

Dark Interlude

Straxus saw it coming before it even happened.

He threw himself to the right, dodging his opponent's strike at the last possible instant. The other's fist struck the deck where he'd just been standing, producing a loud clang as it did.

"You'll have to do better than that," he taunted, falling into a defensive posture.

"And so I shall!"

Switchblade raised his fists before him. Two deadly blades shot out of slots in either forearm. Not wasting another moment, he moved for the Emperor, determined to connect.

Straxus avoided his first thrust nimbly then his second. Seizing an opening, he chopped the other in the back, dropping him to the deck with a resounding thud.

"Are you even trying?" he demanded.

The other repositioned himself and retracted his blades then slowly returned to his feet.

"My apologies, my Liege," he said. "It seems my best effort this day is inadequate to the task at hand."

"Then I suggest you exert yourself further." Straxus' face was grim. "We both need this sparring session. We must be at our peak in battle if we expect to overcome Magma and his renegades the next time we meet."

"Do you believe the data Razorwing provided you will be sufficient to counter their tactics?"

"In time, yes," Straxus replied. "We have been foolish in our previous outings, relying on a sheer force of arms to overtake them. We need to think the way they do in combat, to adapt our tactics to their own. Anything less is a waste of resources."

"Magma is able to equal your strength now. I do not pretend to understand how but does the mere fact of this matter not cause you some concern?"

Straxus assumed a defensive posture and gestured with his fingers for the other to strike.

"He is a challenge, Switchblade. I do not deny that. In fact, I welcome it. For far too long I, like our warriors, have stood unopposed in my might. When one has nothing to test one's limits any longer they become complacent--weak even. I am made the stronger for his existence."

He thrust his fist at Straxus, a move the Destara Emperor easily avoided. He was surprised by Switchblade's abrupt follow-up, a strike that tracked him to where he had moved. He shifted his head in time to just miss the blow. The other's hand scratched the side of his head armor, glancing off it instead of connecting fully.

"You have an interesting way of looking at things." Switchblade leapt back, avoiding him as he grabbed belatedly at his opponent.

"I would be a fool to think anything less of Magma," Straxus replied. "He always was a competent commander and since this transformation into a rebel leader, he has become physically dangerous as well. I must be adequately prepared to combat him."

Switchblade charged him, blades drawn, determined to land a blow. Straxus dodged every single strike in quick succession, making his exertions seem futile. He side-stepped the other and slammed his arm down at him, forcing Switchblade to duck under the appendage and move off-balance. He fought to stay on his feet, barely succeeding as he did.

"Do you not wonder how he became so physically strong that he could equal the greatest of all Destara warriors?" Switchblade regained his balance, dropping into a defensive position. "Surely something must have happened to cause so great a change. After all, he was no match for

you on the battlefield at Centaurai III.”

“I have no need to wonder,” Straxus replied, pausing a moment. “I know full well what occurred to change the circumstances in Magma’s favor. I am privy to our Dark Lord’s council after all.”

“Our Master shared his insights with you?” He considered this new information. “An interesting revelation. I take it your warriors are not to be privy to this knowledge?”

“I gave my word I would not reveal that of which he spoke.” Straxus moved toward him, striking out with his fist. “I must honor that commitment.”

Switchblade dodged the strike easily but was unprepared for his follow-up: a floor sweep that caught him in the calves. He tumbled to the floor.

Straxus extended his own claws and leapt for his lieutenant, hoping to make contact, but knowing the other could easily avoid the attack. To his credit, he rolled sideways and leapt to his feet as Straxus landed where he’d just been.

He twisted in the air, slamming his feet into the Emperor’s side and thrusting him backward onto the deck.

“Impressive,” Straxus muttered. He recovered quickly, charging for where Switchblade stood. The other dropped to the side, allowing him to charge past. He spun about, charging the other before he came to a complete stop and forcing Straxus on the defensive.

The other stood his ground, catching Switchblade’s steel with his own blades. The two interlocked a moment before they swiftly pulled them back from one another.

“Your effort has improved greatly.” Straxus stood and retracted his claws. “I see your mind is finally in the heat of the battle!”

“You honor me with your words.” He charged the other. “But fanciful words will not spare you my wrath!”

Straxus just barely dodged the strike, jumping to the side. He lashed out with his heel, catching the other in the head as he passed by. Switchblade crashed to the deck.

“Then action shall save me!” He kept his hands up, jogging slightly from the rush he felt at fending off his opponent. “Do you yield?”

The other leapt to his feet.

“A Destara warrior only yields to death,” he hissed. “You should know that by now.”

Straxus grinned at that. “Well said, brother.”

Switchblade charged him and the two of them engaged in a rapid round of strikes, each dodging the other one impossibly fast. Each tried to gain the upper hand on the other but neither could quite accomplish their ultimate goal.

His opponent leapt backward, removing himself from Straxus immediate sphere of attack. He landed softly, immediately assuming a battle stance.

“Tell me something, Liege,” he said. “Do you truly wish to see Magma fall? You yourself admit that he is the only one to truly challenge you. If you can succeed at terminating him what will you do then?”

It was a fair question, Straxus realized belatedly. Once his great enemy fell would he ever find another opponent as formidable? Or would he be doomed to an eternity of mediocrity.

Sometimes his incredible power was a curse. When one was advanced to the ultimate pinnacle of their abilities through artificial means then what more was there to strive for? Did Deceptar realize the predicament his generosity created? Did such things matter to a being as advanced he was or did he only wish to have a servant capable of achieving whatever ends he

laid before them?

“I must do as my master commands me,” Straxus said finally. “As must we all. If that means extinguishing Magma’s life then so be it.”

“Without hesitation?”

Straxus met his gaze. “When have you ever known me to hesitate?”

It was true he had failed to stop the Renegades on Sybora Prime—but that had hardly been his fault. Their arrival had been a complete surprise. Who would have ever expected they would have the audacity to pursue their captured brethren to the heart of the Destara Empire?

Magma had gotten the best of him then but he certainly had not hesitated in his mission to stop the renegade leader. Underestimated his newfound power perhaps but not hesitated to strike.

Their next encounter had been interrupted by that alien automaton, Heavy Metal. It had been destroyed in the ensuing battle but its presence had ensured his control of the situation had been sufficiently eroded, allowing the Renegades time to escape his clutches.

There would come a time soon enough when he would take on the Renegade leader again and be able to prove his power against his opponent. He was certain of it. That day, he would not hesitate nor yield in his pursuit of his enemy’s ultimate destruction.

“Never.” Switchblade stood his ground, awaiting the Emperor’s next strike. “Your determination and strength have always been a source of inspiration to your warriors.”

“Then why would you doubt me now?” Straxus advanced toward him. “I am challenged by these opponents for the first time in recent memory. I find it stimulating on some level. Do not confuse my delight with compassion. They are still enemies of the Empire—my Empire—and they will die for their opposition.”

He charged Switchblade forcefully. The other flinched in surprise then moved toward him instead of away. The other moved to pin his legs and force him to fall. He adjusted his momentum, preventing him from getting a good grasp on his legs and fell sideways instead, free of his opponent’s would-be trap. Switchblade, likewise, toppled to the deck where he’d been originally.

“Well played.” Straxus sat up. “You have a way of being able to keep me alert in our sparring sessions. That is why you are such an excellent warrior.”

“You honor me with your words, my Liege.” There was a hint of satisfaction in the other’s optic.

Their sparring was an interesting diversion from the tedium of his responsibilities. Straxus also liked to keep himself sharp tactically—even though his great power and stature made him more than a match for any others that would dare attack him.

Of course they kept any artillery out of the battle. For one thing, it ran the risk of damaging the inside of the ship. Also, such weapons were too easy in personal combat in actual war situations. He preferred the finesse of a personal attack when it was practical to do so.

His weaponry was more than capable of killing Switchblade—something he had no intention of doing. Indeed, he made certain to hold back somewhat on exertions of strength in their sessions as well. He didn’t want to injure or kill the other Destara in their mock combat. He had no compunctions about killing normally—but it seemed a waste of a good soldier in this case. If his opponent had been some waste of metal like Stryfe, well, so be it. But Switchblade had proven his value time and again over the years.

“Do you wish to continue our session?” Switchblade asked. “Or have you had enough for the time?”

Straxus considered his words.

“A while longer, I think,” he answered. “I have no pressing matters to attend for the time being.”

They both slowly rose to their feet.

“Have you been updated on the Trixaan unit’s progress?” he asked. “With the new tactical data provided it should only be a matter of time before they stand ready.”

“I inquired about their status earlier today,” Switchblade replied. “It appears all is going well in their new training regime. Still, we must rush them too much. Certainly a false start against the Renegades could prove disastrous.”

Straxus nodded his agreement. “There is wisdom in your words.”

When the unit was ultimately ready to make their first move he would be assured total and final victory over their elusive enemy. They would be crushed; wiped utterly from the face of the universe. A partial victory or an outright failure was unacceptable.

He would stand triumphant over Magma’s twisted ruined corpse and tear the Tetrrix from its remains. He would present it personally to Deceptar as a gift.

“It is a pity our Master has not contacted us in some time,” he said. “I believe he would be pleased by our progress.”

“I am certain he is aware of it on some level,” Switchblade replied. “After all, there is nothing he does not know.”

Straxus wondered about that sometimes. He knew Deceptar was no longer able to track the Renegades after they’d defected from the Empire. Was it possible other things could elude his sight? Certainly he was supremely knowledgeable but clearly not omniscient.

Of course the other warriors of the Destara Empire need not be privy to such information. He could not be certain of the mysterious Amethyst Order since they functioned as an extension of his Master but the rank and file did not know such things nor would they find out any time soon.

He wondered about their mysterious Master and what had so urgently preoccupied his attention that he had abandoned the throne room on Sybora Prime when confronted by Magma. He was no coward. He would not flee at the first sign of danger. So what had happened?

Perhaps even more importantly, where was he? Had he since returned to Sybora Prime and simply not bothered to inform his servant? Was he still out there—wherever he’d gone—and, if so, would he be returning any time soon.

Of course Straxus could run the Empire in his absence—it was what he did, after all. The other did not concern himself with such trivialities. But if Deceptar had abandoned them for some reason or the other then Straxus wished he could have been bothered to inform him why first.

He had made inquiries of the Amethyst Order. Certainly they were privy to Deceptar’s location if anyone anywhere were. But his two attempts had proven fruitless—although he had expected as much. The Order were enigmatic at the best of time and he had little use for them.

Since all else had failed, he would simply have to carry on as before and await their Master’s return when he was good and ready. He just hated being kept uninformed about matters of import. Certainly being the Emperor of the Empire was an absolute and entitled him to certain privileges. He disliked being treated like a common foot soldier—told to go here and do this or that without understanding its importance.

Not that Deceptar seemed to understand that distinction sometimes. It could be frustrating

but there was little he could really do. He suspected their Master was only concerned with whatever his far-flung cosmic goals were not the insecurities of his minions—even his chief minion at that.

Still, he had stopped being an insignificant foot soldier a long time ago. He was master of all he surveyed. His word was law and the Empire itself bent to his will even if Deceptar and the Order did not. He had become the ultimate physical specimen he could be when he had defeated Triaxus and become the new emperor. His insecurities could manifest every so often but he knew they were ultimately baseless. He was the ultimate warrior in the Destara Empire, indeed, the ultimate leader. No one and nothing could stop him from seizing whatever it was he desired.

And he wanted it all! The Universe itself would bend to his will in time.

“Prepare yourself!” He crouched into a battle stance. “I will not be denied victory!”

Switchblade smiled. “Consider me prepared.”

Straxus smiled then launched himself at the other.

Copyright 2014 Anthony Klepack. Please do not republish this work in any form.