The small fortress at Border Crossing 17 had fallen into disrepair in the years since the Empire’s descendants had established control of Ragnath. The duracrete walls had begun crumbling under the relentless force of time. The crenellations at the top of the defensive structure were the first to show signs of attrition in their battle against the elements. Blackened streaks stained the light grey cement, revealing the path that rainwater had taken as it crept into the foundations. The seeds of several intrepid plants had found their way into the cracks forming in the slabs. Saplings grew upwards from them and their tiny roots widened the gaps, making room for more of their kin.

Their orders would come down soon, but in the lull the wizened master still continued his instruction. His student, young and still bright eyed, sat cross-legged on the stone lookup up at him and listening to his musings. She’d taken to his lessons well, learning skills that would help her extort her rivals and forward her own agenda. Their time together had been full of lessons. Today, her topic of education would be in perhaps the most studied field in history; War.

Anxiety gripped her heart, forcefully driving its normal rhythm far beyond a resting tempo. Doubt clouded her mind. Fear, the insidious poison, coursed through her veins. All of their training had been pointing towards this being an inevitability, but she’d always assumed that her master would be leading the effort from the bridge of a Star Destroyer. She presumed she would be at his side and there she would learn the intricacies of this ancient and baleful art from the safety of the Clan’s Flagship. The girl did not expect to be on the ground, imbedded with soldiers, preparing to execute on orders that did not come from her master’s lips. It was from the uncertainty of where the orders had originated, the motivation behind them and the depth tactical contingencies that unease began to grow. That seed was sprouting with the pressure of facing down an unknown opponent from Clan Taldryan and the scrutinizing eye of her father who would be judging her every move. Like the small trees growing from the stone mere feet from her, she could feel the roots of fear spreading inside of her.

The slender man looked back over his shoulder at her. His eyes closed as he drew in a deep breath, as if he were drawing in the stench of her mounting terror. She had never seen a battle, much less taken the field as many times as he had. His emerald eye cut through her like daggers. The young Sith prepared herself for another one of his verbal lashings.

“Will you let it dominate you or can you muster the strength to harness it?” he asked.

“What?” she replied.

“The fear,” He said, stoically.

“I...I...don’t know,” She replied, nervously wringing her hands together.

“You must. Remember our lessons. Fear, while sometimes useful, is a primitive emotion. It is wild, created in the most rudimentary parts of our brains. You must look deeper than your fear, if you seek to conquer it. Search your heart...What is it you’re afraid of?” he said, leaning against one of the crumbling walls.

“War. Death. Injury. Disappointing you,” Her reply came quickly.

“No. Don’t react as Terrence would; like an animal. You are smarter than that,” he said loudly, angered by the girl’s instinctual response.

“Failure,” She said, hanging her head.

“Good. Now, imagine how you would feel if you failed. Draw up that feeling inside you,” He said, prodding her verbally.

Her eyelids closed, obscuring her brilliant green eyes. She found herself in a consuming fear, manifesting as a dark cloud. It was suffocating. She clawed against it. Rip and tear at it as she may, it would not give. Anger crept into her mind. The darkness of fear had a sudden break. It started at first like as a small flame in her mind’s eye. As she thought of the consequences of failure, the young Sithess’ breath hastened. She could feel her face flushing as her blood began to run hot.

The true wisdom of the Dark Side was found in time, with practice and experience. In their hours of tutelage, he had taught her some basic conceptual practices in tapping into the power of passion. He had often spoke of the dogma of the Jedi and how its ignorance of the Dark Side portrayed it as savage. Likewise, he had taught her how one could master their primal emotions and build them into something greater. From fear, she could synthesize anger. Anger, being a more developed emotion, removed the seeds of doubt that festering in fear would eventually germinate. Yet, Anger was still basic in its form. Children were capable of anger. If she could distill it again, she could gather the essence of power from those lesser emotions and manifest yet another more potent brew.

Jasmine dwelled on the anger, until she could manage to direct it at the Taldryan force who opposed them. It was they who had caused all of this trouble. It was they who had disrupted her comfortable retreat on Seraph. It was they who would make her feel so small. They were terrible. She hated them.

Thran drank in the swirling emotions as one would a fine wine. He dwelled on the aroma of hatred for but a moment, its acrid notes tickling the deepest reaches of his own mind. The girl was full of venom and wrath. She had but dipped her toe in the great depth of power within her. When he was ready for her to do so, he would teach her how to make the final plunge and soak in the true power of the Dark Side. She still needed his guiding hand to make the connections, she was not yet practiced enough to do so on her own. It was his influence on her mind that allowed her to find the flame of anger, which ignited the inferno within her. He was honing her to be a weapon; a weapon that he could use at will.

“Excellent, girl. You are learning. Use this...feel the power flowing through you. Harness that emotion. This is your greatest weapon. When we take to battle, you will be able to bring down upon the enemy a fear so heavy they will drown in it. You will show them just how weak they are,” He said coldly.

“I hate them. I will see the Taldrya dead, father. All of them.” She said, her face contorting into a baleful grimace.

“In time. We must first see that our plans are ready,” He said, righting himself from his leisurely leaning. “Come, let us go to the army commander...the time for waiting has passed. Remember what you have learned. It will serve you well when we meet the enemy.”

“And the fleet?” he asked.

“The blockade has been established, mi’lord. What forces they have here shall be without reinforcement,” The field officer said.

“Excellent. And our air support?” he inquired further.

“The Emperor has set aside all 4 squadrons of TIE Strikers from the combined legion. We suspect the Taldryan force to have some fighter or gunship support, but intel from the ISI regarding their numbers is spotty at best,” The man said, looking over a scrolling report from the Imperial Security agents.

“And our ground contingent, have they mustered?” the Sith asked.

“Yes, mi’lord. Our artillery units are taking up position as we speak. The battle line is drawn, mi’lord,” The soldier replied, clicking his heels together.

“Well done, Commander. The positions you have deployed these units to are perfect. Should you grow tired of the field, the Imperial Academy could use the minds of a tactician as skilled as yourself,” The green-eyed man said with a smile.

“Thank you, mi’lord. If I may speak candidly a moment, sir,” The army officer said, with slight hesitation.

“You may, Commander,” The Sith said, inspecting the holoprojection of the battlefield thoroughly.

“Mi’lord. I was on Antei with you. I was much younger then, just a Leftenant...Well, mi’lord, to put it plainly...It brings great ease to my heart knowing you are taking the field with us,” He said, lifting his chin a bit.

“Commander Criddle, after seeing your battle plan, I assure you it is my heart that is at ease knowing I am entering battle with such a capable officer. Your dedication to the Empire shall not be forgotten. Prepare the men. They are to eliminate the Ewoks with extreme prejudice. Any Taldryan leadership shall be left to me and my apprentice. It is time we rid this system of the Taldryan filth and exterminate the Ewok presence,” The Sith said, issuing a salute to the officer.

The commander returned the salute and quickly rushed out to take his position in the command outlook they had established in the ramparts. The Sith continued to inspect the projection of the battlefield. The plan had been sound, prepared beyond his own capability. It had been some time since he had gone into battle. The war he had been fighting had been conducted in boardrooms and the corporate offices. The feeling of pure excitement was refreshing. He had always loved the carnage of the battlefield. His anticipation was like the feeling of visiting an old friend.

The Taldryan forces were meager in comparison to the mustered might of the Imperial Legion. The fight would be over swiftly, if the horde of Ewoks could not contribute greatly to the effort. Unlike on Endor, this was not their home. They had not had time to build traps and were unaware of the intricacies of the terrain. Yet, they could not be written off entirely. Afterall, Teebu was a very skilled tactician. The Sith had spent enough time in the Regent’s office with the diminutive Commander to have sufficient proof of that. Having witnessed the Magistrate play several games of Dejarik, Thran knew that adapted well to changes on the battlefield. Whatever defensive measures Nyrrire had drawn up would be far from rigid.

Teebu would employ some method of deception in his defense, that much was expected. Thran smiled to himself. Engaging with Sith in a game of might and deception was a fool’s errand. The thought that the Taldrya believed that they could stand against the might of the Dark Side of the Force on guile alone was indeed laughable. Having finished soaking in the entirety of the assault plan, Thran lifted his trusted E-11 D from the nearby rack. He slung the carbine over his shoulder. Immediately, Jasmine joined his side. The girl passed a communicator to him. He grabbed the device and depressed the button.

“Kamjin. We are ready. Seal the doors of the throne room and begin your Battle Meditation,” He said, stoically.

The Throne room was bare of adornments. While Kamjin had a penchant for rarities and fine works of art, the throne room was too easily accessible for him to display such finery. The early part of his reign as Emperor had been filled with the terrorizing antics of Thran Occasus and Rayne. The duo had labelled themselves as ‘The Bureau Bandits’ and their craftiness had cost him thousands in replacement furniture. He did not dare to put up decorations in the throne room, as they would vanish in seconds, only to be ransomed back to him by the pranksters.

It was suspected that their chicanery was brought about by fits of boredom. The emperor also suspected that Thran had coerced Rayne into forsaking her role as Emperor’s Hand to engage in such deplorable actions. Tensions between Kamjin and Thran had waxed and waned. At least for now, with open war knocking at the Clan’s doorstep, Occasus was preoccupied with a target other than Lap’lamiz; Clan Taldryan. There had even been signs of cooperation shown by Thran. He didn’t fully believe it. While he had not known the man long, he was wise enough to remain suspicious of the Bakuran.

The administrator had become extra vigilant in the last weeks. Occasus had grown in power, which could only mean the depth of his treachery had also grown. While Thran could certainly not be trusted thoroughly, his insistence on Kamjin performing a Battle Meditation was sound advice. The ruler of Ragnath wanted Clan Taldryan eliminated as badly as the emerald-eyed, serpent of a man, Thran did. Using the Force to aid his soldiers would slam the scales hard in favor of Scholae Palatinae. Of the many curious powers granted by the Dark Side, Battle Meditation was one of his most well practiced. He was so skilled that he could take to the field and need not be sequestered away to petition the Force to sway the tides of a battle. However, given his protected position, he could better focus on the details of the ritual, thereby increasing its effectiveness.

Kamjin took to the cushioned seating area and sank to the floor. His knees creaked slightly as they folded beneath him. He situated himself and got comfortable. He closed his eyes, slipping immediately into the deep meditation. In his mind’s eye, he played out all eventualities, explored every possible permutation of the timeline of battle, and opened up paths to greatness for all the soldiers of Scholae Palatinae. He sank every bit of his power into the grand survey of morale. He remained focused. He could sense each soldier, every pilot, and all the officers. He wove the mental tapestry of victory, silently. The Battle had begun.

The whirr of actuators followed by the seismic thud of broad foot pads set the tempo for the advance. AT-ATs marched on the enemy position, slowly and methodically eliminating all that crossed before the path of the advancing infantry. Punching bolts of fiery red plasma erupted from the heavy laser cannons hanging from the walker’s heads. Gouts of flame and earth spat into the sky as they impacted into the defensive positions that had been established by Clan Taldryan.

A smattering of blaster fire came back from the positions, followed by the occasional trail of smoke from a shoulder fired rocket. The rockets impacted into the thick armor of the quadrupedal walkers. If it not for the light ring of black residue left at the point of impact the effect of the explosives would be unnoticeable. Undeterred, the hulks continued their slow and steadfast march.

The roar of ion engines filled the skies as TIE Strikers laid down strafing runs on the enemy armor, before peeling off to engage the enemy fighter group which had accompanied the assault. While the TIE Defender was a marvelous space superiority fighter, it was not tailor made for the rigors of atmospheric combat. The Strikers, with some patience, were plucking them from the skies one by one.

Scurrying around at their feet, AT-STs and 2M tanks cleaned up what survivors remained from the initial barrages. The thin legged walkers chased down hordes of fleeing Ewoks, leaving piles of smoldering furry corpses laying in the open. No respect was given to the fallen, they were trod upon as the advance continued. Among the tanks, the crimson red armor of Scholae Palatinae’s elite fighting Praetorians summarily executed all resistance that was missed by the Armor.

Kamjin’s Battle Meditation had indeed furthered the imbalance. What had started as a skirmish had devolved into a methodical death march. Imperial casualties were low.

Among the red armored Praetorians, Thran and Jasmine casually walked forward. With lightsabers in hand, the pair aided the soldiers in their ‘cleansing’. Occasus took special care to watch his daughter. The doubt that rested on her shoulders earlier in the day had been lifted. His gentle guidance had given her the will to surrender to the full might of the Dark Side.

She was ruthless in her path of destruction. He could see the corners of her mouth turn up as the wounded begged for mercy. As she plunged her lightsaber into the chest of one man, he could see the spark of pleasure in her eyes. All the coordination to keep her at his side in the past months had allowed him to gain such a hold on her mind and will that she was taking the final steps into being weaponized. Watching his protégé develop her own lust for blood and so readily approach achieving the status of Dun Moch on her own, brought a deep pride to him.

It was good for her to learn the cruelty of war first hand. He had doubted for a moment that she had such viciousness in her. He was pleased, for once, to be wrong. As important as it was for her to find the depth of her own ferocity on the battlefield, it was perhaps more important to his plan to show her what he was capable of. Though she was his offspring, she had taken to the teachings of the Sith well. That meant that he must prevent her from getting any overly ambitious ideas. He needed a vulgar display of power.

His hand extended forward, lifting an Ewok from its hiding place. The creature’s stumpy, furry legs kicked wildly as it floated several meters off the ground. The Sith cast his hand back and forth, bashing the remaining strength from the Ewok with repeated strikes against the ground and near by rocks and splintered trunks of trees. As it spat curses at him, his mental grip on body of the miniature ursine elevated it from the ground. It remained suspended in the air, ten feet from the ground. His other hand flicked towards a shattered abatis. One of the sharpened pikes that comprised the makeshift defense ripped free of its lashings. The log turned in situ, point aimed directly at the helpless creature. The sound of the last hempen rope lashing snapping echoed like a whip’s crack. Like an oversized arrow, the log rocketed towards the Ewok. It impacted with a vile thud and squish. The log ran through the creature, expelling a patch of fur and entrails from the exit wound. The being gurgled and spat for a second. Life, at last, left the despairing creature’s eyes. Thran had made it look so easy.

“HOLY SHIT!” Jasmine screamed joyfully. “THAT... WAS... AWESOME!”

As the last syllable of her exclamation escaped her lips, the deep bellow of a horn filled the battlefield. A heinous smile crept over Thran’s face. The Ewoks were preparing a charge. Their patter of their feet could be heard on the wind. Among the meter tall shapes, several taller silhouettes stood out. Not clad in the armor of the Taldryan regular army, the true leaders of the invasion force and his real prey emerged. Their defeat had come so swiftly, they’d run out of options. Teebu must have been killed, such a charge was idiotic. He had to give it to them. At least they would die fighting.

“Now, Commander,” Thran barked into a communicator he drew from his pocket.

Two hundred meters in front of them, the last charge of the Taldrya began. The mass of Ewoks, soldiers, and Clan members undulated over the terrain, like a swarm of ants. There must have been one thousand five hundred bodies total. As they pressed forward, a distant whistling broke the relative silence of the field. From above, a hail of artillery fire immolated the majority of the assault instantly. Impact after impact sent bodies and parts of bodies skyward. The explosions were so violent it felt as though they were shaking the whole moon. Supplemented by the concentrated fire of the Empire’s walkers and tanks and precision fire from its most trained troopers, they burned away the incoming waves.

The execution march continued on. As the force dispatched the last of the survivors, a soldier in the blood red armor of the Praetorian approached the two Sith. His tinny voice seemed nearly alien.

“Sir, we have one of their leaders,” He said, his voice punctuated by the click of his helmets voice box.

“Take me to them,” Thran replied.

The soldier lead on. Thran followed, drinking in the carnage that had occurred. Jasmine followed, nipping at his heels like an excited pup. She always had a healthy respect for him, though she dared not admit that publicly. However, after what she had witnessed him do, she was in absolute awe. The weight of her own actions had yet to settle on her mind. In time, they had traversed the engagement zone to the location of what had been the Taldryan command post, purging whatever survivors they came across along the way.

The man’s body was twisted and mangled. His armor was unmistakable, vibrant red with a golden stroke of lightning across the chest. Thran looked down at the man as he groaned in pain. Beskar was a marvelous material. It protected against blaster bolts and rumor had it that it could even block lightsaber strikes. Yet, for all its defensive capability, it offered only a modicum of protection against concussive force. What Appius had been subject to was not just a nearby grenade or missile explosion, but the entire might of Scholae Palatinae’s artillery. While his armor was intact, the soft flesh and bone beneath it was not. What remained could best be described as a slurry of blood, tissue and fragmented bone contained within a loose sack of skin.

“I will never understand you Mandalorians. Did you find your honor dying in the mud like a womprat? If not, I hope for your sake that you find it down there soon. Your end has come. There is no escape. There will be no mercy,” Thran said, spitting on the mud-covered armor.

“Take the Armor. Bring it to the Emperor as...a gift...” Thran commanded to the lingering soldiers.

“And him, sir?” the ranking soldier asked.

Thran looked down at the broken Consul. He was disappointed. He was hoping to have had the opportunity to show off his bladesmanship. The Mandalorian coughed and spit curses with his dying breaths. In this state, killing the Consul was beneath him. It was no grand feat. Occasus turned to his daughter.

“Kill him,” He said, issuing the order directly to her.

Jasmine sat silently reflecting on what had transpired. She was unsure how she felt about taking so many lives. The weight of her actions was still weighing on her. The debriefing was incredibly boring. They reviewed casualty numbers and points of tactical importance. She drifted in and out of listening, so she could recite certain specific points back to her father when he interrogated her about it later.

“The Emperor’s Battle Meditation was far more effective than we could have anticipated,” Came the voice of one analyst.

Kamjin looked smug, as if he had won the battle singlehandedly. The emperor bowed, as if to show graciousness. She was beginning to understand her father’s disdain for him. She picked over the room, scanning each individual. Jasmine locked eyes with Rayne.

She could feel Rayne’s cold blue eyes piercing through her. The Firrerreo had been watching her for several minutes. The apprentice practiced what she had learned, locking her mind away from intrusions. It was too late. The Nightsister had already gotten all the information she needed.

In time, the important figures of the Clan filtered out of the room. Generals shook hands with the Emperor and Viceroy. The Rollmaster nodded at them as they departed. They were headed for another celebration, this time for the Clan’s grand victory. The Clans leadership would join them shortly. She was uncertain she would call is reason for celebration. It was no battle; it was a massacre.

Rayne found her chance to leave. She placed her arm over the girl’s shoulder.

“You did well, Jas,” She said, her silky voice bringing some comfort to the girl.

“Thanks,” She said quietly.

“What you are feeling is normal. It is an important lesson...” Rayne said with a slight smile.

“Rayne...” she began, as if to start a question.

“Hrm?” the bronzed skin woman replied.

“Have you ever seen him...do...war?” Jasmine asked.

“Do war?” Rayne laughed a bit. “Yes, I have...Quite the sight, isn’t it?” she added.

Jasmine nodded, thinking about the brutality she witnessed. The girl had always had the impression that Thran was powerful, and when he allowed it, she could sense the raw power that emanated from him. But to see it with her own eyes, in action, was a very different feeling. Jasmine searched for words, but they never found the end of her tongue.

“Come, my darling...Let’s go to the banquet, find the cookies...and you can tell me all about it...” Rayne said, smiling just enough to show the points of her sharp teeth and squeezing the girl tight to her side.