

Temple of the Desired One

Planet Myrkr

3 hours after initial contact with Plagueis

Ira knelt over the unconscious form of Jon Silvon, the Force flowing through his palms. The blaster rifle had struck his battleteam leader's side, tearing a hole through the human's synthweath body armor. The moments it had taken for Ira to drag the man away from the front line had cost him his consciousness.

Exhaustion seeped into the old Pantoran's bones as the hours of fighting cost the Jedi his focus. An explosion nearby rocked the interior of the Temple sending sandstone and debris raining down over Odanites. Ira leaned forward, covering the body of his fallen teammate, his own heart racing as the damage to the Temple grew as the conflict between the two Clans continued.

Seconds passed as the combatants took cover, the cacophony of blaster fire silenced only for a few heartbeats. Ira reached to his belt and withdrew a canister of bacta, breaking the seal and covering the remainder of Silvon's wound, now drawn small enough through his healing.

"You'll be alright my friend, stay here," Ira said as he pulled the man further behind cover, a small prayer to the Force accompanying them.

The Pantoran drew up to his knees looking around. His team and their accompanying escort had been pinned down. Less than half a dozen of their soldiers remained upright, against a seemingly increasing number of enemy forces.

"My Lord!" Sergeant Halsten called out to him while lifting his rifle to return fire as the battle erupted once again.

Ira slid into cover beside the man, taking a deep breath and drawing the Force inward, pushing aside the weariness that threatened to dull his senses and form.

"We received word, sir, they have pushed the enemy back from the temple and reinforcements are on their way. We just have to hold ou—" The man's words choked off. The man suddenly appeared to be gasping for breath, the rifle slipping from his grasp as he clawed at his throat, eyes bulging in fear.

"Throw down your weapons and surrender, Odanites. You will be taken as prisoners and your lives spared." A broad shouldered, lean man stood with his hand outstretched as if his intent was to crush the remaining resistance from the remaining forces of Odan-Urr.

Ira looked out from the makeshift barricade of a fallen pillar, his concern grew as the man beside him continued to gasp for air. The remainder of their soldiers hesitated on what to do when faced with one of the Plagueian Force Users, their remaining hope for rescue diminishing.

Ira felt his heart pounding with dread. Jon was unconscious and hurt, along with many of the others who hadn't lost their lives already. His frustration as being involved in such a futile quest for an artifact better left forgotten only added fuel to the dark misgivings he felt. How had the Force not warned him, given him some vision or insight to avoid the loss of so many? And yet a part of him felt as though he knew the answer: the artifact they sought was likely bound within the Force and held its own influence.

The brief lapse of thought vanished as he once again drew on the Force, looking to the nearest of their remaining soldiers, a woman whose face was hidden behind her helmet. He drew his hand up into a fist as he bolstered her courage with two simple words: "Keep fighting!"

Without hesitation, the Odanite leveled her rifle and took aim before firing, her years of training kicking in as her fear and hesitation were cast aside. Tisto Kingang's attention shattered as he drew a Force barrier around his body, his telekinesis faltering with a growl of anger. "I tried to spare you fools, kill them!"

The darkened interior of the temple bloomed brilliant as with the crimson glow of blaster fire being exchanged. Ira took a few calming breaths. He knew there was little chance they would survive the next few minutes unless circumstances changed in their favor.

Keep the injured safe, Ira projected his thoughts out to those around him. His own concerns quashed, pushed behind a barrier of concentration and faith in the Force to guide them through these moments.

At the same moment he turned to face the enemy forces, remaining low behind cover he sought the enemy Sith. Touching the twisted thoughts and finding to his surprise the frustration of the leader who's intent had been to keep his word. "Tisto Kingang... former Jedi?" he felt a sense of familiarity but the man was a twisted presence, almost as if what had once been pure within the Force was burnt, scarred and twisted. The Sith's presence was a cancer of anger and power. The battlefield fell away in the span of a few heartbeats as Ira delved into the Sith's conscious thoughts and feelings.

"I can sense your presence Jedi," Tisto was aware of him, as the two circled one another within the Force, each of their thoughts, intentions, emotions on display. Ira could feel the Sith probing his own thoughts, though more of a blunt instrument compared to his delicate unweaving of the other's thoughts.

"You should have let them surrender, they would have at least lived," Tisto spoke, though the Sith believed what he said. A sudden image filtered to the surface of his thoughts of Ira's execution as a Force-user and the soldiers sold into bondage to live their lives as slaves or gladiators for the entertainment and profit of Plagueis.

"What are you after? Do you seek slaves or do you seek glory?" Ira responded, seeking the man's true desire. It took only a moment to form the image of his fall at the hands of the Sith, the

Plagueian forces cheering and congratulating their leader, the praise he would receive from his superiors filling the Kiffar with pride.

“Yes, you understand. I would have accepted your surrender but this way is better,” Tisto responded, his thoughts clouded with the temptation of glory and power.

Ira steeled himself to the power that was tempting the Sith, he felt a small guilt for pushing the man’s emotions to take control of him. He had sensed Tisto’s willingness to spare them, his belief that they would have been better off. That sentiment twisted by the power of the dark side into a lie.

“Very well, face me directly then, let us decide the fate of this conflict,” Ira took a last calming breath before standing and moving from cover. He could barely hear the shout of distress from the Sergeant as they saw him face the enemy directly. A brilliant glow of sapphire blue sparking to life as the Jedi’s lightsaber ignited.

A stray shot from the Plagueian soldiers flew towards the Jedi, who raised the blade and deflected it harmlessly away from both sides of the conflict.

“Stop!” Tisto’s voice rang out calling an end to the firefight. The Kiffar stood and faced Ira directly. Voices rang out from each side as the two Force-users faced one another down, shouts of encouragement, shouts of dismay, bled away as the two still connected by their thoughts within the Force came to their arrangement.

“Your life for theirs Jedi?” Tisto asked.

“If the Force has willed it to be my time,” Ira responded.

“I look forward to being the end of the path you’ve chosen,” the Sith responded, his hands coming together in a small show of respect, the shock gloves covering his hands sparking for a moment with the impact.

Ira raised his blade, the brilliant glow illuminating his face, the fear, the doubt he had felt up until this moment fading away. He had succeeded in goading the Sith and knew he had to draw the conflict out as long as he could. He’d carefully shielded his intentions from Tisto during their exchange, while feeding the Sith’s desires.

The two closed the distance, the no man’s land that had formed between the last of the Odanites and the superior force of Plagueis. Despite the situation they could no more pull their gaze from the duel than they could contain their excitement or dread for its inevitable outcome.

Ira watched the younger man approach. His own steps led his two-handed grip on his lightsaber with purpose, ensuring he kept the blade between him and Tisto. He was surprised to find the Sith fighting without a lightsaber of his own. Tisto’s own movements were much quicker, circling

the older Jedi keeping his hands close to his face and his weight distributed evenly with each step.

Ira watched closely, with no intent to make the first move. He felt confident that should he strike down the Sith too quickly the remaining Plagueian soldiers had no intention of holding to the Sith's word. Their only hope would be to draw the duel out as long as they could and pray the Force would guide reinforcements to them.

A warning echoed through the Force from behind him, a sense of incoming danger that forced Ira to quickly turn and strike. The fist sized block of sandstone shattering as his lightsaber cut through it with ease, Ira cursed as he realized his error in being distracted by his thoughts. The older Jedi tried to turn in time, managing only to see the blow at the last moment as Tisto came close enough to land a powerful kick to his side.

Pain flared through his entire body at the impact, the Sith's body fueled not only by superior physical conditioning but the augmentation of the Force. Stumbling back, Ira lashed out on a backstep, his blade forcing the Sith back. Tisto's responding smile was nearly sickening to see, the man's features twisted by the influence of his desires to toy with and mock the Jedi.

Before his enemy could summon another telekinetic attack, Ira forced the pain away and struck forward. Relying on his training to guide his weapon, he used powerful sweeping blows to keep the Sith at bay. Tisto in turn danced out at the edge of the blade, circling and drawing the Jedi towards him. Ira brought his blade back over his shoulder and swung it forward driving the blade towards Tisto.

The Sith ducked the blade, rushing into the Jedi's guard driving his fist into Ira's exposed torso knocking the older man off balance and following with a spinning elbow that caught him flush to the side of the head. The Jedi collapsed, his lightsaber deactivating and falling away as he fell first to his knees and then fully to the temple floor.

Tisto circled the man in anger with a growing sense that something was wrong. This was no glorious battle to win him praise and recognition. This was an old man, this was a fool who thought he could stand against the power of a true Sith.

Realization finally struck: it was not the Jedi who was a fool. *He* was the fool who allowed his thoughts and emotions to be toyed with. They could have easily overtaken the meager resistance provided by the Odanites and yet he had called an end to things to satisfy his own ego and pride.

"Clever trick, Jedi, for that I'll ensure each and every one of them suffers for what you've done," Tisto spoke as he hefted the man by his collar. He kicked aside the lightsaber at their feet as he did so.

Ira coughed and sputtered, his vision swimming from the blow to his head. He felt sick and exhausted all at once as the concentration he'd used to fend off the weariness was shattered.

"Don't worry my friend, I brought help," Elyon de Neverse's voice broke through his faltering consciousness.

Cries of confusion and panic went up from the exterior corridors, followed by sounds of blaster fire, booted feet, and the other tell tale signs of Odan-Urr's reinforcements arriving. The assembled soldiers drew tighter knit, watching every corridor and entryway they could, the lights of their rifles illuminating as each exit seemed to be filled with incoming Odanites except for a single corridor from which they had originally arrived.

"Damn you," Tisto cursed drew Ira closer, dragging the faltering Jedi up. The Kiffar's fingers closed tightly around the Jedi's throat, a last desire to crush the impudent Pantoran. A second later he dropped his enemy as a new presence struck out at him. A woman with long brown hair and brilliant blue eyes that reflected the light of her lightsaber stood between Tisto and Ira.

"I will give you this one opportunity to retreat Sith, enough blood had been shed today," Elyon de Neverse stood rigid, her voice calm but the threat of a promise. She would die defending her comrades.

Tisto took stock of the situation, his pride bruised but certainly not so much of a fool to let himself or his soldiers be captured and pinned in. "Pull back! Pull back damn it!" the Sith took control of the faltering morale of his soldiers and led them in an organized withdrawal.

Ira lay on the floor struggling to remain conscious, a small smile lit the man's bruised and battered face and a silent prayer of gratitude to the Force for once again saving him. He slipped into unconsciousness.

"Glad you arrived when you did, Elyon," Jon Silvon's voice was weak, but the man had awoken laying on a stretcher beside several others as the injured were carried to transports awaiting them outside the Temple.

"I found Master Sorren after we were separated. It seems there were small engagements taking place throughout the Temple," Elyon responded, her gaze falling onto the senior Jedi and former Consul.

"Seemed like you could use a helping hand. Damn glad they fell for the illusions though. Alethia ordered a withdrawal from the temple once what we found what we were looking for. If Elyon

hadn't been looking for you we wouldn't have known you were missing until it was too late," a third voice responded.

"Thank you," Jon started.

"Just be glad they fell for the trick. If Elyon here hadn't been able to back down that Sith we'd have been in trouble," Turel replied, hurrying the formation to a nearby medivac where they began loading up.

"See you kids back on the transport home, good work."