**Tampopo Guesthouse**

**Inazawa, Capital City of Kyataru**

**A short while ago...**

The guesthouse was packed, with patrons in almost every available seat. At the long bar, a line of road-stained travellers (Kyataran, Nevonese and a host of more exotic species) sat elbow-to-elbow, eagerly gulping down noodles from the steaming hot bowls placed in front of them by the enthusiastic hostess. The air was noisy with chatter and the scent of searing meat from the kitchen.

At one table, however, there was a relative oasis of calm. Manji Keibatsu, the second son of the Keibatsu line and one of the de-facto rulers of Kyataru, was not a man that any traveller dared to sit next to uninvited. This left him ample room to spread out across the long bench, which he was taking full advantage of - empty cups, bowls and bottles of saké littered the table, framing a small personal holopad.

As Manji took another swig of rice wine, the holopad chirruped brightly and a shimmering blue head swam into view.

"Manji-san," it said coldly, the emotionless tone of voice as much a marker of the caller's identity as the familial honorific. Manji's attention focused instantly, and he pulled himself upright.

"Musashi," he smiled, genuine warmth suffusing his weathered features. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"There's trouble brewing," the former Grand Master replied, his words clipped and precise. "I know you've been enjoying your retirement, but... We'll need you. We'll need the Dokugan-ryu."

The smile slipped from Manji's face. Dokugan-ryu... The One-Eyed Dragon. It had been his nickname amongst his clan-mates, a marker of respect and fear, a worthy name for the battle-thirsty madman that he had been. He'd left that life behind on his retirement, for the most part - he hadn't stopped living by the blade, but bandits and upstart warriors looking to make a name for themselves by defeating one of the Keibatsu were hardly on the same level as the enemies he'd faced with the Brotherhood. He’d not been challenged in years.

The frown deepened as he realised something else- Muz had far surpassed his power long ago, so this wasn't just about needing the strength of his younger brother. The Force must have shown Muz something... Something that he couldn't ignore.

Smacking the bottle down on the table, Manji leaned forwards, feeling the alcohol burn away as the Force roiled within him. "Where should I meet you?" he asked.

"Rendezvous with the Clan at Sepros. I'll meet you there with the 'Spear," was the reply. Muz no longer seemed capable of cracking a full smile, but a receptive ear might have caught the slightest trace of pleasure in his next few words. "See you soon, *otōto*."

Just like that, the hologram flickered out of existence. Manji grinned, a slow, savage smile sneaking across his face. He could feel his blood stirring in anticipation of combat, tearing off some of the years that he'd built up. Slamming his twin swords on the table loud enough to silence the hubbub, he pushed himself upright.

"Nobuko!" he bellowed towards the enthusiastic hostess. "Noodles to go, if you please!"

**The Harbinger**

**In orbit above Nancora**

**Now**

***Ktooooooommm***

Another explosion tore through the hull of the Harbinger, adding to the cacophonous din of sirens and alarms blaring throughout the ship. She was crippled, drifting slightly as the orbit of Nancora tugged at her and with debris and dead soldiers floating out of the gashes that the Collective’s suicide bombers had opened up.

His face smeared with grime and sweat, Manji steadied himself against a bulkhead as the ship shook again, trembling as another bomber crashed against the hull. He’d been on board the Damnation with Muz and the others when the Collective attacked, and the fleet (along with the rest of the Brotherhood’s forces) had been scattered by the onslaught. The Clan’s flagship was safely out of danger, but the Harbinger had been caught as she tried to turn. Now every shuttle and ship at the Clan’s disposal was engaged in trying to evacuate soldiers from the Harbinger to minimise their losses.

His commlink chirped at him and Muz’s voice cut through the din. “Manji, what’s your status?”

“Kriffin’ fantastic,” the Dragon growled in response. “Half the decks are gone already. I’m heading to the command center now.”

 “Grab who you can and get out,” Muz replied. “And watch for boarders, we’ve seen some shuttles heading your way.”

As the commlink clicked off, Manji grinned unpleasantly. “I karkin’ hope they try and board,” he muttered, reflexively reaching for the sabers thrust through his belt as he set off down the listing corridor.

**Command Center**

**The Harbinger**

Plumes of smoke and fire rose from battered and broken databanks around the command center as five smartly-clad crew members ran back and forth trying to coax some life out of the groaning ship’s drives. At the helm, Admiral Aramis Nestor stood ramrod-straight, arms clasped behind his back, staring out of the viewscreens at the planet that lay glistening below them.

 “Somebody tell me we have auxiliary power,” he snapped, his voice carrying above the hubbub. “I need a full retreat!”

“Both reactors are gone, sir,” a harried crewman replied, his face streaked with sweat. “We’re helpless out here.”

Aramis gritted his teeth, one hand balling into a fist. Suddenly, the hydraulic door to the command center shot open and a flurry of blaster bolts poured through, peppering the room. Turning in shock, Aramis saw a small squad of Collective soldiers running into the command center – Capital Enterprise Agents who’d boarded the ship. Self-preservation instincts kicked in and Aramis leapt off the central podium, taking cover behind one of the databanks as bolts smacked into the durasteel beside him. Reaching for the small blaster he kept at his belt, Aramis steeled himself for confrontation.

Then he heard a familiar, welcome sound. The frantic *vwumm-vwumm* of lightsabers. Peeking over the edge of the databank, Aramis felt his jaw drop involuntarily.

Twin whorls of silver scythed through the air as Manji leapt into the midst of the Collective squad, his teeth bared with battle-lust. As they turned in shock he attacked with unhinged ferocity – no surgical precision here, just blunt, visceral violence. His blades carved through synthweave armour like it wasn’t even there, bisecting trunks and hacking off limbs as he let loose, the deadly whine of his sabers drowning out the screams of the dying.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, the Muun agents lay dead on the floor of the command center. Ignoring them, Manji strode towards the podium as Aramis got to his feet.

 “Admiral Nestor,” he grinned. “Good to see you. You and your men need to evac right now.”

Nestor smiled in response, snapping off a salute. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, sir. Thank you for the assist, but all our shuttles and pods have already gone.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Manji chuckled, turning away and striding back towards the door of the command center. Nestor fell in step alongside him with the rest of the crew members following, clutching their blasters as the door to the command center slid shut behind them. “I brought my own. She’s not the ‘Spear, but she’ll do-”

***Ktooooommm***

The blast knocked all of them off their feet as a Collective ship ploughed into the command center behind them, blowing out the door and sending a sheet of flame down the corridor. As they reeled, the ship’s interior lighting blinked out, to be replaced by red emergency lighting. Groaning, Manji pushed himself upright then helped Nestor up, wincing silently.

 “Everybody alive?” he growled as the crew members got to their feet gingerly. “Double time to the hangar, alright?”

They needed no encouragement, setting off at a brisk run along the debris-strewn corridor with even more alarms blaring through the ship. Manji led the way, his one eye constantly alert for the prospect of danger, his feet retracing his steps back to the hangar effortlessly.

As they reached the final corner, Manji stopped dead, smacking a hand against Aramis’ chest to stop him from continuing. “Collective,” he hissed, leaning forwards to look around the bulkhead at the open door to the hangar beyond. “Two agents and a soldier. You wait here, I’ll deal with them...”

Letting the Force seep through his veins, Manji twirled his sabers and launched himself around the corner at full speed, charging towards the startled agents and the Technocrat soldier who led them. Suddenly, he felt his feet drift off the floor as his body became weightless - the ship’s artificial gravity generator had failed. For a brief moment, Manji and the Collective squad simply stared at each other in confusion, trying to adjust as they began to float upwards. Then the Keibatsu snarled angrily, lashing out with a wave of telekinetic force that crashed against the corridor wall behind him and propelled him through the air towards his targets.

The agents opened fire as Manji soared towards them, only for his silver blades to whirl in an impenetrable wall and send blaster bolts smacking harmlessly into the walls. Between them, the soldier pulled a riot baton off his back and sparked it to life, electricity crackling between the two prongs. With a grunt of effort, corded muscles thrust the baton forwards toward the oncoming form of the Augur. Manji whipped his primary saber across to meet it, the resulting impact shock hurling both of them backwards and into the sides of the corridor.

Manji was the first to recover, flipping round and bracing his feet against the bulkhead. Crouching slightly, he pushed himself off the wall with a snarl, sabers thrumming through the air again. One of the agents, fumbling to turn and fire at the Keibatsu, barely had time to register shock before the Dragon’s blade slashed his throat and the blaster drifted out of his lifeless fingers. The technocrat had braced himself against the other side of the corridor and kicked out to meet Manji when the body of the agent crashed into him. With a heave, he tossed the body to one side, throwing it into the other agent who was knocked backwards by the impact, flailing to keep himself upright.

As Manji hit the other side of the corridor and turned himself round to aim another zero-g lunge at the soldier, the constant alarms shifted to a different tone and he felt a strange, heavy sensation throughout his body – seconds later the ship’s artificial gravity slammed on again and both Manji and the soldier crashed to the floor of the corridor. Scrabbling to his feet, the Dragon launched himself at the rising Technocrat, his fury unleashed now that he was back on solid ground – the riot baton rose to meet his strikes with a thrum of electrical discharge, the soldier slowly giving ground as Manji battered at his defences.

As he reached the other agent, who had pushed the body of his comrade aside and risen to his feet, the soldier leapt backwards and pushed the agent into the path of Manji’s onslaught. Two sabers came down in a sweeping X-shape and carved straight through the shocked agent before Manji lashed out with the Force, a telekinetic blast that sent dismembered body parts hurtling down the corridor towards the soldier. The soldier flinched away involuntarily, his gaze snapping back up just as Manji’s fist ploughed into his featureless face and hurled him down the corridor and out through the open door into the hangar bay.

Aramis and his crew members broke round the corner and ran down the corridor as Manji advanced on the rising soldier, gesturing with his saber at a nearby vessel; a sleek, black-clad assault fighter. “Get her fired up, Admiral,” he called over his shoulder as the soldier stood, whipping the baton up into a fighting stance. “I’ll be with you shortly-”

His words were cut off as the soldier surged forwards, spinning the baton around his head before aiming a thrust at Manji’s mid-section. Dancing backwards, the Keibatsu smacked the attack away with his *shoto* blade, primary saber rising above his head as the soldier staggered slightly from the impact. As Manji brought his blade down in a sweeping silver arc, the artificial gravity once again shorted out – but nothing could stop the momentum of the Keibatsu’s strike. A whorl of silver hacked through the soldier’s armour and sliced through his neck, his head drifting helplessly upwards with an expression of mild, confused shock.

Letting out a breath of effort, Manji turned as though swimming, deft hands deactivating his sabers and thrusting them through his belt before he started to propel himself over towards the landing ramp of the fighter which the last of the crew members had just made their way up. The ship’s engines powered up as he reached the ramp and she began to rise, another explosion blossoming through the wall of the hangar bay as Manji smashed his fist against the ramp control to close it behind him. The fighter swayed to the side from the force of the explosion, but she was in good hands – falling debris and chunks of metal pinged off her hull as Aramis deftly pulled her out through the energy shield of the hangar bay and opened up the throttle.

Behind them, as *Amaterasu’s Glory* pulled away from the *Harbinger*, the destroyer continued to list, fire rising from innumerable points across the hull. More shuttles carrying Collective troops could be seen rising from Nancora towards the crippled ship, all resistance now wiped out.

Manji’s hand clapped down on Aramis’ shoulder as the Admiral sent the fighter searing through clouds of space debris from the battle and back towards the safety of the Sadowan flagship. “Good job, Nestor,” he said quietly. “I was worried you might have forgotten how to fly one of these little things.”

Aramis smiled coldly. “Some things you never forget, sir,” he replied. “Same way I’ll never forget what those bastards did to my ship.”

Manji leaned back against the wall of the cockpit, his arms folded. “Good. Hold onto that rage, Admiral...” He glanced out of the view screen as the *Damnation* came into view, nestled just behind a large rocky planetoid, a smile lightly touching the corners of his mouth.

“...you’ll need it.”

-End