*The Quality of Trust*

The Sentinel-Class shuttle’s ramp slowly opened exposing the bright, desolate landscape of Judecca. Zagro had to squint to adjust to the contrast from the dim shuttle’s cargo hold. Regaining his perspective he was immediately awed by the mountains ringing his view and the metropolis seemingly built into the rock below. He turned his back and was crestfallen to see the precipitous drop to the city below. “This is a landing pad.” Thought the Hapan Acolyte.

The mysterious stranger was already upon him. Zagro felt something cold, something missing approaching him. “This is the Imperial Winter Palace. Welcome to Judecca, your new home.” The black robed man made the utterances but Zagro was not certain that the man truly spoke them. He took a step back, raising his shoulders slightly to grant better egress to the shoulder-holstered pistols suspended from his armpits.

Moving with imperceptible speed the phantom reemerged beside the Acolyte and placed his left hand on Zagro’s shoulder in a calm and reassuring manner. “That will not be necessary here, not for you at least. It has been decided you can retain your weapons, as honestly we do not trust you *without* them. My name is Koryn Thraagus, Krath Priest and Rollmaster of Clan Scholae Palatinae.”

Walking at a slow pace the duo entered the Winter Palace from the terrace and the Krath Priest gave the obligatory introductions and tours. Zagro’s head was spinning. As a slicer and later as an officer he knew his line of work and the requirements of decorum. Here, he was lost so utterly and unperceivably he began to laugh. Seeing the concentration and mental alacrity fading from the Acolyte, Koryn speed them towards the House Quarters section of the palace.

They arrived at a bare cell. The room was made of sterile, cold, unfeeling stone and the only light came from the corner window. The window itself was unremarkable except for the fact it began at the waist of a normal man’s height and ended at roughly where the head would be and went the entire length of the wall. It offered a dazzling view of limitless sky, then cloud, then the lights of Ohmen City dangerously far beyond. “I thought you would like this room…we are a bit short handed recently with Force-sensitive personnel. You will find administrators, soldiers, officers, and all other types in the palace but there are also the Dark Jedi brothers and sisters that make up this house.” Said Koryn as he paused and gazed emptily across the room.

Zagro heard the words but could not drown out the throbbing in his head and more importantly in his veins. “Thank you for that compliment of the view, and the furniture could use some…refining however.”

It was true, the room was sparse and lifeless. A sunken bed, two large dressers, a desk, and an alcove where a showering unit was installed were the breadth and scope of the accommodations. “I see. Well, once you prove yourself and if you become one of us in truth as well as name you can do what you want with this place. Remember this is a room only. You control your destiny. You can either be on training missions or assignments. You can make your own path here if you so wish. As such I think I will give you some time alone. It has been the wish of the Quaestor and Aedile that you have free roam of the palace for the night and tomorrow we will talk again…I feel it will be a very lively discourse.” Koryn spoke with measured restraint and enthusiasm. The Krath walked out of the room and left Zagro to his own devices.

The Hapan sat down on the bed and wasted no time in retrieving his narcotic kit from the hidden pouch lining his holster. It was a bad habit picked up as a slicer that he could only barely repress as a Hapan Royal Marine officer. Riddled with such uncertainty as he now felt Zagro had no recompense but to fill the needle and walk to the window and stare down into the nothingness as the drugs entered his bloodstream. “If only there was ale I could drink this feeling away. No matter, though. My work is about to begin.” Zagro sighed, regained his composure, and embarked on his clandestine task.

*The Next Morning*

The Interrogation Room. Koryn did not call this place as such, but Zagro knew instinctually that it was used as such. To the room’s credit it conveyed no sinister machinations or trappings of dire omens. It was a large room with white walls and terribly bright lights draped with a sole table and two sparse chairs. The Rollmaster sat cross from Zagro and eyed him with a friendly glance and a ready smile. “Good morning Acolyte Fenn.”

Zagro greeted the man with the same carefully orchestrated familiarity and deference. “Thank you for seeing me, I have been told that the Quaestor and Aedile would like to meet me today to evaluate if I can be taken on as a student of the House?” As he spoke these words he leaned casually back in the chair and let his right hand slid to his boot.

“Zagro…I *know* what you are doing here. You are a damn gifted slicer I cannot take that away from you. The way you spiked into our internal security wire, patched that onto our logistic resupply flight control uplink, and ferried it over onto the bridge of one of our capital ships for dispatch back to Hapes via HoloNet was in a word brilliance.” Koryn betrayed no signs of fear or anger as she spoke which unnerved Zagro to the core.

“A feat like that is impossible…” Zagro convincingly blurted out his lie but it was of no benefit to him. “Son, it was almost perfect. Except, well, we trust no one. Spies watch every officer in our Fleet entrusted with a capital ship. Our Knights in turn watch those spies. “ Koryn again showed no signs of fear or mistrust.

Leaning back slightly and leaning to his right, Zagro delayed a nanosecond longer than he should have. “Is this man reading my mind? Does he indeed know?” His brain was alight with this question, burning in every synapse. It was indeed futile, he resigned himself begrudgingly to this fact.

“It is my only chance. My handlers promised me a chance to find and kill someone if I divulged the existence of any external threats to the House Drollel. The Matriarch has always had a feud with the Dathomiri upstarts who now hold the crown in Hapes.” Zagro exuded all the confidence of a paladin of old embarked on a noble quest for redemption.

Koryn shook his head and motioned for five heavily armed shocktroopers to enter the room and ring Zagro. “Acolyte…we knew all of this. On Antei, the Shadow Academy indoctrination, that course is more beneficial for us to map your brain and learn your backstory than it is to train you and gauge an individual’s Force abilities. I am sorry but you must now go face the Quaestor and Aedile. I had…great faith in you.”

Zagro leaned further back and pinched his boot. Nothing. He pinched his boot again. Nothing. Kicking back with all his might, Fenn forced the sturdy chair into the nearest three shocktroopers and pulled his blasters on the remaining adversaries and squeezed the trigger in lightning speed. Nothing.

Yet the shocktroopers made no move to restrain him or pull their rifles or stun batons. They braced the bulkhead and departed the room in a tight formation. Stunned, Zagro pulled his remaining weapon from his belt, grasping the knife with all his might.

“Enough. You have passed.” A look of satisfaction came across Koryn’s face as he said these words. “ You were caught. You knew you were caught yet you divulged only the information we could have reasonably known yet obscured the true facts. Likewise, knowing you were compromised instead of being taken alive you resigned yourself to kill me in the process. Slicer Exemplar should be your title. Your blasters, arced at such an angle and rigged to fire by tapping your boot onto your hidden knife embedded in the lace was a stroke of ingenuity I have not seen in some time. It is too bad we deactivated the mechanism and traded your bullets with training blanks.”

“Blanks…blanks…I checked my weapons last night and before I was summoned…” Zagro got the words out in disbelief as he sheathed his knife. Koryn rose from his chair and walked towards the exit. “As only a trained assassin would do. However, your rounds were traded out before you ever left Antei. This has been staged since you were picked up. You were ready to die defending your secrets and taking out a high priority asset, namely myself, with you knowing if you didn’t check back in Hapes would send another agent to find us and report back. It is known the current ruling family has ties with the Jedi. But, you chose the honorable way out and showed your devotion. You have passed.” The Rollmaster entered the hallway and formed the shocktroopers up in a tight box formation. “Come, time to begin your training…The Quaestor and Aedile will be pleased with your progress so far.”

Zagro entered the box side by side with Koryn as the shocktrooper leader motioned his men forward and the column began to walk down the dark and labyrinthine corridor to meet the House leadership.