typical pilot boot.

"Magnets. Very clever." The soldier settled into the co-pilot position. "Did they teach you that in flight school?"

The pilot quizzically tilted his head.

"I'll take that as a no. What is your designation pilot? I am putting you in for accolades. Meritorious Service to the Empire for valor in battle." The captain said, leaning in, hoping to see a bit of the pilot's face behind the round eye covers.

Again, the pilot did not speak. He turned back to piloting the craft. He lifted a single finger to the side of his helmet. It had been too dark to notice it before, but now under clear running lights, the captain could make out against the polished gloss plastoid helmet a detail of matte finish. It was a single black Spade.

There had only been one unit that he'd ever worked with that wore such iconography. They had been disbanded, which was the Empire's polite way to say Executed, when their leader had been. No official report had ever been published. They had been loyal to him and him alone, and they were thusly a liability to the new regime. The Black Aces.

The captain looked again. There was a fine detail he had missed. In old numerals, a single strike of polished black appeared at the heart of the Spade shape. One. The captain processed it, blinking. Ace One.

He immediately stood to attention, before bowing to a knee.

"...You..." He stammered.

The pilot said nothing. He raised a single finger between the two bulbous protrusions that accepted the life support tubing, where his mouth would be.

“Not a word to anyone.” The captain said.

## II – Terra Firma

Dust whipped around as the boarding ramp hit the dry soil of Seraph. In file, soldiers clad in the polished white plastoid armor of an Imperial legionary poured from the Sentinel Class Landing Craft. Seventy-five refined killers were being unleashed into the field to do as they had been conditioned to do. The carnage that would follow in the coming hours would be unspeakable. When word of this hit the cities of the resistance would be forced to surrender or be butchered at the hands of these refined machines of war.

Their helmets damped the shock of departing a dark vessel into the shock of sunlight. They immediately advanced, clearing room for the next shuttle already on approach. A hulking YV-4 crushed surrounding terrain nearby, depositing a load of venerable AT-ATs. Soon, an entire regiment was pressing forward into the enemy position. They rolled in like a tide, bringing waves of blaster fire down upon the shores of Seraph.

The hiss pop explosions of the AT-ATs’ heavy laser cannons, rang out several hundred feet ahead. There was a tinniness to them, like the high octave harmonics of a dropped metal tin echoing off the walls of an empty hangar bay. In tempo with the blaster fire, a melodic beat of the landing footfalls of the walkers drove them the enemy back. The AT-AT excelled in this role. Psychological terror was its primary armament. Purposeful and deliberate, the titans advanced clearing paths for the soldiers to mop up what they had missed.

Their heads swiveled from side to side, vigorously spotting and subsequently eradicating the pockets of guerillas clustering together in the narrow trenches that encircled their camp, the walkers would make this beach head safe in short order. As the soldiers pressed up into the trenches, units with flame belching weapons moved in. Their fuel spit from the muzzles, sticking to the flesh and clothing of the rag-tag resistance force. The brutality of the weaponry came in the cause of death, asphyxiation. The flames would burn so intensely, the air in the victims’ lungs would be drawn out and consumed as they burned. If they were lucky, the pain would render them unconscious while the flames strangled them.

A single stormtrooper was a dangerous and brutal destroyer, but they rarely operated alone. In such formations they didn’t engage in battle, these were massacres. It wasn’t long before the imperial command barges were planet bound. The field commanders had established a cordon of relatively safe area and were readying the next stage of the plan.

Supremacy on the ground was at hand before the first boot hit the ground, but the fight in the air was proving difficult. A flurry of gnat like star fighters and repurposed repulsor craft were beginning to harass the elephantine armor. An underwhelming contingent of fighters had been sent by the fleet to assist landing operations. The fleet and the Army always had contention and the coordination between the two branches had never really reached its full potential. The “eyeballs” seemed to lazily chase off the fighters, but couldn’t keep up to finish the job.

A trio of Jedi fighters managed to weaken the legs of one of the AT-ATs, causing it to buckle. The immense weight of the walker brought the lurching to the ground. It erupted in a ball of flame as an additional flight of fighters let loose their energized plasma into the downed hulk. The Jedi fighters were offering enough distraction to cause the advance to stumble. Among the bodies strewn about the battlefield, most were the drab grey, green, and tan of rebel fighters, but an increasing tally of gloss white armor could be seen starting to amass in each three established fronts. The imperial war machine was being ground to a halt simply by lacking air superiority.

Colonel Shansi was barking orders to the fleet command and getting the same tempered responses one could expect of a casual requisitioning of non-critical materials from the Army's Logistics Group. He was on the edge of losing his first real command to a group of moisture farmers.

"Throne Copy? This is Spearpoint Actual. Request additional air support, these bugs are chewing us up! We need more birds in the air. Over." He croaked.

"Roger, Spearpoint Actual, Request for additional support acknowledged. Continue operations. Over." The voice came back over the monitor.

"Are they sending more, Colonel?" piped in a lieutenant.

"We'll get them when we're dead, Jaz. We need a solution to these fighters. Get more rockets out to our boys, issue each team to get some frags up in the air." The officer said, raising his ocular surveyor to pan the field again.

"Yessir." The lieutenant said, ducking as a pair of slim legged scout walkers were rapidly disassembled under another strafing fighter run.

As the orders were sent out by the team of communications officers, a tough group of soldiers clad in onyx stepped up onto the platform of the command bridge. The mobile fortress was being unfolded and erected by a swarm of workers, but the key operations points were already fully functioning. Each soldier had a distinct crimson stripe ornamenting his helmet.

"Captain, I am glad to see you. Are you and your boys ready for action?" the Colonel said, addressing the newcomers.

The Captain stood at attention, saluting before fully boarding the platform. He was taller and thinner than the average Storm Trooper and he had seen more action than an entire company of the soldiers out sweeping the field. His cadre of warriors slipped in behind him, each giving the quick salute to the officers on the deck. They were an elite Force and their unflinching posture spoke of their abilities.

"Aye, Sir. We were instructed to come to you directly. I understand you're having some difficulty with all these bugs." The captain said, his voice bearing the grit of an entire career in service to the Empire.

"Yes, Captain these petulant fighters are outclassing our Fleet's finest nerfherders." The Colonel said, sliding the cap from his head to twist in anger.

"That's why we've come. Someone wants to see you succeed here, and they have brought us with this message: 'One for up the sleeve'." The captain said.

The colonel looked puzzled hearing the message, it was cryptic and didn't offer him the comfort he had been searching for. Their situation was growing worse with every passing second and these commandos came with a riddle. As he opened his mouth to speak, the unmistakable screech of a TIE Engine filled the air above the platform. The sleek ship roared overhead, spitting a gust of wind strong enough to lift the caps from the heads of the other officers. It was a single fighter. He was furious. Some gift from the Navy.

Unlike the sluggish fighters issued by fleet command, this descending angel of darkness bore a trio of pylons each of which bore a jagged wing of solar panels. It was larger, more formidable, but somehow more graceful and faster than the standard fighters that had been failing defending the ground forces. It was a TIE Defender, the masterpiece of the TIE Series of fighters. Shansi observed the fighter with judicious scrutiny. The typical slate grey hull of the vessel had been painted black. It looked like a malignant specter, returned from the nether realm to exact vengeance. This fighter was not from the Fleet, they wouldn't dare break from habit and allow their faceless masses to customize their chariots.

It took to the air like a raptor, screaming as it turned in behind its first bite of prey. The quad laser cannons erupted with a volume of crackling green energy. The First Jedi fighter fell from the sky, careening into an upturned stump and spouting a gout of flame and black smoke. The hunter turned to the next morsel, and in a single inverting maneuver unleashed another serving of laser fire. The second Jedi Fighter sublimated in mid-air, raining smoldering bits of starfighter far afield.

In quick succession, another fighter had been eviscerated. The looping and arcing flight of the fighter brought up memories of Mon Cal ballet dancers, moving with such direct intention and grace. It was fluid and organic. The pilot had a way of making his vessel feel alive and that was noticeable in every calculated action. It slid in behind a fourth fighter, shredding it open with another strike of its quad linked talons. A pair of the would-be victims of this tyrant of the skies, thought it brave of them to give pursuit. They formed up and notched in behind the TIE. The Pilot had cut throttle, inducing a stall. The finches that were giving chase ripped past. Just as soon as it slipped, the blue glow of the Defenders engines roared back alive. Spewing a trail of ionized crimson behind it the bird of prey, locked its vision on the pair. Two alternating streaks of neon lime laser fire erupted from the tips of the bladelike wings, peeling open the hull of one of the ships. It stutters and rolled, colliding with its twin. Both arrowhead fighters fulminated, flashing like a crack of lightning as they fell.

The Colonel watched in amazement as their avenging spirit systematically terminated the cloud of enemy fighters. He hadn't thought to time it, but in the matter of minutes an entire squadron of Jedi fighters had been deleted from the airspace. Those that remained, quickly vacated their posts. This beast that occupied the skies above them was still hungry. Instead of remaining in the pattern of circling buzzards taken up by the remaining "eyeballs", this screaming nightmare dove at the remaining cannon emplacements. Flak cannons spat bursts at the Defender. It dove between them, leaving smoldering craters behind each dive. Over and over, it struck out. One by one, allowing for the mustering Storm Troopers to press into the installation. This demon was surely bringing its own breed of terror to the enemy. The enemy would cave soon.

The shadowy fighter opened a hole in the enemy defense and the officer watched as his brave soldiers poured in behind the precision strikes. The operators on the ground were taking the enemy position. It was a real sight to behold. The pilot of the ship had flawless technique and awareness of the battlefield. He seemed to always be in the right place to drop another target, as if he had practiced the

routine for thousands of hours as a flight demonstration. The Colonel wracked his brain, where could this unbridled predator have originated from.

“Sir. A gift.” The captain said, extending a hand to the Colonel.

Between his fingers, there was a single card. He offered it up to the Colonel, as a gift from pilot above. The card was pressed, there were no indications of printing or any kind of manufacturing. It had a quality to it that felt as though it had been birthed in the heart of some far-off world, almost as if it were a slice of rock cut microns thin. The Colonel’s hand trembled as he dared to take the card. The intricate designs etched into the back of the card had a fractal nature to them. The more he looked into the pattern, the deeper it went. The matte black finish of the card’s backing gave his fingers enough grip to keep hold as his fingers shook.

Shansi took in a quick sniff, summoning the courage to flip the offering over. From one rounded corner of the card to the others, there was a field of matte black. In the center of the field, a lonely symbol caught a hint of the sun and spat back a flick of light. It had been impossibly polished to a near mirror finish.

A single spade, with an antique numeral. One.

III – Ripples

A crippling chill sat in the dark night air. It clung to the high facades of coral and ivory tones, slipping off the polished stone and settling in over the city streets like a damp blanket. Fourteen hours earlier, a vibrant yellow morning sun light the colorful banners hung from market stalls and brought an illuminating warmth over a field of people. As varied as the patterns in the traditional local garb, the people of Tokare were a diverse and on this level one could see that they possessed the distinct ingenuity of the economically downtrodden. That bustling morning had long passed and the street was silent, the City was on lockdown and only the lowest urchin and miscreant dared rush from shadow to shadow. The city was stratified. High above the cold and wet streets, the administrators and robber barons of the Caperion system found comfort in their penthouse suites and luxury apartments. Yet, here, on the crumbling bed of concrete, the only comfort the masses could find was in the hopes of pulling down the tall towers and setting the course of their politics on an even field.

Had it not been for the clerics, with their tidings of hope and promise of the deliverance brought at the hands of another false prophet, the people of Tokare would probably have submitted to their fates long ago. The clerics, holed up in their five spired fanes, brought food and medicines acquired with the blood money tithes they had collected from the upper class in exchange for devotion and enlisting in ritual sacrifice to their cause. The Jedi armies were built on the backs of those who wanted most to believe their lies. What the Jedi were really after was unclear, but to say that they only wanted the people to enjoy the endless boon of a peaceful existence was the type of ignorant understanding they wished to convey to the populace. Keeping the mass of millions poor, uneducated, and dependent upon their handouts kept their coffers full and attendance at their sermons high. All of them clung to the idea that if they were to follow the Jedi, they could wrestle happiness from the jaws of a miserable and ruthless universe.

Lies, all of it lies. It started in the streets, worming its way deep into the core of the population. The Jedi were hiding something from all countless followers they had lured in. Not a single mystic in their

numbers slept in the gutter, having to stave off starving womprats or fighting off bands of brigands armed with vibroknives and ill intent nightly. They had come to rid the jeweled city of Tokare of this evil, all while keeping their boundless congregations in the same sad state they had always been in. There was no discussion of building infrastructure, fostering manufacturing, nurturing trade and commerce. Their economic promises were built upon falsehood fairy-tales of an all-benevolent Force and the now dead leaders which would bring that message of salvation to them all. They were false prophets.

The thoughts made him sick, grimacing with venomous disdain for the Jedi behind a faceless mask. He would the truth to this place. Ambition was the only way to elevate oneself beyond the limits of the circumstances of their birth. Strength was earned through vigorous pursuit of that ambition. This would break their bonds, not some dead Jedi soothsayer. He would deliver the universe's message personally: The weak shall perish at the hands of the strong.

An Imperial wolf pack, built of the only most vicious, disciplined and obedient killers, stalked behind him. Rumors had already permeated the public houses and darkened corners of the city. Phantoms had come in the night, stealing away their Jedi overlords as the city slept. The stories began as survivors poured in from the massacre that happened a week prior. The heavens opened, consuming an entire starship. A Demon, black as night, came from the skies, it tore the army apart and had acquired a taste for Elayan blood. The demon had summoned these phantoms. The end times were nigh. The faith of the residents was faltering. The terrors of the night were methodical, working up the ranks from the bottom. They were deliberately eating the snake tail first, letting the head flounder in the chaos wrought with each additional body. The body count was climbing each night, Sixty-Seven had been confirmed; seven knights, and six full defense patrols of elite guard. The fear in the city hung as thick as the fog that obscured the killteam's alley observation point.

"It is time." He said, croaking behind a vocal obscuration device.

The stone silent phantoms, clad in long black robes and tall thin helmets, moved towards the building and dipped into crevice between two towering pillars of architecture. He couldn't help but notice that the moniker the locals had given them had a certain accuracy to it, the guard appeared as though they hovered, feet hidden by the flowing ebony garb. Each carried a weapon, resembling a bardiche, a long curving axe-like blade of polished alloy at the end of a carbon haft. They undoubtedly appeared to the dirty and superstitious witness as ghosts or apparitions of judgement.

He wasn't used to wearing a helmet, it obscured his vision. He could smell his own breath; it was stale behind days and weeks of operating in secret. His body had a certain musk and his eyes felt heavy. This type of action was not his modus operandi, but it was paying dividends. His machinations were beginning to unfold, he would aid the Empire in their conquest, but the population would remember the horrors they had met at the hands of a faceless and nameless predator.

His hatred of the Jedi was only matched by his hatred of the leaders of this assault. He did not hate the Empire, in fact he loved it more than anything. He lusted over the throne. It had been his once, but it had slipped through his grasp. Now they sat in their high spots, forgetting the authority that his name once carried. That would change soon. They would soon remember and each of them would begin taking another look over their shoulders in empty corridors. Just as word of his unsanctioned actions had traveled in the city, so too rumors had flooded through their own armed forces. He'd earned favor

with several key players in the last weeks. The special operations group, a promotion bound Colonel, an entire flight of fighter pilots, a cabal of officers from the fleet, and the silent specters presently in his company were all indebted to him. It was an extortion racket. The day would come when he would collect on the debts and each had received a small reminder of that outstanding liability; A single black card. A few of them had bought in further, directly offering aid to his further his agenda. A few stood with him in this alley and others were on station around the city.

The alias was obscure enough, few of the Sith immediately key in on his identity. Others wouldn't believe it true, after all he was dead, supposedly. A thought brought a smile to his face; how fitting the ghostly imagery he had been manifesting was in the greater story of this conquest.

He turned, as their target was approaching. The Jedi had increased the frequency and numbers of their patrols. Masters had joined the ranks of the night wardens. It was the sort of morsel he could not resist striking. If they could show the city that even the Masters of the Force were Mortal, he could entirely break their confidence in the faith. There was no absolution, only submission or death.

In the middle of the street, between a series of flickering lights, he stood. The Jedi and their retinue approached. Their arrogance was unjust, they had no idea what they were walking into. They were expecting the phantoms to be a single assassin, everything they bit of fabricated intelligence they had received had indicated that.

"You must be our little boogeyman." The master said, casually moving his hand to his hip to rest upon his lightsaber.

The master would not draw first, that was not the Jedi way. He was hoping to siphon away bits of information that he could relay to his Lord, to bely the advance of the invasion force. Behind a silent mask, the phantom closed off his mind to the probing. He filled it with only one thing; Hatred.

"There is much evil in you, but it is not too late for you my friend. The path of darkness leads only to ruin. Be saved, surrender." The master spoke, lifting his free hand as if offering a literal peace.

There was no reply. A slight crooked hilt apparated into the phantoms hand. It was bound in the hide of some evil beast. The blade erupted to life, spitting flecks of superheated plasma to the surrounding area. It had fallen into disrepair and was teetering on unstable. It made him volatile.

"Very well. If you will not receive salvation, you are beyond hope." The master said, unleashing his beam of cerulean deliverance.

The pair of knights that accompanied him stepped forward as well, summoning beams of vibrant green and electric blue. The triad stepped into an attacking formation. The knights would attack on the flank, leaving the master to contain the brunt of force at the center of engagement. They moved quickly, but all too predictably. The shade's primary form was best suited for single engagement, but the trap would be sprung soon enough that he need only delay them. The typical salute of the way of the duelist was absent, its practitioner reserved that for foes he respected.

The younger Jedi had clearly been pressed into frontline service and had likely spent most of their time behind the pages of holo-texts. Their swings were slow and painfully deliberate, as if he were a mannequin that they could easily dismember. He sidestepped, sweeping his leg under the mousey looking Jedi. She collapsed, blind to the rudimentary strike.

Her fear bubbled up like the stink of a fetid corpse, but to the silent assailant it was an odor as deep and rich as fine incense. He breathed it in, he consumed it, he drank of its essence and was refreshed. It had been a long time since he had tasted this order of battle and it was delicious.

The second knight swung as if he were encased in a crystalizing cocoon of cryofluid. It was if he believed he could end the disciple of the Dark Side as easily as clearing weeds from an overgrown field. The master was stalwart and calculating. He was looking for cracks in the Sith's form. As a duelist, the Master surmised, the nightmare specter was unmatched. He could only be defeated by coordinated attack, too many angles of defense would overwhelm the Contention form.

"Nila. Crowe. Remember your training." He spoke, each word dripping with reassurance.

The Knights forms tightened as they adopted the strong handed double grip of the primary form. Their hammer blows were still as predictable and deliberate as before, but they had better execution. All the while, the Master stood defending each prodding thrust the featureless mask could aim at him. The group exchanged a series of strikes, counters, ripostes and katas. The engagement was intense enough to draw the Jedi Away from their contingent of guardians. The separation created the moment for the vipers coiled in the dark alley to strike.

They struck at once, drawing their long-handled weapons down through the unwitting squad of TRF Elites. Some had been run through with the blades, others cloven from head to waist, limbs had been severed, and their shrieks were short-lived. The strike had been precise. This was not an engagement with the enemy, this was an execution. Before the blood had even began to pool, the black clothed true born Imperial sons descended on the Jedi.

The wave of death visibly struck the Master, dulling his honed psyche. He writhed in pain, the horror of what had just befallen his loyal guardians manifested physical pain. His saber tip hung low. Behind the featureless visage of the haunting mask of the enemy, a low laughter began. The old man panted, stunned by the violence. His eyes rose to meet the enveloping formation of black robed acolytes. He swung at them like a drunkard swatting flies, random and uncoordinated. Sparks flew his directed attacks were contained by the Cortosis infused axes clutched in twenty hands by sure gripped warriors. From the high windows and street corners, faces began to peer out into the night. There were witnesses; Good.

"I can sense your anger, Jedi. Yesssss." The modulated voice hissed.

The pair of knights had become overwhelmed with their fear. They were outmatched in every way. Here in the street, a potion of terror and rage was beginning to boil. It would soon roil over and the zealots would falter. The woman and her scaled equal closed the distance, expecting to be met with more of the batting defense maneuvers they had previously encountered. Seeming empowered by the mire of negative emotion, the ghost moved quicker. His stance had changed, single strikes became strung together in a pressing advance. He targeted the weakest first. Predatory instinct drove the choice.

The woman was young and she was inexperienced in combat. She was a lamb, being drawn in for slaughter. The pressing flurry of aimed blows battered her. Like a small ship in a storm, her defense was subject to the command of the onslaught. She cowered under the force of each wave. She held her weapon as tightly as she could, but with each crash her guard opened.

“NILA!” the stocky knight cried as he raised his blade as if it were a cudgel.

His advance was met with a blast of unseen energy. Mid-step, he was stopped dead. He was airborne at the directive of a black gloved hand. The scaly and clawed hands pulled to the knight’s throat. His feet kicked, hoping to once again find purchase on the firm earth. With a clench of his leathery talons, the phantom crushed the soft tissues and cartilage in the reptilian Jedi’s neck. In a flash, the body was limp and discarded to the dirty concrete to rest with the other detritus that had collected in the gutter. The flashes of crimson and burnt orange were unrelenting. They had given no pause during the vulgar display of power. The phantom had been toying with them. The woman let out a scream of loss and unbridled terror. She was face to face with her doom.

The blade ran her through. She gasped for air, but none entered her lungs. Her eyes welled up with saline tears and she coughed up a spray of spittle and blood. Her hand clawed at the mask. It was her body’s death throes, a pleading panic driven response brought up by her primordial brain. The Jedi stared into the abyssal void of the mask’s visor. The rapid eye movements ceased and her life left her. The girl collapsed in a motionless heap.

The phantom scoffed, turning back to the Jedi leader. His hand rose, arcing volts of crackling blue white energy. They briefly found purchase, before the master’s defense could wrangle the lightning. The smell of ozone and seared flesh filled his nose. The execution squad was between the Jedi and path back to the facsimile temple in the heart of the city. He eyed it, hoping to flee. Encroaching step by step, the demon terror descended upon him. He turned to face. There was no escape, but if he could cut down the leader the black robes would surely scatter. They appeared only to take direction and would be rendered weak without the corrupted guidance that drove them.

The blades met in a clamber of buzzing crackles. At first, the masked weaver of dread was keeping pace, but clearly the Master was as he was labelled. His mastery of the forms found translation in action. The Sith began to struggle against a tirade of feints and true strikes. The blades swirled about, and were it not for the deadly implication of the conflict, the simpletons watching from above would have been amazed by the show of lights. On his heels, the wraith looked to a far-off rooftop.

He had made himself the target of such ire, that the master had been blinded. Like a bull, charging a waving toreador’s flag, the master could see only what was directly in front of him. There was only space for the target of his wrath in his mind’s eye.

The searing pain stabbed in the Jedi’s chest and his eyes bulged. The sound rang out echoing between the tall buildings, like a passing holo-tram in dire need of some crucial repairs. It buzzed, but was still full of a throaty depth. There was a resonance to it. It was the charged beam of a disruptor. The Jedi fell to his knees. Staring up as the morphing color of his enemy’s blade rose.

“Lord Lanis will cleanse you and your type. Evil will never prevail. The Force will set me free.” The master spat, clinging to his waning life energy.

“Lies to the end...I have set you free.” The oscillating voice intoned.

A single swipe. The head rolled forward, stopping under his boot. He trapped it like a child would do a ball, he bent down slipping something into the Jedi’s mouth, before batting it aside. A finger came up to his ear.

“Excellent work, Captain.” He said.

“Anytime.” Croaked back the encoded transmission.

Just as they had come, the haunting vanished into the night. The separated head rolled to a stop, cold lifeless eyes peering to the heavens. Pinched between the clenched teeth, a card. It bore a flat black background and in the center the sigil of a single spade, struck through with the numeral one.

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Epilogue.

“General Shansi has secured the Capital. Occupation forces are distributing rations and coordinating region officials for the Summit. We are snuffing out resistance cells as we speak. We will be in complete control in a matter of weeks.” Spoke the military advisor.

“Excellent.” The Empress replied, turning her eyes to the next supplicant.

“Empress, I have completed the investigation into the matter you had inquired about...It seems some form of splinter cell had infiltrated the city prior to our arrival. While their methods were certainly effective in weakening the bonds that the residents had with the Jedi, they aroused a great deal of fear and superstition in the process. It seems that those who held the faith believe that the ancient entities of the planet unleashed a demon, that flies on black wings and commands the spirits of the dead. The disappearance of the warship, the lone starfighter, and these phantoms. They say this demon was displeased with the corrupt Jedi. There is a growing notion that it is the Jedi that kept the masses downtrodden. The locals believe that our arrival was a sign. With the Jedi gone, the demon has left. There have been no more tall tales since our first soldier stepped into the city. The Empire chased off this demon. We can certainly use this to our advantage. These are not primitive people, uneducated and poor, yes. There is someone behind all of this. Our intelligence officers were able to get some details from the residents. It seems one of these assassinations was meant to be seen. The Demon left this.” A clear parcel was slid across the desk.

“What is this?” the Empress queried.

“His calling card, Empress. It cannot be traced; it is made of an unknown mineral. There are no biological markers upon it.” The man tapped on the sealed containment unit.

The huddled group of advisors and members of the war council glanced down at the evidence. Among them, there was a murmur. Some of them seemed to know something she had not yet understood.

“The fighter over the beach-head?” one pried of the investigator.

“Reports from the field indicate it was a TIE model D, TIE Defender, Ma’am. Not one of ours, Fleet command had sent only standard TIEs for surface detail. Witnesses unanimously report the vessel being painted. Black.” He said, clearing his throat.

“What does this mean?” The Empress replied.

“We have put our best researchers on the task...” he began.

“Get to the point.” She said, her impatience tempering the desire for all the details.

“Empress, before the fall of the Cocytus system, the Empire’s TIE Corps contained a secret squadron. Elite. Each member had a flawless individual service record and each was well connected in the fleet. They flew the standard TIE Defender, with one modification, each was painted black. The Black Aces served the Empire with distinction, but they were never directly loyal to the empire. Admittance to the squadron was based on the loyalty to an individual. One single individual. Ace One. We saw this as a liability and the throne instructed that this force be liquidated as a liability of allegiance.” He said, careful not to catch the Sith’s eyes as he spoke.

Shadow’s eyes scanned the plastic evidence bag. It contained a solitary item. The slab was palm sized. It was hewn from a single piece of matte jet-black stone. It bore no markings other than a single symbol, a mirror polished Spade, with a single strike through its core. The puzzle was coming together.

She first heard the name as a faint whisper. The one who spoke it could not contain the thought. Whether by elation, anger, or just amazement, the name had been spoken on the air. She glanced around the room. The news created an array of reactions. Shadow looked up at the officer. He nodded curtly.

“The Usurper. Thran Occasus. He has returned.” He said.