

## Poor Me!

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**Rating:** PG for violence

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**Summary:** In a galaxy with a clear distinction between dark and light, the Sith are born, not made. And masters can be found by their apprentices. Or is an unassuming politician just victim of two Dark Side manipulators?

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## Intro

The heat of the flames made his skin tauten. With a silent sigh he folded his hands into the ornate sleeves and tilted the head deeper to protect his face. This funeral of some Master Jinn was not of interest for him. However, half a life of a Senator is happening on stage, so he would not slip from his role. *You are not Senator any longer; you are Supreme Chancellor now.* Right, that elevation in power was a thing he owed **him**. One of many things, but the only one he knew what to make of.

From the corner of his eye he spotted the rich ornamented hem of the gown worn by a Nubian royal - Queen Amidala. To know she was so close at his side consoled him immediately despite the pointlessness of the situation. How sad she wasn't the Chosen One. In a few years, when she would be well over the brink of adulthood and ripe, he would gladly feel the boot of this beauty on the back of his neck. To be honest, he wouldn't mind if she tried it even now.

Perhaps his Apprentice had hankered after her too. What else could explain this strange plot of a showdown in the hallways of Theed Palace? Once again heaving a low sigh, he freed his gaze from the calling of a jewel-adorned piece of black velvet. To have shared the same desire with **him** would be too precious.

His ears caught a short exchange of thoughts between the two Grand Masters of the Jedi Temple:

"There is no doubt. The mysterious warrior was a Sith."

"Always two there are --- no more --- no less. A Master and an Apprentice."

"But which one was destroyed, the Master or the Apprentice?"

His amplified senses: another thing he owed **him**. *Apprentice, ha!* He felt the inclination to walk over, pat the dark-skinned man's shoulder and say "Yes old friend, that I do wonder too." With a small motion of his head he shook off the crazy idea. It was more likely he would kill the whole assembly with a flick of his fingers than reveal himself to the Jedi. *A fine Master you are!* It was not fair, that some come-along-lately Jedi was so much more the master of living and dying, when he could decide suicide just by challenging his Apprentice.

A resounding noise from the corpse's skull cracking open made him look up to the pyre again. The flames had the colour of his Apprentice's eyes. *Not even this small moment of freedom, Lord Maul?*

## \*\*\* I \*\*\*

When he came to that outer-rim world of Iridonia, he was nothing more than the forty-something senator of a wealthy but otherwise unimportant planet. A politician. Not more incompetent than others, not more ignorant than others, not more greedy than others. In fact, his scores in the later field were rather lower than average. Feeling completely recovered from a recently past nervous fever – yet still he was under triptophagea-medication – he had found the flight boring and looked with anticipation toward the negotiations.

After a long period of palace revolution following palace revolution, his destination was just the other day restored to law and order by Khameir Sarin, an aspiring young King, who desired to bring back his planet into the Union of the Galactic Republic. Such situation promised usually fast signed treaties about huge amounts of money and goods - commerce is a lingua franca of civilisation, much more spread than Basic. Though, it was not he who would make the money. But the knowledge his political work prepared the ground for the trading companies of his home world and from the rest of the Republic, filled him with a kind of professional satisfaction.

Stepping out of the spacecraft, he put his nose into the dry and cold air of a winter afternoon. At first glance Saringul Space Port appeared deserted, but suddenly he spotted curious faces behind transparisteel panes. The hoi polloi was justly barred from the place during the arrival of a senate-member and his retinue.

Half a company of two meter tall Zabraks in the white uniform and the proud tattoo of the Palace Guards were waiting in the lobby for him. The Commander of the reception committee was not that big, but intimidating nonetheless because of his disfigured face and horns. "Senator Palpatine of Naboo, welcome to Iridonia. I am Commander Khahir and at your disposition as long as you stay here."

Assuming this meant honour and protection as well as being under surveillance, Palpatine allowed himself a smart smile: "Thank you Commander. I don't think we need to exercise the protocol in all its ramifications ---"

As expected, his suggestion had struck the right chord. The face of the old trooper lost

completely any humanoid resemblance when it crumpled into a grin: "If you don't mind to stay in your suite Senator. The streets of Chand-Sarin are mostly secure, but there are some pockets of resistance we've not cleaned out yet."

"I don't mind at all. You'll find your task easy," responded Palpatine with a gaze over the panorama displayed by the transparisteel wall behind the back of the soldiers: a steep town-hill with a white, pyramidal castle sitting on its summit. "I'm not planning anything contentious like unguarded walks through the city." Ironically, this was closer to the truth than the Commander might have expected, because Palpatine felt a sudden fit of exhaustion from the hours in hyperspace and yearned for clean sheets in a soft bed.

## ~ ~ ~ II ~ ~ ~

The King had put not only the brand of his name on Iridonia's capital. There was a seemingly new illumination of the streets - which looked like mirrors from a dentist's kit - as well as several official buildings featuring a costly, stony, eclectic style. The rest of the city, especially its private buildings, was just richly made of stone. And amongst the stone were generously strewn installations of metal and duraplast which barely hid their martial nature.

Business traffic was sparse. The towering frames of guardsmen loomed at corners. Four or five times, probably when the invisible border between two districts of the town was reached, Palpatine's transport passed a check point. Of course the motorcade was not flagged down, but he saw locals lining up for scanning - some apparently workers, some with children at their hands, some with grocery bags. Yet none with a vehicle or bulky luggage. However, that had to be expected after the high security welcome at the space port. There were only few other deviations from the fact sheet about Iridonia his aide had prepared prior to the journey. Palpatine drank in the view with genuine interest while the heavily armoured combat vehicles climbed meandering stairs.

With some amazement he noted suddenly that the convoy was en route to the very top of the hill, to the palaces of the Iridonian nobles - Palpatine frowned. "You'll find your quarters much to your liking," spoke Commander Khahir leaning over, "even if we've not been able to cram your servants in." Moments after the leading tank had crossed the last possible junction to turn for the hostels district, Palpatine saw Sarinkap's forbidding gates.

"I don't mind," said Palpatine for the second time this day, "I'm convinced, everything is prepared better than I could have asked for." Palpatine valued his personal well-being quite highly, but only a low-ranking administration-worker would hesitate to sacrifice it for a greater good. At least that was the stance he kept. The realist inside him knew, how pathetic that was. But it felt better.

In the hassle of the arrival Palpatine merely glanced over the suite applied to him. It appeared indeed comfortable and charming, if in an archaic way. The low ceiling of the spacious rooms were held up by heavy columns. None of these were lavishly ornamented, only a few geometric patterns decorated their polished stone. Also the floor and the windowless walls showed naked stone. Nevertheless it was a place well endowed with furniture and comfort.

Finally his cortèges were dismissed and the heavy door closed by the two guardsmen who took up their posts outside - before that the Commander had promised to bring back the aide back in

time. Then the bed embraced Palpatine.

### ~ ~ ~ III ~ ~ ~

Two standard hours of retirement refreshed Palpatine sufficiently to let him fully acknowledge the choiceness he was treated with. Not only that Commander Khahir had taken great pains to send every kind of entertainment a Human might want to the Senator's suite – which spoke volumes of his happiness about the short cut protocol – no, the fact of an accommodation in the King's proximity, in Sarinkap Palace itself, meant he was indeed welcome. Good auspices for business. With delight did Palpatine run his hand over the luxurious furniture in the parlour. The moment he was about to inspect closer a dire yet splendid looking weapon hanging on the wall, his aide appeared: "May I disturb you, Senator? Commander Khahir is asking if he's allowed to waste a moment of your precious time."

With furrowed brow stared Palpatine at the woman – it doesn't suit that old Zabrak soldier to use such a ceremonious address: "That's all?"

"He is not alone."

"Well?"

"I think it is the King," spilled his aide hastily out.

"Oh," made Palpatine. But immediately he braced himself. A quick glance over the room and over his image in a mirror told him, that everything looked neat – he wore his official ornate robes, and his servants had left no half emptied travel cases or used dishes. "Please show in the Commander and who ever accompanies him."

The 'who-ever' was masked with an ordinary, hooded cloak, but the respectful distance Commander Khahir observed when entering the room told Palpatine enough. He tried to make eye contact with the officer – the officer nodded.

Palpatine bowed deeply and courteously: "I am honoured by your visit, your Highness." When he rose, he looked into a pair of bloodshot eyes, scrutinising him with a burning intensity. The King, now with removed hood, appeared to be not older than twenty. His features bore apart from an confusing pattern of black tattoo also the mark of cultivation. True, the Zabrak's horns on the hairless skull were sharp and there was cruelty in the cut of his mouth. And his nose was too broad to be called noble. But no uncertainty tensed him. He carried his head, his shoulders proudly, in fact his whole body in an attitude of silent self-reliance. That man was anything but a low-cast occupying a throne by sheer luck.

"Senator," spoke the King eventually, "your hand, Senator." Palpatine obliged and received a double-handed almost cordially pressure. "I am very glad you're here," then the King turned to the officer: "Anda?"

The Commander saluted: "Senator, the King is expecting you at his table this evening."

And Palpatine was alone again.

#### ~ ~ ~ IV ~ ~ ~

The morning after the dinner, Palpatine, when he had dressed, felt not inclined to move beyond a divan's cushion in his boudoir. The King had obviously summoned nine tenths of his clansfolk for this banquet to convince the guests of the high interest Iridonia took in rejoining the Union of the Galactic Republic. So Palpatine's head was in a whirl of East-Sarin, North-Sarin, Wood-Sarin, Sarin-de and -o. To still his consciousness, which told him it were not the names, but the Iridonian cordials, which were responsible for his headache, he did a take on the fruit basket offered from the Kings table for breakfast.

Slowly advancing through the basket's juicy content - Palpatine was not exactly a lover of such healthy pleasures – he tried to pass in review of the evening...

Among the group of local dignities gathering around the King he had spotted a noble figure in austere dark clothes. The soft white of the man's full hair and neatly trimmed beard contrasted with his abyssal black eyes. Jedi.

Palpatine didn't loathe them. There was just an silent inner reservation he felt toward any people he couldn't predict easily. "May I ask for your name, Master Jedi?"

"No Jedi any longer," shouted animatedly the King and quickly moved up to the two men, "please meet my dear friend Count Dooku of Serenno! Count, please met the esteemed," here made the King a significant break while his gaze lingered on Palpatine, "Senator Palpatine of Naboo."

Palpatine didn't learn more about the 'Count-no-longer-Jedi', because the King signalled to the major domo the beginning of the dinner. Finding himself placed amongst two lairds and their respective wives Palpatine fitted smoothly into a mode of cheerful small talk.

During the ongoing event the King had not only send him friendly gazes of his bloodshot eyes, but gave deliberate signs of his favour - i.e. with a toast to his guests health. And Palpatine had acknowledged the man who obviously played the game as seasoned as he did...

When the leathery skin of a Mon-Calamari blood-berry released its surprisingly sweet-sour pulp on his tongue, his aide announced the Commander and 'company'.

#### ~ ~ ~ V ~ ~ ~

The King, entering shortly after Palpatine's amazed "Show'em in!", was smiling apologetically: "Ah, the protocol! I deeply regret, but the only occasion for a private talk is when I visit you in disguise --- I hope, you can forgive me the repeated intrusions?"

Construing the situation according to his professional experience, Palpatine responded: "I'm honoured. Whatever detail your Highness want to clarify before we start officially the trade negotiations ---"

"Trade," snorted the King, "a man of your refined culture ought to prefer an intelligent exchange of ideas instead of plain business."

"My prior mandate is to be herald of free enterprise, but ---"

But the King ignored the underlying apology and growled: "I have some questions for you. Do you think the Galactic Republic is at its end?"

Apparently the Zabrak was not as seasoned as he had assumed. A zealot! A power-hungry barbarian! And young. Silently cursing himself for having disregarded the hidden meaning of a shaved head and bloodshot eyes, Palpatine managed to decline with mock ease. "No. Definitely not. The Union is still growing, new members are joining, adding their economic as well as their military powers to the Republic. Your planet will be one in a big number. But --- a very welcome one." He smiled benevolently, his arms spreading as if to make that welcome palpable.

"That is not what I mean," pushed the King, a few degrees smoother but still at the edge of growling, "don't you think there is a decline of ---", he paused, searching for a word, a matching term, " --- force?"

"I'm not quite sure what you're meaning, your Highness," confessed Palpatine well aware of the probing gaze fixed on him. To his utter surprise the King did suddenly cast his eyes down: "Of course. I beg your pardon. Perhaps you like to have a look on this," and produced a holocron from a hidden pouch within his cloak.

The Commander discreetly cleared his throat. Swiftly the King turned to him and asked: "Anda?" The Commander tilted his head toward the door. "Ah," brightened the King up, "yes, bring him in!"

Alternately staring at the diminutive opaque pyramid in his hands and the Count of Serenno, Palpatine made a mental note to instruct his aide to provide more detail on the issue of people lurking in the antechamber.

## ~ ~ ~ VI ~ ~ ~

"Words are not where the real power of the King lies," broke the Count finally the uneasy silence.

Palpatine's joints ached, reminding him ferociously of the overdue dose of anti-fever drugs and in a fit of clairvoyance he felt his business endangered: "Excellence, can you tell me what went wrong? The King is gracious and affable, but I have a certain feeling, I'm no step closer to accomplishing my task than a Yawa to become a supercargo with collecting worn out droids!" Ashamed of this lack of manners, Palpatine let follow a mumbled " --- if your Excellence forgive me that I'm not mincing matters."

The nobleman however gave no sign of disgust, instead advised Palpatine to seat himself and moved another fauteuil close for his own comfort. "I see. And I can assure you there is nothing wrong so far. Quite the contrary, the King is sympathetic."

"Aaah, I couldn't hope for more," thanked Palpatine, grateful as well.

"Nevertheless," cautioned Count Dooku gravely, "you said a very true thing too: your task, you will not complete it. Perhaps."

"Your advice, Excellence?"

"Look at this planet. Of course I don't have to go into details, because the official archives as well as those of the Jedi were open for your aides. This planet is known for its rich past. But what is left?" The Count's well balanced sad pose was mirrored by Palpatine to convey his interest - he was waiting for the facts. "Now, the King is working hard on giving Iridonia back it's rightful place. Certainly this aims not only at Iridonia. The Galaxy is an complex web of cultures and histories. So if the Iridonian way of live will be reborn again, the Galaxy will not be the same."

Palpatine took a deep breath of discontent but nodded: "That is of course to be expected. And I will take your explanations into account as much as I can. However, I dearly doubt an ordinary trade negotiation should be influenced by such a long-term agenda."

"That would be valid if your mandate came exclusively from the Senate," responded mildly the Count.

"Well, I can't see any other option ---"

"But there is," insisted Dooku leaning forward. "The Senate is a power, however not of it's own. It is the Temple which pulls the strings like a puppet master."

Not willing to indulge in an extended conversation with an gentry-man without land mourning his parting with the Jedi, Palpatine turned his head to avoid the dark eyes' spell and said firmly:

"They're members of the Senate and as such talk business. I'm hardly convinced we should care much, over what esoteric ideas the Jedi might pore in their Temple."

"What is business," declined the former Jedi with an edge of gaiety in his voice and Palpatine did fear rationality gone again from the scene. "I really recommend the lecture from that holocron. It is about the Great Hyperspace War in terms you probably never imagined to see written down."

"Forbidden lore!" Palpatine threw the data carrier on the desk. "Count, I did ---"

"Not too shy my friend," laughed Dooku rising from his armchair. "Another trait not belonging to the character of the King is patience. He is welcoming you as the recent Master of the Sith."

## ~ ~ ~ VII ~ ~ ~

His first and undiluted reaction was: *Why not?* Then Palpatine shouted for his aide. Several mute seconds ticked by. Nobody showed up. Not even the Count came back, who had left without much ado. Palpatine opened his mouth to shout a second time, but closed it without uttering a sound. Briskly he rushed out of his suite.

The moment he realised what a sight a Senator hurrying red faced and wild-eyed down the hallway was, Palpatine straightened his robes, returned and accosted that one of the guards which facial features under the criss-cross of tattoo seemed more intelligent: "Officer, you don't happen by chance to know where my aide is?" And added, noticing the face of the Zabrak falling: "Or anyone else of my party?"

To Palpatine's chagrin the soldier just stated the obvious after snapping crisply to attention: "Sergeant Khahir-dee, Sir. They're not here, Sir." Then, with a sideways glance at his companion, he continued: "We have a situation, Sir, The Commander ordered to secure the Humans on their ship. They're preparing for an emergency start."

The other trooper unclipped a palm sized folding-messenger from his belt. While it displayed two-dimensional images of hazy street stairs which were randomly lit by what appeared to be heavy blaster fire, he lifted his free hand to a sloppy salute: "Ensign Bna-Khahir, Senator. Your transport to the ship is prepared too. Any minute if it's necessary. But Sarinkap's walls are high." When his uneven features were pleated with a broad grin, the kinship of his clan showed.

### ~\*~ VIII ~\*~

With a silent "Thank you," Palpatine stumbled back into his suite. There he sank down at the large desk in the parlour. *Why me? Why Iridonia?* His hand was not shaky when he rubbed his burning forehead, but he repeated that gesture involuntarily several times.

That he could do nothing except wait, wait attentive yet unmoved he knew. As well that he would not fail. But it never felt good. It hasn't the first time, nor did it this time, or any other time... *Blindly groping along the train of events instead of being a step ahead. I really would give my eye teeth that this should be the last time. But,* and here Palpatine smiled ruefully at his thoughts, *that did you promise every time you got outmanoeuvred. Yet nobody did acknowledge your offer so far.*

In such way consoled he rose defiantly – only to sit down again. His suite had no window. Not even a single, wretched crenel, which would allow him to confirm the treachery with his own eyes. Or the truth...

He didn't waste a thought about a search for technical equipment to connect to the outside. He had done this in the first hours after arrival and found nothing. His hosts obviously took the word very seriously, that the dignity of a member of the senate forbade him to carry items of the mundane world like communicators. Normally nothing to become nervous about. Normally he had his aide.

And then he realised, his offer **had** been accepted moments before: the holocron glimmered ominously on the table. He reached out with a hand... but stopped dead, snorting: "Get stuffed!" and turned pointedly to view the artefacts which decorated the suite. Palpatine even managed to suppress the idea, the paintings, weapons and statuettes where there because the Commander had foreseen his detention.

The rest of the day ticked by as mute as its first seconds. Palpatine was fed with a generous delivery from the King's table, but not equally with information. Two bits he did extract from the uneducated albeit polite soldiers: King and Commander were away, battling. The man from



Serenno might be accompanying them. Or maybe not. Yet it came as a kind of comfort to Palpatine, when the two guardsmen took over the duties of chambermaids.

## ~ ~ ~ IX ~ ~ ~

Sleep had not been refreshing, nevertheless on the next day Palpatine groomed and dressed himself choicely. A look into the mirror showed a cool image in dark blue. Only when he breakfasted on the remnants of the yesterday meal, he suddenly realised he tasted nothing and chewed mechanically. Irritated Palpatine pushed his plate away. But aloud he said: "Now let us admire Sarinkap's splendour."

The string of rooms applied to him lay in an upper level of the pyramid-like castle, so the storey base was small and a walker needed only few steps to reach one of the staircases. Those were open, and, while connecting different floors, allowed vistas over high and wide chambers.

Though his wardens had not hindered him yesterday to run down the whole hall in anger, Palpatine's first step outside his door was stealthy. The soldiers however – Bna-Khahir and Khahir-dee again – huddled in a distance from him over a holomessenger's display and palavered in an agitated manner, their horns almost locked. So Palpatine had already scurried half of the corridor's length, when he heard a commotion. As he looked back, he saw the tall Zabraks hastily approaching him. The Sergeant with an dumbstruck expression, Ensign Bna-Khahir concerned.

Out of a moments whim Palpatine did send them an encouraging smile before continuing his way now in a more portly fashion. From the corner of his eye he noticed that the men paled – which was hilarious given the circumstances. Palpatine shook his head, then turned his attention to other things.

Sarinkap was overwhelming - even by Theed Palace standards. It needed some time until Palpatine realised, it was only the weightiness of the buildings material which provoked this feeling of awe. He reminded himself that actually the Iridonian burg was an old, small thing, cupping the top of an rocky pile and digging a decent way into its guts.

But indeed, there was almost no wood used in the construction, just a multitude of different stones. Far from displaying a tacky mosaic of stark contrasts, the tiles, pillars, beams and stairs were paired with ever so slight variations in colour and texture so it left the impression of an exquisitely composed Wrodian carpet or a garden providing the landscape of a whole planet rising from the glassy sea over lush flatlands and hills up to the ice-clad mountains. Moreover, each of the sparsely carved surfaces was polished to satin-like perfection and thus matched seamlessly.

A visitor had ample opportunity to appreciate the workmanship of the master masons who had created this place, because, compared with Palpatine's suite, the other rooms in the mass of stone were deprived of furniture or decoration. They even lacked heating. He guessed that poor display might be a result of the war-minded last years. But as long as he was wandering, Palpatine didn't encounter an entity – Iridonian or droid - to ask if he guessed right.

He could have turned for explanation to his shadow-like following guards, but something held him back and after a hour of aimless cruising he retired meekly to his suite. There Palpatine discovered his triptophagea was gone.

~\*~ X ~\*~

Palpatine went to bed - and fast so - with a single thought: When I only could have walked more than half a floor unseen, --- The thought did still prevail in the morning. However, Palpatine had also still no spontaneous inspiration about how to manage escape. He even had a faint premonition that this day might be disposed to tie the knot even more instead of loosing it.

The food-delivery from the King's table had become significantly smaller. And so was the information input - in fact, his keepers refused to talk at all. When Palpatine seriously persisted, Bna-Khahir yanked a blaster from his belt. Trembling with anger but deprived of words Palpatine stared into the black eye of a muzzle. For the rest of the cleaning job in his chambers the Senator was held at gun point.

Eventually left at his own devices, Palpatine didn't move. Pain showered over him and he pressed his lids shut until it ebbed. When he had sneaked out of his suite yesterday, he did not have a clear idea what to do. He had vaguely hoped, he would size the occasion with a sure grip when it might present itself. Of course, the goal was to bid farewell to this planet sooner than later! However, without blowing up his mission and leaving burned soil for those who would continue it at another time...

After half a standard hour of fruitless pondering Palpatine gave up. He went even that far to admit, it was not the exhaustion of the fever, but his lack of imagination what barred him from action. This done, suddenly fear and fury vanished, albeit he still felt sweaty and weak. And then, with another wave of nausea, before his inner eye resurfaced the ensign's thick features frozen in an mask of angst over a shaky blaster. *They're afraid of me*, Palpatine realised, *the soldiers are afraid of me*. It was as if a cool and bland hand had finally wiped all the heat from his brow.

Feeling significantly better, Palpatine could not resist undertaking again a half hearted attempt to understand this new insight. Yet of course he didn't came to any sensible conclusion. So Palpatine shrugged and decided to abandon one way of killing time for another: He activated the Sith holocron.

Several standard hours later Palpatine leaned back satisfied. Since the technology of a holocron demanded to 'read' it strictly in sequence, it had kept him occupied for most of the day, thus preventing unreasonable actions on his part. Besides, the things the diminutive image of a nameless Sith Master had been telling him, were not as illogical as he had expected.

That Sith and Jedi are hailed 'fruit of the same tree' he knew before. But what he had learned further made him wonder a little why they had to split at all. However, the Sithly approach deemed him closer to real life. Empathy down to passion, longing down to hunger - the way of the worlds was not a walk in the park, why shouldn't feelings be strong and raw? Taking things as they are and making the best of it? What a contrast to the Jedi-way, with its detached yet ubiquitous caring! The strict immaculateness, which those Knights of the Light aimed for, was not easy to grasp for anyone who put fate into the balancing power of compromises. Which was basically what a politician is used to doing. Somehow Palpatine was glad the Sith were not extinct as the common belief touted.

Animated he paced around the table. After knowing better how his captors ticked, he would adjust the course of his negotiation. However, his talent was wasted with the plain troopers' minds. He hoped for a bigger game.

## ~\*~ XI ~\*~

Perhaps Palpatine would have lost his spirits again in another rush of fever, but eventually Dooku appeared. "I heard, my dear Senator, you were interested in Sarinkap's splendour? May I offer myself as your guide?"

Palpatine eyed the Count heedfully. The old man held himself straight, but his pale face appeared today almost waxy, as after long vigils - he smiled: "Battle meditation is power sapping." Then Count Dooku of Serenno cleared his throat and rose his voice: "The King is sending me. However, not only as your guide, but to beg your pardon. And as a sign of how he feels toward you", the nobleman accompanied his next words with a gesture which was small, but left no doubt it comprised all the movables in Palpatine's rooms, "he's giving you this as a gift."

"But that's really not necessary," Palpatine sketched a smile and a bow, while making a mental note to let his aide check what might be the Iridonian attitude to the refusal of bribery.

The response was dry: "It is your heirloom."

Deciding to leave that as it was for now - especially because he remembered, he didn't know where and how his aide was - Palpatine diverted: "You offered a guided tour through the castle. I can not think of anything better at the moment, because," and here he managed to utter a little embarrassed laughter, "I have to admit, I'm bored."

"Follow me," said the Count curtly.

It did not escape Palpatine's attention, that the soldiers did again not become aware of him leaving his rooms. However, this time he was not even discovered after the full hallway. Suspiciously he watched the renegade Jedi at his side as they turned the corner of the staircase. But Dooku was now again his old amiable self and started to explain with true connoisseurship what they saw while he walked Palpatine much deeper into the basements of Sarinkap than he had gone at his attempted outbreak.

## ~\*~ XII ~\*~

It was amazing how intricate the embellishments of the stony walls from storey to storey became - the closer the core, the more the stone was dressed. Full of hidden meanings, it provided the apt reader with an elaborated subtext of Iridonian history. The term 'battle-meditation' had rung a bell with Palpatine after studying the Sith holocron, but now he deciphered with the help of this recent lecture a whole corpus of prologues, footnotes and commentaries to this planets ancient, Sithly times.

Reluctantly he put aside the diversion these chiselled pictures were and set out the first probing questions, to ascertain if the Count would help him escape: "Excellence, you have been very open to me. And very kind, and I hope you don't mind if I ---"

Dooku smiled and shook a finger like they were two playing boys and Palpatine, the younger one, needed a rebuke: "May I draw your attention to this particular pattern? It might amaze the uninitiated that it survived the centuries. And it is of special interest for a person like you, because it explains how a master is found according to the rites."

For obvious reasons the King had not ordered these dark carvings to be removed. However, that nobody else had brought up the issue in the era of re-established law since the King's accession to the throne was something to behold. Even if no Zabrak - dignitary or ordinary one - objected, what of the Jedi? Didn't their libraries remember that certain book of stone? Or had they become force-less with time, no longer reaching out into the whole of the Galaxy? That would give the rank of a Sith Master a different meaning... Annoyed with himself Palpatine resolved to pursue the issue seriously for now: "Dooku, I ask you --- !"

Again that smile and the childish gesture: "Ah, my dear friend ---" Feigning surprise at his bold tongue, the Count was suddenly all saucer-eyes: "You allow me to consider you such, as a friend that is, don't you?"

"Did I say otherwise the last time?" Palpatine bit his lips. His mind raced, searching for a new approach. He was not the man to let tasks he undertook to become nipped in the bud. As long as his head was clear and the calling of some ancient tales not too loud.

### ~ ~ ~ XIII ~ ~ ~

At the very bottom of the palace a crypt was situated. From the hocus-pocus the Count made before they entered, Palpatine gathered they must have reached the threshold of something very important.

"Look, dear Senator," Dooku spoke with solemn voice, "this is the last remnant of the Sith Academy of Iridonia."

"Home of the Acolytes," Palpatine intoned mechanically remembering a snippet from the holocron.

"Yes," nodded the Count, "and only because of the strong sense of tradition of the Iridonian regents, has it been preserved in the form of a tomb."

"Pretty clever," mumbled Palpatine.

For a moment the Count seemed irritated, but easily he took up the thread of his yarn again: "Due to the strong sense of tradition --- and prudent foresight --- in the remains of the Academy generations of noble Zabraks paid tribute to their ancestors. Thus unknowingly keeping alive a cult more precious than any of their own."

Little impressed but hiding it well, Palpatine ducked his head under the low lintel and stepped down the two stairs into the chamber. It had the golden proportions every species in the Galaxy, regardless of their size and bodily shape, would consider accomplished. Also the room featured a circular bas-relief placed high on the wall. Its blunt ornaments set it apart from the other chisellings at Sarinkap's lower storeys'. At the foot of the walls was a likewise simple circular

bench.

Palpatine was about to make himself comfortable on the chilly stone, when the Count intervened: "Oh no, don't sit down. Unless you wish to become a sacrificial being."

"Why not," shrugged Palpatine ignoring the Count's warning. The sightseeing tour had - like the lecture of the holocron - exceeded his expectations for entertainment. Admittedly, the bar had been low enough to let him embrace everything which was not downright boring, but now his nerves were wearing. He had all the way along failed to convey his request. Anxiety was building in him and somehow Palpatine was not amazed when his gloomiest fears came true - Dooku turned a deaf ear at his sarcastic comment but instead eyed him with awe: "He was right. Such bravery can only come from one who is mastering living and dying."

"Might be," sighed Palpatine and searched for the trace of kidding in the placid features of his companion.

But there was nothing of this, not even when the Count did wind up the nonsense further: "Don't you know, to prove worth of the Sith Order you have to dispatch something close to you? And what, esteemed friend, could be closer to you than yourself?"

Palpatine deemed it not wise to question this logic. If Sith shared their ancestry with the Jedi, they probably had to think in so tricky a manner. He straightened his robes, turned and left the room. When he was half way up the stairs, he heard the call. Albeit 'heard' was not the correct word. Bodily he knew it has been uttered, yet, there was no sound. As he looked back, he had the impression, the room swirled threatening around the man from Serenno who fought a losing battle against that vortex. Involuntarily Palpatine held out a hand. The movement stopped.

"See what I mean?" Said the Count with flat voice and climbed stiff legged out of the crypt.

"I have fever," spat Palpatine - the deep and carefree laughter that shook Dooku in response wiped away all the seriousness he had summoned as his last resort.

#### ~\*~ XIV ~\*~

After the-walk-in-the-dark - as Palpatine noted now jocular the jaunt with the former Jedi into the remnants of the Sith Academy - his imprisonment became lighter. He was eventually one day invited to an visit of the King at his sister's residence. That the republic official was not fully back into royal grace told him the small fact that he was fetched by a ordinary sergeant instead by Commander Anda Khahir. But for the moment Palpatine didn't care: once outside, he greedily took in the day-light, the stone-houses, the empty streets. In his head was a soft haze which felt quite comfortable. This comfort was only once in a while interrupted by the well known stabbing pain in his joints.

Palpatine had supposed the destination would be either within the greater vicinities of Sarinkap or at least close to the upper quarters of the city. However, he was guided to the usual armoured vehicle, a convoy formed and climbed down Chand-Sarin's street stairs, deeper and deeper, until the city ended as if it was cut off. After that, the journey continued in a beautiful albeit deserted flatland. Only a few factories, which had maybe missed the opportunity for putting a foot on the hill, crouched in the spreading plain. Their lights and those of Saringul Space Port danced in the

distance in the clear air of the winter evening. Palpatine couldn't remember a line from his pre-mission readings which would explain why the Zabraks did so neglect the lower regions of Iridonia but lived on the raw rocks of the highland. Perhaps there was no rational reason, just a twisted love of the mountaineers' hardship.

Suddenly he felt the fever recurring in full force. A form came into sight, a form of housing with all the markings of a Jedi's settlement. Dooku, sitting at his side, made also an motion as if feeling uncomfortable: "See, they had even set foot on this heartland of the Sith!" Palpatine didn't say a word. Of course the Jedi had! He knew this from his aides scripts.

The motorcade headed toward the buildings and the Count answered Palpatine's unspoken question: "Into this former convent Tirhoba, the King's sister, has retired."

Palpatine suppressed a chuckle - how easily this lie was spoken by the nobleman. Because, the closer they came, the clearer one could see the ditches, the barbed wire and other additions which had turned the ancient convent into a contemporary prison. There seemed even to hang some dead Zabraks from makeshift gallows as a gruesome garnish of its boundaries.

## ~ ~ ~ XV ~ ~ ~

Tirhoba was an extremely bulky specimen with light-skin. Her thin, fair hair hung in disregarded strands around a face, which had burning eyes. Those at least she had in common with her younger brother. The rest was blunt and brutish, her body wrapped in the gold studded royal brocade.

She had not welcomed them - the tanks, together with the accompanying soldiers, were left back in a narrow, clean-swept yard and King, Count, Commander and Palpatine were ushered by prison guards through several security locks. The naked walls of the rooms the group went through told Palpatine's searching gaze nothing of the buildings history. Maybe those rooms had been in use for incarceration for such a long time, they had forgotten for what they originally were meant.

The King, immediately after entering the chamber posing as Tirhoba's parlour, started to pace to and fro, filling the place with his presence and making the room's smallness almost palpable. "Now, Madame? Do you feel entertained with your machinations?!" He flashed his sister a fast sideways glance while he passed her. "But we nabbed some of them already! They are like dust under my feet --- petty disloyal anarchists. And we will find all of them! All of them, hear me?!" The King turned quickly on his heels before he added in a slow but menacing growl: "And one will play the flute. Pray to whatever you deem powerful, my dear sister, that this one misses the tune."

Tirhoba only folded her arms in front of her heavy breasts, pointedly ignoring the commotion. And that was the set for the next standard hour - the King walking up and down the room, hurling gruesome threats and accusations at his sister, while she remained in brooding silence. The Commander, finding the stage play obviously tedious, gestured Palpatine and the Count to remain seated, but himself grabbed the arm of Tirhoba's lady's companion. She was a young thing with a cute set of horns and delicate tattoo, looking in wordless plea at her mistress as the old Zabrak dragged her out of the room.

When Palpatine followed Tirhoba's eyes, he saw the rebels were hanged right in front of her windows. She however seemed not to recognise them. At least not recognise them as corpses, yet maybe as followers who are loyal to the utmost. He himself had nothing the like to expect from his aide and servants, left alone such display of allegiance till death. He was a poor businessman who could only speculate about his staff's fate. Suddenly Palpatine felt Dooku's gaze lingering on him. He looked up and saw a fine wry smile on the former Jedi's face.

Approximately half a hour later the King ran out of insults and the visit came to an abrupt end. With the Commander still missing, the three men got back to their vehicles in the small yard.

Anda Khahir appeared in the last moment when the engines already roared. He adjusted his usually ugly grin and buttoned the uniform up. Toward the King he whispered: "She told nothing new." Palpatine didn't know if this exchange was meant for him. But he had picked it up with an ease he couldn't remember to possess before.

## ~ ~ ~ XVI ~ ~ ~

On the way back the convoy ran into one of the not-yet-cleaned-out-pockets-of-resistance the Commander had mentioned during the welcome: In the finally arrived night the leading tank exploded in a blinding blast.

Already before its debris rained on the dome of their own vehicle, Commander Khahir growled: "Out! It's just one, but lights will come on." Not caring if his word was obeyed, he crouched over the intercom and barked orders - without question the armed team of the combat vehicle jumped down into the darkness. Another tank - closer now - burst too. But it was empty - Palpatine saw in the glimpse of the next lightning the backs of its dispersing troopers left and right from the street.

Palpatine didn't know how he had managed to scramble from their armoured car. He stood on unsure feet in the cold, vaguely feeling the King's protective figure at his side. *The Commander was right*, Palpatine thought. It must be a single attacker and thus unable to backup the success of the first shots with a wave of warriors taking on the motorcade's approaching squad. That desperate assassin's fate was sealed. And the guy knew that...

Palpatine got the King by his collar and dragged him to the ground. A flare grazed over them and hit close and ear breaking. The King struggled to get up. Palpatine however shove his body upon the young man's and summoned all his might to hold him down. After the second flare the King gave in and lay soft and silent. After the third Palpatine eased his grip. Slowly they rose.

The King brushed the dust from his robes, whispering hoarsely: "You saw it coming, didn't you? But I did not, --- Master ---"

The last word had sounded almost like a question, Palpatine listened its fading syllables. An strange urge overcame him: he wished light to study the Zabrak's face. He wanted to see the down cast eyes, the trembling lips and colourless cheeks... Once again he had tasted fear. Once again it had not been his. And thus felt good. Rejuvenating almost. Palpatine did lift his chin, rolled his shoulders back and took a deep breath. The numbness was gone.

But there had been an undercurrent of something else in what had touched him. Something

strong, much stronger than the tickle of angst - Palpatine's gaze fell on the mangled form of the Commander still bend over the intercom in the slowly burning out tank. Shocked Palpatine froze. He heard the King's recollected voice at his back: "Brave man. He died for me. He'll get all honours for his funeral."

## ~\*~ XVII ~\*~

It got up, up, up the mountains - many Zabrakian ceremonies are to be carried out as close as possible to the skies merciless light. Palpatine lay heavy in the armoured car's seat. A thick rug covered him but could not prevent the cold coming through the open top of the vehicle cutting in his bones. Yet he didn't mind, because every next moment a fire wave ran through his veins, making him wish to throw the blanket away. And then again he didn't mind, because of the cold...

The day was grey, the heavy clouds almost ripping themselves as they chased low over the rocks. In the gorge at the lee of their road languidly floated washed-out ice sheets as if they were in a stale drink. When the convoy turned a bend however, the guests of the funeral saw an colourful picture. Its sudden beckoning invitation was too strong and Palpatine had to sit upright: Young males, with bare torso despite the cold, brandished radiant flags.

Yet even in this sea of beauty, of brawny arms, broad shoulders and muscular chests, the King's supple figure stood out. He moved with an unparalleled grace, whirling and throwing and catching the heavy flagpole as if it was nothing. His tattoos covered every piece of skin as it was with the other Zabbraks. But only over his body the silken fabric licked as if the black lines were accentuating the rippling muscles downright deliciously. He smiled daring when his eye met Palpatine's.

"Did I tell you, he was the last Kings courted dancer, did I?" Asked Dooku leaning over.

Palpatine nodded absent minded and sunk back in his seat. He knew it was meant for him, even if he don't knew why. *Maybe, he mused, maybe, that is the path to the top. A mediocre Senator, a quondam favourite and a defected Jedi ---* At least as a Master he would be free. More free than he had been at any given time in his life before, wouldn't he? It was useless to argue since neither King nor Count seemed to have an ear for reason. So, there left no other choice...

Meanwhile the congregation of young men had flocked to a small elevation where they rammed their flags into the ground and set out to do a serious hop. Palpatine was not sure, but thought he might have spotted Kahir-dee amongst them. There were jumps and somersaults, bodies again and again flying high into the air, spinning, then tumbling..., tumbling...

"My dear Palpatine, sometimes there is a *déjà vu ---,*" begun Dooku, but Palpatine forcefully turned his head and for once looked the Count of Serenno straight into his black eyes: *Tumbling down ---- endlessly down --- hacked to pieces by a Jedi's light sabre.*

Count Dooku didn't flinch, but pulled the blanket tighter around himself while he indignantly mumbled: "Fear is only for apprentices."

At this moment a cold rainstorm swathed everything. Palpatine barely sensed Bna-Khahir, the



driver of the tank, cursing inwardly about weather, funerals and open cars, then he passed out.

### **Extro**

The Jedi. Perhaps he should loathe them. Because he could predict even these people easily now. The one, recently knighted, who was physically responsible for the death of his Apprentice, held the hand of that child. Anakin. *So small a brat yet so important.* As the boy returned his stare, the Chancellor did caste his eyes down and stifled a grin. *You will be proud of me, Lord Maul.*

