

The First Trial of Maverick

Submission for the fiction competition: "Competition: Humble Beginnings"

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The blue-white swirling tunnel of hyperspace never ceased to amaze Kamjin. It wasn't enough that navigating these subspace tunnels enabled mighty empire's to rise and fall over the millennia. There was a beauty, like a serene wave breaking and rolling endlessly through space. The deep blues blending with the striking white. Eternally struggling to overtake the other.

A tone beeped in his helmet as the display brought up an automatic countdown. Taking one last look at the ethereal beauty before him, he reached out for the hyperspace control lever. As the countdown concluded he pulled the ship back into real space, not without a pang of regret. The sensor display lit up immediately with numerous contacts. Kamjin surveyed the various Star Destroyers, support cruisers, TIE patrols, and numerous cargo and trade ships traversing the Aurora system.

Keying in the comm frequency provided to him, Kamjin cleared his throat. "Brotherhood Flight Control, this is TIE Praetor *Hyperhawk* on approach. Request landing clearance and instructions." Kamjin expected a moment of surprise given the relatively low sensor profile of his ship. Usually, he'd have to take a few minutes to explain who he was, why he was authorized to be there, and answer half a dozen questions before he'd get anywhere. Therefore, he was taken aback immediately by the response he received.

"Confirmed, transmit authorization codes," came the curt response. Kamjin had the briefest sense that they had been expecting him. Keying in the code sequence he had received from Wrath before departing he awaited further instructions. Within moments, he had them.

"Welcome to the Dark Brotherhood, Apprentice. We're transmitting landing coordinates. Do not deviate from this course," said the voice, as Kamjin's navigation computer flashed several waypoints and the corresponding flight plan. He inspected the approach and shook his head in disbelief.

"Control, there must be some error in what you've provided. I'm looking at my scope and there's no structure at these coordinates," Kamjin said, adjusting the resolution on the navigation display.

There was a menacing laugh that came over his speakers. "It's there, Apprentice. You'll need to learn to see with something other than your eyes. Now, adjust your course and speed or you'll be late."

"Acknowledged," Kamjin said, keying off the comm. *See without my eyes*, he thought. *Heh, Wrath knows I didn't want to get back into this Force business.* Closing his eyes, he did feel a whirlwind of energy coming from the coordinates. Snapping his eyes back open, he input the flight commands and let the autopilot take him down on approach.

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The Dark Hall of Eos lived up to its name. It was dark and despite having one of the most sophisticated sensor packages in the Fleet, Kamjin's TIE Praetor was not picking up

anything on his scopes. If not for the landing coordinates and the benefit that there was a steady stream of ships descending and taking off on a similar approach vector he'd have never found it. Having ditched his TIE helmet after entering the atmosphere he tried to take in the barren landscape of Eos. If not for the mineral deposits and the infrastructure it supported there would have been no use for the rock. Kamjin could make out abandoned settlements from the previous Aurorian settlers that had been extradited when the Dark Brotherhood had chosen this as the location for their headquarters. Pretty much everything else on the installation was classified, even to a Commander in the Intelligence Division and an elite pilot.

Kamjin moved his glove hand over the controls and deactivated the autopilot for approach. Grasping the yoke, he felt the shear forces at play on the planet as he fought to maintain a level flight pattern. To any outsider observer the TIE maintained a steady approach, none the wiser for the effort it took to perform such a feat on the moon. Kamjin took pride in keeping his skills from getting rusty though he suspected all the other traffic was making full use of their autopilot functions.

Flight Control came back on the comm. "*Hyperhawk*, you're cleared for landing bay thirteen." Kamjin adjusted the throttle on his approach as he noted the positioning of bay thirteen. "Careful Apprentice, if you scratch one of Tau's A9's you'll find a fate worse than death awaits you." Kamjin looked at the shiny new A9 fighters sitting in the hangar and let out a low whistle. *I guess they were serious about making Tau into an elite squadron*, he thought. *Those look like they just came off the assembly line*. A sense of smug superiority came over him as he goosed the throttle, accelerating into the hangar bay. With a flurry of movements on the controls, Kamjin spun the TIE Praetor on its central axis, fired the retrorockets and kicked in the thrusters. The TIE slowly lowered itself to the hangar floor, backing into the landing bay perfectly.

Grabbing his helmet, Kamjin keyed the hatch open as the ship went through it's shut down routine. The ground crew was approaching with the service ladder but Kamjin didn't want to miss the opportunity and jumped, effortlessly, to the floor. The lead crew member provided the datapad with the corresponding landing details and Kamjin signed off. "Which way is it to the receiving hall?" Kamjin asked.

"Take the turbolifts to the bottom of the hangar and follow the corridor. It'll lead you to the foyer where the other Apprentices are gathering," the crew member replied.

"Don't waste your time," came a voice from the cockpit of the nearest A9. "Fresh meat doesn't last long here on Eos. You'll be eaten alive soon enough." Kamjin identified him as a member of Tau squadron based upon the patch on his uniform. Another one of his buddies stepped around the starboard engine and started sniffing the air.

"I smell fresh meat. Looks like we're going to eat well tonight!" Both pilots broke out into rancorous laughter as Kamjin scowled at them. Taking a deep breath, seeking to center himself, his scowl turned into a smirk.

"Better add some more fuel. Judging by how well you've been eating neither of you are going to break orbit," Kamjin said as he strolled by towards the turbolifts. The two Tau pilots looked at each other for a few moments before the insult registered.

"Hey! You little punk Apprentice!" the larger of the two yelled. Kamjin just waved as he stepped into one of the five awaiting turbolifts, keyed the descent button, and disappeared. *Heh, maybe this isn't going to be that hard*, he thought. *Maybe Wrath was just trying to intimidate me. This seems just like any other military base I've been on*. The turbolift lights slowly transitioned

from red to white as he went deeper into the side of the mountain. He let out a yawn to pop his ears, wondering just how large each of the levels were. As the shaft opened onto the corridor the concopy of sound assaulted Kamjin. The corridor, which was a gross simplification for the massive causeway that laid before him, was packed with all sorts of individuals bustling through their activities. Stepping off the lift Kamjin could feel himself entering a new world unlike any he had previously experienced.

There was a mixture of uniformed military members. Whether dressed like him in a TIE pressure suit or the duty uniforms of the Fleet. There was the usual mixture of tech members with their carts of parts or coming from or going to the latest job. But what struck him was all the people in robes. Some in white, or blended white, robes all the way those in black robes with colors highlighting their sleeves. Some red, some purple, and a few blue were to be seen. People with cloaks over their heads or their faces proudly on display they clearly were in charge as the military and crews made way for them. As if some invisible force forced people to keep their distance. Whenever someone did come near them they looked uneasy and hurried away as soon as they were able.

Kamjin blended into the moving crowd heading towards the other end of the causeway. He felt like a tourist with his head constantly on a pivot. There were endless side passageways branching off from the main one. The lighting was nearly non-existent and cloaked figures would appear and disappear down these side paths. Large blast doors dotted the adjoining spaces. Kamjin never saw one open but had a sense that it was for the best. There was something more about this place that, despite its appearance of a military outpost, made Kamjin uneasy. Was it the smell of some exotic spice in the air, the mingling of so many creatures, the sense of secrecy so many people held onto. Whatever it was it hung at the back of his mind like a pair of eyes in the bush at night.

As he neared the other end of the corridor there were queues of people waiting for the bank of turbolifts. He shuffled into one of the queues as he kept looking around at the myriad of people near him when his eyes fell on someone he knew.

"Gibbs? Is that you?" Kamjin inquired. A man with mopy black hair turned around in the crowd and beamed.

"Maverick, you made it," Gibbs said, navigating through the crowd to meet up with Kamjin. Kamjin noticed that Gibbs was wearing an all black robe instead of his usual pilot fatigues.

"How did I never know this was here? It's literally a black hole in all the system manuals and it's right over Aurora Prime," Kamjin said.

"That's because you never bothered to look or, if what Wrath tells me is true, you were ignoring things," Gibbs said with a chuckle. Kamjin gave him a confused look for a moment and then, realizing what was being alluded to and scowled. Gibbs caught onto the look and gave Kamjin a playful punch in the shoulder. "Don't get bent out of shape. Wrath knows everything, that's his job. But what are you doing in this line?"

"My orders were to report to the Main Hall and that was it," Kamjin said, his usual cocky smile back as he rubbed his shoulder.

"We're going to side step some of that and get you straight to business," Gibbs said, grabbing him by the shoulder and pulling him out of line. Kamjin didn't have time to react as Gibb pushed their way through the crowd to one of the mysterious doors. Gibbs waved his hand

near the door and it opened. Kamjin was awestruck as he didn't see Gibbs insert a command cylinder nor touch any controls. Before he had time to examine closer Gibbs was yanking him into the new corridor.

It was quieter than before. Eerily quiet, in a way that made Kamjin uncomfortable. Despite the glow of the traditional Imperial lighting the further away from the main hallway they went the darker it felt. Soon, Kamjin found himself crossing his arms for warmth.

"Where are we going, Gibbs?" Kamjin asked, swearing he saw his breath for a moment.

"Here," Gibbs replied, coming up to another door and again activating it with a wave of his hand. Stepping inside Kamjin felt warmth flowing through his body, such as if he had just exited a shuttle onto a desert planet. He visibly shook for a moment as the wave of heat flowed through his body. He closed his eyes to savor the moment, holding desperately like a starving beast fearful that his meal would be taken from him. By the time he opened his eyes Gibbs had already opened a large locker and was pulling out some sort of combat gear.

"What is that?" Kamjin asked.

"As a member of the Dark Brotherhood you're expected to wear robes while within the Dark Hall. Now, naturally, we're not dressing you in sheets. The robes are mostly ceremonial, especially for you as an Apprentice. Underneath the robes is this padded combat armor that's suited for training and mobility. You'll definitely need the mobility starting out," Gibbs said, offering the white padded chest armor to Kamjin.

Kamjin took the armor and examined it. It was lighter than the traditional Stormtrooper armor, though it had the same white unblemished appearance. As he bent the chest piece he felt the plastisteel inserts interwoven to the material. It would offer some resistance in a fight, though he questioned if he'd be better off with this TIE pressure suit. He'd never had an issue moving with it before.

"I know what you're thinking," Gibbs said. "You need to trust me on this. Now hurry up and get changed."

Kamjin shook his head and began to undress. The white armor fit well though it had been ages since he had worn an all white armor. The midcalf combat boots fit under the padded leggings. The chest plate ended up extenuating his broad shoulders. He was curious about the padded belt with its numerous empty pockets but figured he'd soon have more than enough items to keep stored once he was provisioned.

Bending down he scooped up his TIE suit and hung it, with military precision, into the locker. As he keyed the locker to his thumb print he pulled the gloves on as he turned to face Gibbs and his face fell.

"You're kidding," Kamjin said, with disbelief written all over his face. Gibbs stood beaming holding up a massive white robe. It had a high, tight collar, and baggy oversized sleeves.

"Like I said, they're most ceremonial...but, they're also mandatory attire, Apprentice," Gibbs said, throwing it over Kamjin's head. As Kamjin fumbled to disentangle himself, Gibbs said, "Hurry up, you're gonna be late."

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Walking behind Gibbs, Kamjin tugged at the tight collar clenching around his throat. Gibbs seemed to be chuckling under his breath the more Kamjin tugged. After leaving the locker room, Gibbs had led Kamjin through a variety of different corridors and stairwells that frankly left Kamjin feeling completely lost. Why had he agreed to this? He had avoided this part of his life since he entered the Imperial Academy. The Empire was not known to be understanding of anyone with...talents. How Wrath had puzzled it out left Kamjin concerned about just how much information had been collected during his time at the Imperial Academy and shared with the fleet when he was transferred.

As Gibbs turned another corner, Kamjin started to feel like bolting. This place, the Dark Hall, the very moon itself was suffocating. He could feel some imperceptible shadow stretching out to claim him. His eyes darted around looking for any exit that may present itself but then the corridor opened into a massive open room. Easily five stories high and wide enough to fit an Acclamator-class Star Destroyer. As soon as they crossed the threshold the noise of a massive training facility assaulted Kamjin's ears. There must have been some sort of noise dampeners functioning around the room. There were several groupings spread around the room at various stations.

Kamjin had been in numerous Imperial training facilities throughout his life and this one looked nothing like the others. The equipment was foreign to him and, for the few pieces he recognized, they weren't being utilized in a familiar way. He couldn't understand why someone would be dodging the stun remotes versus firing back. In fact, he just realized, no one was utilizing any blasters. Of the few that were utilizing any combat weapons they were melee in nature and almost all looked to be swords with the occasional polearm.

As Gibbs guided him through the room he began to notice more patterns. The majority of the individuals in the room were dressed like Kamjin in the white robes or the white under armor. They were grouped with one or two individuals dressed in either black armor or robes. There were accented colors on some of the, Kamjin supposed, instructors; a deep red, a smoky blue, and a regal purple. There must be some significance to the colors, Kamjin thought, as he noticed the ones in blue were mostly engaged in hand-to-hand combat. The ones in purple were doing more agility and aerobic training while the red seemed to be a mixed bag of activities.

"Mav, are you paying attention?" Gibbs asked, snapping Kamjin back to reality. Turning back to face Gibbs, his eyes fell upon the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She must have been 1.65 meters tall. Her auburn hair was pulled back into a ponytail which accented her cheeks. Her brown eyes were like the darkness of space, pulling you into them. Kamjin couldn't help but sneak a peek at her toned body where the black with purple accented armor seemed to hug in all the right places.

Gibbs caught Kamjin's roaming eyes and smirked. "As I was saying, this is Hunter Rakhila Rayt. She will be in charge of your training in the Shadow Academy and responsible for ensuring you complete the required coursework and training activities," Gibbs said. Kamjin awkwardly extended his hand to shake Rakhila's. Rakhila, in turn, scanned Kamjin up and down.

"Gibbs, you're certain he's going to make it?" she asked.

"Despite his bumbling expression right now he is a competent intelligence officer and an excellent pilot," Gibbs retorted. Kamjin was too starstruck to catch the doubt in Rakhila's voice.

"It's an absolute pleasure to meet you Rakhila," Kamjin said with a causal smirking smile. "I'm certain in your capable hands I'll make you proud."

Rakhila met Kamjin's eyes and gave a smirking response in return. "Gibbs, I do think you're right. He and I are going to have a lot of fun together."

"Excellent, then I have duties I need to get back to with Wrath. When he's survived you can send him to Scholae Palatinae's dormitories," Gibbs said, giving Kamjin a pat on the shoulder while his eyes lingered on Rakhila. If Kamjin had been paying attention, he would have seen the mirth in Gibbs' eyes at the thought that Kamjin would have a good time.

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"Get up, twerp!" Rakhila yelled. Kamjin ached all over as he stood back up on the mat. Days had blurred into weeks, into months. He had no sense of time anymore as his life existed between this training facility and the dormitory. Classes were held in a separate area of the room but there was always Rakhila driving him harder. She was merciless in her drive for perfection from her students.

As soon as Kamjin had regained his footing he felt the invisible hand of the Force reaching out to push him over. Focusing his mind, he spread his feet, bent his knees, and threw out his hands to grapple with the unseen presence. His fingers went rigid as if struggling to grasp the sides of a massive boulder. He grunted with effort as his feet slowly gave ground until he was finally able to shift the blast of air to the side.

Kamjin beamed at having finally deflected the assault. Looking up he was greeted by the heel of Rakhila's boot slamming into his face. His head snapped back as he fell backwards onto the mat. Rakhila flew past him before tumbling backwards to pin Kamjin beneath her.

"Don't get cocky. You won't always be fighting Jedi who are seeking to delay you or put you off balance. There will be other Dark Jedi out there bent on destroying you no matter what it takes," she chastised him. Leaning over, she whispered into his ear, "And if you're this easy to pin, where's the fun in the hunt?"

Kamjin smirked as he reached up and grabbed Rakhila under her arms and rolled over pinning her to the ground. "Maybe I want you to win?" he cooed in reply.

"I don't think you're that good at hiding your intentions, Apprentice," she replied, playfully pushing him off her. "Now get back to business, we've got a lot more to cover today," she pinched him hard in the arm to prove her point.

"Ouch," Kamjin said, rubbing the very painful pinch he had received.

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"Pilots, adjust your telemetry and come to point 3-5," Rakhila's voice crackled in Kamjin's helmet. It felt good to be back in a TIE after what felt like an eternity. Despite the constant drilling and exercises, life in the Dark Hall still felt odd. Like an unseen visitor was still waiting outside the door to be let in and was peeking into the windows. Kamjin always felt uneasy and did not sleep well. Well, on the nights he slept.

He twisted his radar range finder and identified the nav buoy at point 3-5. Adjusting the yoke he set his TIE to approach the new coordinates. The rest of his flight wing maneuvered with him in formation.

"Maverick, any idea what today's mission is?" Kelvis said over the comms.

"No idea, I got the same briefing you did," Kamjin replied.

"Cut the chatter Guardian 1 and 3," Rakhila snapped over the comms. "You're approaching the position, prepare to begin the exercise."

Kamjin switched over to a tight band channel, "Any tips you want to give me, Rakh?"

"I'm still gonna keep you guessing," Rakhila replied. "Now pay attention."

Kamjin's radar pinged multiple arrivals from hyperspace. "Look alive, Guardian Squadron," Kamjin snapped. "I've got multiple bogeys arriving on vector seven. Looks like a New Republic patrol. Looks like a long-range Y-wing and several A-wing and X-wing escorts. I'm going to buzz them now." Kamjin switched his power settings to accelerate charging his lasers. He wasn't about to go into a firefight and run out of juice. As he was toggling the settings the inside of the TIE cockpit blinked and all the displays went out.

"Sithspit, what now," Kamjin cursed. He ran through the power-up sequence smoothly as his Imperial training kicked in automatically. He did not panic, he was in control of his ship. As he entered in the last sequence nothing happened. Frustrated, he slapped the yoke and the ship responded. In surprise, he grabbed the yoke and halted the yaw he had accidentally sent the ship into. *The controls still work but not the displays*, he thought to himself. Testing his theory he tapped the rudder and the ship responded, pivoting to port. He noticed the lights inside the other TIEs were also out. Then he snapped his head as he saw the explosion of one of his comrades. The New Republic patrol must have noticed them floating in space and was wasting no time in removing the threat.

Kamjin opened up the throttle and began to pursue the offending A-wing who had just taken out Horn. Kamjin swooped in from behind and began to line him up for the killing shot. As he nearly had him centered, Kamjin felt a tug at the back of his neck. The slightest pull as if a breeze had brushed his hair. A sense of danger evaded his mind and he pulled up hard on the yoke, within seconds the spot he had been was illuminated by blaster fire. Kamjin continued his arc, rotating the ship into an S-turn, and came swooping down on the X-wing. He depressed his triggers and volleys of emerald death raked across the X-wing's fuselage. Within moments it began to bubble with explosions before detonating in space. Kamjin continued his barrel roll and came back to the A-wing, snapping off two shots he lanced the engine and cockpit. As the engine sputtered the cockpit was depressurized and the pilot violently ejected into space.

He needed to know what was happening with the rest of the battle. Coming around he noticed that some of his fellow pilots had engaged in the battle. Kelvis and Nedjaa were holding their own with a pair of X-wings. Thraken seemed to have taken a hit but was still in the fight. He couldn't find the Y-wing and that worried him. If that Y-wing had an active sensor package going he could identify their location and strength and call down the New Republic fleet. He began searching, trying to find it through the limited viewports within the TIE cockpit. Then a voice came to him, harsh and condensing, *Do you see with only your eyes?* Kamjin recognized the chastising Rakhila had given him and the other Apprentices. Kamjin closed his eyes and let himself float beyond his body. He felt the TIEs near him locked in mortal combat with the New Republic ships. He could feel their fear. Their hatred. The panic in the New Republic ships

under attack. The joy of having escaped a potential death by lasers. Then he felt it, two pilots rushing to gather as much information as they could. Panicking as their comrades blinked out of existence one by one in giant gaseous explosions of death.

Kamjin found he could control that panic, turn it into dread, they were going to die. Their deaths would be in vain, having accomplished nothing. No one would know what had happened to them. No state funeral, no grand parade. Their loved ones left to languish the rest of the days wondering what had happened to them. Moreso, Kamjin found he could manipulate his own squadron. A nudge to the left to help Kelvis's aim. A warning to Thraken to dive out of the path of an incoming missile. A sense of victory and purpose to them all.

The tide had turned dramatically from the onset. Kamjin brought his fighter to bear on the Y-wing and a quick succession of blasts tore through the body of the ship making the pilots doomed prophetic visions into reality. In short order the rest of the New Republic ships were destroyed. As soon as Kamjin saw the last fighter disintegrate the systems in his TIE sprung back to life.

"All crafts, report in," Kamjin said, immediately into the comm.

"I took a few hits but I'll make it Mav," Thraken reported, first. The rest followed suit. With the exception of Horn, they had taken no losses which was a small miracle. Each reported a similar malfunction with their craft when Rikhila's voice cut in.

"Well done, Guardian Squadron. You've successfully passed your Sith flight qualifications."

All Kamjin felt was rage. A test, just another test, and this one cost the life of Horn for them to pass.

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Rakhila stood waiting on the hangar deck as Guardian Squadron's TIEs returned from the battle. Her auburn hair was let down and draped gently over her shoulders in luscious curls. Kamjin threw his helmet on the deck as he climbed down from his TIE.

"What the hell was that?" he screamed at Rakhila. "What sort of test costs the life of a pilot, a good man, and without any instruments! You're insane, this whole damn Brotherhood is insane!" As Kamjin raged, Rakhila slipped up to his body and kissed him passionately on the lips. Kamjin was shocked, the rage left him momentarily as confusion rushed in to fill the void. As Rakhila broke the kiss, her lips still slightly parted as he was left gapping.

"I cannot believe you're able to use Battle Meditation. That is an exceedingly rare talent. I could feel you from here. Crushing the resolve of your enemies. Coordinating and enhancing the abilities of your fellow pilots. Ahhh, it was such a rush to experience. You are special Kammy, I'm going to keep a closer eye on you now."

As she walked away, Kamjin could only focus on the sway of her hips. He no longer cared about Horn and what had happened up there. He had tasted that power and suddenly the other lessons in the Dark Side started to coalesce in his mind. He could control that power. He could control others, bending them to his will. Accomplishing his goals and advancing his ambitions. A dangerous seed had germinated that day.