

## **Onboard the Imperial Scholae Navy Victory-class Star Destroyer, Sidious**

### **Caperion System**

Calindra paced in her cabin as she listened to the conversation between Battle Lord Raiju Kang, Savant Deathbane and Jorm Na'trej. So far, the Sith Warrior had been silent as the others discussed the political situation on Seraph's war-torn southern hemisphere. Her desk was littered with datapads containing personnel rosters, draft letters, to-do lists. Luckily, no one in the conversation could possibly see the cluttered desk as she watched the rest of the imperial fleet from the cabin's porthole. Porthole was perhaps the wrong word, she had a full uninterrupted view of the imperial fleet from where she stood.

"...Caelestis' will pose a problem to our efforts," Kang agreed. The Nautolan's black eyes seemed overly large and remained unblinking. Next to his image was that of the pale demi-human female, Alara. Her blond hair was braided into a knot atop her head, betraying her pointed ears. She seemed overly young. Much younger than Calindra herself at any rate.

"Perhaps," the other woman clipped, "the mayor of that city should be removed from his functions. His unexpected death might wreak havoc in that small city, and it will likely slow down Queen Meihui's enemies." Looking back into the hololens, Calindra could see Jorm nodding in agreement. She could feel his satisfaction oozing despite the video connection. The Kiffar's was glaringly out of uniform, yet again. Calindra pursed her lips in disapproval.

"Calindra," Kang said as he noticed her displeasure, "you seem to be in disagreement?"

The newly appointed battle team leader looked up in surprise, not expecting to be called out. "According to our intelligence," her voice sounded steady and reassuringly to the point, "the mayor does seem to be aiding the Nayamans' enemies. The majority of the factories in his city are supplying the war effort, and the mayor does seem to be the mastermind behind the whole operation. It *would* be quite a blow to their supply chains were he to be suddenly removed from the equation, but it would take more than that to isolate the city's supplies. Removing the mayor would be a good first step, and something I could see to, personally."

Raiju seemed to consider the matter and then surprisingly shook his head. "No. Ever since your return, it has been obvious to everyone that stealth isn't your forté anymore..."

Calindra had blinked in surprise and just stared at the screen dumbfounded. Problem was, her superiors were still perplexed about the sudden changes to her combat style and the changes to her personality since the Temple of the Forgotten. She used to be quite the lightfoot who could pass unseen among the masses, but ever since she came out of Elincia's care, the woman hadn't been quite the same.

The rest of Kang's explanation had been drowned out by her thoughts and she nearly blurted out *'who would take care of that then?'* when Alara took over the discussion.

"Jorm, you'll take care of that mess down there? You're already in position, yes?"

The Kiffar nodded and grinned, giving a pained look in Calindra's direction. His mirth seemed to wash over her and Calindra's hands were suddenly clutching the contour of her desk. Her knuckles were white and would have slammed them against the holo vid had she not been talking to Scholae's senior most summit leaders..! The gaul of the man! He was laughing at her.

"Excellent then, that's settled," Kang replied. "Calindra, I have something else planned for you. I think, given your family's penchant for politics that you would be more interested in meeting with Queen Meihui..."

"You want me to... entertain the Queen of the Nayaman dynasty?"

"You should probably change out of that uniform," Jorm taunted from his side of the viewscreen, "and get into a pretty dress."

Calindra gave him a baleful stare. "Lucky for me, Jorm... the men also wear dresses on Seraph." She grinned when the battle team leader's cocky smile faltered. "What does she mean...?"

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Queen Nayama Meihui's great courtyard was surrounded by tall fortifications. Tall trees and pristinely manicured shrubs were arranged in such an exquisitely and delightful way that Calindra's gaze took in its vastness and beauty of the royal gardens. There was a rock garden, cascading waterfalls, streams and wooden bridges. People wandered the various trails or discussed on stone benches as [musicians added yet another element to the beauty](#) of the place.

Both men and women were dressed in beautiful silken robes. The [women's dresses](#) complimented their petite figures as they hid coquettish smiles with their fans. Meanwhile, [the men](#) boasted and bragged as they vied for the women's attention. Calindra found it odd that most of the men in attendance were out of armor, but were still allowed to keep their swords. Some women also sported weapons, but the vast majority just seemed to be enjoying the company of others while heavily armored soldiers stood watch at key locations around them.

"I've heard the most interesting story from the enemy camp this morning," confided one of the women to her attendants. Curiosity suddenly peaked, Calindra slowed her pace and lingered by one of the shrubs to overhear the conversation between the nobles.

“Not the bloodless corpses they found in Caelestis, certainly?” Undoubtedly, Jorm’s handiwork that was, Calindra thought.

“No, no... nothing so rude...!” the noble lady in her red gown admonished as she slapped her fan into her hand. Her eyes looked like icy steel, but they suddenly softened and her demeanor became imperious, her nose suddenly up in the air. “No, indeed...! It has to do with a thief in the night and the Nardashian jewel.” Any intelligence on [Nardash](#) would be extremely useful.

The others gasped and leaned in, blocking Calindra’s view of the lady as she unfolded her fan. “No one can hold the Nardashian jewel, one of the men scoffed, how could a thief possible run away with it.

“Do you, or do you not want to hear the story I have to tell?”

Her eyes must have been steel blue fury, because the man stuttered and fell silent. She gave him one more wavering look, and started again: “As Mujang, was so nice to explain, the Nardashian jewel cannot be held, it would turn the thief into stone and he would forever adorn the Meraxis Emperor’s stone gardens. More cruel, the thief’s life force would be leeches from him and get sucked into the stone and augment the Emperor’s power.” Everyone nodded and agreed, they had all heard the stories when they were very small children, but Calindra and Scholae was new to all their legends and histories, “but the jewel did get stolen and the Meraxis emperor is turning the heavens upside down to get it back..!”

“It all happened under the cover of darkness,” she continued. “Surveillance droids reported a shadow going over the wall, but none of the guards noticed the lithe form going from shadow to shadow. Even the twenty-eight Jade guards never moved, and their dishonor was so great that they’ve all been beheaded and their corpses were tossed down the tallest cliffs and broken as the icy ocean tides repeatedly tossed them against the rocky shores.”

“That’s impossible! The Jade guard is the Emperor’s personal guard! Someone would have noticed or seen the thief! Surely!”

“Ahh, but the thief never approached the Jewel’s shrine,” the lady explained, “the Jewel floated to the heavens, high above their unsuspecting heads. They have footage of the Jewel floating upwards, and over the courtyard’s high walls, and then the thief scaled the wall, a dark sack aglow with the jewel.”

Someone whistled appreciatively. “I’ve heard that only the best royal silk can contain the jewel’s power...” a man suddenly chimed in. “The thief must have been Storm Blessed!”

“Storm Blessed?” The words had slipped out of Calindra’s mouth and the others turned to see her standing nearby. She quickly bowed and covered her dismay, “I couldn’t help but overhear your tale, Mistress.”

“Ahh! Our new friend!” The woman said in greeting, “I had heard the Queen had opened her gardens to you leaf peeper.” The woman gave Calindra a slight nod and the others followed suit. “The Storm Blessed have powers that mere mortals do not. They can summon lightning from the heavens, walk on water, stop you in your tracks with a stare, and walk the shadows... I believe you call them Force Users, leaf peeper.”

“Thank you, Mistress, I am forever in your debt for taking the time to educate me,” she bowed again.

“So polite and well behaved, please address me as Keetah Noh-Wara, daughter of Celeste Meihui Noh-Wara, our great empress. Do you also have a name, leaf peeper?”

“I am Calindra Hejaran, daughter of Anaxagores Hejaran the third, Baron of Tepasi, your highness. I must say, your gardens are the most beautiful I have ever seen.”

The woman smiled and rose from her seat, the others promptly bowed and made way for her. “If there is one thing we enjoy, it is our gardens.” She smiled and turned and presented her retinue with a wave of her fan. They each bowed as they were named, and Calindra returned the bows, albeit lower. The last one, a man, then leaned towards the Nayaman princess, and whispered in her ear.

Keetah Noh-Wara listened, nodded, then returned her attention on Calindra. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Calindra Hejaran, daughter of Anaxagores; however my cousin reminds me that tradition demands that you must pass the trials of combat before you address me. Ignorance of our ways forgives you this once, but you must remain silent until you best my second in combat.” A wicked smile crossed the man’s face.

“Don’t be so blatant, Goroda,” she said to him as she clapped her fan back into her hand. “Mind your manners, and you’d be best to remember the story of the Masterless Wanderer and the High Prince. Even a Prince has to show the Masterless courtesy and respect, for you never know who travels in disguise. Now, since you insist on tradition, you will step in as my second.” The man, hesitated, but bowed and stepped forward.

Goroda was a youthful clean-shaven male, dressed in beige silken robes. He was handsome, athletic, with beautiful brown hair and deep brown eyes. His eyes mirrored an intelligent and ambition spirit, yet looked kind. He eyed Calindra’s silken dress and blond tresses, and then bowed.

Calindra returned his bow, and then waited for him to do the first move.

