**Dark Crusade, Ziost**

**Fiction Event**

**OPM Shi Long (Obelisk) /** [**Battle Team Shadow Gate**](https://www.darkjedibrotherhood.com/units/292) **of** [**House Qel-Droma**](https://www.darkjedibrotherhood.com/units/19) **of** [**Clan Arcona**](https://www.darkjedibrotherhood.com/units/8) **[ACC: I]**

**SB / GC / SC-SoA / AC-ToSC / DC-GP / GN-AgL / SN-AuL / Cr:3R-7A-8S-19E-3T-7Q / CI-SC / DSS / SoF / LS-AuL / SoL-BE / S:1D-3Dk-3Rm-5P-6U-4B-8De-2Ret-2Dec-3Aff-1Rn**

**{SA: MVL - MVS}**

**-=[]=-**

**ARC *Lambda*-class Shuttle designate 1L-19**

**En-route to Ziost from Kalsunor**

**Hyperspace**

If he’d been able to take an introspective look on his life, he may have been surprised that there were no earth-shattering explosions as before, no men falling by the scores, their screams punctuating his blade’s hungry growl. There were no raw displays of power, rendering an enemy stronghold into a charnel-house, and no banners being raised to the glory of a dream, bought and sold. Even now, he might’ve found it curious that he wasn’t comfortable at home, in his bed, surrounded by family and treasured friends. Barring that, even a funeral pyre could be expected for a warrior, who lived as warriors do.

It could be argued that his life was spent marking the Dark Brotherhood’s high and low points, a living metronome pacing the growing pains of the latest iteration of the group. But, amidst the undulation of history’s tumultuous flows, the death of Tsainetomo Keibatsu registered as little more than a blip on the cosmic radar.

As was the way in the Dark Brotherhood, these sorts of things were always taken with the “big picture” in mind. Even if they didn’t understand the orders passed down from on-high, the brethren were taught to view such things from a wide-angle, especially in light of the Dark Crusade. A battle lost here could doom the success of a campaign there; a man’s singular sacrifice on one world could mean the Brotherhood’s prosperity on another. Everyone was a thread in the tapestry, a piece of the grand puzzle.

A cog in the machine.

To wit: Sai, who now lie motionless on the shuttle’s mag-lev gurney, had nearly sacrificed himself by way of explosive decompression so that the Arconan forces could take the platform high above Kalsunor. The Arconans would win that campaign, but Sai would never know why. He was not privy to the Arconan Summit’s endgame, just as they had no idea of the true scope of the Dark Council’s grand design. Secrets upon secrets upon secrets.

The key difference between them was that Sai had stopped caring about the endgame. He had for a long time, long before leaving Naga Sadow to join Arcona in a complicatedly simple quest to make himself a literal weapon unto himself, and the Clan whose Overlord had cursed him as Apostate somehow better by focusing on destroying him for his betrayals.

He didn’t care that Arcona had verily become a power unto itself, decimating both foe and cautious friend alike and eliciting the suspicious and watchful gaze of the Dark Council. He didn’t care that he’d somehow - some*when* - grown distant from his friend, Marick Arconae, as the young man replaced *his* friend Wuntila as Consul.

Whether it was the culmination of the countless hours of training he’d spent in an attempt to devoid himself of emotion, or the fact that he was a literal heartbeat away from expiring, he simply did not care.

Funny then, that it was emotion that had conspired to kill him.

Vengeance, to name one, from the Sadowan flight officer aboard the flagship, the Firefox-class *Final Way* who had surreptitiously let slip the ship’s coordinates as it approached what was rumored to be the crowning jewel in the Council’s conquests. He lost his brother to Sai’s wrath as the Primarch left a wake of destruction in his flight to Arcona, and had sworn to make the Keibatsu pay.

Love, to name another emotion, for that officer from a certain Arconan medical chief. She gave the order to divert Sai’s shuttle from the medical platform on which she was stationed to Ziost, claiming “Consular Protocol”. More importantly, she’d loved the Sadowan officer since they had been small children, and did not question the small change in code her lover implored her to upload to Sai’s shuttle’s astrogation computer with the promise of their reuniting.

These seemingly innocuous things culminated in the shuttle carrying the unconscious Sai reverting from hyperspace three scant meters below the *Final Way*.

They never had a chance.

Warning claxons blared within the tiny craft, and the control panel lit up like a garish peddler’s storefront. Hands flew across controls and men yelled, but it was too late. The angle of approach had taken the shuttle right into the hull, the dorsal wing shearing off on contact like so much soft wood before the plane.

The craft continued to bore into the great capital ship’s hull. Systems catastrophically failed, and bulkheads crumpled with frightening ease. Duty-bound, the pilots strove valiantly to keep the craft spaceworthy as their mate dumped Sai off of the gurney and into the craft’s only escape pod. Sealing it, the man turned and rushed towards the cockpit, hoping against hope that they could somehow still...

The pod wasn’t so much launched as it was jettisoned from the explosion of the shuttle. The Sadowans had by now ascertained that a small craft that had collided with their great flagship. They would respond quickly, dispatching the salvage droid to both assess the damage to their own hull and to recover anything from the wreckage of the shuttle that might have told them who was blind enough to miss a capital ship directly in their flight path.

All told, the entire operation would take the Sadowans nine minutes. Unfortunately for Sai, the support systems onboard the craft were irreparably destroyed, damaged from the explosion.

He would not be shot by some sublime marksman from some unfathomable distance, nor would he be felled by some blademaster’s deft stroke. He would asphyxiate while the droid collected the escape pod and brought it aboard the *Final Way*, unaware of his own demise.

-=[]=-

He stood on a featureless landscape, his lightsaber clutched in a scarred and bloodied fist, facing a great shapeless mass that could only be described as a thunderhead roiling with violet lightning. The skies above were the same dull gray as the dusty ground, and no other discernable features were apparent. Sweat tracked glistening rivulets down his grime-caked brow, and his bandages and wraps had darkened in an alarming number of places, his life’s blood seeping through from opened and reopened wounds.

Though his awareness of the situation seemed sudden, the feeling that he’d been here battling for a long long time was paramount.

***“Of* course *you have! Where else would you have been?”***

The sudden response to question that hadn’t even fully formed caused him to whirl. It rang true in his ear as clearly as a bell. Even more alarming, it sounded as if it were his own.

His eyes -  the eyes that had seen so much, from the crisis of the cloned Grand Masters to the taking of Antei by the Vong to the crushing of so many pretenders to the Iron Throne - were not prepared for what they next beheld.

He saw himself.

Rather, he saw what was a *negative* of himself. Where Sai’s skin was dark, the speaker’s was as alabaster. Where the Primarch’s hair were ebon locks, this one’s was as an ivory flame, wild and untamable atop his head, his grin of maniacal acceptance the polar opposite of Sai’s look of stark confusion. Who *was* this apparition?

***“Oh, you know who I am.”***

The figure stepped forward, familiarity gracing his every move, the smile never leaving its face. Sai suddenly thought back to Inos 42, back to Rhelg, back to Kalsunor. Recognition settled into him.

“You are the Apostate.”

The figure chuckled at Sai’s use of the word, and wagged a long, white finger.

***“Come now; using ‘titles’, are we? Names? You ought to know better...and, after all I’ve done to get you past that.”***

Sai heaved and nodded his assent. He *did* know who the speaker was. He just...Was.

Just then, a long, purplish fork of lightning lashed out from the mass before the pair. Where the speaker simply sidestepped, Sai was unable to move and took the brunt of the attack. It seared into his gut and doubled him over, pulling a wretched scream from his throat. Sai looked up questioningly at his companion, who raised an eyebrow in a painfully familiar way and cocked its head at the mass.

***“Oh, that? That is, amongst other things, just the - ahem, excuse me while I get technical - the sum total of everything you’ve ever fought against. Your duty to your Clan, your own selfish desires, your perceived weaknesses, your failures...oh, don’t look so shocked! Right in there, you’ll find your guilt behind killing your wife, your longing to have your cousin see you as an equal, to make your Master give you some praise...every quest and goal and thing you felt you had to conquer is right in there. Well, all except* one*, of course.”***

The mass spit another fork and caught Sai in the shoulder. It lanced upwards, the arcs playing savagely across the side of his face, scarring and burning it. The force of the blow knocked him bodily down, but the Primarch struggled to one knee. His arm hung limp, a useless smoking mass.

Sai’s voice was ragged, defiant. But it was a shadow of itself, no longer the baritone that was rumored to have caused grown men to soil themselves in a fit of petrified incontinence. “I...must fight it. I must fight! It’s..it’s all I am.” The proud warrior’s head bowed. “It’s all I know how to be.”His spirit was weakening, from both the attacks upon his person and from being laid bare by his doppelganger.

The “anti-Sai” stepped close, placing a hand gently upon his injured shoulder. He spoke, and Sai noted that even as his own voice weakened, the speaker’s became stronger, bolstered by assertion.

***“True, true. You* are *a fighter. The very best kind, too: too stupid to know when you’re beaten. But, you can’t fight all the time, and you definitely can’t fight* that.”**

The speaker paused while both pairs of eyes - which were the only constant between them - turned towards the living void. They swam with quicksilver, fluid and opaque as mercury, and they were filled with the churning cloud. It darkened and became more violent in its thrashing, as if responding to their looking at it. Sai’s negative image continued.

***“No one can. You created that...mess...and could never hope to defeat it. Every breath you take feeds it, gives it life. But, you did do one thing right. You created Me.”***

The negative looked away from the mass and into Sai. He looked *into* him, just as much as the thing that tormented him did.

***“*I *can fight that thing.* I *can beat it. That’s why I Am, to do what you couldn’t possibly hope to do. Not as you are, anyway. Look at you. You’re beaten, bloodied, bowed. Your spirit is as nothing. You’ve wanted to be the best warrior, but do you even remember what you would war* for*?”***

The doppelganger’s voice was as much a growl as it was a roar now. He continued, hoisting Sai up fully by his shoulders.

***“That is why I Am! I am War! I am Strife! I am the culmination of all that you could not be, made to destroy all that you cannot unmake! You can’t deny this.”***

He released Sai, who slumped unsteadily on his feet. There was no menace in the negative’s voice, just as there would be no challenge in Sai’s response. The double had given voice to every doubt that had plagued Sai in recent days. He was right. He’d known there’d be a consequence, an after-effect, to the things he’d done on Inos 42 to rid himself of Lord Sadow’s influence. He’d compounded things - driven the nails into his own coffin, after a fashion - by every action he committed in the name of Arcona. He just didn’t expect it to manifest with such...surety. And, he *was* tired. So very, very tired.

“What...must I do?”

Sai looked into his - his *own* - eyes. Beyond the swirling silverish void, he saw the same flame that had been stoked a lifetime ago. He knew now that it would never be extinguished. The lust for improvement that had driven him all these years and had forged him into a machine of destruction would never fade. More importantly, however, he saw a promise of peace.

Of rest.

Sai smiled. Openly. Genuinely. He looked down as the fatigue began to melt away, his many aches and pains subsiding to a whisper of sensation. The Apostate’s hand was outstretched, expectant.

***“Just...let go.”***

Sai hefted *Nenshogeru*, his custom lightsaber, the weapon that some men coveted, that most men feared, and the one he’d crafted to be his searing wind that would burn away all that stood against him.

And handed it over to the Apostate.

There was a sudden and deafening roar as the cloud rushed to envelop the Primarch. Sai offered no resistance, and he succumbed to the void noting distantly that there were no cheering crowds of Arconans welcoming him home from yet another successful campaign. There was no feast of infinite proportions with his forebears seated around a great table in a hall filled with a purifying light.

Musashi Daraku Keibatsu would not greet him as equal. Neither would his master, Shin’ichi Keibatsu, nor his cousins Manji and Shikyo Keibatsu stand vigil at his bedside, ready offer him a warrior’s honors into the afterlife.

At the end of it all, the muted clanging of the recovery droid’s coupling with the escape pod was the only herald of the passing of Tsainetomo Keibatsu.

-=[]=-

Aboard the *Final Way*, a peculiar pair strode towards the hangar that the escape pod had been brought to. One, a scarred Falleen; the other, a woman who had seen many a great thing, but seemed to be looking at them with new eyes.

They wouldn’t arrive at the hangar before the med-droid would sweep the craft, noting no vital signs emanating from within. They wouldn’t walk through the hatch before that same med-droid would delete from its memory banks what would later be classified as a “false-reading” - a subtle yet defined change in the occupant’s brain waves detected *after* the pronouncement of death.

But, they would know that they were led here anyway. Even as the Falleen pried open the craft with the Dark Side, they both knew.

Eleven minutes after the explosion of the shuttle, the occupant inside the escape pod twitched.

And inhaled.

-=[]=-

Darkness, now. All encompassing, ever expansive darkness.

Then, the light. A gradual coming back to the world.

“Brother.” The voice spoke in his mind as much as in his ears, and the effect was as trying to listen through a wall of standing water. “Awaken.”

Then another voice. Lilting. Seductive. Ringing with poison-laced promise. “We shouldn’t keep him. They will miss him.”

“Yes, I sense they search, even now.”

“Then, why tempt fate?” The lilt took an upward, mocking tone.

“Fret not, Apprentice; we shall ensure he is delivered back to the Arconans - as our friend here was wont of saying -  in the fullness of time.”