Ziost, the planet was as unforgiving as the enemy that occupied it. Lieutenant Wolfram was normally the model of a military officer. For this impending battle the former lieutenant looked more like a mercenary. Almost two weeks had passed since Lieutenant Wolfram’s platoon were all killed in an ambush, and now was the time for former Lieutenant Wolfram to avenge their deaths.

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 Zednich Wolfram, or as everyone called him, Zed, was a Lieutenant in the Galactic Alliance Defense Force. Lieutenant Wolfram enlisted in the Army at the age of eighteen and from the very beginning was on the fast track to become a commissioned officer and future Supreme Commander, maybe even Chief of State. The battles during the Dark Nest Crisis and impending Swarm War that followed were where Lieutenant Wolfram received most of his military decorations. He played a critical part during the Battles of the Murgo Choke, Snevu, Tenupe, and the Blockade of the Utegetu Nedula. Starting as a private and being promoted all the way to lieutenant by way of a battlefield commission Zednich had the upmost respect from his troops and in return he loved them as if they were his own brothers.

 The Galactic Alliance received intelligence from an unknown source informing them that an unconfirmed number of Churhee’s Riflemen were located on Athiss. Wolfram was called to the briefing room where he was given the mission overview by Grand Admiral Gilad Pellaeon. He and his platoon were assigned the duty of eliminating the Riflemen. The lieutenant was too well trained to question his superior officers in a mission briefing but he had concerns. The hasty manner in which this mission was assembled made it unnecessarily dangerous, but with the potential to kill or capture the leader of the Churhee’s Riflemen the risk was deemed acceptable. Zed and his platoon were deemed one of the most elite platoons in the Army and could handle any obstacle thrown at them. After the briefing Zed talked to the Jedi Knight who was leading the mission, a Twi’lek, Jedi Master Xirpoc.

 When the platoon touched down on Athiss, Zed had a bad feeling, “I could almost feel the ambush was going happen, but orders were orders.” Athiss is a green planet covered in beautiful forests and lush green fields. The landing shuttle set down in one of the fields that was bordered by a tree-line which the platoon could use for cover. As Zed moved to the ramp, time seemed to slow down and suddenly he saw a rocket fired from a shoulder mounted missile launcher. As the rocket flew towards to the ship in a burst of light and smoke, reality sped up to a rapid pace.

Zed screamed “Rocket!” but it was too late.

The rocket punched a hole in the side of the landing shuttle, and Zed was thrown from the shuttle, his body riddled with shrapnel. Laying in the field with blood running down his face, Zed struggled to focus. Images wavered in and out, but Zed was able to center his attention on a shadowy one-handed figure emerging unharmed from the shuttle and standing tall. As he slipped out of consciousness, all Zed could hear was the horror of his platoon being slaughtered by the Churhee’s Riflemen.

 As he awoke, Zed couldn’t believe he was alive. He was suspended in a bacta tank healing from his injuries. There were signs of healed cuts all over his hands and arms, as well as a large scar on his left thigh. Zed could see his commanding officers discussing him in the medical center with a human Jedi. The Jedi was Master Tee’Cee; he was well respected and an attaché to the Galactic Defense Force. Zed did not know what they were saying but he knew it was bad news.

 The medical droid released him from the tank and moved him to hospital bed in a private room. In minutes, there was a knock on the door and Zed saw the same commanders enter his room.

“Good Morning Lieutenant Wolfram. You’ve been out for a few days….”

Zed interrupted General Carlon “Sir, what happened to my men?”

The General continued. “Lieutenant, I regret to inform you all the men in your unit are dead. Your mission was an ambush. Do you remember anything?”

Zed’s eyes widened “I believe there was a traitor on the shuttle sir. Before I lost consciousness, I saw someone leaving the shuttle without getting fired on.”

The Generals turned around and began whispering. Although Zed could make barely see him, he caught a hint of Jedi Master Tee’Cee standing behind the Generals. The Jedi Master wasn’t taking part in the whispered conversation. He was focused on Zed.

“Thank you Lieutenant Wolfram, you stay here and rest up.” General Carlon ordered.

“Who was it? Who betrayed us!? Sir.”

“Lieutenant, intelligence has uncovered information confirming that it was Xirpoc; he made a deal Churhee’s Riflemen. Apparently, Xirpoc has been selling Jedi and Alliance secrets to the highest bidder for some time. When he found out the Jedi were closing in on him, he made a deal with the Riflemen for protection.” The General continue to explain. “Xirpoc was the source of the bad intelligence in order to lure you and your men into an ambush and use that ambush to fake his own death. The plan was for witnesses to see a one-handed figure leave the shuttle; this confirmed the Jedi’s lack of disturbance in the Force. A severed hand belonging to Zirpoc was found in the wreckage. We think his plan was to make us believe the rocket struck him directly leaving only a hand behind. You and troops sold the story that one could have survived. You were so bloody and cut up Xirpoc left you for dead.”

Zed couldn’t believe it. He had fought side by side with Xirpoc in dozens of battles, he considered him a friend. Zed inquired “What is to happen to Xirpoc.”

The General answered as forcefully as possible knowing the Lieutenant wasn’t going to like the answer “The Jedi are going to take care of him.”

The General was correct “SIR!” Zed exclaimed, “Those were Galactic Alliance men, the Galactic Army should answer for their deaths and kill Xirpoc.”

“Lieutenant! We are not mercenaries out for blood. We are a Defense Force charged with keeping the *peace*. The Jedi will capture, question and put Xirpoc on trial for his crimes. That is the proper way. You are too close to this situation. Your orders are to rest up, rehab, and report back to duty after being cleared by the doctors.”

“This *situation* you speak of were my men!” Zed stood up and swatted the medical droids’ sensors away. “I am going to track down Xirpoc and kill him.” Zed changed into his street clothes and headed towards the door.

General Carlon squared his shoulders and straightened in preparation, “Lieutenant Wolfram, if you leave it will be considered a forfeit of commission and you will be out of the Galactic Army.”

Zed looked over his shoulder and without saying a word left the medical center.

\* \* \*

 It seemed like a lifetime ago. Zed was filled with hate, and all he could think of was killing Xirpoc. As soon as Zed left the Medical Center, he started tracking Xirpoc and found out he retreated to Ziost. There were eight platoons totaling two hundred and forty Churhee’s Riflemen based at the Ajunta Pall’s Citadel. They were dug in waiting for the Jedi to come for Xirpoc. What they weren’t expecting was a lone man, trained, and out for blood. Zed didn’t care if he died, as long as Xirpoc was lying dead next to him.

 Zed was wearing his white military armor; they could take his rank but his equipment he kept at his home. Ajunta Pall’s Citadel was in southwestern region of Ziost and while Zed piloted over he could see another battle breaking out around the base of another citadel. Zed knew he was going to have to move fast, he saw the brilliantly lit lightsabers against the snow white background.

 Zed touched down and immediately looked for cover; he knew the Churhee’s Riflemen were expert snipers and ambush artists. Safe cover was in short supply; Ziost was a mountainous tundra with ferocious gusts of wind that pelted Zed’s face with ice and snow. He pulled his scarf up around his face and wiped the snow from his goggles. Zed pushed forward, trudging through the knee high snow, finger at the trigger. He kept scanning mountain tops and looking for movement. Zed had to move fast but safe until he reached the entrance of the Citadel. When he finally arrived at the entrance, Zed just stood there and looked in awe. The Citadel was built into the mountains of Ziost, the earth kept her safe. There was a coating of frost that grew thicker the higher it went up the building. The base of the buildings held the tan from the rock of the mountains while the tops looked as if they were carved from ice. With the wind rushing through the abandoned streets and corridors, it seemed as if the Citadel was speaking to Zed. Zed entered one of the buildings; it appeared to be a Sith temple. The steeple on top would give an overview of the entire cityscape. Zed made the climb, blaster rifle at the ready. He also had a blaster pistol on his hip, a molecular stiletto on his belt, and two thermal detonators. Slowly he ascended the staircase to top of the steeple. He peered into the doorway and saw a sniper and his spotter looking down on the streets from their perch. Zed slowly moved behind the sniper team, each step purposely taken to remain absolutely silent. Zed slung his blaster rifle behind him and removed his stiletto from his belt. When he finally got close enough he killed both men in a single move to remain unannounced to the rest of the Riflemen. Zed used the sniper’s long rifle to search the streets. He knew there were over two hundred men and one corrupt Jedi down there but the Citadel looked abandoned.

 The Ajunta Pall’s Citadel had an expanding circular pattern cityscape. From the steeple’s point of view looking down the whole Citadel looked as if it was made completely out of ice. In the middle was a central structure. Zed knew Xirpoc had to be there, he could feel Xirpoc was in there. Zed began noticing minute movements in windows and around corners. He visualized a path the through the streets, each turn calculated and meaningful. Zed descended the steeple with speed and purpose; he was ready to exact his revenge. In the back of his mind Zed knew this was a suicide mission. Even if he was able to make it to the center and kill Xirpoc there was no way he was going to make it out alive. The battle with Xirpoc would gain the Riflemen’s attention and the noose would tighten around his neck. Zed sped through the streets cutting corners and ducking through buildings when he needed cover. He was a man possessed. Like a light at the end of the tunnel, the building in the center of the cityscape grew closer and larger. It was a formal building, with long red flags of the Sith insignia hanging down. There were large sets of steps leading up to pillars that stood in front of the front door. Zed approached the two grand ornate doors past the pillars and noticed markings dusted in snow. Zed brushed the snow away and revealed what appeared to be words written across the two doors.

*Nwûl tash.
Dzwol shâsotkun.
Shâsotjontû châtsatul nu tyûk.
Tyûkjontû châtsatul nu midwan.
Midwanjontû châtsatul nu asha.
Ashajontû kotswinot itsu nuyak.
Wonoksh Qyâsik nun.*

 Though Zed could not read the words he knew it was Qotsisajak, the language of the Sith. Zed stared at the words for a few more moments and pushed the door opened. As Zed entered the capital building he saw elaborate staircases and more Qotsisajak words etched into the walls. The floors were marble and statues of past Dark Lords stood guard over the halls and bases of the stairwells. A blood red carpet led down the long main hallway to the grand hall. Zed walked the carpet as if he was one of the Sith Masters himself knowing a fight to the death was waiting at the end. There were two Churhee’s Riflemen guarding the door to the grand hall watching in disbelief. They looked at each other and back to Zed, and back to each other. They were completely distracted, even slightly impressed by Zed’s arrogance. Neither one raised a weapon or fired a shot. Zed approached the men and drew his blaster pistol killing both with a single shot to the chest. His presence was now known, the rest of the Riflemen would have heard the shots. Now the question was could Zed kill Xirpoc before he ran out of time?

 Zed entered the grand hall; there was a large, elaborately carved podium in the center of the room with plush red velvet stadium seating in the full circle around it. Zed climbed the seats up to the ceiling with his eyes. The hiss of a lightsaber being powered up drew Zed’s attention back down. Xirpoc was sitting in the first row, his face being eerily illuminated by his blue blade. Zed’s blood boiled at the very sight of Xirpoc. Zed took a deep breath and sprinted at Xirpoc firing nonstop from his blaster pistol. Xirpoc took a guarded position and deflected each of the blaster rounds. Zed continued to charge down the red carpet, firing, and diving to tackle Xirpoc. Xirpoc was a Jedi Master and Zed’s only chance was to get in close. His rage fueled his desire and Jedi or not Xirpoc had to pay for his crimes. As Zed lunged Xirpoc used the Force to deflect him away, crashing him into the seats. Zed holstered his blaster pistol and took aim with his rifle. Xirpoc cut his own hand off only a few days ago before going into hiding, and being able to fight with only one hand would be his weakness. Zed fired continually at Xirpoc’s weakened left side trying to shoot him in the leg or side. Xirpoc continued to deflect the rounds while jumping to higher rows. Zed maneuvered around the circular aisles using the seats as cover.

 Xirpoc used the force jumped over Zed and land in front of him. Zed pulled his stiletto blade and tried to stab or slash Xirpoc. Xirpoc kicked the blade from Zed’s hand and the stiletto shattered on impact with the ground. As sharp and lethal the blade was, it was equally fragile. Zed rolled and dodged the lightsaber strikes hopping over seats to avoid being cut down. Zed lifted his blaster rifle to fire but before he could pull the trigger Xirpoc cut the weapon in half. Zed threw the remaining part of the rifle at Xirpoc in an act of frustration. Xirpoc leaned to the side and easily avoided the hunk of useless metal.

Zed shook his head and demanded an answer to Xirpoc “How could you?”

Xirpoc stood up right and answered “Credits, every time we find peace war returns. The fighting will never stop. There will always be another war and I now know the Force needs evil with the good, there cannot be just one. What is the purpose of fighting, it never ends? I’m using my credits to buy my own peace.”

“You killed my men in the name of peace? How dare you call yourself a Jedi?” Zed slowly stood up

Xirpoc powered down his lightsaber hooking it to his belt and raised his remaining hand. Zed drew his blaster pistol but Xirpoc used the Force to rip it from Zed’s hand and throw it away. Zed felt the Force grip his neck as his body began rising off the ground moving slowly towards Xirpoc.

“You know NOTHING about being a Jedi!” Xirpoc screamed at Zed with the Force tightening around his neck.

Xirpoc kept ranting about the trials of being a Jedi. Zed noticed that Xirpoc kept looking away in remembrance while telling his stories. Zed used these openings to slowly reach for a thermal detonator. Xirpoc was so focused on screaming and ranting about the challenges of being a Jedi that he didn’t notice Zed’s movements as he squirmed in the air. Zed gripped the thermal detonator in his hand locating the trigger with his thumb. He knew he was in the kill radius but he was willing to sacrifice himself to end Xirpoc. Suddenly there were sounds of explosions and men yelling orders outside. Xirpoc stopped mid sentence and looked down the main hallway. This was Zed’s chance, Zed pushed the trigger forward and let thermal detonator fall to the ground. Xirpoc heard the sound of the detonator hit the marble floor. He dropped his grip on Zed and used the Force to throw the thermal detonator away pushing Zed back too. It was too late. The Force threw the thermal detonator barely far enough to avoid death. The blast violently threw Zed and Xirpoc into the air crashing them in different directions.

 Zed slowly stood up, he was bleeding badly, there was a wound on his stomach and his left shoulder was dislocated but he still managed to stand up. The explosion had managed to burn Xirpoc badly and had blown off a couple of his fingers. Xirpoc fumbled around on his belt for his lightsaber but couldn’t locate it. Xirpoc glanced up seeing his lightsber on the ground at the feet of Zed, who picked it up then powered it on. Swinging the lightsaber slowly back and forth Zed gained a feel for the weapon. With his left hand pressing against his stomach in a weak attempt to stop the bleeding, he walked closer to Xirpoc. Xirpoc moved to his knees and spread his arms out straight in a sign of surrender. Zed raised the lighsaber and Xirpoc’s eyes widened.

“What are you doing?” Xirpoc pleaded

With his head downward Zed looked at Xirpoc out of the top of his eyes and said “This is for my men.” Zed swung the lightsaber lopping Xirpoc’s head from his shoulders. Zed expected to feel a sense of relief or closure but instead felt a sense of power. He decided if Xirpoc died, not a court, he did. Zed noticed the sounds of fighting outside had stopped, turning around Zed saw Sith in all the hallways leading to the grand hall. Their red lightsabers were engaged and they were watching him. He didn’t know how long they had been there but he turned his lightsaber off and dropped it to the ground. Dark Jedi moved in around him and walked him outside.

 He saw droids moving the dead bodies of the Curhee’s Riflemen and fallen Sith to a pile in the center of the city. It appeared they had all been cut down by a lightsaber. Whoever these Dark Jedi were, they were not to be trifled with. Zed was moved to a POW camp outside the citadel, and placed in a holding cell. There was a long line of cells containing wounded Riflemen, each cell holding one man. Walking in was a powerful Dark Jedi. Zed could not hear what this Dark Jedi said, but he was clearly giving orders as he paced the holding cells with his hands behind his back. As the Dark Jedi neared Zed’s cell, Zed looked down so as to not draw attention or offend. Through the top of his eyes he noticed the Dark Jedi’s feet were still in front of his cell. Zed looked up and the Sith looked at him in the eyes as if he was reading his very soul. The holding cell’s energy field dropped and the Sith spoke.

“Who are you?”

 “I am Zednich Wolfram, *former* Lieutenant in the Galactic Alliance Army.”

“I feel much hatred in you Zednich. Do you know what the words on the doors of the capital building read?”

Zed answered the question worrying the wrong answer could cost him his life. “No.”

The Dark Jedi translated for him.

“*Nwûl tash.
Dzwol shâsotkun.
Shâsotjontû châtsatul nu tyûk.
Tyûkjontû châtsatul nu midwan.
Midwanjontû châtsatul nu asha.
Ashajontû kotswinot itsu nuyak.
Wonoksh Qyâsik nun.*

*Peace is a lie, there is only passion.
Through passion, I gain strength.
Through strength, I gain power.
Through power, I gain victory.
Through victory, my chains are broken.
The Force shall free me”*

The Dark Jedi pointed at Zed and offered him a choice “If you come with me, you will learn how to channel the strength you gain from your hatred into power, learn the ways of the Sith.”

Zed mustered all the strength he had to get up and stand at attention. Without a word the Sith turned and began to walk towards a shuttle that was visible in the distance.

Abruptly the Sith stopped and began to explain what was to happen next “That shuttle will take you to the Shadow Academy. If you are worthy and survive then perhaps I will see again, I am Valhavoc.”

Valhavoc returned to inspecting the prisoners while Zed continued walking to the shuttle. As Zed boarded the shuttle he felt for the first time he knew what his destiny really was. A new dawn was soon to break; it was time the galaxy learned of a new power.