

For Competition: Thirteen Stories: Before the Outbreak

By: Acolyte Jinius Griffin (Gray Jedi) / House Shar Dakhan of Clan Naga Sadow [SA: VIII]

[GMRG: I] [SYN: I] [ACC: Q] [INQ: III]

ID: 10545

Black Orchid

Chapter 1 - Code Violet

Jinius tumbled out of bed, his head pounding from the tormenting cry of his room's klaxon. Violet light illuminated the room in waves from the overhead door alarm - the source of the accursed klaxon. After every couple of klaxon calls an androgynous, monotone voice called out "Code Violet" over the comms before fading into the next screech of a klaxon. Code Violet was a code that Jinius wasn't particularly familiar with -- it had something to do with a distress call related to a research incident. Beyond that he didn't have much of an idea.

Half disoriented and half asleep Jinius shuffled the few short steps dragging his feet across the cool metal floor as he made his way to his holonet terminal. The blue screen flickered to life casting a washed out blue light bright enough to drown out the alert light that followed the klaxon. As he expected, a flashing yellow message icon rested in the lower corner of the terminal screen. Jinius quickly opened the attached message; The damn light wouldn't go off until he responded.

The screen fuzzed to show a lanky man in a disheveled Imperial Admiral's uniform. Admirals normally were the pride of the fleet and always had their attire in order. For an Admiral to look like he had skipped wash day, even once -- this guy looked like he'd missed a couple, something had to be going on. The man stared at the screen. His features were frail and worn, his eyes were sunken and shadowed with dark bags that seemed to stretch down into his cheeks. He looked like he hadn't had a decent night's sleep in days and hadn't had a meal in even longer. His pale eyes seemed to come out of the screen as he spoke.

"This is Admiral Havus of the Imperial Science Division. Under order of Emperor Palpatine we began secretly testing the effects of the Murakami Orchid on different sentient beings and last week we realized our mistake," the man sounded calm. However, Jinius could sense a slight quiver - the tremor of terror and fear that lingered under every word. The screen fuzzed some before going to static filling the room with a loud buzz. At least the unholy klaxon had stopped.

Jinius sat for a moment pensively stroking his beard hoping the image would resolve again with more information. He checked the message header on the transmission for an origin tag. Usually distress calls had origin tags in the message header; they made it easier to track down where the signal had come from. Once you knew from where a signal came help could be sent. It was simple logic. Fortunately for him, the message did have its origin tag. It was rare for distress calls to not have their origin tag, however, it does happen from time to time. Unfortunately for Jinius, this message required approval to get the actual origin information.

The screen flickered back into resolution again with a series of electronic pops and hisses showing the weary Admiral. "They are smarter than they seem. And they can speak as..." The screen flashed and flickered as three figures pounce on the Admiral taking him out of view. The

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Admiral's distant and tormented screams poured out of the terminal until the screen flicked to black displaying the white "End of Transmission" text.

Jinius sat for a moment. The sounds of the screaming seemed to echo in his mind as if they had never stopped. Whatever attacked those men was something dark; Jinius could sense that much. Something was horribly wrong.

Murakami Orchid. Those words lingered in Jinius' mind almost as loudly as the man's screams had. Jinius had never heard of that flower before. It wasn't surprising, he didn't spend much time studying flowers and plants. His focus had been on the Force and the combat aspects that his master kept trying to shove down his throat. It was entirely possible the orchid was some research project on a distant world that just never got published. Or it had been intentionally kept secret.

Jinius began searching through the Shadow Academy archives he had available to him, which was, admittedly, not much. He was still new to the Brotherhood, merely an Acolyte, which made him very low on the totem pole. He had begun doing some analysis for the Brotherhood looking lately and his clearance had been upped. Perhaps he would get lucky.

A list of records popped onto the screen. Most of the records were related to any number of exotic and rare plants and flowers found on distant worlds. Most of them unrelated. However, something on the middle of the screen stood out to him: "Memorandum - Murakami Orchid". Sometimes you find exactly what you were looking for when digging through the Shadow Academy archives. Sometimes.

Memorandum - Murakami Orchid
To: Entire Brotherhood
From: Grand Master Muz Ashen
Priority: HIGH
Sensitivity: LOW

We have recently received some reports on a rare and exotic, and potentially dangerous, plant that has been discovered on ==REDACTED==. At this point information is slim. A detailed description of the plant is included as part of this message. Should you encounter this plant report to your immediate superiors and obtain instructions on how to proceed.

Description of Murakami Orchid:
Common Name: Murakami Orchid (Black Orchid)
Proper Name: Oeceoclades Murakami

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Flower is between 13cm and 18cm from top to bottom with a width of 8cm to 12cm. The petals of the flower are a deep indigo to a dark, almost black, violet with electric blue veins that glow slightly in the petals. Flower will be suspended on a stem of 25cm to 34cm and has leaves that are tear-shaped and typically are 42.25cm by 15.4cm, plus or minus 10cm for length. The leaves are green with nearly cyan patches in the middle that resemble lightning.

Jinius sighed. It was time to go talk to his Aedile.

A few minutes later Jinius found himself sitting a small chair in Battlemaster Takagari "DarkHawk" KogaRyu's office, the Aedile for House Shar Dakhan. The man was big, taller than most Jinius had encountered, when it came to humans, and was built like a small capital ship. Jinius was convinced the beast of a man could toss him across the combat hall with ease, and without having to use the Force.

The Battlemaster paced the room staring at a datapad that contained the Admiral's message. "He sent this to you?" the Aedile asked gruffly not looking up from the datapad as he paced around.

"Yes, Sir." When speaking with the Aedile it was best to keep your answers short and sweet.

"Why you?" the Aedile asked almost incredulously still without looking up from the datapad.

"I'm not sure, Sir." It was also best make sure and end every sentence with "Sir" when speaking with the Aedile. "My room hasn't always been my room. It could be one of the previous occupants knew the Admiral?"

They stood silent for a long while before the grizzled Battlemaster tossed the datapad onto his desk and looked at Jinius intently. The man struck a very formal and commanding pose. His tone matched. It made Jinius stiffen.

"Investigate. Figure out what you can. Report back," the Aedile ordered.

"Aye, S.." Jinius started and then paused for a second. "Sir, the origin tag on the message was encrypted. I don't know where I am going. It requires you to unlock it for me, Sir."

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“I know, Acolyte. Where you are going isn’t important to you; you don’t have the clearance. I have sent the coordinates to a shuttle that will take you to the research facility. Go to the base, find the plant, and report back. Assume the staff is lost. Any other questions, Acolyte?”

“So, we think the orchid has something to do with what happened?” Jinius asked. His interest and curiosity had drowned out his fear of the old Battlemaster.

“Not your concern. Investigate what did happen, then report back.” The Battlemaster pointed at the door ushering Jinius out of the room. Apparently asking if he had questions was more of rhetorical question.

Jinius turned and quickly left the Aedile’s quarters. He knew the Aedile was well meaning. Nonetheless the man was a brute and intimidating as hell.

Chapter 2 - The Forest Within

Being locked in the cargo bay of a shuttle for nine hours was exactly as entertaining as it sounds. The shuttle had a sealed cockpit, probably with droid pilots; blacked out port windows; and all the computer terminals in the cargo bay had been disabled. In short, Jinius had no idea where they were taking them or any information about the route except that it was roughly a nine-hour hyperspace ride. He sat quietly on the bench that ran the length of the dimly lit cargo bay staring at his datapad contemplating what was coming next.

Battlemaster KogaRyu had upped Jinius’ clearance for the mission so he was able to pull in a little more on the mysterious Murakami Orchid. He thumbed through various reports detailing the few occasions the orchid had been found and any meaningful study had been done. Unfortunately, all were very short and sparsely detailed, and few made much sense. Some suggested that the flower was somehow sentient and capable of communication. Others suggested it somehow spread disease and plague. Yet others suggested it was a normal, everyday flower with some strange patterning when compared to other members of its genus.

Jinius did have one fact to go on: Botany wasn’t his strong area. Diseases were. If the message had come directly to him and if his Aedile thought him fit for the mission, there must be something to the whole situation that his skill set would match. It still didn’t make much sense. It’s not like Jinius was some galaxy-known scientist. He was proficient, sure. But, he was nowhere near the academic level he needed to be to receive these kinds of missions.

“Almost there,” the intercom buzzed with the warped sound of a droid’s vocal processor.

A smirk made its way onto Jinius’ normally expressionless face. He’d guessed the droid part. Droids could be trusted - mostly. You programmed what you expected out of them and off they

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went to do it. Slicers could get around that some, but in general, droids did exactly what they were told. Sapient beings weren't so good at that.

Jinius stood up and slipped on an enviromask he'd gotten from the ship's supplies. Enviromasks were always uncomfortable and he squirmed as he put it on adjusting to the way it held his chin. Some of the reports he'd read regarding the orchid suggested that it was spore producing and the spores would sometimes linger in the air. There was some speculation that the spores may be pathogenic and able to spread diseases of some kind. No sense in risking it. If there was a remote chance that this bizarre orchid could produce spores that could transmit disease, he was going to wear a mask.

The shuttle sat down on the landing pad just outside the facility's main entrance. As the door to the shuttle dropped open a cascade warm, moist air of tropics rushed in. The computer terminal even fogged up from the sudden change in humidity. Jinius wished he wasn't wearing the mask, tropics were always an experience for the senses. The mask blocked all particulate: even the good ones. Jinius couldn't smell the fresh smell of life, the smell of dew on leaves, or the fresh smell of a rushing river. He couldn't smell a thing. He checked the filter for the mask, it was clipped onto Jinius' belt. The LED on the little black box showed green. The air was perfectly breathable, and nothing had been detected in it to give him any worry. Jinius still wasn't going to take any risks.

The facility sat overhanging a large cliff that dropped several hundred meters into a rock infested raging river. Durasteel beams and thick duracrete pillars held the facility into the cliff face. The structures were mostly blocky, squared buildings that were built in a spiraling pattern around an old stepped pyramid that stretched seven levels up a hundred or so meter. Jinius did have to give it to the ancient Jedi and Sith, they sure did like building elaborate buildings. All around them towering trees formed a dense canopy that hid most of the sunlight casting dense, mottled patches of shadow on the ground broken up by organic patterns of light that broke through the trees.

The landing pad hung over the edge of the cliff. Its perimeter was outlined with flashing white strobes to make the margins of the landing pad clearer; they didn't want anyone parking too close and someone tumbling off into the water below. The cliff had to be at least 50 or meters high. The lights still flashed and flickered, Jinius noted. Working lights meant power which meant he wasn't too late to investigate. He walked towards a large doorway that lined up perfectly with the walkway coming off the landing pad. As he approached the large durasteel doors sucked into the walls, opening to let a rush of cooler air from the building. The air immediately turned to steam as the moist, warm air of the jungle collided with the cooler, drier air of the compound. Jinius felt like he was in some sort of holo. He could imagine the screenplay that would accompany the site of the mysterious building's doors opening to let out a plume of dense smoke.

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It was mostly dark inside the compound with a few sparse emergency lights casting dim light in the long corridors. Some of the lights flicked off and on tossing up intermittent shadows along the tall durasteel walls. The air in the facility felt heavy, more so than it did outside in the oppressive jungle humidity despite the facility having much drier air due to the environmental systems. As he continued deeper into the facility the air got thicker and eventually a purple haze hovered filling the space of the corridor obscuring Jinius' vision some. Interestingly as Jinius walked the haze seemed to linger and move in rhythm with his movements.

A quiet ding from the datapad. A warning. Jinius looked down in time to see the yellowed border of a warning message before the screen fuzzed and went black. He gave the datapad a short shake before trying the power. Nothing; it was dead. To be sure, Jinius gave the datapad a few firm slaps to no effect. He scratched his chin looking at the datapad. It couldn't have lost power; he'd intentionally made sure the power cells were fully charged before leaving. Furthermore, Datapads just didn't run out of power. Datapads were intended to withstand harsh environments for lengthy periods of time; hell, many of them had survived centuries buried in the dirt in deep, dark caves and caverns. He slid the datapad in his pocket. No sense in worrying about it now.

The deeper he got into the building, the more plant life Jinius noticed on the walls and floors. Thick patches of green crept their way up the flat, sheer walls of the facility. Thick, woody vines were as ubiquitous as the conduit and pipes running the length of the halls. Dense pads of moss were beginning to dull the patter of his footsteps on the hard floors. With each step, he seemed to move deeper and deeper into what was beginning to feel more and more like the jungle outside. He half expected a monkey or vornskyr to come around the corner.

Several minutes passed as Jinius followed the organic conduit of vines. The foliage was becoming increasingly constricting, to the point where Jinius thanked creation he wasn't claustrophobic. Several sections of the corridors were so inundated with plants that Jinius had to squeeze himself through waterfalls of vines and plants to get past. He considered using his lightsaber to chop a path through the brush but decided against it. He didn't want to alarm anyone or anything that may be around the next corner. Lightsabers made very distinct sounds.

Finally, the botanically overrun corridor opened in a large, open area. The wall and ceiling lights were obscured by towering green trees with thick, ropey vines and curtains of moss that hung from the branches. As Jinius crossed the threshold into the room his mind exploded with a cacophony of sensation. Pikes of pain shot through his mind like spikes digging into his brain. He dropped to his knees grasping his head as if to hold it together while his groans and yells shook the room sending down a wave of leaves worked loose from their trees by the noise.

Chapter 3 - We Are

The sensation raged in Jinius' mind. He grasped at his skull trying to push through the pain. His mind was consumed; he couldn't focus for a moment to try and stabilize himself. He sat, knees

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pressed into the soft dirt while image after image flew by in his mind. There were so many images; he couldn't focus on any one of them to figure out what he was seeing. Jinius sensed the usually calming presence of the Force. Normally it was a distant light that he only needed to reach out to experience, to feel. Now, that light was a hot spotlight cast upon him relentlessly. He felt like the focus of the ages, the attention of every living cell in the room was upon him. He'd never felt the Force so focused in on him before.

The images disintegrated, vanishing from his mind. The unrelenting pressure on his mind faded. Everything went silent, in his mind and in the room. A few leaves drifted down from above crashing in the quiet crash as they found their fallen comrades. The sensation and the pain had all vanished as quickly as it had come. Jinius sat, bent over hands resting on the soft earth sucking in deep breaths trying to calm his body. He finally looked up at the room and took it in fully.

The room opened into a small glade. Lush green grass covered most of the floor while overhead trees, their canopies stretching into the darkness of the ceiling, cast long shadows from the wall lights. Jinius almost expected to hear the dulcet sounds of a babbling brook winding its way through the room. It would have fit the little paradise he found hidden within the complex. Plants of every conceivable color lined the floor in dense patches of vibrance while lush patches of soft moss wound their way between their companion plants covering the room in a blanket of life.

The haze Jinius had encountered earlier lingered in this room; a swirling mass of slight purple spun around the room. It grew more vigorous as it got closer to the center of the room, a near maelstrom of violet mist. It had grown denser than it was in the hallways and moved absent of wind or breeze to drive it.

Jinius looked up towards the ceiling, towards the blackness that stretched up for a hundred meters at least. Little light from the wall lights made it up that far. The light fixtures on the wall weren't permanent. They were the kind of lights that were put up at an archeological dig. Sure enough, as Jinius looked around the room he saw the ancient sconces that once held torches. He had made it to the center, to the pyramid.

The center of the room was not green and lush as the rest of the room. Instead it was a sheet of black flowers with blue lightning bolts grown into their dark petals. Leafy greens poked up from around them, but the density of the black drowned out any other color. As Jinius stared at the flowers, he sensed an overwhelmingly deep connection with the Force. More so than his short experience had given him. Dozens of faces and emotions drifted through his mind, the imprints of countless souls on a cosmic Force. It was beautiful. It was powerful. It was alive.

"Hello Jinius Lu'Kar Griffin," a crisp, sugary voice asked within Jinius' mind. It was almost a whisper in his ear.

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Jinius instinctively wheeled around as if to catch the person standing. He expected to find a cute, little school girl up on her toes to reach his towering ear for her quiet message. The room was motionless. Even the leaves had stopped falling.

“Silly, human. We’re down here,” another voice said. It was warm and rich and spoke with a smoothness, a smoky laziness.

Jinius spun around again looking for the voice. His fingers touched the hilt of his blade. He didn’t like this. He didn’t like being toyed with.

“Warmer, Darling,” the smoky voice encouraged drawing out the words into almost a moan.

Something about those voices. They seemed close. Jinius knew he wasn’t hearing them in the strictest sense and that something was reaching out to him through the Force. Nonetheless, his instinct was to seek out the source as if he were compelled.

“Look down, Silly,” the sweeter voice instructed.

Jinius looked down. He stared straight at the pad of black flowers. They all seemed to be facing him. They seemed alert.

The toes of his boots were brushing against a gorgeous orchid of deep violet with dazzling blue striations running along the inside of the petals forming veins of electric blue that branched throughout the flower. The blue glowed, pulsing in a rhythm that seemed to match Jinius’ heartbeat.

Jinius scanned the bed of dark flowers. The section of the floor they grew on had grown into a short of clearing showing the rich dirt beneath absent of other plants. Jinius did note several glowing crystals among the flowers. They were barely noticeable from the mat of roots that seemed to cover them. Jinius could see the brilliant hues breaking out from behind their curtain. Kyber crystals. As he watched the roots shifted and moved as if to better cover the crystals from his gaze.

“You found us!” the sweeter voice declared. Had it been a girl in front of him, Jinius imagined she would have jumped.

“Found you?” Jinius asked quietly speaking aloud. He crouched towards the flowers.

“Yes, Darling. You found us,” the smoky voice confirmed.

“I don’t understand. I don’t even know what you are.” Jinius reached a hand down to touch the petals of one of the orchids. The petals were smooth and soft. As his fingers grasped the plant’s

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petals, Jinius felt a zap and his mind went swimming through countless memories of a thousand generations, all flying by in a blur. He released the flower an instant later and felt at his finger. A dark powder clung to his fingers.

“What are you?” Jinius asked instinctively pulling out his datapad. It was still dead. Damn, he swore in his mind. He quickly fumbled through his bag and pulled out an ancient-looking sketch pad and pencil. He quickly began taking notes on the flowers including sketches of their shape and structure.

“We are the flower’s Darling.” The smoky voice almost seemed annoyed at the question.

“Clearly,” Jinius replied. “But explain your nature. I can’t say I’ve met an intelligent plant before.”

“We are... us,” the sweeter voice said matter-of-factly. *“We have been for a long time. Longer than any human has walked the stars.”*

The flowers explained their history to Jinius. How they had been on this planet for millennia. As they spoke Jinius saw visions of the histories of which the flowers spoke. He saw ancient colonies surrounding a handful of black flowers growing on the side of a cliff. His vision flashed, and those same people built a temple to house their mystical plants. His vision flashed a final time and those same people were shown standing around the flowers bowing and chanting.

“We feed off life. The power of the universe. We feed of the power of death and the energy that flows through and binds together all living things on this world,” one of the voices informed in its sweet, melodic tone.

“The Force?” Jinius asked. He wasn’t fully aware he had spoken the words himself for several seconds. He looked down at the flowers entranced. “You feed on the Force?”

“Yes. You call it the Force.”

Without thinking, Jinius reached down and brushed his fingers along the petal of one of the flowers. His mind was hungry for more information. He wanted to understand this unique plant. If they truly had been around for countless generations, he could hardly imagine the knowledge they might hold. As his fingers touched the petal ever so slightly, he felt a sharp pain in his leg. Jinius winced and looked down to see a small brown root pull itself from his leg. Its tip was stained crimson.

“You’ve seen enough, Darling,” the smooth, smoky voice said with a curtness to its tone. The other voice made a quiet moan in the background. The smoky voice quickly smoothed and spoke softly again, *“Tell us of you, Mister... no Acolyte Jinius Lu’Kar Griffin.”*

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“What would you like to know?” Jinius asked dazed. His ears seemed to fill with a chorus of beautiful tones. He didn’t realize it, but he was swaying back and forth to the invisible tone.

“*Everything!*” one of the voices asked. The voice suddenly lost its coolness and its beauty and became filled with bile and poison. Jinius shot back from the flower, alarmed.

Jinius’ senses bristled. Something wasn’t right about this place. Something was very, very wrong. The flowers were controlling him somehow. Loosening his mind and detaching him from reality. He started to rise, to get away from the plants. A tug held him in place as he rose. Wispy veins of green swirled around the hilt of his lightsaber. Jinius reached down to pull his saber free of the vines.

His vision flashed. Three Dark Jedi made their way into the room. They were surrounded by researchers who were vigorously taking notes. The Jedi knelt and started talking to the plants. It wasn’t a bed of plants in the vision; only two plants grew where there were now hundreds. Jinius couldn’t hear what the Jedi were saying to the plants. Suddenly, they all grabbed their lightsabers from their hilts and twisted the cylinders open to reveal the glowing crystal inside. Each Jedi in turn laid his crystal among the black flowers. In that instant the flowers exploded with growth as dozens poked their heads from the ground and began to cover the floor.

“Hey!” Jinius shouted and quickly forced himself up breaking more little vines that went for his saber. A chorus of screams and groans filled his mind as he stumbled back grasping at his head again.

“*No! We want it. We want the power!*” the voices demanded in his mind as one, angry voice.

Jinius stumbled back away from the flowers as vines surged across the floor grasping at his feet. He tried to take a step but fell face first into an orchid that had grown up behind him. He saw the Dark Jedi again. This time they hand turned to face the scientists. Their eyes sunken and black as tendrils of black spread out on their skin like spiders weaving webs. The Dark Jedi charged the scientists.

Chapter 4 - The Descent

Jinius dodged finger-thick vines that shot up from the ground pushing aside dirt and flinging back floor tiles and grates in their pursuit of him. Despite the pain and the agony that cried out in his mind, Jinius focused and ran. The plants had his mind somehow; they had infected him, and he needed to get away. He raced down the corridor sliding past several rooms where yet more vines were surging as great flowing masses of browns and greens.

Jinius slid around a corner ducking low into a roll as a large horizontal trunk of green exploded from the ceiling and pushed down into the floor throwing bits of metal and stone in a wave.

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Jinius ducked past the branches rolling through a mat of vines that all grabbed at him as he went by. He shot back up pulling the vines taught and breaking them. His mind filled more shrill cries.

Several of the paths he had taken were now messes of dense thickets of plants that had grown into sheer walls of life stopping any egress. Jinius ignited his blade and with a careful slash a large portion of the wall of green was gone and now lay as a lifeless pile on the ground. His mind didn't erupt into screens this time. He must be far enough away that he wasn't as affected by the plants.

Turning a corner Jinius' footsteps pounded on the heavy durasteel floor. He could still hear the creaking of moving foliage behind him as the plants grew the jungle around him. However, they were slowing down. The further Jinius got away from the center of the pyramid, the more the plants seemed normal and the more they slowed in their pursuit.

Jinius exploded from the exterior doors in a full sprint. He cleared the distance to the shuttle in a matter of seconds. He could still hear the roar of the base churning and moving on itself as the plants swarmed outward.

As Jinius grew close, the doorway to his shuttle dropped down. Two men lumbered down the shuttle ramp both holding razor sharp vibroblades at their sides. The sunlight gleamed off the curved ends of the blades. The men's skin was covered in black veins that seemed to shift and move. Both men's eyes glowed with a brilliant violet color. They leapt soaring high in the air with Force augmented leaps to come crashing down on either side of Jinius.

Jinius went for his saber. He felt a boot slam into his chest sending him back a couple of meters. Jinius quickly brought himself up again standing ready shifting his weight to his back foot as he ignited his blade. A loud crack sounded to Jinius' left.

The thud of the blaster bolt hit Jinius in the stomach a split second before he heard the crack. He felt his feet come off the ground. His vision obscured as his hair went wild in the tumble. Wind and mist rushed by as he soared over the edge of the landing pad. He reached out towards branches, but his fingers quite didn't work right and they all slipped through his hands. He fell countless stories. His vision went black before he felt the splash of the cool river below.