***Antei Orbit, 39 ABY…***

The unforgiving durasteel bench seating was starting to irritate Zagro’s already uncertain mood, and the dim auxiliary lighting’s blue hue encapsulated the melancholy of the interior. The young Acolyte sat alone in the troop cabin of the Sentinel-Class Imperial shuttle, in truth a relic of former glories and better days. Yet, wasn’t that also true of the Hapan?

“Antei Spaceport ETA thirty minutes. Buckle up, our pressurization system is negligible once we enter orbit.” Dully came over the intercom in a monotonous, uncaring manner. “So this is to be my entrance?” Thought Zagro Zenn. “Entering more as a hostage than as a guest.”

The disembarking process would be painfully easy for the Hapan. He came without the milieu and trappings of a life accustomed to possessions and ill-fated attachments. Black leather boots, matching gloves cuffed at the wrist, and a utility built were his only belongings. These adorned the worn and faded, yet gentile and elegant, uniform of an entry-level officer of the Hapan Royal Commandos. “They even took my blasters.” Said Zagro as he felt the emptiness under his armpits where his side arms were always slung.

“Odd, the leather is still supple and smooth…” Zagro’s mind wandered off to his childhood briefly. This was his only true possession of character or importance. He often forgot he was wearing the shoulder strap holster. It was at least 30 years old, made of unknown cured animal hide. The once dark, glossy mahogany hue gave way to a now somewhat cedar color, matte where it once glistened reflected light.

This was the only gift he had remaining from his parents. It was an unwelcomed revelation for Zagro to think of the plural term for his ancestors. His father had raised the man, yet the one who had brought the gift into his life was a stranger. For Zagro never met his mother, at least not to his knowledge. Growing up of average means on Hapes surrounded by the rich and powerful always irked the young man. He had none of the pedigree and standing of his peers. While his schoolmate’s mothers were officers of the Hapan Royal Fleet or leaders of the community and industry he himself had no mother…a grave sin in the Hapan society. Fathers were seen as little more than concubines and consorts at the best of times, as little as biological donors at worst.

The shoulder holster fit perfectly on his compact yet muscular neck and upper back, fully encompassing his neck and offering wrap-around coverage from the shoulders down to the deltoids with two sets of fastening straps going across the armpit back up to the should. Made from one piece of leather and solid Mandalorian steel buckles it was a simple yet prideful design. The holsters themselves were not without merit, deep pocketed with soft fur lining the inside and fastened tight to the body. Yes, this did not allow the fastest egress to his weapons but it allowed the man better agility and concealment.

His mother had given this gift, ironically, as a memento to his father on the establishment of his own courier service. Men in Hapan society tended to be the laborers and foot soldiers of the matriarchal elite. His mother had used her influence to grant a subsidy and grant permits for her husband to launch a small-scale freight-line operations in the farthest edge of the Transitory Mist working as a scout, delivery service, and when the time required security for the less well-to-do members of society.

Zagro remembered the stories his father would tell, often from the near empty end of a bottle about these days. She had given him this gift as a means to protect himself on his assignments. And protect him from all his enemies it did, except for the one enemy no man can control; the heart. In the father’s absence the mother was seduced by the scion of one of the noble families whose domineering matriarch would allow no scandal to befall her house, especially when the current Queen had no daughters of her own and any instability could prompt a coup to supplant her position from any of the prominent families.

“You may now unfasten your restraints, Antei Shadow Academy personnel will be here to gather you shortly…” Zagro didn’t listen to the pilot’s words. He gently rocked the holsters from the slings and caressed the leather remembering the ephemeral past.

His mother was forced to leave Zagro and her husband once she became pregnant. She knew if she stayed with her husband the mother of her new paramour would have the men killed. With no means to resist such cruel injustice Zagro’s father could only resign himself to fate and the bottle. Yet, somehow, credits always seemed to come to the family with enough certainty to grant Zagro a comfortable education and upbringing if not one marked by ostracism and shame. While his father’s courier line grew in reputation and notoriety so did his alcoholism. To have success as a male in Hapan society not beholden currently to a wife or mistress was unheard of.

But as all things do word did get out, and old jealousies die very hard on Hapes. On one of his father’s rare lengthy returns home Zagro saw a change in his father. The bottles remained full and the bitterness was likewise devoid from the man. That ended however, when 4 female guards came to the modest flat on the outskirts of the capital. Looking at these efficient armor clad women Zagro knew they belonged to no noble House, at least not officially.

“Run…now…” Zagro said, but the words were another man’s last epitaph. The boy of 12 burst through a balcony and fell four levels before being braced by an awning and slid down to the grass of the villa below. Yet, he never heard the blaster shots that he learned killed his father. Executioners seldom leave unwelcome noises. To be sure the killers made it appear to be a robbery by a jealous competitor or jilted lover. No matter. Upon making it to his father’s hanger and the trusty shuttle he would use to enter orbit he found his blasters. They were slung on the holster, resting on the empty co-pilot’s seat. A note was pinned inside in fresh holovid with soft-spoken words. “Thank you for coming back for me, will our son be home tonight when I arrive?”

Zagro never learned if these words were his mother’s voice or if it was a trap or a genuine escape this phantom women was trying to enact. Perhaps it never was meant to matter. With a sigh he looked up at the pilot who steadied him as he walked down the ramp of the shuttle. Looking at the Antei skyline with bloodshot eyes Zagro did not feel much of anything, yet he continued to cradle his holster hanging as ever from his shoulder.