**Mid Rim, Ord Mantell, Ord Mantell City, City Centre**

**39 ABY**

*5 weeks after the events of the RoS…*

Raleien Sonavarret sat on a plastoid bench. The old, grizzled soldier was an immovable sentry amid the urban chaos. All around him, shopkeepers and hawkers cried their wares and passers-by spoke with one another amiably. Their voices melded into a cacophony of city song that sounded like a fighting pack of beasts hounded by insects. Intense, intermingling aromas of the myriad food stalls, durasteel buildings, cleaning supplies, rubbish, and people invaded one’s nostrils. The planet’s strikingly blue sun bathed the area in a late spring glow. It was a bustling metropolis at the peak hour of a commercial workday.

And it may also be the site of a clever trap.set exclusively for him.

Passers-by pretended to take no notice of the large, cerulean skinned man sitting on one of several public benches. They ignored his battered armor and his array of weapons and gadgets that were clearly visible through a plain dark cloak. The slung rifle was especially an odd sight, but Raleien kept the barrel smartly facing the ground.

You could tell a soldier from a street rat by the way they treated their weapons. This old hound was not a fan of accidents, nor of pointing a weapon at someone unless he meant it.

Blasters weren’t an odd sight on the commercial Mid Rim world. Weapons and armor were common due to lax laws. But Raleien had the look of a man who had been through hell and back. One look at his weather-worn, pockmarked face and his faded family emblems tattooed on forehead and cheeks was enough for most folk to realize he had been around the bend. When you see a man like that, one might begin to wonder what he was doing sitting still. Others might wonder, and then turn and walk away. The latter was a smart move. While he appeared to lounge casually, the old soldier was not relaxed in the slightest. He was tense, focused, and in control, wound up like a coil ready to spring.

He had learned this control over decades of battle. He had trained in the Empire, and upon its fall he had found work fighting private wars. He had lived through decades of battle, and part of him yearned for more. Another part of him, deep inside, was being destroyed by it.

There’s a reason that the Loyalist had lived as long as he had. In comparison to many of his former Imperial colleagues, he had been more skilled than most. He was able to hit a target reliably, anyway. Because of this, he had been assigned to elite Imperial squadrons that would follow the shock troops to continue the fighting in earnest. These experiences had shaped him into a weapon. A scalpel, a bludgeon, or a spear, depending on who asked and what needed to be done. First he had been used by the Empire, and then the Remnants, and then this oligarchy or that company – oh, they had used him, indeed. Recently he was used by whoever paid the best rate or inspired in him the drive to destroy. Destruction helped him forget.

He had aligned himself with a group of second-rate pirates and freedom fighters on Dandoran. They had called themselves the Tenixir Revenants. Their rivals, the so-called Severian Principate, had not drawn his eye at the time. They were another Remnant faction without the will to exert true dominance. Besides, he had another reason for finding solace in the Revenants. While he sought the drive to destroy, he also felt immeasurable guilt for his past actions. Therefore, it was their objective: to seek retribution, by any means necessary, against the Principate which attracted him. The soldier in him felt a spark of compassion for their plight. Those honourable scoundrels sought justice of the kind Raleien could deliver: by the barrel of blaster, the thrust of a knife and the brute deliverance of fist to flesh. He felt drawn to their single cause, and he had felt useful helping them on Dandoran.

The Galactic Empire had endowed Raleien with the skills of his trade, in exchange for being used. They had called it duty. Through duty, they had convinced Raleien to obediently follow orders, including those that crossed moral and ethical boundaries. But in his older age, he lived with the impact of this indoctrination. His mind was slowly cracking under the weight of guilt and shame he felt about his actions. It would be a long while before his trauma manifested into debilitating symptoms, he suspected. Perhaps years. One way he avoided thinking was to throw himself back into the fight, any fight, so long as he stopped ruminating on the past and was forced to live in the moment. But one day he would have to face his past.

Soldiers like Raleien fed the fire of war. Often, warriors burned hot and fast, their lives cut short in pursuit of the power and glory of their superiors. Others were like Raleien. They were cut of sterner stuff, perhaps. Or they were just lucky. But they still burned, in the end. He now thought of himself as a pile of hot coals in his advancing age. Coals gave off an immense amount of heat, but did not produce a brilliant crimson flame. In the end, even coals would dim, left to smothered underfoot into nothing more than ash left to drift on the wind.

*Old soldiers never die, they simply fade away*, Raleien thought. An old soldier’s proverb whose origin had been lost to time.

Raleien shook himself. *I’m getting lost in my own head*. *Focus*.

He looked up and scanned his surroundings. A datapad, what felt like long ago, had been left for him with the words of some obscure organization in a ruin on Dandoran: Scholae Palatinae. What little he could discover about this organization – which was scarce little – made him feel uneasy. Another Empire, it was said, that was part of an even larger Brotherhood. But these folks from Scholae Palatinae, they were the literal shadow of the now dead Galactic Empire. And if he had barely heard of them, they were certainly a scarce shadow.

They sought his services, it seemed, or else he was about to die for something he may have done to one of their kin in the past.

His golden eyes caught movement to his right. A young human woman dressed in plain clothes walked toward him. She was clearly unarmed, though a communications device was attached to the belt of her fine robes. However the lack of weapons made her no less dangerous. She walked like a Nexu, a large feline-like creature. Her every step was graceful and sure, likely from years of martial training. Her brown hair was tied back in a neat ponytail, and as she came to stand before him, he noticed her deep brown eyes and a small grin on her face. She had made herself known, he suspected.

“Are you Raleien?” She asked over the din of the crowd.

He nodded, gripping his blaster rifle tight. He was ready to aim and shoot if the need arose.

Her grin turned into a smile as she noticed his movement. “Scared of an unarmed woman?”

“You’re the weapon,” Raleien said in his gravelly bass voice, “and I never underestimate anyone.”

“Good. You’re a wise man. Often a wise person can learn more from a foolish question than a fool can learn from a wise answer. Sadly, you provided a wise answer. May I sit?”

“You speak in riddles.” He gestured to an open space beside him on the bench.

With an elegant flourish of her cloak, she sat in a noble posture, straight-backed and attentive, though she scanned her surroundings with a keen, experienced eye.

“I do,” she admitted. “But what you call riddles, I call the learned wisdom of ages.”

“So what brings you to my bench, riddle master?”

“My name is Xiaying, and I come on behalf of the benefactors that contacted you on Dandoran,” she began, ignoring his quip. “We wish to secure your services and talents. This would involve traveling off-world to meet your benefactors in our domain.”

“Certainly there might be other folks who are more interested?” Raleien asked.

“Don’t consider yourself special. We approach persons of interest regularly,” Xiaying said.

“And I’m one of them?” he asked.

“Clearly,” she said.

“I see,” Raleien responded. “Why –“

“Why you?” She interrupted sharply. “My superiors observed some of your actions on Dandoran. You’re a capable soldier, with a good head for tactics, and you’re able to do what needs to be done.”

“I’m flattered you think I’m good at killing, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

“Know your enemy and know yourself and you can fight a hundred battles without disaster.”

Another proverb of ancient knowledge, he surmised.

But he didn’t interrupt her as she continued, “Men who live as long as you do, and in your line of work – well, they’re the most dangerous.”

“Genius can be recognized by its childish simplicity,” he quoted from memory, an ancient Pantoran proverb. “And showing off is the fool’s idea of glory. So please: speak plainly. No proverbs.”

“So you’re not just a brute. Fascinating.” She nodded her head in respect before speaking again.

“In truth, our forces have seen action recently. Dandoran was only one such example. We need new blood to fill the ranks. Therefore, you’ve been selected as a candidate to serve in a variety of military functions, including close protection duties, among others.”

Raleien looked around for a moment, checking to make sure no one was listening. Then he said, “Are you trying to hire me as a bodyguard?”

“Recruit,” she corrected, holding up a finger. “We are trying to recruit you, and principally as a bodyguard. You would be in command of a small, elite force that will most certainly see action at some point or another. And potentially other duties I have not been made aware of.”

*Other duties*, Raleien mused. *Cryptic*.

“What’s in it for me?” he asked.

“A commission, pay, training, lodging, food, fine equipment and competent team members. Also, a planet to call home besides Pantora. And action. Likely lots of it.” She listed the items off on her fingers. “The art of war is a road of life and death of vital importance to the state. It cannot be neglected.”

“More ancient knowledge?”

She shook her head. “Some of my own. And you are avoiding the offer. What say you?”

Raleien considered for a moment. Did he really want to be used again? He looked down at his rough hands. They were scarred and calloused from decades of fighting and soldiering. Is this all he was capable of? Being used, fighting someone else’s battles, committing someone else’s crimes?

For now, yes. Serving another Empire was better than no purpose at all. He longed for the fight.

“Whom would I serve?” He finally asked after a long moment of contemplation.

It was the woman’s turn to sit back and consider her words. She seemed to stare off into the distance, her gaze loosening as her mind considered a response.

“I am somewhat uncertain of that, myself. The one who shows particular interest in you is dangerous, and a man of contradictions. Steeped in dark arts, but loyal to a fault. A great leader, but a sadistic fighter. Self-effacing, and yet a charismatic force of nature. He does not rule us, but he is second among us. He doesn’t seek glory, either. A good commander is benevolent and unconcerned with fame.”

He looked up again, meeting her intense brown eyes with his deep, golden gaze. “That is a Pantoran military proverb.”

She smiled. “I seek and treasure wisdom from all. And you avoid the question, again. What is your answer?”

*Better a diamond with a flaw than a pebble without one*, he thought. A quote from his mother about serving the Republic. She had been a soldier, too. The proverb meant that it was better to seize opportunity that was imperfect than none at all. He could barely remember her face, but that sing-song voice and her regular quips were clear in his mind forever.

“I’ll consider it. Let’s go.”

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**Caelestis City, Seraph Moon of Ragnath, Caperion System**

**39 ABY**

*8 hours later...*

“This is not what I was expecting.”

Raleien had seen large cities before. During his time as a TK-Trooper - as a Stormtrooper - he had served the Empire across the seemingly endless galaxy. From the bustling ecumenopolis of Coruscant to the distant expanse of backwater worlds in the Outer Rim, he had seen and done a considerable amount in his sixty-five years of living. About fifty of those years had been spent killing, but there was always time to make memories during the slaughter. You just had to live long enough to remember.

“What were you expecting?” Xiaying asked with genuine curiosity.

Raleien shot Xiaying a sideways glance, meeting the lithe woman’s amused brown eyes.

“Hutts or an underground lair. Something rough around the edges.”

Xiaying laughed. “It is best to win by persuasion and not by force.”

Raleien recognized and understood the context of the proverb immediately. It was another that originated from his homeland of Pantora. Uttered by a famous philosopher of the Old Republic era, the proverb was a reflection on power and rule. Ol’Tallin believed that ruling through economic prosperity rather than by the end of a blaster was best.

He grunted. So this so-called Clan sought to rule by the bank, did they? If Caelestis City was an indication of their success, they were doing just that.

“Still, I wasn’t expecting… this.” He gestured around him.

She nodded. “It *is* impressive,” she said proudly.

His surprise was not Caelestis City’s existence, but its grandeur, wealth, and advanced technology. It was a cosmopolitan megapolis of considerable beauty. A mixture of squared, thick ancient buildings seemed to be moulded into the delicate curvature and lively green spaces of the contemporary structures which had sprouted around them. Closer to the heart of the city and its bustling spaceport, soaring towers of gleaming glass and unblemished durasteel shot up into the cloudless cerulean sky, though all were dwarfed by the gargantuan presence of Adoniram Tower near the city’s centre.

But its sights weren’t all; the aromas and sounds of this unyielding urban centre were equally sophisticated. It made Ord Mantell City look like a dump by comparison. Among the crowds of multi-racial denizens of Caelestis City was the buzz of commerce. Shouts of bargaining, bouts of full-bellied laughter and the constant stream of multilingual conversation blended with the hum of traffic and the city’s utilities at work, while the wafting scents of the city’s blossoming living walls mixed with herbs, spices and other goods from across the galaxy. And below it all, there was an undertone of *cleanliness*. Not the pure smell of chemically treated streets, but the natural odour of seventy two million reasonably treated people living cheek by jowl in the massive city.

Xiaying had been observing Raleien as she led him northward through the Entertainment District toward Adroniam Tower. The Pantoran was used to such behaviour. At first glance he looked like nothing more than a brute. He had arms like tree trunks, a heaving chest, a face like gnarled vines and a girth which belied his lingering fitness. He knew he looked brainless. But Xiaying and Raleien had, when the man was willing to speak, debated philosophy, shared stories and proverbs, and had bonded on the short journey to Seraph from Ord Mantell. He often didn’t reveal his introspective intelligence. But Xiaying was perceptive, and eager to learn, and he found himself content to share what little wisdom he had accumulated over the years with an eager pupil.

*The wisdom of a murderer*, part of him thought.

He smothered the thought. Now was not the time for his guilt to rise up. He had to focus. After all, he was about to meet an Admiral.

“Bit off more than you could chew, soldier?” Xiaying asked, breaking Raleien’s moment of troubled introspection.

He shook his head. “No. No, I don’t think so. It’s just been a few years since I worked with an organization with resources.”

“From what I heard, you don’t need resources. One report claims that two years ago, during an operation in Hutt space, you managed to rally the remnants of a few mercenary companies in a ruined building and hold off an overwhelming force of soldiers and pirates.”

“That?” He asked, trying to hide his shock at the level of detail in her report. “No, it wasn’t quite like that. Definitely embellished.”

He remembered the day clearly. He had been one of the teams sent in to rob one of the Hutt outposts, similar to Dandoran. And like Dandoran so recently, something went wrong. Another team got caught early. The faint *whizz* of blaster fire grazed his face as the ten frozen hells broke loose. In what seemed like seconds, most of his team had been wiped out by a repeating blaster turret. One thing led to another and thirty odd mercenaries huddled together in a shattered building, holding an intersection and the doorways behind from everything that tried to kill them. He had placed them just so, hoping beyond hope his quick tactical assessment would hold true. Only twenty of them had survived, but by the gods he had lived.

“I see,” she said, unconvinced. “And the faction war on Sullust?”

The Loyalist shrugged. “I did my duty.”

He didn’t want to think about that bloody business.

“For credits,” she said flatly.

“Faithless are they that say farewell when the road darkens,” he said, quoting an old human proverb from Coruscant. The proverb spoke to the need to commit to single tasks to find success. That was Raleien’s way. “I commit to my work.”

“The work of war?”

“That's all I know.”

“And that’s exactly why you’re here, Raleien Sonavarret.”

Xiaying and Raleien spun to face the source of the new voice. It was a powerful baritone that oozed with confidence and charisma. The voice belonged to a handsome human man of average height leaning against one of the nearby buildings on the wide boulevard they occupied..The man was fit, though nearing middle age. He had brown hair in a stylish spike at the front, and a welcoming face with distinct laugh lines.

Xiaying suddenly made a formal, if shallow bow to the man, arms erect at her side.

“Admiral,” she said, rising from the bow. “We were not expecting you here. I was escorting your new head of security to the Tower.”

The Admiral waved a hand indifferently. “I decided to change plans on the fly. I can’t sit staring at reports for hours. Is this our man?” He asked Xiaying, nodding to Raleien.

“This is he.”

The human man clapped his hands together and said, “Excellent! Well, I can brief him myself on our way back to the tower. You’ve accepted our offer?”

Raleien nodded, rolling with the shock of meeting the man he had been mentally preparing himself to face for the last few days.

 “I signed the datapad and agreed to the contract. Close protection is one of my specialties.”

“One of many, so I gather. Good. As of this moment I’m promoting you to the rank of Captain in the Palatinae Legion. You will be assigned a squadron of the Praetorian Guard to serve under your command and as Adroniam Tower’s personal protection unit. And, oh yes, my name is Kamjin Lap’lamiz, though you may refer to me as sir, Admiral, or Mav.”

*All at once? He doesn’t mess about*, Raleien thought. *I like it.*

But then he considered the gravity of what just happened and looked around to see if anyone had eavesdropped. It was then that the old Pantoran saw what he had missed before. A small knot of open space had formed around the Grand Admiral and his two guests, and Raleien could pick out perfectly placed bystanders - or, he thought, bodyguards - standing and speaking casually in small groups which redirected the flow of people just far enough away that speaking openly was possible.

“Yes sir,” the newly christened Captain responded, saluting in the Imperial fashion.

Kamjin grinned. “You really are a veteran, then? Good. Well, let’s talk on the way and enjoy the sun before we’re back in the tower. Xiaying, join us.”

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**Adroniam Tower, Grand Admiral’s Office**

**39 ABY**

“Any questions?”

Kamjin stood leaning on an office chair behind a well kept desk. His office space was clean and military like, but otherwise unremarkable from the rest of the city’s extravagant wonders. Xiaying stood by the door, watching Raleien who stood at parade rest in front of Kamjin’s desk.

“I have three responsibilities. First, I am to be given command of Besh Squadron, who are attached to the Fourth Praetorians Company, also known as the Black Guard. Our squad will be responsible primarily for the protection of this tower, particularly the upper levels, along with accompanying you on missions offworld,” Raleien responded, reciting a summarized version of his instructions.”I will also act as your military attache, and will provide timely and relevant tactical advice if and when required by you or your staff. And finally, I will be placed in command of House Acclivis Draco, a newly formed unit within your organization that fulfills specialized tactical functions.”

The human Adept nodded. “Our organization, Captain. You’re one of us now. Otherwise, very good.”

Raleien was still reeling at the last order. Xiaying had prepared him to accept a position conducting close protection operations for this man and he was comfortable providing tactical advice to a flag officer. Yet he looked down at the datapad he held in his right hand that Kamjin had proffered earlier. On it he found a long series of files related to this new House. The word “House” was even foreign in his mind, let alone on the tongue. This - in his head he imagined Acclivis Draco as a subunit, similar to a company but instead within a Clan - this House was made up of powerful Force users and specialized soldiers or mercenaries with years of experience and the ability to cut him down the middle like livestock. It was a daunting task.

“Grand Admiral, permission to speak freely?”

“Granted.”

“Sir, are you sure putting a new face in charge of -” the grizzled Pantoran paused, the words faltering on his lips. “Are you sure putting me in charge of this lot is really ideal? After all we’ve only just met.This is highly irregular”

Kamjin was silent for a time, staring at Raleien with a quiet intensity and rubbing his chin. After a while, he spoke.

“Allow me to be frank with you, Raleien. May I call you Raleien?”

Raleien nodded.

“As you know, I have been tracking your movements and researching your background since Dandoran. We know everything there is to know about who you are, how you act, and what you’re capable of. *I* know what you’re capable of. You’re capable of making the hard calls when the situation demands it. And that’s exactly the person we need in our Clan.”

*Hard calls.* Sounds, images and memory flooded Raleien’s mind. Battles, murder, events he would rather forget. But these were the core of his being, now. They were the ingredients which had forged Raleien into a keen battle commander and aide. His left hand shook violently for a moment as he fought to control his emotions. One image began to override all the others. *A little Duros child in brown rags, hands outstretched before him he could see through the visor of his helmet. Raleien raised his blaster to fire and -*

He squeezed his hand to a fist, and the memories fell away as abruptly as they had come. Like pollen on a faint summer breeze, his guilt drifted back into the depths of his mind he could not reach. His hand ceased shaking, and his moment of vulnerability ended as soon as it had begun. All of this happened in the blink of an eye, and the old Pantoran hoped that Kamjin and Xiaying hadn’t noticed.

Kamjin stood, stepping away from the chair and walking around the desk. He stood in front of Raleien, almost uncomfortably close, drilling holes into the older Pantoran’s golden eyes. *Had* he noticed?

“But you’re also a man of commitment. You follow orders. And you never turn your back on something that’s worth your while. So allow me to convince you it’s worth your while. We in Scholae Palatinae seek to bring about the peace, order, and justice that the Empire delivered to the galaxy. In this, we continue Palpatine’s legacy. And you have to look no further than to the people you saw around you as you walked into this tower. Were they oppressed? Were they mistreated?”

“No.”

“No, they were not,” Kamjin agreed. “What were they?”

“Prosperous. Secure.”

“Exactly. The Empress, whom you will meet shortly, holds power firmly here. But we aren’t here to brutally dominate the people of Seraph, or of any world our Clan claims. We are here to rule, not to be worshipped. Our Clan rules this system from the shadows. We exert our will over billions, and we strive to even greater heights. And now our Clan is at a crossroads. We have new goals. These ambitions require people with the expertise to turn one’s vision into reality.”

Kamjin paused, and Raleien was struck by the man’s genuine passion and openness. Xiaying had warned him he was a Sith of some repute, a mystical wielder of some dangerous aspect of the so-called Force. But the Force wasn’t so-called, he knew, and Kamjin’s eyes did not seem to hide the truth of his words. Was the Admiral manipulating his mind, somehow? Because Raleien believed him. He believed him and, he realized, he was beginning to want to serve this man and this Clan.

“And I’m one of those folks that can help you achieve these new goals?” the Pantoran asked.

Kamjin nodded, smiling. “You are, Raleien. One of a select few. You climbed the ranks as a Stormtrooper and you managed to stay alive. You have outlived the ambitions of galactic imperialism. Time and time again you have lived, and you have learned. And through it all you’ve also developed quite the head of tactics and strategy. Those in Acclivis Draco will respect those abilities. But more importantly, we will all reap the rewards of them in time. We’re going to use your knowledge for war. I’m going to use it, to great effect.” The Admiral - the Proconsul, Raleien now knew - paused again, letting the silence stretch for a time.

The Pantoran Loyalist considered the Sith Adept’s words. Though he didn’t fully trust Kamjin, he felt the weight of real conviction behind his words. Raleien was even more convinced that he was part of some grand design. He felt like there was a place for him in this Clan, much as he had felt a place in the Empire.

“Does that answer your question, Raleien?” Kamjin finally asked.

Raleien looked up and nodded.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good!” Kamjin clapped again and the Pantoran jumped slightly. “Then let’s go meet Acclivis Draco.”

“Now?” Raleien and Xiayiang exclaimed simultaneously.

“They’re already assembled in the Empress’s throne room.”

And so his work began.

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**Empress’s Throne Room, Adroniam Tower, Top Level**

*10 minutes later…*

Raleien followed Kamjin and Xiaying into the throne room, the ceremonial and literal seat of Clan Scholae Palatinae’s imperial power. The room itself was oriented east-to-west. The door they had entered faced east toward the elevated, yet surprisingly simple and unadorned metallic throne. The Imperial Seat was framed by large, blaster-proof glass windows designed to silhouette the throne in the setting sun of Seraph. The rest of the rectangular room was open and unadorned, though Raleien noticed some well-placed side-doors along the north and south walls that could make easy escape routes or servant’s entrances. A few simple wooden benches were also located near the entrance of the room, but that was the only additional furnishing besides the throne itself. Interspersed throughout the space were a series of beautiful metallic columns that were part of the Tower’s superstructure. Overall the room was austere, but impressive.

A youthful half-Sephi woman with pointed ears and a pale complexion sat on the throne. She wore an imperious expression and sat straight-backed in her throne, the epitome of regality and control. She watched Raleien, Kamjin and Xiaying approach with a discerning golden gaze. Raleien’s breath caught. He had heard rumours that the Sith had yellow eyes, but he had thought when meeting Kamjin that it had been a myth. No longer.

At the base of the throne’s elevated platform and stairs, a small group stood to the side in a haphazard order. Perhaps thirty or forty in all, they represented House Acclivis Draco, at least the core of its strength. Ten of those stood out to Raleien as Force users in various kinds of robes and armour. He suspected the others were companions or support staff of some kind. Some were human, others were not. Aristocrats, former slaves, Raleien wasn’t sure who these people were but he knew they were each *unique.* They each stood out to the old Loyalist as powerful and confident individuals originating from various walks of life. They were also people who were used to wielding power that were constantly displeased at having someone placed above them.

After taking exactly sixteen steps into the throne room, Xiaying paused and grabbed Raleien’s arm, forcing him to do the same. Xiaying bowed like she had for Kamjin earlier, and after a moment Raleien mimicked her.

Kamjin continued, alone, toward the Empress. He took three of the nine steps up towards the Empress’s throne and then made a shallow bow. In truth, it was almost more a simple nod of his head toward an equal.

“Proconsul,” the Empress greeted Kamjin in a melodic but commanding voice. She hadn’t broken eye contact with Raleien.

“Empress,” Kamjin responded. “I come bearing a gift!”

“A gift?”

Kamjin turned on the dais to look out at the onlookers as he said, “Captain Sonavarret! Step forward.”

Raleien responded with the instinctive experience of an Imperial soldier. He exited the bow he had held and walked forward, head held high, his step sure and firm. He wasn’t quite walking at attention, but he drew on his martial and formal training to project an air of controlled aggression. He walked around the assembled House members who stared silently at the Pantoran. Raleien spared a quick glance and caught the eye of a green-skinned Duros man who looked particularly menacing, with a series of scars on his lean face.

The Pantoran stopped in front of the throne and stood at parade rest, waiting, eyes forward.

“I present to you Captain Raleien Sonavarret,” Kamjin said, gesturing to Raleien with his left hand.

“Captain,” the Empress began as she stood and descended the Imperial dais. She stopped to stand beside Kamjin. “Has Kamjin explained what we expect of you?”

“Completely, uh - Empress.”

“Empress will do, for now. So you wish to be Quaestor?”

*Getting right to it, just like that Kamjin*, Raleien thought, a little flustered at the sudden question.

“I wish for nothing. I willserve in whatever capacity is required,” Raleien said.

“As you served the Tenixir Revenants during the fighting on Dandoran?”

“As I have served all those to whom I’ve given my loyalty, Empress.” He could match her flowery language with his own if it meant he wouldn’t be killed.

But Raleien took a moment to reflect on the line of questioning. This was beginning to sound like an interrogation. He had no time to think further, however, as the Empress’s verbal onslaught continued.

“And would you be loyal to the Clan? How do we know that you’re not some mercenary on the hunt for credits?”

Raleien looked up, glaring, before realizing who it was he was glaring at.

He reigned in his temper before responding, “I don’t fight for money. I fight for a cause, and to serve.”

“And to which cause would you dedicate yourself?” She asked, ignoring his failed use of her title.

“Your cause. Any cause you desire, Empress.”

“And why should we trust you? Why should we trust an old hound that Kamjin plucked off the street, working amongst mercs and criminals to make a living?”

“I wouldn’t expect trust,” Raleien began. “At least, not right away. The Proconsul has explained your position, and your need for my skills. He has also created in me a renewed desire to serve your Empire. To that end, as I have said, I will serve in whatever capacity is required. And I will prove my worth.”

The Empress nodded her head slowly, the impromptu interrogation now concluded. Her expression remained cool and composed. She had prepared for this, he realized.

“You sure about this?” The Empress asked Kamjin in a hushed voice, low enough so only Raleien and he would hear.

“Absolutely,” the Proconsul responded just as quietly. “We can use him, Shadow.”

Shadow considered for another long moment before finally nodding her ascent. Raleien let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding, feeling a wash of relief. Kamjin didn’t look surprised in the least.

“It’s done, then. Quaestor, I will speak with you in one hour. Meet me in our command centre.”

*That’s it? Just like that?* Raleien thought, trying to shield his surprise.

“Yes, Empress.” Raleien bowed again, mimicking Xinyiang’s movement. As he stood up he thought he saw Shadow trying to hide an amused grin. If he had, it was gone, now.

Shadow began to descend the steps as she said, “Kam, I expect you to continue briefing the captain before then.”

“Of course.”

“And Kam - make sure he makes it to the meeting.”

The formal audience with the Empress appeared to be over, evidenced by her descending the rest of the throne. But as Raleien turned to look over the assembled House, he realized his own audience with his new colleagues had not quite concluded.

“So, we’re being led… by this?” A blond-haired human man dressed in military fatigues said, the displeasure in his voice dripping like hot wax from a candle. He was just past his prime, perhaps nearing middle age, but he struck a formidable figure.

Another human with a powerful physique that was closer to Raleien’s age grumbled, “I could carve this one up the middle.”

A human woman with a distinctive scar running from her left eye to her jawline said, “Why don’t we wait and see what he has to say, and what he can do, before we carve him limb from limb, hmm?” She spoke with the surety of someone who recognized their own wit. But the way she casually spoke of dismembering him made it clear she was also no stranger to violence.

The Duros man that the Loyalist had noticed earlier said, “I agree with Xathia. We can kill him later if it turns out he’s bantha fodder.”

“Glad we agree, Xantros! It doesn’t happen often. I’ll drink to that.” True to her word, she procured a sizable flask from her belt and took a long swig.

Another human man, this one with a well-trimmed military mustache, nodded in agreement before adding, “Wouldn’t be the first time we trimmed the hide off a Quaestor, eh?”

“You got that right, Horus,” Xantros agreed.

“Well, you gonna’ say something, blue man?” Another human Sith shouted, though this one had brown hair. How could humans tell each other apart without facial markings? Raleien could barely distinguish between some of them.

“You know I’m standing right here, Kodais,” a younger Pantoran man grumbled near the back of the crowd.

“As am I,” a female Pantoran added, who stood at the left-hand edge of the assembled House members.

The human named Kodais shook his head. “Well, sorry. I spoke without thinking. But can we at least agree this man looks weak? Oh, and I fully support dismemberment.”

Raleien had experienced this form of hazing in the military. Before him stood a group of tight-knit and talented Force users who were sizing him up. He had received the same decades ago after being assigned to his first Legion. The older veterans had eyed him head to toe until he had proven his mettle in training and battle.

But from what little he had read of the Sith during his short time with Kamjin, he had no doubt the boasts about his impending demise could be real. Soldiers joked, though they often pushed the boundaries of propriety. Sith and other practitioners of the Dark Side were driven by passion and aggression. If he stepped the wrong way, he could find himself very, very dead.

“Well you best say something, Raleien,” Kamjin whispered. “They’re getting restless.”

Raleien agreed. He cleared his throat in that formal, unnecessary way to get the group’s attention. They fell silent again, watching him.

“My name’s Raleien Sonavarret, and unlike most of my people, I’m no good with words. Before going further, I have no doubt that most, perhaps all of you could carve me up like a womprat without a second thought, though I might ask you to hold off before roasting me over the spit.”

He was surprised to get a series of chuckles from the joke. His confidence renewed, he continued.

“Allow me to be blunt. I’m not here to rule any of you through sheer force of will or brute strength. In fact, I am not here to rule you at all. That’s the Empress’s job. What I’m here to do is *command* you,” he paused for emphasis, smacking his left fist into the palm of his right hand.

“I have seen war most of my sixty odd years. And like those of you around my age, I have lived to tell the tale, and to learn from my experiences. I’ve won battles thought unwinnable. I’ve won small wars by making the hard choices no one else could and keeping my head. I’ve followed orders even when I nearly died in the process. Through this fire and brimstone I got a knack for strategy and tactics. I will now provide these services willingly, and gladly, to the Clan.

“Your strength lies with the Force. My strength is the art of war. The Proconsul has asked me here not to rule you, but to command you. I will place you all in harm's way on behalf of your Clan - our Clan - and I expect you to do your duty when that time comes. I will not hesitate to use each and every one of you. I will draw out every ounce of talent and skill you can provide to make sure that this Clan is protected and, if it comes to battle, that we’re victorious. To do this, I do not demand nor seek your respect. But through the seat of the Empress and Kamjin, who have seen fit to give me this post, I *will* demand your obedience on behalf of the Imperial Throne.”

Silence. No one stirred, and everyone stood staring at the Pantoran soldier in front of the Imperial throne. Each one of the House’s members were independently weighing and measuring Raleien’s words. Perhaps he had lied when he said he lacked the art of pretty words he knew his people were known for. But he didn’t deliver eloquence, like Pantoran government representatives. His was more akin to a commander’s speech to his troops before the start of a war. In a way, winning the loyalty of this House would be its own war, and this was the first of many battles to come.

“You’ll have it.”

The blond human man in the military uniform stepped forward from the crowd toward Raleien.

“That’s Dante, arguably one of the most respected and powerful among the House,” Kamjin whispered in Raleien’s ear.

Dante continued, “Now we know where you stand, and where we stand. Until such a time you prove your position is undeserved, you’ll have our obedience. Command us well.” Dante looked at Kamjin, nodded, and then spun and began to exit the Throne room.

There was nothing more to be said. Raleien wasn’t sure if he got through to each of them, and in truth he didn’t care. He had made the nature of his position clear. He served Kamjin and the Empress, and as Quaestor he spoke with their authority, not his own. He hoped that ease some of the potential jealousy they felt, knowing that Raleien didn’t view himself as a powerful individual, but rather as a vessel for the power of the Consul and Proconsul of the Clan. In the end, they all served the Clan, and he had helped them see that they were serving the Clan, and not the newly minted Pantoran Captain of the guard without access to their precious Force. But there would be more battles to come, he knew.

But not today.

“Good work, Captain. Now let’s get to work,” Kamjin said, following the dispersing crowd out of the throne room.

Today, Raleien knew he had to fulfill the bureaucratic responsibility which accompanied all positions of power in perpetuity: reading and filling out paperwork, and meetings with the boss.