

Temple of Darkness
Sepros
Sadow Territory

"They're playing our song, Acker." The soldier let a wry smile cross his lips as he pulled his helmet on. The base reverberated with the explosions outside, even muted as they were. His compatriot, a pale man with dark tattoos across the side of his face nodded at him, straightening his robes as he stood.

"Well then, Grase." The knight chuckled as dust fell from the ceiling. "Shall we?"

It was no surprise; the Consul had warned them it would come to this. The winding tunnels beneath the Temple led them on a circuitous route, the map drawn directly from the original site. The one it was said was built by Sadow himself.

The sounds of blaster fire and grenades grew louder with every step, the blinding light of the outside world menacing their eyes as they raised weapons, bolting forward.

"For Sadow!" Sneering lips bellowed the call, his red blade surging forward, deflecting a blaster bolt as he moved. The soldier moved directly behind him, firing behind the swirling shield of his Acker's saber blade. Across the field, they saw others, the half broken visage of Malisane as he pummeled an enemy soldier to death. Other journeymen they recognized from Arx, from the Academy, from Tarthos and Aeotheran. The sound of ship's cannons and sublight engines screamed overhead, heads ducking a fraction out of sheer instinct.

Comms were an absolute mess of howling static, and the shouting and chaos of the battlefield made their usual work dangerous, uncoordinated. A Grenade landed near their feet, Grase following the arc back whence it came and burning a hole in the thrower's forehead. Acker stretched out two fingers, wrapping his mind around the grenade and throwing it into a group of enemy soldiers.

"This is a bloody mess." Grace snarled. "We're going to die out here like this."

"*Forward, Sadow.*" The voice of the Consul beckoned into their ears. The soldier had long given up understanding their ways, but the Knight smiled. The Orb that the Consul used was a way around the enemy's plan. Bentre's words continued. "*There's a column of armor coming from the southwest approach. Jade Serpents engage before they get into range.*"

"Izzat us?" Grase chirped, twisting his rifle forcefully to eject a spent magazine as he slapped a fresh one in place.

"Yeah." The Knight reached out, feeling the tide of battle, knowing where the next blast was coming from, so he could return to sender. He chuckled, watching the Lightbringer fall. The

Jade Serpents hadn't been a battleteam in a decade, if the records were to be believed, but the Sadow were lovers of tradition, and reused the old names often.

"Night Hawks, to the ground to support." The Knight paused, the soldier nearly bumping into him, before swiveling to deliver more shots to the enemy. "You good?"

"The...Night Ha..." His sneer became a smile, wide and toothy.

"I must be missing something, Acker. Who?" Grase grunted, following the knight as he charged into the edge of the clearing, making their way toward the target.

Acker just laughed, his arm carving wide sweeping arcs of light before him. Defensive velocities he had learned years ago had served them well today. Grase kept pace with him, sliding up against his back and moving in tandem as he squeezed his trigger at the Lightbringers following them. They had done this before, too many times to count, but this felt different somehow. Exhaustion crept in behind their eyes, dragging them down.

They turned around the corner of the temple, eyes widening as they saw the column of armor in the distance, slowly but surely making their way toward the Temple. Dark humor bloomed in his heart and Acker fed on it, as he raised a saber to point at the one man walking out from the temple toward them. "That's who."

Grase could barely make out the details, but the dark glint of armor and flowing dark fabric marked him as one of the Brotherhood. "An elder?" Grase had not seen an elder on the battlefield before. He had heard stories, but those seemed like fever dreams and tall tales.

Acker laughed again. "Better still. Come on, let's get over there." He broke into a run, his blade batting away blaster bolts that never seemed to show up. Grase followed, his mind racing as he tried to put it together. What did he mean 'better still'? Why was this side of the temple so quiet? Where the crik were the rest of the reinforcements?

They slid to a stop a few feet away from the man, his stride unbroken as he walked almost casually toward the walker. Grase mouthed a curse word as his view offered him recognition of the design as an AT-M6. The heavy armor, the massive cannon. There could be no mistake. They were here to break the Temple. He looked to his friend, finding him dropping to a knee, knuckling the dirt. "What is thy..."

The man raised a hand and redirected it toward the oncoming column, never breaking stride. Grase curled his lip under his helmet. "WhAt Is ThY bldDiNg, My MaStEr." The words dripped with sarcasm and mockery.

Acker shook his head at him, then tilted his head to nod toward the man. He continued to walk directly at the walker, that now obviously had taken notice of him, the head swiveling with each step to keep him in view. Grase tapped his magazine, then ran a hand over his belts, taking

inventory. “Five more magazines, three grenades, a shapeable charge. Maybe the shapeable charge would breach that armor, but that was a pretty big maybe. You think your saber could cut through those legs? Where are our kriffing reinforcements?”

The squall of energy erupting from the walker all but deafened them, the blast of red screaming at them before stalling a few feet ahead of the man, who just continued moving forward, only slightly altering his course to avoid it. Grase blinked.

Twice.

Acker pulled him out of it, a hand on his shoulder pushing them both forward, walking along the other side of the frozen fire, Grase’s eyes drawn to it, even as he felt his pupils shrink from the brightness of it. They kept moving, keeping pace with the man, their attention divided between the intrinsic threat they moved toward, the man they moved with, and the stilled blast behind them.

A few steps later, it exploded forward, continuing its original trajectory into the dirt where they stood when it was fired. Bits of moistened soil, chipped plant material, and a wave of heat washed over them. Grase mouthed a curse beneath his helmet.

The walker fired again, but this time, the beam froze as soon as it left the weapon. It was too late for them, the walker’s movement too plodding to change on such short notice. It stepped forward into its own attack, the frozen fire eating away its own weapon in an eruption of sparks and scorched metal. The tibanna canister exploded, the head of the walker swinging free of the body and falling to the ground, leaving the rest of it standing.

The crack of energy caught their attention as blades erupted in golden flame, flying from the man toward the open neck of the walker, the screams and strangled cries of those inside reaching their ears. A moment later, the weapons found their way back to him, flying around him in lazy arcs like summer flies. Grase’s eyes couldn’t get any wider. “I’m sorry, sir...but...”

He turned his head toward the soldier, the faceplate dark as he regarded the man. The metallic thump in the distance reminded them all that it was a column of armor, not just a single walker. His head turned back toward the threat, a single arm raising and gesturing almost casually.

The remnants of the broken AT-M6 throttled backward with sudden intensity, crushing the lesser walkers behind it, smashing them all to the jungle floor with the grating sound of armor plates grinding against each other. Acker set his teeth at the sound, then turned to look at Grase. An eyebrow raised, then his eyes darted back to the man. The long coat, three purple slashes at the biceps. A lion atop his helmet. Flying lightsabers. Grase tilted his head at Acker. There was no way. He wasn’t real.

And yet here he was.

Walking calmly toward the wreckage, his pace calm, steady, measured, a stark contrast to their frenetic movement. It couldn't be. The golden blades darted forward with a thought, slashing at bits of ruin, carving away the metallic shrouds to ensure that there were no threats left. There was no way. Grase blinked. "Is that..."

"ASHEN!" The bellowed name echoed across the wreckage, the sun glinting off of the crystals of his armor. A lightsaber erupted to life in his hands as he pointed it at him.

"They're never going to believe us." Grase muttered under his breath as he raised his rifle at the Lightbringer.

Muz tilted his head slowly, continuing to walk toward the ruin. The Lightbringer roared, bounding from one ruined walker to another, the Force enhancing his speed, his agility as he grew closer. He leapt into the air, saber raised high as he screamed again.

There was only a faint crack as the Lightbringer folded into himself, falling to the soil a ball of flesh and bone with a crystal shard coating. Muz twitched a finger, and even that was swept from his path. Acker's mouth fell open, and it was Grase's turn to prod him back into action. Elbowing him in the ribs gently, he swung his head, looking for any additional threats.

"*Southwest Approach clear. Thank you.*" The Consul's voice worked its way into their heads once more. "*Eastern entrance needs reinforcements, if you will.*"

The distant sound of a rocket reached their ears. Grase dipped his head at the man, a hand going to his heart in the old salute. Grase nodded at his old friend. "Please excuse us, they're playing our song." Muz nodded his head once, smiling beneath the helmet.

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Muz Ashen Keibatsu, #3714
Option 2: Into the Fire