

Assault Shuttle
Low Orbit
Moraband

*L*ocke Sonjie looked out the viewport at the reddish-brown world ahead of them. This world, throughout its history, had held so much mystery. It had been the site of ancient Sith empires and now was home to their tombs. More recently, it had been the site of a climatic battle between three of the Dark Brotherhood's Grand Masters. It was strange that it had been left unoccupied, but after that conflict, Locke was not surprised that the Brotherhood had turned to other matters.

He made a show of checking over his blaster rifle before glancing at his companion for this trip. Sanguinius Tsucyra Entar, his Proconsul, sat against one bulkhead, hands folded in his lap, seemingly at peace with the world around him. Once, Sang had been a Jedi who embraced the teachings of their failed Order. Others had shown support for him, and so Locke had been required to deliver an ultimatum: his Proconsul abandon those teachings, or be destroyed. Fortunately, it seemed that Sang had chosen the former, and continued to do so to this day.

Calm is okay, he thought to himself, *as long as he does not fall back on his old Jedi ways*. It had been a great risk to continue to keep Sang in his current position - especially with the current activities of Grand Master Pravus - but Locke felt the problem was behind them now and the continued benefits outweighed the risks of the past.

"It will be good to see some action again," Locke said. "Even if it is on this dust bowl again."

Sang said nothing for a few seconds. Locke thought that he felt a darkness within the other man but was not sure. "Yes," was all he said.

Sang glanced at Locke, then out a viewport, looking back toward the heavy cruiser *Retribution*. He let the dark thoughts that were not truly his own slowly slip away, the dark side presence he had maintained with such difficulty evaporate. The Proconsul knew that Locke would be wary, and he had to be careful. Once he had learned to alter his appearance in the Force, he had kept that fact carefully hidden from the Clan.

"Hopefully," Locke continued, "we will find some useful relic on this world. Even with the forces of seven Clans so recently having been on it, they could not have found everything. The world is covered in tombs."

Sang exhaled slowly. It seemed that Locke was not suspicious and the ruse was still working - for now. "Indeed," Sang said, "there must be great knowledge hidden in it's depths - great, dangerous knowledge."

"Yes," Locke said, still studying the world.

In truth, Sang hoped that if there were any relics on the world, he could prevent them from falling into the Clan's hands. Locke's newfound interest in ancient tools and secrets was alarming. There were things that were better left dead and forgotten. They were dangerous, destructive, and could threaten not only the Brotherhood, but the entire galaxy. Sang had to stop them from being used.

He found himself in a difficult position. He was second in command of a Clan who wanted to find, collect, and use those dark artifacts. He knew he could use that to his advantage, but had to discover how.

LZ Designate-Zeta-Five-Nine-Zero Coordinates Redacted

Sergeant Julion Grul kept his blaster rifle propped on the fallen stone obelisk he was crouched behind, watching the entrance of the ruins ahead. His troops surrounded him, all in similar positions, weapons trained on the opening. Twisted, grey bodies lay strewn across the exposed ground between their position and the ruins' entrance ahead, where those creatures had attempted to escape. Julion didn't know how anyone could survive down there, but supposedly there were still Warhost personnel trapped inside. His force had made no headway, though. After one bloody and unsuccessful attempt to get inside, they had taken up position here and signalled for reinforcements.

So far, no response had been obtained. It seemed that this entrance was of little importance, compared to other ones the Warhost had been assaulting. They had barely been given a squad to hold this entrance and 'make any headway possible.' Julion looked at the smoldering, chrome remains of the protocol droid that had been sent with them. Before the creatures had gotten it, it had spoken of the runes on the walls of the ruins' entrance here, and of their importance.

Julion sighed, checking his comlink. As he did so, he heard someone's shout nearby. "Here they come again!"

Old, battle-worn armor and ashen skin poured from the ruin entrance, the gaunt-looking soldiers firing weapons and charging out blindly. Julion fired his rifle repeatedly, his laser fire and that of

a dozen other soldiers cutting into the ranks of their opponents. Julion cursed as the creatures - whatever they were - scrambled over their fallen and continued coming.

"Retribution!" Julion shouted into his comlink, "where in the nine hells are our reinforcements?"

An irritatingly calm voice finally responded, barely audible over the blaster fire and inhuman screams and wails of their attackers.

"Reinforcements inbound. Foxtrot designations A-Zero-Zero-Nine and Gamma-Three-One-Seven are on approach to your position."

"Foxtrots," Julion growled. _They'd better be good._ Personally, he would've rather had a tank than some hopped up sorcerer, but they were probably being sent because of his reports about what the droid had said.

"Alright!" he shouted "hold them off! Reinforcements inbound!"

Moments later a *Decimator*-class assault transport's engines roared as the craft hovered overhead. Its lower laser turret fired at the ground in front of the entrance, vaporizing the latest wave of attackers. It continued firing until the twisted creatures stopped coming, and then the transport slowly landed behind their fortifications.

"I hope we chose a good spot to approach," Sang said as the boarding ramp lowered and they began descending.

"We did," Locke insisted. "The Warhost needed reinforcements here and we were available. Plus, the droid found something. Those droids were a good idea." Protocol droids had been sent with every Warhost squad that had landed on the planet; their role being to interpret any ancient script that was found.

The Consul felt the world's heat immediately. It was a dry, hot wasteland, but it was also potentially a goldmine of lost knowledge.

He approached the troops waiting at the bottom of the ramp. One of them had some indication of rank and saluted to Locke, who returned it grudgingly.

"What've we got?" he said, dropping all pretense of formality.

Fortunately, the Warhost generally seemed used to that. "There are ancient runes surrounding this entrance. We don't know what they mean, but our protocol droid claimed it means there is some source of power within these ruins."

"Ah, let's go then," Locke said.

"That may not be easy-"

"Sergeant Grul! Sir! More creatures!"

The soldier cursed and turned toward the ruin entrance. Locke readied his blaster rifle and prepared for the onslaught himself. "Sang, " he called, "if you wouldn't mind leading the way..."

The cries of the fell creatures echoed around the desolate wasteland, mixing in with the sound of blaster fire. The Warhost troopers had chosen their position well, funnelling the attackers into a killzone. Training and experience had enabled the Warhost to contain the creatures to an extent.

Sanguinius watched the assault for several seconds, noting firing arcs and studying their opponents. They certainly seemed fearless, charging into the torrent of plasma bolts. The Entar sighed and unclipped the lightsaber hilt hanging from his belt and brought it up. Glancing at his compatriot, "If you insist," Sang shrugged and started jogging towards the entrance to the ruins, the plan would be to dam the flow of creatures and the two Sadowans would be the cork in the bottle.

The aquamarine blade erupted into life, catching several bolts and deflecting them into the ground. The ragged soldiers began to drop to the floor, flesh cauterised where blaster bolts had impacted, the fire discipline of the Warhost was strong, despite the continued assaults.

Sanguinius swayed past a corrupted soldier and his lightsaber lashed out, the blade slicing through cloth, flesh and bone. A cry of pain issued forth from the once-human creature as it collapsed. Locke followed close behind, each shot of his blaster rifle putting down an attacker. The Anaxsi reached up to activate his comlink bead, "We're heading into the ruins, Sergeant Grul. Leave four men to hold this position, while A-Zero-Zero-Nine and I sweep and clear with the rest of you."

"Do you think it's wise to leave so few holding the LZ, Sang?" Locke asked, concerned at over-extending their luck, while hitting a particularly stubborn soldier with several bolts to put him down.

"Moraband is pervaded by the Dark Side. Whatever affected these poor souls could do the same to our men and women." Sang replied, as he deftly cut down the last of the soldiers who had emerged from the ruins.

The two Grey Jedi stood, surrounded by bodies. They stared at each other for a second, Locke measuring Sang, while the Entar maintained his calm presence. The Proconsul continued, "Besides, who knows what artefacts we may find down there...do you want to get gunned down from behind because some ancient Sith Lord's ghost starts freaking them out?"

Locke frowned momentarily, "Of course not. But..."

Sanguinius smiled, his guile hidden behind a mask of indifference. More bodies meant more opportunity to sabotage whatever was down there and prevent it from being used by Locke and his cabal of Sadowans. "Trust me." Sang winked and strode into the ruins, his lightsaber swiftly found its way back to his belt and pulled out a small flashlight from his utility belt.

His fellow Augur sighed, "Trust me, he says." Locke shook his head and jogged after the Entar, intent on securing whatever the Warhost had found.

Grul watched the pair disappear into the ruins. They had repulsed the attack, but it had cost the Warhost two men. Private Trua had been killed, he hadn't been quick enough to get to cover. Corporal Rellik on the other hand, had just been grazed. Rellik sat propped up against some rocks as another of his men dressed the wound.

"Bit of a mess, eh Sarge?" Rellik asked, she hissed in pain as the medic sprayed her wound with antiseptic.

"Aye, it's a bit of a mess, Rellik." Grul replied, "But it's not your place to question those two."

"Why not, Sarge?" she replied.

"Because those who questioned people like them in the past usually wind up dead. Not all of those lot are so kind as that pair, some of them would sooner use you as cannon fodder than look after you." Grul answered.

"Oh..." Rellik fell silent, "Good thing we're not with one of them, then?" she laughed.

Julion Grul nodded in agreement, "Just remember not to be too vocal around others like them, Corporal."

"Understood, Sarge."

The flashlight illuminated the darkness pervading the ruins. Their path had taken them underground, along stone corridors, covered in dust. Footprints on the sandy floor had led them thus far. Locke and Sang were both eager to find what these creatures were defending.

Sang had taken point, his free hand hovering constantly by his lightsaber hilt. Locke walked behind him, though the corridor could have taken two, maybe three people abreast. The walls, despite being dusty, were a deep ochre colour.

The remaining soldiers, led by Corporal Yukka, a native of Aeotheran, followed them.

Sanguinius paused as they came into a chamber of sorts. The room was empty, save for a pillar in the middle of the room. The pillar was covered in what the Entar assumed was a dialect of the ancient Sith language. Sang's time in the libraries of the Shadow Academy had introduced him to the Sith language, but a protocol droid would have been ideal.

Locke studied the pillar, as the Warhost troopers secured the room. "It looks familiar," he muttered.

"It should," Sang replied. "Some sort of ancient Sith. I recognise a couple of words, but I'm no expert. Something about an all powerful weapon that will strike down their foes."

"Really?!" Locke exclaimed.

"No, I was being facetious." Sang replied, earning a look of disdain from his compatriot. "I'm joking, Locke. There's something down here, but..."

Blaster fire erupted, cutting down one of the Warhost soldiers and catching them off guard. Angry cries echoed through the chamber as more of the grey creatures hurtled headlong at the soldiers.

"Up and at them, Warhost!" Locke shouted, rallying the troopers. Sanguinius ignited his lightsaber and cut down the few creatures that got close.

The fight was over in seconds, as the creatures retreated from the chamber, leaving their dead.

Locke looked over at Sanguinius, "I don't like this, they seem to be somewhat organised. We should ensure we have a way out.

"Agreed, let me go on ahead and see what I can find." Sang offered, smiling.

"Alright, but don't go and get yourself killed." Locke warned.

Sang laughed, "Trust me, I can stay alive."

The flashlight flickered, forcing Sanguinius to smack it, hoping it would make it work properly. The Jedi had managed to persuade Locke to let him go on ahead. Alone, he could move faster and wouldn't have to worry about anyone slowing him down. If Sang got to the artefact first, he could destroy it and prevent Locke from getting it.

It had been 20 minutes since leaving the chamber and Sanguinius knew that Locke wouldn't be far behind. Rounding a corner, Sang came upon a door blocking his progress. The Anaxsi looked around to find a way through, though was unsuccessful. Sang ignited his lightsaber and plunged it into the door and began to slowly carve an entry hole.

Completing the cut, Sanguinius focused upon the wellspring of calm within him and unleashed a blast of telekinetic force that cleared the hole and allowed him access. The Entar clambered through to find himself in a large antechamber that rivalled the Grand Hall in the Temple of Blood on Sepros.

Sang whistled in appreciation at the spectacle. Steps led up to a dias, where a large throne was situated. The Proconsul walked towards the steps and stopped mid stride, as his subconscious screamed danger. He threw himself to one side as a large sword bisected the space he had occupied.

Sang rolled and pushed himself up to punch one of the corrupted soldiers in the face. The soldier grunted in pain and staggered backwards. The Entar lashed out again before a sharp pain reverberated down from the back of his head through his body. Sang fell to his knees, as the soldier smashed the stock of his rifle into the back of head again.

Two of the corrupted soldiers half carried-half dragged Sang up the stairs towards the throne. The Jedi was slightly concussed, his mind whirring as adrenaline flooded his body. Sang blearily stared at the man sat in the chair, the stern look on his face, the eyes filled with rage.

Sang shook his head, hoping to clear it. "What brings you here?" asked the man sat on the throne.

"Wha...?" Sang replied, still not fully with it.

"Who are you and why do you encroach on my domain?"

"Your domain?" Sang asked, "Who am I addressing?"

"I am Lord Dormammu, I am the scourge of Morabund. I protect my realm from pretenders, thieves and outlaws." the man's voice boomed.

"I'm no thief," came the reply. "I'm here to help protect your realm."

"Hah, you expect me to believe you?" Dormammu scoffed.

"Dormammu, I've come to bargain." Sang chuckled wryly.

They stood in a large intersection, Warhost troops positioned to guard each entrance. It would not be the easiest position to defend, but Sang had gone down one corridor and their path to the outside was up another path. Those strange creatures had come from either side more than once, in repeated waves. They had finally stopped recently, and now it had been nearly ten standard minutes since they had last appeared.

I hope Sang is alright, Locke thought. If these creatures had somehow gotten to him, Locke would not enjoy having to kill his own Proconsul. Further, if they could corrupt Sang, Locke was not sure how the rest of the Clan would fare.

No, some of them were probably too intense for whatever entity had possessed those here. Locke thought of Macron, and chuckled softly to himself at the thought of some dark entity trying to possess him.

"What's that?" Colonel Yukka asked.

"Oh, nothing," Locke replied. "I was just thinking - there may be malevolent spirits here, but they don't know who they're dealing with."

"Don't forget about us," Colonel Yukka said proudly.

"Oh no," Locke said, "I couldn't. Without the Warhost, we would get nowhere. And those loyalists with unique skills who support us. As for mercenaries..."

The Colonel spat on the dusty floor. That told him all he needed to know of her opinions in that regard. Still, sometimes credits were the best way to guarantee loyalty.

He wondered what wealth the artifacts within these ruins would bring.

His wonderings were cut short as a cold wind suddenly whipped up through the ruins. It slammed into him and the soldiers, causing their cloaks to billow and obscure their vision. Glowlamps flew across the chamber and shattered against the walls, and in moments they were in almost total darkness.

It was quiet, too. No creatures came. Then, it began. A long, deep growl that grew louder, growing and growing until it was a roar. It was coming from deeper inside the ruins.

The way Sang had gone.

Locke fired his blaster rifle several times into the darkness and then threw it aside. His lightsaber was ready in an instant, pale blade casting the others in a sickly light. Still, it provided illumination in the absence of most of their glowlamps.

As that roar got closer, a darkness appeared, seeming to absorb what little light remained. That darkness coalesced into the features of a man: eyes as glowing embers, mouth twisted in a snarl. The darkness formed into his complete figure, and as he took his first step into the room, he gestured with one hand.

Three Warhost troops were flung against the nearest wall, their bodies collapsing to the floor against it.

Locke didn't have time to see if they were alive still. He yelled in rage - let the dark side power of this place into his heart - and charged forward, aiming to decapitate the man before he could reply.

Instead, the man's hand came up, gripping Locke's wrist. They stood there for a long moment, poised like that. The two men stared at each other; Locke's expression of rage against the other's contempt. Locke barely paid him any mind, the dark side welling within him. This was a battle, not a time for talk.

"I am Lord Dormammu..." the man began.

"I bet," Locke spat between gritted teeth. His free hand came up, firing a burst of lightning into the man's gut.

He reeled back, releasing Locke's hand. At the same time, one of the Warhost soldiers who had fallen got up to one knee and tossed a thermal detonator at the so-called Dormammu. Locke dived backward, and the blast exploded in the man's face.

The twisted shell of a man, ancient, frail skin torn half off it's bones, stood up from the epicenter of that explosion. Laughter followed, coming from the man, the walls - everywhere at once.

"You cannot defeat me!" the man's voice boomed.

It seemed hopeless, but Locke would not give up.

Sanguinius smiled as he thought of how easy it had been to manipulate the wannabe Sith Lord. The Jedi had taken advantage of the man's pride, which had allowed the Entar access to the artefact that he believed gave the man power and had corrupted the others.

Dormammu had charged off with the few men he had left, leaving Sanguinius alone in the chamber. The Anaxsi studied the throne, believing it to be the item in question. The Professor had experience with similar items in the past, aware of the power of the Serpentine Throne that the Consul of Arcona sat on.

Kneeling down beside it, Sanguinius placed his hand on the seat and recoiled visibly in response to the darkness contained within. He could only assume what he felt was the hatred and emotion of a long dead Sith Lord, poured into this vessel. The darkness that had enslaved so many throughout the ages had infected these poor creatures.

The Entar felt conflicted, if he destroyed this throne, it would most likely kill Dormammu, the ancient crone was still alive only due to the chair. Did he have the right to condemn a man to death? While Sanguinius believed in the living Force, he still hated to kill someone who could have once been an innocent. On the other hand, if he held off as long as possible, Locke could die and thus enable the Augur to take control of Naga Sadow and turn them from this path that would eventually see them destroyed by the Star Chamber for becoming too much of a threat.

Sanguinius stood and reached for his lightsaber, but paused halfway. The Proconsul was indecisive, two paths stood before him. Destroy the artefact and kill an innocent man or let Locke die and potentially save Naga Sadow.

The Jedi closed his eyes and made his decision, his lightsaber lashed out and carved the throne in two.

Locke dodged the Force lightning that caught Colonel Yukka and fried the poor soldier. The stench of burning flesh pervaded the air as the Colonel convulsed before collapsing to the ground. The Consul grimaced at the loss of the officer, but Dormammu continued to arc lightning.

Dormammu laughed arrogantly as he continued to assault Locke. His laughter turned hollow as the lightning dissipated. "Wha...THAT TRAITOR!" he bellowed as his body began to fail, the ravages of time catching up with him.

Locke paused momentarily before his lightsaber moved and decapitated Dormammu, intent on ending the threat and avenging Yukka. He stood over the body for a few seconds and turned his head to look at the corpses lying around the chamber. More men had died here, for power, for

control, for something that gave them meaning. The Sadowan shook his head, power was important, it led to victory.

However, his suspicious mind couldn't help but wonder where Sang had gotten to. Dormammu's final words had piqued Locke's interest. Just who was the traitor, did it mean that there was another who would take Dormammu's place? That just wouldn't do. Locke deactivated his lightsaber and gestured at one of the junior officers to clear the room.

"Lieutenant, I'll take four men with me. Tidy this place up and link up with me afterwards."

"Yessir!" came the reply.

Sang sat near the top of the stairs that led to the destroyed throne, waiting for the eventual arrival of Warhost troops. Though he didn't know whether Locke still lived or not, the Jedi had determined his choice of words for what happened just in case.

His attention was caught by the sound of multiple footsteps and the focused beams of light that illuminated the corridor that led into the antechamber.

The Entar smiled and chuckled as he recognised the telltale blonde hair of the Consul. So Locke had survived. Sang wouldn't be Consul this day it seemed.

"What happened?" Locke barked, "Who on earth was this Dormammu?"

"Oh, just some poor old fool that had been ensnared by the rage and hatred of some long forgotten Sith." the Anaxsi replied nonchalantly. "I had to uhh, destroy the throne."

Locke looked disbelievingly at his compatriot, "You had to destroy the throne, eh?"

"Well, it was dangerous and I really had to stop him." he replied.

"So I take it you're the traitor Dormammu talked of, what did you promise him?" Locke asked, concerned at the opportunistic behaviour of his Proconsul.

"Oh, I just told him some Sith Lord was encroaching on his territory and I was here to warn him," Sang laughed, "The poor fool believed me."

Locke lowered his voice, his anger clear. "So you lied to him, almost got me killed, got others killed and then destroyed the artefact that we could have used?"

“Well, when you put it like that, it makes me sound like a bad guy.” Sang raised his hands in supplication.

Locke scowled at Sang, he was angry, but his fears that the Entar had not turned from the Light were somewhat assuaged. No Jedi would have allowed him to have died, not like that.

“I’m not too happy with the outcome, Sang.” Locke pointed at the throne. “We lost a potential asset here.” He turned to one of the soldiers accompanying him, “Corporal, catalogue and recover that throne. I want it on board the shuttle and off this blasted planet asap.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Now then, Sang,” Locke returned his attention to the Entar, “We have more ruins to explore.”