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Appearances can be Deceiving

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Watching the fire consume the hated enemy flesh, Palpatine felt a dash of satisfaction amidst his barely controlled rage. However the satisfaction was soon drowned out in the mixture of anger, hatred, and lust for revenge that swirled within him. It had taken years to train Darth Maul, years. And for what? So that he could kill one aging Jedi before being killed himself by a hot headed Padawan. He had often told Maul not to underestimate the enemy, not to let down his guard until his prey had been vanquished, but the younger man had obviously ignored his instructions.

Thinking back to when he had felt the Force announce the death of the Jedi lying on the bier before him now, Palpatine remembered how he had relished the sensation like the taste of a very fine and rare wine. He had, however, not been able to enjoy it to the fullest as he had been busy with other matters and had expected to feel the Force ripple with such delicacies often in the near future. As it was, he'd probably have to wait several more years until he had trained another apprentice who possessed the capabilities of killing more Jedi.

He felt the sliver of satisfaction within him grow ever so slightly as he looked at Qui-Gon Jinn's burning form, but it also fueled his ever growing flame of Dark emotions. One Jedi's death was all he got after all the time and effort he had put into training and shepherding Maul down the Dark path. Originally he had planned everything precisely so that he would have a fully trained apprentice at his side when he commenced his rise to power. Now he would have to juggle training an apprentice and taking the necessary steps towards laying the foundation for his Empire.

Palpatine glanced to his right to observe Queen Amidala for a few seconds, suppressing the smile he felt coming. Unknowingly she had helped him enormously with the first and most important step to turning his Empire from a brilliant idea into reality. He was sure that, when all was revealed, she would immensely regret her decision to bring up the motion to remove Valorum from office. She would also be humiliated by how easily he had used her to his own end. But that would only come when he dropped his disguise and showed himself for what he truly was. Until then, she would trust him implicitly.

The thought of how he was misleading and manipulating every single member of the Naboo government and of the Galactic Senate, caused him to feel a sprinkling of pleasure, which Palpatine masterfully hid both from view and from the senses of the Jedi who were present for the cremation in the Theed Temple. He had long ago learned to mask his true emotions while letting whatever facial expressions he needed to be shown for all to see. At the moment anyone who glanced at him, saw him mourning the death of a man he honored. Even the Jedi would only be able to sense sorrow and regret radiating from him as that was the aura he projected around himself for them to sense. His mental shields were so perfected that even one of their probes wasn't likely to pierce his guise and discover his true nature and intentions.

Whenever Palpatine used the Dark Side on Coruscant, his shields were up, thus preventing the Jedi from sensing his presence and actions. The fact that the planet was also teeming with life forms of every imaginable race, some of which were long forgotten in the slums of the city-planet, and that the Jedi believed until only very recently that the Sith were long dead, also helped. One did not look for what one believed to have long since gone extinct, especially so near to one's sanctum. That was the Jedi's greatest weakness. They believed themselves to be nearly invincible in their number and power. That the enemy would tremble in fear of their might. And, even now, once they discovered the fact that the Sith were still alive, they expected them to come from the fringes of the galaxy. The very possibility of the Sith being on Coruscant, the capitol of the Republic and home of the Jedi Council and Temple, never entered their mind.

Over time the Jedi had become complacent when all that existed to interrupt the period of peace that seemed to have cloaked the galaxy in its embrace were minor uprisings or small disputes between planets. But then, Palpatine had counted on this complacency and had added it into his plans. Now the time was ripe for him to conquer the Republic as it had begun rotting from the inside out and the Jedi had forgotten just exactly what the Sith were. True, they had the old fables and tales to draw upon, but they had not gone to battle in a long time. The true power the Sith were capable of controlling had long since been forgotten. Not only had there not been a major war in centuries, but they had also not had a Force strong opponent in nearly twice as long. Now they were vulnerable, ready to be exterminated.

'Appearances can be deceiving,' Palpatine thought, reveling in its simplicity. He had always known that the best place to hide was out in the open where the enemy least expected it. There one could easily remain hidden as the opponents exhausted themselves by searching for him in the most obscure places. One couldn't get more out in the open than he currently was. He had just been elected Supreme Chancellor of the Republic and would therefore be working closely with the Jedi on matters of galactic importance. Thus he would get firsthand updates on all their futile efforts to locate him.

Suddenly a wave of uncontrolled grief and despair washed over Palpatine's senses, dousing his thoughts. Looking in the direction of the projection, he found himself looking at young Anakin Skywalker. Watching the firelight reflect off of his blue eyes, the Supreme Chancellor didn't need the Force to gauge the depth of the boy's grief. From what he had heard, Jedi Jinn had been the only one who had looked after him since they had departed from Tatooine.

"What will happen to me now?" Anakin inquired of Obi-Wan as he turned to face the newly established Knight.

"Council have granted me permission to train you," Obi-Wan stated emotionlessly. "You will be a Jedi. I promise you."

Feeling the Force twitch ever so slightly at the words, Palpatine probed the pair with his eyes knowing that to even attempt to use the Dark Side at this point would be nearly suicidal. Although his shields were powerful, the risks of failing to mask his usage of the Dark Side with so many of the most powerful Jedi around who were all completely open to the Force at the moment were simply too great for him to undertake. Thus he was reduced to gathering his info the way the masses did. The duo in question turned their eyes back to the burning form of their friend as silence fell between them once more. Doing the same so that he wouldn't draw any attention to himself, Palpatine let his mind race.

From the moment he had first laid eyes on the young Skywalker, he had felt that there was something important about the boy. Something in his aura pulled him towards the former slave like a magnet attracted metal. At the time he had not had ample opportunity to analyze the sensation to explain the causes behind this occurrence. However, on the trip from Coruscant to Naboo, he had poured over it after learning of how the Jedi Council was split on what to do with the boy. Yoda's constant insistence that Skywalker's future was shrouded in mystery and what appeared to be Darkness had caused him to give the situation his fullest attention.

What he had found had both astonished and intrigued him. Anakin Skywalker's potential was all that Jinn had made it out to be and more. But what had caught and kept Palpatine's attention was his clouded future. Upon meditating he had definitely recognized signs of Darkness on the path the child would tread as time wore on. Other than that, however, he had been unable to see just what lay in store for Skywalker's future.

Glancing at the boy in question once more, Palpatine wondered at the Darkness. Since Maul's untimely death, he was the only Sith Lord or Dark Side user left which practically meant that Skywalker's Darkness would be somehow intertwined with his own future. The possibility of taking and training the boy as his next apprentice when he came of age had crossed his mind, especially after

he had arrived on Naboo and had learned the full story of what had transpired. Not to mention just what the nine-year-old boy had accomplished during his first time in a snub fighter.

The decision, on the other hand, was both a complicated and difficult one, Palpatine knew. There were many variables to consider, not the least of which was the fact that Skywalker was going to become a Padawan. Having potential and being qualified were, after all, two entirely different things. It had taken him several years of searching to find someone who had even remotely displayed the standards he was looking for in his apprentice, and Maul had proven with his death that he had not been nearly picky enough that time round. Besides, the boy was far too young at the moment to commence any kind of Sith training.

"There's no doubt," Palpatine heard Mace Windu state from somewhere behind him. "The mysterious warrior was a Sith."

"Always two there are," Yoda replied, causing Palpatine to wonder just how much the old alien knew of the Sith. "No more, no less. A master and an apprentice."

"But which was destroyed?" Windu inquired. "The master, or the apprentice?"

'*The apprentice*,' Palpatine replied silently as he smiled inwardly. The fact that Kenobi had been unable to alert the Council as to Maul's status was crystal clear evidence of how much the Jedi had forgotten over time. Had they not become so complacent, then they would have realized that, while Maul had been an excellent fighter and had been absolutely brilliant with his lightsaber, he had nowhere near the abilities of a fully trained Sith Lord. And while they wasted time on hunting down the answer to that question, he would continue his scheming. He would adjust his plans for Maul's loss and see to getting him replaced even as he secured his position as head of the Republic.

Although he wouldn't make any concrete decisions just yet as far as young Skywalker was concerned, he resolved to keep an eye on him as he grew and to see how the situation developed. If events transpired in such a manner that Skywalker was proven to be insufficient for the training and the tasks ahead, then he would be able to continue without any major alterations to his plans. Though the Jedi had made Anakin Skywalker a more appealing option by talking so poorly about the boy while the former slave was in the room. Yoda hadn't even attempted to conceal his distrust of Skywalker and that could be made into a powerful and lethal weapon if handled correctly.

All things considered, Skywalker was a perfect option for a future Sith apprentice, but only time would tell. Palpatine knew all too well, after all, how appearances could be deceiving.

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