**Death Walks Among Us**

Archangel Palpatine #7589

Some paths take us through a pleasant meadow, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the cool breeze winding its way through the grasses and flowers. Others… like this one… occur in darkness, away from the light and sequestered in a world which only the hardiest or desperate individuals would tread. Fear and sadness emanate from these kinds of places, and as a part of the sentient being condition, they occur in every city and town throughout the galaxy.

Coruscant was a world of cities, a stratified society where the powerful and rich stand upon the backs of the poor, desolate, and rejected. Those of wealth and status enjoy what passes for fresh air and sunlight on the urbanized junkpile, while the rest of society must survive on reprocessed air, reclaimed water, and fluorescent light stripping which blanches the skin and damages eyesight.

I had always felt a general sense of claustrophobia whenever not on an open world, especially when the buildings created canyons. Much larger than most of my comrades, I had become acutely aware that I did not always fit in spaces that they could, which I am perfectly ok with. But that unease and natural anxiety manifests as claustrophobia whenever a situation like Coruscant presents itself. I did not choose to come here; I was led here by the nose. The Children of Mortis were, in a word, cruel.

The Inquisitorius had known for a long time that the Children had eyes and ears within the Dark Brotherhood but had had little luck ferreting them out. So, when a series of clues started to crop up in remarkably consistent and direct fashion, the powers that be jumped at the chance. Only the Voice, Idris Adenn, had recognized the folly of this venture. If the Children had been so careful for so long, why were they suddenly slipping up, becoming careless, and allowing a trail to form?

Which is why he had turned to me. I am, in many respects, a blunt object. I am sent in when an affair of some nature needed a decisive, final, and generally blood end. The Dark Brotherhood’s attempts at sus out information regarding the Children of Mortis lacked finesse and subtlety, at least in comparison to that which the Children possessed. Clandestine operations and trickery could get your far in the New Republic systems, but an oranges-to-oranges battle would fail miserably. We simply did not possess individuals keen and sly enough to outwit the Children, but also survive long enough to report back. A dozen operatives had been lost on this campaign already.

I looked up through the transparasteel of the elevator car, watching as the last vestiges of light faded around the towering skyscrapers. As the shadow crossed my face, I could feel the slow fist wrap around my heart and squeeze ever so gently. It was enough to know that it was there, but not enough that I could beg off the mission. It was one of my many burdens to bear, and it helped to fuel me as I propelled myself through the avenues and tunnels of the undercroft.

My movements and gait were purposeful. I strode with vigor and direction, my eyes fixed on my destination, not swiveling side to side as if I were afraid or intimidated by my surroundings. In all my life, I had faced countless enemies, and survived crowded melees. Most who knew of me had come to fear me, or at the very least respect me. There was a trophy case in my quarters on the Warspite which sported two dozen lightsabers, clean and shiny as the day they were made, except for a bloody thumb print over their activators. My reputation, it was hoped, would precede me.

Nevertheless, those who did not know me by sight or name made way for me. It was not uncommon to see large, armored men walking through the underworld of Coruscant, but very few bore a long handle lightsaber at his hip, and a curved double saber at his back. My armor had been polished to a near mirror sheen, such that it reflected the fear-stricken faces of those poor souls in my way. I soaked in the fear, its pervading warm soothing my black heart.

Lost in momentary revelry, I almost missed the Ithorian to my left raising the disintegrator. It chirped a few strains of Ithorian that I didn’t catch and depressed the activation stud. The disintegrator belched a blue-orange ball of pure destructive energy, which lanced out at me across the promenade. My ligthsaber was up in a flash, but my body was already falling away. Lightsabers were rarely beneficial when responding to disintegrators, and mine remained dormant. The ball of energy narrowly missed my shoulder, scouring a long line through the pauldron, and vaporing a passing human, who was little more than an unfortunate bystander.

I wrenched myself to the side, my backward fall transforming into a roll, coming up beside a hawker stall selling meats in bread pockets. The Ithorian fired again, the disintegrator ripping through one of the corners of the stall, causing the grill to drop to one side, and starting a fire. I took a deep breath, trying to ignore the smell of burning grease and mystery meats. With a snap, I unhooked my helmet from my belt, and slapped it into my head. The pressure seal initiated immediately, and the cool fresh air of the conditioning system began to flow.

“I thought…” I mumbled under my breath, raising my lightsaber to near eyeline, “…it would take longer to draw them out”

The street devolved into mayhem as the civilians panicked. Violent emotions rippled through the crowd, washing over me like an oncoming tidal wave. Children screamed and clung to their parent’s hands, pulled along roughly in the throng. The various street vendors tried desperately to save what little merchandise they could from the stampede, and I saw more than a few wrenched from their feet by the press of bodies.

A blaster bolt cut a neat hole just near my head. I could smell the ionized metal and fabric fibers, could almost sense the momentary burst of heat and light which had missed me by inches. I looked up, my helmet swiveling to spot the newcomer to the party. A Sullustan with a blaster rifle peered down a scope at me, his diminutive frame hidden behind a stack of shipping crates. He had excellent cover, and I… I had almost nothing. Time for action, as Idris liked to put it, as upon us.

With a grunt, I bounded awkwardly over the slowly conflagrating hawker stall, and collected a fair amount of singe and smoke. My attackers adjusted their aim, peppering the boulevard around me. With a flick of my thumb, I activated the primary chamber of my new lightsaber, its viridian blade bursting forth. Designed by the Herald himself, the blade was extended, and the hilt featured a cross guard. Certainly, a heavier striking weapon, far more suiting my sensibilities.

The Sullustan tried his luck, leaning out of cover to gain a better angle on me. I caught his movement and curled my free hand into an enormous fist, before wrenching it downwards. Imbuing the motion with a generous portion of the ambient Force energy, I dragged the alien from his perch, toppling him off the building. He hurtled downward far faster than gravity would normally have allowed, and he crumpled in on himself as he slammed headfirst into the promenade’s heavy paving stones.

A flurry of bolts to my left announced another set of newcomers, a human and a Twi’lek, each sporting E-11 blaster rifles. They appeared to know what they were doing, resting their weapons on an overturned fruit cart, taking careful aim between shots instead of blasting away like amateurs. I batted away a few bolts, which careened harmlessly away. With a quick step forward, I drew on the Force again, unleashing it along the length of my arm, slamming the cart into the pair, knocking them from their feet.

The Ithorian had been quiet for a few moments, and with a glance, I figured out why. He was fumbling with his disintegrator, which appeared to have run its powerpack low. Fear and adrenaline, or whatever Ithorians had which serves a similar purpose, made his long digits fumble, dropping the empty power pack and slapping at his waist for another. He was right to be concerned.

I charged forward, my lips splitting into a feral grin. With a few steps, he was within reach, and my lightsaber sliced up through his hip, and back under his arm pit. The creature fell to pieces, a guttural screech cut short as its life force faded. The air around me sung with death and terror, infusing my very soul with its delicious energy. I looked back towards the riflemen and saw their backs as they rounded a corner.

The adrenal acceleration of combat slowly faded away, as I looked around, searching for new targets. Spotting none, I dropped to one knee besides the dismembered Ithorian, and rifled through his pockets. A few cred chips, a commlink, and a shattered datapad. Though the panel was splintered in a dozen pieces, the final image was still in place. It was an action shot, taken from a significant distance, of a black armor-clad force user. It was clearly me, the size comparison to the soldiers around me was obvious.

“Wash,” I announced, the commlink in my helmet crackling to life in response to my voice, “bring in the bird. We have some bodies to examine.”

I stood up, looked around again, and spotted a single person in the rush, standing like a rock in the middle of a stream. She was short, middle aged, and portly, dressed head to toe in black and brown cloth. Around her neck was slung a deep purple wrap, matching a thin leather strip at her waist. She was staring directly at me, an almost gregarious smile on her face. She winked and bowed her head a little.

“Bob,” I whispered, my lightsaber bouncing slightly as my fist involuntarily flexed, “The Children are here. Engage capture protocol”

The woman strode forward, her hand disappearing behind her back, returning clutching a staff lightsaber, which ignited with bright purple ferocity. She moved quicker than I would’ve given her credit for. A sharp pair of chirps sounded from my commlink in response to my request. I watched her movements for a few moments, before taking two steps and leaping with a rush of Force energies into my thighs and calves.

The woman watched me as I ascended, lightsaber held aloft, and stopped in her tracks. She held up her lightsaber in a high guard, showing for a moment an expression of uncertainty. As I reached my apogee, I let out a vicious roar, and descended directly towards the woman. She dove away, tucking into a ball as she tried to escape my leap. I landed hard, and slammed my fist into the promenade, my Force-boosted telekinetic strike sending a ripple of paving tiles into the air. One tile clipped the woman’s temple, and she fell to the floor, dazed and scalp bleeding.

My hand hurt, a lot. It had been a while since I’d use that particular trick, and certainly not on well-worn stone. At least I was in better shape than my opponent, who was making her way to her feet with the groggy gait of a drunk. I waded into lightsaber range, slashing out at her, not aiming to hit, but to dazzle, distract, and to keep her off balance. She responded deftly, the blades of her staff flicking back and forth, countering each move I made.

“I can make this easy for you,” I snapped at her, my voice modulated by the helmet I wore, “Come quietly.”

She sneered in response, blinking away the blood in her eye. A purple blade whipped at my shoulder, and I faded back, only to have to frantically fend off the other end of her saber. I retreated a few steps to create some distance, and her sneer morphed into a grin, her teeth tinged pink. This wasn’t how I was expecting things to go.

“Come now, Son of Palpatine,” she said, her accent tinged with Corusanti and Kuati lilts, “You are out of your depths! A rube, a blunt object when a scalpel is needed! Do you think the Bear of Ptolomea could hope to find the Children of Mortis if they didn’t want him to find them?!”

She was making a lot of sense, which bothered me to no end, but I appreciated the breather. Combat always took a strain, but I was out of practice and certainly less fit than I had been before my return to the Clan. Best of all, she thought she had the upper hand. Above, the downthrust of an old freighter washed over us, and a shadow dropped from it, landing behind the woman. She turned to meet the new threat, an HK series droid with a blaster rifle in hand.

The distraction was all I needed, as I surged forward, and slammed my elbow into the base of her skull. She crumpled to the ground, her lightsaber falling from her hands. The HK droid, Bob, aimed his rifle at the woman and shot her with an ion blast.

“Bit of overkill,” I muttered, crouching down and securing her hands behind her back with a pair of stun cuffs. The droids head swiveled up and tilted to one side.

“Your input is noted, Master, and summarily ignored,” he said, his sardonic response bringing a smile to my face. The YT-2000 freighter returned, hovering over the promenade, ready to accept the prisoner. I nodded, and turned to Bob, who had lifted the woman onto his shoulder. With a gesture, I pulled the woman’s fallen lightsaber to my hand, and slipped it into my pack.

“Another trophy, Master?”

“Proof, Bob. Proof the Children of Mortis are more dangerous than we expected”