

## Beware of Folly

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War has been waged since the creation of sentient life. Each time it has a different shape or name, but the core of its metaphoric form always remains the same. War is brutal, but simple. For a soldier at least. You have your enemy, and your objective. You fight against your enemy to achieve your objective. They say that war never changes.

Probably for the best.

The ancient sands of Korriban detonate into plumes of ochre clouds around me. I'm running at breakneck speed, letting the Force fuel my muscles and guide me forward. Blaster fire erupts from up ahead, but two Mandalorian soldiers jump in front of me and return fire. The one on the right takes a repeater bolt to the chest, sending him hurtling through the air and into a nearby dune. The second holds his ground and buys me enough time to break off, but meets a similar fate.

With the soldiers acting as a diversion, I wrap the Force around me like a shawl and dissolve from view. My shroud doesn't protect me from star projectiles or explosions, but my body moves on instinct as it carries me towards my objective.

"Forward!" Cethgus Entar Arconae calls out from behind me. I can imagine the burly Quaestor holding his saber high above his head. He was no stranger to war. He'd been doing this just as long. Sure enough, his cry is met with a cacophony of shouts. The screech of blaster fire, the hiss of artillery cannons firing, and armored tanks mobilizing fills me with a sense of pride. The *Shadehammer* had been everything I had hoped.

Arcona had been the first to land on the sands of Korriban, and the first to engage the lurking One Sith forces. The *Acclamator's* forward cannons had cleared the landing zone, and landed like a comet that grew legs and dug itself into the ancient planet. Once it had touched down, it transformed into an armored fortress. Perfect for an immediate Forward Operating Base and a giant middle finger to the enemy forces.

Worth every credit, in my opinion, if not just for that brief moment of hesitation in Esoteric's forces when the might of Arcona's armed forces piled out of the drop-plates. *Karkhead*.

I keep moving forward. Alone. Legorii had taken to the idea easier than I imagined. Too easily. There are few I trust more with leading Arcona, but something simply felt off. Maybe I am just not accustomed to *not* being argued with. Everything these past few years has been just that; argument after argument after argument. I'm sick of it, really. I never signed up to

fight my own brothers and sisters. Still, someone had to do it, and fate, as it were, had placed me in the position to do so. Regardless, there were just certain things a man needs to do.

Atyiru will be furious with me. I had purposely assigned her to a different vessel, so she would not be able to stop me. Even she, one of the few people who has ever probably given a damn about me, for some reason, doesn't understand.

I'm no leader. I'm no hero, either. I am nothing more than what I crafted to be. A weapon. A tool for war.

The objective was clear before me. Infiltrate the ruins of the Sith Academy. Secure the "goods" and present them for confiscation.

Why did this seem so familiar? Oh, right. Kalsunor still leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

It's probably holocrons. Always holocrons. They seem to always have the answer for every problem. They are probably guarded by a bunch of ancient traps too. Not to mention, the rest of the Brotherhood's personalities and acquaintances will have the same objective.

But I'm not going for the temple, though. My target is simple.

Wars tend to have these little moments that stand out among the rest of the tales and exploits. Contrary to popular belief, wars are not won by who has the most troops, or who outmaneuvers or outthinks the others. No. War is won by the minds of the leaders at the head of their armies. And if you remove that head, the body follows shortly after.

I watch the temple from a safe distance. My grey robes mesh perfectly with the earth tones I layered beneath them. Even without the Force to help cloak me, I blend perfectly with the desert. And so I wait.

Waiting is always the hardest part. Not because of time itself, mind you. But because waiting is when everything catches up to you. Behind *Deadheart* my emotions rage into a tempest waiting to burst. I crush those sentiments--doubt, guilt, remorse--and burn them as fuel.

I have the chance to strike a crippling blow the enemy forces. If I succeed, this war will be over before it truly starts.

This is what I was built for.

I move closer towards the Academy's entrance, and continue to wait. Time passes, but my patience is rewarded as my target arrives. Well, I shouldn't say target, really. *Shadicar* don't have targets, for a target can be missed. Instead, we simply have *kills*.

My *kill* hops off his speeder, stretching like a lazy cat. He shouts, "Sweetie! I'm hooome!"

The One Sith Adept flicks his robes out behind dramatically. Synin Torin prostrates himself against the steps of the ruined Academy and kisses the steps with his lips.

Synin Torin. Master Engineer of Esoterics forces. He had been a wrench in the side of the Brotherhood for too long. His death would mean more than my standing at the helm of a bridge looking all billowy with my Shadow Lord get-up on. The Summit has grown tired of my rein anyway, and I'll never be the inspiring figure Wuntila or Zandro were. What I could do, and do well, was this.

A platoon of One Sith warriors takes up a defensive position around Torin. Their black and red robes do little to shroud the glistening chrome plate of their armor. Each has a lightsaber at their belt, and a blaster in hand. At their lead, something out of a bad science fiction holodrama stands at attention. It appears to be human, but only in shape. The YVH-1 combat droid is Torin's greatest creation. Powered by the secret art of *mechduru*, it was smarter than the average combat droid, which made it absolutely terrifying.

None of that mattered though. All that mattered was the kill.

My boots move silently across the soft sand. I'm no more than a desert heat wave in the air as I move behind a half-eroded statue of a towering Sith Pureblood in full armor. I press against the cool stone and wait for my target to climb the rest of the stairs, entourage in tow.

I could jump him and take him out quickly head on. That method would leave me a sitting duck for the rest of his cadre. I'm fast, but not that fast. So I wait, until he's moved past me entirely. I wait until the center of their phyle is before me and slip behind one of the soldiers. I match the pace of his footsteps almost mechanically, having already been subconsciously studying their movements.

Left foot, right foot, I keep time with the One Sith warrior's steps. I'm still no more noticeable than the long shadows cast by the scorching sun overhead. The YVH-1 swivels his eerie head around and looks right at me.

My heart races. The droid probably had some kind of infrared filter that made my cloak fairly useless. I quickly run through my options, but before I can snap the neck of the guard I'm shadowing, YVH-1 turns his head away.

I guess becoming an Adept had its perks.

I slow my heart rate with practiced ease. I lower myself as deep as I can into *Deadheart*, and my fear and excitement fade away. I draw on those emotions I had repressed earlier and let them burn inside of me like a furnace.

I burst into motion, breaking away from the back of my warrior and closing the distance between myself and Synin Torin. Even as I accelerate, my body is no more than a translucent ripple in the air. Only in the last second before the stiletto blade built into my gauntlet juts free and I sink its needle-like tip into Torin's jugular does my figure materialize.

The strike is clean, and quick. Blood squirts free from the puncture wound as Synin gasps his dying words away. While he is still in shock, I grab a hold of him and hug him close to my body, turning to put him between me and the rest of the One Sith warriors.

They can't be sure that their Master is dead, though he's dying in my arms. They hold their fire for a moment, but a moment is all I need. I throw Synin forward and into the arms of his combat droid and draw both of my twin shoto-sabers in tandem. They his to life, and I throw each of them to either side of my body like tomahawks. Guided by my mind, the sabers hurtle into the first two One Sith take off their arms at the shoulder where the armor split for mobility purposes.

Blaster fire erupts, but I'm already moving. My sabers track back to my hands like magnets, and the second they return, I shimmer into nothingness and make a dash for a third One Sith. This one manages to get his saber free of his sheet, but I make two quick cuts with my own sabers and his head goes tumbling away from the rest of his body.

Can't stop. Have to keep moving. I start to fade back into the shroud of the Force, but a trio of blaster bolts nearly turn me into swiss cheese. I slip around one bolt, deflect the second, but the third grazes my left hip, causing me to cry out in sudden pain. I grit my teeth hard and let my adrenaline drown out the pain. I can worry about pain later.

Can't stop. Have to keep moving.

The next One Sith is on to my tactics and has his saber ready. Our blades clash, once, and then twice, and I realize that it doesn't matter which of us is the better duelist. All it would take is one shot from one of his friends to finish me. I shuffle in a semicircle, angling my opponent between myself and the others. None of them can get a clean a shot, but they try anyway.

I narrow my focus on the One Siths' stance. He is swinging his saber with one mighty hand at me, bold and aggressive and fearless despite seeing me slaughter his friends in a few blinks of the eye. He favors his right hand, so I focus on his left, forcing his saber across his chest and pinning it against his own chest just for a moment. A moment is all I need as my second blade thrusts forward like a spring, the point poking right through the center of his skull.

As my latest victim starts to fall, I kick his body into the last remaining One Sith, sending them both tumbling down the stairs in a heap of limbs and clanking armor.

YVH-1 doesn't leave me much time to savor my accomplishment. My senses scream at me, and I turn just in time to see a pillar of flame open its hungry mouth to envelope me. The flamethrower is powerful, and I can feel my flesh singe behind my disintegrating robes. The scent of burned hair stings my nostrils, and I throw myself out of the way of the flamethrower that continues to erupt from YVH-1's wrist.

Fatigue starts to set in. I hurl one of my sabers at the combat droid, but he times the rotation mechanically and deflects it harmlessly aside. The blade disengages as it tumbles away and down the tall staircase. I shift into a defensive stance and look around, hoping to find an exit.

It's just YVH-1 and I. I've tangled with ancient spirits. I'd killed women and men, and things that were more than men. I could do this.

That's when the whistling sound of a rocket propelled grenade caught my attention. My senses told me to move, but for the first time since I could remember, I was too slow.

The detonation was loud. I felt the air get syphoned out of my lungs as the intense heat of the blast singed my skin and enveloped me. My body flew like a ragdoll and bounced across the stone tile of the Academy. I try and move, but my body won't respond.

"Taldryan, kill the droid! Move in and secure the ruins!" a familiar voice shouts. I'd had to listen to Rian Aslar--Consul of Clan Taldryan--voice countless times in meetings over the years, but for the first time since we scrapped with one another as Journeyman in the Combat Center, I felt a sense of dread attached to it.

Darkness enfolds me, but somehow, I manage to smile.