

Eternity's Price

A Vodo Biask Story

Option 3 | Continued from Phase I Fiction "Echoes of the Past"

9 Years Earlier

Korriban, Moriband, Mirkan... The graveyard of the Sith had many names. Empires and dynasties had risen here only to crumble into so much dust. It was the same dust that covered the world, pervaded every nook and cranny, every surface, and every artifact. Not that many of those remained, the place having been picked over thousands of times over the past millennia. The Sith had plundered their world looking for the secrets of their past. The Jedi had scoured the world seeking to find those same secrets so they could hide them from any who might be drawn to them. Now it was Vodo's turn.

Vodo had always had a fascination with old things. In his earlier days, he'd been a slave and the tools given to him were often well-worn and clearly from a different era. He'd once used a hydrosponder whose manufacturer's mark declared it had been made in Year 728 of the old calendar. That made it nearly three-hundred years old by the time he'd placed his hands on it in 2 ABY. His appetite had only whetted when he discovered the cabal of Dark Jedi and their Brotherhood. Given access to the Shadow Academy, he discovered treasures and manuscripts of untold age. They whispered to him, called to him, and spoke of secrets long forgotten.

The wind whipped around him. It was cold, fitting for the place called the Tomb World of the Sith. He stood on a precipice overlooking a wide ravine down upon which he looked with excitement. Hewn from the red rock cliffs to either side were the final resting places of the Sith Empire's greatest minds. Where once their massive edifices cast shadows over the floor of the Valley of the Sith Lords the temples, tombs, and great monuments were covered in thousands of years of dust, silt, and rubble. He could see where they lay, vast pyramid-shaped piles marked out not only by their unusually geometric shape but also the barely discernible forms of toppled pillars, fallen statues, and partially uncovered entrances. It was a dead world but grave robbers had known for centuries of this place's location, purposefully erased from navigational charts by the Jedi after one of their many devastating galactic wars against the Sith, and the evidence of their digging could be seen dotting the valley.

Vodo lowered a pair of quadoculars from his eyes, satisfied that none of those digs were recent or on-going. He placed it back in his sack and began making his way down into the valley. Atop his cybernetic legs he was a bit unsteady. He'd only had them installed two years prior, after the LAAT/i crash had left him paralyzed from the waist down. He remarked with some little amusement that he'd been flying away from a Sith Lord's temple and now he marched towards one. That war had cost him his legs but it had awarded him something of significantly more value. Buried in the sack on his back was an artifact. He'd discovered it laying in the sand

before that other temple and it had occupied those thoughts that weren't dedicated to leading his House or Clan.

It was not very interesting, the artifact, to the untrained eye. It didn't glitter with precious metal, it had no obvious use, and though it was engraved in Sith markings it was very clearly only half of a whole. It was semi-circular and contained a zig-zag pattern along its inner diameter where, presumably, the other half would fit into it perfectly revealing the whole of the writing. What had caught Vodo's attention at the time of discovery was not the writing, though it did pique his interest, was the material it was made of. It was metallic and very dense. Though it was only as wide as his handspan it felt as though it weighed nearly three times as much as it should have. Analysis of its molecular structure had revealed that it was an alloy of four very rare elements. Vodo had studied those reports and consulted with metallurgists, geologists, planetary survey companies, and historians at some of the Galaxy's most prestigious academic institutions.

He was told over and over again that such an alloy could not exist; the metals cooled at different rates and would have separated into their component parts before the casting could be finished. He was told that such an alloy could not be natural, the conditions that might theoretically make it possible were so outlandish as to be clearly fantasy. He was told that the elements found in the artifact, of which he never showed these people, were not found on any one known planet. Rare as they were, they were most likely to be found in miniscule quantities in asteroids and barren planetoids and rarely, if ever, all in the same place. Simply put, it shouldn't exist. And yet, there it sat on a shelf in Vodo's study.

It was a mystery that the Twi'lek Dark Jedi could not let go. Vodo had begun amassing a small fortune in recent years and by investing wisely, and hiring people to manipulate prices to his advantage, he was able to sink a fair number of credits into helping solve his puzzle. He'd bought every ancient Sith manuscript on any black market he could find. He pilfered from the Shadow Academy's library at great personal risk. He delved through images of temple walls, broken fragments of artifacts, and handwritten notes thousands of years old left by archeologists sifting through the ruins of the Sith Empire. Two weeks ago he'd come across a lead at last.

The Valley of the Sith Lords was not terribly deep, perhaps only 200 meters from canyon rim to valley floor at its worst, but with the sun so low on the horizon he quickly found himself in the canyon's shadow. Down on the valley floor the wind moved with purpose through the scar on the planet's surface and it stole his warmth from him. He pulled his hood up over his head after wrapping one of his Lekku around his neck like a scarf, the other hanging down the front of his left shoulder. He breathed hot air into his palms and studied the piles of rubble to either side of the valley. The big one, several kilometers down, at the end was the Tomb of Marka Ragnos. Using that as a reference point he counted down the east side of the valley-- Ajunta Pall, Ludo Kreesh, XoXaan, Tulok Hord, and finally Naga Sadow.

Vodo set course for the Temple of the great alchemist though he knew that the Sith Lord himself had never been laid to rest there. There were hundreds of legends of adventurers or wayward Jedi Apprentices encountering the ghosts of long-dead Sith in these tombs but if those tales were true, it was unlikely he'd find Naga Sadow here. Vodo knew the Sith Lord had spent his final years on a moon around the gas giant Yavin ordering his Massassi warriors to build him

pyramids for his own amusement. No, Vodo wasn't here looking for him but rather some of his effects.

He made his way up some rubble and found himself, soon, at what appeared to be the temple's portico. It was mostly covered in the fallen fascia of the temple itself and the dust of centuries but there was a black hole, large enough for most humanoids to enter, that seemed to lead inward. Vodo reached into his sack and pulled out a glowrod. In the growing daylight, its light meant little but as soon as he crawled into the hole it cast a sphere of light around him like a protective cocoon. The debris continued inward for a dozen meters or so until it opened up into a massive hall. Columns two meters across lined the entry and led towards the back at intervals of forty meters or so. They reached to the ceiling which was only barely distinguishable in the light of the glowrod some 100 meters up. He was inside the canyon's wall now, inside the temple itself. Though the exterior may have weathered and fallen into ruin the inside looked as though it could use a good dusting before its master returned.

Vodo's eyes were wide with wonder. Twi'lek's, having grown accustomed to life below ground, could see better than most in the dark and he could, with the aid of the glowrod, see more than he could have hoped for. The walls were decorated with hand-engraved frescoes depicting the great deeds and achievements of Lord Sadow. The pillars were intricately carved with geometric shapes and designs that snaked upward to the ceiling giving them, despite their size, a surprising lack of visual weight. The floor was highly polished stone. Where it had been intended for people to walk from the entrance to the stairwell at the rear of the hall the rock was black. Off to the sides, it alternated between stretches of grey and dull white. There must have been gilding at some point as Vodo recognized the remnants of gold trim on collapsed doorways and plinths supporting the columns. The grave robbers had been here at some point too it seemed. Vodo held out hope that they had not stolen what he'd come for.

Deeper and deeper into the temple Vodo ventured, carefully marking his route on the walls and floor as he went so as not to get lost on his way out. Without a chrono it would have been impossible to make out the passage of time in this ancient place. So enthralled by everything he passed Vodo was surprised at one point to note that he'd been inside the temple for nearly four hours already. The complex was enormous and corridors seemed to stretch for hundreds of meters for no purpose other than to convey the grandiosity of its builder. Naga Sadow was probably never accused of humility, he supposed to himself. On and on he went until at last he came to the Throne Chamber.

It too was unnecessarily grand, its vaulted ceiling peaking above him fifty meters and stretching out to either side just as far. A raised dais at the rear held a pile of stone rubble. Vodo approached it and studied the rock and determined that this could have been the throne itself. He noted the smooth edges where the stone had been cut apart. A Lightsaber had done this. It had probably fallen to the hand of a Jedi during one of their purge missions to erase all memory of the Sith and their Empire. Vodo smirked, for all their prattle and moralization the Jedi weren't so different from everyone else: They just tried harder to hide it.

"Welcome, traveler", a voice spoke to Vodo.

In an instant, he had his lightsaber in hand, "Who's there!?"

“The keeper of this place”, the voice responded, “the question is though, who are you?”

Hesitantly Vodo’s ignited lightsaber, held defensively, lowered a measure, “I am Vodo Biask Taldrya.”

A form materialized before Vodo, standing beside the ruins of the throne of Naga Sadow, “What brings you to this hallowed place Vodo Biask Taldrya?”

Almost speechless Vodo stared at the man. He was of the Sith species, marked out by the spiny growths along his jaw and crown, “I... I seek knowledge.”

The man smiled and waved an arm before him with nonchalance, “There is not much left here to learn, as you can see. The Jedi cleansed this place in ages long past. Your kind have taken all that was not destroyed from here.”

“I am no Jedi”, Vodo spat venomously.

The Sith stared peaceably at Vodo for a moment, appraising him. Vodo, for his part, did likewise. He stood before an apparition, a real Force Ghost, just like in the legends. Possessed of a skeptical mind Vodo had always doubted those stories for being too convenient. Exar Kun, having killed his Master and fellow apprentices, travels to a Sith temple and sees the ghost of some long-dead Sith who proclaims him the Dark Lord of the Sith? Makes for a neat way to claim legitimacy when uniting the various cults of Dark Side practitioners around the Galaxy before your war on the Jedi Order. Deep down though Vodo had always wanted them to be true. The men who claimed to have these visions always went on to do great things and make lasting names for themselves. Vodo knew he was destined for greatness, he’d always known it, and to see a Sith Lord’s ghost would prove it.

“I sense great emotion within you, Vodo Biask Taldrya”, the ghost said at long last, “powerful, dark emotions.”

Vodo kneeled, and awkward maneuver atop his reverse-articulated legs, “I keep the ways of the Sith, My Lord.”

“Aha! I am no Lord, rise!” the Ghost beckoned him up to his feet, “I am Juris Kall, Chief Priest of his Lordship, Naga Sadow”.

“You were a priest of the Dark Side?” Vodo’s eyes grew wide with wonder, “There’s so much you could teach me!”

“I’m afraid my knowledge has faded with the millennia, traveler. I remain here, trapped by a curse of my own devising, and here I fade away little by little with each passing century.

Perhaps, had you visited me two-thousand years ago I might have shared some secret with you but now... Now I am a shadow of what I once was”, the Ghost looked forlorn.

“Curse?”, Vodo asked.

“My Master sought the secret to everlasting life. He wished to rule the Empire for all of eternity, to extend his power to the boundaries of the galaxy itself. I, and my brethren, were tasked with researching the ways of the Force to find him this secret but all I succeeded in doing was tying my spirit to this place long past the time since my body decayed to dust”, Kall walked to the edge of the dias and looked out across the great room as though he were seeing it filled with worshippers still.

“I have come for just this knowledge, Master Kall”, Vodo set his pack down and pulled from it a rubbing on a piece of flimsi of his artifact, “Do you recognize this?”

The Ghost studied the rubbing for a moment and then shook his head, “I cannot say. The writing speaks of immortality, that much I can discern, but I cannot remember if I have ever seen it or not.”

Crestfallen Vodo put the rubbing back and picked up his sack once more, “Then I must continue my search. You are the keeper of this place, can you show me where your work was done?”

“We performed our work here, in this chamber, so that the Dark Lord could oversee our efforts”, Juris Kall turned and walked to the rear of the dias, “Stay if you like but I grow weary.”

“Wait!” Vodo called out to the apparition but it was too late and the man was gone as if he had opened a door, walked through it, and shut it behind him, “Fantastic...”

Vodo stood in the chamber by himself again. The cavernous room was lit only by his glowrod casting its yellowish light. The air was still and musty. In frustration, he kicked at a stone from the remains of the throne. It clattered away into the darkness, its tumbling clacks echoed off the stone walls back and forth for long seconds. Preparing to kick another for lack of an idea of what to do, Vodo paused. He was looking downward to aim but an engraved line caught his eye. He tilted his head to follow it and realized that from where he stood at the front of the dias it curved away towards the back of it in a circular pattern, disappearing under the rubble of the throne in several places. Moving aside some smaller chunks of rock with his metallic foot he made out engravings of Sith runes and scrawling and recognized it immediately.

He tore his sack off once more and plunged his hand into it for the rubbing of his artifact. Placing it on the floor he oriented the flimsi to match the exposed lines on the dias and lit the area by holding the glowrod over his head. Sure enough, what he could see matched. Vodo stood and looked at the rubble which covered what should be the missing half of his artifact. He concentrated and reached outward with both of his hands, dropping the glowrod as he did so.

He focused his mind on the Force and felt its slippery, eel-like form. He seized it and held it tightly and it fought him like it always did but he wrenched it to do his bidding all the same.

The rubble vibrated subtly, small pebbled cascaded to the floor and dust rose from the pile in small wisps. Before long the scrape of stone on stone could be heard and the large pile of hewn rock began to slide to the left. Vodo continued, his brow furrowing with the effort of maintaining his focus on the telekinetic act until he'd pushed all of the largest stones off the dias entirely revealing what lay beneath. Sure enough, the engravings showed the missing half of the artifact. Grabbing his flimsi drawing he fumbled for a pen in his pack and began to sketch out, with as much precision as he could manage, what it was he was looking for. The thing wasn't here, he knew that in his gut but armed with this he could begin work on the particulars. When the time came and the second half came into his possession, and it would, he would be ready.

Immortality would be his.

Arx System
Elos Vrai
Present Day

Kiran Zarec was rather plain looking and he knew it. He wore his hair nicely styled in an undercut with the sides and back shaved clean but a fashionable haircut would never make up for the fact his face just wasn't that distinguished. His nose was average, his eyes were normal, his forehead wasn't that large, and his chin had just enough character as not to get lost in his neck. What a teenage Kiran had hated the adult Kiran relied upon all too often. In a crowd of humans, he just blended in. If asked to describe him people struggled to come up with answers that could be used to pick him out of a lineup. He was average height, average build, and while his skin was of the paler variety it tanned well so he didn't stand out on warmer or colder planets. As a Cipher, these properties played to his strengths.

This was no sneak and peek mission though. This wasn't even a kill and bill adventure. He was headed to a warzone, the Collective's attack on the Brotherhood's capitol was well underway, but he wasn't going there to take part. He had on him a parcel, one that the Director himself had personally asked him to retrieve from his Caelus property and deliver in-person to him with all due haste. He'd snagged the Director's object, a dark semi-circular disk covered in writing, that was far heavier than it had any right to be given its size. What it was and why it was so important he had no idea but having no idea came with his job. He received orders, he executed them with professionalism, and then he moved on.

He was moving under orders from the Director of Clan Intelligence, Vodo Biask Taldrya, but something told him that the Sith man would prefer if his presence while in transit remained low key. Kiran wore his duty uniform bearing the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and carried the parcel in a leather satchel under his arm. He had taken a space available shuttle from the

Caelus dockyard to a contracted supply vessel chartered to carry resupply and medical goods to the Taldryan fleet in orbit over Arx. Once they'd arrived in the Arx System he hopped a ride with a shuttlecraft headed for a Taldryan cruiser and presented the Director's orders to the Ship's XO to requisition a space on a shuttle destined for the surface in the region in which Biask could be found. Few people, aside from the necessary dockyard foremen or ship's officers he'd had to deal with, took note of him.

The Lambda shuttle touched down gently and the boarding ramp lowered with a loud hiss. The engines were still powering down to the rear and their whine could still be heard as he walked down the plank to the soil below. The air was cool but not uncomfortable in the daylight. Here it was peaceful but the drum of heavy blaster fire could be heard against the rumble of distant explosions-- It was a warzone after all. The Cipher agent was met at the bottom of the ramp by an Army attache who introduced himself as some Lieutenant or other and had been ordered to escort Kiran directly to Quaestor Biask's command tent.

The Lieutenant stopped Kiran at the entrance and entered. A moment later he popped his head out and invited Kiran in. Kiran entered the tent, removing his duty cap, and stood at attention, "Lt. Colonel Zarec reporting as directed, My Lord."

Vodo Biask Taldrya glanced up from the holotable over which he hovered, "Lt. Pierce, you may leave us."

"Yes, My Lord", the attache clicked his heels and left the prefabricated structure.

Vodo waved for Kiran to come closer, "You have it then?"

Kiran removed the satchel from under his arm as he approached the holotable and removed the paper-wrapped parcel within, "Right here, Director."

Vodo took the wrapped parcel from the Cipher and untied the synthetic string containing it. He tore the paper free and revealed the object within. He held it reverently and Kiran noted how the man's eyes, normally so cold and stern, nearly glittered with delight as he looked upon it. The Director tore his eyes away from the thing and looked around the tent until his eyes fell upon something behind Kiran. Unnervingly, the Sith reached out casually, and it floated into his hand. Kiran was well aware of the Force and was trained in many ways to kill those who used it but it still made him uneasy seeing its power demonstrated so near to him. He didn't allow the feeling to show but he suspected the Sith could feel the emotion within him.

The Sith was in his own world now. In one hand he held the object Kiran Zarec had handed him and in the other he held what, to Kiran's untrained eye, appeared to be an identical copy of the first. A small smile crept upon Vodo's normally glowering face as he fit the two pieces together and heard a small click. Where there were once two objects there was now only one, a round disk about the width of a man's hand. Vodo studied the completed artifact intensely, the spell only broken when Kiran shifted his weight and the tent's floor creaked beneath him.

"You've done well, Cipher", Vodo said, placing the thing down beside him, "I have another mission for you."

"Yes, Director?" Kiran asked.

“Chief Malskopo is sending me the entirety of his Direct Operations teams, they’ll be arriving later today. I’m placing you in charge of them as well as a detachment of the 1/12th Shock Battalion. By 0600 tomorrow I need you to establish a perimeter here”, Vodo indicated for Kiran to come closer to the holotable and watch as he drew a circle around a plaza at the center of the Eos City map displayed there.

Kiran studied the plaza and the surrounding buildings, “And what is our objective, Director?”

Vodo tapped the table’s surface to add emphasis, “The perimeter is your objective. No one is to pass it coming in. Any one of the city’s residents within the perimeter that wishes to leave may do so but No One will pass your cordon for any reason. Do you understand?”

The Cipher agent wasn’t a troop leader but he had performed as a platoon leader in his brief time in the Army before he’d been recruited by the then Taldryan Secret Intelligence Service. He considered the implications of the order before nodding his ascent, “Yes, Director.”

“Very good. Take the next few hours to freshen up, I’ll have Lt. Pierce fetch you when your men are expected to arrive. Dismissed”, Vodo returned his attention to his object and Kiran was forgotten.

Kiran Zarec snapped his heels and turned in an about-face. He left the tent, replaced the duty cap on his head, and wandered through the Taldryan military camp. Prefab structures, hastily erected shelters, and piles of cargo containers were everywhere. Everyone, save Kiran, seemed to move with a purpose and he had to, several times, move out of the way of a vehicle transporting men and material one way or another. This was combat in a way that he had not experienced in some time. Ciphers were precision tools where armies were blunt instruments. He was a finely honed blade, a specialized multitool, a highly trained multi-specialization secret agent and the Director was placing him in charge of nearly two hundred men. He wasn’t happy about the assignment but the Director was, well, known for his displays of disfavor. That was the way of the Sith, Kiran had gathered.

Instead of freshening up Kiran instead commandeered a hovercar and drove it into Eos city which lay to the east. The Collective assaulted the city’s western suburbs still so the way was clear. The streets were mercifully empty as the exodus of those who wanted to leave already had done so and those who remained had not realized the folly of their decision. He found his way to the plaza with relative ease and studied the area. He knew how he would attack the place, a flat expanse of tile 100m on two sides and 300m on the others, so he began devising how he would divide up his forces to quarantine the area. There was nothing here of interest that Kiran could see, the Plaza had a fountain and some humanoid statues but little else. There was certainly nothing here of strategic value.

Kiran notated his observations in his datapad and returned to camp, returning his borrowed hovercar to a quartermaster who was less than enthusiastic by the Cipher’s lack of proper paperwork. With a rank equivalent to an Army Battalion Commander Kiran told the man to send his complaints up the chain of command, knowing full well the Office of Secret Intelligence, and Director Biask, lay entirely outside of this man’s reach. His stomach rumbled so Kiran found his way to a chow tent and took up a position in line and sat at an officer’s table to take the food in. He was halfway through it when the stick-thin Lt. Pierce appeared.

“Colonel, the shuttle with the D:Ops is arriving. Would you please, follow me?” the Lieutenant gestured to another hovercar.

Sighing Kiran pushed his plate to the center of the table and dropped his eating utensil with frustration, “Lead on.”

Direct Operations fell under the purview of Director of Counter-Intelligence Abram Malskopo, Director Biask’s number three man in the OSI. The Counter-Intelligence office was tasked with maintaining control over the information and population of the Caelus system while Kiran worked under the Foreign Intelligence office of Director Dasic Keyl. Direct Operations was the group of Cointel that worked to take in terrorists and subdue armed insurrections. They worked in teams of eight, clad head to toe in matte black armor and body gloves, and were developing something of a sinister reputation for themselves on Caelus as the last thing the enemies of the state saw before their windows shattered, their door exploded inward, and the flash grenades went off. This was not the sort of mission they were normally tasked with but Foreign Intelligence didn’t really have an analogue to them and if they did, it would be the Ciphers in the Zero-Desh division like Kiran Zarec. There were only 80 men in the D:Ops teams though so they would be reinforced by 130 men of Aurek Company, 1st Regiment 12th Shock Battalion.

Kiran stood, his arms clasped behind his back as he’d been taught at the Imperial Officer Training School on Gandry, before the two formations. One was clad in black bodygloves, their armor stowed in the duffles at their feet. The other wore green-brown camouflage Krayskin Armor. Arrayed as they were the green formation of Taldryan troopers outnumbered the Direct Ops men two-to-one and it showed but everyone stood at rigid attention.

“Welcome to the Arx System! I am Lt. Colonel Kiran Zarec, Office of Secret Intelligence and the assigned commander of this mission. Captain Salcero of the 1/12th will be my executive officer while Captain Jansen of the 1st Operations Team will report to him”, it was hard to project his voice to 200 people but he did what he could, “The operation begins at 0600 tomorrow but we will move into position at 0400. Commanders, take charge of your formations.”

Kiran marched away from the adhoc parade ground and heard both Captain Salcero and Captain Jansen yelling to their chief enlisted men to take charge and square the men away for the night. Both men would report to him later that night to go over the mission details before turning in for the night.

Night fell over the continent of Elos Vrai but the distant drumming and rumbling of war did not let up. At last report Clans Arcona and Tarentum were holding the line there but suffering immensely for it. Vodo was certainly willing to allow Arcona to suffer as much as they could

manage at the hands of the enemy, to the last man if it came to that. He despised all the lesser Clans of the Brotherhood but chief among them was Taldryan's bitterest rivals in the so-called Shadow Clan. The Collective were free to do their worst but soon it wouldn't mean anything. Vodo would be the victor here.

He held the complete artifact in his hands. It was heavy, the dense metal of both halves now forming one solid disk with lines of uninterrupted script flowing from one side to the other. It was intimately familiar to Vodo though he'd never seen it like this. For nearly a decade he'd studied the scrawled tracing he'd made in that dark temple, memorized its every line, and recited its ancient incantations in preparation until it was like breathing to him. He'd known, in his gut, that one day the second half would come to him and he would finally set to work on his grandest of plans.

There was nothing that declared he must perform the ritual here. There were only two requirements specified by the disk, and one of them was that it must take place in the vicinity of a Force nexus. They weren't common, in a galactic sense, but given the Brotherhood's proclivity to occupying and governing places with an affinity to the binding power of the Force they were relatively accessible. Arx possessed several, one of the reasons perhaps the Grand Master Pravus had chosen the system as his throne world. The city of Eos sat atop one such nexus. Caelus had one as well, as did its mysterious moon with the unexplored temple, so nothing compelled Vodo to perform the ritual here during the war save for his own vanity. Great men did things on a scale unimaginable to the rank and file and this would be his opus. Arx would be the drop cap, the grand expression, that emphasized the start of his greatest chapter. The histories would tell the story of Vodo in two parts; those events that came before this moment and those that came after.

He placed the disk in a plasteel case padded with foam and closed the lid. It was secured with several clips on all sides. The disk's metal was impervious to most forms of damage, the blaster bolt the second half had stopped on Mattock Station several days ago was a testament to that, but this made it less conspicuous in a military operation. Vodo suspected the metal alloy of the disk was one of those types that was immune to the properties of a lightsaber beam given that at least two of its component elements were known to have such qualities. He wasn't like to test that given the importance of the artifact to his plans. Grasping the carry handle he hefted the case and carried it out of his tent. Six armored men awaited him by a hovercar there.

He nodded to the squad leader and climbed into the vehicle followed by the troopers. Handpicked from the Army SOF Vodo often trained beside, he had every confidence in these men to be his close escort and loyal defenders. As the hovercar's repulsors whine grew in pitch and the vehicle moved forward, he thought on Kiran Zarec. The man was a consummate professional and a dependable asset. He'd been right in choosing him to fetch the first half of the artifact from his collection and believed he was capable of commanding the perimeter forces well enough. The man was a killer, every CIPHER was, but he did have the remnants of a moral compass which made Vodo wary of placing too much trust in him, particularly now. Should the CIPHER prove less than trustworthy, Zarec would have these picked at his side.

The hovercar was waved through a checkpoint by men in camouflaged armor, the Taldryan Troopers, and as it moved into the plaza Vodo was pleased to see his three

companions already awaiting him. Zyxl Venzos, Nihilus Vexrii, and Appius Wight. The hovercar slid to a stop, the repulsor's whine idling down to a lower pitch, and Vodo climbed out with his case. He greeted the three men awaiting him with a curt nod and proceeded, after a moment's consideration of the surrounding buildings and the layout of the plaza, to a spot that seemed suitable. The Force Nexus required of the ritual encompassed much of this quarter of the city so one specific spot was much like another but for a moment so momentous it seemed spurious not to be more particular about where he would ascend to immortality.

"Let's see it then", Nihilus was unimpressed by his former Master's show, knowing full well much of what the Sith did was a charade to convince others he was more in control than he actually was.

Vodo leveled his stare on the Umbaran man disdainfully, "It would do you well to learn patience, but you will have time enough to learn it."

Vodo set the case on the tiled ground. Flipped the catches he opened the lid and revealed the dark-colored disk within. Standing around him the three others looked at it. They were all force users, experienced practitioners of the Dark Side, so it came as something of a let down to finally lay eyes upon the thing that had been described to them so reverently by Vodo in the prior days. He had only let them in on its existence, knowing he would require their support for the ritual, and promised them the gift of eternal life as a reward for their help. The Disk lay there in the case, inert though. It did not glow with a radiant presence in the Force. It did not sparkle in the growing daylight nor did an angelic choir sing its praises as the lid was lifted up.

"That's it?" Nihilus's mechanical voice, normally so dry, was full of incredulity.

Zyxl summoned the Disk to his hands and held it appreciatively, turning it this way and that as he examined it closely, "It's not what I expected, that's for sure..."

"The power we will engage doesn't come from this artifact. It's a focusing tool, like a lens", Vodo took the Disk from the Proconsul of Taldryan and laid it flat on the ground before him, "We will channel our powers through this, tapping into the great well of the Force beneath us, and it will feed it back into us."

Appius, the youngest and least experienced Sith looked at the thing through his beskar'gam helmet, "Why was it never used before now?"

Everyone looked at Vodo, "It was used before, unsuccessfully."

"Unsuccessfully?", Nihilus crossed his arms.

Glibly Vodo continued, "The priests of Naga Sadow who had created this thing attempted to use it upon their Lord but failed. I spoke with one of them once about it. I am confident I know where they erred."

Vodo was grateful that Kiran Zarec made an appearance at the point, cutting off any further discussion, "Director, the men are in position. The latest intel suggests that Arcona's lines are failing. If the Collective overwhelms them we're in the line of their approach to the Grand Master's Palace."

Zyxl, Taldryan's Proconsul, was curious that the man had saluted Biask and not him. He studied the Cipher through his own Mandolorian mask, "Men, Colonel?"

The Cipher turned to the Proconsul to answer but was cut off by Vodo, "Our task here must remain undisturbed-- one of those things I've learned that will lead to our success. Lt. Colonel Zarec here will see that the battle remains out there."

"Does the Consul know you appropriated soldiers for this", Proconsul bore down on Vodo who stood erect and undeterred, "You overstep yourself."

"Calm yourself, Master Venzos", Vodo smiled placatingly, "Most of the men are OSI assets and fully within my rights to deploy as I see fit. Their numbers are flushed out with merely a handful of your troopers."

Kiran cleared his throat, "If there's nothing else, My Lords?"

Zyxl was about to say something but Vodo cut him off with a dismissive wave to his Cipher, "There's nothing else, Colonel.-- See to your men. Remember, we are not to be disturbed, no matter what."

Kiran saluted the Director crisply and trotted off, joined by Vodo's close protection team, to where a small knot of his subordinate officers waited for their orders. The plaza was left empty as the hovercar was driven off and parked and the few men lingering around were corralled into their final positions well away from the four Sith. Surrounded on all four sides by the facades of three and four-story residential buildings the plaza felt walled-in. The not-so-distant din of battle could be heard here but it seemed further off for being heard through the air above them. The plaza looked up at a clear blue morning sky with only the barest hint of cirrus clouds in the sky to the north.

Vodo smiled to his companions, "Do as I instruct and everything will be fine."

"I'm not going to spend eternity doing as you say, just so we're clear", Appius clapped Vodo on the shoulder, a gesture that the Twi'lek did not take affectionately.

"Yes, I imagine we'll have more than enough time to discuss that, my Aedile", Vodo tapped a few commands on his wristlink, "I've transmitted detailed drawings to each of you. You'll use your sabers to engrave these designs, precisely, into the ground around the artifact. I will inspect your work when we've finished so that one wrong stroke doesn't kill us all."

Kiran had a commanding position overlooking the plaza. He stood atop an adjacent building looking, at this moment, down into the sheltered courtyard. The buildings surrounding the courtyard fronted on it with their straight bluff sides pocked with windows and small balconies. It was a stately area that had drawn inspiration from some of the more storied core worlds' architecture. Much of Eos City had been constructed in imitation of grander places to give what was really a rather young place the feeling of age and permanence. Many buildings of this sort were now little more rubble, having been the site of floor-to-floor battles between the soldiers of the Brotherhood, and its clans, and the Collective.

He watched as the Sith below used their lightsabers to carve a design, circular in nature, into the marble tiles of the plaza. What it was supposed to mean, or do, was far beyond his understanding but his orders told him this was the most important thing in the galaxy at the moment and the work was to be undisturbed. That would prove difficult shortly, Kiran knew. The intelligence had been correct but had failed to impress upon him how imminent Arcona's

collapse would be. The Collective had crashed over their defensive lines ten minutes ago and had broken through. The Clans on Arcona's flanks were now adjusting their positions to react to the new salient but the Collective did not seem intent on curling up around them and encircling them. They were pushing for the heart of the city en masse and that put them on a collision course with the Plaza.

"Radio in our position again to Fighter Command", Kiran instructed one of his attending subordinates, "and someone tell the Troopers to ready heavy weapons. This is going to get ugly."

"Fighter Command acknowledges, Sir. They say to keep our heads down", responded the coms-officer.

Overhead the scream of two bombers could be heard, TIE models, as they flew in low over the city. They passed overhead to the cheer from some of the Taldryan men. A few seconds later small glittering points of light could be seen dropping from their hulls followed by the rubble and whump of enormous explosions. Kiran smiled but had a feeling that even with a few more passes like that his job was still not going to be made any easier.

Vodo finished his last symbol and inspected his quarter of the runic inscription. The circle had been defined at 15m across and as the rest began to make their final additions the center of the plaza looked to have been turned into a strange art installation. The runes themselves were cleanly engraved but the slag and cooling molten edges made for a slightly less aesthetic appearance. If time had allowed Vodo would have commanded them to clean it up but they were pressed and he believed that it would do no harm so long as the runes themselves were the proper shape and in the right place.

Appius was last to finish and Vodo occupied himself inspecting first Zyxl's work and then Nihilus's. Vodo looked over his Aedile's and gave him the all-good sign as well. They gathered together at the center of the inscription, an exact replica of the Artifact Disk, and attended Vodo for their instructions.

"I will stand in the center here", Vodo pointed to the exact center of the circle, "and the three of you will sit in position around me at those three locations."

Zyxl, Nihilus, and Appius saw that there were in fact three identical symbols placed equidistantly around the center and they listened intently as Vodo continued, "You will enter a meditative state and focus upon the Force. You will feed the symbols to the left and right of you with your emotions of desire and purpose and you will feel the Force begin to swell here."

"Swell?", Appius asked, "Feed our emotions?"

"These are the instructions I have gleaned from the sources I have gathered", Vodo stared-down the former-Jedi in a Mandalorian helmet, "My own instructions are just as vague. You will have to figure it out, and quickly."

Nihilus nodded, "Then what?"

Vodo looked around them and heard the din of war growing closer by the minute, "Once you all have succeeded I will guide the Force into tapping the Nexus below us. It is at that moment that our moment will be had."

"Sounds simple enough", ZyxI unclasped his wrist guards and gauntlets and began making for the position he chose for himself, "Sitting you say? Facing where, towards you?"

Soon enough they were in position.

It had been Staff Sergeant Owen Jules who had fired the first shot. A Collective patrol had come to the intersection at the end of the block and seemed surprised that a manned barricade was there waiting for them. Soon enough an intense firefight erupted over the hundred-meter distance of the block to the west of the plaza. The Taldryan Troopers fired from cover and aimed their shots for effect while their heavy weapons section laid down a stream of suppressing fire from E-Web heavy repeating blaster. Weapon launched thermal detonators flew in both directions and exploded, kicking up road cobbles, building fragments, and sometimes the bodies of fighters. The fight didn't remain isolated here though. The Collective, seeking a means to by-pass or flank the barricade, found that each street they passed had a similar defensive position. All these roads lead to the Plaza and therefore had been made all but impassable at Kiran Zarec's order.

Kiran listened to the coms chatter as squad and platoon leaders coordinated, called out information on enemy positions and composition, relaying casualty numbers and equipment status. He occasionally issued orders redeploying men from one position to another, generally from the east side of the perimeter to the front engaged with the Collective. To his right the bark of a heavy blaster would sound occasionally from where a D:Ops marksman and his spotter lay at the edge of the roof. Similar sounds repeated from a number of the surrounding roofs as well as other snipers put their height advantage to good use.

The bombing runs had kept up overhead but their targets remained upwards of a kilometer away so as to avoid laying a proton bomb too close to friendly units. This left the embattled Taldryan men to fend for themselves. Zarec had inquired the night before of the possibility of reinforcements from the Clan basecamp if things went south and had been told, cagely, that there was no chance of it. They were out here, questionably without authorization, and beneath the notice of the Consul. Kiran cursed his Director but maintained the trust he'd placed in the man years ago.

"Sir, 2nd Platoon is in trouble. They need anti-armor weapons immediately", the coms-officer called out.

Kiran turned his attention to the three streets he knew to be occupied by the shock company's 2nd Platoon. One of them was streaming black smoke, "What is it? Tanks?"

"Walkers, Sir", the man responded crisply.

Kiran balled his fist, "Fierfek. Okay, tap the 1st Platoon to send their launchers over. Advise the other PLTs there's armor in the area."

Vodo stood at the center of the engraving and he turned slowly to see all three of his companions sitting cross-legged around him. They were five meters from him so he could easily see their faces, eyes closed, as they focused inwardly in their meditations. He watched them and opened himself to the Force as well so he could feel them and monitor their progress. ZyxI and Nihilus were calm, steady flames in the Force where Appius was a candle light flickering in the wind. He was younger and less experienced than the others but he was also the newest to steep himself in the ways of the Dark Side. Vodo grinned inwardly that he'd pushed the straight-laced Mandalorian Jedi closer and closer to the edge before the edge had taken him. He was the weak link in this ritual and Vodo made a mental note to watch him closely.

The skin on Vodo's lekku began to tingle. It was a familiar sensation, one that told him the Force was swirling about, communicating, and seeking him. In a fight it would often warn him of imminent danger while in a tense meeting it might clue him that someone was not being honest. Here he felt the tingle and the goose flesh rise from his skin and knew that it told of the gathering presence of the Force in this spot. He could feel the charge on the air like static electricity. Perhaps it was time that he too began his part of the ritual then.

The Twi'lek closed his eyes and focused inwardly. He found the Force there and seized it. Normally the Force wriggled and fought against his grasp, like an eel seeking to escape the clutches of its doom, but here he found it docile. Good. The others were doing the wrestling for him. Their meditations and the runes of the Disk served to rein the Force in making the job Vodo was to do easier. Where Jedi allowed the Force to flow through them and claimed to act on the Will of the Force the Dark Side was different. A wielder bent the Force to their will, they made it do their bidding, and with the aid of strong emotions their work was made easier but it was always a battle. With the others doing the battle for him, Vodo could wield the Force pliantly.

The Disk lay at Vodo's feet and he could feel it in the Force now too. It glowed and as he spread his awareness he could see the lines of power flowing around his companions, in and through the engraved symbols on the plaza's pavement, and all of it converging at the Disk beneath him. Vodo reached for it with his mind and like a tangle of rope he held that power. He explored it and found that he could guide the tendrils of the Force leading away from him. Vodo held the power and caused its lines to grow and branch, to fill each and every rune and symbol of their carving, to tie each one together in a very specific pattern, and then to begin reaching out into the world past the border of the engraving's perimeter.

Vodo concentrated, beads of sweat forming on his brow and his robes grew damp across his body. He felt the lines of Force Power snake out from the Plaza. He tied them around the Taldryan men fighting their defensive battle. He ensnared the Collective soldiers in their mismatched uniforms and cybernetic enhancements. The more people he touched with this power the quicker and easier it became. The lines multiplied swiftly and soon touched every soul in the city of Eos. They darted forth and claimed each of the camps and clusters of soldiers of the various Clans. The Army of the Iron Throne was engulfed and so too was the mass of the Collective's Forces. Across the face of the planet, the lines of power raced out, invisible to the eye of all save for Vodo and his companions, until every living person and creature had been tied together in a single web.

The feeling of wielding this magnitude of the Force was ecstasy. Vodo felt more alive than he'd ever been. He could feel everything, smell everything, hear and see everything. He

realized he'd been living in a world that was a pale shadow of its true self and that without the power he now wielded it was veiled and hidden from everyone. Colors were more vivid and his understanding of everything around him extended further than just knowing its shape and its composition. He could see its history and its origin. He could see how it had come to this place and why it was where it sat. He could see the imperfections of the armor of the two Mandalorians sitting in meditation before him and how with a simple touch he could shatter their fabled armor to dust. Vodo drank the sensation in, reveling in the majesty of this moment which he would remember for eternity.

"Colonel, it's not looking good for 2nd PLT", the coms-officer had a long face, "The reinforcements didn't have the impact we hoped."

"Sithspit", Kiran looked at the street billowing smoke, "Okay, pack it up here, we're headed down there."

The men around Kiran, his headquarters, moved quickly to place everything into their packs and hefted their weapons. Leaving the sniper team his squad made their way down an external fire escape to the plaza and hurried to the place in trouble, taking a wide swing around the Sith and their ritual. Kiran could see Vodo standing erect in the center, his arms held out from his body at a diagonal angle and his face lifted to the sky with a serene smile on his face. Serenity was not something he'd ever seen on that man's visage, it was too peaceful and it spooked Kiran. Arriving at the street in question Kiran was greeted by SSgt. Jules who informed him that the Lieutenant, the Platoon's commander, had died several minutes ago and that he now had command.

"We've got you now, Sergeant", Kiran said while buckling on a helmet someone handed him, "Second and Third Teams are inbound to assist, we just need to hold out a little longer. Get someone back on that E-Web in the meantime!"

The Collective had advanced nearly half-way down this street already. The burning wrecks of several walkers could be seen up and down the road but three more still stood. The AT-MP walkers used their chain guns mercilessly; their cannons roared ceaselessly pouring blaster bolts, cerulean in color, into the piled cobblestones and building masonry that made up the barricade. One of Zarec's men pulled a tube off his back and, with the aid of another man, loaded it. As soon as the E-Web opened fire again the man popped over the barricade and fired. The launcher fired a plume of flame out the rear and a shaped warhead out the front. The rocket impacted on the viewplate of the nearest walker and exploded with a crack. The walker fell to the ground, clanging loudly, to the cheers of the defenders. The Collective didn't relent however and their advance moved on.

Infantry followed up the two surviving walkers and the street was filled on their end by crouching and creeping forms moving from cover to cover, using whatever existed to hide from the dug-in Taldryan defenders. Decorative planters, tree trunks, fallen trash bins, anything of sufficient mass to hide a humanoid became a piece of the battlefield. Kiran aimed his LPA

NN-14 carefully and took shots of opportunity. It was a pistol and not the best weapon for the task but he was a fair shot and he could hit a man-sized target at 50m.

“Thermal detonator!”

Most men didn’t hesitate to throw themselves to cover at the yell of the warning. Those few who didn’t were dead once the rubble settled. Kiran’s ears were ringing and he shook his head to clear it. Someone helped pick him up and ran their hands over him to ensure he wasn’t injured. Kiran pushed them away and picked his weapon up from where it lay at his feet and threw himself back on the line to return fire. Another launcher tube hissed as another rocket lanced out from it and struck another walker. This time the machine wasn’t destroyed, the rocket hit the hip-joint below the cockpit, but the armored vehicle toppled to the ground all the same.

“One more! We need to get that last one out of action!”, Kiran yelled to no one in particular, the dust in his eyes making it difficult to see.

“Colonel, 1st PLT is suffering heavy casualties, they need reinforcements”, the coms-officer was beside Kiran, apparently he’d been the one who had picked him up.

Drawing his datapad Kiran looked over a map of his units’ deployments, “We could call in the 1st and 4th D:Ops teams”.

“Sir, we risk leaving the rear too weak to repulse a flanking attack if we draw any more men from there. We should call for reinforcements”, the man’s eyes were pleading.

“Negative. There are no reinforcements. Until Lord Biask is finished here we’re on our own, now send the order”, Kiran replaced his datapad and returned fire again.

Vodo was connected to every living being on the planet. He could feel them, their life force, and it was euphoric. He explored his new awareness and his new powers and found something he did not expect. Vodo took a step forward, but not with his body. He turned and found himself looking at, well, himself. Looking down his hands were transparent, tinged blue and white like a hologram. He could still feel his body and the power it wielded but here he stood outside of that body. It was Zyxl who noticed first. The man never opened his eyes, Vodo could tell through the man’s helmet, but he could sense the change and perceived what it meant. Soon a ghostly blue-white apparition rose from the ground where the Zabrack Mandolorian was sitting, still, cross-legged. Zyxl examined his hands and his arms before noticing he was standing inside of himself and took a step forward too.

“What is this?”, he wondered aloud, unaware as of yet his apparition was not cloaked in armor and Vodo could see his face.

They were joined by the natural voice of Nihilus who spoke without the aid of a cybernetic jaw, his apparition possessing its original biological one, “This may be a form of Force Projection. I’ve heard of cults who practice it.”

Vodo looked down at his legs and saw that he was standing atop a pair of regular, two-legged legs. His legs. The three Sith looked at the seated form of Appius who had not yet discovered the secret to projecting himself. Vodo walked over to him and, after studying the Aedile carefully, reached into his chest and pulled up a pale blue-white figure of the man. Appius looked surprised, as they all had, but noted quickly that Zyxl was maskless and his ghostly hands shot to his own face and found no helmet there either.

“Calm yourself, Appius”, Vodo said, releasing him.

“What’s going on? Are we dead?” the young man asked.

Zyxl grinned and laughed, “No, this is just an out-of-body experience.”

Nihilus worked his jaw experimentally, “Interesting that we are projected in the bodies we should have had. Biask has legs, I have a jaw, but Appius hasn’t got a brain.”

Zyxl laughed at that but Vodo cut them off, “Enough. We have a ritual to complete.”

“What’s next? I can feel everything and everyone on this planet like they’re a memory in the back of my head”, Appius looked around at the Plaza in which they now stood, beside their meditating bodies.

Vodo took several steps forward, inwardly excited that he remembered how to use these legs, “I have connected every being on this planet to our ritual. They constitute one entire battery upon which we can draw for our needs.”

Zyxl and Nihilus looked at Vodo with surprise and fascination but it was Appius whose face showed surprise and anger, “What? What do you mean battery?”

“This is how the ritual works. The power that will grant us immortality is drawn from the life force of others”, Vodo studied the Aedile, “It’s too late to suddenly grow a conscience again, Appius.”

“No! This is wrong, I don’t want to live forever knowing I killed an entire planet!” Appius stomped forward and grabbed the ghostly collar of Vodo’s robes.

Vodo’s face was a mask of indignant fury and he tore the Mandalorian’s hands from his vestments, “It’s YOU who is wrong! This is how power is gained or have you not had your eyes open? Power is taken from others, always. I lead you down this path because I saw potential in you... I saw how you struggled to convince yourself the narrow way of the Jedi was right, that it was natural. I showed you that the Dark Side is the natural way. Embrace your feelings, do what you know to be true, and let no one stop you. After today, you will have eternity to do just that.”

Zyxl and Nihilus watched the two quietly. Appius fumed, his nostrils flaring, “You lied to me, you didn’t tell me that I would become a genocidal murderer if I followed you!”

“Then you weren’t paying attention! I’ve killed countless numbers of people. I’ve ordered innocents to their death, soldiers to throw away their lives, and witnesses to be silenced. I am powerful because I have taken it from every person who has ever challenged me. I never lied to you about that”, Vodo paced back to his body and examined the fearsome metallic legs his torso sat atop, “We will continue this ritual, my Aedile, and I will be sure to teach you the true power of the Dark Side.”

Out of the corner of Vodo’s eye he saw Nihilus’s head flick over to where the former Jedi was, “Appius, wait!”

Before Vodo could turn around Zyxl yelled, “Wait, NO!”

The Collective just kept coming. With Clan Arcona in tatters the other Clans were struggling to reposition themselves to stem the push their enemy was making through the heart of the City. The small pocket of Taldryan men and women held out desperately but their advantage was waning with every minute. Having been stymied down the length of one side of the plaza exploratory pushes were being made by small, mobile units of Collective soldiers down the side-streets and through the buildings. The majority of the forces under Kiran were still deployed to the streets they'd first encountered the enemy on and now found themselves contending with attacks that flanked them from upper story windows and cafe fronts.

"1st PLT is down to 50%, 2nd PLT 60%, and 3rd and 4th are both hovering around 70%, Sir", the coms-officer was glued to Kiran's side still, relaying status updates.

"What about the Direct Ops teams?", Zarec glanced over the barricade and fired several shots, one of which caught a Gamorean in the thigh and sent him crashing to the ground squealing.

"I haven't heard from the 1st Team in a while, Sir. No response to the comlink. 2nd and 3rd Teams have combined and have ten men, 4th Team is gone, and 5-8th teams are now engaging the forces trying to encircle us", the look the man gave Kiran spoke the words he knew not to say.

They were out here with their ass in the wind and nothing to show for it except bodies and blood. Behind them, the Sith continued their ritual, unmoving in their seated or standing positions as they did... something. Kiran wasn't even sure what the ritual was about, what it was supposed to accomplish. Things wouldn't hold up long though if nothing changed. The Director had been very clear nothing was to bother them but without reinforcements they would be disturbed sooner than later.

Kiran chewed on his lip for a moment before he made up his mind, "You'll stay here. I'm going to get authorization to send out a call for help."

Relief flooded the man's face, "Understood, Sir. Good luck."

I'll certainly need it when Lord Biask sees that I've disobeyed him, Kiran thought ruefully as he sprinted back out of the street and into the Plaza.

He was nearly to the Sith when he saw the Aedile of House Ektrosis open his eyes and stand to his feet. Kiran slowed to a trot and then stood still as he watched. The Aedile's face was a stormcloud of rage and he drew his lightsaber. A green blade of light emerged from the Mandalorian's hilt and he roared with a com-magnified voice as he charged at Vodo. Kiran's blood ran cold but his mind was still sharp. He aimed his weapon and fired it, striking the Aedile in the backplate several times.

It wasn't enough. The Beskar'gam absorbed the heat without a mark and the man, enraged as he was, barely felt the thudding impacts. The green blade of the saber flashed high into the air. Vodo stood motionless, his arms in the same out-stretched position Kiran had seen earlier. Moments before the green blade came down Vodo's eyes flickered open and focused on

Appius. His hand shot for the long-hilted saber at his belt and drew it from its clip. A red-white blade emerged with a snap-hiss but it was too late. The Aedile's blade cut cleanly through Vodo's neck and severed his head from his shoulders.

The green face of the Director fell to the ground and rolled to a stop, the dismembered pieces of his lekku plopping to the ground beside his body which toppled a moment later. Zyxl and Nihilus were awake now too and screaming at Appius. Kiran stood motionless, frozen in place as he stared at the head of Vodo Biask Taldrya. It stared back at him, lifeless, in condemnation. Appius turned to the two other Sith, his weapon still ready, and dared them to attack him. Zyxl pointed an accusing finger at the Aedile, while Vodo's former Apprentice stared at the back of the severed head with a mix of confusion and fury.

It was Kiran though who moved. He moved swiftly, and quietly, and came up behind the murderer like a ghost. Appius had no warning before the vibrodagger plunged into the soft of his neck and a blaster bolt fired into the unarmored place beneath his left arm. The Mandalorian fell dead, his lightsaber retracting when the pressure plate was released. The Proconsul and former Apprentice stared at Kiran wordlessly, caught entirely off-guard by the devastating attack.

"Lord Proconsul: we are surrounded, our troops are falling left and right, and we are in desperate need of reinforcements. The entire Collective Army has been bearing down on us for an hour, do I have your leave?", Kiran spoke evenly, though his chest rose and fell heavily.

"I--", Zyxl was still trying to process what had happened in the last few seconds, certainly feeling the abrupt loss of the sensation of the ritual's power.

"Lord Venzos! Do I have your leave to order for reinforcements!?" Kiran marched up to the Sith's helmeted face and glared.

The Proconsul nodded, "Yes, do what you must."

The world was hazy, covered in a grey mist that obscured objects and places that were not all that distant. People moved through the mist, oblivious to his presence. Vodo yelled. He raged. He tried to accost those people but they did not see or hear him. They could not feel his fists or sense his presence. Try as he might Vodo could not move from where he stood. The Disk lay beneath his feet, his biological feet, and nothing could move him from it.

The ritual had to go on! If it failed while it was in progress...

The realization dawned on him. It fell upon him like a weight, like a wave crashing down and smothering him. The old priest, Juris Kall, had told him the price of failure. If he'd had blood in his veins they would have run cold. He was dead, trapped here for all of time. Frantic he looked around, desperate to find something that would invalidate his knowledge. Instead, he saw his head laying there on the marble tile. A trickle of blood seeped from his mostly-cauterized neck. His eyes looked back at him, yellow flecked with red, lifelessly in condemnation.

This was the price he paid for his arrogance and his greed. This was the price of eternity.