

Standing at a Crossroads

*Submission for the fiction competition: "On the Theme of Loyalty"
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The sun streaked in through the two story windows of the courtroom. As the light ebbed and flowed with the passing clouds Kamjin found his mind wandering. As he watched the starfield of dust floating carefree throughout the room he absentmindedly listened to the officer present his case. He leaned forward, a move intended to mask his boredom while appearing to be more interested in the proceedings. It also had the added benefit of allowing him to temple his hands in front of his face and hide his yawn. He'd had enough.

"Prosecutor, can we finish this up?" Kamjin asked?

Flustered, the Prosecutor responded. "Of course, sir. As I was saying. Commander Rastion was caught modifying one of the combat simulators to decrease the A.I.'s combat level ahead of his annual performance rating."

Kamjin held up a hand silencing him from going on. "Very well, this is really a cut and dry case. Commander Rastion, you are hereby demoted back to Sub-Lieutenant, stripped of all medals and awards, and will serve six months in the stockade." Kamjin banged his gavel upon its sounding block. The stormtroopers moved forward and grabbed Rastion dragging him from the courtroom.

"No, please, it was a mistake! I was doing maintenance and didn't know I would modify the flight data," Rastion pleaded. Kamjin didn't bother reacting. He had heard these protests before from every office to come before the High Court of Inquisitors. 'I didn't know' and 'It was an honest mistake' rolled from their mouths smoother than the waterfalls of Naboo. As the pilot continued to scream protests of his innocence, Kamjin began packing up his travel bag. One of the perks of being an Inquisitor was he could leave once he had finished his docket for the day; and this had been his last case.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and situated the strap across his chest. He smoothed out the wrinkles that had appeared in his uniform. Turning, he saluted the bailiff and exited out the rear of the courtroom. As usual, the High Court's building was abuzz with activity. As soon as he entered the hallway his assistant greeted him.

"Another fast day, Fleet Admiral?" Ume asked, matching his pace in the hallway.

"As fast as I could make it. Sometimes it would be better if they just issued summary judgements when they arrested some of these pilots," Kamjin replied.

"Well, then what would you do?" Ume inquired.

Kamjin thought about that for a while. It had weighed on his mind for some time now after so many years on the High Court. He was a pilot at his heart and being behind a desk felt like a waste of his talents. The thought of being back amongst the stars blazing a trail of destruction in his fighter brought a smile to his face. Seeing the twinkle in Ume's eyes caused him to steel his resolve. "I'd do my duty, Ume. As long as the Fleet Commander and Executive Officer have a need for their laws to be upheld the High Court must do its duty."

Ume's eyes fell as they neared the private offices for the Inquisitors. As they entered the private lobby the noise dropped. Only a single voice was speaking from the larger than life holoprojector image broadcasting across the holonet. "Kamjin, who is that?" Ume asked.

Kamjin walked around to see the face of the bluish tinged face. "It's the Grand Master, Chi-Long," he responded to Umi. *Why in the world is Chi-Long broadcasting on a public channel*, Kamjin thought to himself. He had maintained a friendship with Chi-Long for a while. Especially given Kamjin's continued interest in the success of Clan Scholae Palatinae. As they joined the crowd watching, Kamjin could finally make out Chi-Long's words.

"...there can be no peace. The efforts by Sector Admiral Astatine to meddle in the daily affairs of the Brotherhood undermine our sovereign right to rule ourselves. Since the onset of the Emperor's Hammer Strike Fleet there has been an understanding of mutual allegiance and independent rule. If these traditions cannot be maintained then we shall strike forth on our own path; leaving the corrupted leadership of the Emperor's Hammer in our wake."

Kamjin's jaw dropped. He had known for a while of the meddling Chi-Long was referring to. Yes, the Executive Officer was in charge of any of the various factions comprising the Strike Fleet. However, it was always seen as an advisory position and not one of direct management. Clearly all he had heard from his contacts had failed to paint the scope of the unrest that had arisen between Chi-Long and the Executive Officer.

"...Council is in agreement with this course of action as are the majority of the Consuls." Chi-Long had continued speaking.

"Ume, what was that last?" Kamjin asked.

"Apparently there's seven co-conspirators with Chi-Long in drafting this declaration of grievances and demands. He was just adding that he has the support of the Dark Council and the Consuls," Ume replied.

Sithspawn, this has to be stopped. Kamjin rushed into his office, locking the door behind him. He could hear Ume banging on the door, screaming. "Kamjin. Kamjin! What's going on?" she demanded between thumps from her fists. Kamjin entered his security clearance and pulled up a direct line to the current Consul of his clan. After a moment a holo-image appeared on his desk.

"...No, move that over there. Hey, Novice, drop that. We don't need it. Oh, Mav, I take it you heard the announcement?" Cooch asked.

"Yes, I just heard. What are you doing? What is happening?" Kamjin probed.

"We just got orders from the Iron Throne. Prepare for an immediate Exodus if Ronin and Astatine don't accept the terms issued today."

"Just like that? You're an officer in this fleet as well. You can't just drop everything and leave." Kamjin was raising his voice in protest.

"Mav...this isn't a me decision. This isn't even a Clan decision. The **whole** Brotherhood is committed to this action."

How...how could this have happened without my knowing, Kamjin asked himself. He probed his memories. All the conversation with Chi-Long, FireFox, and the others that had voiced concerns. Had he misread the situation? Had he been oblivious to the signs?

"Mav...Maverick, are you listening to me?" Cooch looked concerned at Kamjin.

"Sorry, what was that Cooch?" Kamjin replied.

"I said, do you want me to send a shuttle to get you? We don't have final coordinates yet for the jumps but it's pretty clear that if you're not with us when we jump you're not going to be able to find us later."

Kamjin couldn't process that question. It completely ignored that there was a solution to resolve this. That *HE* could solve this. "Don't do anything Cooch until you hear from me. I am going to speak to Ronin and Astatine now!"

"Mav, I can't promi..." Cooch was cut off as Kamjin deactivated the holoprojector. Dropping his bag on the floor, Kamjin raced out of the office. As he unlocked the door Ume fell forward. Apparently she had given up on banging and had decided to rush the door. Kamjin brushed passed her as she connected with the floor. Behind him he heard her yell out, "Where are you going?"

Shouting back over his shoulder, "To solve this!"

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The Capital was in a panic. No one knew who could be trusted and lines were being drawn amongst colleagues. Kamjin, by virtue of his rank and the general sense of apprehension of tangling with an Inquisitor had made his way unscathed to the Fleet Commanders command chambers. As he approached the doors two guardsmen crossed their force pikes barring his way.

"Sir, the Fleet Command and XO are in a private session. No visitors are allowed," the left guard spoke.

"I am a Fleet Admiral and Inquisitor in this Strike Fleet. Stand aside!" Kamjin commanded unfazed by the confrontation.

"No visitors are allowed," the guard repeated. They uncrossed their force pikes and leveled them against Kamjin.

Deciding to take a different approach, Kamjin stated, "I've known Ronin for years. I've advised him in other matters of state before. I am confident he will see me."

The guard on the left advanced, repeating the same monotone denial. The guard on the right put his hand up to his helmet, Kamjin assumed it to be a comlink message.

"Sir," the right guard spoke. "You may enter the chamber but by order of the XO you are to be disarmed."

"Disarmed? What right does the XO have to bar me from my saber? I'm a Dark Adept and a loyal officer of this fleet."

"All officer loyalties are suspect. You will disarm before entering or you will be denied entrance."

"I will not have my loyalty questioned by the likes of you," Kamjin growled under his breath. Reaching out his arms he lifted the guards off their feet. The unexpected move caused them to drop their force pikes as they grasped at their throats. "This isn't the first rebellion I've seen in this fleet but it will be the last!" Kamjin sent them hurling into the door, crashing it off their hinges.

Inside Ronin and Astatine turned, startled by the noise. As the guards attempted to recover Ronin waved his hand dismissing them.

"Leave us," the tall, aging, Chiss Fleet Commander commanded. The guards attempted to regain their dignity as they rose, bowed, and shuffled past Kamjin to resume their post.

"How dare you barrage in here like this, Maverick," Astatine snarled. His usual annoying voice trembled slightly. Kamjin sensed the fear in him.

"How dare you attempt to deny me my rights as an Officer and a Sith." Kamjin spat back. "Now isn't the time for us to quibble over these matters. What is Chi-Long asking for?"

"He is demanding to be treated as equal to the Fleet Commander; as if he has the authority to make demands." Astatine replied. "Ronin, I've told you how many times that if I had been appointed Grand Master that we wouldn't have these issues."

Ronin made a dismissive gesture as he continued to read status reports from the fleet. There were more and more officers being x'ed out as declaring their intent to follow Chi-Long.

"Ronin, that is not an unfair request. The matters of the Brotherhood should not demand your day-to-day oversight. While you're Consul of Clan Alvaak you're not actively managing their responsibilities. This is a political gesture of good will. As long as they serve the Fleet's objectives why does this matter?" Kamjin pleaded.

As the Chiss turned to face him, his red eyes aflame, Kamjin knew he had erred. "Why does this matter?" Ronin asked rhetorically. "I am in command here. Not Chi-Long. Not Firefox, Not any of these so called 'Council of Seven'. Me and they test me with nonsense."

"Ronin...Krenn'sa, this is a mistake." Kamjin could barely choke the words out.

Astatine's face exploded in a smile. "You're right, Ronin. You are in command of the Fleet. These Dark Jedi are always prone to rebellion and have always been quelled in the past. I will take the fleet and lay siege to Eos. The Iron Throne will remain ours and I will ensure the Brotherhood remains loyal."

Kamjin could see the poisoned words of Astatine corrupt Ronin's ego. The Chiss noted as his shoulders bent. "You are right, Astatine. This has happened before with Zoraan and Thedek and how many others. Go, take the fleet and end this."

"Of course, Ronin. Fleet Admiral, you will take command of the *Challenge* and ensure no traitors from your Clan can flee." Astatine commanded Kamjin.

"Astatine, you can..." Kamjin was cut off by Astatine.

"You will address me as 'Sir!', Fleet Admiral and carry out your orders. That is, unless you're declaring that you're one of these traitors." Astatine's eyes sparkled at the prospect of throwing Kamjin in chains and ending their rivalry.

Kamjin looked at Ronin hoping to see an opening to continue the discussion but there was none. Resigned, Kamjin responded, "As I have always been...I am loyal to the Emperor's Hammer."

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Kamjin stood on the bridge of the ISD *Challenge* as the ship hurtled through hyperspace. In the blue/white tunnel he took stock of the rest of Battlegroup III surrounding the *Challenge*.

"Sir, we're preparing to exit hyperspace," the helmsman relayed.

"Very good, ensure all gunners are in position," Kamjin said. After a pause he added, "Inform them to hold fire until they hear my orders."

"Yes, sir," came the response.

As the tunnel collapsed back to subluminal speeds they saw the whole of Clan Scholae Palatinae's fleet in the middle of evacuation. Kamjin pulled out a small holoprojector with the crest of the Clan upon it. As he activated it the image of Cooch appeared.

"Mav..." Cooch paused. "I wish this hadn't happened."

"I wish it hadn't happened either," Kamjin chest rose and fell with the words of resignation.

"You're one of our founders. You should be with us." Cooch pleaded. The years they have served together bleeding out in every word.

"I have always been loyal to the Fleet...to Ronin and his vision. We all were."

"You will always have a place with us. Don't let it end like this."

"Farewell, old friend." Kamjin said as he deactivated the holoprojector. The Commodore of the *Challenge* came up behind Kamjin.

"So it's treason then. All gunners prepare to fire. Target their transport ships first. We may not stop them all but they won't be leaving here with any of those treasures," the Commodore commanded with a snide smile.

"Belay that order," Kamjin said. "It's a shame they had already departed by the time we arrived."

"Sir, they're right there," the Commodore protested.

Kamjin's brow furled as he closed his eyes. The Commodore grabbed his forehead at the same time the rest of the bridge crew put their hands to their temples. "No one was here. They've slipped away before we arrived."

The Commodore stuttered, "Y..y..yes, they slipped away." Regarding his balance he continued, "Quite a shame, all teams stand down. We'll hold position here until we receive new orders from the XO."

Kamjin opened his eyes, breathing heavily. As his vision focused he saw the ships of his Clan blink one by one into hyperspace and the unknown.

Maybe one day all of this can be righted. I won't stop until it is, Kamjin thought as the last one vanished.