

Dark Circles, Dark Paths (Ziost - SF)

Everyone is gone.

There is no one here.

A void.

37 ABY, in orbit around Kapsina, Jusadih System

Aabsdu Dupar sat in the pilot's chair of his GAT-12 Skipray Blastboat, *The Wandering Tide*, staring out the viewport towards the lifeless planet before him. From orbit, Kapsina, the capital of the Jusadih System, appeared just as it had four years prior when Aabsdu had taken flight from Brotherhood space on a pilgrimage he knew not the destination of. In that time, many questions had been answered with more left hanging, so he had suddenly, in the depths of meditation, felt a familiar pull, a tugging at his newfound sense of calm within the teachings of the Krath that pulled him back.

Instinctively, he set course for one of the few places in the galaxy he considered home. The Jusadih System, headquarters to Clan Plagueis, the only home Aabsdu had known since being initiated into the Brotherhood nearly fifteen years earlier. He had fought alongside his brothers and sisters after they were pushed out of the Aerun System, conquered Jusidah, only to be pushed out again by the Yuuzhan Vong. They had, after much turmoil, reclaimed Jusadih, and it was in that state Aabsdu had retired.

No one was here now. No cruisers patrolled the planet's orbit nor did there appear to be any traffic in the area. A single Cardan-III class defense platform floated along but made no efforts to hail him. Aabsdu did not remember the station but recalled plans to commission a waypoint. Not only was there no presence of the Brotherhood, so strong and noticeable in the Force once one knew where to look, but there was no presence of anything. The planet was completely empty of life.

Aabsdu panicked, his heart racing as he ran through what could have happened. Had the Vong returned with their weapons of terraforming? Had the New Jedi Order and Republic finally located the hotbed of negative energy and darkness and wiped them out entirely? He did not recall feeling moments of death or disruption, yet questioned why the Force would have encouraged him to return here if those he sought, the remaining members of the Dupar Family, were absent.

"Didn't you say to expect immediate communication from clan leadership, Master?" asked a stark black-and-white trimmed protocol droid stationed behind him. "Dex" was one of Aabsdu's many new habits alongside *The Wandering Tide* and his newfound connection with the Force.

"I certainly expected something," he answered to Dex and himself. Instead there was *nothing*.

The Adept set course for the orbiting platform hoping computers there would provide answers. *The Tide* sailed half the distance before a shudder rippled across the vessel.

ZHING!

Sparks flew off stern as a Z-95 Headhunter let loose another warning shot. Aabsdu raised shields as Dex prepped the laser cannons, knowing his opponent outmatched, but waited. He had questions that needed answering.

The comm buzzed - "*Unidentified enemy vessel, you are trespassing in a private sector that is off limits to outside entities.*"

The starfighter did not identify itself, but the only group Aabsdu imagined being in the area would be Sistros Corporation. The shell company served Plagueis' economic interests both in the system and greater galaxy. When their relationship had been tumultuous the Clan Summit had placed the heads of Sistros' management on spikes as a reminder of who led whom.

"Sistros Corporation," Aabsdu responded, "This is Aabsdu Dupar of Clan Plagueis. I seek an audience with your chairman."

The pause was longer than encouraging as the Adept found his hands inching towards the weapons systems.

"The Plagueian organization no longer holds claim to this sector. Force Point and Kapsina are under independent jurisdiction. You are to leave immediately or be fired upon."

A welcome home as much as Aabsdu could have expected, but his years of experience had not resulted in a naive Elder of the Brotherhood. He wasted no time spinning the Blastboat around to fire upon the Headhunter. His prey took evasive action as it barrel rolled and let loose a volley of laser fire. Senses heightened, Aabsdu easily evaded the attack and locked his target.

The starfighter disappeared in a ball of flame quickly extinguished by the coldness of space, but the warning sirens in the cockpit kept flashing as the orbiting platform, Force Point, lit up with life. Perhaps unmanned, the station was not ungunned as multiple turbo lasers spun towards the *Tide*.

"They've locked target, Master," Dex said in a robotically neutral tone.

Aabsdu flipped his ship and punched in codes for a quick jump to safety. Stars blurred as time and space wrapped around the Blastboat; Force Point and Kapsina vanished behind him.

Outskirts of Morroth, outermost planet in the Jusadih System

After a few seconds, the *Tide* emerged on the outskirts of the system. The icy prison world Morroth was a small sphere in the distance. Aabsdu expected to see Omicron Platform orbiting but radar again showed no signs of activity. While relations with the local government had never been harmonious, Sistros rarely took the offensive. Whoever the pilot had represented, Sistros or not, they claimed control of the system. Something disastrous had happened, but Aabsdu had not the time to infiltrate Kapsina or the Temple of Plagueis for answers. Not for the first time, he felt a tugging suggestive of events moving quickly. He needed to act; needed to find whatever remained of Clan Plagueis.

"Keep weapons primed," he told Dex, "Should more locals harass our presence here."

Sitting back, Aabsdu closed his eyes, calmed his breathing, slowed his heart, and allowed everything to melt away as he opened himself to the channels around him. His vision shut off, he was anything but blind as space took shape in a blur of colors and lines imbued with the Force.

Past, present, and future etched themselves before him as he settled deeper into his state of meditation.

Some lines were easy to reach out and grasp, like the present absence of Brotherhood forces from the area. Others were vague but recognizable when trained to read the Brotherhood's aura, like the truth that dark forces had been here in the past, including his own distinct metaphysical signature.

Aabsdu strained for the pockets of information he could not easily reach. A past he was not present for as well as an uncertain future he did not have a place in. The task was difficult but surmountable with training, and the former Sith Adept had had years of training. The Sith taught that peace is a lie, but in studying the philosophies of the Krath Aabsdu had discovered a sense of peace never felt before. Thus, it was from within this calm state that he clenched the waves of energy rolling across him and rode them to the lines he sought.

His victory was calculated but the reward came in a flash. Kapsina besieged not by Vong or Jedi yet enemies strong in the Force. The fields and cities of the planet engulfed in flame as all life was wiped out by a force unknown. Among the dying were many brothers and sisters of darkness, but the strongest beacons held strong. The fleet of Plagueis fled the system to...somewhere beyond.

The world flickered as his hold loosened. His jaw and fists clenched as he poured energy into his threatened mental battle. He raced after the fleet as it jumped out of the system, the imaginary portal closing quickly until -

The world turned into streaks of blue and white as he rode through time and space. Their destination was unknown as Aabsdu allowed the Force to guide him in the wake of Plagueis' exodus. He could not tell how much time passed, but found himself slipping into a trance as his field of vision was swarmed by the blur of hyperspace.

His pilgrimage had been eventful but hardly magnificent. He had first returned to Onderon, his home world, seeking information about his parents and early teacher Genako Haofae. The New Republic had a sizable presence in the Inner Core, forcing Aabsdu to work covertly and conceal his dark identity. After several weeks, he had discovered Haofae to be fraud with no true talent. His "master" was a hack, and Aabsdu started questioning his own

motivations. He spent the next two years wandering aimlessly, allowing himself to charge blindly ahead expecting his dark guide to reveal its greater purpose. That hope had been foolish for the Force was not his master. Only after diving into the studies of the Krath had he discovered the truth and set out to return to the -

Hyperspace turned into an eclectic mix of yellow, orange, and red hues as his reflection was ripped away. Unsure of his surroundings, colors circled him. The darkest was red. Red for blood. Red for Sith.

Next came the sounds, distant but growing. Screams, roars, blaster fire, and the all too familiar hum of lightsabers locking. The air grew thick with sweat and adrenaline. A great battle was waging for what seemed like infinity; both sides tired but fueled with the energy of the dark side to push towards total victory.

Stars returned as his journey warped to a close. Aabsdu struggled to open his eyes partially glued together from dried tears. His meditation must have been hours at least, his body weak, his appetite eager. Except physical need shrunk from his mind as he stared out the viewport to discover he was no longer parked beyond Morroth. The world before him was most definitely filled with life and activity. The dark side of the Force radiated outwards in an unending stream of death and despair. Several fleets waged war in orbit.

Aabsdu had never been here before but recognized both the planet and his coordinates. This was Sith space.

The Wandering Tide, in orbit around Ziost, Ziost System

"Dex?"

"Yes, Master Dupar?"

"Have we left Jusadih?"

"Yes, Master Dupar," the protocol droid answered matter-of-factly, "We left approximately nine standard days ago. You did not input coordinates but appeared set in our destination."

Aabsdu ignited propulsion engines for a smooth bump towards the most recognizable cruiser, the NSD *Ascendancy*, capital ship of Clan Plagueis.

"So it seems," was all he could mutter in response. Any sense of joy over locating his objective was overwhelmed with confusion over his manner of discovery. The Ascendant Fleet of Clan Plagueis orbited before him but was surrounded by vessels bearing the markings of Naga Sadow, Tarentum, Arcona, and an unknown fifth party that appeared to be in a firefight with Brotherhood forces.

The situation above Ziosst only raised more questions, but Aabsdu thought it best to seize the opportunity. He turned to Dex, "Raise shields and have us ready to jump out of here should someone start firing."

No doubt each of the fleets, friendly or not, were questioning the presence of his unmarked and unannounced arrival.

NSD *Ascendancy*, in orbit around Ziosst

Sith Warlord Dacien Victae, Aedile of House Plagueis, stood on the bridge of the *Ascendancy* overlooking the battle of fleets. Plagueis was in the final stages of launching its ground assault of Ziosst in a race against their sister houses and clans, notably Clan Arcona, for control of one of the final two planets under occupation by the One Sith. The Brotherhood's Dark Crusade against the Sith organization had lasted over a year but resulted in the conquest of multiple planets in Sith space. Their ultimate fate was still unknown to all except the Dark Council, but Plagueis' objective was clear: conquer Ziosst first.

"Sir," an analyst called from a console, "An unidentified vessel is hailing us. It just jumped into the system."

Dacien looked across the sea of stars for the craft, "Our own?"

"Unknown."

"Bring it up," he said as he stepped to the console, "This is Aedile Victae of House Plagueis. Who is this?"

The comm buzzed - "*Dacien Victae? This is Aabsdu Dupar seeking permission to land-*"

The rest of the sentence was a blur as Dacien found himself shocked by what he heard. Aabsdu Dupar returned? The former Consul and Headmaster was thought lost beyond the Shroud. His sudden emergence in the midst of battle was suspiciously convenient, but Dacien sensed no warning signs from his old friend. Aabsdu only seemed...confused.

"...and what do you mean House Plagueis? What have you done to my clan?"

"Aabs! By the Force this is a surprise! Come aboard with haste. You'll find yourself in hostile territory out there."

"So it seems. Coming in now."

NSD Ascendancy hangar bay 'Echo'

The GAT-12 Skipray Blastboat settled with ease in the bay emptied of fighters deployed above Ziost. Dacien stood alone but had positioned a squad of battle droids and young Plagueis initiates nearby. Aabsdu's arrival was welcome, but House Plagueis had recently been disrupted and brought to its knees by corruption and deceit among those thought trusted.

A ramp lowered and Dark Adept Aabsdu Dupar stepped off the platform. Several years older, the man appeared largely the same if not thinner and less muscular. Dacien had gone rogue himself for several years but was aware of his friend's time leading both Plagueis and the Shadow Academy. Much had changed in both their absences.

Aabsdu grinned as he approached. He seemed more relieved than dangerous.

"Dacien! I am pleased to see you, old friend."

The two Plagueians clasped each other at the forearms. Aabsdu glanced over Dacien's shoulder towards the compliment of guards and young Dark Jedi.

"Were you afraid I'd gone rogue," he asked with a sly smile.

"It's been years, Aabs," Dacien responded as they walked, "I was prepared to kill you should it be necessary."

"You would have tried," Aabsdu grinned wider, allowing himself a small amount of ease over locating a familiar face.

"It would have been regretful. Let's speak in my office. Events transpire you are unaware of."

"I hadn't noticed. All of the firefights and cruisers were a bit of a distraction."

Office of the Aedile, NSD *Ascendancy*

Aabsdu stepped into an office partially lived in. An extra set of robes hung near the door and the desk was piled high with data pads and holocrons. He took a seat as Dacien lowered himself into his own high backed chair.

"How long has this campaign been going on?" Aabsdu asked quizzically.

Dacien let out a brief sigh, "A long time, though our assault of Ziost began just before you arrived. Appropriate timing."

Silence enveloped the room for a moment, each man taking time to consider his next words. Aabsdu spoke first, "I returned to Jusadih."

A noticeable frown emerged on the Aedile's face, "The system was lost. We were forced to evacuate and have been maintaining base among the fleet since."

"Since when?"

Another pause - "It has been well over a year, possibly two. But we recently gained control of several planets turned into staging areas for our present campaign."

Aabsdu glanced at a nearby star chart with distinct Brotherhood symbols spread across several systems. "What sort of campaign is this?"

"They are called the One Sith and have taken control amongst the Sith systems of old. They were a threat to our strength and resolve, or so the Dark Council led us to believe. We have spent over a year planet hopping. This looks to be our final push."

"A push beyond the Shroud seems risky with the Jedi and New Republic expanding their own boundaries so resolutely."

Dacien's eyebrow raised, "Is that what you've spent these years doing? Scouting out our enemies."

Aabsdu chuckled, "Hardly, though I've traveled. Onderon. Korriban. Dantooine. Collecting a bounty here and there."

"Have you returned for the glory, then? Eager to wage war?"

Aabsdu scoffed, "War is not what I seek. I'm here for Galaphile Dupar, one of the few remaining in our family, as well as to speak with Headmaster Aybara."

"Taigikori is now Justicar, but I'm unaware of his current whereabouts. The Council rarely participates directly in these dark errands they are so keen to send us on," Dacien consulted a data pad, running through a list of names and ranks, "Galaphile goes by Shirai now and looks to be among Clan Naga Sadow."

Aabsdu stood and turned towards the door, "I shall report to their ranks, then."

The chair the Adept had sat in moments earlier suddenly slid to the side of the room, shoved by an invisible force. Dacien rose, his voice calm but chilled, "He is neither there nor would you be welcomed. Shirai fights on Ziost against the One Sith."

"The Brotherhood's squabbles are not my own. I seek Galaphile - Shirai - that is all," Aabsdu turned to face Dacien but maintained his distance.

"Clan Sadow is as much an enemy to House Plagueis as these Sith. You owe a debt to us. If you seek him out it will be among the slain on the battlefield," Dacien's posture was relaxed, but Aabsdu could tell his hands were in position to grasp his lightsaber when needed.

"I am not here for war," Aabsdu responded, almost a whisper, "I seek knowledge and guidance within the For-"

The Sith-turned-Krath stumbled on his words when he grasped at his belt to no avail. He had allowed his hand to slide slowly towards the clip at his belt. Now he realized no weight hung where it had consistently for a decade.

Dacien stepped around the desk to stand only a foot away, his own hand grasping his deactivated blade, "Have you turned so weak you don't even carry a weapon? Aabsdu Dupar, Adept of the Brotherhood, Headmaster of the Shadow Academy, has grown so attached to his scrolls he thinks understanding the past will shield him from the terror that awaits us."

Unarmed, Aabsdu remained confident in his ability to confront the Warlord one on one, but he was less confident in being able to evade the squad of droids and journeymen still positioned outside the office. He was experienced but rusty.

"You are no more my enemy," he said to Dacien, allowing his hand to fall to his side, "than these Sith the Brotherhood seeks to vanquish."

Dacien's pause made Aabsdu uncertain whether he still stood on friendly ground. The Brotherhood's resources were vast. While they generally allowed the initiated to self-exile, returning under the wrong circumstances could be dangerous. Aabsdu could not fully penetrate the guarded thoughts of his old friend and mentor, but he knew Dacien to be gazing deep into Aabsdu's thoughts in search of motivation. He granted it.

Finally, Dacien's hand fell from his hilt, "I welcome you back to us, Aabs, and must encourage your experience during these dark times. Alas, if you do not seek shelter, the man you ask of remains on Ziost and if he returns alive it will not be for some time."

The room shuddered briefly and a data pad fell from the desk with a clatter. Both men took the interruption to separate. Aabsdu mused, "It seems your battle is not only below."

He stepped towards a side wall where artifacts and elaborate weapons rested on glass shelves. Several were Imperial relics from the Aedile's life before the Brotherhood. He allowed his fingers to caress the binding of an old tome tucked safely away. Much of the past few years had been spent studying scrolls, manuscripts, tombs, and holocrons as old as this one. On Dantooine, he had sought information regarding a former Jedi who eventually revealed himself as Darius Dupar, father of Nemo Dupar, one of Clan Plagueis' sworn foes. Aabsdu had murdered Darius but found himself following the trail of Dupar lineage. On Korriban, Aabsdu had sought guidance among the teachings of his Sith Lords. He spent weeks among libraries and tombs thousands of years old, surviving as a nomad among the harsh desert wilderness. His visit had both succeeded and failed in supplying answers.

"This book is old and belongs in the Plagueian Vault," he said, "What happened to Clan Plagueis in my absence?"

Dacien stepped to the shelves and shared Aabsdu's inspection as he answered, "Only Arcona and Sadow retain the status. House Revan is disbanded, and the Grand Master saw opportunity in the Force by welcoming a house of Jedi and followers of light."

Aabsdu turned abruptly, "The Brotherhood is corrupted from within!"

"Many worried the same," Dacien responded, "But a campaign against House Odan-Urr made clear the dominant force. For now, we find peace in common enemies."

The Aedile faced Aabsdu, "House Plagueis is changed but stronger and more united than ever before. Our crusade has been long but successful and we stand on the cusp of victory. Join us, my old friend! Help your house claim its new home and stand defiant against brothers and sisters so eager to cripple us."

A beep indicated a visitor. Dacien waved his hand to open the door and an armored guard took two steps into the room to announce, "Aedile Victae, the first wave of shuttles is preparing to launch."

Dacien turned to Aabsdu, waiting.

"I seek answers from Shirai," Aabsdu answered as he made to leave. He stopped at the doorway and smiled, "That said, I have never hesitated to cut down those in my path."

Aabsdu Dupar, Adept of the Brotherhood, started back towards the hangar and *Wandering Tide*. He spoke into his comlink, "Dex, prepare the *Tide* for takeoff. The man we seek is on Ziost."

Stepping quickly but confidently down the hallway, a small contingent of droids still shadowing him several meters behind, Aabsdu found a wave of pleasant memories and darker desires return as he walked well remembered corridors.

"Also," he called Dex again, "Retrieve my lightsaber from the bins."

House Plagueis staging area, Southwest Quadrant, Ziost

The Wandering Tide settled among the host of Plagueian landing craft outside the massive cityscape and its trademark citadel erected for the exiled Dark Jedi Ajunta Pall. Aabsdu stepped off the platform fully robed with lightsaber in hand. He had chosen his original construction, a

single silver hilt etched in Sith teachings, and had ignited its slender white blade for the first time in over a year. Aabsdu had not become a pacifist, but he often found it easier to travel Republic systems with a blaster than a lightsaber. He also knew his strongest weapon was not a blade but the infinite supply of Force surrounding him.

The harshness of Zios't's tundra stung Aabsdu's face as he approached a soldier wearing captain's insignia and inquired, "Where are the majority of Naga Sadow's forces?"

The Captain looked the Adept over, not recognizing him, but the Elder of Plagueis crest Aabsdu had swiped while leaving the *Ascendancy* proved he was an individual you did not question. He straightened and answered, "Most have breached the city through the eastern gate, Sir, but are meeting heavy resistance from Nimbus commandos."

Aabsdu nodded and started striding towards the city walls. Potholes cracked the frozen ground around him where heavy artillery had taken aim at the landing Brotherhood forces. He had never been to Zios't before nor had he heard of these One Sith, but his ever brief briefing on the way down proved they were a literal dark side force to be reckoned with. The Brotherhood's crusade had extended over a year, and while Aabsdu knew not the deeper motivations he found himself unsurprised the longer he spent on Zios't.

The planet felt as if created of the dark side. The Force radiated from its core in all directions sending darkness and despair across all who dared approach. The power could be felt from orbit but Aabsdu had confused it with the signature of the Brotherhood. Now, on the planet's surface, he recognized the Brotherhood's aura nearly engulfed in pure energy streaming from Zios't.

Without warning, he found his anger bubbling. Plagueis' home on Kapsina, a home he had spent years helping to build, was gone. Plagueis itself was gone, a once mighty clan born of two noble clans humiliated into meager house status. No matter how much they rebuilt and rallied, some force always appeared to rip their work apart.

The anger was satisfying. He had refused to allow himself to indulge, but Aabsdu had been holding back for some time, assured that answers to his questions would resolve the tension building within. His research and meditation on Korriban had brought strength but few answers

towards the Dupar lineage. Thus, remembering his years as Headmaster of the Shadow Academy, Aabsdu decided a different approach to his questions.

He journeyed to the origin of Krath philosophy, Empress Teta, only to discover the world once ripe in the dark side was a metropolis of the New Republic. Aabsdu found himself working within the shadows again, seeking as much information as was available in the public record. He spent months aboard *The Wandering Tide* studying Krath texts and entering into deep meditation sessions. The experience had been soothing, relaxing, and he had discovered a new of peace and clarity of mind that encouraged his return to the Jusadih System where he had intended to question both Nemo Dupar, a captive of Plagueis, and Galaphile.

Ziost screamed that his newfound peace was a lie - It is not peace that drives you but your passion for the truth.

Aabsdu drew within himself, I seek answers to my past and the future of my family.

Your passion for truth gives you strength.

Yes, Aabsdu thought to himself, Through strength I gain power. Yes, power and then- VICTORY! Ziost roared!

Knowledge is my victory. Answers will free me of the past and allow me to-

Only the Force can free you, screamed Ziost, but only victory will grant you freedom!

Passion. Strength. Power. Victory. Freedom. Passion. Strength. Midwanjontû châsatul nu asha. Ashajontû kotswinot itsu...

The wailing of the planet's energy turned into a deafening roar as Aabsdu was knocked to his senses and tossed several meters across the icy planet surface. He rolled instinctively and saw the flame of explosion die out not far from his earlier position. Two legs and an arm, all in separate places, suggested a nearby warrior had been less fortunate.

Aabsdu looked up to see the great walls of the citadel looming over him. A large chunk had been blown apart to allow invading forces entryway, but the sounds of blaster fire and clashing lightsabers suggested movement towards the center citadel was slow. He charged ahead defiantly.

Ajunta Pall's Citadel, Southwest Quadrant, Ziost

The Adept ignited his white blade and moved forward with grace, quickly but not impatiently. He slipped over the crumbled wall and slid behind a patch of debris to survey the chaos. Distinguishing between Brotherhood and Sith forces was more difficult as bodies meshed together, but the distribution of limbs strewn across the ground appeared even. Uncaring to the battle at hand, Aabsdu made his way around a decrepit building seeking higher ground with which to locate Shirai.

Stepping inside a four story stone building, he made up the stairs to the top floor. The carnage was more homogenous from this vantage, but he started to channel his senses and seek his target not by sight but feel. Numerous bodies disappeared immediately, their presence in the Force insignificant. Someone among the bright beacons of darkness was his target.

Suddenly he heard the energy of Ziost call out again, *Behind you!*

Aabsdu spun in time to see a dark armored commando leveling his heavy assault rifle towards him. He rolled just as the blaster fire ripped into the stone perch he had been kneeling at. The commando was well trained and immediately turned his torrent of fire to his target's new position. Aabsdu raised his blade and deflected the onslaught into the walls and ceiling but was unable to angle back at the trooper.

The commando's clip ran out giving Aabsdu an opportunity. He seized it and took two long strides towards his opponent, lightsaber raised for a hard downward slash. Just as he made to strike, a tall chrome assassin droid stepped into the room and slammed into Aabsdu. The Krath was so stunned he failed to counter before the commando had delivered a hard kick to his abdomen. The droid followed in quick tandem with a spinning kick that sent Aabsdu stumbling backwards against the stone walling.

Maintaining grip on his lightsaber, he raised it in time to block another volley of fire as the commando drew a blaster and took aim. He could see the assassin droid moving to flank him.

You have grown weak, Ziost sneered, Unable to take even a droid.

This is not my objective, thought the Adept as he allowed anger to fuel his desire to reach Shirai quickly.

Aabsdu dropped to the ground, sending his left fist slamming into the floor. It shook and cracked under the force of the strike causing the commando to falter half a second too long. Aabsdu raised his hand towards the droid and gripped tightly, squeezing his fist as an invisible force crushed the droid. It struggled to free itself but spurts of steam and hissing suggested failure. Aabsdu flicked his wrist and tossed the half destroyed droid out the window to the rave below.

Without pause, Aabsdu was back to his feet and stepping towards the commando as he tossed aside the droid. The trooper reached for a grenade but Aabsdu deflected it through the same window where it exploded midair, sending shrapnel down on the street fighters. The commando threw a punch that Aabsdu dodged with a duck and spun as he brought up his lightsaber and pierced it through the man's chest. No doubt fueled by the dark energy of Ziost, the commando used his last gasps of life to pull the pin on a second grenade. Sensing it clink onto the floor at their feet, Aabsdu launched himself across the room as the commando disappeared in a blast that shook the building's foundations.

The weak stone roof cracked and started collapsing. Debris smacked against Aabsdu as he raced down the stairs and out of the now three story building.

A short laugh burst from his lips over the destruction before him, but was quickly followed by frustration. He was losing focus on the task at hand. The intense energy of Ziost was infecting him with a lust he had long since purged, but somewhere deep within himself his new feelings were not unwelcome.

No, he thought, I seek knowledge. Information from Shirai. Nothing else.

Aabsdu again closed his eyes and focused on the complex pattern of Force signatures weaving themselves among the streets of the citadel. Some of the Brotherhood members he remembered from years before, but many were fresh blood. He hadn't seen Shirai in years but knew he would recognize the presence of a Dupar. The amount of visual noise was tremendous, but after close to a minute the insignificant figures started to vanish. One stood out among the others and Aabsdu snapped back to reality and moved into position.

It was difficult to make out anything in the street. Bodies pressed together as lightsabers hacked through the crowd and grenades rocked corners with body ripping explosions. Aabsdu scanned the faces back and forth, searching, searching-

There.

Shirai Dupar was a hulk of a man. Tall, tanned, and muscular; in peak physical condition, and it showed as he cut a vicious path through the One Sith, lightsaber turning into an axe that sliced through waves of droids and commandos like they were blue milk. The sight of the juggernaut tanking at the front of Sadow forces was impressive, but Aabsdu needed him for less violent reasons.

The Krath watched the Sith behead a rifleman and two droids in one swing, organic flesh rolling down the street next to mechanic ones. A warning flashed through Aabsdu's senses as he saw two Obelisk warriors, a man and woman, baring Clan Arcona sigils heading straight for the Sadowite. *No*, he panicked, *He's mine!*

The Obelisks pounced on Shirai, who threw off the first with a mighty shove but engaged the second in ferocious dueling of sabers and brawn. The fight was evenly matched with Shirai holding the advantage, but the second Obelisk was regaining his feet. Aabsdu couldn't leave anything to chance or the will of the Force.

Allowing the energies of the planet to fill his soul, Aabsdu charged into the crowd. He cut through two droids before reaching the female Obelisk. Her focus set to Shirai, Aabsdu's appearance came in a burst of energy that threw her backwards against the wall. Icicles dropped from an overhang like daggers, shattering across the street. Her light chest armor cracked as Aabsdu swung a blow towards her neck. She rolled, dodging, and came up in a defensive crouch. Aabsdu slammed his blade down hard on her own once, twice, and a third. She gave way on the last and fell backwards.

A nearby Arconan infantryman noticed the skirmish and made to assist his comrade. Aabsdu raised his free hand and sent three tendrils of energetic lightning spiraling through the man's body. He stopped and convulsed. The Obelisk took the chance to jump to her feet, yellow lightsaber angled for a jab, but Aabsdu pushed outward with his other hand and sent her falling back to the ground, pinning her beneath an invisible slab of weight.

Meanwhile, the infantryman gave one last shake before falling to the ground. Aabsdu maintained his force on the Obelisk as he scanned the crowd for Shirai and the male. They had vanished.

Turning back to the woman, he lifted the weight and placed his white blade to her chin. "You are not my threat, so I offer reprieve," he warned.

She spat, saliva dissolving on the hot plasma, "Only the weak and pathetic allow their enemies to-"

Her tongue dissolved in its entirety as Aabsdu slide his blade through her chin and out the crown of her head. Another infantryman labeled Tarentum leveled his assault rifle towards the Adept, but Aabsdu easily swatted and bounced the bolts back into the naive man's body.

It feels good, doesn't it, a dark voice whispered within him, To spill blood again.

War raged around him as he took stock of his surroundings. The voice, that voice he had thought the energy of Zioist now seemed much closer, more familiar. The vortex of power channeled by Zioist was new to Aabsdu, but this voice was an old yet common one thought forgotten.

Do not fear the strength, for strength gives you power, Aabsdu told himself. You have ignored it for too long, but only with power will you achieve the victory you seek.

The Adept found the sounds of battle muffled around him as the energy of Zioist erupted in a wave of darkness that consumed everything in its wake. The wave knocked aside the citadel of Ajunta Pall and rolled down city streets vacant until recently washed in blood. It raced towards Aabsdu, but he stood his ground, relaxed as he held out both arms and let loose a roar. The ice cold wave slammed into him and the world went pitch black.

Everything is gone.

There is nothing here.

A complete void.

He could not see even himself, but he knew he still stood. He could feel his feet planted firmly to the cold, hard ground. His robes, starting to ice over under the chilly temperatures, hung off his body. For the first time in four years, Aabsdu opened himself to the Force in ways learned and practiced by the Brotherhood. Immediately, he could feel Zioist's energy pressing

against him from all sides, but then he could also smell nearby death, hear the echoes of a great battle, and suddenly the darkness was pierced by blue light that burst outward like the explosion of a dwarf star.

The world returned. The chaos returned, but Aabsdu was contained within himself. The feelings he sensed were not new but heightened beyond memory.

He had thought himself to have found peace within the Force, a balance from which he could call upon the universe to guide him towards answers. Except the balance had been unstable. He had been given many false leads, his journeys extended and hardened for reasons he did not understand.

Now, on Zioist, he could feel himself renewed. He felt his passion for knowledge strengthen into a power he was finally granted access to. He knew this feeling, he missed it, loved it, and craved for its return. Few unlock the mysteries of the universe, but Aabsdu knew himself to be placed on a path towards victory. His feeling of peace achieved during his pilgrimage now rely like boredom, a craving for something greater.

The Brotherhood shall guide you once again.

Yes, he thought, through victory my chains are broken.

Scuffling down an alley drew his attention. He broke from reflection and moved around the corner. The wind whipped past his frosty ears to create a low wailing between the tight walls. The wail was a moan carrying hundreds of years of horrors.

At the end of the alley the wind continued around the corner but Aabsdu's gaze rested on the hunched figure of Shirai Dupar. He stood over the Arconan Obelisk's corpse, breathing heavily but alive.

Sensing another, Shirai spun and roared, lightsaber raised defensively. Aabsdu stayed several meters away.

"Should I still call you Gala?" he asked wistfully.

Several seconds passed before Shirai grinned a hearty but lethal grin, "Aabs. This is a surprise."

"Our paths converge in the near future, brother," Aabsdu told him, "The Force will see it so, and at the end stands a figure we know but whom is difficult to make out."

Shirai's counter was distanced, "Gaidal..."

Aabsdu nodded.

"I am," Shirai continued, "preoccupied at the moment. Fighting you, indeed."

"This battle was not mine to claim," Aabsdu said, "But I suspect Zioist may be a new beginning for both myself and our family."

Shirai stepped past the Adept, "I shall seek you out, but I am needed at the citadel."

Aabsdu watched the hulk of a man race down the alley and plunge himself back into the thick of wrestling bodies.

During his pilgrimage, Aabsdu had thought the Force would guide him, so he followed blindly. His journey had sent him to Onderon, Dantooine, Korriban, Empress Teta and more, but still he craved. Finally, he had returned to the Dark Jedi Brotherhood. His self-exile come full circle, Aabsdu realized the Force would never give him answers; only point him in certain directions.

In the cold alleys of Zioist, Aabsdu discovered what he had been searching for on Onderon, the place of his birth, Korriban of the Sith, and Empress Teta of the Krath.

He sought a home.

For ten years, he had thought the Brotherhood to be his home, but events conspired to falter his resolve. Now he had returned, but Krath mystics taught one can never step in the same river twice. The ever flowing currents of time had delivered him to a new Brotherhood nestled into Sith worlds of old, a new Plagueis exiled from its home and forced to conquer anew, and, perhaps, a new Aabsdu Dupar, Dark Adept of the Brotherhood, former member of the Dark Council, ready to seize his place within this new home and begin forging a new and darker future.

The Force had guided him alone this far, but Aabsdu would continue down his path next to the Brotherhood and House Plagueis.