

Heart of Shadow

by unspeakablehorror

Summary: While on a routine mission to recover secrets from the reclusive Nightsisters, Sidious is tricked by Mother Talzin into accepting a power even he may not be able to handle. When Darth Plagueis becomes infected with it as well, the Sith Order spins into disarray. But Sith do not give up easily, even if their Grand Plan may require some--recalibration.

Story Downloads and Metadata...

[\(epub version\)](#) [\(pdf version\)](#)

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Notes

For a while now, I've become rather frustrated by the relative lack of Sidious redemption fanfic. To be sure, there are a few, but they are so few, and so far in-between that I feel there is an immense gulf of unexplored possibilities in this space. So this AU kind of spiralled out of that. Also a very special shout-out to my lack of self-control! Because I couldn't have started an entirely new fic of indeterminate length without that, right? This is also a very Sith-centric story, so if you like Plagueis or Maul, they will feature here quite prominently as well. San Hill will appear too from time to time, too, since I must admit he's one of my favorite characters. Also, while I will reuse some concepts from my fanfic Cut Strings, this story should be considered as taking place in an entirely separate continuity. And though the Sidious of this story may start out quite similar in temperament to the one in Cut Strings, he will develop in ways that I assure you will be quite unlike his counterpart in that story.

Furthermore, I must of course ruin this story with one of my entirely unnecessary romances, in this case between Talzin and Sidious. It's kind of a rare pair, it seems, but I for one see quite a lot of potential in it!

The writing is still a bit rough around the edges, I feel, but I was rather impatient to get it out. Anyway, I hope you enjoy the story, and I'd be most interested to hear your thoughts!

EDIT: Jun 6, 2017: I've added considerably more detail to the flashback scene in the first chapter. Many thanks to SLWalker, who is currently beta-reading this story, for pointing out that this scene could be improved by fleshing it out more, and for beta-reading the additions as well!

EDIT: Jul 22, 2017: Just wanted to mention that the flashback scene in the first chapter is in my opinion one of the darkest, most emotionally intense scenes in the story written thus far (up to ch 11). Also, a relative of mine who heard it found that scene to be super dark, so that kind of prompted me to get around to warning for it. I am not consistent or organized about warning for content, but I will occasionally do so.

EDIT: Oct 4, 2018: I have edited the tags to include important platonic relationships in the story. Please note that any relationship tags using '&' reference platonic relationships, as is the intended purpose of the & symbol in relationship tags.

Chapter 1: Trickery

Palpatine hit the ground, emitting a hiss of pain and anger. This was a lot more difficult than his Master had made it out to be. *Just subdue a few witches and retrieve their secrets. Should be easy. Easy. Hah.*

The Nightsister hovered closer to him, a look of interest on her face, as if examining an unusual insect. He took the opportunity to jump to his feet, lashing out with his lightsaber.

He recoiled as the red saber hit something unyielding. Staggering backwards, he looked between the saber and the Nightsister in bewilderment.

She currently floated serenely inside a green bubble of Force energy, some bizarre conglomeration of Dark and Light powering the thing.

“You have so much power,” she mused. “And yet you limit yourself just as much as your foolish Jedi foes do.”

“And you weaken yourself with your use of the Light Side,” Palpatine scoffed. He held his lightsaber in a defensive pose now, though he didn’t think it was going to be of much use against Talzin.

“You admit it then,” she said, sounding intrigued. “You choose to reduce your abilities.”

“Hardly a reduction,” Palpatine said. “Perhaps you are projecting your own diminishment of talent.”

She laughed. “I see. Of course. That’s why I’m losing.” She put a hand to her chin, appearing to ponder the situation. “Wait, I don’t believe I am.”

“You only think you’ve won.”

“Oh, you are an amusing one, Sidious. We don’t get many outsiders, Sith Lord. And our men are so-obedient. They know their place. It gets a bit boring after a while. So it’s quite a treat to have met you twice.”

“I won’t say the same. I liked you better the first time,” he said, grimacing as an attempt to attack her with Force lightning recoiled from that accursed green bubble of hers and rebounded back onto himself. He stopped the attack immediately.

Talzin laughed again. “You mean when I was still half-dead from childbirth? Still a lowly servant to my own mother? Don’t you enjoy the thrill of battle with a worthy opponent?”

“I would hardly call this a battle,” Sidious said, “when all you’ve done is float around in that Force shield of yours.”

“I disagree. This has been truly an invigorating experience. You are like an irascible, untamable rancor.”

Sidious narrowed his acid-yellow eyes. “I don’t think you are taking this seriously.”

Talzin floated closer to him. “On the contrary, I am entirely serious. In fact, I’d like to offer you something--a rare gift.”

Sidious tilted his head. “Is this another child? I don’t have need of it. The last one was perfectly sufficient.”

“By the Twins, no,” Talzin responded. “But that reminds me--how is my dear Maul doing?”

“He is in good health. One day he will be a powerful Sith,” Sidious said. The child was currently being cared for by Palpatine’s caretaker droids. He had seen Maul a total of two times to confirm that

he was growing sufficiently, but of course it wouldn't be possible to begin his Sith training until he was older.

"Good," she said. "I'll accept only the best for my firstborn."

"You mentioned a gift," Sidious said, curious now what she had meant by that.

"Ah, yes," Talzin said. "You came to steal our secrets, did you not? So I thought I might freely offer you one instead."

"All right, you have my attention."

She beckoned him with one languid hand, and began floating backwards. Palpatine followed in anticipation. Soon they reached a dark pool of reflective black liquid. Palpatine could feel that this place was not simply an ordinary pond, but a true Dark Side nexus. She gestured, and he stared at it, transfixed. "What is this?"

"We call it a Font of Power," she said. "They are unique to Dathomir. When you drink from this one, you consume pure Dark Side power. The effects are permanent."

Sidious frowned. "What's the catch?" Her words rang true. His senses told him this place was one of power, and furthermore, power that could be taken. But nothing could possibly be this easy.

Talzin's expression became one of mock seriousness. She put a hand to her breast. "You'll feel things. Emotions are evil."

Sidious smiled wryly. "A passable imitation of a Jedi."

"Oh, that wasn't a Jedi. That was a Light Witch."

"They sound pathetic."

"They are."

Sidious looked back at the black pond. "Do I simply--drink it?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

Sidious walked over to the pool and knelt at its side. He hesitated. This could be a trick for Talzin's amusement. But--the power was real. And if there was one thing Sidious would never refuse, it was power. He cupped his hands in the pool and drank.

And felt the Dark Side grow within him. After that, he drank more of the liquid, and more, until he found he couldn't bring himself to drink another drop. "Why can't I--?"

"The Font will only allow any one person so much of itself. I confess I was surprised to see that you were allowed as much as you were."

He stood, feeling invigorated. He turned to Talzin, a cruel grin forming on his face. "Perhaps we should have a rematch."

To Palpatine's surprise, Talzin dismissed her Force-shield and walked closer to him. "Are you sure that's what you really desire?"

"Of course that's what I wa--" he began, then stopped as she stood directly in front of him. She really was--quite fascinating. He took a step backwards, surprised by the intensity of his traitorous thoughts. He looked over to the pool, then back over to Talzin, his eyes narrowing. "There's something you didn't tell me."

Talzin laughed. "You catch on quickly! I did not lie, though. It is a Font of Dark Side Power. It is called the Font of Love."

"Love?!" Palpatine hissed. "I have no use for that."

Talzin floated away, laughing cruelly. "It's too late for second thoughts now, Sidious. Anyway, you should thank me. It *will* make you more powerful."

Palpatine frowned, glancing at the dark pond. He had felt the raw power of the place. It was, undoubtedly, a Dark Side nexus. But--love? "Gratitude is not the way of the Sith, Talzin. Anyway, you did trick me. You should thank me for not blasting you out of existence."

Talzin smiled. "I thought you said that's exactly what you were about to do. Have you changed your mind?"

Sidious crossed his arms. "That remains to be seen. Your *gift* was tainted. But perhaps you have something else to offer me? An item of power? A spell? I might allow you to live if there is some benefit to me."

Talzin shook her head. "Tsk, ts. So ungrateful. Still, I have many things to offer. But there will be no more gifts. I will offer further knowledge, further power, for exchange only. That is the way of the Nightsisters."

"Do you think me incapable of further hostility? Do not mistake my deliberation for mercy. Your attempt to bind me to your service has failed," he sneered.

"Bind you to my--?" Talzin stopped, seeming to realize something. Then she laughed. "Oh, no. Oh, how tacky that would be. How pedestrian. No, Sidious, that was not some simple love potion, as a simpleton might concoct to create a dotting thrall. There is no thrill in that, and I daresay you are too powerful to be affected by such a thing."

"Then what is it, and why did you trick me into consuming it?"

Talzin floated onto a tree branch and settled there. "There is a beauty to nature, don't you think?"

"Answer the question, Talzin."

"Life. Death. A cycle. There is chaos, and order. Order within the chaos, and chaos within order."

“Don’t try my patience, Talzin.”

“The Sith are a threat to the Nightsisters, Sidious. It is my duty to destroy such threats.”

“And yet here I stand.”

“Yes. Because we could be allies, Sidious. But only if the Sith are capable of caring about something besides their own personal gain.”

“Love is weakness.”

“I think that you already know that not to be true.”

“You have hobbled me. But it matters not. If I am truly ruined by this, my Master will simply destroy me and choose another apprentice. The Sith will continue.”

“Is that what you want, Sidious? Are you ready to die?”

“I said *if*. Plagueis is more knowledgeable about the Living Force than you imagine. I daresay he will know a way to reverse this.” Palpatine walked back over to the pond and knelt again at it. He pulled a flask off of his belt and filled it with the liquid. Curious, he brought it to his lips. But he was unable to drink any more of it still.

Talzin laughed. “You surely seem eager to consume more of that which has *hobbled* you.”

“I don’t see how it can do any further harm,” Sidious retorted. And there was real power in the liquid. Perhaps that power could be separated from the--unfortunate side effects. Surely Plagueis would know how it could be done. He would bring the liquid to his Master for examination.

The Sith would certainly not be defeated by some jumped-up primitives from a nowhere backwater like Dathomir.

Plagueis had warned Sidious that his channels were not currently secure, and he should contact his Master only in his guise as Palpatine.

But he had not warned Sidious about this.

“Oh, hello,” the teenage Muun said pleasantly, swivelling back and forth in his chair. “You’re that

Ambassador from Naboo, right? Sheev Palpatine?”

“Why yes.” Palpatine said, his face a kindly mask, all the while wondering why a *child* was answering his Master’s comm line. “And who might you be?”

“San Hill,” the Muun said.

“It’s nice to meet you, San. May I speak with Magister Damask?”

“No,” the Muun teen said cheerfully. “He’s *busy*. But I can take a message if you’d like.”

Sidious took a deep breath. “This is really quite urgent.”

“You don’t understand,” San said. “My Uncle is doing an experiment. Those are very important to him. He would, and I quote, ‘flay alive and leave to be eaten by jarrel wolves anyone who interrupts him now’.”

“I see,” Sidious said. “In that case, please tell him that the Ambassador of Naboo wishes to discuss those important matters which we earlier discussed. It’s quite urgent. Please let him know as soon as possible.”

“Sure thing, ambassador man.” San said and then cut the connection.

Sidious scowled at the empty screen. Of course he was familiar with Damask’s assistant Larsh Hill. But he could conceive of no reason why that assistant’s progeny should be allowed access to his Master’s comm lines. *This is very inconvenient.*

Still, Sidious also knew better than to interrupt Plagueis during his experiments. He wished Plagueis would use droids to take his messages, though, and not the unreliable creature he’d been presented with.

Sidious sighed, leaning back in his chair as he slipped into hyperspace. He would travel directly to Sojourn and return to his Master as soon as possible.

For now, though, he would meditate on his situation, try to find the root of the rot that Talzin had infected him with.

He had always known he was different. Better than everyone else, really. He didn’t form attachments like others did. Not even to his own family.

He closed his eyes, recalling his father’s screams of pain as he died, savoring the memory.

That wasn't so bad. Perhaps the effects are not--

Then came a stab of anguish as he recalled his mother.

"Oh, open it already!" his mother said.

Palpatine squeezed the wrapping paper. "One part brick, two parts squish," the teen boy said. "This is another sweater-book combo, isn't it?" He gave her a disappointed look. "What is it this time? The third book of Jedi Sage? I told you I hate that entire saccharine series. I would murder the author myself if I could get my hands on him."

"I think you'll like this one," she said. "Better than the last two, anyway."

He sighed and ripped the silvery paper open.

"A blue sweater!" he said with mock excitement. He noted the bit of gold lettering near the fold. "I'm sure I'll have many occasions to wear a sweater that says--" he opened it all the way out, letting the object inside drop without so much as a glance, "--Pal."

His mother smiled. "Your name, right?"

"You're missing a few letters, mother," he said, but smiled back. He looked down at the book, then, and noting the unusually weathered cover, picked it up, examining it with sudden interest. "This is--Artifact 204." Which was written in an indecipherable language that Palpatine was positive was Sith.

"Yes, I saw how you looked at that thing at the auction before Cosinga made you leave."

"How did you get this?" Palpatine asked, turning it over in his hand. His father certainly hadn't given her the money for it.

"You know my friend Vera, right?"

"I don't know any of your friends."

"Oh, of course. Anyway, she bid on it for me. I told her I was interested in it."

"Thanks, mother. This is possibly the best thing I've ever received."

He didn't think his mother had ever looked happier.

She had cared for him so much, and he had always been her favorite. Even at the end.

His mother, staring between him and the charred husk that had been his father in shock. "Pal?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You've missed a few letters, Mother."

Lightning crackled from his fingertips, and she screamed, trying to plead with him, trying to reach out

to him, until her heart finally gave out and she grew still.

He scowled down at her. "Pathetic."

Palpatine tried to calm his breathing, but then the next memory came. No, no, not Ricar. He didn't want--

Ricar walked up to him and held a smooth stone out. "This is yours."

He looked down at his four year-old brother's mop of tousled brown hair. The odd one out, Ricar didn't look much like his father at all. He wondered about that sometimes.

"I've never even seen that thing before."

"I'm giving it to you. You're the rock."

Palpatine was fairly certain he had been a lot smarter than Ricar at that age.

"And why am I a rock?"

"Because you're strong," Ricar said. "Take it. It's a lucky rock."

Palpatine accepted the odd gift. "All right. But I don't believe in luck."

Ricar gave him a wide smile and ran off. Palpatine watched with curiosity as he noticed Ricar stop next to a trash bin and pick up a shard of glass.

And if I were a good brother, I would tell him he shouldn't play with glass shards or trash. But let's see where this train of thought leads little Ricar, shall we?

His brother then made a straight beeline to his parents.

"Pa!" he cried out. "I have a present for you!"

Palpatine grinned. Perhaps despite his lack of intelligence, Ricar had some redeeming qualities after all.

Palpatine was having trouble breathing.

Ricar, crying over his mother's still form while Palpatine simply stood there, feeling nothing until the boy's cries began to irritate him. He felt the power inside him reach out and saw it snap the boy's neck. Ricar's body fell over his mother's.

Palpatine closed his eyes. But that only seemed to increase the clarity of the memories.

"Let's play a game!" Mayelle said.

"Let's not," Palpatine said, attempting to nap on the sofa.

Ignoring his response, the child dropped something on the table in front of him with a loud thud.

"You'll like this one."

"Is it called 'murder noisy siblings so I can sleep'?" Palpatine asked curtly.

"Nope," she said. "It's called dejarik." Palpatine opened one eye, glaring at the tiny girl with her red hair in a ponytail.

"You're way too young for that."

"I'm eight. You can't tell me what to do."

He opened the other eye in resignation.

"No, I mean I'd destroy you. It's a strategy game, May. And you have all the strategic ability of a Gungan."

"Mil would be mad at you for saying that. She says the Gungans are smart."

"Yes, she would say that. But perhaps she wouldn't say the same for you?"

Mayelle stamped a foot. "Are you going to play the game with me or not?"

"Not," Palpatine said.

"Bet you're just afraid you'd lose."

"Would not."

"Would too."

"Would not."

"Would too."

"Fine, I'll play. It's surely better than exchanging what passes for witty repartee with you."

"Whoohoo!" she exclaimed.

She'd eventually become quite good at it, of course, so good in fact that she'd even beaten him.

Mayelle screaming and screaming until he broke her neck, too. He bent down over her wide-eyed, still form and pulled the award ribbon off her dress. The Aurebesh read 'Junior Dejarik League, 1st Place'.

"Looks like I win this one, sis," he said, his voice almost monotone, cold and uncaring.

There was a sound issuing forth from Palpatine's throat now, a strangled croak. He couldn't seem to control it. He wasn't ready for this, but still the memories came pouring forth.

"I need some advice," Markon said.

"Sure. Go away. There's my advice."

"How do I talk to girls?"

"You must be joking."

"No, really." Markon insisted.

"Go ask Mil."

"No way. She'd just tell me not to and laugh in my face."

"Sounds like good advice!" Palpatine laughed.

"Come on! I don't know what to say!"

Palpatine pretended to ponder the question. "First I need to know what your end goal is."

"What do you think? Dating. Doing it."

"Oh, that's simple then. You're way too young for that."

"I'm 13 years old!"

"Which explains why you're asking your celibate virgin brother for dating advice. That sort of thing means nothing to me."

Markon gave him a surprised look.

"Only girls are virgins."

"I want you to think really hard, Markon, about why what you said cannot possibly be true."

Markon frowned. "If you're a virgin, it means you haven't done it yet. Which means--I'm a virgin."

"Congratulations, you figured it out! I promise I wouldn't have explained it to you if you hadn't."

"But you! You must have done it with hundreds of girls! You go to all those parties. The ones you're not supposed to." he said the last part in almost a whisper.

Yes, of course he did. It was the perfect chance to collect blackmail on his fellow political proteges.

He smiled at his younger brother. "There's more to life than the fleeting affections of mayflies, Markon. But if you'd like, I can get you into some of those forbidden parties."

Markon's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Of course. What else are older and entirely irresponsible brothers for?"

Those had been some fun times, corrupting his father's favorite. He'd also come to realize that Markon looked up to him, almost worshiped him really, and he'd--liked that. He really should have--

Slowly he choked Markon, the favorite of his father. Of course he had to die, no matter how much he had begged, promised he wouldn't tell. Everything his father loved must be destroyed.

He put his head in his hands. It would be over soon. It would be--done.

"Hey, I need you to sign this petition for--"

"Go away, Mil," Palpatine said, laying in the grass turning the pages of Artifact 204. What did it say? No one seemed to know how to translate Sith. Probably because those greedy Jedi hoarders--

"Oh, come on, Cos."

"Don't call me that. I changed my name almost a year ago."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"Inconveniently, you attend an all girl's school."

"Yeah, and you never call. Or write. What did you change it to?"

"Just call me Palpatine."

"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "That's my name too. We're all Palpatine."

"Fine. Call me whatever you want, then. Just--not his name."

"Okay. Sign my petition, then, Sheev."

Palpatine closed the book and looked up at his teen sister. Her red hair was tied back in some elaborate style, and she wore a simple red dress. Her hands were on her hips, clutching a datapad in one and a pen in the other.

"Sheev. Sheev?" He raised an eyebrow.

She lidded her eyes. "Yeah. You look like a Sheev."

He snorted. "Because that's the name of someone who's going far in life, right?"

"Maybe it's the name of someone who won't sign my petition."

Palpatine grabbed the datapad and read the heading. "Petition for Naboo Withdrawal From

Northeastern Gungan Lakes.” He looked up at her. “And how exactly do I benefit from this?”

Milena gave him a steely look. "It's Father's favorite fishing spot."

Palpatine gave her his brightest smile. "Save the Gungans!" He took the pen from her and signed 'Sheev Palpatine' on the datapad.

It was too much. Excepting his father, he'd always had the most adversarial relationship with Mil, but then that made sense, didn't it? She'd always wanted to be a hero, helping the helpless, saving the day. Caring too much about everything. Still, much unlike his father, he hadn't ever hated her. In a way, she'd amused him. And now? Now she was twisting the knife in him worst of all. Which was fitting, he supposed.

"It's over Mil," Palpatine said calmly, pitching his voice loud enough to be heard in the other room. She'd locked him out, unsurprisingly. "It's just you and me now."

"Stay away from me!" she screamed from behind the door.

"You know I can't do that, Mil."

Frantic muttering from the other room and then a loud, "Kriff! Kriff! Kriff!"

"Language, Mil," Palpatine said in that same dead voice.

A clattering noise from the other side of the door. Palpatine walked to the control console, searching his memory until the passcode came to him. He keyed in his father's override command for the door and it slid open.

The kitchens were in chaos. Shattered glasses and dishes lay on the counters and floors, and cabinets and drawers were opened seemingly at random.

And there was Milena, sinking to the floor and hugging her knees, a desperate horror on her face and tears streaming from her eyes.

"Don't do this, Sheev! Don't do this..."

But the most interesting part of the tableau were the knives, perhaps thirty or forty of them floating above her in midair, and every single one of them aimed right at him. He stared at them, transfixed.

She looked up then and seemed to notice them at last.

"What are you--what are you doing with those knives?" she asked in almost a whisper.

He looked down at her, surprised.

"Those aren't mine," he said. He lashed out, then, with blast after blast of blue electricity, and one by one the knives fell to the ground like a metallic rain.

He stopped when the last knife clattered to the floor.

His sister lay in a heap on the tiles. He stared at her lifeless body in a kind of numb shock. Wasn't the hero supposed to win against the villain?

Disgust rose in him, then. She was just as weak as the others. She was always trying to save everyone. But in the end, she couldn't even save herself.

Desperately, he tried the usual rationalization.

They were weak, and so I destroyed them. They --he could feel the tears that came to his eyes, unbidden. No. No! I am over this. I conquered this long ago...

But he hadn't, not really. That had been different. Bewilderment over the suddenness of it all. Fear of what would happen to him with his entire family dead, and him the killer. The worry that he could never truly control such raw power, and that it might at any moment destroy him as well. There had never been this feeling of complete and utter loss.

Sidious hoped his Master would cure him of this soon. It was unbearable. Intolerable. Worse than any physical or mental anguish he could recall ever feeling--and as a Sith Apprentice, he had felt plenty of both in his time. It was a gaping psychic wound and he knew that nothing he did, nothing he told himself, could make it go away.

You will pay dearly for this, Talzin, he thought, as he wept over the control console.

Chapter 2: An Unfortunate Setback

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter includes 100% more disgruntled Sith Lord content. Because the only thing better than one ruined Sith Lord is two of them!

"Master," Sidious said, kneeling before Plagueis.

"I welcome your return, Apprentice. San has told me that there was something you wished to convey to me. I take it this involves your recent trip to Dathomir?"

Internally, Palpatine seethed on hearing the Muun teen's name. Plagueis had not deigned to contact him back during the trip to Sojourn. Worse, every time he had contacted Plagueis, the same horrid little nonentity had answered, and Palpatine had been forced each time to give an equally vague response.

Still, he had finally reached Sojourn itself and received a private audience with his Master, far away from the worthless scrap of a child who took his messages.

"Yes, Master," he responded.

"What secrets have you retrieved from the witches?"

"Only this," Sidious said, presenting the flask to Plagueis. The Muun Sith took the item and opened it, staring down at the contents.

"It is extremely dangerous," Sidious warned him.

"A poison?" Plagueis said, eyeing it with interest. "I can sense the Dark Side emanations from it. Most intriguing."

"No, my lord, not a poison. But-"

At that, Plagueis upended the flask's contents into his mouth.

"No! Stop!" Sidious said, but it was too late. Darth Plagueis had already consumed the entire flask to the last drop.

"Pity you didn't collect more," Plagueis said. "It was imbued with considerable Dark Side power. Power that is now mine."

Even now, Sidious felt a strange envy. He had actually planned to volunteer to drink the remaining liquid himself. He had thought it might help his Master understand the process through which it worked. And he still felt some strange desire for it, even as he despised and loathed it. "Yes, Master. I know. I myself drank some of the liquid already," he said slowly, trying not to panic. "But it also has an unacceptable side effect, which I was about to explain."

"You seem to be in good health, Sidious," Plagueis said. "What side effect could possibly be worth forgoing additional power?"

Sidious grimaced. "Love, Master. It compels you to feel love."

"Oh." Then Plagueis said something long and emphatic in the Muun language.

Sidious tilted his head. Had that been something about where someone could go cancel their inequalities? "I'm not familiar with that terminology, Master."

"Really? I thought you would know all the Muun curses by now."

Sidious felt relief. "So you understand the gravity of the situation, then."

Plagueis curled his lower lip in disgust and threw the flask behind him. "Yes, and I will resolve this setback."

Sidious looked up at him hopefully. "So you know how to reverse it?"

"No," Plagueis said. "But I'm sure I can figure it out. If you bring me some more samples of the material to run the necessary experiments."

"As you wish, my lord." Sidious said, and rose. He allowed himself to feel optimism at his Master's

confidence, though it mingled with his suspicion that the 'necessary experiments' Plagueis mentioned might involve the Sith Master consuming more of the accursed liquid.

Sidious looked at the small nav computer he held in his hand. It told him that the Dark Side nexus was close now. Closer...closer...and walking past the tall grass, there it was. A small clearing containing a pond full of black water. But another knelt before the pond in front of him already.

"Talzin," he rasped.

She finished drinking the liquid cupped in her hands and turned to face him. "Back again so soon?" she asked, giving him an amused smile.

"So you sabotage yourself, too?"

"I'd hardly call it sabotage. Surely you can sense the power of this place?"

"Yes, the power to ruin my life," Sidious responded derisively.

"If you hate it so much, why did you return?"

"I merely require additional samples so their properties can be fully researched," Sidious said, kneeling at the pond and removing five flasks from the belt under his robes. "And reversed."

Talzin adjusted her position so she was seated cross-legged now at the edge of the pond. "Ah. Of course. Must be an awful lot of research if you require so many vials."

"How often do you subject yourself to this thing?" Sidious asked casually.

"About once a year. It won't let me drink from it more often than that."

"Hmmm," Sidious murmured, frowning. This could be a problem. "So all of you can only drink from this thing once a year?"

"Oh, no," Talzin said. "The timing depends on when the pond chooses."

"The pond chooses. The *pond*."

"Yes, I thought that was clear."

"I don't think I've ever articulated how much I hate Dathomir," Sidious said as he scooped up the black liquid in the flasks. After that he did his best to ignore Talzin. He did not want to test himself in battle just now, not when she had turned his own mind against him. He had to admit, if only to himself, that it had been a clever attack. Perhaps he would even use it himself some day, if the opportunity presented itself.

When he returned to his ship, a Naboo cruiser vessel, he entered and set the flasks inside of a secure box. He checked the living space and small sleeping area to ensure everything was as he'd left it, and that there were no stowaways. Then he settled himself at the pilot's controls and entered the coordinates for his return to Sojourn.

Plagueis *would* fix this. Everything was under control.

He hoped.

Chapter 3: Sith's Heir

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm back! Just to give a little background on the fic-Palpatine starts out at age 28-29 and I'm currently thinking this fic will span up to the Revenge of the Sith time period. Probably going to be a very different story than the canon one by then, though!

Also thanks to everyone who commented! I really appreciate hearing your thoughts!

Also, as you know, Ambassador Palpatine has his tiny Sith Apprentice Maul. He should probably check in on the little guy, right? Purely to make sure his plans are progressing smoothly, of course...

Palpatine closed the door of his modest apartment on Naboo, carefully placing the pack with his Sith robes and a single flask on the table.

The last trip to Sojourn had gone, if not well, at least without major incident. Though Plagueis had insisted he didn't require his Apprentice's assistance in researching the reversal of the liquid's effects, which had only confirmed to Sidious that his Master might not be entirely devoted to the task at hand.

And so he had kept a flask for himself. He might not have his Master's skill or knowledge, but he had a library of his own Sith tomes, scrolls, and artifacts. And he thought he might keep a better eye on getting results, rather than losing himself in the process, as he felt his Master sometimes did.

Meanwhile, there was something he wanted to check on. Or someone, rather. Opening the pack, he placed the Sith robes back on over his Ambassador's garb. He walked into his room and lifted a particular bookend on his shelf. The shelf creaked as it moved to the side, revealing a hidden staircase descending into darkness. Sidious walked into the shadows, and the bookcase closed behind him. His vision adjusted with its typical unnatural ease to the gloom. He had had this secret staircase built between his apartment and the adjacent ones when he had moved here. It led to a larger area he had had built far below the apartments that would give him sufficient space and privacy to conduct his work as a Sith. The estate he had inherited would have had more than enough space, of course, but it had also been a source of unpleasant memories for him, prompting him to sell it. It would have killed his father to see him discard it all so casually. He grinned to himself. If Palpatine hadn't *already* killed him, that was.

When he reached the bottom of the staircase, he keyed the code in the keypad, and the stone in front of him moved aside. He blinked as light entered his eyes again. He noted the droids as they went about their tasks. Then he stopped in front of a large crib. Inside was Maul. The zabrak toddler looked up from the toy he was examining, his eyes suddenly wide. "Mas-ter?"

"Yes. Hello, my young Apprentice." He was pleased to note that the reprogramming he had given the droids during his previous visit had had an effect. The last time he had visited, Maul had tried to call him 'da-da'. That would not do.

The small zabrak extended his arms upward. Sidious hesitated. It was clear to him what the child wanted—he just didn't think he should oblige him. Sith needed to experience coldness and indifference, become inured to it. Use it to make themselves stronger. Nothing that was worth the mantle of Sith needed to be *coddled*. But that traitorous voice inside him seemed to compel him to lean over and pick the child up, holding him to his shoulder and whispering words of comfort to him.

"Someday, you'll be a magnificent Sith Lord, Maul," he said, rocking the child back and forth.

Maul cooed happily. "Mag-nif-cent."

"Hmmm, yes, very good, Maul," Sidious said, pleased. Perhaps he should devote more time to the child's training. There was only so much droids could accomplish, after all. Sidious felt an unfamiliar warmth bloom in his heart, then. Nothing could be allowed to harm Maul. He would be the future of the Sith, if Sidious could not be.

He would not be some mere brute, to be discarded at will, as Sidious and Plagueis had agreed upon before. He *must* be trained fully, to be the very best Sith that Sidious could possibly make him.

What was this? This sudden desire to devote himself to this small creature that couldn't even keep itself from drooling? Sidious, of course, knew exactly what it was. But what he found disorienting was just how much he wanted to keep it. If love could cause him agonizing pain from his denial of it, it could also try to chain him with this indescribably wonderful feeling. He was afraid now. Afraid he might stop fighting what Talzin had done to him. He should put Maul down now and leave him here, try to clear his head.

But he knew he wouldn't do that.

Sidious turned around to bring Maul up the stairs, but stopped at the sight of an intruder in his lair.

Talzin stood in the doorway, her expression one of delight.

"Oh, my little Maul has grown so much!"

Sidious stood there in shock and momentary panic before recovering enough of his equilibrium to respond.

"You!" he growled. "How did you get here?"

"I hid on your ship when you left, of course," Talzin responded.

Sidious narrowed his eyes. Obviously she had used some sort of Nightsister ability to conceal herself. It must be extremely effective if he hadn't noticed her *for the entire return trip*. A chill ran down his spine as he realized what this meant. She could have done anything to him during that time—poisoned him,

stuck a knife in his chest while he slept. He would have to learn what she had done and how to circumvent it.

But he had a more pressing question at the moment.

"All right," he said. "*Why* are you here?"

"I'm here for Maul, of course." she said.

"You gave him to me, remember? There will be no-returns." He held the small zabrak more closely.

She smiled lazily. "Oh, I'm not going to take him from you. I only came here to see him."

Sidious gave her a disdainful look. "You've seen him now. I suggest you leave my domain before I make you do so."

Talzin crossed her arms. "And how do you propose to do that? Fight me one-handed with Maul slung over your shoulder like some kind of sack? Do you even know anything about child care?"

Sidious laughed. "That's what droids are for. Anyway, he *likes* it." He leaned his head over to the infant. "Isn't that right, Maul? You like being a little sack."

"Sack!" Maul said excitedly.

Talzin sighed, grimacing. "I can't say I expected anything else from you. And it's not as if I know much more about the matter. I never really had much time with my little prickly pear before I had to give him up."

"Why did you give him up, anyway, if you're so attached to him?"

A cool expression settled over her face. "I couldn't have him around when I went to murder my dear mother."

Sidious raised an eyebrow. "So that's what happened. I'd wondered why you seemed so-different from the last time. You took her power when she died?"

A look of immense satisfaction crossed her features. "Yes. My mother left me quite the legacy when I forced her from her mortal coil. It's the greatest, and only, generosity I've ever received from her."

Intriguing. It was the same with the Sith, of course. When the Apprentice killed the Master, the power of the Master was passed to them. Plagueis had described to Sidious how just such a thing had happened to him after he had killed his own master, Tenebrous.

And now he knew why Talzin had been able to ward off his attacks as if they were nothing during his recent trip to Dathomir, when just a little over a year and a half ago she had seemed like someone barely worthy of his notice excepting the Force-sensitive child she had to offer. She had been an exhausted, limp woman, so much so that the idea of killing her to ensure she wouldn't be a future threat had seemed ludicrous at the time. He could have blasted her into dust in an instant and that would have been the end of it, but he had dismissed her as unimportant and thought that nature would likely do the job itself in short order.

Of course he now knew he had been quite mistaken. An idea formed in his mind, then. "You probably want to hold your son," Sidious said.

"My, aren't you a master of deduction," she said, light sarcasm tinging her voice.

"I might be persuaded to allow it, if you'll tell me a bit about Nightsister magic."

She raised an eyebrow. "You truly are diabolical."

He smiled. "Why, thank you. Understand, though, that I don't accept compliments in lieu of compensation."

Chapter 4: Hypothesis

Chapter Notes

A/N: Just a very quick chapter to show how Plagueis is coping with all this. Because he's not just going to take this indignity lying down, right?

Plagueis tapped his journal with the pen, pondering his next words.

In summary, the effects of the liquid are indeed quite debilitating. I find that the plans I have carefully cultivated for over a century seem beyond my current capability to implement, and indeed I even question whether my insights are actually worth bringing to pass. There is a great deal of self-flagellation and doubt as well, over events that should be long-forgotten and dismissed. It's all quite disgusting, really.

He sighed, then switched off the datapad, dropping it and the pen onto an empty space on his workbench. As difficult as it had been for him to write that entry, he felt it was also invaluable. It was an essential record into his mental state, one which might otherwise be forgotten or glossed over in the future, and he did not want to lose what might be important information. Clearly, the Nightsisters were hoarding a psychological weapon of great power, and if he must suffer from it, he also fully intended to utilize the experience to learn how it might be turned to his own purposes.

Of course, it would be helpful if he had another data point. Sidious, of course, immediately came to mind, but he also didn't think his Apprentice was as likely to record his thoughts in sufficient detail to be of benefit to Plagueis. It would be laying all his vulnerabilities bare to another, something which Plagueis suspected that Sidious had learned to prevent himself from doing in his time as a Sith. His previous attempts to question Sidious about the liquid had yielded adamant alarm about the liquid's effects, but only an incredibly vague description of said effects that deftly evaded any messy specifics.

But Plagueis could make do. He'd had the thought that certain criminal underworld elements might make good experimental subjects in this regard, and the idea had instantly appealed to him. He was also extremely curious about what the effects of the liquid would be on an average person, and on a Jedi. There was the difficulty that it seemed to actively limit its own voluntary consumption through some as yet unknown mechanism, but Plagueis thought that could be easily overcome through injection

by a third party.

He turned his attention to the microscope on his workbench. Bending his long frame over it, he carefully adjusted the lenses until the liquid sample came into focus. This sample looked similar to the previous one, the items of interest being minuscule black orbs suspended in ordinary pond water.

It was clear to Plagueis that these orbs, whatever they were, were the active agents of the solution. It had also become clear through a number of focused experiments that the orbs interacted primarily with midichlorians.

Which made absolutely no sense at all. Plagueis had determined that their effects were purely psychological. He had tested his Force abilities afterwards and found no noticeable differences from his previous benchmarks. Which of course directly contradicted what he had sensed, but observations didn't lie. Plagueis had never had his Force sense deceived in such a way before, but then everything about these entities was highly unusual.

What he should be seeing was some sort of exotic neurotransmitter, but his attempts to introduce the orbs into cultivated neural cells had shown no interesting interactions. They didn't even have interactions with the midichlorians inhabiting the microorganisms in the pond water. It had only been when he'd examined a vial of his own blood, taken after the incident, that he'd finally seen that the orbs were binding to his midichlorians, forming some sort of complex lattice around them.

One spidery hand grabbed a dropper, which he filled with a sample of his own blood from a month ago, a sample that would not have any of the peculiar black orbs of its own yet. He watched with anticipation as the red liquid hit the orb-filled water.

And...nothing happened. Disappointed, he tried several more samples of his own blood and the blood of others, with the same underwhelming results. Sighing, he grabbed a datapad and recorded the information.

The process must only occur in vivo, and only in certain organisms. And those sorts of tests would have to wait. He checked the time. In exactly two standard hours, he would begin his work day. He frowned. Damask Holdings had been having some difficulties ever since the incident with these unidentified menaces, for which said orbs were clearly at fault. While the worst blow to him in his mind was how this would affect his plans as a Sith, it didn't help that his day job had been suffering as well.

His hearts just weren't in it anymore.

Chapter 5: Test Subjects

Chapter Notes

A/N: Another chapter already? That's right! This time from Talzin's POV. So you will get to see some of her thought process.

I've used a number of sources to draw ideas from this story from. One is the Darth Plagueis novel by James Luceno, which remains one of my favorite Star Wars novels. Another book I really like, and which I have drawn some ideas from for this story, is the Book of Sith. The Book of Sith has what are supposed to be short fragments of writings, from various Sith, and also from Mother Talzin, and was supposed to have been compiled by Sidious during his time as Emperor. I have used the ideas from this short picture book (and what cheery pictures they are, haha) on Talzin's beliefs, Sidious's personality, and its emphasis of Plagueis as a bit of a Dr. Frankenstein sort (albeit with a DaVinci-esque aesthetic). There's also Maul: Lockdown by Joe Schrieber which not only features Maul, but also Sidious and Plagueis as well. Wookieepedia is, of course a great resource which I use often, but I find there are some things that can only be obtained from the source material. Also, I found these to be quite fun books.

Talzin reclined on the ridiculously comfortable sofa that Sidious had in his living room, holding Maul contentedly in her arms. At her insistence, he had agreed that they would all retire upstairs for his interrogations regarding her Nightsister magic. She certainly found it much preferable to the barren subterranean doom nursery where he had been keeping Maul. There were even some flowers here, albeit hacked viciously at the ends and placed in various vases to serve as mere ornament. Barbaric.

"You're a sweet little prickly pear, aren't you? Aren't you?" Talzin said, holding Maul to her chest and bopping his nose gently with one long pointed finger. Maul emitted a high pitched scream of delight, followed by peals of laughter. She considered that it had been perhaps unwise to tell Sidious as much as she had, but for all that he had seemed to soften somewhat since his encounter with the Font of Love, he was still implacable when it came to his desire for knowledge. And she knew where *her* priorities lay. Even if it seemed that knowledge would only be used by Sidious to further his devotion to the Sith Code.

And what a waste that is, she thought, for Talzin had long studied the Sith and the Jedi, and the long, protracted war they had waged against each other across the stars. It was a vital backdrop to understanding Allya's true teachings as recorded in the Book of Shadows. And Talzin had determined that it was no wonder the Jedi reigned supreme while the Sith scurried like mice into their burrows. The Sith were such tiresome solitary creatures, their only companion someone who they either plotted to kill or who would eventually kill them. It would be like if her mother had been her only friend. She shuddered inwardly. As distasteful as Talzin found the Jedi, at least they understood the concepts of strength in numbers and solidarity.

The Sith, of course, had some foolhardy plan to destroy the Jedi by stabbing them all simultaneously from the shadows. Which, even if they managed against all odds to succeed, seemed rather empty and dead-ended to her.

After all, what was the point of winning if there was no one with whom you could take thrill in that victory? And if you had no friends, who would protect you from the inevitable backlash? It seemed a life of constantly watching your back and waiting for the knife. She really had done the Sith a favor, even if they didn't see it that way yet.

Still, the reaction Sidious had to Maul seemed promising to her. She could tell that already *that* attachment was digging its claws in him, much to her immense satisfaction.

And that was another thing. The Sith, having spawned from the Jedi they so loathed, had also kept sacred the Jedi's most ridiculous tenet, that a person should feel no attachment to anyone. But how was that compatible with allowing yourself the freedom to revel in your feelings? It was all quite absurd, really.

"-and do not make me use drastic measures."

Talzin looked up from Maul's tiny laughing face.

"What?" she said. "Oh, please excuse me-I was a bit preoccupied. Prickly pear loves to have his nose bopped, you see. I bet you didn't know that."

The red-haired Sith Lord curled his lip in distaste. "Be that as it may, your time with 'prickly pear' is up." he held out his arms expectantly. "Return him to me now."

"Prickle pear," Maul said.

Talzin smiled widely, delighted. "Oh, he knows it now! He knows he's a prickly pear!" She bopped his nose once again and handed him to back to an exasperated Sidious.

"That's ridiculous," Sidious said, scowling. "Do you want your son thinking his name is 'prickly pear'?" As he turned to look at Maul, all hostility dissolved from his face and he said with a warm smile, "Don't worry, Maul. I will ensure you know your *real* name. Come now. Say Maul. Maul?"

"Prickle," Maul said, his eyes wide, expression serious. "Prickle pear."

Sidious sighed. "Your mother is a bad influence."

"Oh, *I'm* the bad influence? Who wants to turn my son into a Sith Lord?"

Sidious raised an eyebrow. "You have an objection? I thought you said that would be what was best for him."

"Of my available options at the time, it was the best choice, yes. Of any possible option? A vastly inferior one."

Sidious frowned, holding Maul to his chest. "What were your other options?"

"His death. His torture and captivity to my mother. I could not have defeated her if I had to worry she might get her hands on him. I knew what you were. That was still better than the alternative. With her, he would have been nothing more than a bargaining chip, his torture or murder used to keep me in line."

"You are talking about your mother, as in your parent? Or your clan Mother?"

"Both."

"Then, she would do that to her own grandson?"

"Without hesitation. She knew my love for him."

Sidious held Maul closer. "I see."

There was a beeping noise. Sidious fished his comm out of a pocket and, shooing Talzin out of visual range, turned it on. Talzin watched with interest as a tall, spindly creature in robes was displayed in the palm of his hand.

"Apprentice," he said.

"Lord Plagueis. Is there something you require from me?"

Lord Plagueis, Talzin thought with interest. *So this is Sidious's Master*. He did not look particularly dangerous, but Talzin knew that looks could often be deceiving.

"Yes, I-is that Maul?" The holo of Plagueis asked.

"Oh, ah, yes. I was just exercising him, Master. To make sure he grows strong."

The frown on the holo deepened. "Can't your droids do that?"

"No, Master," Sidious said, looking towards the floor. "They are-malfunctioning."

"I see," Plagueis said doubtfully. "Anyway, I've made a couple of discoveries about the liquid which I think will be useful to share with you, Sidious."

"Oh. Thank you, Master," Sidious said.

"Think nothing of it. The first is that it does not increase one's power."

"But Master, I felt-"

Plagueis held up a hand. "As did I. But my tests of my abilities showed no differences from before. Our senses have deceived us."

"Ah," Sidious said. "That's-unfortunate."

"Indeed," Plagueis said. "The second discovery is that the substance operates on midichlorians in some way."

Midi-what? Talzin thought. It was such a bizarre-sounding term.

"Ah. Then I gather you will have no difficulty discovering the mechanism through which it operates."

"Actually, that is part of the problem," Plagueis said, grimacing. "That interaction does not make sense."

"Oh," Sidious said. "How-unfortunate." Did Talzin detect a note of relief in his voice?

"Yes. It may take me some time to study it. To that end, I need you to obtain for me a number of test subjects."

Sidious looked at him blankly. "Of what sort?"

"Criminals of various types," Plagueis said. "Sorted by rank. I plan to obtain a few myself, but it would be too time-consuming for me to acquire the necessary numbers alone."

Sidious raised an eyebrow. "What are they for?"

"A comparison. Behavior before and after exposure to the liquid. Also, to study attempts to reverse the effects."

"Would this not attract unwanted attention to us in the criminal underworld?" Sidious asked.

"If we are not careful, yes. You must not be either Sidious or Palpatine when you perform this task. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good. I will send you a document detailing my specific requirements for these subjects. I will expect a status report from you in a week." Then the hologram cut off.

Sidious turned his head towards the ceiling, emitting a long sigh.

Talzin had gleaned some interesting observations from the conversation. She considered commenting on the fact that Sidious had intentionally concealed her presence from his Master. Or that, from what Plagueis had implied, he had also drank water from the Font of Love, presumably from the flask Sidious had collected earlier. But first, she had a question.

"What are *midichlorians*?" she asked.

"My Master's one true love," Sidious answered slowly.

Chapter 6: The Agreement

Chapter Notes

A/N: And here we are again! While I never write any chapter I feel is dull or filler, I do feel this chapter slows the pace of the story a bit. It addresses some important plot points, however, so I felt I should include it for that reason. I consider this a kind of interlude chapter. Still, while the action quotient is admittedly low, I had a lot of fun writing it. And I do hope to ratchet the action up in the next chapter.

Public Service Announcement that adorable infants lead to diapers gratuitously included.

Sidious looked between Maul and Talzin. If he was going to collect dangerous criminals for Plagueis, it might be easier if he did it without a baby zabrak in tow. He could leave Maul with the caretaker droids for now. He would merely-move them upstairs. Something in him couldn't bring himself to leave Maul in the lonely cavern he had carved out to conceal his Apprentice, even if it would be the easiest solution. He knew with a feeling of absolute certainty then that he never wanted Maul to have to see that loathsome place again. It had been created with a much crueler intent than he could now bring himself to implement.

Weak. Soft. Foolish. Sidious could easily expand the list of undesirable traits he seemed to have acquired. In fact there were several Sith curses he felt could much more adequately express just how far he had fallen. He was still berating himself for not hiding Maul before answering his Master's call. There had been time, but a completely irrational part of him had been unwilling to let the tiny zabrak hybrid out of his grasp. His Master had not been fooled. He had merely chosen to overlook the issue for the moment. It chilled him to think what punishment Plagueis might see fit to mete out once that moment had passed.

But still, he had gotten away with it for now. And so Sidious had made up his mind, however much he might come to regret his decision later. He called up the holoscreen at his desk and searched until he found an appropriate form template.

"What are you doing?" Talzin asked, her tone one of mild curiosity. She was now standing next to him behind the desk.

"Adopting Maul," Sidious said. He filled out the forms, falsifying most of the entries.

"But-you've already adopted him."

"True, but there's no paperwork, and that matters on Naboo. I can't just go walking around with a child who's clearly not mine, with no record of how I got him. People may start asking inconvenient questions."

"Oh. So you *do* plan to take him outside. That's a relief, then."

Sidious didn't answer. Maul, meanwhile, had crawled up Sidious's robes and started gently tapping his tiny hand on the Sith Lord's nose.

"Just a moment, Maul," Sidious said, craning his head to look at the holoscreen. Having finished the forms, he then used a program he had earlier obtained from a slicer to deposit the records in the appropriate locations—one in a large orphanage on Coruscant, the other in the records office on Naboo. He had no idea *how* the program worked, of course, but unlike Plagueis, such details had never troubled him. The important thing was that it *did* work, and very effectively. Though he had never imagined it would be put to this specific use.

"There," he said. "It's official." *Maul is mine.* He lifted the child up, smiling at him, and then placed him on his shoulder. Then, he looked over at Talzin. "And now, we come to an important question. When were you planning on leaving my abode?"

"Soon."

"Ah, that's good to hear. When you leave—"

"I thought I'd come along on this little trip of yours. I plan on returning when you do, of course."

"What." Sidious stared at her.

Talzin smiled. "Did you think I came all the way here merely for a brief glance at Maul?"

There were two issues here that Sidious felt needed to be addressed. He decided to address the longer-term one first.

"You cannot seriously think that I will allow you to stay here," he said.

"You should. There is a great deal I have not yet told you about the power of the Nightsisters."

"And I'm sure we can arrange for you to tell me that somewhere *besides* my personal apartment."

"True. But consider this-I can help you protect Maul."

Sidious was silent at that, trying to formulate a suitable retort. But none came. He had thought he was being clever, earlier, using her affection for Maul for his own personal benefit. But now, it seemed, she had turned the same tactic back on him.

"All right. I'll allow it." He held up a finger. "But there are a few terms you must agree to."

"Yes?"

"One-you do not enter my room. Ever." He would not have her riffling through his Sith tomes, his art collection, or sleeping in *his* bed. He pointed to the couch. "You can sleep there."

"Sure," she said serenely.

"Two-absolutely no one besides myself and Maul will know you are here. You will make yourself invisible if necessary-a skill I know you are quite capable of."

"No problem," she said, and smiled.

"Three-you will not interfere in Maul's education as a Sith Lord."

"Agreed," she said, though not without some amount of sourness in her voice.

"Then we have a deal," Sidious said. Now to address the second issue. "Oh, and you will not be coming along with me when I go on this criminal collection spree for Plagueis."

"Why not? I could help with that, too."

Sidious crossed his arms. "And why would you do that? Plagueis intends to use them to discover a way to reverse what you did to us."

"That may be what he *intends*, but there is no way to reverse the effect of the Font, Sidious," Talzin said. "There have been attempts, of course, but none who ever succeeded. It is impossible."

"Yes, yes, that's very nice," Sidious said. "And do you know what that means?"

"Plagueis will fail."

"No, because impossible just means everyone gave up when it got too hard. But *he* will keep digging and digging until he's broken up whatever causes that glorified pond muck to work into tiny pieces, and those pieces, into tiny pieces, and so on, until he knows how all the parts fit together and has worked out everything they do and how they do it. And then he will know how to reverse it."

"You cannot break *love* up into pieces," Talzin said.

"No, *I* cannot. But Plagueis can. The universe is just one big puzzle box to him."

"I would like to see him try," Talzin said smugly. "Anyway, do I detect a note of concern from you? Perhaps you no longer want this to be reversed?"

He scowled at her. "What do you think? I want to protect Maul. And that includes from old me. *Especially* from old me. But I can't exactly ignore a direct command from my Master. I'm not ready to confront him yet."

"Then bring me with you," Talzin said. "If what you fear does come to pass, you will not have to face him alone. But I would like to see him. In the flesh. To study the studier."

Sidious hesitated. What Talzin had suggested was unSithly, a blasphemy even. A Sith who could not kill their Master alone was no Sith at all. Then again, allowing his Apprentice to use him as a jungle gym was also very unSithly. Perhaps he must allow himself to be more flexible if he wanted to succeed.

"All right."

In the end, they took Maul, too. Sidious realized he no longer trusted leaving Maul alone for so long with the caretaker droids, and an ordinary babysitter would hardly do. He also took one of the caretaker droids, though, as both Sith and Nightsister feared the prospect of changing their tiny charge's diapers.

Chapter 7: Captives

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hello again! Thanks to those who have commented on this story so far! I very much appreciate the feedback!

Just a warning: this chapter may make some people squeamish, despite the fact that I've worked to tone down the violence to a Teen level. This chapter also took me some extra effort, due to it's unusual structure. I'd be most interested to hear any feedback anyone has to give about any element of the story, but I also have some questions I am particularly curious about. Does the structure work for you? Or does it make it difficult to read through? Do any aspects of the chapter make you squeamish, and if so what parts? Would you have preferred if I had toned it down even more, or do you think it's just right or even a bit too tame? If anyone is willing to give feedback on any of these aspects, it would be much appreciated.

I've drawn freely on both the Legends and canon material here, as I always do, as well as making things up when necessary.

Black Sun Sub-Headquarters, Ord Mantell

"Found him right outside," One of the mercenaries said. "Says he's come to collect a debt." he laughed.

Target is human, just under 2 meters tall, and 52 years old. The Black Sun head for the sector sat on a ostentatious throne. *Demonstrates terrible taste in decor,* Plagueis noted.

The human laughed. "You came to the wrong place, my friend."

"Your name is Rizlus Arcturus, is it not?" Plagueis asked. "Sub-Directorate for Black Sun."

"Yes, and you are?"

"Mak Plain," Plagueis said.

"I see. The thing is, Mak, we don't particularly care for those who come rooting around here for money without paying their proper respects."

"Proper respects?" Plagueis asked, raising one hairless brow.

"Do you know how to kneel, Muun?"

Plagueis was silent a moment. *Exhibits excessive displays of dominance despite limited influence.* "I do."

"Then I think you know what happens now."

"You're absolutely right." Plagueis grabbed the necks of the two heavysset, but shorter, mercenaries, pinching a pressure point. The two men toppled to the ground. He then loped over to Rizlus and, pulling out his concealed weapon, stabbed the man with it in the heart.

Rizlus gaped at Plagueis, then stared down at the syringe in shock before collapsing in his throne. Plagueis leaned over him and checked his pulse and breathing, which he found to be within the expected parameters of the sedative he had used. Turning to the mercenaries, he saw they had also both survived his attack.

All targets successfully acquired, Plagueis thought with satisfaction.

Darropolis, Hosnian Prime

"Please, sir," Sidious said, holding up his hands. "Don't hurt me."

The man stared at him, his eyes wide. "Oh, but don't you know? Hurting people is what I do. It's what I'm built for."

"Please, have mercy."

"I don't understand that term."

"Don't do this! I have a family."

"Don't care." The man took a vibroblade out of his pocket. "Now let's hear some screams."

I agree. Sidious grabbed the man's wrist and pushed it back 180 degrees until he heard a loud crunch. The man screamed and dropped the blade, which Sidious grabbed with his other hand. The Sith Lord

then kicked him in the solar plexus, sending him crumbling to the ground in a heap.

Sidious grimaced, and kicked the man a few more times for good measure. He found the physicality of these attacks distasteful. His very essence was a weapon, and he was reduced to this? But Plagueis had insisted that they not use any skill that might inadvertently indicate their status as Sith. Which meant no Force abilities, or even lightsabers.

This is beneath me, Sidious thought sulkily as he bent down and began dragging the man back to his ship.

Ivax Nebula, Anoat Sector

"You are Voras the Hutt?" Plagueis asked.

"I should think that would be obvious," the Hutt replied in his native language. "Not that I imagine you comprehend Huttese." Looking up at the guard, he said. "This had better be worth my time."

"I caught him wandering a quarter mile north of here," the guard said. "Certainly he's decent hostage material."

Hutt, age 237, head of Ivax Syndicate.

"I trust you checked he was someone more significant than a lowly accountant?" Voras asked, his tone bored.

"He's a Muun," the guard said. "Got to be worth something. Maybe alot of something."

"You *didn't* check, did you?" Voras said. He turned his gaze to Plagueis. "I suppose we can put him in a holding cell until he can be identified. Was he carrying any ID?"

"No, sir."

"Curious," Voras murmured.

It was at that moment that 11-4D, disguised as a protocol droid, struck out with multiple stun-blasts. The five guards in the area dropped, and Voras widened his large eyes, lurching with surprising speed off his dais.

"You've got to be kidding me," the Hutt rumbled to himself as he slid across the floor, ducking behind tables and sofas and attempting to reach the exit.

Inconveniently fast, Plagueis thought as he pursued the fleeing Hutt.

Just as Voras reached the entryway, Plagueis caught up with him and stabbed him in the flank with a syringe. Voras made a noise of dismay and whipped around, grabbing Plagueis with his large muscular tail and lifting him off the ground, squeezing thick muscles around his chest and neck.

Plagueis could feel himself begin to suffocate. Just as he had prepared to use a Force attack in desperation, the Hutt's grip on him slackened and the Sith fell to the ground, covered in slime. Plagueis

rose, attempting to wipe off the unpleasant material.

Target acquired. Barely.

11-4D walked up to Plagueis. "I apologize I could not be of more assistance. Energy blasts are ineffective on Hutts."

"The fault is mine," Plagueis said. "I became overconfident. Still, we have succeeded. Now I will require your assistance with moving Voras." He looked down at the Hutt, who's eyes were still wide open, his mouth slack. Plagueis had used a paralytic rather than a sedative this time, as all the known Hutt sedatives had required an overly large dosage and waiting time to take effect.

So Voras was still fully conscious. Plagueis looked down at him. "You may find this part slightly uncomfortable," he noted. "I would apologize, but you *did* try to kill me."

Broken Horn Syndicate Headquarters, Lothal

"If it isn't our sneaker," Aritar Vizago said, crossing his arms. The Devaronian eyed Sidious contemptuously.

"I wasn't-"

"Save your protests," Aritar said. "You were sneaking, and if you were sneaking, it means you were thieving."

"Are you-going to get me in trouble with the authorities?"

Aritar laughed. "That's a good one! No, we take out our own trash here."

To his guards. "Remove all his fingers."

Sidious was bound this time, but he had anticipated this complication. He had taken the time conversing with Aritar to pick the lock. Not that lockpicking was his specialty, but he'd tried it over 200 times in Force visions until he'd finally figured out the trick. That had been a lot of hypothetical fingers lost.

He took out his anger by grabbing a blaster from one of the guards while poking the other in the eyes. Sidious grinned maniacally as he shot at the guards and Aritar, who dove for cover. Not all of them survived.

But Sidious wasn't troubled by this. He had ensured Aritar had lived, along with a random selection of his underlings. That would have to be enough to appease his Master.

Aritar crawled slowly behind a crate, groaning. Sidious stood over him.

"I was just joking about the fingers," Aritar pleaded.

Sidious bent down over him. "I don't believe you." Then he changed the setting on the blaster and shot Aritar in the face with a stun blast.

Level 1313, Coruscant

Plagueis opened his eyes, noting with interest that the metal slab he had been manacled to was surgical-grade. He'd allowed his attacker to sneak up on him and administer the sedative, silently reversing its effects with his Force powers as he'd allowed his body to fall limply to the ground. He trusted that such a thing would be unlikely to be detected even if his attacker hadn't taken great pains to ensure he wouldn't be seen. The mode of attack fit the description. *Subject is behavioral match for target.* Deciding that he should make a show of it, he started rattling the manacles.

"Oh, so you're awake now," the man turned around. He wore a smock and a doctor's mask.

"What do you want? I am quite wealthy," Plagueis said.

The man laughed. "Oh, you needn't trouble yourself with the cost. I do all my operations for free, you see."

The Dissector, human, age unknown, true name unknown. Psychopath, homicidal type. Fascination with anatomy.

The Dissector walked up to him and placed a stethoscope on the Sith Lord's chest, making a displeased 'hmmmm' sound after a moment. "Your heartbeats seem unusually calm for one of my-patients. A bit of an adrenaline speed-up, but not erratic. You do not appear to be a Muun under significant stress."

Possesses some legitimate knowledge of physiology. Intriguing. Perhaps we should compare notes sometime. Plagueis performed a quick scan of the room.

"This appears to be a completely private location with soundproof walls and no cameras," the Sith Lord noted.

"Yes, I would consider that the ideal environment to perform my procedures on conscious subjects," The Dissector said. "It's not exactly a legal activity, after all."

"Perfect."

The man gave Plagueis a baffled look, his eyes wide. Plagueis unleashed a Force wave which sent The Dissector smashing into the far wall along with a number of glass vials and medical implements. He ripped his arms and legs out of the manacles and sat up on the slab, rubbing at his wrists. Jumping off the table, he walked over to The Dissector, grabbed one of the man's own syringes, checked the label, and stabbed him in the chest with it.

Target acquired.

Pirate Vessel, Sriluur

Sidious, hanging by nothing more than his two hands off an airborne shuttle, had had an epiphany.

I hate pirates. More specifically, he hated their boots.

Sidious hissed as the pirate captain brought her durasteel-toed boot down on his hand.

"No one double-crosses Jenea Ohnaka!" Sidious moved his other hand before she could stomp that one, too.

"Obviously you're wrong about that," he goaded.

"Arrgh! Fine. No one double crosses me and lives!" She stomped again.

This time Sidious was a split second too slow and the pirate crushed a finger. *This is completely ridiculous.*

Sure, the pirate captain was surrounded by a rather numerous assemblage of lowlifes. And sure, she was reasonably well-armed. But that sort of thing was an obstacle to normal people. Not Sith Lords!

Nevertheless, the Weequay woman seemed absolutely untouchable. And Sidious had an inkling as to why from what he could sense of her. She was a Dark Side nexus. It made absolutely no sense—a nexus was a place, not a person. But—there it was, plain as day to him. She was a walking, talking, boot-stomping Dark Side nexus.

"Looks like you missed a spot," he mocked, glancing at his remaining uninjured digits. He didn't think the Dun Moch was actually doing him any favors in this case, but it was just his nature. On the other hand, it seemed it hadn't occurred to her to just shoot him in the face yet, so maybe it was of some value.

"I will kill you and then I will kill you again!" she said.

This is not worth it, Sidious decided. "You can only do that once, you know," he drawled. She wasn't Plagueis, after all. At least there was that.

Just as she was about to bring her boot down to stomp his remaining good fingers, two red-robed arms materialized out of a green mist and pulled her back.

"Aughh!" the pirate groaned, hitting Talzin in the face repeatedly with the side of her blaster. The Nightsister grimaced and backed away. Sidious thought she might be sensing the same thing he had from the pirate.

Talzin's expression brightened suddenly and she grabbed a Weequay man who was standing off to the side. Then she jumped out the the open hatchway Sidious was hanging onto. Looking down, he saw their ship. *Time to get off this worthless rock.*

He grinned up at the enraged pirate and let go of the hatchway. He and Talzin landed on top of their ship, which then began to move away from the pirate vessel.

"Come back here with my jogan cake, you vile creatures!"

Her what? Sidious thought, before he realized she was referring to the man Talzin held. He must be her-lover? Husband? Whatever his significance to her, it seemed to be preventing her from firing on

their ship, which Sidious found an immense relief.

They entered the ship and left Sriluur right then, Sidious applying bacta bandages to his fingers and noting the caretaker droid piloting the ship. He'd wondered who had been flying it. Talzin, meanwhile, had placed the Weequay in a holding cell, and was now holding Maul to her robes and showing him something outside the ship's window.

This trip had been a wretched failure. It troubled him that he had put Maul in danger, however briefly. And Sidious hadn't even achieved his objective, since Plagueis had specifically requested the pirate captain, and not her spouse, lover, or whoever the Weequay they now held captive was. He did not look forward to explaining this.

But Sidious wasn't going back for her.

Chapter 8: Master and Apprentice

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hello! Here's the new chapter. Featuring a travelling Nightsister, a baby Maul cameo, and two Sith Lords in agony! By the way, I added a fairly substantial scene to chapter 1 after writing chapter 7. So do feel free to head back there if you missed that and want to see the full HD version of the wrecking of Palpatine via family flashbacks! I'll also be referencing that scene later on in the story.

I appreciate the reviews I've received for this story so far and I hope you'll let me know what you think as the story goes on! Also note that while I have no shortage of ideas and interesting scenarios (as well as a great beta reader!) for this story, I also take all suggestions into account. So if there's a question you'd like to see answered, a character you'd like to see more of, or a scenario you think would be really cool, do feel free to let me know! While I do not guarantee it will make its way into the story, I do consider all such ideas and I have used quite a few such suggestions in the past.

Also, thanks to guest reviewer Glycogen for your comment about teenage San Hill! I'm going to have fun writing him as well! Since I can't send you a PM I thought I'd reply to your note here.

Landing his private yacht on Sojourn, Plagueis intended to move his new captives to their holding cells soon, but first he felt a compulsion to attend to something quite different.

Plagueis turned a corner of the compound, and there it was. The hallway with the holding cells containing his experimental subjects. There were forty cells, half empty, the other half containing a number of sapient species--human, trandoshan, yinchorri, wookie, and others still. As he walked past them, a datapad in his hand, he frowned, troubled by something besides their progression in his experiments. He saw them all watch him with varying degrees of apprehension and hatred, their pain apparent to him not only through their expressions, but through his connection to them in the Force.

It was that pain that had been troubling him. It was causing him pain. All of them had been slaves or

other unfortunates who he had acquired through various shady means. They had done nothing to provoke his cruelty to them. Of course, Plagueis had never cared before. But it seemed that had changed. He entered the cell of the first captive, a human dressed in the plain brown jumpsuit he supplied all of them.

“Hello,” he said. “You are injured. Allow me to assist.” He held out a hand, and coaxed the midichlorians to close the precise, surgical wounds in the her arm. Wounds he had created.

The human watched him silently with suspicion. Plagueis hesitated.

“I am going to release you.”

The human gave him a wary look. “You will send me back to Gardulla?” Fear and uncertainty flitted across her features.

“No,” Plagueis said. “You will be free. ”

“Where will I go?”

“A few moments, please,” Plagueis said, bringing up the HoloNet page for Damask Holdings on his datapad and logging into the site. A moneyless freed slave would just end up a slave again. Clearly, they would need some sort of financial resources if they were to avoid that fate. But how much should he give them?

Perhaps 5,000? he thought. *No, that won't last long at all.*

25,000, then? It seemed a rather paltry amount.

50,000? Perhaps more reasonable, but they had no possessions--no clothes, besides the rather unstylish jumpsuit they wore, no speeders, no furniture, no books, datapads, nor anything else an ordinary person would have purchased over the course of their life.

100,000? That might make up for their disadvantage somewhat, but what about education, without which they might be unqualified for any jobs allowing them to better themselves?

500,000? Yes, that seemed--but wait. What if they had health expenses from damage he couldn't heal, or from something he had overlooked?

1 million. Surely that is enough.

He frowned.

Perhaps there should be some additional cushion, in case I overlooked an expense.

He created the new account, placing the ownership in the human's name. He had logged in as a fictitious employee, so the account creation would not be linked to him. After all, a new account created by a large banking company such as his was just another account among billions. An account created by the CEO of that company, on the other hand, would be rather more peculiar and could draw unwanted attention.

He finished creating the account in a matter of minutes.

Plagueis handed her a card. “This is linked to an account containing 2 million credits. It is yours.”

She looked at the card in stunned shock. “Why are you doing this?”

Plagueis looked down at the cell’s silvery metallic floor. “I believe it is called--guilt,” he said. He paused. “You will not remember any of this. You escaped Gardulla and won the money in the lotto.” He didn’t need to elaborate the suggestion. Her mind would fill in the necessary details.

“If you say so,” she said, giving him a bemused smile. Plagueis returned the smile. The suggestion would not take effect until she left the planet. It would be too confusing otherwise.

He briefly wondered if giving former slaves such exorbitant resources might draw unwanted attention to himself, or to them. He did not think it would be traced to him. The truth of the situation was in this case much more bizarre than any likely scenario a hypothetical investigator might devise. Perhaps the main concern would be suspicion that the money was stolen. But he had already created a record trail to a fictitious lotto account from which the money had supposedly been transferred from. And any investigation of transfers from that account would only occur if the account holder complained, which of course was a rare occurrence for nonexistent account holders.

But what if? What if somehow, an investigation was opened by some nosy busybody who found the circumstances suspicious? Possible. He supposed that was a risk, but he also thought that 2 million credits would give someone reasonable protection from that risk.

More worryingly, was it possible the *Jedi* would become involved, perhaps if one of the former slaves was linked to criminal activity? And what if that somehow led them to him? Plagueis smiled wryly, quickly dismissing the thought. *Because of course the Jedi always investigate crimes outside their jurisdiction.*

With that fear allayed, Plagueis opened the next cell.

It took him some time to attend to the rest of the captives. However, after three hours, twenty Force healings, 40 million credits, and one large cruiser shuttle later, he had finally completed his task. All forty cells stood empty. *It was necessary. I needed more--space.* Only, of course he hadn’t, not with half the cells originally empty, and space didn’t explain the effort he had gone through to soothe their pain, or the sizable sum of money he had unnecessarily parted with.

He sighed and then turned to the opposite wall. Several hundred smaller cages lined the wall. These were the non-sapient test subjects. He stared at them. Beady eyes of various furred, feathered, and scaled creatures stared back. He sighed and put a hand to his forehead.

Oh, no. Nonononono.

Not them, too.

I’m not done with them.

Those experiments are still--in progress.

Much like the status of the other experiments with the slaves.

But! The slaves were different!

Larger. Took up too much space.

I won't do it.

I won't!

Slowly, gritting his teeth, he walked up to the control console and stared down at it. He noted the red of the alphanumeric Aurabesh characters and the black of the background. He noted the curved squares outlining each character. He ran a finger down the side of the console.

Some of the furred animals began squeaking and chittering excitedly.

“This isn't what it looks, you know,” he said to them with a grimace.

A lizard stared at him.

“You mean nothing to me. Vermin.” He sneered at it.

Several birds cooed.

“You think that's charming? You know what's even better? Slides of your entrails.”

Soon the animals were emitting a cacophony of sound.

With deliberate slowness, he typed each letter and digit of the authorization code, his face a mask of incandescent rage. Nearly completed, he yanked his hand back, as if from a flame, holding his wrist with the other hand.

If I do this, it undermines everything I stand for.

After a maddening several minutes of deliberation, he loosened his grip on the hand, and it reached out again, tentatively. The last letter was typed. All the cells opened at once.

Immediately, animals jumped, hopped, or flew out from their cages. A feeling of immense relief washed over him as he watched them scurry, slither, and flap away in all directions.

“Go free!” Plagueis said quietly, smiling brightly while feeling both strangely elated and disgusted with himself. The animals dispersed within the compound. There were no windows or doors leading outside in this area. *Free enough*, he supposed. Plagueis didn't have time to carry each and every one of the small creatures outside. It wasn't as if he cared what happened to them, after all.

Revolting, all of them.

I have completely lost it.

He sighed. He still needed to go and move the captured criminals here. Then he would wait for

Sidious. His Apprentice would be arriving with his own set of captives soon.

Plagueis wondered why he did not feel similarly distraught about his new test subjects, who he thought much more similar to him than any of the ones he had released. How exactly did this emotional response work? This 'love'? It didn't seem to make him care for everyone indiscriminately. Thankfully. But what was the deciding factor? He needed more data. And he needed it fast.

Subject is experiencing rapid degradation of character. Loss of resolve and-- he grimaced-- gross sentimentality.

Exiting hyperspace, Sidious thought it was time to ensure everything was in order for the trip to Sojourn.

Sidious looked to the cradle where he would be leaving Maul for the duration of his stay at Sojourn. The caretaker droid, with its boxy but friendly-looking face would see to Maul's needs while Sidious and Talzin walked through the compound that comprised the secret laboratory of Sidious' Master.

"You're sure you can do this without being detected by Plagueis?" Sidious spoke to Talzin inside the ship, holding Maul in one arm. He had some apprehensions about her trying to use her powers of invisibility to deceive his Master.

Talzin smiled. "I wasn't detected by you."

"That's different," Sidious said. "Plagueis is considerably more knowledgeable than I. He has lived longer already than any human lives in an entire lifetime."

"There is only way to find out for certain, yes," Talzin said. "But I will not wait here, in fear of him. If the worst happens then I will--improvise."

Sidious frowned. "You mean, you don't have a plan for if something goes wrong?"

"I don't think that's necessary."

"Well, I do!" He took a deep breath, his mind racing. "Alright. If Plagueis sees you, I will feign ignorance of your presence, and I will offer to question you myself. If Plagueis refuses that offer and takes you captive, I will secretly release you, and again claim ignorance when he brings up your disappearance. If he tries to kill you, we will both attack him then and try to kill him." It seemed a very inelegant and simplistic plan, but surely it was better than nothing. Improvise indeed!

"Your concern for me is heartwarming," Talzin said. "If entirely unnecessary."

Sidious pointed a finger at her, scowling. "I am not doing this for you. I am doing this for Maul. You would do well to understand the difference."

"Of course," she said, smiling serenely.

Infuriating , he thought. However, it wasn't anger, but worry that creased his brow as he watched her prepare her spell.

Sidious had felt a change in the humid air of Sojourn the moment he had arrived, a feeling of the Force twisting in on itself, and had feared that it might be a sign of his Master's growing temper, perhaps at the failures Sidious had reported to him.

He couldn't have been more mistaken.

"Master," Sidious said, as they reached the cell block, Sidious leading a prisoner towards the cells and zapping him with Force Lightning whenever he thought to try to escape. "This place seems unusually empty." There were a handful of prisoners who looked to be the criminals Plagueis had recently captured, but Sidious knew he had had a number of slaves he used in his experiments.

"That's because I released all my prior test subjects."

"The slaves? I assume you cleared their memories of this place?"

"Yes, that's correct."

Sidious's eyes widened. "You completed your experiments with them?" He shoved the captive criminal forward when he dallied in front of him. Briefly, he wondered where Talzin might be at this moment, but of course it could only be a good thing that he couldn't answer that question.

"Not really," Plagueis said casually, his expression dispassionate. "I needed the extra space." He didn't meet his Apprentice's gaze.

Sidious didn't believe the excuse for a moment. He tried to wrap his mind around the idea of an impulse powerful enough to cause Plagueis to abandon an experiment. Perhaps if he felt his life threatened. But that hardly seemed the case here. Yet he knew what must be at the root of this. This was not attachment to a particular person he felt close to, as Sidious had come to associate with his own changed nature. This was true, undiluted compassion--a drive to care that extended even to those he may have encountered only briefly and might never see again. It was that terrible rot the Jedi were always preaching. At any rate, for Plagueis to put such things even above his own greatest interests seemed inconceivable to Sidious.

Sidious resolved then and there not to let himself go that far. He would care about Maul, and *only* Maul. To allow himself anything else would be the worst weakness and sentimentality. Though he admitted, he also cared for his mother and siblings--but they were dead--so he did not see how that could further influence him. And he certainly didn't care for Talzin, though he couldn't help wonder if she trailed behind them or to the side, and whether she was keeping a cautious distance from Plagueis or hovering over his shoulder. Plagueis who had, it seemed, undergone a much more dramatic shift than his Apprentice.

And the release of the slaves was not even the full extent of it.

"I notice," Sidious said carefully, "that I hear nothing from the small cells, either."

"Oh, that. There was a malfunction in the cage wiring. It released all the test subjects," Plagueis said calmly.

"Most unfortunate," Sidious said.

"Indeed," Plagueis replied, though he hardly sounded disappointed, and there was the shadow of a smile on his face as he stared off into the distance.

I don't believe it, Sidious thought, stunned. *He let them go*. What other explanation made sense? Sidious did not buy for a moment that the malfunction had been in the *wiring*. It was all due to the effects of the Font, as Talzin called it. What else would explain his Master's complete lack of rage at this turn of events?

Sidious realized then that he was feeling something akin to affection for his Master. The Muun had been more of a father to him than the man who had sired him, after all. And he seemed genuinely calm and content now, his manner pleasant and friendly. *No. This is dangerous*, he thought. *Plagueis is dangerous. He needs to die. It's the only way to be sure I'm safe. It's the only way to be sure Maul is safe. No loose ends.*

Plagueis wasn't making such thoughts easy, however.

"I'm pleased with your results, Sidious," he said. "With these test subjects, I will have plenty of data points. You have done an excellent job."

Sidious tried to quash the growing pride he felt. What made it worst of all was that he suspected his Master might actually mean it. "Are you certain? As I said, I wasn't able to retrieve the pirate captain."

Plagueis waved a hand dismissively. "These things happen," he said. "Anyway, a sapient Dark Side nexus would hardly be an ideal test subject. Probably would have thrown my data way off." He looked up, turning his head to an empty cell. "You can put this one here."

Sidious smiled, shoving the prisoner into the indicated cell and activating the force field to contain him. "Of course, Master." He began to worry that his desire for Plagueis' approval would interfere with what he felt needed to be done. He had already told Talzin that he planned to strike at Plagueis soon, perhaps even within the next year.

But he couldn't do that if he was going to become so sickeningly maudlin.

Chapter 9: Deception

Chapter Notes

Got a new chapter here! Just a short one, but I think it sets up some useful framework for the story, as well as being a nice little bonding scene for Palpatine and Maul.

As always, I'd be most interested to hear what you think! Am I delivering what you want in a Palpatine redemption fic?

Anyway, here we are! I hope you enjoy the chapter!

Palpatine had at last returned to his Naboo apartment and closed the door. The trip to leave the captive criminals with Plagueis had gone without incident. Which was to say, none of the criminals had escaped, Palpatine had successfully transferred ten additional flasks from the Font of Love to Plagueis, and most importantly, Talzin had at no point been detected.

Now Talzin was familiarizing herself with the layout of Theed from her perspective of invisibility. He supposed she might instead still be in his apartment, hovering undetected, but she didn't seem to want to miss any opportunity to steal Maul's attention from him, so he rather doubted it.

Which meant he was alone with Maul now. Turning to face the living room, he decided it was time to start addressing the threads of his nascent plans, which would now require a new deception.

Eventually, he would have to address Talzin's role in this as well, but he thought it best to give that aspect some thought. He would need to talk with her about the matter anyway, obtain her agreement, tiresome as that sounded to him. He was not accustomed to detailing his plans or requiring their approval from anyone besides Plagueis, and even then, he had always kept many things from the Master who he had planned in time to replace.

But it seemed that his new reality would require considerably more cooperation, cumbersome though that might be to him. He felt comfortable taking a few months to work that particular issue out, however. For now, Maul's mother could be an invisible friend that others could not detect.

He sighed and turned around, scooping Maul off his perch on his shoulder and setting him in the middle of the living room floor. He also brought out the gift he had purchased in a nearby shop in Theed, a soft mottled brown stuffed shaak, and set it down in front of Maul, who picked the item up and examined it with great interest.

Palpatine smiled down at Maul as they sat on the plush red carpet together. The tiny red zabrak was now holding the stuffed shaak toy to his body and staring up at the Sith Lord, his expression thoughtful.

"Today, we're going to learn some new words," Palpatine said, his tone cheerful even as he felt a certain sadness at this. Until Maul was old enough to understand deception, he would have to believe that their facade was their true identity.

Palpatine chafed at this, because he wanted Maul to understand his own significance. His own importance. But that would have to wait. Palpatine would force himself to be patient, as he had been in so many other matters.

Still, he could not help the feeling of regret that welled up in him.

There was another reason, too, why this made him sad. But that reason also made him feel--it wasn't exactly happiness. He wasn't sure how to describe it, really. A connection, something that could survive

even death. A memory.

It was time to begin. He pointed at Maul. "Maurice," he said. "Can you say--Maurice?"

Maul smiled at him. "Maul."

Palpatine smiled back, feeling a burst of pride and a tiny stab of pain on hearing him say his true name. At having to correct him. "Yes, you remembered that. But from now on, you'll be Maurice. Maurice."

Maul held out the stuffed shaak.

Palpatine laughed. "No, that's yours." He said, pushing the toy back towards Maul. He leaned forward, bringing his face closer to Maul's. "Maurice."

Maul smiled. "Maurice."

Palpatine gave him a bright smile, filled with approval. "Very good!"

And now, for the other piece of this deception. Obviously, Maul could not call him Master, but just as obviously, he would have to call him something. He paused, readying himself to project the calm he did not feel.

He had given this quite a lot of thought. And he had decided that under no circumstances did he want Maul to call him father, or anything related to that word. He didn't think he could be a father--he had never planned to be one. He had planned to one day stand alone, to be the Sith'ari, to dispense with the the Rule of Two and to become the sole embodiment of the Sith, destroyer of Jedi, conqueror of death, Emperor of the entire galaxy, and even beyond that, for his ambitions knew no bounds. None of that had involved any notion of an heir, even an Apprentice that might take him down. His Apprentice had been intended to serve him, not supplant him.

Now? He was unsure what his ultimate plans should be. He would have to restructure them from the ground up, decide what he truly wanted to accomplish.

But he did know one thing.

Palpatine wanted Maul to excel. He wanted Maul to share in his victories, as well as enjoy his own. To eventually exceed and surpass him.

But he had never planned to be a father, and his own father had certainly not given him any example worth passing on. And Plagueis? He would have to be disposed of, regardless of these new and inconvenient feelings for his Master. He hoped Maul would never wish to dispose of him in such a way.

He would not have Maul call him father.

He gave Maul a radiant smile and pointed to himself. "Pal."

Chapter 10: Plots and Plans

Chapter Notes

A/N: And now for the milestone 10th chapter! There's a lot going on here as these Sith Lords try to rearrange all their plans, haha! I've also created what I hope will seem like a sufficiently Star Wars-esque creature for the purpose of this chapter! I hope you will enjoy the introduction of the Sojourn wood vole! These tiny troublemakers will probably be turning up again later on...

Plagueis was eager to get started with his experiments. However, Hego Damask still had to contend with his other obligations during the day, one of which included tutoring his young protegee, San Hill.

But he had decided he could still make good use of this time.

Hego set his briefcase down on the silvery table in front of him and opened it. San walked in through the door as he removed flimsiplasts and a datapad from the briefcase. As Hego grabbed the last of the flimsiplasts, a small, grey furry six-legged creature with four eyes, a stubby tail, whiskers, and antennae leapt out of the case. A wood vole.

Startled, Hego dropped the sheaf of flimsiplasts he was holding, which fluttered to the floor. The wood vole scurried along the table, its tiny nose moving almost as furiously as its tiny feet. Hego grabbed it before it could leap off the edge.

"Looks like you picked up a hitchhiker," San remarked, stopping.

More like an escapee. He recognized the creature-subject 312. He always remembered all of his experiments, after all.

San backed up against the far wall, regarding the wood vole with an anxious expression. "I'm just going to stand over here while you deal with that, ah, allergen." Hego was, of course, familiar with San's allergy to furred creatures.

Hego narrowed his eyes at the small mammaloid held firmly in his hand. "Certainly, San. I will dispose of this unauthorized presence," he said, grimacing. He walked to the door of the domed building and, opening it to the forested environs, plopped the wood vole on the path outside the door and quickly slammed it before the animal could scurry back inside. *Unauthorized creature disposed of*, he thought smugly.

San, looking relieved, walked to the center of the room and settled behind the desk there, sneezing a couple times into a handkerchief. Hego walked back to the table at the front of the room and casually picked up the flimsiplasts scattered on the floor around it.

San clasped his hands on top of his desk. "All right. I'm ready to get started!"

Placing the flimsiplasts onto the table, Hego looked up. "Today, we're going to do something a bit different," he said, calling up three images of Muun brains with colored activity mappings onto the large holoscreen display above the table.

San's eyes widened. "Wow, I know we were discussing the psychology of stock purchases, but I didn't realize we were going to get quite this technical."

Hego laughed. "Oh, no, this is unrelated. You see, I thought you might help me with an experiment I'm running."

San's eyes lit up at that. "Really? I mean, sure!"

"Yes," Hego said. "I thought I'd start with something straightforward so you could familiarize yourself with the patterns. Tell me, what would you say about these brain activity scans?" He gestured a hand towards the row of three images on the holodisplay.

"They're all from entirely different people?" San said.

An unnerving observation. Still, Hego had to admit he'd had the same thought, even knowing that two of them were his own. "Go on," Hego said.

"Wait, these were all induced from the same external stimuli, right?"

"A good detail to verify," Hego said, one corner of his mouth quirking upward. "The answer is yes."

"Alright, I'm trying to remember back to my introductory neuroscience classes--the brain structures look Muun."

"Correct," Hego said. "The middle scan is from a textbook image of the experiment I replicated--a baseline image showing a typical response. The other two are from volunteer data I acquired." Probably almost the only volunteer data he had ever acquired. He had long had an interest in recording his own physiological data, especially information such as this.

"What's the experiment?"

"Inducing Sympathetic Emotional Responses," Hego said, bringing up the text abstract for the experiment. "The images represent responses to holorecordings of other sapients experiencing pain." He thought it fortunate that he'd long had an interest in this experiment and its numerous variations and so had a number of historical data points of his own brain activity to compare. It seemed extremely applicable to his current predicament.

"Intriguing!" San said.

"Indeed. Do you remember the functions of the different brain regions sufficiently to draw any conclusions here?"

"Sure," San said. "The one on the left is not having a sympathetic response," he said. "Whereas the one on the right is having an extremely strong response and--" he paused, frowning, "that's weird."

"What?"

"Er, a number of things, really. The one on the right shows unusual readings from a lot of the brain structures. Anyway, both are abnormal compared to the baseline image."

How true. He called up another image aligned to the left underneath the other three.

"It's so tiny!" San said, laughing. "A human brain?"

"Yes," Hego said. An old image obtained from Sidious. He tapped a button on his pointer and another human brain, this one from a textbook, appeared to the right of it. Soon he planned to obtain another reading from Sidious -- he simply hadn't gotten around to it yet. "The one on the right is the baseline. Do you remember the analogous human brain structures sufficiently to evaluate the response of the one on the left?"

"Oh, ah-- yes, of course. This human is having a similar response to the Muun on the left, only not only are they not having a sympathetic response, but they're deriving significant pleasure from whatever painful experience they're viewing. Wow, is this one a serial killer or something?"

"I'd rather not give any details so as not to bias your responses," Hego said calmly. "I'd like to give you this data for further study, and I have a number of analyses I'd like you to perform on it. Do you think you are up to the challenge?" Hego felt increasing urgency to make sense of what the orbs, the-- emotional additive, had done to him and Sidious, and he needed an assistant to help him analyze the data, especially since he would soon have a large amount of additional data from his new captives.

"Of course!" San said enthusiastically.

Excellent. He could have asked Sidious, of course, but sadly his Apprentice did not seem to share his interest or aptitude with such things. To be fair, he was quite diligent at following through on any instructions he was given, but analysis, much less discovery, was another matter entirely.

San was rather young, but had demonstrated both great ability and flexibility in his academic talents. He also possessed considerably more intuition for these sorts of things than Sidious did. He was already far ahead for his age in all of his financial and business courses and Hego had simply been ensuring that he would be the unquestioned choice for replacing the current Chairman of the IGBC when the time came. He could afford to miss a few of those classes.

"Good," Hego said. "I look forward to evaluating your analysis." Yes, San's other lessons could wait. Right now, this task had priority.

Sidious heard the knock at the door. His visitor had been expected; had come here on his insistence, in fact.

Sidious scooped up Maul, who clung happily to his new stuffed toy. Then he walked over to the door and opened it.

"Vidar, please come in," Sidious said solemnly.

"Palpatine, I--," Vidar said, walking into the apartment and rubbing his hands together to warm them, his eyes immediately drawn to the small zabrak on Sidious' shoulder.

"I believe you had something of great import to tell me, my friend?" Sidious said. "Please, take a seat." He indicated an armchair next to a small table. Vidar dropped onto the chair, seeming endlessly burdened, though again he looked up at Maul.

"Palpatine, there's much we must discuss, but first I must know--why is there a baby alien on your shoulder?"

"He's a zabrak," Sidious said, "and my heir. Vidar, meet Maurice."

Vidar's eyes widened. "And the mother? Are you and she--?"

Sidious laughed. "You misunderstand, Vidar. Maurice is adopted. I haven't decided on how to go about finding a mother for him yet. But if that doesn't work out, I'm sure I can manage on my own. There's just the one of him, after all, and with adoption, there are never any--surprise extras."

Vidar gave him a baffled look, then laughed. It was the first time Sidious had seen him smile since the accident. He returned the smile.

"You weirdo," he said. "Still, I knew you'd eventually realize the importance of leaving a legacy. Even if this has got to be the strangest way of going about that I've ever seen."

"What can I say?" Sidious responded. "I defy the expectations of others."

"That you do," Vidar said, his expression becoming serious again. "Which is why I'm here today," he continued. "Because you may be one of the only people left that I can trust."

"What do you mean by that?" Sidious asked, knowing very well what he meant by it.

Vidar waved a hand expansively. "My family didn't die in an accident--they were murdered by none other than Veruna and Tapalo."

Sidious frowned, considering the man's ungroomed hair, his tired eyes. This was a man who was sick with grief. Sidious realized unhappily that he understood the feeling.

"You have evidence of this?" Sidious asked.

"I will," Kim said. He held out some flimsiplasts to Sidious, who took them without comment. "These are the reports of the 'accident' scene. I was hoping you might look at them-- perhaps with your knowledge of speeders you will be able to pick out some suspicious detail."

"Of course," Sidious said, placing the documents on his desk.

"Even without that, I know enough about Veruna and Tapalo to oust them from power. And I know exactly who will help me with that, too."

"Who?"

"The Jedi Order."

Alarm flashed through Sidious. "The Jedi? How do you plan to gain an audience with them?"

"Ronhar," he said. "He will speak to them on my behalf, after I convince him to take his place as my heir."

Sidious gave him a stunned look.

"What? It's not like that's any stranger than what you've got going on here." he gestured towards Maul, who had begun chewing on his stuffed shaak's head.

Sidious tried every type of persuasion he could imagine to attempt to dissuade Vidar from going to the Jedi, of all people. But the man was determined to regain his son from them and gain their help to depose Veruna and Tapalo.

Sidious might use the Force instead to compel Vidar to do as he asked, but while that would be completely effective it would also surely damage him. While Jedi could only exert their weak and ephemeral but undamaging suggestion over others, Sidious only knew how to control a mind completely while slowly breaking its will and resolve. Neither of which would do in this case.

Of course it would be the Jedi Vidar would seek. Beings always thought that if only the Jedi were on their side, that if only they noticed their plight, then all things would become possible.

Sidious sighed. Again, he would defy Plagueis. This time, surely, his defiance would not go unpunished. But he had made up his mind. "Vidar, you're in terrible danger. If you are right about your family, they will stop at nothing to eliminate you, too."

"I will not be cowed by those slimy bottomfeeders! I have nothing left but my vengeance and it will not be denied!"

Sidious held out a hand in a placating gesture. "Alright, I understand how important this is to you." Suddenly a new approach occurred to him. "But consider the danger this would put Ronhar in."

"Ronhar? Nonsense, he'd surely be able to handle anything they could throw at him. He's a Jedi!"

"Even Jedi are not invincible," Sidious said. *Fortunately.*

Doubt grew in Vidar's gaze. He crumpled back into the chair, deflating. "I can't lose him, too." He curled one hand into a fist. "But I can't just let this go! What can I do?"

"Simple. Tell me what you know, and let me contact the Jedi for you," Sidious said.

"You? You'd have even less chance of getting their ear, surely."

"On the contrary, Vidar, I know exactly how to get their attention."

A knock at the door. This time unexpected, but anticipated all the same. Sidious answered it. There was no one there. He waited several moments, then carefully closed the door.

As he turned to face the living room, he saw Talzin materialize from a green mist. She gave a vase of flowers to her right a disparaging look. Maul of course, also noticed her appearance. "Mama!" he said,

holding out the stuffed shaak.

She turned and smiled at him. "And what do you have there, prickly pear?"

"Shaak!" Maul said.

Sidious smiled. "Very good, Maurice."

Talzin looked directly at Sidious, her nose wrinkling. "What?"

"His new name. It's Maurice."

Talzin crossed her arms. "And what, exactly, is wrong with Maul?"

"Nothing," Sidious said. "But it's not a very Naboo name. I do not want him to attract undue attention." He glanced at his tiny Apprentice. "Well, anymore than he already will."

Talzin rolled her eyes. "You should have consulted me. That is a terrible name."

Sidious frowned. "I'm not changing it."

"Shaak?" Maul said, holding out the mottled brown stuffed toy.

Talzin looked over at Maul. "Yes, very good, my little prickly pear. You are just as amazing and smart even with that abominable name Sidious gave you."

Sidious sighed. "And speaking of names, I'll ask you not use my Sith name with him."

She looked over at him, raising an eyebrow. "What am I to call you, then?"

"Most know me as Palpatine."

"Palpatine?" she said. "That's it? Just the one name?"

"Ah, not exactly. I don't use my first name often, though."

"But you have one."

"Yes."

"What is it, then?"

Sidious hesitated. "Sheev."

She grimaced. "So terrible names run in your family I see. Your parents gave you that name?"

"No," Sidious said. "My sister, actually. I suspect she never thought I'd really use it. It's--not my favorite, but it gave me something to put on the name-change forms."

"Your original name was worse than Sheev? I'll not ask what that was, then."

"Good."

Talzin seemed consider something. "I haven't had an opportunity to discuss my thoughts on Plagueis with you."

Sidious raised an eyebrow. "You mean you have other descriptors for him, besides pretentious?" Sidious had found that one amusing, but ultimately unhelpful for actually devising a plan to dispose of his Master.

Talzin laughed. "Of course--I was merely collecting my thoughts. It takes time, to reflect upon the measure of a person."

"All right. So what do you think? You attack from the front to distract him, then I stab him in the back with my saber?"

She rolled her eyes. "I didn't mean about that."

Sidious gave her a baffled look. "Then what did you mean?"

"I mean that he seemed to view you favorably. And to be disinclined to harm you. I am sure you know him better than I, but have you considered attempting persuasion before resorting to murder? Perhaps he might now listen to what you have to say?"

Sidious frowned. It wasn't as if the thought hadn't occurred to him. "And if he doesn't? It would warn him of my intent and rob me of any advantage. I assure you that what you see as pretension is in actuality self-knowledge--his confidence in his own abilities is entirely justified. The only way you and I could possibly defeat him is to take him by surprise."

"Do you want to kill him?"

Sidious scowled. "Yes. And no. But I know what needs to be done. For Maurice's sake, and that decides his fate."

Maul placed the stuffed shaak on top of Sidious' head.

Talzin sighed, though she gave Maul a small smile. "Alright. I'd simply prefer to avoid any conflicts I may not win. If, as you say, his arrogance is truly justified, I would hate to orphan Mau--my dear, sweet prickly pear."

"I won't let that happen," Sidious said calmly. "I simply need some time to plan an effective attack." Still, her words had caused him renewed concern. What if he was actually being overconfident in his belief that he could pull this off? And what if Talzin was right?

Talzin looked back to Maul. "I can give you a farseeing spell for an hour with--prickly pear."

Sidious tilted his head. "Agreed." It seemed a good deal. What he didn't say was that he would have let her hold Maul even if she hadn't offered anything in return. He found he rather enjoyed her company.

Not that he planned to admit that.

Still, he asked her if she wanted to accompany him to Coruscant when he planned to track down a Jedi on Vidar's behalf in two weeks' time. Unsurprisingly, Talzin expressed immediate interest.

It would be nice to have someone along he didn't have to dissemble to.

Chapter 11: Questionable Experimental Procedures

Chapter Notes

Here's another chapter featuring my favorite science-loving Sith Lord! I do enjoy writing Plagueis quite a lot.

Thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter! And in general, thanks to everyone who has commented so far! I very much appreciate getting the chance to see other people's perspectives on the story!

"Here are the new blood samples, Magister," 11-4D said, handing Plagueis the vials. "And the brain scans you requested."

Plagueis began organizing the vials, looking intermittently at the flimsiplast brain scans of his current experimental subjects.

"Yes, these will do nicely, thanks," he said, pleased. "It seems you were successful in securing data from all the test subjects, FourDee."

"Yes, Magister. I assured them that I was not going to harm them, and that they would receive a meal of their choice on the completion of my instructions."

"I see you were quite successful," Plagueis remarked. "Especially given how--recalcitrant some of our subjects are."

"Yes, Magister. For several meals I fed all of them exclusively on nutrient rations which were selected to be both nutritionally complete and unappealing to most in their given species, as you instructed."

Plagueis smiled. "I suppose they must have found that--quite unpleasant."

"Yes, Magister."

Plagueis planned to also do as he had instructed FourDee, which was to incentivize his experimental subjects to respond to any necessary instructions to ensure he received maximally useful data.

When he finished with them, he would wipe their memories of him and this place and release them, tracking their behavior in real scenarios. But that would not be for a while now. First, it was time to get started with the main experiment.

He walked over to a centrifuge. He had used this device to separate the black orbs from the pond water. He had chosen to use injection as the method of delivery for the orbs, as he felt it would be the easiest and most reliable choice. But of course he did not want to inject his subjects with pond water. So he had had to remove that component.

He took the black material he had separated, sterilized it, then combined it with a simple saline solution carefully calibrated for each species he would be testing. According to his painstakingly considered theory, this should obtain equivalent results as ingestion. But he would soon find out, at any rate.

Voras the Hutt

The Hutt gave him a terrified look upon seeing Plagueis approach with the hypodermic needle filled with black liquid.

"Agh, no! Please, I pay my taxes!"

Plagueis stopped and tilted his head. "Intriguing, but ultimately irrelevant to your current situation."

"Okay. But I--I'm pregnant!" he protested.

Plagueis blinked at what he could easily sense was a blatant lie. Of course, he knew such a possibility would not be considered unusual for one of the hermaphroditic Hutt species. He did not know if Voras had assumed him to be aware of this fact or had instead planned to delay him with some lengthy explanation, but regardless of such logistics, it was the implications such a remark made about his own motivations that troubled Plagueis.

"No, you are not, and again I am puzzled--did something in my manner give you the impression that I have scruples?" Though he had phrased the question rhetorically, part of him couldn't help wonder about the answer. Could his current weakness be detected by others? Or was this simply a desperate ploy, deemed unlikely to work but worth trying in a situation with nothing left to lose?

"I--I have money! Release me and I can--"

Plagueis smiled. "Ah, finally, I understand your thought process here! Unfortunately for you, your money is of little interest to me, and certainly not enough to convince me to forgo you as a test subject."

Voras deflated, clearly disappointed that his attempts to talk his way out of his situation had failed.

"What is that, anyway?" the Hutt asked anxiously, his eyes fixed on the hypodermic.

Plagueis shrugged. "Some sort of drug."

"And what does it do?"

"I prefer not to say. But I will say that what interests me are the psychological responses. It doesn't appear to cause any physical harm."

This seemed to mollify Voras somewhat.

"Why me?"

"You will see," Plagueis said.

"My guess is that this is not the kind of experiment you get volunteers for. Which I find...concerning."

Plagueis uncapped the hypodermic. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "You might be surprised what some beings will volunteer for. But such an approach was not very compatible with the timeframe or the secrecy I require." He approached the Hutt slowly.

Voras, of course, tried to move away, but found he could not. His eyes widened in alarm.

"What--?"

Plagueis smiled. He was using his Force power to restrain the Hutt now. "I anticipated your response this time, Voras."

Voras looked away. "I'm not looking forward to this."

Plagueis jabbed the hypodermic in the Hutt's side.

"Ah, but I am," The Sith Lord said. He held up his datapad. "Now, I have a few questions for you..."

Pirate Man, Type Unspecified

"She's gonna find you," the Weequay man said. "And she's gonna kill you."

Plagueis had to admit, he found the man's intensity more than a little disturbing.

"I think you are mistaken about that," Plagueis said. He took out the hypodermic needle. The Weequay looked over at it.

"She's gonna find you," he said again. "And she's gonna kill you."

Plagueis walked up to the man and pressed the hypodermic in his shoulder. The Weequay man watched dispassionately as he completed the injection.

Plagueis brought up his datapad. He would try to get some initial data now. "If you would like to comment on what you are feeling at the moment--"

"She's gonna find you," the man said. "And she's gonna kill you."

"I see," Plagueis said, noting the response. "Fascinating."

Rizlus Arcturus

"I demand to be released at once!" the man growled on seeing Plagueis.

"I'm afraid that won't be happening," Plagueis said.

"Black Sun will make you pay for this!"

"Unlikely," Plagueis said. "You really aren't that important to them." Of course, they *would* look into it, more on principle than anything else, but they would stop when they found the end of the false trail Plagueis had laid. The Sith Lord had been quite careful about covering his real tracks.

"You'll regret this, Mak Plain!"

"I doubt it," Plagueis said, smiling at the fake name. He took out the hypodermic, and his captive's eyes widened.

"What's wrong with you?!"

"A question I'd like to know the answer to myself," Plagueis said, before injecting the man with the hypodermic.

Plin Rov

"Hello," Plagueis said cheerfully. The man rose to a sitting position on the long bench attached to the wall, looking sullen and bruised. Sidious had not been gentle with him, but then Plagueis had not asked him to be.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"Just a simple scientist who needed some experimental subjects," Plagueis said. "Would you like to describe what you do?"

"I kill people painfully for fun," the man said.

"And--your occupation?" Plagueis asked. "How do you make money?"

The man blinked. "I kill people for fun. I take their money when they're dead."

"Noted," Plagueis said. He typed the information into his datapad. *Plin Rov, postmortem thief, human, age 27, warrant for arrest in Republic space.*

"What's going on here? Am I being executed? I get a last meal, right? I mean, the one earlier didn't count--"

"No, Mr. Rov," Plagueis said. "You are not being executed."

"Life in prison, then?" He looked around. "I don't remember a trial. Is this solitary?"

"This is not a prison," Plagueis said. "This is an illegal research facility."

Plin stared at him. "Oh," he said. "That's--unexpected. What are you researching?"

Plagueis took out a hypodermic, checking the labelling. "This. I am hoping to study your psychological responses to being injected with this substance."

"Oh," Plin said. "Sounds boring. Can I opt-out?"

"No."

"I guess I should have expected that."

Aritar Vizago

"Ugh," Aritar said. "What's this about?" He looked around nervously. "And where's that crazy freak from earlier?"

"Do you mean the man who captured you? He is not here."

"Good," Aritar said. "I'm still getting headaches from being stun-blasted in the face by him. Hope you're not going to do that to me again."

"No," Plagueis said, taking out the hypodermic needle.

Aritar's eyes widened. "What's that?"

"A drug I'm testing," Plagueis said.

"Really? Anything good?"

"It's not recreational, if that's what you mean," Plagueis answered.

Aritar scowled. "You're as bad as your crazy freak friend, then."

"Yes, I suppose many would describe me as unpleasant," Plagueis said, injecting the mixture into the Devaronian.

The Dissector

"Oh, it's you again," the man said, looking up at Plagueis. "You some sort of Jedi enforcer?"

Plagueis shook his head. "No. I am force sensitive, but I am no Jedi, nor do I work for the government."

"So--then are you a vigilante? Is this where you tell me the error of my ways and execute me messily?"

"Hmmm, no, I would not describe what I'm doing here as vigilantism, though it is doubtless illegal. You are here as a participant in my research."

"So now you're going to poke and prod me, then," The Dissector laughed. "How ironic."

"This does not disturb you?"

"In an abstract sort of way, I suppose," the man said. "But it is also rather amusing."

"What is your occupation?" Plagueis asked.

"My day job? I'm an accountant. Boring job, but it pays the bills, and buys my--essential equipment."

"Thank you," Plagueis said, recording the information in his datapad. Then he took out a hypodermic needle.

"Ooo, what's that?"

"A drug," Plagueis replied.

"Exciting," the Dissector said, tilting his head at it. "What's it do?"

"It causes a number of psychological changes," Plagueis said. "I am studying the effects." He paused. "It is not recreational in nature."

"I'll be the judge of that," the Dissector replied. "When do we start?"

"Now," Plagueis said. He didn't think he'd ever seen a test subject look so enthusiastic. He almost felt a bit bad about it, to be honest.

Almost.

Plagueis had visited all the rest of the criminals and had given them the injection of the emotional additive.

Now all that was left was his final subject. He stood in front of his last captive's cell.

Mak Plain, Muun, 158, mid-level IGBC banker, Plagueis thought. He eyed the currently unconscious captive. Yes, this one would be especially useful to him. Not only was Plain a Muun, but he possessed a number of other qualities that Plagueis found particularly relevant for this study. Plagueis had collected quite a bit of information on him over the years in the service of his eventual planned takeover of the IGBC via San Hill.

What made him such a good test subject was that Plain's resume was anything but plain. War profiteering in the Yinchorri crisis, extensive lobbying to remove the public safety restrictions on the Trade Federation, and of course, maneuvering his predecessor into an early death to secure himself an office on Coruscant. He was an ambitious individual who was unafraid to step over the bodies of others in the pursuit of his goals. Metaphorically, of course.

But unlike the Sith Lord's other subjects, Plain had never been on the wrong side of the law, had never even gotten so much as a ticket for a traffic violation. Even the murder of his predecessor had been done in such a way that a prosecutor would never be able to make a case against him in a court of law. Quite brilliant, really.

Plagueis still would have preferred holding the current IGBC Chairman. Now *he* would have been an ideal subject for this experiment, and of course there was nothing more satisfying than addressing a personal grudge. Unfortunately, Chairman Tonith was a bit too high profile for his purposes. His disappearance would undoubtedly lead to questions, and a rigorous search by his large and well-heeled family.

Whereas Plain had no such close relations, and for all his ladder-climbing, a rather low profile that ensured few would notice or remark upon his disappearance.

He had chosen all his current captives with such considerations in mind, but nowhere was it more important than here, with the victim so close to home.

He woke his unconscious captive with a small trickle of Force lightning. Plain twitched, his eyes fluttering open.

"Magister Damask?" Plain said on seeing him, bewildered.

"Yes, that would be me," Plagueis said.

"What are you doing?!" he growled, futilely attempting to tug his arms out of the energy restraint Plagueis had activated. "This is exceedingly illegal! You can't just go kidnapping business rivals!" Plagueis smiled. "You should thank me for that, really."

"Thank you?" Plain asked, scowling. "Why?"

"You see--I kind of--may have--possibly--put you on Black Sun's hit list."

"What?!" Plain's yellow eyes stared at him in shock.

"Yes, I see you understand the gravity of your situation now. So think of this as a, hmm, sort of protection program."

Plain narrowed his eyes. "So you put me on their hit list, and now you're protecting me from them? I see the motivation for the first act, if not the legality, but not the incentive for the second."

Plagueis laughed. "Ah, yes! I should explain. You see, I run biological experiments as a hobby of mine and I required an additional test subject. That's you."

Plain's eyes narrowed, and his lower lip curled in disgust. "You are a sick, sick man."

"I know," Plagueis said. He pulled out a hypodermic needle, and with a bright smile said, "Now, let's get started."

Chapter 12: Preparations for Travel

Chapter Notes

So here's the new chapter!

Thanks to everyone who's commented on AO3 and ffnet since the last chapter! And thanks so much to Quantumphysica and anonymous (my new Tumblr friend!) who's commented on every chapter so far! It makes me really happy to know there are people invested enough in this story to write so many comments on it! And I love talking to you!

Sidious gets ready for his trip to Coruscant, and the threads of his new plans begin to unfold...

Sidious held the flask in his hand. He didn't really need it. Not anymore. He'd already tried to drink it. Again. But that hadn't worked.

The pond chooses. He scowled. *Ridiculous.*

He would just hold onto it for now.

He placed it back on the shelf in the storage facility.

He'd reluctantly had the Sith relics he stored in his apartment moved here, where they would stay until the completion of his current plan. He would have liked to store them somewhere closer, but that would pose a risk of their detection.

He looked around at the space, a windowless boxy room the size of a warehouse, filled with dusty books, datapads, and artwork. When he'd sold the Convergence estate, he'd sold most of his family's possessions along with it. Money had been of considerably greater interest to him than his family's furniture or assorted knickknacks, after all.

But there had been some items he'd considered valuable enough to keep. Certain pieces of artwork, certain books, and most importantly, every personal document and record anyone in his family had ever accumulated, all of it meticulously sorted and organized.

It hadn't been an act of sentimentality. Rather, he'd anticipated that his family's accumulated connections and knowledge might someday be of value to accomplishing his own goals. He'd had occasion to use some of it already.

He even had some of Ricar's old drawings and effects, something which he'd kept in case he'd ever wanted to follow up on an...idle curiosity of his. He picked up the rock Ricar had given him once, turning it over in his hand, then placed it back on its shelf.

Next to Ricar's single shelf was a much larger set of bookcases filled with Milena's records, books, and journals. His sister had expressed an early interest in politics, but had been forced by their father into dance, an area of study Cosinga had said was 'more befitting a lady of their house'.

Palpatine snorted. Cosinga had tried to mold his eldest daughter into something she would clearly never be. And when all had been said and done, he'd only delayed the inevitable.

"Hey, looks like we'll both be attending the same university, Sheev," Mil said. They were outside, seated in a gazebo near the lake for which the Convergence estate was named. Mil was examining a flimsiplast on top of her datapad that Palpatine assumed to be an acceptance letter.

Palpatine raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were to attend the Theed School of Theatre?"

Mil smiled, though the expression didn't reach her eyes. "Oh, yes, that. The thing is, ballet is somewhat lacking in fulfilling my career goals. Playing Queen Yram on the stage isn't really comparable to a political science track, I feel."

"You enrolled in the same major Father is forcing me to take?" Palpatine frowned.

"Of course," Mil said. "If you're going to end up a politician one day, someone has to stop you."

Palpatine rolled his eyes. "Presuming I ever finish my education."

Mil narrowed her own eyes. "You expect me to believe that you won't? That you plan to drop out? And do what?"

Palpatine shrugged. "Maybe I'll become a racer."

"You, a racer? You, who said that seeking the Naboo monarchy would be beneath you, are going to drop out of school and become a racer?"

A sudden breeze passed through the gazebo.

"I never said racing was beneath me." He leaned back on the wooden paneling. "Anyway, how are you doing this?" He knew she had to have gone behind Father's back.

"It was easy to get accepted--I have top marks in the Legislative Youth Program. But I needed to change my concentration, and my university--and I've finally figured it all out."

"That still doesn't explain how you're doing this."

"You're not the only one who can forge documents," Mil said. She pulled a leaf out of her hair that had been blown into the gazebo and glanced down at her datapad.

Palpatine laughed. "The forgeries! I believe that was the 134th time Father threatened to disown me. Ah, I remember the special camp for troubled teens he sent me to after that. It's a tricky business, forgery."

"You can tell me what to watch out for, then. You aren't going to snitch, are you?"

"What, and help Father? No, of course not. You're going to need more than a few fake documents changing hands to pull this off, though."

She grimaced. "Don't I know it."

Sidious stared at the dusty datapads and flimsiplasts arranged in front of him. She would have made an ambitious politician...

He sighed, and turned away. It would help nothing to dwell on such matters.

He lingered then on the shelves containing his mother's effects. She hadn't really kept a journal or anything of that sort. She had saved most of the letters she'd received, however. His mother's life had been heavily defined by Cosinga. When she'd expressed any political opinion at all, it had been one approved in advance by Cosinga. When Cosinga made decisions about his children's lives, she had never shown any resistance to them. In this she had disappointed him time and time again.

And yet. She had not simply been a moon orbiting his father. As she had proven to him many times as well, most notably with the gift of the Sith artifact. The book which, alone among his Sith relics, rested on these shelves now. His eyes settled on the ancient glyphs embossed on the binding:

Sith Alchemy Vol 4 by Sorzus Syn

He'd never mentioned the book to Plagueis. It had become a source of amusement to him. Plagueis possessed the other six volumes but had never been able to track this one down. It contained information on the creation and behavior of hybrids created from disparate animal species--A topic Plagueis would have found of great interest, he was sure. But the book belonged to Sidious, and he'd

had no intention of giving it up, ever. And even less so now.

It reminded him of her. Of her smile whenever she sensed he was pleased, of her tending to his bruises after his bitter fights with Father...

He felt a sudden sense of overwhelming loss. Standing in the presence of these items had never affected him this way before. He glanced over at the rows of shelves devoted to Markon and Mayelle before looking away.

He scowled. Was he really doing this? Wallowing in these sickening feelings of sorrow, of remorse? What he wouldn't give to turn it all off.

But then he would be a danger to Maul.

He sighed again. There would be time to reminisce later. He would return to this place once he'd completed the execution of his current plan.

But he needed to finish his preparations. Yes, it was time to leave.

He had an assassin to hire.

Sidious stood with his arms crossed in the subbasement he'd had built under his apartment, wearing a generic cowl. The cowl was merely decorative--he'd digitally blanked out his face along with his voice--but even if it wasn't his Sith robe, it seemed appropriate for this sort of skulking.

"Well?" the Sith Lord asked. "Will you do it?"

"How many credits, again?" the assassin's voice was soft, almost a whisper.

"1 million," Sidious repeated, his own voice terse.

"3 million, and not a credit less."

"May I ask why?" Sidious had already offered twice the man's usual fee.

"You want me to kill Ambassador Palpatine, correct?"

"Yes."

"Man who murders the the Orphaned Lord is going to be an unpopular man around these parts," the assassin said. "Man's going to have to move away. Man's going to miss Naboo." He said the last part resentfully.

Sidious felt a pang of annoyance. This wouldn't have been an issue if he had hired a Core assassin. Unfortunately, it was necessary in this case to work with this more local underworld denizen, for whom he would be a bit of a minor celebrity due to his family's abrupt and well-publicized deaths.

"If you're really so worried that you'll be identified, why not conceal your face?"

"I plan to," the assassin said. "But if I stay here, someone will find me eventually. That's the way of these things. I'll have you know, this is a terrible idea for you, too, stranger."

"But you'll do it?"

"For 3 million credits, yes."

"Then we have a deal," Sidious said.

"If I may ask--why are you doing this? Did he spite you in some way?"

"Is there a reason you wish to know?" Sidious said, though he had counted on this question being asked.

"Yes, I need to know what kind of death you require."

"Any, but it is imperative you carry it out in the time and place we discussed, and with no additional casualties. It's not personal. He's become a political liability," Sidious said. "You don't need to know the details."

"You're right. I don't. I will contact you when the deed is done." The assassin's hologram flickered then, and was gone.

Sidious smiled. Now all that was left for him was to pack for Coruscant. He was looking forward to this trip.

Sidious was packing a suitcase on his desk with Maul seated next to it. Talzin was standing next to him, watching him fold clothes and pile datapads into the suitcase.

"Have you ever seen Coruscant?" Sidious asked.

"No," Talzin said. "This is the first time I have left Dathomir."

Sidious looked over at her. "I could guess that, but I was wondering if you'd ever seen holos. Or pictures."

"No."

Sidious handed her a datapad. "In that case, you'll want to read up on it."

She looked down at it. "What do I do with this?"

Sidious was silent a moment, surprised by the question. *Though I shouldn't be*, he thought. *Dathomir is a wretched place.* "Give it to Maurice," he said.

She placed the datapad in front of Maul, who activated the screen and began to press merrily on the front of it.

"Maurice, can you find the Holonet?" Sidious asked cheerily.

Maul tapped the screen and a display showing the galaxy came up.

"Very good!" Sidious said.

"You've taught him well," she said.

"He learns quickly," Sidious replied. "You can give the datapad voice commands or type with the virtual keypad--see demonstration below." He gestured towards Maul, who was smiling widely and typing a random combination of Aurebesh characters.

"Though I don't think he's quite gotten the hang of the written word yet," Sidious noted.

As Talzin leaned over the datapad with Maul, Sidious returned to packing and considering the plan he had developed. This would be his first time meeting Jedi, which he viewed as an important test of his Force masking abilities. If they sensed anything amiss in him, things could get--messy.

But it was also an opportunity. It was time to test the ability of the Jedi to perceive him. He thought it unfortunate that he wouldn't have control over which Jedi he encountered in this case, but at least he felt confident that the Order wasn't going to send someone like Yoda to meet with an obscure dignitary like himself. If things went badly, he had arranged to give himself ample opportunity to rectify the issue. Though hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

Sidious pondered also his plan to address Vidar's thorny situation. He knew, of course, that Vidar was right. King Tapalo had had his entire family murdered. He also knew that Vidar was in danger of ending up that way, too, unless something was done.

And he certainly knew that the Jedi were not the solution to this problem. They were, however, a necessary component of his plan.

"The Jedi Temple is enormous," Talzin commented. She was regarding the datapad with a frown.

"Yes, approximately 50,000 Jedi reside in the Temple at any one time," Sidious said, reciting the fact from memory.

"Fifty thousand Jedi." Talzin said, placing a hand over her heart. She looked up at him, wide eyed.

"We are massively outnumbered."

Sidious shrugged. "That is of no consequence. The Sith no longer rely on numbers to overpower our foes." He looked over at her. "Of course, *someone* has upset the current plan," he said, giving her a significant look, "but I am working on a new one." He folded a set of his ambassador robes. "One day, I *will* destroy the Jedi."

"Jedi," Maul said, looking up at him from the datapad.

Sidious looked down at him. "Yes, Maurice. Do you know what a Jedi is?"

"Jedi?"

"Jedi are ineffectual, sanctimonious fools," he said, smiling down at Maul. "Can you say 'ineffectual'?"

"In-fect-uall."

Sidious patted the toddler carefully on his spiky head. "Good, good."

"I must wonder why you are contacting these Jedi. Surely it is too early to strike at them." Talzin crossed her arms.

"It is," Sidious said. "But I have no intention of striking at them yet. This is merely an observational mission, intended to further my long-term plans."

But also to help Vidar, which greatly complicates my long-term plans. He looked worriedly at Maul. He of course planned to leave Maul with Talzin while he met with the Jedi. She would explore Coruscant with Maul while he implemented the most complicated part of this plot.

That part of his plan would be far too risky to involve Maul in, even with all the additional safeguards he'd put in place.

"And what are your long term plans?"

"I could ask the same of you," Sidious replied.

Talzin laughed. "That's fair." She lifted Maul off the desk and held him to her chest. Sidious looked over at her briefly, but raised no objection.

"I must admit," she said, "despite the appalling number of Jedi who reside there, I am looking forward to seeing Coruscant."

"Yes, it is quite an exceptional place," Sidious said. He smiled. One day, he would destroy the Jedi, and take Coruscant for himself. Or give it to Maul, if he wanted it.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door.

He looked up, frowning. Who would be visiting him at this time of night?

Chapter 13: Visitors in the Night

Chapter Notes

A\N: Looks like I finished another chapter!

Thanks to everyone who's commented since last time! And thanks to my beta-reader for doing such amazing work so quickly!

Time for Sidious to find out who's at the door!

Sidious approached the door cautiously and looked through the peephole. He looked over at Talzin, narrowing his eyes. "I believe you may be familiar with our visitors."

She smiled. "I may."

Sidious scowled and then turned and opened the door. Two Nightsisters stood outside. One was a heavysset red zabrak woman in armor, the other a tall, thin near-human with black hair and green eyes dressed in red and black robes. They stared at him expectantly.

He gave them his best fake Ambassador smile, in case anything or anyone might be watching, though he thought that unlikely.

"Ah, of course, my midnight meeting," he said cheerfully. "Please, do come inside." Internally his thoughts ran along a very different course. *Just what exactly is Talzin up to?* he thought with some irritation. He didn't recall extending an open invitation to the entirety of Dathomir to visit him here, and he'd certainly never seen either of these two in his life.

After he closed the door, he stood in front of them and narrowed his eyes. Blue electricity crackled at the tips of his fingers. "Is there a reason I shouldn't blast both of you so far into Chaos your constituent atoms will cease to exist?"

Talzin's voice answered from his right. "I would ask you not to. I invited them here, after all," she said.

"That's right," the armored zabrak said. "We're with her." She smiled and waved over at Talzin and Maul.

Sidious continued to glare at the two unknown Nightsisters. "I already guessed that. Whatever Talzin may have told you, you are not welcome here. This is *my* domain--leave or suffer the wrath of a Sith Lord."

The armored zabrak crossed her arms. "We do not recognize your authority, Sith. Also, we greatly outnumber you. Concede defeat."

The other Nightsister also crossed her arms and nodded.

Never, he thought. His narrowed eyes flitted towards Talzin, who stood to his right, holding Maul.

"You invited them. To my apartment."

"Yes, that's what I said," she replied, giving Maul his stuffed shaak.

"And did you ever consider asking my opinion on the matter?"

"Not when you already agreed to allow it," Talzin said, shrugging her red-robed shoulders.

Sidious scowled. He recalled no such thing. He would have words with her about that, but first...

He narrowed his eyes at the pair. "Who are they?"

"My lieutenants, of course. Atherion and Dremra. Maybe you Sith really enjoy that lone wolf aesthetic, but we Nightsisters hunt in packs."

"And just how much of your--pack did you invite here?" Sidious asked.

"Oh, do stop your worrying, Palpatine. I know they won't all fit in here. It's just those two."

Sidious breathed a slight sigh of relief.

"I told the other five to camp outside."

There was a moment of utter silence. "What?!"

"Invisibly, of course," Talzin clarified. "They will camp invisibly. Not to worry, I have factored in your requirements for stealth."

All things considered, she thought the introductions had gone fairly well. No one had actually tried to murder anyone, at least.

Sidious's eyes were currently acid yellow, however. She'd noticed that they seemed to change between that color and a sort of faded blue, depending on his mood or desire for concealment. It was some sort of Sith-specific trait, of which she was quite curious about. Though she decided that now would not be a good time to ask about it.

"Were they hiding on my ship too?!"

Talzin laughed. "Of course not. I hired a pilot to bring them here."

"What made you think I would be okay with this?" Sidious hissed.

Talzin stared at him. "It doesn't violate the agreement."

"Agreement? What agree--" Sidious paused. "Oh. *OH*." his eyes widened, and he groaned and put a hand to his face.

Talzin tilted her head, watching him with interest.

Slowly, the hand edged down from his face and he looked up, his eyes blue again and accompanied by an obviously fake smile. "Alright. That--that's true. It doesn't violate the agreement." He held up a finger. "Addendum to the agreement: you do not invite roommates to my apartment without my permission."

"In the future, I will ask. But do not dismiss their value to you--they are here to help," Talzin said.

"Help? With what?" Sidious said, regarding the two Nightsisters with a skeptical expression.

"Protecting Maul. Defeating the Jedi." She paused. "Atherion is a master healer and expert on the arcane, and Dremra is an unparalleled warrior. And as Mau--prickly pear's aunts, they will protect him just as I would. The others can also assist with protecting Maul, fighting Jedi, or dealing with your master, should it come to that."

Sidious glanced over at the two Nightsisters, apparently considering this new information. Finally, his expression settled into a reasonably non-murderous annoyance.

"They can stay." He narrowed his eyes. "But no more surprises. Are we clear?"

"Certainly," Talzin said, pleased. She turned to Dremra and Atherion and smiled. It had been awhile since she'd seen either of them, but of course she had arranged to remedy that issue. Her own plans depended on their help. And she had missed the company of her friends.

Dremra turned to Atherion and began signing an explanation when Talzin heard a familiar sound.

Sidious heard his comm. There was only one person who would be calling him at this time of night. He shooed the Nightsisters away from him, reluctantly allowing Talzin to take Maul this time. Then he answered the comm.

"Master," Sidious said.

"Sidious," Plagueis said, dressed not in his Sith robes, or even his business clothing, but in a lab coat and goggles, his expression clearly excited. "I have made a discovery!"

"Oh," Sidious said, quietly panicking. "You have found a way to reverse the effects of the Font?"

"No," Plagueis said. "But I have discovered how to tap into its power."

"Really?" Sidious said with interest. "I thought you said it did not increase one's power."

"A misconception," Plagueis said. "The problem was that I was performing the tests identically to my previous tests."

"Isn't that--how they should be done?"

"Yes, but I realized that I misunderstood the nature of the test itself." The hologram of Plagueis laughed. "Quite obvious on reflection, really."

"Perhaps you could explain?" Sidious asked, perplexed but intrigued.

"Of course. You see, I was using the same emotional inputs to fuel my power as always. The tests were not therefore testing my entire potential, but only my abilities as sourced from those motivations. Which did test the full extent of my power previously. But I have found this emotional additive produces emotional responses that source much greater power. Up to 1.3 times as powerful, from what I have seen so far."

"Oh," Sidious said. "That's good to know." So Talzin had been correct after all. For once he was interested in replicating one of Plagueis's experiments. Very interested indeed.

"Yes!" Plagueis said. "It certainly bears further investigation. Also, I would like to obtain a new brain scan from you for my research. Perhaps you could drop by sometime soon?"

"Apologies," Sidious said. "My ambassadorial duties currently prevent that."

"Oh," Plagueis said. "Unfortunate, but there is no hurry. Drop by when you can."

"Of course, Master," Sidious said.

"Thank you," Plagueis said. "Oh! And there is an urgent matter which we must discuss as well."

"Yes?"

"Vidar Kim," Plagueis said.

"Of course," Sidious said, feeling both relief and disappointment at once. A part of him had hoped that Plagueis had simply forgotten about Vidar. The other part had been hoping for his Master's orders to initiate the assassination, so he could muster sufficient resentment towards Plagueis to feel at ease when the time came to push him through the doors of death.

It would be difficult enough to kill the Sith Master given his skill in the Dark Side alone. Plagueis was an expert at all forms of lightsaber combat, though the art bored him profoundly. But more importantly, his ability and knowledge in the Force would make him a truly terrifying opponent. Sidious didn't need to suffer all these doubts as well.

"I no longer think it is necessary to kill Vidar," Plagueis said.

"What," Sidious replied.

No, no, that's not what you're supposed to say, Sidious thought angrily. *Order me to kill him!*

"You will become Senator in due time," Plagueis said. "Anyway, Bon Tapalo has become too complacent, and I think killing Vidar would send him the wrong message."

"The King is very sure of his place," Sidious agreed, wondering where Plagueis could be going with this.

Plagueis grinned. "Which is why you're going to abduct his supporter Veruna instead. I will send you the details of the plan."

"What am I to do with Veruna afterwards?" Sidious asked.

"Bring him to me," Plagueis said.

"What do you have planned for him?"

Plagueis smiled. "New experimental subject."

"Oh. I will retrieve him for you at the earliest opportunity, then," Sidious said, cursing the terrible feeling of hope that had surfaced in him.

"Thank you." Plagueis tilted his head, frowning. "Apologies for contacting you at this hour. I just realized it must be rather late on Naboo, and I know you still require sleep."

"Not a problem," Sidious said. "I was working anyway."

Plagueis smiled. "I'll let you get back to that, then. I will keep you updated on any important developments in my research."

"Thank you, Master."

When Plagueis cut the connection, Sidious took a deep breath. That had gone--unexpectedly. He needed to meditate on it. But first, he needed to modify his plans to account for these extra Nightsisters.

He looked up and frowned at the three Nightsisters, reserving a more tender smile for Maul. He turned his gaze to the two new arrivals.

"So, you want to fight Jedi, do you?"

"Yeah!" Dremra said.

"That's too bad. We'll be having tea with them instead."

Dremra gave him an outraged look. "What kind of Sith are you?!"

Sidious crossed his arms. "The living kind. We cannot win a direct confrontation against an enemy who so greatly outnumbers us. So we must strike quietly, long after they've dismissed us as being no threat to them. But first, we must study them, and identify their weaknesses."

"Over tea," Dremra said, her eyes narrowed.

"Yes."

Atherion began gesticulating to Dremra, and Dremra responded with similarly detailed gestures. Maul, being held by Talzin, watched the two nightsisters from behind his stuffed shaak.

Sidious tilted his head. They were communicating with some sort of sign language. Probably a Dathomirian variant which would be all but unknown off-planet.

Which meant they could be plotting to kill him right now and he wouldn't know it. Also, he supposed it meant that Aetherion was deaf. And possibly plotting to kill him right now.

He waited patiently to see what they would do.

Finally, Dremra and Aetherion looked back over at him. "What about Maul?" Dremra asked.

Sidious looked over at his tiny heir. An idea had occurred to him, and as much as he disliked it, he also had to admit its practicality.

Maul would be safer on Naboo than Coruscant. He couldn't help thinking of the danger Maul had been in on Sriluur. There he had also planned for Maul to be far away when the dangerous part of his plot was enacted, but things had not gone as planned.

"You will have ample opportunity to reintroduce yourself to your nephew while Talzin and I visit

Coruscant to find ourselves some Jedi. Oh, and his name is Maurice now."

It seemed he had found Maul some suitable babysitters after all.

Of course, this might be an attempt to take Maul from him, but if so, he would simply retrieve his small Apprentice. He did not judge them to be dangerous to Maul at any rate, and that was what was important. There would be consequences if they tried any such thing, though.

For one, he would be banning all Nightsisters from his apartment.

Chapter 14: Are We There Yet?

Chapter Notes

I finally finished writing this chapter and thanks to my excellent beta reader I am now ready to post it! Thanks to everyone for their comments!

In this chapter, Sidious and Talzin spend some quality time together as they travel to Coruscant.

Sidious stared out the viewport at the blue of hyperspace. It would be nearly a week before they arrived at Coruscant. He had just used his ability of foresight to look ahead at his meeting with the Jedi. The future had not solidified yet, and each vision seemed to show him different Jedi.

No matter. It wasn't who they were that was important to him. He did note that they always sent a pair rather than a single Jedi--often a padawan and their Master, but sometimes a knight and their former Master, or a Master and their former Master.

Sidious found the Jedi hierarchy needlessly complex, with its multitude of masters, Council, grandmaster, knights, and padawans.

Though he had to admit, he didn't have any intention of continuing the Sith Rule of Two. Perhaps he would kill Plagueis, but he would not force Maul to kill him to become a Sith Master.

Sidious would have to remould the Sith into something else. Of course, he didn't care for the idea of emulating the Jedi, but he was sure he could think up a different way to organize the new Sith Order that required neither adopting Jedi dogma nor continuing the Rule of Two. He could get ideas from the old Sith, and perhaps--even the Nightsisters.

Suddenly, as if his thoughts had summoned her, Talzin walked into the room and took the copilot's seat next to his. "I wonder about it," she said abruptly.

"About what?"

"Why hyperspace is blue," she responded.

Sidious waved a hand. "Radiation-something-something-emissions-blah-blah-blah. Plagueis would

probably know. Why? Do you have plans to manipulate hyperspace with the Force?" Sidious had thought about how useful just such an ability could be, from time to time. But such a thing would require considerably more power and experience than he had now.

"No, just idle curiosity. Though perhaps the answer to the question could help accomplish that too."

Sidious laughed. "I suppose. Knowledge is power, and all that. But I've always thought that knowing what other people are thinking is much more valuable than knowing why the universe works the way it does. The latter is largely predictable, yet requires immense resources to bend to one's will, but people are full of surprises, yet their intent can be influenced by nothing more elaborate than words."

"Yet you still seek knowledge on how to increase your power in the Force."

"Of course. Sometimes it pays to know how to influence the universe a bit. But my power in the political sphere is even more important. Without that my Force powers would be little more than amusingly deadly parlor tricks."

"Is that how you plan to bring down the Jedi? With politics?" Talzin looked dubious.

Palpatine sighed, laying back in his seat. "Partly, yes. To tell the truth, I was going to see what Plagueis planned to do. He's been at this for much longer than I have."

"That sounds reasonable."

"Only now that's going to be difficult, since I have to kill him as soon as possible."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I would like to be." Plagueis had not seemed interested in killing off Vidar as he'd assumed, and in general seemed to be more open and...caring. But Plagueis could not be allowed to find a way to reverse the effects of the Font, which Sidious was sure he would manage to do if allowed to live. He abruptly changed the subject.

"Your Nightsister friends, perhaps you can tell me more about them." Really, he was interested in knowing more about her, but he wasn't going to say that. "Your two lieutenants--you said they are Maul's aunts. So, are they your sisters?"

She blinked. "Yes."

Realizing that the word 'sister' in this context might have multiple meanings besides the intended, he decided to clarify his question. "Perhaps I should refine my wording," Sidious said. "Are either of them your blood relatives?"

"Ah! No. Dremra is the blood sister of Maul's late father, and Atherion is her spouse. As is common among Nightsisters, both of them were originally exiles of different Light Witch clans. They met before they joined my clan."

"Ah. So, they are your sister-in-law, and your sister-in-law-in-law."

"I suppose," she said, frowning. "Though your choice of terminology leaves something to be desired."

Sidious smiled. "Do you have a better suggestion to more precisely denote their relation to you?"

"Several." She smiled back. "Do all the Naboo use such inefficient terminology to denote their relations?"

Sidious shrugged, suddenly wishing he had chose a different topic of discussion. "I wouldn't know. I can't say I ever paid much attention to such things when I was younger, and now all my family is dead."

"Oh," Talzin said, her eyes widening. "How did that happen?"

He frowned. "I don't wish to discuss it." That was putting it mildly. It was difficult enough trying not to think about it. He'd begun to have nightmares about their deaths, made all the worse because the nightmares were only minor variations on the actual events, and so waking provided no real escape from them.

"All right," Talzin said. She turned to face the viewport, seeming to contemplate the streaks of blue light outside the viewport. Sidious watched her out of the corner of his eye.

After a few minutes, he closed his eyes to nap. He really did need to find out how Plagueis went without sleep before he killed him. Those nightmares were really starting to get to him. He would have to find some pretext to get his Master to explain it to him.

He heard a loud clanking noise to his right. Suddenly alert again, he opened his eyes, and saw Talzin had opened the secret compartment under the control panel and removed his lightsaber, turning it over in her hands.

"Did I say you could rifle through my possessions? How did you find that, anyway?" There wasn't even a visible seam around the compartment.

"I saw you open it the first time I entered your ship."

"Oh." That made sense. He'd brought his saber with him whenever he expected he might encounter any of the native denizens, and he'd stowed the weapon away each time he'd left.

"This is very nice. Where did you get it?" She ignited the saber, moving it in a slow arc.

"From the Sith Saber Store, of course," Sidious said.

"Come now, don't tease me," she laughed.

"I made it," Sidious responded.

"Impressive. A powerful and handsome weapon. Much like its wielder."

Sidious felt a swell of pride at the compliment. "I do like to think I put a lot of myself in the construction."

"It's very impressive."

"Do Nightsisters use sabers?"

"Occasionally." She turned the lightsaber off and handed it to him.

"Do you have one?" he asked casually.

"I do."

"May I see it?"

"Certainly." She pulled a flaming green sword from the air.

"Showoff," he said.

She shrugged. "It is a creation of magic--this is simply the most expedient way to summon it." She held the hilt out to him and he took it, examining it intently.

"Incredible," he said. "Quite detailed for a temporary creation. Truly a work of art." Pulling energy or mass from nothing was possible, but took incredible effort.

Sidious doubted the saber he held truly came from nothing, but the ability to manipulate matter and energy in this way was still no small feat, he judged.

"It really is impressive."

"Thank you," Talzin said.

An idea occurred to Sidious. "Usually I spend most of these trips meditating. But perhaps there is a more worthwhile use we might put this time to."

Talzin tilted her head. "What did you have in mind?"

"Perhaps some sparring, to practice our saber skills?"

She smiled. "That sounds delightful."

He held her saber out to her. Instead of taking it, she dematerialized it and then rematerialized it in her own hand.

"Showoff," he said.

She smiled at him. "I suspect I'm not the only one."

They moved out to the main room in the ship where there was more space to move around and stood across from each other. Talzin held her green saber at a slight angle in front of her. She tilted her head expectantly. "Are you going to draw your saber? Or did you lose it already?"

Sidious smiled and shrugged, his hands empty. "I must have forgotten it."

"That's unfortunate." Talzin said. "For you." She lunged forward.

Sidious waited until she was halfway across the room to draw his saber from his sleeve.

Their blades clashed, the green blade pushing down with considerable force on the red.

"Unfair," Sidious said, tilted backward and smiling up at her. "I was unarmed. There's supposed to be a countdown."

"Lies," Talzin said, amused. "You were obviously not unarmed, Sith Lord, and I gave you more warning than you'd have given me."

"I'll admit, you've got me there," Sidious said. He pushed upwards until he had enough leverage to sidestep the green saber.

Their sabers clashed together again and again in quick succession. Sidious concentrated on evading Talzin. She slashed at him again before he blocked the green blade and then flipped over her in midair. He'd dueled Plagueis, droids, and a large number of (now deceased) sapients, but that had all been in considerably less pleasant circumstances.

Plagueis despised dueling but Sidious had never been able to beat him at it. And the others had mostly been melee fights, pitting Sidious against a large group of foes.

Both were demoralizing--Sidious hated losing to someone who obviously had so little passion for dueling, and being forced to expend so much effort on scores of unskilled opponents had always irked him when he could think of much more satisfying ways to dispose of them.

But this was different. Talzin was clearly enjoying herself, and certainly had had prior training in this regard, though her style was markedly different from anything he'd encountered before.

They paced around each other, two predators testing the other's vigilance, looking for an opening.

"Not bad, but I think I'm going to win," Sidious remarked.

"Really?" Talzin said, slashing her blade sideways at him. He blocked the blow and slipped away to the side, forcing her to overextend to meet his attack. "Care to explain why you have this misconception?"

One corner of the Sith's mouth quirked upward. "If you could beat me with a saber, you wouldn't have needed to cheat the last time we fought."

"Ah, but maybe I just don't like to expend unnecessary effort in performing such tasks." She parried his attack and spun around him. He turned simultaneously to face her.

Sidious clashed abruptly against the side of her blade, forcing it from her hand. The blade clattered to the ground, dissolving on contact.

He held his red blade near her heart. "I win," he said, breathing heavily.

She took a moment to catch her breath before answering. "Yes, it appears you do," she said, smiling.

He turned the saber off. "That was a good duel."

"I agree."

Sidious settled onto an armchair in the corner of the room. Talzin leaned against the wall next to him.

Sidious glanced up at her. He'd been hoping to avoid this for a bit longer, but this was the perfect opportunity to bring it up. It would surely take some time to finalize the details of such a decision, after all, so it was best to get started early. "There is a matter we should discuss."

Talzin raised a single brow on her tattooed face. "Which is?"

"If you will be staying with me, you will need a fake identity and some reason to be doing so."

"Invisibility is not enough?"

Sidious frowned. "That would not work well long-term. No, I have a different suggestion." He hesitated. "Marriage."

"Sure."

Sidious narrowed his eyes. "That was a rather fast agreement."

Talzin shrugged. "I have no objection."

Sidious crossed his arms. "It would be in name only."

"Of course."

"For show only." He frowned.

"Obviously."

His eyes narrowed. "A loveless marriage."

"Understood." Talzin smiled.

Sidious settled back in his chair. "We'll need to come up with some plausible cover story."

Talzin sighed. "Yes. And my Sisters and I will have to hide our Dathomirian origins or the Jedi might take an unwanted interest."

Sidious frowned. "That's true. How do you plan to do that? Those tattoos don't look like they'd be..." he trailed off, watching in surprise as the tattoos seemed to absorb into her face, leaving only light brown skin in their place.

"An illusion?" Sidious asked. "To hide them?"

"No," she said, smiling. "We imprint the patterns into our skin once with magic. Though they are always a part of us, we can hide them as well if the occasion calls for it. We sometimes do this to deceive the Light witches, who would otherwise recognize our nature immediately from the markings. It is a physical change that allows us to manipulate their ability to be seen, just as we can decide to open or close our eyes. They are still there, just not visible."

Sidious was intrigued. "So it's a biological change? Do you manipulate your DNA?"

Talzin frowned. "Yes, it is a biological change. I don't know what DNA is."

"That just makes it even more intriguing," Sidious said. "No wonder Plagueis wanted to--" he stopped.

"Wanted to what?"

"Oh, nothing," Sidious said quickly. "You already know I was there to find information on your use of the Force."

"Yes, but I also am curious about what he was specifically after."

"I suppose it won't do any harm to tell you now. He wanted me to retrieve a 'live Nightsister' to question, with emphasis on the 'live' part. I can only guess he wanted to interrogate one of you about your methods of Force use."

"I see," she said, smiling. "And he thought you'd be able to capture one of us?"

Sidious narrowed his eyes. "Yes, and I have no doubt he was right."

She smiled. "Perhaps so." She looked down at her robes. "I'll need something else to wear for my disguise. Some may be able to recognize my Dathomirian garb."

"That's true. I can find you something on Coruscant. We should also decide where your fake identity will be from."

"Preferably somewhere I've been. Naboo perhaps."

He gave her a dubious look. "You will not be able to pass for a Naboo."

"Why not?"

"Can you speak our language?" he asked in Nabooian.

"What was that?" she asked, her expression perplexed.

"I rest my case," Sidious said, switching back to Basic. "No, you'll have to be from somewhere else. Preferably somewhere that doesn't have a distinct language or uniform cultural attributes you would have been expected to pick up." He put a hand to his chin. "Somewhere like...Coruscant."

"I've never even been there!"

"But you will have been soon," Sidious pointed out. "You'll have a much better chance passing as a Coruscanti citizen than a Naboo. Unless you want to be from somewhere no one's ever heard of like, oh, I don't know, Sriluur?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't think so. Coruscant it is, then."

"You Nightsisters seem to have a bit of a Core-sounding accent anyway. I suppose it's from being founded by a rogue Jedi."

"Allya does speak of her life on Coruscant in the Book of Shadows. Her description of it is...not complimentary. I never thought I'd ever want to travel there myself."

"What made you change your mind?"

Talzin was silent a moment, seeming to mull over the question. "You look into the future sometimes, do you not?"

Sidious laughed. "Only all the time! That's what I was doing earlier. But it's usually only helpful to see how my own actions will affect a near-future event. Why?"

"Usually I would agree that the far future is too difficult to see clearly, but in this case, I saw a single outcome."

"What did you see?"

"The death of every Nightsister and Nightbrother. A thousand deaths, a thousand different ways. Sometimes our doom is sealed by Jedi, sometimes by scores of white-armored men. Sometimes we are slaughtered by a four-armed creature too machine to be affected by our magic. And sometimes..." she paused, grimacing. "But you get the idea. In the course of a few decades, sometimes less, I saw us all extinguished. It was clear to me that as much as it was contrary to my instincts, I had to leave Dathomir and confront the root of these threats if I wanted to have any chance of preventing what I saw."

"Oh," Sidious said. "That's unfortunate." He smiled. "But I think I can help you with that. Especially in regards to the Jedi."

Chapter 15: Arrivals

Chapter Notes

A/N: It's been a while! This chapter had several spots I vacillated on what to do with, but I'm finally ready to post it!

I saw The Last Jedi recently. I won't give any spoilers but it wasn't my favorite Star Wars movie. The porgs have assimilated me, though, and now I want ten of them.

This chapter features Sidious, Talzin, Maul, and Plagueis, among others! The second section here features a scene that's based on a particular part of the Darth Plagueis novel, though of course with quite a different outcome than the original...

Palpatine felt excitement as the ship touched down on the landing pad. For the first time, he would see Coruscant.

And as this was the private landing pad of Plagueis for his Kaldani Spires suite, it was equipped with a one-way barrier activated on landing to deter prying eyes, whether organic or mechanical. Which meant that he wouldn't have to worry as much about subterfuge even on this planet where cameras and prying eyes were everywhere.

He would be staying in the top suite, the one Plagueis used. Which he hadn't expected--the other Sith had combed him halfway through his trip and made the offer. Sidious had ended up cancelling his

previous booking in a political district hotel as a result.

The suite was a considerable upgrade from the expensive hotel he had reserved and it had been offered entirely gratis. It was a much more generous offer than he was used to receiving from Plagueis, who previously would have seen no need to assist his Apprentice with such mundane matters.

But Plagueis had been uncharacteristically interested in Palpatine's well-being of late. His unusual concern over his Apprentice gave Sidious pause when he considered his plans to eliminate the other Sith. Not only that, but he found he enjoyed the approval that radiated from his Master now.

He didn't know what to do. He was beginning to forget his fear of Plagueis, who had neglected his usual acts of casual cruelty. Which should have made it easier to kill him--would have, anyway, if Sidious had been his usual self. Then he would not have felt this conflict within him. Because despite all of his anger for Plagueis, he also--cared for him now. But it seemed neither feeling could manage to negate the other.

Anyway, this proved to him that love was an inherently broken emotion that he had every reason to despise and distrust. But then there were his feelings for Maul. Those, he felt no ambiguity over. Those, he was certainly unwilling to erase. Which made it all the more important that he dispose of Plagueis before the Sith Master found a way to do that!

"Your eyes are doing that thing again," Talzin said, interrupting his thoughts. "That really is a most intense shade of yellow. Is something troubling you?"

He looked over at her as she picked up two of his suitcases. "No," he said. He picked up the last suitcase and extended the landing ramp. Talzin gave him a skeptical look but didn't otherwise respond.

As Sidious stepped out of the ship with Talzin, he tried to put aside his concerns and instead focus on the vista of skyscrapers and Coruscanti traffic before him.

"Ah, Coruscant," Sidious said, smiling brightly and taking in the view of the skyline. "Such a lovely planet."

"Such a dead planet," Talzin said disdainfully.

Sidious gave her a sidelong look, and gestured expansively to the buildings around them. "This is the central hub of the galaxy. This is where everything happens. This is where we must be, if we want alter fate and achieve greatness."

"Maybe so. But Dathomir is the central hub of the galaxy," Talzin said. "Others have simply forgotten this."

Sidious rolled his eyes. "Dathomir is the center of nowhere, home to those with inflated ideas of their own importance."

Talzin smiled serenely. "You mean like Naboo?"

Sidious gave her a small smile. "Yes, I mean exactly like Naboo."

"So humble," she said.

"But aspiring not to be," Sidious replied.

He led her to the elevator, which they took directly into the suite.

"At least there are some signs of life in here," Talzin said, eyeing the assortment of potted plants spread throughout the apartment placed in various places on the floor or hanging along the walls.

"And yet you dislike flowers," Sidious said. He'd remembered her eyeing the floral arrangements in his apartment with utter disdain.

"I dislike slowing dying flowers," she said. She gave him a withering look.

Sidious laughed. "Oh, I see how it is! I suppose I could get some slowly living houseplants instead."

"That would be agreeable," Talzin said.

He looked around at the expansive apartment. Plagueis only used this place occasionally as he was usually found on either Muunilinst or Sojourn. It had a large couch, bookshelves, a bedroom with an absurdly large bed, a study with a desk, and a kitchen. There were also a number of Sith statues and artworks mixed with fairly innocuous works such as a reproduction of the famed Killik Twilight.

"Do you think there's any chance the Jedi will detect either of us when we meet them?" Talzin asked.

"As long as we don't actively use our power in their presence, no," Sidious said. "At least, none of my glimpses of that future meeting show us being detected as long as we don't intentionally reveal ourselves."

"That's good to know," Talzin said. "I would look ahead myself, but my power--does not work well here."

Sidious frowned. "Your overreliance on the Living Force is a weakness."

"It is one of the reasons we do not like to leave Dathomir," Talzin said, running a finger over a leaf on a nearby fern. "I have used my own life force to sustain my power since we left Naboo, but that greatly limits its scope. I cannot pull power from the nonliving as you can."

"No, you could," Sidious said. "If I explained how it was done."

Talzin raised an eyebrow. "And what would you ask in exchange?"

Sidious was silent--he hadn't been thinking of asking anything in return. He tried to think of some suitably selfish rationale.

"It's for my benefit as much as yours," Sidious said finally. "You're here to help protect Maul and at some point, you may need to fight Jedi. For either of those tasks, it would be useful for you to be able to access all of the Force. As such, I do not require anything additional from you."

Talzin smiled. "Then I will gladly take you up on your offer."

"Good," Sidious said. "I can instruct you on the basics of this knowledge before our first meeting with the Jedi. I don't anticipate you will need it then, as we certainly don't want to be broadcasting our abilities in front of them, but it cannot hurt to be prepared."

"I agree," Talzin said.

Sidious heard his comm. Pulling it out of his pocket, he could see that it was his own home residence calling. Raising an eyebrow, he turned on the communicator. A hologram of Dremra appeared, holding Maul.

"Yes?" Sidious said.

"Mama! Pal!" Maul said.

Sidious smiled. "Hello, Maurice."

Talzin looked back at Dremra. "Everything is proceeding smoothly, I hope?"

"Yes, we've successfully settled in. Maul just wanted to see you. And him, I guess." She gestured towards Sidious.

"Oh." Sidious smiled and waved at Maul, and Talzin joined in. Beyond the holoconnection, Sidious could sense the Force bond between himself and Maul. Maul would understand through that bond that

he still existed, and that he would return. In turn, he could also sense Maul. Beyond that, it could not be used for communication as yet, but in time that too would be possible.

It was inevitable, he thought, that such a thing would develop between them. He worried a bit about how it might complicate his plans, but he would manage that. Somehow.

He was looking forward to spending more time with Maul once he returned to Naboo. He had much to teach his young Apprentice, even if he couldn't yet instruct him in the ways of the Force.

"Thank you. And his name is Maurice now," Sidious reminded the Nightsister.

Dremra stared at him, holding the small zabrak hybrid in her arms. "Yes," she said. "Maul-Reese. Got it."

Talzin smiled. Sidious sighed. Maul laughed and clapped his tiny hands.

Plagueis sat through the mediation on Serenno, feeling more than slightly gloomy. Usually, he enjoyed meeting Jedi, testing the limits of their control, looking for weaknesses to exploit and twist down a darker path...

But his plans were in shambles--even thinking about them made him feel ill. Still, he had felt he had to try.

But he hadn't spent much time during his trip contemplating ways to turn Jedi. Instead he'd read treatises on cellular biology, commed 11-4D three times to get the current status of his experimental subjects (now at 83% inconsolable sobbing), and commed Sidious to give him updates on his findings. He'd also offered his Apprentice the use of his Kaldani spires suite on learning that he was travelling to Coruscant.

He'd also realized that he'd lost any desire to cure himself of his current predicament. As fascinated as he was with his current experiments regarding the emotional additive, he did not look forward to their conclusion. Still, he couldn't disappoint Sidious by giving up now! Not when his Apprentice was constantly asking about his progress on the antidote. And yet he also couldn't deny that any thoughts of success in this endeavor filled him with feelings of dread.

And so, preoccupied with these other matters, he had arrived at Serenno unprepared to deal with the Jedi. Still, he'd hoped his derision for them might at least distract him from his own self-loathing for long enough to enact this small part of his plan.

But apparently, he'd become his own worst enemy.

He had found himself drawn inexorably to the issue of the hyperwave repeater under mediation. And no matter how much he had tried to hold his tongue, he kept thinking about how many would suffer if the project collapsed. *That is the point!* He thought, attempting to quell the insistent voice. But to no avail. It seemed he had come all this way only to sabotage his own plans.

"Both parties have legitimate grievances," Jocasta acknowledged to Count Vemec and the Celanon ambassador. "But it is in the best interests of all if a compromise can be reached, is it not?"

"If I may comment?" Plagueis spoke into the sullen silence.

"Certainly," Jocasta said.

"Thank you. This issue can be easily remedied," Plagueis replied. "When Damask Holdings purchased the location of the repeater, we were not aware of the issues that would cause." This was a lie, of course, but Plagueis had no difficulty saying it with a straight face. "The Holonet is a valuable service that should be made available to all," he continued. "Which is why I am offering to move the location." he called up a holographic map, pointing one long finger to the new location. "Here." he looked over at Vemec and the ambassador. "If that works for the two of you?"

Count Vemec and the Celanon ambassador exchanged glances before looking back at him.

"Wait," Count Vemec said, frowning. "If the site is moved there, then Serenno would have to pay the Celanon workers double the previous arrangement due to the increased regulations of the region."

"Not to worry, Count," Plagueis said. "I believe this to be a worthwhile investment, which is why I am offering to change our contract from loan to grant. If that is agreeable to both of you?"

The Celanon ambassador shrugged. "We get paid either way. Now we get paid more. That is most acceptable."

"I have no objection to the new proposal," Count Vemec said.

Jocasta looked surprised. "Are you certain, Magister? I understood Damask Holdings was unwilling to make any concession that would increase operating expenses. Are you saying you've reconsidered that position?"

Plagueis smiled faintly. "That is exactly what I am saying. Damask Holdings will still make a profit, and everyone else gets a better deal."

"I'm happy to hear it, but I just want to verify--are you sure?"

"Yes," Plagueis said. "I must admit with some embarrassment that my initial planning for the project was less than thorough. But I am quite sure my new projections are correct. Your presentation reminded me of the relevant details."

"All right," Jocasta said. She smiled at the Count and the ambassador. "I believe that settles it, then."

As they all filed out of the building, Qui-Gon gave him a dubious look. "I must admit to wondering what your ulterior motive for this unexpected generosity is."

Plagueis smiled. "Your suspicion is understandable," he said. "No one acts to benefit others unless there is some benefit to themselves, right?"

Qui-Gon frowned. "I would not say that all people are selfish, but it is a common motivation, especially for one such as yourself..."

"Qui-Gon, are you pestering Magister Damask?" Jocasta-Nu cut in, walking up to the Jedi from the other side.

"Apologies, Master. I--"

"Of course not!" Plagueis said cheerfully. "We were simply having a friendly conversation. I must say, Master Jedi, you did excellent work on the mediation."

"I wish I felt the same," Jocasta-Nu said. "I do not think those two would have come to an agreement if you hadn't changed your mind."

Plagueis shrugged. "Perhaps, but I must admit, I for one found your statements compelling. You are well-informed on the project."

She smiled. "Thank you. I consider it my duty to be informed on any topic I help mediate for."

"You should get full credit for this success," Plagueis said.

"Ah, Jedi do not require credit for our achievements," Jocasta-Nu said. "Anyway, it was a joint effort."

Plagueis raised a hairless brow, his gaze switching to Qui-Gon. "Do you agree? There were two other Jedi here, were there not? I haven't seen them around since the mediation talks began."

"Master Dooku and Sifo-Dyas were here to lend their voices if needed," Qui-Gon said.

Plagueis smiled. "I suppose they get credit for showing up. If needed."

Of course, Plagueis should have been talking to the two spares. Dooku was a powerful Jedi, and Yoda's former padawan to boot. And he had sensed great dissatisfaction in that one. Plagueis had no need of another Apprentice, and he hardly thought this Jedi could compare to Sidious, but Dooku could probably be recruited informally to do the Sith's dirty work.

And he had sensed fear in Sifo-dyas, fear and doubt. The man had clearly been working to quell it, but Plagueis knew that something about this mediation had brought old anxieties to the surface of the Jedi Master.

Neither of the two he talked with now emanated the same anger or anxiety, nor did he know as much about them. And neither was as powerful as Dooku certainly. Still, he lingered in their presence, determined to discover what he could about them.

"I must wonder Master Jocasta-Nu, do you travel often to the Outer Rim?" Plagueis asked. "You seem unusually well-informed on it."

"No," she replied. "But I work part time in the Jedi Archives."

That caught the interest of the Sith Lord. "The great Jedi library! I've always wanted a tour of it." What he wouldn't give to know more about that place. Plagueis had often coveted the knowledge stored there, both Jedi and Sith. He had acquired every piece of data he could on the archives, legal or not, but none of that could compare with what a Jedi could tell him about the place.

Jocasta smiled. "It's a popular tourist attraction. We don't normally give guided tours, and the locations non-Jedi are allowed are very limited. But if you drop by during my hours I could show you some of the points of interest. "

"You can be sure I will make time to do that," Plagueis said, already making plans for the questions he would be asking about the 'off-limits' areas.

"Glad to hear it. In truth, I plan to take up full time management of the library soon. Our current head librarian is retiring."

A librarian! And the future head of the Jedi Archives no less. This was better than Dooku. Much better.

He turned to Qui-Gon. "Do you work in the archives as well?"

The Jedi Knight shook his head. "No," he said.

Jocasta chuckled. "But he does occasionally sleep there."

"It's not sleeping--it's meditating," Qui-Gon said, his tone mock-defensive. He smiled briefly.

"I've never seen meditation involve so much snoring," Jocasta quipped.

"You are researching something?" Plagueis asked Qui-Gon.

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. "It's a Jedi matter. About the ancient Journal of the Whills."

"Is it confidential? I understand you cannot divulge Jedi business to an outsider such as myself. And this sounds like it must involve a task of some importance to the Order." He was fishing for any small detail the Jedi might divulge in his response.

Qui-Gon shrugged. "I wouldn't say that. To be honest, most the Jedi don't even believe in it anymore. My former Master tells me it's a fool's errand."

Not the response he was expecting. Time to follow up. "Really? And what is this 'fool's errand'?"

He worried then--had his question been too bold? He felt he had practically demanded the answer.

But neither Jedi seemed alarmed by his query.

"The quest for immortality," Qui-Gon answered. "The ability to live--beyond death."

And why would a Jedi be after that? the Sith Lord wondered. A whole list of questions presented itself to him, and he vowed that he would do whatever needed to be done to find the answers. Plagueis decided he'd definitely chosen the two more interesting Jedi to talk with.

Perhaps this trip hadn't been a waste of time after all.

Chapter 16: Chiaroscuro

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who commented since I last posted! I really appreciate it!

I put the rest of the comments at the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [Chapter 16: Chiaroscuro notes](#)

Sidious sat patiently at his seat in the outdoor cafe. He'd strategically chosen a table which looked out on a less than picturesque corner of Coruscant which gave him the space he sought between himself and the other patrons.

Talzin had, of course, insisted on coming along. They were married now, a quick elopement performed by an efficient, if not especially attentive, Coruscant official. The Trandoshan had congratulated them on their marriage and wished them many happy hatchlings.

"Are they always this late, do you think?" Talzin asked. She sat to his right, wearing a green dress in a popular Coruscanti style, and hiding her characteristic Nightsister tattoos. Her mahogany hair was pulled back into a simple braid.

Sidious took a sip of his glass of water and frowned. "I wouldn't have thought so." He found the tardiness of the Jedi somewhat concerning at this point. His recent visions had all indicated a certain pair of Jedi arriving--on time. And while it was true that the future was always in flux, such a divergence from an event he had so consistently foreseen as recently as this morning concerned him.

Talzin placed a hand over his. "I'm sure they'll turn up shortly."

"You're right, of course," Sidious said, smiling. They couldn't speak in more detail to each other here, but Sidious had already discussed his expectations for this meeting with her extensively.

But if the Jedi take any longer, this could get very awkward, he thought. Sidious hated to think that such a minor thing might throw off his plans so thoroughly, but in this case, it very well could. He had to admit, he was worried.

He turned his head casually towards a nondescript building in the distance. He had done so five times in the past ten minutes. He wondered how long he would have to endure this charade.

Earlier, he had tried to teach Talzin how to use the Unified Force. She had not yet picked up the ability, but Palpatine was confident she would learn it in time. He'd also asked if she was sure she wanted to attend this meeting, to which she smiled and asked him if he was worried about her. He had replied that it would interfere with his plans if she died.

Then the two Jedi finally appeared. He noticed them almost as soon as they came into his sights. They were disguised, as he had requested, though he worried they were still too obvious.

He squinted. One of them was a neti--the same species as the Sith librarian Dail'liss, a favorite historical figure of Plagueis's. Sidious knew they were a plant species with moderate shapeshifting abilities.

This neti had somewhat approximated human form, though perhaps that was exaggerating the resemblance. No clothes, of course, since there was nothing which needed concealing or protection from the elements. Perhaps twice as tall as Plagueis, the neti had two long, thick stilt-like legs, a short 'abdomen' and a vaguely humanoid 'face' surrounded by a tangle of branches with bright green foliage. Sidious found the diagonal their eyes made across their face slightly offputting. Also there was the disconcerting lack of any sort of arms or hands. *The business-casual morph, perhaps?* Sidious mused. The neti wore A Very Serious Look.

The other Jedi was a human teenager who, for whatever reason, was bald. He was dressed in clothing vaguely resembling that of a university student and wore a satchel on his back, though his posture was far too stiff for any normal teenager. He also wore A Very Serious Look.

Palpatine stifled his annoyance at how incredibly obvious they were being and gave them both warm smiles as they approached. At least neither of them wore robes or visible lightsabers. He'd have to hope it was enough. The Jedi he'd seen in his vision had seemed more prepared for this. He wondered again what had happened, though of course he couldn't ask.

"Ambassador Palpatine of Naboo," the teen said, his voice as serious as his expression. "You asked to meet with us."

Palpatine made a show of widening his eyes. "Oh! Please, have a seat." He gestured to the chairs across from himself and Talzin. "This is Kycina. We've recently married."

"Ah," the neti said. "Congratulations. My name is T'ra."

"And I am Mace," the human teen said.

"A pleasure to meet you," Talzin said, smiling politely.

"I apologize for taking up your valuable time," Sidious said, looking between the two Jedi. "And for requesting such subterfuge. But I believe it to be a prudent precaution, given the situation."

"Understood. What is your concern?" T'ra asked, eyes wide. A bird landed on one of the neti's branches. No move was made to dislodge it.

"I have been looking into a tragedy which has befallen our unfortunate Senator, Vidar Kim--" Sidious said, leaning forward at a very particular angle.

And that was when it happened.

In mere moments it was over, but Sidious had observed everything that had taken place, both through

his normal senses and through the Force. Sidious had made a show of pulling Talzin and himself down as the laserbolt rang out--a bolt which came from the same nondescript building he had been casually gazing at earlier.

Mace pulled out a purple lightsaber and deflected the bolt. T'ra stood and ignited a long, green lightsaber with one of the branches extending from their head. Several more shots rang out which were deflected by both Mace and T'ra.

There were screams from the other patrons of the cafe, and Palpatine rearranged his features into a suitably shocked expression, though in this case he actually had been surprised--but by Mace, not the attack.

"What--what just happened?!" Palpatine exclaimed.

Mace grabbed his arm and pulled him out of his seat, while T'ra ushered Talzin out of hers by snaking a branch around her arm.

"It looks like you were right to be cautious," Mace said, his eyes on the building the laserbolts originated from as he pulled Palpatine from the cafe. "Someone was watching you. Looks like they don't want anyone to hear what you have to say. Don't worry, we'll get you to safety. Then you can tell us everything."

Palpatine gave him a bewildered look, and again it was easy in this case to channel his real feelings into the expression. But it wasn't from the assassin's attack, which had gone exactly as he'd planned, but rather because he'd just witnessed this Jedi use some bizarre and broken form of Juyo to deflect the bolts.

He'd also felt the undercurrent of the Dark Side from him, which had just as suddenly vanished once he'd begun pulling Palpatine away.

Just what kind of Jedi *was* Mace, anyway?

"I--I never imagined there would be assassins involved!" Sidious said. "I just didn't want some reporter making it obvious I'd gone to the Jedi!"

"We believe there was only one assassin," Mace said.

"Only?!" Sidious said, scowling. "Someone could have died!"

"I believe that was their intention," Mace said, his face expressionless.
"But we've already dispatched another Jedi to seek them out."

"Yes, you are safe now," T'ra said gently. "We can help you, but you must tell us what you know." The neti gestured to an armchair behind him. "Please, have a seat." They'd taken him and Talzin directly to the Jedi Temple. T'ra was right. There was no way his hired assassin would attack him in here, even without another Jedi searching for him. This place was like a fortress.

"Sorry," Sidious said, settling into the cushioned seat. "This has just been overwhelming for me. I was so worried for Kycina."

"I'm fine, dear," Talzin said. "I was worried for you! I'm no one important--they were clearly after you!"

"I suppose," Sidious said. "But I never thought anyone would--"

"You should tell the Jedi why you're here," Talzin said firmly.

"Hmmm, yes, you're right," Sidious said. He craned his neck up at T'ra's lopsided features, then turned to Mace. "Perhaps you've heard of the tragedy that befell Senator Kim recently?"

"I'm afraid not," Mace said.

"His entire family died in a speeder accident," Sidious explained.

"I saw something about that," T'ra's deep voice said from somewhere far above the seated Palpatine's head. "It's very unfortunate."

"Yes, and it's why I'm here," Sidious said. "Vidar believes that foul play was involved. I thought perhaps that he was mistaken, but it seems I was the one who misjudged the situation. I was going to ask you to investigate simply to help placate his concerns, but it now seems they are quite real." Sidious gave Mace a concerned look.

"Not to worry," Mace said. "We'll definitely look into it now. In fact, we'd like to escort you back to Naboo, where we will search for the culprit of this attack."

"Oh, thank you. I'm sure we don't need an escort, though--"

"We insist," T'ra said.

Mace nodded. "It's for your safety. Both of you."

"All right," Sidious said. He had brought his ship out to a public landing pad near the cafe they'd been to before meeting with the Jedi in anticipation of this.

So far, despite the fact that the Jedi had been late and not the ones he had foreseen, everything had gone roughly as expected. The Jedi had not suspected anything of him or Talzin, and he had successfully gained their continued attention with the assassination stunt.

Now he would have a chance to learn more about these Jedi, and more about their Order as well. He was especially interested in Mace, though he did not have any way to directly ask the questions that burned foremost in his mind about that one.

Of course, unfortunately for the Jedi, they were doomed to failure in bringing the murderers of Vidar's kin to justice.

Fortunately for Vidar, a Sith Lord would be doing that instead.

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun with this chapter!

I've referenced some EU characters here, such as Dail'liss, T'ra Saa, and Kycina. I've also made various changes for the purposes of my story, which I'll discuss a bit here.

Kycina and Talzin appear to be completely separate characters in the old EU. They were also both Maul's mother, so...for this AU, I merged them into one character: Kycina Talzin. So yes, she is using her real first name here--I plan go into this some more later in the story, to explain why she's not worried about hiding that.

Also for the purposes of this AU, the neti do not have a concept of gender. I gave them leaves as well. Additionally, I did some redesign of T'ra Saa. I wanted the character to look less human since they're, you know, a tree. Incidentally, I really, really love the idea of Space Ents!

Sidious has gotten the attention of the Jedi now, and he intends to learn as much as he can about them. And especially about Mace. He's going to have to be creative about his lines of inquiry, though!

Chapter 17: The Unexpected

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [Chapter 17: The Unexpected notes](#)

Plagueis had decided to take a detour to the Jedi Archives on his way back from Serenno. It was a shame, he thought, that Palpatine had already left Coruscant by this point. Still, he looked forward to the personal tour of the Jedi Archives he'd been offered. While there were a number of things he knew he should be prioritizing instead, this had been a truly irresistible opportunity that he didn't want to miss. Tonight, he would stay at his now-empty suite in Kaldani Spires, in anticipation of his trip to the Archives.

Though none of that was explanation for his presence here. No, he had a very different purpose in mind this time.

He was mere kilometers from the Jedi Temple, which in more normal circumstances might have meant that he had come to view the Temple itself, perhaps to internally gloat about the eventual demise of its occupants. But there was no view of the Temple here, or indeed any of the sights of Coruscant that any sightseer would have an interest in.

Not when he was several miles beneath the level the Temple resided in.

The Crimson Corridor was pitch black at this time of afternoon. Which suited Plagueis just fine. He had no trouble navigating the area without light, and knew it would draw less attention to him to do so. The Force allowed him to sense everything in the Corridor as easily as if the area was bathed in full sunlight.

Easier, actually, since there were things he could sense through the Force that might otherwise pass unseen, such as the miniscule pinpricks of insect, animal, and fungal life residing around him, hiding under discarded boxes or in rubbish heaps, or within the very walls around him.

But that was not what he was here for. He turned a corner and finally reached his destination.

This area of the Corridor was occupied by a number of impoverished individuals. Plagueis counted 53 of them, which seemed to him an inconsequential number. Coruscant had billions of these indigents.

He put that last thought out of his mind. He knew his purpose here.

Plagueis turned on his penlight, which got an immediate response.

The inhabitants of the area swarmed him instantly, requesting, pleading, or demanding food or credits.

"Hmmm, I have don't have either of those things on me," Plagueis said. "But I do have something else that may interest you."

"And what's that?" a rodian woman in rags asked.

"Yes, what is it?" a grimy togruta man echoed. Other voices murmured similar questions. He saw a few aqualish, a bothan, a couple duros, a chagrian, a few gran, and an ithorian, among others.

"Free real estate," Plagueis replied.

After that night, Kaldani Spires had a sudden uptick in tenancy. The new tenants appeared to especially appreciate the additional features of their homes, which included free furniture, clothing, Holonet, and 24-hour meal-service.

After Plagueis had explained the conditions of their tenancy (a free lifetime lease and free access to every absurdly lavish service available in Kaldani Spires), he had them all sign their leases. This went quickly, for the most part, and soon he had reached the last new tenant.

The togruta smiled cheerfully and shook his hand. "I don't think I'll ever be able to repay you, Mr. Damask."

"Ah, just Hego, please. And that won't be necessary. You owe me nothing. Let us just finish the appropriate paperwork, shall we," Plagueis said, settling down into a plush chair at the silvery circular table in the dining room.

"Of course," the togruta man said. They sat down across from each other and Plagueis handed him a stack of flimsiplast documents.

As the togruta took a pen to sign them, he remarked, "I wish my sister was here to see this."

"Your sister?" Plagueis asked.

"Yes. She disappeared years ago, along with her ship the Woebegone and all her crew," he remarked. "I was only ten."

"Ah. I see," Plagueis said mildly, though his internal dialogue had filled with a single, continuous shriek. This was not happening. It couldn't be. The odds of this happening were truly astronomical. Perfectly preserved, an image flashed through his mind of Lah's expression of shock as he stabbed her through her heart on the Woebegone, her brown eyes desperate, her montrals swinging back as she fell forward to the ground. He noticed then that Eolin had the same brown eyes, though his montral stripes were much more jagged and irregular than Captain Lah's had been.

The togruta frowned, his forehead furrowed in concern. "Are you--alright?"

Plagueis started and placed a hand on his chest in surprise. "Me? Oh, I'm fine. Perfectly fine. It's just--that's terrible."

"It's alright," Eolin said. "It was a long time ago. I know she's never coming back. I know she's dead. I wish I knew what happened to her, but maybe...maybe there are some things we aren't meant to know."

"No," Plagueis said abruptly. "Nothing is unknowable!"

Eolin gave him a surprised look.

"Er, I mean, there must be some explanation," Plagueis said. *Get a grip, you utter fool*, a voice that sounded very much like himself hissed angrily in his head. *Try not to expose yourself!* Then a newer voice, the voice that sounded like a twisted funhouse version of himself, chimed in. *Don't tell him that! You'll traumatize him!*

At least this made his decision much simpler. "But you're right, it might not be so easy to find." *Or to hear.*

He talked with Eolin a bit more as they finished the paperwork, though he still felt shaken by the unexpected revelation.

Afterwards, he headed into to the elevator towards his suite, ruminating on the day's events. Staring at the curved, polished chrome doors, he felt...uncertain. Uncertain whether he had accomplished his objective.

Finally, the doors opened and Plagueis entered his suite, glancing at the plants to his left and right. Then he went to sit on the sofa and called up the holoscreen to access the information on the current revenue for Damask Holdings.

Everything was as expected. He grimaced. Everything except himself. Because he knew where that money came from.

It hadn't worked. His attempt to manipulate his own emotional state with some miniscule good deed had failed utterly. Was it because Eolin Lah's unexpected appearance had unsettled him?

No, that wasn't it. He had been surprised by that, still was, in fact. But the failure was due to his own awareness. It was clear now that his token act of kindness would not allow him to ignore or overlook the enormous cruelty he had built his shadow empire upon.

Damask Holdings, despite being run by a Sith Lord, was a mostly legal enterprise. Hego ran his business in much the way his late father Caar had, not seeing any reason to deviate from an already working formula.

His investments, to be sure, had a slightly different track. Hego emphasized investments in biomedical research and pharmaceutical companies whereas his father had emphasized tech. But he, like his father, frequently voted on the boards of those companies to raise prices on goods, especially common necessities, and decrease the pay of employees. Unlike his father, this specifically had been a

motivation for working in what he considered to be a less interesting field. Though he rarely had opportunity to directly observe the extra suffering caused by his actions, he nevertheless knew it was there, and that fact alone had given him some measure of satisfaction.

While he took great pains to avoid saying anything publicly that might admit to his malicious intent, he had often impressed on Palpatine the value of such actions. A Sith Warrior of old only harmed, for the most part, those they directly cut down, whereas he could achieve suffering on scales such a being could have barely imagined.

Except that now that suffering was eating away at him, too.

He placed his head into his hands. What was he to do?

Sidious sat next to Talzin, across from the two Jedi at the dining table in his apartment. There was a pot of shuura tea in the middle of the table.

“The tea is excellent,” Mace said.

“Agreed,” said T’raa, daintily slurping at it with two fingers they’d created from their rootstock.

“Thank you,” Sidious said. He felt a great disappointment at himself. Though he loathed everything these Jedi stood for, he couldn’t quite bring himself to want to kill either of these two.

And that was a problem.

His desire to destroy the Jedi gave him purpose, and a tangible marker of his ultimate goals. Certainly he hadn’t planned for it to happen today, or tomorrow, or even ten years down the line. But to not even feel the desire to ruminate on how he would ultimately bring about their grisly deaths? It sickened him.

He had thought that perhaps familiarity would help to induce contempt, but asking them inane questions during the trip back to Naboo had, if anything, backfired, and even seemed to have created in him a sort of nauseating fondness for the two.

How was he going to fix this?

“However, we require more information from you to investigate this matter fully,” Mace said.

Sidious wished there was some way to ask the Jedi about his Dark Side use back on Coruscant, but as of yet he had found no way to subtly prompt Mace to speak of it. He also wondered how these Jedi had ended up on this case when his attempts at foreseeing the future before meeting with the Jedi had at no point produced this particular pair. But he couldn’t directly ask that question, either.

“I would have thought that you have everything you need already,” Talzin said. “Palpatine has told you everything he knows about the situation.”

“Everything he *thinks* he knows, perhaps,” Mace said.

“What do you mean by that?” Palpatine asked.

“I sense that you will be pivotal to this investigation,” Mace said. He looked up at Talzin then, too, meeting her gaze. “And you as well.”

Talzin laughed. “Me? But I know nearly nothing of this matter. This is the first time I have even been on Naboo. What do you think?” Talzin asked T’raa.

“Knight Windu can sense shatterpoints,” T’raa said. “I trust his judgment in this.”

Sidious smiled, exerting effort to make his expression seem vaguely curious, even as he internally generated a large variety of Sith invective. Now he was certain he knew why these two had ended up supplanting the Jedi he’d seen in his vision. “A Shatterpoint? What’s that?”

“Shatterpoint,” Mace corrected.

Sidious chuckled. “Apologies. I’m not familiar with your Jedi terminology.” He leaned forward slightly, clasping his hands on his teacup. “Please do explain.”

“It’s to do with the Jedi ability of foresight,” Mace said.

“Do you mean to say that the Jedi possess the ability to predict the future? So you can look ahead and, oh, see if you’re going to find evidence against Bon Tapalo, for example?” Sidious stirred his tea, then tapped the silver spoon lightly against the edge of his filigreed red and gold cup.

“How useful!” Talzin said. “So if you foresaw how you solved a problem after much effort, then you could solve it right away without any dead ends.”

“It’s not that simple as either of those things,” Mace said. “Yoda teaches us that--”

“Yoda? You’ve met Yoda?” Sidious said, modulating his voice to an awed whisper. He placed his spoon back into the teacup and brought up a spoonful of the steaming liquid. “I thought he was just, that is, I didn’t know he was *real*.”

A corner of Mace’s mouth quirked up. “You’re not the only one who’s said that.”

“I can imagine!” Sidious said. “So what were you saying about, ah, Shinglepoints?”

“Shatterpoints,” Mace corrected again. “As I was about to say earlier, the future is constantly in flux. This can make it difficult to know what details to focus on, and we cannot control what the Force chooses to show us.”

Sidious would quickly lose patience if his foretelling ability had required watching snippets of a future where he was only a passive observer, like someone who was forced to watch only the Holonet shows chosen by someone else.

“That’s unfortunate,” Sidious said, sipping his tea.

“Perhaps, but my ability to detect shatterpoints allows me to mitigate this disadvantage somewhat. Because the important details stand in relief to me in a way that’s not clear to others. A Shatterpoint

can be a location, an object, or even an event, but more commonly, a person is a Shatterpoint.”

“I’m still not quite sure I understand what a--Shatterpoint is,” Sidious said.

“It’s a point in time along which an event hinges,” Mace replied.

Mace had just repeated what the Sith knew as the standard definition for a shatterpoint, a definition that had always annoyed him.

“Along? Apologies, perhaps Jedi use these terms differently than the general public. But wouldn’t that be upon?” Sidious asked. “I wouldn’t think that a point would possess length with which to move along.”

“A point in time becomes a line across time,” Mace explained.

Sidious widened his eyes. “Oooooohhhh, I see.” Now he was doubly annoyed, because this barely-adult Jedi had just explained in less than ten words why *he* had been the one who was wrong. Maybe if Plagueis had ever lectured about something besides *midichlorians* he would know these things.

But more importantly, this complicated matters considerably. The talent to sense shatterpoints was something above and beyond mere precognition, and there was no way for Sidious to obscure it.

And Mace had just identified both Sidious and Talzin as shatterpoints.

It was in that moment, that Sidious heard a sound, like static, or the crackle of electricity. He turned to face Talzin, seeing her turn to gaze down at him at the same time, before realizing the sound wasn’t coming from a physical source, but rather from directly *inside* his head.

Even worse, feelings he had previously dismissed were surfacing as well, and apparently determined to be even more distracting than the internal sound effects they accompanied. The idea that such feelings might make his marriage to Talzin something other than the complete sham it was intended to be greatly irritated him.

What an inconvenient time to be forming a Force Bond.

Talzin was watching the Jedi closely, though they did not have her full attention.

She heard a sound, like dead leaves being crushed underfoot, mixed with the droning of insects.

She turned towards Sidious, who had turned to face her as well, his expression puzzled, then irritated, but relaxing quickly into a cordial smile.

Talzin knew this last expression to be a mask for the benefit of the Jedi, but she did think it one that made him look particularly handsome.

Of course she knew what was occurring. She didn’t think the Jedi could detect such a thing directly, but their behavior might cause great suspicion if they didn’t maintain proper control.

She also wasn't sure how she felt about such a thing. Despite the steps she had taken to secure this alliance, and regardless of the Sith Apprentice's attractiveness, she wasn't sure if she was prepared to have such a connection to him.

A Force Bond could be incredibly useful, but it also opened one up to the other person in ways that could be...dangerous. On the other hand, Talzin would not have entered into this situation if she hadn't been in the habit of courting danger, in this case perhaps quite literally.

Palpatine rested a hand on her hand under the table, slowly brushing his delicate fingers from her wrist to the tips of her pointed fingernails.

It was quite intriguing, but also exceedingly distracting.

"We will need a way to get close to King Tapalo to investigate," Mace said.

Talzin's attention switched back to the Jedi. "How can we help?" She moved her hand out from under Sidious's and grabbed it, holding it firmly.

Sidious seemed to get her message, though there seemed to be more tension in his frame than before.

"We assume that Ambassador Palpatine will know how we could gain an audience with the King," T'raa said.

"Yes," Palpatine said. "He is very interested in financial opportunities. If you claimed to be part of some corporation willing to make an offer double the current for Naboo's plasma, he would almost certainly be willing to hear you out."

Though Talzin had no idea what the term plasma referred to, she understood the direction of Palpatine's intent, to have the Jedi convince the King of this planet that they had something valuable to offer in exchange for his own resources.

Naboo was apparently a despotic planet where great power over all aspects of life was bestowed to this single individual, rather than being run through a more distributed system as the Nightsisters were, where anyone could join the political councils and deliberate or vote on decisions. Not that she cared about Naboo.

Not at all.

Maybe a little.

"Do you know how we could best pull off such a deception?" Mace asked.

"I know he is meeting with a few of the major Mid-Rim companies soon," Sidious answered. "If you could delay the real delegates, you could take their place. I can give you his schedule."

"Excellent," T'raa said. They smiled with their barklike mouth. "Yes, that's a good plan."

The two Jedi soon finished their tea, making small talk with Palpatine and Talzin and showing no intention of leaving.

Though Palpatine had said nothing of the sort, she sensed he was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the Jedi's presence. Possibly he had not yet determined a polite end to their conversation. Naboo seemed to have many rules of that kind.

Fortunately, she wasn't from Naboo.

Using the information she had gleaned from the holostories she had watched during their trip illustrating marriage conventions from Coruscant, she stood and lifted Palpatine out of his chair and held him horizontally between her arms. He was quite heavier than he appeared, likely due to muscle hidden beneath his extensive clothing, but still certainly within the means of her physical strength to carry.

His startled expression quickly changed to a jovial smile. "Oh, there you go again, sweeping me off my feet!" Palpatine said, laughing.

Talzin looked apologetically at the two Jedi. "We never really got to enjoy our honeymoon. I know it would be unsafe to travel now, as we planned to, but perhaps we could have some--time alone?"

The two Jedi looked at each other, then back to her. "Of course," they both said at the same time. They both gave Palpatine and Talzin their thanks and promised to stay in touch. Then they politely filed out the door.

Talzin and Palpatine waited silently, unmoving, for several minutes. Eventually, Talzin could no longer sense the presence of the Jedi nearby.

"Finally," Palpatine breathed. "I thought they'd never leave." He made no attempt to escape from her arms, though, and as a result she made no attempt to release him.

Atherion and Dremra appeared in the adjacent living room, Atherion having secured Maul in a harness over her abdomen and holding one arm around him. It had taken some convincing to get Palpatine to agree to their presence during this meeting, but Talzin had been very insistent, and eventually he had conceded that they might add some useful perspective.

Dremra crossed her arms. "Jedi seem like pushovers."

[We should not underestimate them. I sensed great power in both of the Jedi, but especially the human.] She looked over at Talzin. [But at the moment, I just want to know what you plan to do about the connection forming between you and Palpatine.] Atherion signed while Maul watched her hands with interest. Dremra's eyes widened.

[What?] the red zabrak warrior signed back, her expression vaguely horrified.

Talzin shrugged her shoulders. "There does seem to be a Force Bond forming between us. That is...obviously an issue the two of us must decide upon." A spontaneous Force Bond did not have to be accepted. It could be delayed or quelled by either party, but only established by mutual agreement. But it was not a decision to make lightly for mere convenience.

"I mean surely you're going to..." Dremra made a snipping gesture with one hand.

“That will be up for discussion, but not in front of you two,” Palpatine said. His eyes narrowed. “Now get lost.”

He seemed to consider something, his eyes glancing over at Maul. “That is, thank you for taking care of Maurice. You can leave him here while you take a...well-deserved break.” His tone indicated he did not consider the suggestion optional.

Dremra and Atherion looked over at Talzin.

She sighed. “Yes, it would be best if we discussed this between ourselves.”

Dremra signed the responses to Atherion, before both gave her a dubious look. Talzin turned her gaze down to Sidious.

“Still, as much as I want to catch up with prickly pear, it might be more efficient if we discussed this alone,” Talzin said.

Sidious frowned. “We have discussed many things efficiently with Maurice present. It might be best if we are *not* entirely alone.”

Dremra smiled brightly. “I agree! Atherion and I should just hang out here too while you work this out!”

“Changed my mind,” he said quickly. “I’ll concede your point, Talzin, if it means you can get these two to *leave*.”

“Would you mind taking prickly pear to get some fresh air?” she asked.

Dremra gave her a frown of disapproval, but nodded assent and repeated the request to Atherion.

[Are you sure?], Atherion signed, frowning. Talzin nodded.

[It is as good a time as any to start teaching Maul about trees, I suppose.] Atherion signed.

Dremra and a horizontal Palpatine seemed to engage in a momentary glaring contest.

“Yeah, I know just the place,” Dremra said. “The little guy will love it. Just let us know when you’re done with--him.” Her hard brown eyes gazed towards Sidious before she signed briefly to Atherion.

“Certainly,” Talzin said.

As the two of them filed out the door, Atherion turned to face them and smiled cheerily, looking down at Maul before waving at the two.

Maul noticed and copied her movements, also smiling and saying “trees!” in his tiny voice.

Then, for a brief moment, she made a snipping motion with her fingers before closing the door behind Dremra and herself.

Talzin smiled. *Your votes are duly noted.*

However, the final say on this matter would have to be decided between herself and Palpatine.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took a while! My updates are just unpredictable like that!

In case there's anyone reading this who hasn't read the Darth Plagueis novel, this chapter refers to a character who appears briefly in that story, Captain Ellin Lah of the Woebegone. Eolin Lah is my OC, who ends up impoverished because he was a child when his sister died. I also reference Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter here with the mention of the Crimson Corridor.

Chapter 18: Connections

Chapter Summary

Talzin and Sidious discuss their current predicament. Plagueis goes to the library.

Chapter Notes

It's been a while! But I finally finished this chapter.

Just thought I'd mention that there's a KOTOR II reference here and some mentions regarding the Old Republic era Sith Darth Malgus and the Bane era Sith Darth Zannah that some people who don't know about those characters might consider spoilers, particularly the brief mentions referring to Malgus and Zannah.

See the end of the chapter for more [Chapter 18: Connections notes](#)

Talzin set Sidious down in front of her. Talzin watched as Sidious walked over to the red sofa, sprawling down onto it. Talzin sat down on the arm of the sofa near his slippers. Even though there was no need for it with the plush carpet, Talzin had noticed that Sidious always wore slippers indoors. She had also noticed that he had put in new houseplants with actual soil. They were some sort of prolifically growing plant with long, pointed leaves and red and violet flowers.

"I suppose I should clarify that I do not see any strategic reason to avoid this Force bond," he said. "By accepting it, we can more easily coordinate our actions."

"But you think there are other reasons to avoid it," Talzin said, guessing the direction he might be heading. "You don't know me well enough to trust me with such a connection."

"Yes," Sidious said. "If I don't want you riffling through my stuff, I certainly don't want you riffling through my thoughts. Even though you would only see anything I voluntarily shared, such sharing is... much more complete than through conventional means."

"I agree," Talzin said. "It's also much more... visceral than conveying one's thoughts or feelings through other means." She knew that well enough from the Force bonds that connected her to Maul, Atherion, and Dremra. Maul's emotions especially were so intensely strong, it was overwhelming at times.

Sidious gave her a skeptical look. "I would have thought you'd be all for this."

"Really? And why is that?" Talzin asked.

"You sounded awfully enthusiastic about the marriage idea."

Talzin considered her response.

"It solves a lot of problems, even if it is slightly awkward," Talzin said.

"True," Sidious said. "Anyway, I can't pretend I had no part in causing our current predicament. It seems both of us may have gotten a bit too comfortable with this... arrangement."

"Yes," Talzin said. After all, a Force Bond had to be initiated from both sides. "I think that is an accurate assessment."

"So we are agreed? This marriage is one of political and practical convenience only?"

They shared a long look, and Talzin wondered if the answer Sidious was hoping for and the one he was leading into were the same. Still, she knew where her priorities were. For now. "Yes," Talzin said.

"Alright. Good. Then you should disengage from the...connection."

"I'm trying. These are not supposed to be difficult to sever from one side," she said, frowning. "But I think you will need to help me here."

"In that case, it would help me if you could do something particularly off-putting."

"Like what?"

Sidious shrugged. "I don't know... maybe... talk about those meddling friends of yours?"

Talzin smiled. "Certainly. I have known Atherion and Dremra both for many years, though I met Dremra first. They were both fleeing from different Light Witch clans."

"Oh? They weren't always Nightsisters, then?"

"No. But they both learned quickly."

"You seem to place a lot of trust in them," Sidious said.

"I do," she said. "They have been by my side since we were barely adults. They were responsible for delivering Maul." *They witnessed my death, and my return to life.* That last part Sidious did not need to know. Nor that her husband had died, by her mother's hand, that same day. Some things were deeply personal to her.

"They dislike me."

"Yes, and I don't see that changing any time soon. However, in the interest of our alliance against the Jedi, I have asked them not to instigate any conflicts with you. However, I will not stop them from retaliation if you make trouble with them."

"I... won't. I don't really want to fight the lot of you." He didn't say it in a way that indicated that he was intimidated by the idea, but rather as if he found it unpleasant, distasteful even. "And I know that's how it would be. What did you say? They are your pack?"

"Exactly. I'm glad you understand. But what of you? I know you weren't ever a Jedi, but what were you before you became a Sith?"

Palpatine shrugged. "A spoiled aristocrat. Nothing special."

Talzin raised an eyebrow. "Did you ever use your powers then?"

"Yes, in subtle ways, but I wasn't aware of what they were until after I met Plagueis." He hesitated, as if considering something else he might say on that, before changing the subject. "How many Light Witch groups are there?"

"I don't really know. There are fifteen that my people encounter on a regular basis, three of which consider themselves at war with us, five of which have thus far mostly ignored us, and seven of which we have active treaties with..."

"Treaties?!" Sidious scoffed.

"Yes, treaties," Talzin said. "Not all of us solve our problems by killing everyone who stands in our way."

"So you just, ...what, ...let them do whatever they want?"

"No, we compromise," Talzin replied. "We give up some of what we want--in return, they give up some of what they want. Thus everyone shares the dissatisfaction of dealing with those they find distasteful, which is wretched, but none of us wake to the other side trying to eviscerate us in our sleep. A fair trade."

"Sith don't believe in compromise," Sidious said.

"And yet there have been treaties between the Jedi and the Sith," Talzin said.

"Between the Jedi and the old Sith," Sidious corrected. "A Baneite Sith would never compromise with a Jedi."

"Then you will die as foolishly as you have lived."

Palpatine crossed his arms. "I would've thought you'd be all for destroying the Jedi Order. Didn't you foresee they would be a threat to you?"

"One of many, yes," Talzin said. "But I hardly think it possible to crush their entire Order. I think it will have to come to a truce with them at some point, perhaps after some amount of... necessary mayhem."

Sidious shook his head. "Oh, I would not count on that. Plagueis says the Jedi only deal in absolutes. They seek to decimate the Dark Side, wherever it resides. We must destroy the Jedi in their entirety."

"There's too many of them! That's not possible!"

"I disagree."

"The only other possibility besides an eventual truce that I can see is you getting yourself killed in some foolish plan," Talzin said, frowning. "I have read of your Order, Sith Lord. Allya considered joining your lot for a time, but concluded your only path could be to ultimately extinguish yourselves."

"We will succeed. Regardless of what your founder may have thought. Bane saw the true destiny of the Sith."

"Oh, really? And did he make any mention of you specifically in this vision?"

"No, but everything about his vision aligns with my future, the future of the Sith'ari."

"The Sith'ari. What is that to you? A future prophet?"

"Also no. You--you believe in twin deities, do you not?"

"Yes. The Son and the Daughter."

"I thought so. That is what the Sith'ari is. A god. *The* god of the Sith. Me."

Talzin snorted. "You must be joking."

"Hardly," Sidious said.

"You are telling me that the Sith'ari is your god."

"Yes."

"And that you, specifically, are that god?"

"Correct!"

Talzin thought back to Allya's musings from the Book of Shadows.

To be a Sith is to gaze only upon one's own reflection to find power and wisdom. For every voice of theirs chimes 'I am the Sith'ari! Yes, it is me, the savior of the Sith, the saviour of all!'

"Now I know why Allya thought you all such a hopeless waste of time."

"Sacrilege, but I'll overlook it," Sidious said, waving a hand, a warm smile settling over his features. "I hardly need others to believe in me when I already believe in myself."

"Completely hopeless," Talzin said, though she couldn't entirely suppress her own smile.

"Come now, don't you want your son to be a god?"

That gave Talzin pause. "But you just said--you are the god of the Sith. I understand there is only one?"

"Yes. And yes."

"So, does he become the Sith'ari after you die?"

"I hardly think he should need to wait for that. And of course Maul will become the Sith'ari. It is inevitable."

"You are making this very difficult," Talzin said, shaking her head. "How can I speak meanly of you when you say such things?"

"Oh, right," Sidious said. "I suppose I should get back to that. But I must protest that you did a poor job of angering me, Nightsister."

"My insults were of the highest quality," Talzin retorted. "It is yours that lacked...stamina."

"Disengage the connection," Palpatine said.

"I am trying," Talzin replied. "Maybe you should put more effort into it."

"I *am* putting effort into it," Sidious said. "It is you who is not trying hard enough."

"Fine you--you Jedi-lover."

"Light-side user."

"Hah! Mine was better," Talzin exclaimed.

"Hardly," Sidious said. "We both know it's not even remotely true."

"It is entirely true. They are your tea friends now."

Sidious groaned. He frowned, seeming to consider something for a moment. Then he looked up at her, his expression grim. "There's something you should know about me."

"Oh?" Talzin said.

"I told you that my family was dead," Palpatine said. "What I didn't mention... was that I was the one who killed them. Every last one of them--my parents, my younger siblings, my... twin sister. My father, I don't regret. But the others, I do."

Talzin considered his remorseful words, and the haunted look of anguish in his eyes. It was really all so satisfying. She wondered if he would notice how much she was enjoying this. Was one supposed to conceal that sort of thing on Naboo? Was it considered impolite? She supposed it didn't matter, since she wasn't Nabooian.

It really was a good tactic to tell her that, though, she thought. It might be more difficult to relish such pain if she could directly feel it.

"That was quite terrible of you. But not at all surprising, given what I have seen of you in the Force."

Palpatine raised an eyebrow. "That wasn't surprising? What do I need to say to be sufficiently shocking?"

"I have studied the Sith, Sidious," she said. "I know that your Order shuns attachments as much as the

Jedi. Darth Zannah framed her brother and ensured his death. Darth Malgus killed the woman he loved. Your lives are one long winnowing of attachments to others. I have guessed that you would have been quite efficient in that respect. It seems I was correct."

"Not as efficient as Plagueis would have liked," Palpatine said. "At least before all of ..." he began, waving a hand erratically, "this happened." He laughed. "Seems he's changed his mind about that since."

"You're referring to that friend of yours, right? Vidar Kim?"

"Yes," Palpatine said. "He owes you a debt he will never know. He'd almost certainly be dead by now if not for your interference."

"He owes me no debt," Talzin said. "His change in fortunes was entirely incidental to my plans."

"Your plans to destroy the Sith, you mean."

"In a manner of speaking. But, here you are, still speaking yourself. So if you were destroyed, you seem to have rebuilt! Perhaps I'm your Sith'ari."

Palpatine narrowed his eyes. "Very funny. Though I suppose it is convenient that you seem to have some familiarity with Sith teachings. Since we are to reside in the same space for the time being."

"Yes, I have studied the Sith for many years," Talzin said. "So I find it a bit puzzling that you already think of yourself as the Sith'ari. What of Plagueis? Don't you have to usurp him first to claim that title?"

Palpatine laughed. "Hardly! Plagueis thinks himself the Sith'ari, yes, but he has a rather different view of what that means than I do. You see, Plagueis doesn't believe in concepts that he can't quantify by science. And so, he doesn't believe that he is a god, because he doesn't believe in gods. But I do. And I'm right, and he's wrong, ergo *I'm* the Sith'ari."

"Ah, so it's about having a certain point of view, then."

Palpatine smiled. "Yes. Yes, it is." He gave an exasperated sigh. "The connection still hasn't closed!"

"Yes, I've noticed," Talzin said.

"I can't say I haven't developed a certain fondness for you...but I don't know you well enough for this," Sidious said.

"Yes, and I enjoy your company as well, Sith Lord. But I agree," Talzin replied. "Force Bonds shouldn't be accepted rashly."

And with that the connection was gone.

Palpatine widened his eyes. "Oh. Finally!"

"Interesting," Talzin said. "That did take an undue amount of effort, though."

"But now we know how to deal with it if it happens again," Palpatine said.

"True," Talzin said. "You know, there's not a lot of writing on preventing Force Bonds from forming. This could be useful information to record for others."

"Suit yourself," Palpatine said. "But that sounds about as fun as volunteering for one Plagueis's experiments to me. So don't expect my contribution."

"Of course not," Talzin said, amused.

Sidious looked as if he wanted to say something more, but then thought better of it. "I'm going to go do some research now. It seems I need to figure out how to deceive a Jedi who can detect Shatterpoints." He grimaced.

"I can help you with that," Talzin said.

"Ah, yes, I'd be most interested in your input," Sidious said. "In the most extremely professional way, of course."

"Yes, certainly," Talzin said. "I look forward to supplying my very professional opinion. But first I'm going to go pick up Maul."

"Yes, that sounds very agreeable," Sidious said. "I'll see you and Maul when you return, then."

Soon she would go to find Atherion and Dremra in the park, but first she wanted to record a few of her thoughts. She took out her pen and notebook from her clothing, inscribed a few notes, and then returned them to the concealed pockets she had added on the trip back to Naboo. The green dress was elegant, but the Coruscanti simply had no understanding of function. Why would anyone design clothing without pockets? Or internal armor? No wonder Allya had given up on them all.

"Halt! You are not authorized to enter the Jedi Temple!"

Plagueis regarded the force pike wielded by the Jedi temple guard with mild interest. The design was extremely similar if not identical to its ancient counterpart, with no significant changes or improvements to its several-thousand year old forebears. The design of the mask the guard wore also had not changed in thousands of years. *Attachment to tradition breeds complacency.* Which, of course, he would be counting on today.

Plagueis gave the guard a bland, polite smile, and said, "I have an appointment."

"Oh, alright, but you can't just walk in here. Do you have an appointment slip?"

An appointment slip! What delightful bureaucracy! Now that was new. When Tenebrous had taken him here as a young Apprentice, they had been allowed to enter at request and had even been given a tour of the more public areas of the Temple by a bored guard, though the Archives had not been included in those areas. At some point he had planned to take Sidious here, but it seemed that his Apprentice had already contrived a way to enter the temple on his own, if Coruscanti news reports were any indicator. He was always good about taking initiative.

"Ah, I'm afraid not," Plagueis said. "But Jocasta Nu will be expecting me."

"Just a moment," the guard said. She conferred through a voice-only communicator on her forearm for several moments. At last she looked up and motioned for Plagueis to enter the Temple. "Jocasta Nu has arrived in the main atrium to escort you to the Jedi library. Do not leave your escort or deviate from their instructions for any reason. Understood?"

"Certainly. Me, disobey a Jedi? Perish the thought," Plagueis said, and walked past the guard.

Within moments of entering the expansive room, he saw the brown-haired Jocasta weaving her way towards him. "Ah, Magister Damask! I'll admit I wasn't sure you'd come. I thought you may simply have expressed interest in the library out of politeness."

"Not at all," Plagueis said. "I wouldn't miss this for all of Muunilinst." To be fair, he much preferred the snowdrifts and glaciers of Mygeeto where he had been raised than the pastoral environment of the muun home planet, but even so he knew he was an outlier in this regard, and it was a figure of speech, in any event.

"Follow me, then," Jocasta said, walking deeper into the temple. Plagueis examined his surroundings with more than a passing interest. He had been here before, but much had changed in the intervening decades.

The temple was expansive, almost a city unto itself, with its own walkways, indoor trees and shrubbery, fountains, public transit, and interior buildings. Enormous statues of Jedi lined the various walkways.

When they reached the library, Plagueis mentally prepared himself for the task ahead. He took a deep breath to center himself. Of course, his physical preparations had been made already. The Sith spider droids tucked into his sleeves were readying to begin their momentous task. This droid model had been designed by Tenebrous himself to be used as a more modern method of Sith warfare. Stealthy and swift, they were perfect for the task Plagueis had planned ahead of him.

Though what he had planned was... not exactly warfare, per se. Unless one wished to call it information warfare, but even that might be a stretch. No, today he planned to copy information which the Jedi had hoarded for generations, information which was not otherwise available to anyone else, for any price.

So, not warfare.

No, what Plagueis had planned was something quite different: piracy.

You wouldn't steal a speeder, he thought wryly, recalling the popular piece of propaganda distributed at the start of every holovid. Of course, that was certainly untrue when the 'you' in question was a Sith Lord, and particularly if the 'you' in question had been a Bith named Tenebrous with a weakness for collecting vintage speeder designs. *Piracy. It's an intergalactic crime.*

One that I will soon be committing.

As Jocasta led him down the rows of shelves, he felt the cloaked spiders climb out of his sleeves. Though he couldn't see their locations, he knew where they were headed--the data stacks. And the holocron vault.

"Is there a particular subject you'd like to see?" Jocasta asked.

"Medical research?" Plagueis inquired.

"Right this way," Jocasta said, turning left. Plagueis trailed behind her.

Plagueis was very proud of his retrofitting of the spiders, and he thought even Tenebrous might have been impressed at the additions. Though they had come at the cost of the poison injection capsule.

Additionally, he had Darth Traya's meticulous journals to thank for his design. Of course, she had used an extremely secure encryption scheme during her time as Head Librarian, but had lamented that her successor had opted to depend on Force locks operating on the principle of security by obscurity, making Traya's successive thefts from the library mere child's play. To her, this reason alone was sufficient justification to destroy the Jedi.

"Here we are," Jocasta said. She picked out a data card. "This is a text detailing some Jedi healing methods. Here, I'll show some of the holos from it." She placed it into a projector, and it began displaying text along with anatomical diagrams of various species.

"Intriguing," Plagueis said. "I'm especially interested in learning what techniques might be transferable to non-Force users. Damask Holdings is invested in a number of pharmaceutical companies."

"Many of our techniques are non-transferable, I'm afraid," Jocasta said. "They require a Force sensitive, you see. But we do have a division that determines what findings are to be publicly released."

"Ah, I didn't know that," he lied. Plagueis knew the Jedi believed that most of their healing techniques were useless to the wider world, and that, furthermore, disseminating certain knowledge about their practices and techniques would be dangerous. He also knew that they had a very slow, ineffective method for releasing knowledge about their medical practices to the wider public. Plagueis thought this situation was one that needed to be rectified.

Of course, Plagueis could not use the Force in the presence of Jedi without alerting them to his Force signature. So he couldn't use his own Force ability to open the Force locks. And the spiders he had brought with him were unable to use the Force at all.

But they wouldn't need to. After all, the Force locks themselves were composed of mere inert matter, and opening them via the Force was merely one method by which they might be operated on. Like a child's puzzle box, they simply required the right physical configuration to be solved. However, few scientists or engineers had ever considered this issue, and none had had the opportunity to attempt what Plagueis was about to. Traya herself had used her own Force abilities and intimate knowledge of the library and her former peers to commit the largest heist of the Jedi Archives in all of recorded history.

While Plagueis did not have any pretensions that he could top her sacking of the galaxy's most

prestigious library, he thought that Traya herself might have appreciated his approach. For while he had had to custom design his Force unlocker due to the lack of any off-the-shelf machinery that operated in a way conducive to unlocking them, the mechanism nevertheless operated on quite simple physical principles.

The locks operated like a data disk's memory, each microscopic bit representing a simple 1 or 0 in a binary array. The major difference was that the locks were made entirely of plasteel, a non-electromagnetic reinforced plastic. So the method whereby the bits were changed was by physically flipping them.

Each side was a different color, and the machine's electronics used an optical scanner to read the resulting color pattern.

The method he would use to move them? Microwaves. Specifically, microwave lasers. And as plasteel had a very high melting point, he needn't worry about the resulting heat being an issue.

"What else do you keep here?" Plagueis asked.

"Jedi history," Jocasta said. "We have a number of biographies, such as that of Bastilla Shan, Lord Hoth, and Vodo-Siosk Baas."

"Intriguing," Plagueis said.

"Yes," Jocasta agreed. "We also have a number of training manuals for Jedi younglings to master, the results of Jedi scientific research, and--"

"What kinds of scientific research?"

"Oh, all kinds," Jocasta said. "There is a science division for the more research-oriented Jedi."

Plagueis had to restrain himself from showing too much excitement. "I'd like to see a few, if you don't mind."

"Of course not," Jocasta said. "Allow me to show you where we keep the collection."

Jocasta showed him several tomes on physics, chemistry, and biology. He was looking forward to examining these volumes in much more detail soon. He knew that several of the spiders would be following him and copying anything he lingered on, so he made certain ask about anything that drew his interest, especially the texts on midichlorians.

"Is Qui-Qon in, by any chance?" Plagueis asked.

"Oh, I'm afraid not," Jocasta said. "He and Dooku have been sent on a mission to Kalee by the Council to aid the Yamrii. Those two are always in high demand."

Plagueis tilted his head. "Ah, yes, Kalee. That is in the same sector as Muunilinst, my home planet. Perhaps I will encounter them again soon after all." It couldn't hurt to muck around with their plans there a bit. Surreptitiously, of course. He still wanted to stay in Qui-Gon's good graces, after all, to find out everything he could about the Jedi's search for immortality. But really, what self-respecting Sith

would pass up such an opportunity?

"Perhaps," Jocasta agreed. She tilted her head. "Do you mind if I ask you a question? I don't wish to pry."

"Of course not," Plagueis said. "What did you wish to ask me?"

"What is your opinion on the Jedi Order?"

Plagueis considered his response carefully. Obviously 'I hope to someday stand upon the ashes of the burnt out husk of your Order' would not be an appropriate reply.

"Undecided," Plagueis said.

"Hmmm," Jocasta responded. "I understand that a lot of people are suspicious of the Jedi."

"You are a very secretive Order," Plagueis said. "Secrecy begets suspicion."

Jocasta smiled at that. "Fair enough. Especially for someone who is as much of an open book as you."

Plagueis blinked. "Open... book?"

"Yes, I did research your background extensively on my way back to Coruscant. Any entrant to the library must be personally vetted by a member of the staff before being allowed entry."

"Ah, of course," Plagueis said, smiling and attempting to tamp down his anxiety. Not that he didn't go to great lengths to keep his more... Sithly activities from being linked to his public persona, but he still didn't like the idea of this Jedi looking him up *specifically*.

"Yes. I was surprised to learn that your only living immediate family was your aunt. Muuns are usually very long-lived."

Plagueis gaped at her. *My father didn't have any... oh.* He had never looked up his mother's family, had he? It hadn't seemed important to him, after he'd learned of her death. She was the only one of her family he had ever known, had ever cared about.

"My father's family had a health issue," he finally managed. "Both him and my stepmother had a dominant gene for early failure of the hearts that they unfortunately managed to pass to all their children, but due to my mother, not to me," he said, telling the usual lie, though he could no longer choke out the rest of the blatant untruth about trying to save them, and he didn't attempt to do so. He tried not to linger on the regret he now felt, feelings that had long since scabbed over suddenly returned with nearly overwhelming intensity. He was responsible for those deaths. He and his father had not ended things on good terms, and his father had paid the ultimate price for that. "As for my mother--"

Jocasta gave him a sympathetic expression. "You don't have to explain."

"Ah, of course," Plagueis said. "I got carried away. I confess, I hadn't even known that I had any living relatives in my immediate family," Plagueis said.

"Your mother never mentioned her?"

Plagueis shrugged. "Not really."

"Hmmm, Fala Damask must not have very close with her sister," Jocasta said.

"It seems she was not," Plagueis said. *Though I rather suspect my mother's lack of mention of her sibling was motivated by concern for her well-being, and not resentment or apathy towards her.*

"I must confess, though, now I'm curious about her." Perhaps he could even...meet with her? Though he wasn't sure if that was a good idea. What would he even say? Still, perhaps he should think on it. Perhaps he should try to find out if his mother had had any unfinished business in that regard, though he had no idea how he would discover such a thing in the likely event that she had deliberately concealed information about her sister. He had her old journals, but he'd read them enough times to know that none of them had ever mentioned her sibling.

"I can give you a flimsiplast with the information I found on her. That was in a publicly available database, so we don't have any retention policies for it."

"Thank you," Plagueis said sincerely. One day in the future, when he was gloating over the ashes of the Jedi Order, he would ensure he had spared this librarian. It seemed only fair.

"It's no problem," Jocasta said. "Now, where were we? What would you like to see next?"

A thought occurred to Plagueis. What if he took on an extra Apprentice? Would it be possible to convince Jocasta Nu to become a Sith? Of course, he wasn't yet sure it was. But it was worth trying, was it not? He had sought to abolish the Rule of Two, after all. Though he worried that Sidious might be offended by such a thing. But would his Apprentice perhaps be more willing to consider the idea if Plagueis encouraged him to train Maul as *his* full Apprentice? He seemed to have taken a strong interest in his young charge. He would have to talk with Sidious about this matter.

"Magister Damask?" Jocasta asked.

"Oh, my apologies," Plagueis said. "I must confess to a curiosity about how you Jedi train younglings. That must be quite a challenge."

"Oh, certainly! I can show you a few things about that," Jocasta said.

Plagueis restrained from rubbing his hands together in anticipation as he followed the librarian down the row of shelves. The Sith spiders following him would copy some of the items in that category now, too.

It couldn't hurt to see what strategies the Jedi were using to train their young. Just for comparison, of course. Obviously a Sith would never train an Apprentice in the same way a Jedi would. But it might be useful for Sidious in anticipating problems that he might encounter raising a Force sensitive child to use their powers, which would not be something he could expect to find in a typical parenting book.

In the meantime, he thought it might be best to find out what he could about this librarian.

"How did you become interested in the Archives?" he asked. "Were there any other occupations you

considered?"

"Ah, I was a Jedi Master on the Council, but I resigned recently to take this post," she said.

"Really?" Plagueis said. "I'm given to understand that being on the Council is considered a prestigious position among the Jedi. I don't mean to pry, but was there something besides an enthusiasm for knowledge behind your decision?"

Jocasta seemed to consider her response. "I've always had strong opinions, but I lacked the charisma to sway others to my side. It seems I have a tendency to be overly blunt at times," she shrugged. "I felt too often at odds with the rest of the Council, to no good effect. So I left, to go somewhere I wouldn't have to constantly butt heads with them."

"It sounds so crassly political," Plagueis remarked, intrigued by her answer.

"Yes, though I'd think that was something you would have enthusiasm for. I'm given to understand that you throw quite exciting parties for those Senate friends of yours."

A very thorough background check indeed.

Plagueis laughed nervously. "Talking to politicians can be so very, very dull. Sometimes a good party can help make it tolerable."

Jocasta raised an eyebrow. "Must work very well. From what I can tell, they tend to vote in favor of your lobbying."

"Oh, my," Plagueis said. "How mortifying. How many of my sordid deeds are you aware of?" He felt like an insect stretched over the slide of a microscope. Part of him half-expected her to name him a Sith on the spot.

"A number of them," she said casually. "However, I must confess, your motives on the HoloNet construction project puzzle me. True, the selfish option would only have resulted in a slightly higher profit margin for yourself, but that never seemed to stop you before. Still whatever you have in mind for that, I'm glad to see it resulted in an actual advantage for someone else besides you or your cronies for once."

"Whatever motives I have, I suspect you may find them out sooner or later," Plagueis said. "I can see that little gets past you."

"On the contrary, many things get past me, but I do spend my days sifting through thousands of years of information," she said. "One starts to learn where to look for villainy that way."

And here I thought Qui-Gon was the distrusting one, Plagueis thought. "Why did you invite me here if you believe I am up to no good?"

"Because that is not what I believe," Jocasta said. "I am... undecided as to what you are currently up to. But I intend to find that out."

Plagueis laughed. "Fair enough. I confess I'm a bit undecided on that myself." Jocasta Nu might very

well make a good Sith. But he would have to have patience, to see what direction she was moving in. Even if she never chose to be a Sith, he sensed her path might someday diverge from that of the Order. But he would have to wait to learn what the future held.

At the end of the tour, Plagueis thanked Jocasta Nu before heading back to Kalani Spires, where he tallied the items that the spiders had copied. In all, they had managed a full 5% of the library. A modest accomplishment, yes, but the volume of information dwarfed the current size of the Sith library. Though he didn't wish to merely fill out the personal library of the Sith, but also to release the information to those who might find a use for it.

Except he would have to do that in a way that wouldn't attract undue suspicion to him. He would have to think that over a bit more. He had developed some half-formed plans for that on the trip from Serenno to Coruscant, but nothing well-defined. Still, he was confident he could refine those plans further. In any event, he was looking forward to giving Sidious the books on training younglings after he'd had a chance to talk things over with him about training Maul.

Maybe that would also distract him from asking about Plagueis's progress on reversing the effects of the emotional additive.

Chapter End Notes

Just a note that I know the line about piracy being an intergalactic crime should technically be 'intragalactic', but it seems like the kind of mistake that someone writing those lines for a general audience might inadvertently or purposely make because it 'sounds better'. So I decided to keep it as is. Not entirely related, but this also reminds me of the fact that the title of Star Wars in Spanish is 'La Guerra de las Galaxias' or 'War of the Galaxies' even though the story is only about one galaxy far, far away. I'm convinced they did it for the alliteration, and as someone who loves alliteration, all I can say is--that's so, so valid. Though as someone who may notice even very small inaccuracies, it does cause me some amount of grief. Though I'd say not worse than the feeling I get whenever they say they're moving to lightspeed when they jump into hyperspace augh!

Additionally, I know that the relative Zannah framed was not her brother, but her cousin. But I headcanon that the Nightsisters often refer to close cousins as 'brother' or 'sister' (as well as overloading those terms in other ways).

Also, if anyone is reading this who has played KOTOR II, you may have recognized the reference to Darth Traya. between this chapter and the last, I finished playing both KOTOR and KOTOR II and Darth Traya became one of my absolute favorite characters of the series, so I thought I'd put in a reference to her here.

Chapter 19: Peace is a Lie

Chapter Summary

So, I finally finished this chapter. It took me a couple years, but I've finally updated!

I'd like to thank my two beta readers for this chapter, [SLWalker](#) and [PermianExtinction](#). This is the first time I've had two beta readers for the same chapter of a work. I feel very fortunate to have gotten such immensely helpful feedback from both of these incredibly talented writers.

This chapter looks in on what's happening with Sidious and Plagueis, as well as introducing a new POV character.

The next day, Mace returned to Palpatine's apartment alone, explaining that T'ra Saa was scouting out the royal palace in Theed to plan out their approach. Talzin and Palpatine were there to greet him and continue their previous conversation.

"--and so it seems clear that Veruna and Bon Tapalo are closely in league with Magister Damask, whose plans for exploiting Naboo's plasma fields have been heavily opposed by Vidar," Palpatine explained.

"I see." Mace's entire attention had been on Palpatine during his explanation, to the point that Palpatine had had to hide his own nervousness at the intense scrutiny. His encounters with Mace and T'ra Saa were his first time in close contact with any Jedi, and he had always expected that this encounter, when it happened, would be with *normal* Jedi. With *average* Jedi. Not with a Jedi that openly manipulated the Dark Side or sensed Shatterpoints. Palpatine had yet to get over that. Still, Mace hadn't given any indication that he thought anything was amiss with either Palpatine or Talzin.

"Yes." Talzin scowled in an attractively fearsome way. "All three of them sound like true villains. They must be brought to justice!" She brought an enormous clawed fist down for emphasis, shaking the entire table with her fierce declaration. Palpatine smiled at the gesture. She was really getting into her role.

Though the words he had just relayed caused him considerable unease. Palpatine felt no small amount of discomfort over having detailed his Master's involvement in the scheme so closely to a Jedi. It just felt wrong. It was one thing to simply deny association with Plagueis when convenient. That was expected, encouraged even. Murdering him? A venerable Sith tradition. But selling him out to the Jedi? It made Palpatine feel like a traitor to the entire Sith Order. And unlike Zannah, he wasn't going to be making up for the betrayal with some brilliant about-face.

Still, this was necessary, if he was to convince the Jedi of his intentions, and if he wanted this plan of his to work. He would just need to stifle his moral qualms.

"Thank you for giving me a more complete background on this." Mace was all efficient professionalism. "Master T'ra Saa and I agree with your assessment of the situation. Usually we would use more transparent methods in our investigations, but as using such methods here could further endanger your and Vidar's life, we understand the need for subterfuge in this case. These are very serious allegations indeed, though, so we will need to verify for ourselves the truth of them. It could be that some other party is using this obvious motive as a cover for their own."

"Of course." Palpatine nodded, keeping his expression carefully neutral. "I would expect no less from

ones such as yourselves. What will happen if the allegations prove true?"

"We will make the necessary arrests." Mace projected a serious confidence that instilled a sense of his utter certainty in this statement. It was not the foolhardy assurance of youth, but the air of one used to taking on responsibilities far beyond those typically expected at such an age. "And both Bon Tapalo and Veruna will be tried by the courts for conspiracy to assassinate public officials. Magister Damask will likely need to be tried separately, but rest assured that he will be brought to trial as well."

"I see," Palpatine said. "Then I hope justice prevails." He was curious how Plagueis would handle a direct inquiry by the Jedi, though despite how despicable his actions had made him feel, he truly doubted this scenario posed any threat to his Master. Plagueis might not be a politician, but he was well-versed in navigating through political encumbrances, and he had too many politicians in his pocket for anyone to be able to threaten him with something like this.

"As do I." Mace's response was earnest, but made no promises. So he had some idea of how the Republic courts worked in practice and not just theory, then, Palpatine decided.

"I'm sure it will," Talzin said.

"Though I must also ask, what will become of Naboo's government, if the King and his right hand man are deposed?"

"I expect another king will be chosen through the line of succession--"

Palpatine moulded his face into an expression of concern. "Ah, excuse my interruption, Master Jedi, but it's not as simple as that," he said. "You see, the Naboo elect their monarch, and the backup option must also be elected. If Bon Tapalo and Veruna are both rightfully prosecuted, as I truly hope they will be, then there will be no one to occupy the throne, as Naboo has no other qualifying elected officials."

He could see both Talzin and Mace giving him horrified looks at this pronouncement.

In the privacy of his own mind, Palpatine allowed himself a malicious cackle. He was truly curious how the Jedi would try to resolve this issue, if they tried to resolve it at all. It didn't matter that it was his own planet's broken political system at fault here. No matter what option they chose, he was confident it would cast the Jedi in a deeply unfavorable light to many Naboo.

Judging by the series of expressions that were occurring on Mace's face, Palpatine wondered if his thoughts were not moving along similar lines.

"I see," Mace said. "I will confer with T'ra Saa on this matter, as they have much greater experience on these issues than I."

"I'm certain their wisdom will result in a satisfactory resolution to the issue, then. I have the utmost confidence in your Order." *To utterly fail in this task*, Palpatine thought with glee.

After which, he would go in and quietly clean up the mess. Two birds, one stone--the Jedi made to look incompetent to the Naboo, and Bon Tapalo and Veruna deposed and unable to ever pose a threat to Vidar again.

Mace went through the appropriate conversational niceties before taking his leave of them. As soon as Talzin shut the door behind him, Palpatine saw her black and white markings cloud back over her face, like watercolors blotting through paper. He also dissolved his own mask of normalcy, allowing his eyes to take on their true color. Talzin retrieved Maul from his crib, where he'd been napping. Maul gazed wide-eyed around the room, turning his head in all directions as if surveying the area. Then Palpatine and Talzin settled down next to each other on the carpet and Talzin placed Maul down to crawl around the living room under their watchful gazes.

"That was incredibly conniving of you," she said.

"Thank you." He gave her an amiable smile. "You played your part admirably as well."

"I may as well grow used to maintaining a public facade. It was good practice. Also your planet has the *worst* political system I have ever heard of," Talzin said emphatically.

"Yes, it's so beautiful," Palpatine sighed happily. "It's times like these that I truly love being a Naboo."

"What is even supposed to happen in a situation like that?" Talzin asked. "Surely the issue has come up before?"

"Yes, it certainly has." Palpatine greatly relished recalling that history. "Sometimes one of the noble families used the power vacuum to seize the throne and establish an autocratic dynasty. At other times, the planet was plunged into civil war, sometimes for several generations. During one such period an anarchist commune briefly seized control of the government before they were messily murdered and deposed by the former monarch's appointed council members. Interesting times, those."

"Did they never just... hold an election to choose a new monarch?"

"Oh, but what fun would that be?" Palpatine asked.

"I presume you don't plan to leave the results of *this* power vacuum up to chance." Talzin frowned over at him.

"No, indeed not," Palpatine said. "As entertaining as that might be. I'll find someone to stick on the throne." *Just not me.* Palpatine had no intention of being stuck in the dead-end job of being his homeworld's monarch, elected or otherwise, particularly since current and former planetary monarchs were both barred from ever being elected to the Republic's highest position of power.

"You might have competition." Talzin lidded her eyes and smiled fiendishly. "Several of the Nightsisters I've brought here have political aspirations. And of course I wouldn't say no to having some political influence on this planet myself, though I have no intention of being tied down as an official leader."

"Are you challenging me?" Palpatine said, intrigued.

"What are you going to do about it if I am, Sith Lord?" She leaned closer to him.

Palpatine really needed to do something about his fascination with this... charade. But he knew he had

real feelings for Talzin. And as much as he wanted to be angry at her for what she'd done to him, and the Sith, he really wasn't. Still, he couldn't allow himself to become attached to her, for all that he found himself enjoying her company more and more.

"I would say revenge, but that would be as much a lie as peace is," Palpatine replied. "I don't wish to take vengeance against you at all. It's really very un-Sithly of me."

"Maybe you don't have to be a Sith all the time," Talzin said.

But what was he, besides a Sith? The insignificant nobility of a backward, backwater world? A common murderer, a serial killer? A man playing house?

"I have to disagree," he said. "In any event, I certainly *do* need to be a Sith when it comes to the Jedi, and I would very much appreciate your help with that. I do believe that was the purpose of our alliance." He glanced over at Maul, who had crawled over to the couch and was examining it. "A purpose of our alliance," he corrected.

"Certainly, I agree," Talzin smiled indulgently over at Maul rolling across the carpet at the base of the couch before looking back to him, her expression turning serious. "But what I know of your plans in that regard do strike me as deeply questionable."

"And your plans do not strike me as adequately addressing the threat the Jedi pose," Palpatine said. "Even assuming we could negotiate with the Jedi, a truce or peace treaty is at best a stopgap measure that does little to mitigate the actual threat. And such things are only arranged between equals in power, but we would be seen as nothing to the Jedi."

Talzin was silent, seeming to consider this.

He glanced again over to Maul and followed his exploits as the small zabrak hybrid successfully scaled the couch and crawled onto the coffee table. He was now examining the marble statuette of Shiraya in the center of it with his teeth. Apparently deciding that the decor wasn't to his taste, he withdrew his mouth with a look of disgust and toppled the aspirant goddess with a single tiny hand.

Palpatine felt a swell of pride for Maul at this. *Yes, that's right! Show righteous authority your wrath!*

Palpatine turned his attention back to Talzin.

"You have a point." Her expression was serious. "Still, we simply cannot wipe them all out. Even if I was so inclined, the only thing more dangerous than the Jedi as they are now would be Jedi desperate to save themselves from eradication."

"You are right," He said. "And I have to think of Maul's safety now. So I can no longer execute the Revenge of the Sith in that way."

"The what?"

"The Revenge of the Sith. The culmination of our Order's plans to topple the Jedi Order and replace their Republic with a Galactic Sith Empire," Palpatine explained.

"So how do you plan to accomplish it now?" Talzin's focused her full attention on him then.

"That is a good question." Palpatine considered his response. "I think... there must be a way to hollow out their Order without necessarily killing the Jedi themselves."

"That sounds... less hazardous, at least. And the Republic? You're going to destroy that too?" Talzin gave him a dubious look.

"Oh, yes, definitely." Palpatine was still certain of his destiny as the Sith'ari.

"And how do you plan to do that?"

"That's easy. I'm going to be elected Supreme Chancellor and then I will slowly consolidate power to myself until I can dissolve the entire government and replace it with my own."

Talzin sighed. "And you were planning to do all this with just you and your Sith Master?"

"Until I killed him, yes." He tried to quell the irrational guilt that thought brought. "At some point he would have taught me everything I need to know from him. Sadly that can't happen now."

Talzin seemed to consider his words. "Thank you for sharing this with me. I must admit I am deeply skeptical of this plan. Still, I will do what I can to help you with defeating the Jedi. You're on your own with the 'Sith Empire' part, though."

"Fair enough," Palpatine said. He had to admit, he looked forward to working with Talzin on toppling the Jedi Order. Still, never satisfied with a mere half-victory, he asked, "What specific issues do you have with a Sith Empire, though?"

"Let's see: They begin with 'Sith', and end with 'Empire'."

"Ah, that presents a challenge, then." He met her smilingly implacable gaze. *An exciting challenge.* If he could convince Talzin to help him destroy the Republic as well...

He simply needed to work harder to sell the idea.

After his visit to the Jedi Archives, Hego had promptly returned to his ship and left Coruscant. En-route to Kalee, he informed Larsh of his plans, which had surprised his long-time friend and associate.

"Are you sure," Larsh asked. "I know you're a daredevil, Hego, but this seems dangerous even for you. Holding in-person negotiations with the yam'rii? In the middle of a warzone?"

"I assure you, Larsh, it will be more than worth the trouble," Hego said. "In any event, I trust the Jedi will have everything under control."

Larsh gave him a sardonic smile. "Hopefully not enough to go prying into *your* business."

"Actually, I intend to pry into theirs," Hego said, returning the smile.

"You have nerves of steel, Hego. Even your father hesitated to involve himself with Jedi."

"As you've said many times." Hego felt a slight catch in his hearts at the mention of his father, which he carefully tucked away for future examination.

"I must confess to being a bit surprised about your resolution to the Holonet construction dispute." Larsh's expression was mild, his eyes only a touch wider than usual, but Plagueis could tell he was more than a little concerned. "I seem to recall you saying that you would let the project fall through before you'd agree to a single demand."

"Yes, that was my original plan," Hego said. "But I reconsidered the long-term implications."

"I'm sure you know what you're doing." Larsh seemed resigned. "I suppose I'll leave you to your warzone travel preparations. Do be careful, Hego."

"I will. See you at the Board Meeting." Hego deactivated the comm. He was sure that Larsh harbored suspicions about his recent erratic behavior, but was probably trying to convince himself he was overreacting. Hego planned to deflect those suspicions for as long as possible, and by any means necessary. Still, he thought that at some point even he would reach the limits of his ability with diverting such notice. He wasn't looking forward to it.

But, in the meantime, he absolutely planned to learn more about Qui-Gon Jinn, the Jedi who was obsessed with immortality.

Plagueis had of course read everything he could find on Sith achieving immortality. There wasn't much, and most of it was highly disappointing. He expected the Jedi version to be even less appealing to him. Still, the fact remained that the information could yet be of some use to him. Also, he just Had to Know.

Plagueis could recite from memory every Sith who had discovered a path to immortality. He could also recite every horrific cost they'd endured to achieve that end. For some, like Darth Sion, he had wondered if immortality had been more curse than gift. What was the point of ultimate power, Plagueis had wondered, if you had no capacity to enjoy it?

Tenebrous had of course chided him for such questions. As Sith they were supposed to have grander interests than their own petty desires. And Plagueis was all for grander interests, but he couldn't see how such things could be accomplished by beings completely consumed by their own suffering and pain. He had also decided that if he must experience pain to accomplish his goals, there had better be some reward for him at the end of it.

And the reward he sought was immortality. An immortality that offered pleasures both simple and elaborate, not some mere clinging to existence through sheer fury. But in the end, every gambit for immortality that Plagueis was aware of had failed. Some, like that of Darth Zash, had floundered embarrassingly. Others had never even gotten that far. Even Vitiate, a being whose lifespan had measured well over a millenia, had eventually died. Still, Plagueis had studied Vitiate's methods for a time as a young Sith, obsessed with somehow imitating them, until one day when Tenebrous had taken notice of his interest.

"Do you think it was him, really, all that time?" His Master had stood peering over his shoulder at the dusty tome, his eyes glowing like yellow searchlights in the dim room.

"Of course it was him." Plagueis had looked up at him, irritated. "Who else could it be?"

"An echo," Tenebrous had said pensively. "A mere simulacrum of consciousness. Every memory, every ability preserved, but the core of the original nothing but a dead husk."

This pronouncement had chilled Plagueis. "But he seemed so... alive."

Tenebrous had looked amused. "Yes, he did, didn't he? But maybe the sorcery that consumed an entire world of souls to create its imprint took his as well as its final price."

After that, Plagueis had decided he would need to forge a new path to immortality. There would be no separation of his body from his mind, as there had been with Vitiate. And there would be no mere occupation of his distressed corpse, as there had been with Sion. He would find a way to keep his body in good health among the living in perpetuity. But in order to accomplish that, he would need to cultivate the ability to create and sustain life, an ability no other Sith had ever been known to have, much less to master. However, Plagueis had made great strides in that direction already. He'd just encountered a few...complications.

To that end, just as he had studied the Sith who (hadn't) lived forever, he would study the Jedi who sought to transcend the limits of mortality as well. Plagueis knew this preoccupation of his was excessive, but that didn't change how he felt. Even the Font, whatever else it had done to him, had not changed this. The fact remained that he was terrified of death.

And he was determined to do something about it.

Plagueis engaged in a frenzy of activity during the hyperspace trip. He commed San, 11-4D, Palpatine, his yam'rii associates, and the board members of Damask Holdings.

And as he sipped a glass of Serrenian wine, he reviewed his research on immortality. His recent acquisitions from the Jedi Archives had contained some illuminating entries in that regard. But he wanted to know what paths Qui-Gon's research had followed, if he had seen something that Plagueis had not. He considered at great length how he planned to approach his questioning of the Jedi.

He was also about to make the yam'rii occupation of Kalee a lot more uncomfortable. This was going to be a real pain to explain during the Board Meeting.

But it was also going to be immensely entertaining for him to watch.

Tradeoffs, he decided philosophically.

Dooku fled from the assault, deflecting the hail of slugthrower fire with a gesture as he levitated the unconscious Qui-Gon underneath the jungle canopy. Behind him, he heard as much as felt a deafening, though distant, explosion.

Distant, he knew, because if it had been nearby, he would already be dead. The yam'rii soldiers were retreating in a panic as the soldiers of the kaleesh warlord advanced through the humid jungle. The Force was howling with the deaths of both yam'rii and kaleesh alike, though at the moment, more yam'rii than kaleesh. And this was why Qui-Gon was currently unconscious.

Dooku sighed.

He had warned his former Padawan that nothing could prepare a Jedi for the experience of all-out war. But Qui-Gon had believed his resolve and the background he had gained from earlier missions would be sufficient to see him through.

The empathic shock had taken Qui-Gon by surprise when the kaleesh warlord Drennil lir Kummar had suddenly attacked the yam'rii outpost. Dooku and the remaining yam'rii soldiers reached the hidden base and he settled the unconscious Qui-Gon onto the cot in the small room. He bent down and placed a hand over Qui-Gon's forehead, quieting his own mind and slamming his mental shields shut to block out the screaming world around them.

A blue light glowed under Dooku's hand, and Qui-Gon's eyes fluttered. He was silent for several moments as he regained awareness. "I'm sorry, Master." he seemed genuinely remorseful.

"I'm sure you are. You shouldn't have come." The words came off harsher than Dooku intended.

"I'll recover. I can do this--"

"You could have died," Dooku said. "You still might."

Qui-Gon looked up at him. "How do you bear it?"

"Detachment, Qui-Gon." Dooku was encouraged by the lucidity of Qui-Gon's words. He hoped this was a sign of full recovery. "To connect yourself too closely to a dying creature is to risk yourself being pulled towards death in that creature's wake. To do that with a sea of death is exponentially worse. You have been taught to sense the world around you, but in a situation like this you must be able to shut it out. As I tried to warn you earlier."

"But is not our ability to sense others through the Living Force our greatest power?"

"Perhaps." Dooku felt calmer now, and made more of an effort to inject some gentleness into his tone. "But it can also be our greatest weakness. You must learn how to sense what you can bear, but no more."

"Master Jedi!" A voice trilled from behind Dooku.

"Yes, Commander Hiletek?" Dooku turned to face him.

"You must tell the Order we require more reinforcements!" Hiletek clicked, waving his pincher-like arms for emphasis.

"We are not here to fight your war, Commander," Dooku said crisply. "We are here to help you end it."

Dooku's comm began to beep. He looked at the name on the display. "Leave us, now. I need to take this

call," he lied.

"All right." Hilitek said. "But tell the Order we need more Jedi!" The insectoid biped filed out of the room.

Dooku answered the comm. The corners of his mouth quirked upwards. "Jocasta! To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Just checking in on you, dear Count," she replied affectionately.

"I see," Dooku said. "How are you finding your new role in the Archives?"

"Most agreeable." She looked happier than she had been in a while.

"I know you will excel there. I still think you belong on the Council, though." Dooku could certainly think of a few choice words he'd like to share with certain of its members on the matter.

Jocasta gave him a wry look. "I know. But the fact of the matter is I can get more done where I'm at now."

"Only because some of our peers fail to grasp your brilliance," Dooku said.

"Regardless of the reason, I *am* happier here," she replied, though her cheeks flushed at his pronouncement.

"Then I am glad for that, at least."

Jocasta took a few moments to compose her expression back to her typical calm professionalism. "And how are your negotiations going?"

Dooku deflated. "Not well. Neither the yam'rii nor the kaleesh seem to be aware there are any."

"Oh." Jocasta gave him an encouraging smile. "I'm certain you will clear that matter up for them, though."

"That is exactly what I will do," Dooku said. *It's simply going to be a lot more trouble than it ought to be.*

"Stay safe." She seemed concerned now. "You and Qui-Gon both."

"I will try," Qui-Gon added from behind Dooku.

Jocasta tsked. "Is he causing you trouble?"

Dooku sighed. "Qui-Gon is an expert negotiator. He is exactly who I need to help me with this difficult situation."

"Glad to hear it." Jocasta smiled knowingly.

"I understand the Holonet construction project is back on track," Dooku said. "I wish I had been able to attend the proceedings. You must have been a force of nature."

"Hardly!" Jocasta said. "It was Magister Damask who set everything back on course."

"The Magister?" Dooku asked, bewildered. Damask had looked to be in a dreadful state when he'd arrived at the negotiations, smelling like he'd raided a Corellian brandy freighter and looking like he hadn't slept in the last decade. "Are you telling me he actually spoke during the delegations?"

"More than that," Jocasta said. "He resolved the whole thing!"

Dooku blinked. "Really?" He had only briefly encountered Magister Damask during the deliberations. Dooku had sensed such a deep despair from the man that he had inquired as to his personal wellbeing. The muun had barely acknowledged his existence before muttering 'never better' and sweeping sullenly away in his green finery.

"Absolutely." She seemed entirely serious. "You didn't tell him about that, Qui-Gon?"

"To be honest, I tuned out most of the proceedings the moment the Magister started speaking." Qui-Gon looked slightly embarrassed. "By the time I realized what was happening, I'd already missed the bulk of it. So I felt it was better that you recount the event correctly the first time than have to correct my version of it."

"I suppose." Jocasta seemed about to continue her response when her expression suddenly shifted to one of concern. "Which reminds me, the Magister asked about you, Qui-Gon, and that gave me the distinct suspicion that he was planning to travel to Kalee."

Qui-Gon groaned. "Truly? That man is up to something, I'm sure of it."

"I certainly hope he will not be so reckless," Dooku said. "It would be incredibly dangerous for anyone to be travelling *here* at this time."

Jocasta's mouth formed a thin line. "I'm sorry to dash your hopes, then. I looked into that suspicion. A brief entry in today's Coruscant Times states that Magister Damask plans to personally visit unnamed yam'rii associates on Kalee to work out...some sort of business deal, I'll not bore you with the details. Says that he expects the Jedi will keep order during the negotiations."

Dooku, sighing deeply, touched a hand to his forehead. "Then on top of everything else, a pathetic lifeform to look after? I can't wait."

Chapter 20: The Discreet Charms of Domesticity

Chapter Notes

And now, for another chapter! This one was very complicated for me to write, but I enjoyed writing it a lot, so I hope others will enjoy reading it!

PermianExtinction has agreed to continue beta-reading this work along with my other beta-reader SLWalker, so I'm now getting two different outside perspectives on the story! I hope I can make good use of all the feedback I get from them both!

I'd like to thank those who commented on the last chapter as well! I always enjoy getting reader perspectives on the story. I also pay a lot of attention to what readers are interested in and what they may speculate about. While I have my own thoughts on what I want to do with my stories, I'm not averse to exploring or emphasizing aspects of the story that commenters enjoy as long as that's compatible with my own goals for the narrative. Every reader has their own unique perspective, and I love seeing how different readers react to my works.

I also often check the profiles of users who like my works. I don't worry too much about the total likes my works get, but it can be interesting statistical information to ponder.

Lastly, if you're a lurker, I hope you're enjoying the story, too! I love interacting with my readers, but I know not everyone has something to say, and social interaction can be a bit too much sometimes.

Anyway, on to the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [Chapter 20: The Discreet Charms of Domesticity notes](#)

It had all spiralled out of control. Palpatine hadn't intended this purely informational meeting on his planned buyback of the Convergence estate to become a full-fledged negotiation. What was there to negotiate, after all? While *he* might want to burn the whole place to the ground, that would hardly be an issue for anyone else. What more was there to discuss? But it seemed that his new roommates were not content to leave perfectly well-enough alone.

The three Nightsisters stood across from Palpatine, the holo of the Convergence estate casting a blue glow on them in the dim room as they engaged in verbal battle with him.

"I really think that some modification of the terms is only reasonable," Atherion said. It seemed she could both lipread and speak, which hardly seemed fair. He still didn't know any of the Nightsister sign language she used with the others.

He had hoped to avoid direct conversation with this particular Nightsister, but she was apparently intent on needling him. In a last-ditch attempt, he looked over at Dremra, who stood next to her. "Could you tell your spouse that I am not doing this so I can host a Nightsister coven? This is for *Maul*."

Dremra rolled her eyes. Dremra was hardly his favorite person by any stretch of the imagination, but at least the exchange of unactionable threats between them was simple and uncomplicated.

"I think I'd prefer to discuss this with you directly at the moment." Atherion smiled.

Atherion, on the other hand, affected the appearance of being innocuous, while in truth she waged a full-fledged war to test the limits of the terms of the agreement.

"And I'd prefer not to," Palpatine said. If there was anything that should be under discussion, it was the fact that Atherion would blast Mandalorian Death Metal during Talzin and Maul's trips to the park. Apparently she had discovered this 'music' on the Holonet during his Coruscant trip and decided she

'liked the vibrations'. She consistently denied any use of said ear-shattering vibrations as an offensive weapon.

The dark-haired near-human smiled insincerely and put a hand to her chest. "It warms my hearts to know how much you care for little Maul, but surely you wouldn't deprive him of the company of his dear aunts?"

Palpatine narrowed his eyes at her. "You needn't worry for yourselves. My agreement with Talzin remains unchanged. I merely wish to make clear that I do not want this to be taken as a general invitation to bring all your friends."

"But surely there would be adequate space for the *few* of our friends who are already here?" Talzin had decided to try out her new 'entirely harmless' facade on him now, apparently. He had to admit, the gambit was working, even if he knew it was a complete and total lie.

Palpatine smiled at her despite himself. "I suppose." He would regret letting her win this, he was sure, but perhaps his concession here would incline her to consider a few of his own requests.

"Delightful!" Atherion's eyes glittered with friendly malice. "Not to worry, Sith Lord. Surely with all that space, you'll hardly even notice we're there."

"I doubt that." Palpatine glared daggers at her.

"I do have one concern," Talzin said.

"Oh?" Palpatine turned back to face her.

Talzin was frowning, her clawed fingers laced together. "I understand you have unpleasant memories of this place. I agree with finding a larger residence, but perhaps it would be better to choose somewhere else?"

Palpatine crossed his arms. "I am Sith. *Unpleasant memories* are hardly the worst of what I've experienced. I--"

Palpatine's comm chirped. He fished it out of his pocket and stared at the name. "It's Plagueis," he said, shooing them all away. Talzin nodded, and she and the other two Nightsisters scrambled out of the comm's line of sight.

Palpatine placed the comm on the floor in front of him and activated it. The holo of Plagueis appeared life-size several feet from him, superimposed on the Nightsisters standing directly behind it. "Master." He knelt. "What do you wish of me?"

Plagueis gave him a puzzled look. His holo was dressed in his typical business garb of his Magister role rather than his Sith robes. "Ah, I didn't call to ask for anything, Apprentice. But I wished to discuss some things with you."

Palpatine stood, his heart filling with dread. "Oh?" Plagueis had commed him a few days ago, too, to give him access to books and other materials he'd somehow copied from the Jedi Archives. He'd

drawn Palpatine's attention to the guides on training young Force sensitives in particular. Because apparently he had independently come to the conclusion that Maul should be trained as a full Sith.

"As you know, it is my will to end the Rule of Two," Plagueis said.

"Yes, Master. I agree, it is a wise decision. I will train Maul to the best of my ability."

"Then I know he will exceed all expectations," Plagueis said. "However, for now, he is very young, and it will be some years before he will be able to make use of his abilities."

"Yes, that is true," Palpatine said.

"And I would like to expand my ambitions in this regard," Plagueis continued. "I've been thinking about this a great deal, and I've concluded we will accomplish more if we do not impose limits on the number of Sith. I think we should actively try to increase our numbers. And to that end, I think a Sith should be allowed to have as many Apprentices as they judge themselves able to train."

"Oh," Sidious said. "You wish me to take an additional Apprentice?"

"Or more! Though not if it will place too great a strain on you."

"I could probably manage at least two or three," Sidious said thoughtfully.

"I was also considering finding some additional Apprentices myself," Plagueis said. "Not that I don't have the utmost confidence in your abilities!" he hastened to add. "But neither of us can be in more than one place at a time, and I was also thinking that--we may wish to recruit some Jedi into our Order. As spies for our cause."

Palpatine grinned. "Yes, I think that would be most useful."

Plagueis rubbed his hands together. "Then we are agreed!"

"Yes, Master."

Plagueis seemed to notice the holo still switched on next to Palpatine then. "What is that all about?"

"This? Do you remember the old Convergence estate? I am planning on repurchasing it to give Maul better training grounds."

"Oh," Plagueis said, looking thoughtful. "I thought you said you hated that place."

"Yes, but--"

Plagueis frowned in disapproval. "This isn't some kind of attempt at self-inflicted punishment, is it?"

"No, of course not! I simply--"

"Do you want to be able to concentrate on training Maul, or do you want to drown in your own anguish and guilt? I'll remind you that the latter is very definitely not in alignment with your duties as a Sith."

Palpatine looked away briefly. "I'll find somewhere else."

"Good. I know you won't let this...situation get the better of you, Apprentice." A smile crept back at the edges of Plagueis' lips. Palpatine noticed that Talzin was smiling too. Meanwhile Dremra and Atherion were conducting an animated sign-language conversation.

"Of course. Thank you, Master." He was going to miss Plagueis. No. No, he had to stop thinking like this. He had to remind himself why this was necessary.

"How is your research going, Master? On the Font?"

Plagueis frowned, his eyes widening and shifting briefly away. "Oh. That. Well. I have been a bit busy of late, so I have not been able to focus my full energies on it. But not to worry! I have every confidence that I will solve this mystery. Mark my words--the Nightsisters will rue the day they challenged the Sith. Furthermore, all their secrets will soon belong to us!"

Dremra made a rude hand gesture at the holographic muun's back.

Plagueis briefly turned his head away then, as if he had sensed the hidden onlookers behind him. "I would love to explain further, but I have just received clearance to land on Kalee, and I can't keep my hosts waiting."

"Kalee? I'm not familiar with it," Palpatine said.

"A planet in the same sector as Muunilinst. Nominally I'm here negotiating a business deal, but in truth I am here to advance the Grand Plan of the Sith. I will talk with you more later, Apprentice. Good day."

"Later then, Master." Palpatine nodded. The holo of Plagueis flickered and was gone.

"I could take him." Dremra looked distinctly unimpressed.

"You sorely underestimate my Master," Palpatine insisted. He was infuriated with himself, though, because he didn't feel half the confidence the zabrak woman did when it came to killing Plagueis. Worse, he didn't *want* to kill Plagueis. But he had to. He couldn't allow him to find a way to reverse the Font.

Turning back to the holo of Convergence, he dismissed it. "Anyway. Househunting later. Convergence is out. But I *will* find a residence suitable for the heir to House Palpatine."

It was a sunny morning in Theed as Sidious parked his speeder in front of the caf shop. He squinted disapprovingly around at the lush foliage, fat and contented wildlife chirping or chattering, and vivid blue sky with fluffy clouds scudding across it. It was another picturesque day in the capitol of the kind that tourists swooned over. *Disgusting*, he thought.

He entered the shop, his mood improving on taking in the omnipresent scent of caf and feel of rising rage that pervaded the establishment.

Sidious walked up to the counter. "A large caf with extra sugar and double cream. With a croissant." He smiled amiably.

"That will be 5 credits," the server said. As usual his order had been anticipated and placed on the counter, the coffee mug and croissant placed on top of a small silver tray. Sidious paid, grabbed the tray, and then dropped a ten credit chip into the tip jar.

The server, an orange gungan, twisted her eyestalks to look at the anomalous tip, then looked up at Sidious. "Have a nice day, sir," she said, her fake smile and cheerful lilt giving no hint of her deep antipathy of him. Her face said *how delightful to see you* but her feelings said *I hope you die*. Palpatine marvelled at the complete disconnect between the two, accomplished as adeptly as any politician.

He smiled back, and walked with the tray to sit in his usual seat alone by the window. Most gungans disliked Palpatine, but this was no surprise to him, as gungans and Naboo rarely got along in general. But the server in this shop did not hate him in that vaguely generalized way. Oh, no, her hatred was *personal*. Which was what made it special, of course. Though Palpatine knew there were other gungans who hated him just as much as this one, he certainly did not encounter them regularly.

He had no idea why that particular server hated him so completely, but such a degree of antipathy was not something he could otherwise usually expect to encounter, and so he'd made a habit of coming to this particular shop before work ever since he'd accidentally discovered her, even though the place was slightly out of his way.

Finding strong emotions to feed off of could be such a challenge. So many people had lackluster emotional responses. Especially in the mornings, but really, all the time. They were calm, content, tired, sad, resigned, apathetic, or depressed. Boring! Of course, that was the nature of things, that emotions tended towards equilibrium or entropy. Sometimes you just had to stab a being with a lightsaber to get an actual emotional response out of them! But not here! Oh no! Here there was pure, undistilled rage.

Of course, beings could be manipulated to feel anger or fear for each other, but it was generally at odds with Palpatine's plans for them to feel that way about *him*, and either way he had to be careful about using such things for short-sighted personal reasons. While such a level of resentment directed at him might in some cases indicate a threat to be either pacified or destroyed, Palpatine thought himself quite safe from the retribution of a lone caf server. It was the feelings of anger and aggression this atmosphere was marinated in that really helped to wake him up in the morning, much more than the substandard caf.

As he sipped the sour caf and gazed out at the grandiose Theed architecture, he considered his Jedi problem. Of course, in the grand scheme of things, two Jedi were insignificant. Still, Mace's ability to see shatterpoints was... concerning. It *would* be his luck for the first Jedi he met to have a one-in-a-million talent like that. Not, of course, that Sidious believed in luck. But worse than that, what kind of Jedi used Juyo, even as incorrectly as Mace had? Not a normal one, that was for sure.

Plagueis had told him about all the different kinds of Jedi. They had an extensive hierarchy, much as the Sith had once had. The most interesting position the Jedi maintained was one called 'Jedi Shadow'. These Jedi were apparently a type of spy whose entire purpose was to hunt and destroy Sith. Officially,

they no longer existed. But Sidious was sure they did, in fact, still exist unofficially. He had no proof, but a group such as that, full of paranoid beings for which the ends justified the means, and which operated outside of most official sanction, was unlikely to have ever disbanded itself voluntarily. Was Mace a Shadow? Except, if he was, he certainly didn't seem to make any effort to appear ordinary in any way. No, that didn't add up.

Anyway, the Jedi believed the Sith to be extinct. Even if the Shadows still existed, Sidious had no reason to believe they had any awareness of the Sith of today. Their purpose would be different than that of their ancient forebears. Sidious wondered idly what a Shadow would hunt if they were not hunting Sith.

As intriguing as he found that digression, though, it was not as important as unravelling the mystery of Mace Windu. He had learned that Mace was a Jedi Knight, though Sidious understood that it was unusual for a Jedi to obtain that rank so young. Though Plagueis' declaration that they should turn Jedi to the Dark Side had almost immediately caused Sidious' thoughts to turn to Mace, he had to admit that he didn't think this Jedi would be easily swayed. Even his inexplicable affinity towards the Dark Side seemed more like a deflection of it than an embrace of it. And despite his youth, he did not seem particularly uncertain in his worldview, or inclined to change his mind about such major matters as his opinions on the Jedi Order.

But Sidious would never shy away from a challenge. And he would much rather have Mace on his side than fighting against him. Sidious had seen how fast he was with a lightsaber and how incredibly efficient he was. He would have to make the attempt. As young as Mace was, Sidious also got the impression that he was one of the brightest rising stars of the Jedi. That was worth some additional effort on his part. Sidious thought he still possessed some wisdom that no teen, no matter how skilled, would have picked up. And certainly Mace would not possess the perspective of his Order that an outsider might. Yes, he could work with that.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden premonition, and Sidious, sensing a mini melodrama about to play out just for him, discreetly directed his gaze to watch. Sure enough, within moments the only other customer, a blond haired Naboo man, dropped his tray onto the floor, shattering his glass.

The gungan server came out from behind the counter to clean up the mess.

"I want my caf replaced immediately," the Naboo man said to her.

"Of course," the server said. She rose and walked back behind the counter.

"What are you doing?!" the man said. His anger was absolutely incandescent now. "This needs to be cleaned up!"

"Not to worry, sir," the gungan woman said. "I'll get right back to it." She looked over at the other server, a pale dark-haired Naboo woman. "The customer needs a replacement caf and grey tea mix on ice, no sugar."

The other server looked up from her datapad. "All right." Her expression was bored. She began to

busy herself with reproducing the order. The gungan woman went back to cleaning up the spilled beverage.

After a minute, the Naboo woman returned with a new tray and glass.

"Ah, thank you," the man said to her. He began to drink the beverage only to immediately spit it out. "My order was for no sugar!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the Naboo woman said, her expression concerned. "I'll fix it immediately."

"Nevermind," the Naboo man said. "I'll take my business elsewhere." He rose and left.

The Naboo server looked down at the gungan woman. "You told me the wrong order."

"I said no sugar," the gungan woman protested.

"I know what you said. The shop can't afford to lose customers like that. You're fired."

"What? Please, no, I--"

"Return the apron immediately and leave," the Naboo woman said.

The gungan woman dejectedly removed the apron and walked out the door.

I suppose there is nothing left for me here, then. Palpatine rose, and giving the Naboo server a polite smile, he abandoned his cheap caf and stale croissant and walked out of the shop as well.

Outside the shop, he focused his senses on one particular individual who was currently alternating between numb despair and anger. Pinpointing the source of the emotions, he turned down an alley to the side of the shop, passing the sides of buildings festooned with vines and surrounded by neatly manicured trees and multicolored flowers, and walked briskly until he caught up with the gungan woman. It was curiosity that motivated him, he told himself. Nothing more.

"You did say no sugar." He was right behind her now.

"Augh!" The gungan woman jumped, her long limbs and floppy ears briefly flying in all directions, and turned around on the cobblestone street. *And there* was the pure rage again. "You!"

Palpatine smiled in uncomprehending bemusement. "Me," he confirmed. Stripped of the duplicity of the caf shop, there was something vaguely familiar about her, but still that answer lay just outside his reach.

For a moment, the gungan was absolutely still, her expression contorted in fury. Then she punched him in the face.

Palpatine yelped in surprise and staggered backwards, putting a hand to his nose. A sharp pain emanated from where he'd been hit, and he blinked as his eyes immediately began watering. Palpatine felt his face. Some of the bones had been slightly... rearranged, so he should probably get a bacta patch on it soon. He looked over at her. "What was that for?"

"It should have been you!" she said. "She hadn't done anything! It had nothing to do with her! It

should have been you!"

Bewildered now, Palpatine said, "I am not following this at all."

"Milena! Your sister!"

Sudden comprehension dawned on Palpatine, the puzzle pieces all arranging themselves into one coherent whole. Those three words had been considerably more painful than the physical attack. Palpatine knew exactly who this was now. And he knew exactly why she hated him.

Cos leaned in the doorway as he watched Milena walking up the path with a gungan girl. They were laughing about something. She'd finally come home from boarding school, and she was going to spend the short holiday with some charity project? It incensed him.

When they arrived at the door Cos had closed it and stood in front of it, crossing his arms. "Animals aren't allowed inside."

"Ew," Mil said. "Stop being gross, Cos." She turned to the gungan girl. "Just ignore him. He's the worst."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Mil?" he asked.

"The opera," Mil said, her eyes widening.

"Yes, we're going with Mother to see it!" Cos said, bouncing up and down in excitement. "Just you and me!" Mother had felt Markon and Mayelle would be too young to enjoy it, and likely too disruptive besides. And Ricar, being an infant, wasn't allowed in the Opera House. Most importantly, Father was away on some unspecified business.

Mil grimaced. "I can't believe I forgot!"

"Me, either. That is not invited," Cos pointed to the gungan girl.

"I'm going to ask Mother to add her to the ticket." Mil narrowed her eyes at him in challenge.

Cos frowned. "I don't think she can do that."

"Of course she can," Mil insisted.

And Mil was right.

Of course, that hadn't been the end of it. Oh, no. Cos had decided that his night was not going to be ruined by this interloper, and that she must pay a price for her intrusion.

Mil was away, being dressed for the opera by Mother. Cos, on the other hand, was already dressed for the evening and ready to go. The gungan girl sat warily across the table from him. He noticed she'd eaten all the scones. Not that he cared.

"I'd like to apologize," Cos said, imitating a look of genuine remorse. "I was most rude." He held out a hand. "I'm Cos. What's your name?"

"I'm Danai," she said, frowning at his extended hand.

"Nice to meet you, Danai," Cos said, smiling blandly. He held out his hand a little further. Eyeing it warily, she took his hand and he shook it, then released her hand.

She seemed to untense a bit on finding that the handshake really was just a handshake.

"I can't wait until the opera tonight," Cos said. "Are you excited to see it?"

"Yeah." She smiled shyly. "Milena says it's a great story about a witch."

"Yes, her name is Cora Vessora and she's the best! I hear they have all sorts of special effects." Cos lit up with an enthusiasm he didn't need to pretend to. "There's even a scene where they fill the whole opera house with green smoke!"

"That sounds fun," Danai said.

"It's going to be incredible," Cos said. Then he frowned, scrunching up his features in concern. "I see you're not dressed for it yet, though."

"Not yet," Danai agreed. "I'm sure Milena will find me something, though."

"No, there won't be enough time! But we could find something now," Cos suggested. "I know just the thing!" He gestured for her to follow him and then ran off. She rose and ran after him.

When he finally stopped inside an empty bedroom, she doubled over, gasping. "This place is huge! How do you not get lost in here?"

Cos shrugged. "You get used to it." He walked over to the closet in the room and opened it, gesturing inside to an ornate chest in the back. "Why don't you take a look in the chest?"

Danai stepped into the closet and knelt down in front of the chest, opening it. She frowned back up at him. "There's nothing in there."

"No, there's not," Cos said, grinning maliciously. He slammed the door shut and locked it. Then he closed and locked the door to the room as well. She was screaming really loudly, but the two doors muffled the sound a lot, and no one used this wing of the house, so Cos didn't think anyone would stumble on her any time soon.

He'd been right about that. Cos had returned to the foyer and when asked about Danai, had said she'd gotten mad at him and left. Milena had been suspicious, but Mother had taken him at his word and they'd left for the opera without the gungan. She wasn't found until the next day, when a cleaning droid discovered her.

"Alright, I deserved that," Palpatine said, using a handkerchief to wipe the blood out from under his nose. "And you're right, Danai. It should have been me. But it was not. And I can't bring Milena back. But I can help you. With your employment problem."

Danai barked a short laugh. "Oh, no way," she said. "How're you gonna help me this time? By putting me in a body bag?!"

"That's a valid concern." Palpatine sighed. "I was such an unpleasant youth."

"I doubt that's changed." Danai scowled at him.

"The youth part changed," Palpatine said. "Anyway, about your employment. I seem to recall you studied politics. I presume that didn't work out for you?"

"What a genius observation," Danai said acerbically.

"What if I told you that I could get you any political office on Naboo that you wanted?"

Danai scowled and looked as if she was about to tell him off again, but then stopped. Palpatine could sense the gears in her head turning.

She suddenly smiled sweetly in a way that didn't reach her eyes. "What about Ambassador?"

Palpatine smiled back. "Of course. Though that one is not immediately available. And there are better options! Just think: Governor Danai of Theed! Queen Danai of all Naboo!"

"You can't just make someone Queen! Or even Governor."

"I can, and I will. Just name the position."

Danai narrowed her eyestalks at him. "Ambassador. Of. Naboo."

"If you insist." Palpatine shook his head. *Truly incomprehensible*. "Though as I said, that position is not immediately available. But I could offer you an administrative position until I can vacate the role. I believe the Governor of Theed has several openings--"

"If I'm going to be an Ambassador, It would be more useful to me if I was administrating for the current Ambassador."

Palpatine was deeply puzzled by this statement. "You are aware that *I* am the current Ambassador of Naboo, right? You did catch when I said that I must vacate the role?" He would think that the last thing Danai would want would be a position under him.

"Yes," Danai said. She crossed her arms. "So what's it going to be? Can you do it?"

"I do believe there is suddenly an Assistant Ambassador position available."

"You just made that up." Danai eyed him skeptically.

"Yes, I did. But I'm allowed to do that. Do you want the job?"

"Yes."

"You're really sure?" Palpatine asked.

"Absolutely." She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Alright. You start tomorrow." He handed her a card. "Here is the address and Holonet node for the Ambassador's office."

She looked it over. Her expression was... calculating. "See you tomorrow, then." She left the alley. Palpatine lingered in the tree-lined alleyway, ruminating on the exchange that had just occurred.

What just happened here? Palpatine hadn't meant to do all that. He'd only meant to solve the mystery. Except that the answer to the mystery had upset him, and then he'd *had* to do something. He'd felt a sense of obligation... but to who? He barely knew Danai--she'd avoided him as much as possible after that first disastrous experience. And Milena was dead. She was dead and gone and nothing he did for her friend now could ever matter to her again.

"Truly incredible!" a low voice rumbled appreciatively.

"Argl!" Palpatine jumped, looking frantically around the alleyway.

And that was when one of the trees opened their eyes.

"T'ra Saa! What a pleasant surprise!" Palpatine smiled brightly, his heart still racing. *What is a Jedi doing skulking around an alleyway?!*

"I apologize for startling you," T'ra said. "I took the liberty of following you to look after your safety. You know, because of the attempt on your life and all."

"Oh, of course! I must say, you are remarkably good at blending in!" Palpatine silently cursed himself for not anticipating this. Then he mentally rewound his conversation with Danai, trying to work out what the Jedi might have been able to learn, and what they might conclude about him based on what had been said. "How much of that conversation did you, ah, overhear?"

"Oh, the whole thing," the Jedi said. "It was so beautiful! Some of my friends are so terribly jaded, you know. You wouldn't think a Jedi would be jaded, but it's true! Some of us are! There are no good politicians, they say. Non-Jedi are never truly generous, they say. People can never turn over a new leaf, they say!"

"Oh?" Palpatine said.

T'ra Saa's entire body shook excitedly as if they were the only tree caught in a windstorm. "Yes. But they are wrong! You are proof of that!"

"Ah."

"Although I do think you may have overstated what you could offer. Governor! Queen!"

Time for damage control. "Yes, in a technical sense, I did overstate that," he lied. "However, I know Danai, and I know she could succeed at anything she put her mind to. But first, she needs to believe it is possible. I only meant to help her see that."

"Oh! Yes, of course, I understand completely!"

"Glad to hear it," Palpatine said, internally breathing a sigh of relief.

The Jedi chattered on like that for some time, though they did also update Palpatine on their progress for the investigation. Apparently the ruse had been successful, and Bon Tapalo believed that Mace was

an agent of a rival corporation who had come to bid on the plasma. They had not been able to uncover any evidence yet, but T'ra Saa was confident they would soon have the answers they sought. Palpatine fully intended to let their little investigation play out however it would. He would only get involved in the aftermath.

When T'ra Saa finished their report, Palpatine left the alleyway and returned to his speeder, glumly pondering what his life was coming to when Jedi were praising him. It was one thing for them to do so when he was manipulating them into believing he was a person he was not, quite another for them to express admiration for any of his entirely candid or genuine behavior!

Chapter End Notes

And that's the chapter!

I'm looking forward to including Danai in the story more and showing her interactions with Palpatine. I am also planning on going into the gungan-Naboo relationship more. The canon seems to make them out as having very little interaction with each other, but I wanted to explore the scenario of there being both a significant number of gungans who live in the Naboo cities as well as gungans who live in their own city-states, so I could look into all the interesting interpersonal and political ramifications that might have. So that's the interpretation I'll be exploring in this fic.

Chapter 21: Rendezvous at Kalee

Chapter Notes

I spent quite a bit of time editing this one, and I'm sure I could spend even more, but the time must come where I wrest every chapter from the editing process and present it to the world. And so here it is!

Time for Plagueis to spend some quality time with Qui-Gon and Dooku! He's very excited to meet with these two, even if they don't exactly share his enthusiasm...

See the end of the chapter for more [Chapter 21: Rendezvous at Kalee notes](#)

Plagueis had not anticipated that the trip to the top-secret meeting location would take quite so long. But traveling overland on a planet with few roads and considerable jungle had taken nearly as many days as it had for him to get to Kalee from Coruscant in the first place. He'd also had to leave his ship at the landing site. Which he'd anticipated, but it was still something of a loss to him. He very likely wouldn't be seeing it again after all.

Still, when the land transport finally stopped at its destination, he exited the ramp with considerable enthusiasm. It was finally time--time to meet with the Jedi, of course, but also to accomplish his larger purpose here. He entered the humid jungle, the air thick with insects, and was met with a familiar Jedi standing at the bottom of the ramp. Qui-Gon's extensively hairy visage frowned dourly up at him.

The Jedi narrowed his eyes at Plagueis. "If you think that we're happy to see you, Magister, you are quite mistaken. Was this your motivation for assisting in the HoloNet negotiations?"

"Your suspicion is quite understandable, but I assure you this had nothing to do with that. I wasn't even aware there would be Jedi on Kalee until after the negotiations."

"So you thought you would just head on over here, then?" Qui-Gon asked, his eyes hooded. "For a holiday?"

"After having met you, I was confident that I would be in good hands, yes. But this is hardly a pleasure jaunt. I have a very important deal to negotiate with the yam'rii. I don't claim to have the vision of a Jedi like yourself, but I think once you have had a chance to see my proposal, you might agree on its value."

Qui-Gon's frown deepened. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Magister. As a Jedi, my purpose here is to protect life. *All* life. But you are here to make money off of a war. That is not, in my experience, a compatible goal."

"Your suspicion is understandable," Plagueis said. "Still, I--"

"And if the kaleesh should attack this base, our presence here will not be adequate protection against them. Your life is in mortal danger. You should leave now, for your own safety and the safety of others."

"I'm sorry to hear that I misjudged the situation. However I have already invested too much effort into this venture to pull out now."

Qui-Gon's face relaxed and he waved a hand, intoning, "You don't want to sell anything to the yam'rii. You want to leave Kalee for your own health and safety."

Plagueis gave Qui-Gon a friendly smile. "Fascinating. The famous Jedi Mind trick. Kind of tingles in the back of the head." He waved the fingers of one hand for emphasis.

Qui-Gon's eyes widened momentarily, though his face showed no other indication of emotion.

And what a rare opportunity, he thought. Jedi tended to avoid using their power so as not to 'show off' or 'be frivolous', and so he had had little opportunity to directly observe their use of the Force in action. But he had long wondered about this particular practice of theirs. The suggestion had tugged at Plagueis's deepest fears, offering a simple solution to allay them, but of course had been easy for him to recognize as something quite foreign to his own intention.

Qui-Gon seemed to have recovered his resolve. He raised his hand again before Plagueis interrupted.

"Oh, are you going to do that again? If you could--wait a moment?" Plagueis fished a datapad and pen out of his satchel. "Ah, thank you. Please proceed." He looked over to Qui-Gon, his pen perched between his hand and the datapad, meeting the Jedi's gaze.

This time one corner of Qui-Gon's mouth twitched slightly downward in his otherwise impassive face.

Would Qui-Gon make another attempt? It was clear that Plagueis had given him more than a few misgivings. Still, Jedi *were* known to try this deception again if it did not initially succeed, often with improved results.

It seemed that Qui-Gon's hope for such results still outweighed his doubts, as he continued on, intoning, "You will leave Kalee promptly for your own good."

Plagueis used his pen to scribble a few notes on the pad. "Hmmm...that one wasn't as strong as the initial attempt, but I definitely noticed something. Like when a visitor just so gently taps at your door but is too timid to assert themselves further. Interesting. I've heard subsequent attempts are usually more strongly suggestive."

Qui-Gon sighed, his face losing its emotionless mask. "Well, it doesn't work on everyone," he said, lowering his hand in resignation. Plagueis had known about this limitation, but he'd long wondered about the reasons for it. The Sith version of this power had no such restrictions on species without natural mental barriers, and indeed Plagueis's own abilities exceeded even that, though Plagueis had found himself unable to continue his previous experiments on this ability.

"I won't fault you for trying to do what you believe to be in the best interests of all. Still, I find it good to know that the rest of us are not entirely disadvantaged when it comes to our dealings with your Order," Plagueis said, putting the pen and pad away. "Do you ever worry about it?"

"About what?" Qui-Gon asked.

"About the ethical implications inherent in being able to bend another to your will," Plagueis said. *He* had certainly worried over it a lot ever since the... incident.

"The mind trick can only persuade people to do something they already want to. As I believe your response has proven."

"My response proves only that I was not receptive to the attempt," Plagueis said. "It does not provide a reason for that lack of receptiveness, or for why others may respond in the expected manner. And if it was for some purpose a person truly wanted for themselves, surely it would be standard practice to ask permission beforehand."

Qui-Gon looked pensive. "Perhaps you have a point, though I hardly think one such as yourself is in a position to lecture on the ethics of *asking permission*. Given your lack of any attempt to ask that of us before coming here."

Plagueis laughed. "Indeed not! It was merely an observation."

"Since you refuse to do the sensible thing, come with me," Qui-Gon beckoned Plagueis towards him, his bearded face resigned. "I'll take you to your lodgings."

Plagueis followed at Qui-Gon's side as they walked toward the fortified yam'rii compound. "Thank you, Master Jedi. I do apologize for the imposition, but I assure you, I have come here to assist in your task, not hinder it." He reflected that from a certain point of view, this was even true. Not his point of

view, of course. But from someone's.

Qui-Gon assessed him coolly. "One such as yourself may have a very different definition of assistance than we do."

Plagueis looked around. "Is the other Jedi about? The older one?"

"Master Dooku? Yes, he's in a meeting with the General right now, but he'll be by to talk to you later." Qui-Gon said the last part in an ominous tone.

"Excellent!" Plagueis said, pretending not to notice the obvious implication in Qui-Gon's voice that Dooku's *talk* with him would not be a pleasant one. "I regret I did not have the opportunity to converse with him during the HoloNet negotiations." *That is something I definitely must rectify.* Plagueis knew Dooku was probably not any happier about his arrival here than Qui-Gon at this point. However, he was confident the other Jedi would warm up to him in time.

The same was not true of Qui-Gon. He knew what *he* wanted to know from the Jedi, but not what made this Jedi tick. And he didn't expect Qui-Gon would be casually volunteering any of his own secrets given his current mood. Still, he had to try something.

Best start with something innocuous. "The life of a Jedi must be a difficult one."

"I shouldn't think so, actually," Qui-Gon said. "No more difficult or easy than that of any other being in the galaxy. We have our share of hardship, certainly, but our lives are hardly without joy or companionship."

"And what do you enjoy, Master Jedi?"

"A lot of things," Qui-Gon said. "But smashball is pretty high on that list."

"Ah. Sport."

"I take it you do not feel the same," Qui-Gon said.

"Some physical activities can be diverting." Plagueis laced his hands behind his back. "But I dislike the ones with *rules*."

"Oh, and why is that?"

"Because rules were made to be broken," Plagueis said.

"That explains a lot about you." Qui-Gon narrowed his eyes.

And not a lot about you, unfortunately. But Plagueis was hardly ready to give up.

"I'll admit, Jedi abilities are quite intriguing to me. Being able to move things with your mind must be useful."

"It can be," Qui-Gon said. "But I would hardly consider that our most important ability."

"And what would that be?" Plagueis asked.

"Our ability to sense, understand, communicate with, and heal the other lifeforms around us," Qui-Gon said. "Our ability to access the Living Force."

Perhaps we have more in common than I thought. This was a considerably more interesting piece of information to Plagueis than the Jedi's sporting activities. *Immortality, the Living Force. Yes, there is much we should discuss*. It might take quite some time to get Qui-Gon to divulge such information, but it was time Plagueis was more than willing to take. Of course, the Jedi were somewhat imprecise in their terminology. What they called the Living Force, Plagueis usually thought of as the two separate forces of anima and pneuma. But still, he was most interested in learning more about the Jedi approach to such things, and specifically, about *this* Jedi's approach. "A most worthwhile ability indeed," Plagueis said. "I should love to hear more about it."

"Perhaps later. Here we are," Qui-Gon said, showing Plagueis a small, grubby room not much larger than a walk-in closet. "I apologize if the lodgings are not to your taste," Qui-Gon said unapologetically. "This isn't exactly a hotel."

"Oh, no, they are quite satisfactory, thanks," Plagueis said. "I appreciate your assistance, and apologize for my imposition on your time. But this meeting with the yam'rii is of the utmost importance. As I've said, I believe my dealings here will be a great help to you."

"I highly doubt that, but I will be interested to see what you define as 'help'," Qui-Gon said.

"You will learn that soon enough, Master Jedi," Plagueis assured him. He was quite looking forward to that moment.

There was a booming knock at the door. "Yes, who is it?" Plagueis asked, though he already knew the answer to that question.

"Master Dooku, of the Jedi Order," the clipped voice from the other side responded.

Plagueis opened the door. "Ah, I've been expecting you!"

Dooku's eyes narrowed. "I'll bet you have. Qui-Gon has told me you refuse to leave."

"Then he has told you correctly." Plagueis gave Dooku an apologetic smile. "However, I think there has been a grave misunderstanding. Your friend seems to think that I am here to stir up trouble. I assure you, nothing could be further from the truth."

"Your assurances do not count for very much among the Jedi. Perhaps you've assumed your comparatively low profile in the corporate world would shield you from scrutiny, Magister, but your many unscrupulous business dealings are still a matter of *public record*." Dooku scowled and crossed his arms.

"You have particular objections to me, then?"

"Oh, yes. Perhaps I should expand on that. Only I don't know whether to start with the lobbying activities, such as the ones that crushed regulations in the Chommel sector, or the hostile takeovers you

have instigated, such as with Starside Pharmaceuticals, or the--"

Plagueis held up a hand. As much as he enjoyed researching others, he did find it most uncomfortable when others researched *him*. "Ah, no need. I get the idea."

"Then my objections with you should be most clear."

"I can understand your suspicion, even if I think it is misdirected in this case."

Dooku gave him a doubtful look. "I have been informed you will be delivering your pitch to the Yam'rii Military Council tomorrow morning."

"That is true, yes." Plagueis gave him an impassive look.

"Whatever you are selling them, know that I *will* see this stopped," Dooku said. "I will lodge a complaint with the yam'rii government, the Council, the Senate; I will send letters to every nonprofit focusing on the rights of beings; I will see that your name is splashed on the front page of the news and your current exploits exposed for the vile acts that they are--"

Plagueis held up his hands, smiling nervously. *My, my, such a firebrand!* "Master Jedi, please! Is a being not innocent until proven guilty?" *If I were planning whatever nefarious act you are assuming, this response would be quite worrying! Rest assured, Master Dooku, that I will not be nearly so obvious as that when I pull the rug out from under you.*

Dooku made a dismissive noise. "You are not innocent."

"That is not an unreasonable assumption," Plagueis said, lowering his hands. "Still, give me a chance, Master Jedi. I must confess to a curiosity as to what you think I am selling." And what a fascinating question that was! While he could venture some reasonable theories as to the general shape of the conclusion the Jedi had come to, there was simply no way he could know precisely what that conclusion was. Beyond knowing that it was undoubtedly incorrect, of course.

"I've no wish to give you ideas in case I am wrong," Dooku said. "But...I highly doubt that I am."

"You will soon have the chance to judge that for yourself. You and the esteemed Qui-Gon are of course extended an invitation to my presentation. I should most like to get your perspective on the matter."

"You could just tell me what you will be presenting now and I will give you my *perspective* immediately," Dooku said.

"Oh, no, I'm afraid not," Plagueis said. "I am sure the Yam'rii Military Council would object to you knowing that information before they did. And even if they did not, I'm simply not in the right frame of mind at the moment. I'm still working out the final details of my presentation. I'll not reveal anything until I can be sure I can give the proper impression of what I have to offer. But not to worry, you'll have a chance to ask any questions and submit further comments during the presentation tomorrow."

"I will do that," Dooku said ominously.

"I look forward to it! Good day, esteemed Jedi Dooku," Plagueis gave him a small bow and closed the

door to his room before Dooku could say anything else. He sensed the Jedi leave after several moments.

Though Plagueis had originally become interested in traveling to Kalee due to the presence of the Jedi, they were no longer his primary reason for being here. Still, they were certainly a reason that he was here, and he looked forward to learning more about them.

Dooku would surely be unwilling to converse casually with him for the time being. Perhaps after the presentation. But his threats had given Plagueis an impression of the Jedi Master. With his aristocratic bearing and his political inclinations, Dooku reminded Plagueis a great deal of Palpatine. Of course, the difference was that where Dooku was stern and all sharp edges in his anger, Palpatine was easy-going and smooth, friendly until the moment he stabbed his enemies in the back. Plagueis marveled at the irony of it.

Plagueis had missed the chance to talk with Dooku at Serenno, but he fully intended to make up for that. Dooku was certainly very passionate--a quite un-Jedi-like quality. And there was *a lot* of anger in him. Of course, being a Jedi hardly exempted beings from anger. But most Jedi did not express it quite so openly. They were encouraged to let it flow over and past them like water and to appear above it all.

Plagueis, on the other hand, had been encouraged to cultivate his anger as a Sith. At any time he could be a seething sea of emotion, ready to unleash the full force of his power. Of course, he could calm that sea when he wished to, as he often did, but it could be called upon again in an instant, if needed.

Though most of the time, Plagueis preferred calm deliberation, or at least the illusion of it. He thought that Dooku must be similar in nature, if inverted--fully capable of expressing the depths of his emotion, but able to place them aside at a moment's notice to call upon his power. Jocasta Nu had indicated that he was a Jedi of considerable talent, after all, and all of Plagueis' own investigations had indicated the same.

Dooku would surely be a powerful Sith, if he could be put onto that path. And Plagueis was confident that he could be. But first, he would have to have the right incentive.

What about Qui-Gon? Qui-Gon seemed less inclined to outbursts, but that didn't mean he was emotionless. Plagueis sensed a deep stubbornness in him, and that was not possible without deep feeling. Plagueis was still unsure what motivated him, and without that any attempt to turn him to the Dark Side would surely be a waste of effort. Still, he *would* find out about what Qui-Gon had found in his search for immortality. And he would find out *why* the Jedi was looking for it.

Plagueis rubbed his hands together, excited. He would study these Jedi carefully. One day, he would destroy the entire Jedi Order, but until then, field studies on them would surely prove most intriguing.

Plagueis surveyed the tiny room with its bare gray walls. Not exactly a hotel, indeed. Fortunately, he had brought his own entertainment. He took a flimsiplast magazine of Galactic Geographic out of his satchel. The cover image was of Kalee, but that was merely the camouflage, not what had interested him about this particular magazine. There was actually nothing of value to him in the Kalee article at all. Turning through the pages, he arrived at the article of interest, carefully pulling the photo pages out

of the magazine.

Removing a dartboard and darts from the satchel, he affixed the dartboard to the wall and taped one of the flimsiplast photos to it.

Moving to a spot across the room, he threw two darts which hit the figure in the photo. Walking back up to the photo, he removed the darts and focused his attention on the two holes in the image, using the barest trickle of Force power to relink the molecular chains of flimsiplast and repair the perforations. Satisfied with his handiwork, he turned away from the photo and dartboard.

Then, returning to his former spot, he aimed again and threw the pair of darts.

They hit the photo of the Nightsister directly in her double hearts.

One of the advantages of being a Jedi, Dooku reflected, was the ability to hold private conversations.

The yam'rii are unfortunately much more excited to see the Magister than we are, Dooku remarked as he watched the crowd of military officers surrounding Damask and peppering him with questions. The Magister was dressed as extravagantly as he had been at Serenno, though in an entirely different outfit. This one also had hints of green, though the predominant color was the golden gleam of aurodium, which was painful to look at in the bright Kalee sun. And in contrast to the tall, ornate hat he'd worn on Serenno, here he wore a thin circllet of aurodium.

What kind of weapons do you think he's selling? Qui-Gon asked Dooku through their Force Bond. It seemed Qui-Gon had also guessed something of the reason Damask must have come here in person.

Dooku glanced at Damask, who was smoothly evading all questions, insisting they be saved for the presentation. The yam'rii seemed to have been as kept in the dark about what the Magister was offering as Dooku and Qui-Gon were.

I should think that would be obvious, Dooku said. *I've looked into Damask Holdings. They're a bank and investment firm. They don't normally sell anything tangible at all.*

It was strange, actually. Dooku could hardly imagine the yam'rii military investing time on something if they hadn't even been told what it was. Certainly it couldn't be an investment or a loan, as he would typically assume. Damask Holdings was too small to offer those things at such a scale. Certainly it could offer nothing like what the IBC currently was. He had to wonder what Damask had said to them to induce such interest in a complete unknown like his company, and in a completely unknown weapon.

That sounds more mysterious than obvious, Qui-Gon remarked. Dooku quelled his exasperation, resisting the urge to suggest Qui-Gon try a Holonet search to help him gain enlightenment on the matter. Not every answer had to come from a Force vision! Sometimes more mundane sources could provide the necessary clues. Still, perhaps his expectations in this regard were unfair.

He's clearly here representing a company his firm is highly invested in, Dooku supplied. *And all of his*

firm's top investments are in biomedical and pharmaceutical research. Therefore, he must be offering the yam'rii a bioweapon. Damask seemed to think that he could somehow gain the approval of the Jedi for such a thing; Dooku intended to counter that belief with harsh reality.

Dooku felt Qui-Gon's revulsion. *We have to put a stop to this.*

I agree, Dooku said. *And the point where we must apply pressure is the Magister himself.*

How? Appeals to reason do not work on him, mind tricks do not work on him, perhaps nothing works on him. Dooku could sense Qui-Gon's frustration.

Before Dooku could answer, the General's firm voice interrupted his thoughts, rising in volume.

"And this is our friend Serthal," General Letiliss said to Damask, gesturing the dagger-like end of an arm delicately to the kaleesh woman. "In truth, this war is hardly about ourselves at all. Rather, we wish to free kaleesh like Serthal from the oppressive rule of warlords like Drennil."

"Yes," Serthal agreed. "In fact, it was a warlord very much like Drennil who General Letiliss ousted from my village." she frowned. "And it was Drennil himself who took my sister from me."

Damask made a sympathetic noise. "Such dreadful business, war."

The Magister shook Serthal's hand, and they exchanged polite niceties. Then Serthal murmured something that Dooku didn't catch and all three of them glanced at Qui-Gon and Dooku. The three aliens laughed.

"Hmmm, yes," Damask said. "Humans indeed."

Dooku endured the exchange with a resigned smile. He knew Serthal didn't much care for him or Qui-Gon.

Dooku turned his attention back to his conversation with Qui-Gon and smiled. *You are overly pessimistic, my friend. The solution to our problem is simple. Damask is a businessman. This is about profit, so we appeal to the profit motive. By threatening it.*

That seems so crass, Qui-Gon frowned.

There are lives at stake, Dooku replied. *I will be as crass as necessary to save them.*

I don't know. I don't like this. This kind of politicking is exactly the problem with the Council. Do we really want to sink to the level of the CEO's, the Senate, the Chancellor --,

Dooku gave him a sharp look. *Do not,* he warned, *ever compare me to that travesty of a Head of State.*

Sorry. I just think we should follow the will of the Force, Qui-Gon glanced over at the Magister and the assortment of yam'rii military officers currently orbiting him.

And what is the will of the Force, Qui-Gon? To wander aimlessly until a miracle falls into our lap, hmmm? This was an old disagreement between them. Dooku had to wonder where he had gone wrong with his Apprentice. But Qui-Gon had always been a stubborn one. A lot like Dooku himself, as other

Jedi had often remarked.

No, the Living Force wills us to be active agents in our own destiny. It is hardly 'aimless wandering' that I am called to, even if it looks that way to you, Master. Will you at least let me try my way first before you employ every underhanded political trick you know? Qui-Gon asked.

Of course, Dooku said. *But if that does not work, I will expect your full cooperation with implementing my 'underhanded political tricks', as you call them.* Dooku had always allowed Qui-Gon to take his own approach to problems. To do otherwise would only allow his former Padawan to assume the approach would have worked.

If it does not work, Qui-Gon said, *Then perhaps your way is the will of the Force after all.*

Dooku smiled. *You are diplomatic as always, Qui-Gon. We'll make a politician of you yet.*

Qui-Gon gave him a pained look. *I should hope not.*

I know you will do your best, Dooku said. *But there are situations where it is not possible to avoid getting one's hands dirty.*

We must never concede ground to the Dark Side, Qui-Gon countered. Qui-Gon often felt uncomfortable with Dooku's approach to problems. It was one reason why he would have preferred to have been on this mission with Sifo-Dyas. But perhaps it was good to have an alternative perspective available.

Of course not , Dooku said. *But ethics is more than just a matter of Light or Dark. Even if one stays in the Light, one can still unknowingly commit great evil. Or through inaction, allow it to take root.*

Qui-Gon pondered this somberly. *That is true.* Dooku was proud of his former Padawan, despite their many disagreements. Qui-Gon had firm convictions, but he was still willing to listen to others even as he argued his own case.

Dooku was confident that together, they could convince Damask to remove himself from this war, leave Kalee, and never return.

Plagueis sat on the cot in the small room. It wasn't quite long enough for him to lay on, but fortunately he didn't need sleep. This would serve quite comfortably as an area from which to utilize his power during meditation.

It was time to make use of his Force Bond to Sidious. As this was not an externally directed power, it wasn't in danger of detection from anyone besides the source and recipient, though Plagueis was adept at masking even the more obvious uses of his power.

He had only infrequently done this in the past, but never with any difficulty. He closed his eyes and reached his mind across the tens of thousands of light years between them and found his Apprentice.

This time, instead of immediately speaking as he had during past contacts of this sort, he sent a short,

wordless query.

Sidious did not immediately answer, but Plagueis had expected this. He waited, and within a few minutes, his Apprentice responded.

Master? Sidious asked. *Is everything all right?*

Yes, Plagueis said. *I merely wished to talk, but this area is insufficiently secure for a comm call.*

Ah, Sidious responded.

If you are busy, we can talk later, Plagueis said.

No, now is fine, Sidious assured him. Plagueis could see through the Force bond that he was watching Maul sleeping in his crib. *What did you wish to discuss, Master?*

Plagueis didn't answer immediately. Instead, he studied the small infant Sidious watched in fascination. This was only the second time he'd seen Maul, and the first time he'd seen him outside of a holo. Maul was a brilliant red and black, with a crown of horn buds already beginning to grow out of his head. Plagueis had no desire to raise children himself, but he found them immensely intriguing. The bold beginnings of life.

Plagueis knew Maul was a zabrak-human hybrid, a being possible due to the genetic experimentation of the long-extinct rakata, who had enslaved most other species in the galaxy, including zabraks and humans. For whatever reason, they'd genetically modified many of their slave species to be able to hybridize with each other. Only a few of these species, such as muuns and grans, had not been included in this modification.

Plagueis had first learned of the rakata from his mother, whose career as a historian had given her ample background on the ancient galactic conquerors. Muuns were not typically prone to fanciful stories, a trait which tended to make his species poor liars. But his mother would weave frightening tales to thrill him into her readings of the histories. *The rakata considered muun meat, specifically the meat of younglings, a special delicacy,* she might say, reading directly from one of her many thick tomes. But then she might add something such as: *A friend of mine once went home from school to visit her family but found all of them dead. The bodies of the parents had only a single large scorch mark over their hearts, but the bodies of her young siblings were mutilated, as if chewed on by animals. Yet the teeth marks did not look like animal teeth, and parts of their bodies had been sliced off, as if with a knife. The holo-recording on their home security device was blurry, but showed a short creature with two eyestalks extending horizontally from the lower sides of a muun-like head. She turned from the holo after hearing the sound of boots on tile from the hallway. Someone was still in the house. Then there would be a loud thumping noise outside the bedroom door and she would exclaim that they were coming to eat her delectable child up, much to young Hego's delight.*

The rakata had been the unquestioned rulers of the galaxy for nearly 10,000 years. But no civilization lasted forever--as Plagueis planned for the tiny Maul to one day witness with the current unquestioned rulers of the stars.

Maul was also, more specifically, of the Dathomirian variant of zabrak-human hybrids. This variant, which comprised approximately half of Dathomirians to some degree or another, also had further genetic modification that was responsible for the patterns on their faces and bodies, and this modification was entirely Dathomirian in origin, specifically found only in the Nightsister and Nightbrother Dathomirians.

The genetic tinkering of both the rakata and the Dathomirians themselves were what history had written into Maul. But one day, Maul would write into history.

Wrenching his thoughts away from these intriguing digressions, he brought his attention back to the topic he'd wanted to ask about. *I was wondering, what was the marriage for?*

Sidious didn't answer for several long moments. *Could you clarify that question?*

The Coruscant Times, Plagueis said. *It mentioned your visit to the Jedi Temple, though it was rather sparse on details. Congratulations on that, by the way. But I read the whole thing recently, and I noticed it said you were married.* He'd been completely baffled by the brief mention of a Kycina Palpatine in the article. A Baneite Sith marrying was more than anomalous. It was unheard of.

Yes, Sidious said. *It was for... political connections.*

Really? Plagueis felt deeply puzzled. Sidious seemed more than capable of forging those by other means, and he'd certainly never expressed an interest in marriage. He'd even adopted the phrase that Plagueis had often used as an excuse to fend off would-be suitors--that he was 'married to the work'. Like all other Sith of his lineage, Sidious had never had any pragmatic concern he couldn't remedy with considerably fewer extraneous entanglements than matrimony would inevitably present. Until now, it seemed.

Yes. You can be sure it won't interfere with anything. And I will end it once it has served its purpose.

Oh. Understood, then. I'm sure you've thought this through. A part of him wanted to ask how his Apprentice planned to end this marriage, but he quelled the impulse. Normally, he would have pressed for more details, but he could only imagine Sidious was having a difficult enough time coping with the emotional additive, and he didn't want to stress him further. Plagueis wasn't sure what answer *he* wanted to hear, anyway. He vowed to himself that the Nightsisters would pay for the emotional turmoil they had caused his Apprentice.

Yes, every detail has been accounted for. Was there anything else? Sidious asked, looking over at a stuffed shaak occupying a table near Maul's crib. As usual, his Apprentice transmitted none of his emotions through the Force Bond, so Plagueis could only guess at what he was feeling, but unusually for him, he had chosen to share what he was seeing. Sidious' gaze moved from the stuffed shaak back to Maul.

Have you picked a Sith name for him? Plagueis asked.

Since I've made his legal name Maurice, I thought he could simply use his original name as his Sith name. Darth Maul has a good ring to it, I think.

Yes, agreed, Plagueis said. Though I must confess, I do not think he looks much like a Maurice. Perhaps he should be glad that Sidious had not come up with the Sith name for this one.

He actually felt amusement from Sidious then. If the name troubles him, he can always change it. And what a valuable insight into bureaucracy that could be, don't you think?

I suppose so, Plagueis said.

If I may ask, Sidious began, what is it you wish to accomplish on Kalee?

Plagueis hesitated. The answer to that was certainly not to prevent the yam'rii from squeezing Kalee dry of its resources, much as he had sought to squeeze Naboo dry of its plasma. It was certainly not to help end the death and destruction in the villages, towns, and sprawling cities, the poisoning of Kalee's jungles, the covert enslavement of its people, and the theft of their eggs by the yam'rii to be used as a delicacy food item. No, none of that was something a Sith Lord would care about at all.

Two things, Plagueis finally said. Firstly, the Kalee war is a major investment of Chairman Tonith's. Tonith stood a lot to gain if the yam'rii won the war. And it was expected that the yam'rii would win the war. After all, they had the support of the Republic and the IBC. And the kaleesh had the backing of no one at all.

Ah. I understand then. You do not like him.

An understatement, Plagueis said. He has been a thorn in my side for many years.

Why haven't you simply killed him, Master?

Because I want to see him suffer. This was not untrue, but there was more to the matter than that.

Fair, Sidious replied. What is your other interest in Kalee? You said you were there on Sith business?

Yes. The other interest are two Jedi. And Plagueis had been looking forward to discussing them with Sidious.

Ah. Any potential Apprentices?

Master Dooku. The last padawan of Yoda. Plagueis offered.

Oh. Fascinating.

There is much anger in him, Plagueis said.

He sounds most promising. And the other Jedi?

Another Jedi Master by the name of Qui-Gon Jinn. A former padawan of Dooku's. Not as prone to anger, but of interest to me as a subject of study.

Oh, Sidious' intonation flattened. About Dooku--do you think he will turn?

I anticipate it would take some time. But that seems very possible.

Might I be able to meet this Master Dooku sometime soon? While his tone was casual, Sidious rarely

made such requests.

I will see if I can arrange for it, Plagueis said. *I would most like to hear your thoughts on him*. Though Sidious expressed little interest in uncovering most of the deeper mysteries of the Force, he often had keen insights on politics and people. Plagueis was very curious what he might think about Dooku. And of course, it would help immensely if he got along with any other Apprentices Plagueis might take.

Plagueis had to end the discussion soon after that, as having such a long conversation at this distance required a significant expenditure of Force energy to stand in for the external power of the entire galactic comm system. Still, it was a reasonably workable alternative. Perhaps he should use it more often.

It occurred to him that in all his research on Force Bonds, he'd never heard of a sustained conversation of this length happening at this distance. Certainly all of his previous uses of this ability at such a distance had been considerably briefer. He made a few quick notes on his datapad. He decided he should look further into this matter at some point.

Plagueis turned his mind back to his current plots. This was going to require some politicking. But that was not a problem. Plagueis might not be a politician as Sidious was, but he was still quite familiar with navigating such intricacies. Nevertheless, he thought Sidious had exceeded him quite significantly there. There was much he had learned from his Apprentice in that regard.

Though he wouldn't be emulating the marrying part. Whatever situation Sidious had gotten himself into with this Kycina and her political connections was already worrying him enough as it was.

Chapter End Notes

I like to use a lot of canon material in general, but remix it in what I hope will be new and interesting ways. I like AU's because they allow me more flexibility to explore ideas from the canon on my own terms.

The rakata backstory here is based roughly on what I could cobble together from Wookieepedia, KOTOR, and a clip from a SWTOR cutscene, with some extrapolations and extensions to integrate it into this story. But basically, yeah, the rakata had a huge Empire where they enslaved most every other species that they encountered, they genetically altered various species, and had a habit of eating their slaves.

I recently read *Yoda: Dark Rendezvous* to try to get some extra background for Dooku, as well as rereading the Darth Plagueis scenes featuring him, but I want to look at some of the other canon material on him too. I have also read the first of the Jedi Apprentice books to try to get some more canon background for Qui-Gon. I read *The Jedi Path* to try to get more background for both Dooku and Qui-Gon, as well as to help give me ideas for depicting the Jedi in general in this fic.

The anima and pneuma are mentioned by Plagueis in the *Book of Sith*, so I thought it might be fun to mention those here to show a bit about how he conceptualizes the Force.

Anyway, hope you found the chapter of interest, and I'd certainly be interested to hear reader's thoughts if anyone has any they'd like to share! I'm always very curious what other people think of the story--people have so many different perspectives from which they approach stories, but it's also interesting to me to see where different people's perspectives overlap.

Have a comment? Please send me an email at unspeakablehorror@protonmail.com to let me know!