

The Lambda-class shuttle hissed exhaust as its landing gear settled into the sandy beach. Reflected against the cockpit, the island burned. Shadow and Mauro rushed down the boarding ramp before it had fully extended. The heat from the lashing flames assaulted their senses and they both raised their arms trying to fend off the heat. Troop transports continued to land across the beach and they set off towards the triage tent that had been established. The sight of medical cots and equipment lit by the flickering light of the fires against the otherwise still night conflicted with the invitation so many of Clan Scholae Palatinae had received promising relaxation and adventure.

Shadow and Mauro's hearts grieved at so many of their clan members haphazardly laid out on the cots. It seemed more had blankets covering their faces than not.

"There he is," Shadow exclaimed, tugging Mauro after her. Ellac sat upright on a cot, breathing deep from an oxygen mask. Bacta patches covered most of his body. As they drew closer they saw they were covering nasty angry red burns, oozing with pus. Despite the scorching heat, Ellac clutched tightly to a rough spun blanket.

"Ellac, we got your message. What happened?" Mauro asked, kneeling down in front of him. Ellac's lone eye stared blankly ahead, not registering the question. Mauro could barely reconcile the person in front of him as the same youthful Knight heading off for some R&R. As Mauro waited for an answer a tree snapped and crashed to the ground in the distance. Sparks flew into the night sky and the ground rumbled. Ellac dropped the oxygen mask and dove to the ground, cowering under the blanket.

Mauro forcefully grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him upright. "Ellac, what happened here? Where is everyone?" Ellac was numbed to reality. Despite the pressure on his throbbing burns Ellac didn't react.

Shadow stepped closer and looking Ellac in the eyes asked, "Ellac, where is Kamjin?"

Ellac shuddered and pointed towards the blazing inferno raging across the island. Shadow and Mauro exchanged a worried glance and looked into the hellscape.

"How could this have started?" Mauro muttered.

At long last, Ellac responded, "The way all things start. With an invitation from Kamjin."

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"Guys, come gather round," Kamjin hopped easily over the back of the couch. Despite being middle-aged, there were times when he would act so carefree. While other times, he acted like the elder member of the clan that he was. "I found these littered across the mess hall. It promises an all expense paid trip to Seraph. Apparently there's some private island that the owner has generously donated to the Clan to make use of."

Ellac reached over and grabbed the brochure from Kamjin. He carefully turned it over in his hand before skimming the details and passing it over to Kah'ri who was sitting in a nearby chair, his feet casually propped up on the low table.

"Kam, this has to be a scam," Kah'ri exclaimed after taking a look. "In fact, I'm fairly certain I ran a scam like this once."

"It's legit. I had a couple of my old Intel buddies check it out and they couldn't find anything wrong with the place." Kamjin snatched back the brochure and boastfully read on, "To the glorious members of Clan Scholae Palatinae. In recognition of your recent conquest of the

The Republic of the Force, I invite you to a blissfully peaceful retreat on my private island.” He then pointed his finger at the pictures to emphasize the next piece, “Here you will enjoy all you can eat and drink while every pleasure can be tended to.”

“You’re being paranoid.” Katyusha’s light hearted voice sang out from across the room. She strolled over with Cello in tow. Lightly lifting the brochure from Kamjin’s hand she examined it. “Look, it’s got private cabins throughout the beach and nature walks.”

“Besides, if Kamjin’s contacts say it’s safe I’m willing to try it.” Cello chimed in peering over Katyusha’s shoulder.

Kamjin smacked Ellac on the shoulder. “See, I told you. It’ll be fun.”

Ellac gave Kamjin an all too knowing look. “Ya, like the last time was fun.”

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“Hurry up with the bags!” Kamjin yelled back to Duk as he strolled onto the sand. The Elder stretched his arms as he took in the scenic beach view. He had traded in his usual uniform for swim shorts and a loose fitting white button-down. His short hair fluttered in the breeze. Equally, Ellac, Kah’ri, Cello, and Katyusha were rushing down the boarding ramp in their casual beach attire. Unsurprisingly to Kamjin the young Knights were horsing around and trying to impress poor Katyusha. For her part, she seemed non-interested with her floppy large beach hat covering her colorful hair.

Duk struggled down the ramp with several bags tucked under his arms. “Master, this should be all of it. Where should I take it?”

Kamjin squinted, looking off into the distance. “You can leave it right there. The servant droids will be here shortly.”

“Okay,” Duk let out a sigh of relief as he let the heavy bags drop to the ground. “So, I’ll go grab my suit and be right back.”

Kamjin turned around, glaring at Duk, “No you won’t.” Duk’s mouth fell open before quickly recovering.

“Master, I don’t think I understand.” Duk began before Kamjin shuffled through the sand back to the ramp.

“You still have studies to complete. So you’ll be taking the shuttle back to the Academy until we’re finished here.” Kamjin’s face left no room for debate. As Duk shuffled back up the ramp his lekku swayed regretfully at the lost opportunity.

Kamjin turned and smiled, seeing the group of Knights frolicking in the tide. They’d been through a challenging fight against a fanatical enemy. It was important for them to remember what they were fighting for. Ellac took a moment and pulled a giant wave up dosing Kah’ri with water. The shoulder length hair on the other Knight was matted to his face. As he brushed it out of his eyes, Cello and Katyusha guffawed at the sight.

“Sir, welcome to our private resort. We hope your travel was pleasant,” a floating servant droid greeted Kamjin.

“It was most enjoyable.” Kamjin braced himself as the transport took off behind him. Sensing Duk’s murderous glance he felt pride that his apprentice was picking up the finer points of the Dark Side. Throwing fuel on the fire, he turned and waved up at the departing ship. “Our bags are over here. Can you tell us where we’ll be staying?”

“Of course, we have a private cabin for you, sir. It’s right next to two, two-bedroom cabins, here on this side of the beach.” The droid turned and pointed towards a small row of cabins a short distance away amongst several rows of cabins that stretched back inland.

“Those will do nicely. Do you know when our host will be meeting us?”

“He plans to join you for dinner this evening. Assuming he’s not delayed as usual.” As the other droids lifted their bags and, checking the tags, began to hover to the appropriate cabins, Kamjin had an odd sense come over him. Shaking it off to the tension of the recent family revelations and his desperate attempts to avoid confronting those hard truths, he went off to find a place to sprawl out and get some sun before the evening.

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Ellac paused and took a deep breath from the oxygen mask. His breathing labored from speaking. “What happened next?” Mauro pressed. “None of this explains what happened.” Towards the middle of the island an explosion could be heard, dully echoing through the fire. Several fire control ships had been dispatched from orbit and slowly the tree line near the beach was being extinguished. Once lush, leafy trees were now laid bare, blackened husks of their former radiance.

“Mauro,” Shadow placed a calming hand on his shoulder. “He needs to rest. Come on.” Shadow turned and walked through the medic camp. While Kamjin’s group wasn’t the only one to accept the offer to attend, he was the highest ranked individual to have attended.

Kamjin will be alright, he’ll make sure the rest of the Knights are okay too, Shadow thought as she stared into the tree line wondering where they were. At first she thought it was a trick of the light. Slowly, two figures began to emerge from the smoking jungle.

“Medic!” Shadow screamed as she rushed towards them. Two medics and a med droid followed close behind. Katyusha, covered in smoke and cuts, had Cello’s arm over her shoulder. He slowly shuffled along as she supported his weight. At the sight of Shadow they both collapsed to the sandy shoreline. “Katyusha, what happened? Where is Kah’ri and Kamjin?”

Katyusha coughed up smoke as the medics quickly fitted an oxygen mask to her and Cello. “I don’t know, we got separated when the fire started.”

“Shadow, we’ve got to help them. It was a massacre.” Cello weakly added.

Mauro had caught up to Shadow and was talking into his comlink for additional medics and a squad to be redirected upon the path Katyusha and Cello had emerged in hopes of finding more survivors.

“Massacre? Who started the massacre?” Shadow asked with growing concern of this deepening mystery.

Katyusha rolled onto her back, coughing with every few words, “It all started with dinner.”

Kamjin stood on the deck of his cabin, watching the sun hang low on the horizon. He buttoned his shirt as a gentle, cooling breeze came off the ocean. He sighed as memories of his family came unbidden to his mind. How long ago was it that he had taken his family to a similar beach? Ten years? Fifteen? Had Hikaru been born yet? So much had happened since then that it all seemed a blur.

Where are those kids, he reflected as he checked the chronometer on his wrist. While he was in no rush to leave the view, they did have a small hike inland to reach the fire pit for dinner.

He turned and walked through the open doorway, feeling the breeze follow him in. The cabin had such a welcoming smell. The seaspray and humid air brought out the floral scent of the wood that had been used. It was relaxing and his muscles felt the years of tension melt away. Lifting the lid of his luggage he rummaged around for his comlink. His hand briefly grasped the hilt of his lightsaber before continuing to reach out. Before he could find it he heard the casual conversation of the four Knights start to filter in on the warm wind.

Sticking his head out of the door he hollered, "You're late!"

The four had equally not dressed up for dinner. The only change was loose fitting shirts and a floral sarong for Katyusha. The blue fabric with pink flowers matched her hair and seemed to radiate in the twilight.

Heh, she's going to have to fend them off, he thought before his mind flashed to a memory of his wife in a similar outfit. As he joined them in their trek through the jungle path he let his mind wander on that memory.

"Did you fall asleep too Katyusha?" Ellac asked as they followed the winding path.

"Ya, Cello and I both fell asleep. The cabin beds were so comfortable and relaxing. If Kah'ri hadn't come in from the beach to get us we'd probably have slept right through dinner."

"They did look comfortable! But I wanted to get some time in the water and poor Ellac wouldn't have been able to find his way back with his disability," Kah'ri jokingly responded, slapping Ellac on the side of his missing eye.

"I'm missing an eye, not my sense of direction. Don't you have a scam to be running?" Ellac was annoyed at the jab.

"Now that you mention it, I do have this pretty slick idea. The key is to find a game of chance with moving pieces..." As Kah'ri went on with this plan, Kamjin slowed his pace to follow a step or two behind the group. They were good kids and it was good to see they could still unwind and let go of their anger. He was showing his age that even in a place of paradise all he could focus on was teaching lessons and the importance of embracing your passions while not getting lost to them or ignoring them. Something about this place set Kamjin's mind at ease in a way he hadn't been for decades.

"Hey, do you smell that?" Ellac sniffed the air, moving his head like an animal catching a scent.

"Leave it to the single sighted Sith to smell something first." Cello joined Kah'ri in his gentle teasing of Ellac.

"I smell it, too. We must be getting near dinner," Katyusha cut off another round of fighting amongst the boys. Light began to filter through the foliage as the path opened onto a large clearing. Wooden tables were spaced in a circular fashion around a massive fire pit in the center. About a meter perimeter was established where large cooking grates were set up before a massive three meter high pile of burning wood. The aroma was spicy yet aromatic and pleasing to the nose.

Several other parties were already gathering around tables. The clearing was filled with jubilation as the Knights and Kamjin recognized other clan members. Ellac, Kah'ri, and Cello rushed ahead to the bar. Large, intricately carved, wooden mugs were arranged around huge

casks of fermented beverages. Kamjin smiled as they shoved each other out of the way to be the first to fill the large vessels to the brim with the brew.

Katyusha sauntered off through the crowd, turning more than one head, as she went to inspect the various meats slowly grilling over the fiery pit. Various floating droids hovered on the fire side of the grates. Their shimmering chassis reflected the crackling fire.

Ellac had won out and came rushing back over to Kamjin with two mugs overflowing with the ale. As Ellac came up short it sloshed out, spilling onto Kamjin's bare feet. "Sorry, I got you one." Ellac proffered the more full mug to Kamjin. Kamjin gave Ellac his best evil glare. Ellac stood up straight and started to back away slowly until Kamjin busted out laughing.

"It's alright," Kamjin grinned as he took the mug and, in an impressive sight, downed half of it in a single chug. He looked at the stunned expression on Ellac's face. "I used to be a pilot years ago. I still have some of those skills."

"Of course...no one said you were..." Ellac stopped short of calling him 'old' and took a swig of his own mug.

"They've got some wonderful looking meats," Katyusha reported back, "and they've got wood planks charring for some of the most wonderful looking fish!"

"Hey, where did you get that drink," Cello asked as he and Kah'ri rejoined the group.

"Oh this?" Katyusha held up a forearm-length, skinny wooden tube with a fancy umbrella and some sort of yellow-orange fruit slice. "I got it over there," she turned and gestured to a floating droid with a tray of similar drinks.

"Bo Shuda!" Kah'ri exclaimed as the boys began draining their mugs. Slamming the empties down on a nearby table, they rushed off after the droid.

"It's a good thing we're here for several days. They're going to be dragging by the morning." Kamjin chuckled as he sipped his mug and then set it down, claiming the table the boys had put their empties on.

"They've earned it. After what you've put Ellac through, he deserves a drink."

"I didn't put him through anything," Kamjin feigned being hurt by her words. "I just...didn't prevent it from happening either."

"Why is that?"

"Because," and Kamjin got suddenly serious, "It's possible one day he'll be leading this Clan. He had to be prepared. We have enemies within and without the Brotherhood. No one is going to pull their punches."

"Uh-huh," Katyusha absentmindedly sipped her drink, "you enjoyed it didn't you?"

Kamjin didn't say anything but picked up his mug and drained it. After he set it down they both laughed at poor Ellac's expense.

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A couple hours had passed and several more rounds of drinks had been shared. Yet, the tables were no fuller than when they had first arrived.

"Guys, I'm going to go back to the cabins and check on the other groups. No one should miss out on this dinner." Kamjin set down his, yet again, emptied mug. He wondered when the ground became so unstable as he found the path and started the trek back to the cabins.

As soon as Kamjin had disappeared into the foliage, the young Knights huddled together. "I can't believe he can keep up." Ellac suppressed a belch.

"I know, how many have we had?" Cello asked as Kah'ri shakingly held up his hand to raise fingers to count.

"He's an Elder. Of course he can keep up with us. He's probably mitigating the poison as he drinks or some other trick." Katyusha was slurring her speech as she nodded her head aggressively in agreement with her own statement. Her bluish hair and pink highlights curtaining her eyes.

"I swear, everytime I think I have him, he pulls off one of these impossibly impressive moves," Ellac vented. "I thought I had him with that Rancor pit, but no! He just," at this he held out his hands and wiggled his fingers, "sends out his sparks and walks away."

"You've got to be sneakier," Kah'ri offered.

"I am not going to be a con-man!" Ellac spat back.

Before the two could go at it a droid began to chime. "Honored guests, if you'll find your seats, we'll begin serving soon."

"Finally, I'm starving!" Ellac collapsed onto the bench by the table they had earlier claimed.

"Starving," Cello yawned, "I'm beat. I don't know how much longer I'm going to last tonight."

Katyusha mimicked his yawn, "Let's eat and then we can go back to crashing at the cabin.

"Looks like some of the Novitiates here already crashed." Kah'ri jabbed his thumb over his shoulder towards a table of newer clansmen passed out on a table behind them.

They all shared at a laugh at the expense of those that had passed out as the food began to be served.

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Ugh, I shouldn't have tried to keep up with them, Kamjin fought to keep the ale in his stomach. Leaning against a tree he tried to center himself to cleanse his body but was having limited success. *Heal thyself,* Kamjin's inner voice mocked him. Taking a deep breath his stomach settled but his head still swam. *Once I check on the others, I'll just call it a night.* With the promise of a comfy bed awaiting him, he straightened up and continued on to the cabins.

The lights were all out and the rows of cabins were only lit by the lone moon, full in the sky. Coming to the first row of cabins that were to be assigned to the early arrivals, Kamjin gained a sense of unease. Knocking on the door, it swung open slowly. There was no answer. Entering, he called out, "Hello? Anyone here?" The room appeared empty. Luggage could be seen resting on the floor. Kamjin was about to leave when he noticed the linens on the bed were rumpled. Walking into the room, he peered over the bed. Upon the floor was the body of one of the clan members. She was new to the Clan and he didn't know her name.

Rushing to her side, he knelt down and felt for a pulse. After several tense seconds, he stood up. "Dead...but from what?" He looked around the room and didn't see any signs of a struggle. Taking a second look, focusing for details, he saw that there was one of the tall, skinny wooden mugs that Katyusha had been drinking sitting on the nightstand.

Something clicked in Kamjin's mind and he raced to the next cabin in the row. Again, inside was the corpse of one of the earliest arrivals on the planet and, again, no signs of a struggle. The only difference was a tall mug of half-drunk ale. Soon, Kamjin had confirmed everyone in the first row of cabins was dead. The next row was the same. It wasn't until he was two rows before where his cabin was located that he found people alive, though incapacitated.

I've got to get back! He thought as he raced back to the fire pit.

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"Another round!" The four Knights sang out in chorus. Piled high on their table were smoked meats, grilled fish on wooden planks, various fruits and vegetables all charred from the fire. Their empty glasses piled three rows deep cluttered amongst the food. As they laughed and jabbed at each other their vision was streaked, like an orange hyperspace tunnel.

"Umm...guys," Katyusha hiccuped. "Maybe we should...slow down."

"No, no...one more." Ellac's head wobbled upon his shoulders.

A server droid hovered over and placed another round of drinks on the table. "Come on, I'm sure Kamjin will come back and out-drink us immediately!" Kah'ri tipped the new mug into his mouth and with his other hand tipped the one nearest him into Cello's.

"Guys...GUYS!" Katyusha was looking around, "Have you noticed how quiet it's gotten?" The others started to look around and noticed that most of the other people were now faced down on their tables.

"What's going on?" Cello slurred as he took in the sight.

"Well, I guess I'll have to tell you."

"Who was that?" Ellac spun around, lost his balance and fell off the bench.

"Don't you recognize your host?"

"Wait a minute...that's not a server droid voice." Kah'ri poked his finger on the chassis of the floating server droid that hadn't left. The center chest piece receded and split apart. Revealing a small, greenish creature, sitting inside behind a dashboard.

"Eeeww, it's some sort of worm!" Katyusha screeched and she stumbled backwards.

"No, I'm a Zilkin."

"O...kay. So, are you going to explain what's happening here?" Ellac asked.

"I'm going to kill you all."

The Knights looked at each other and then laughed. "You...you're barely bigger than my hand. How are you going to hurt us? Throw slime on us?" Kah'ri mocked the little Zilkin while holding his head to keep his vision steady.

"I'm already doing it."

"It's the wood!" Kamjin huffed as he came out of the jungle. His right sleeve had been ripped off his arm and was wrapped tightly around his mouth and nose.

"Why, yes, that's right...Hey, how are you still standing!?"

"Guys, back over to me." Kamin said, ignoring the Zilkin.

"Why? Is there a rancor over there?" Ellac spat out at Kamjin before giving a coughing laugh.

"No, because the wood here is poisonous." Kamjin deadpanned as he beckoned the Knights to move.

The Knights' eyes slowly widened as the situation dawned on them. Cello looked down at his hand and noticed a rash spreading out from where he had gripped the wooden mug. The Knights threw their drinks. As they pushed back from the table they stumbled. Their legs were no longer able to support their weight.

"So you figured it out. Yes, all the wood is poisonous on this island. Normally, if you are just near it you get a euphoric sensation, which has led people to seek out this island as a retreat from their stresses. If you stay in contact with it for a while you gain a rash as your blood vessels relax and your capillaries spill blood into your body. Now ingestion and inhalation...that's where things get interesting," the Zilkin puffed out his chest as he pontificated his master plan.

"I really don't care," Kamjin flicked his wrist and sent the servant droid hurling through the air towards the fire pit. As it crashed, sparks exploded out where it impacted with the burning logs.

"I won't be defeated. I'll kill you all!" The Zilkin screamed as it rapidly entered commands into the dashboard. "Get them!" were the last words he uttered before his droid exploded around him. Around the clearing, the droids' eyes glowed red as their hands folded back to reveal blasters.

"Oh sithspit," Ellac muttered as he fell to the ground. Clawing his way towards the jungle, he started to black out.

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"Look, sir, there's another one!" A trooper called out interrupting Katyusha. Mauro and Shadow looked up as a lone figure stumbled out of the jungle. It was Kah'ri, though it was nearly impossible to tell. His hair had been burned down to his scalp and he was covered head to toe in black soot.

Leaving Katyusha to catch her breath, they rushed over to Kah'ri. The trooper had reached him first and was supporting his weight. Kah'ri's soot-covered skin left dark streaks upon the otherwise white armor.

"Where is Kamjin!?" they both exclaimed at once.

Coughing up soot, Kah'ri meekly answered, "I don't know. I lost track of him after the fire pit exploded and the jungle caught fire."

"What happened?" Mauro asked.

"I don't know, Kamjin was screaming at us to follow him into the jungle. Then some weird creature was in a droid and Kamjin killed him." Kah'ri coughed again, "I must have passed out because when I came to the fire pit was exploding and the jungle had caught fire. Kamjin was hurling objects through the air, attacking the droids."

"How were you able to escape?" Shadow asked.

"I don't know, I blacked out and when I came to I was deep within the jungle. I saw the searchlights from the ships landing and followed them here."

"Sir, initial reports are coming back from the clearing," the trooper shared. "There are no survivors at the site. There's debris everywhere from the droids. It looks like lightning struck, judging by the glass formations in the sand around what was the fire pit. From there it looks like the explosion of the logs spread the fire to the jungle."

“So, Kamjin was able to fight back,” Mauro puzzled out based upon the report. “Then where is he?”

“Trooper, get a transport ready. We’ll search from the air,” Shadow commanded.

“Yes, Empress!”

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The sky really does look beautiful tonight, Kamjin thought as he stared up at the night’s sky. The gentle rhythmic lapping of the water from the shore raised and lowered his body like a newborn. His tattered shirt hung loosely around his neck from where he had tied it earlier. *All I wanted was a relaxing vacation. Instead, I had to fight off murder droids sent by some odd ball Zilkin.*

When the droids had activated, he had reacted quickly. Finding the two nearest droids he reached out and sent them spiraling into each other. As their metallic bodies crumpled together he pivoted to a group approaching from the tree line. His head was pounding like a rancor nesting. Despite not being at the dinner he had ingested a large amount of ale and had been around the cabins most of the afternoon. He tried to focus, straining to uproot several trees. Slowly they crashed down, missing one droid while hitting the other.

I need to end this before I succumb. Turning towards the large gathering of droids amassing from the various grilling stations, he planted his feet. Reaching deep within himself he summoned forth the cosmic energies of the Dark Side. As lightning arced forth from his hands it cascaded over the assembled droids. Lightning jumped between them as their bodies twitched violently from the overloading energy.

If his head had only been clearer he’d have recognized the dangers of having so many droids explode near the massive fire pit. The force of their explosions sent the wood in the mounded fire pit hurling in all directions into the jungle. As the fire started to spread and the smoke got worse, he rushed to carry the Knights to safety.

He grabbed Ellac first. The poor Knight had been trapped under burning debris and was the worst off. The trek through the jungle had been draining and by the time he had returned, the others were missing. They must have recovered enough to start back on their own. Kamjin tried to find their trail but in the smoke he could barely make out which direction they could have gone. His head was awash in pain. His vision was blurred and his ability to think had been diminished. Without conscious thought he settled on a direction. After a while, he found himself on the shoreline. Exhaustion had overwhelmed him at this point and he collapsed into the tide. The gentle water cooled his skin. As the tide rose and fell it slowly washed the sand out from beneath Kamjin; dragging him closer to the shore.

Morning must be coming, he thought as a bright light filled his eyes. He relaxed, knowing he had survived the night. As he drifted off to sleep he thought he heard the sound of a transport’s respolifts firing but that was a concern for when he woke up.