**Ragnath, Caelestis City, Caelestis Spaceport**

**39 ABY**

The hour was late – or early if you were a creature of the dark. Twilight’s rising crescendo of light occupied the distant horizon, bathing the blue and green silhouette of Ragnath’s bonded satellite, Seraph. Abruptly, twilight ended in a brilliant, though still subdued, burst of light. The faint golden glow of early morning sunrise pierced the scattered clouds of Ragnath’s cerulean sky. It bathed Caelestis City in a soft, rising warmth which illuminated the bustling crowds going about their business. In a megalopolis the size of Caelestis City, there would never be a moment where at least a few million of its seventy or so million inhabitants would be causing a ruckus.

A ruckus is exactly what Raleien wanted to avoid, not only because he was escorting one of the highest-ranking members of the Scholae Empire, but also because he was still relatively new to the post of bodyguard for the Scholae Empire’s Grand Admiral. In his time in the former Galactic Empire as a T-K-Trooper, better known as Stormtroopers, he and his squad had been assigned all manner of tasks, including close protection – the fancy name for bodyguard duty. Yet never in his sixty-five odd years had he been assigned to protect a man that could probably cut down half the city in a rage, if he so desired. He had not expected to be swept up in politics and empire this late in his life, but the call of duty was something an old, grizzled soldier like him just couldn’t ignore.

That man was Kamjin Lap’lamiz, In comparison to Raleien’s rugged, relatively taller and more corpulent exterior, the human Adept looked decidedly average, if conventionally handsome, on first glance. Perhaps one could discern he was rich, too, based on the simple if finely cut robes he wore and the air of fine nobility he bore in his step and stance. Of course, take a second or third glance to notice the intricate conversion lightsaber attached to his robes or meet the deep, measuring olive eyes of a hardened warrior, folks would often disperse unless they lacked any semblance of common sense.

Of course, in a crowded spaceport, it really didn’t matter how rich or important someone was. Perhaps the only person on this urbanized terrestrial moon that could part a crowd is the Empress herself. Either you had a battalion of troopers, you were the Empress herself, or you dealt with the realities of city living. Kam’jin could have brought along an entire company of troopers to make way but insisted it hadn’t been necessary for the task at hand this sunny morning. Instead, he had selected Raleien, who he had often co-opted in recent days for personal duties, and one squadron of handpicked troopers to form a tight circle around him. The Pantoran soldier suspected it was because the Sith warrior could maintain the semblance of being a part of the crowd, without the need to worry about navigating the crowds and being jolted to and fro.

“Not much farther, folks!” Lap’lamiz shouted over the din of hawkers and other shopkeepers crying their wares. Kamjin pointed up the broad avenue of the current upper level of the spaceport that they occupied.

“At the end of this section, on the eastern side! Come on.” He gestured forwards, and the soldiers dressed in plain gray robes, sidearms and daggers followed, maintaining their close but casual formation around their commander.

They passed through the crowd without incident and reached their destination, which was a few hundred metres further north on their level. Eventually, they came to the door of a large complex in the spaceport. Raleien surveyed the establishment with keen golden eyes, looking for signs of danger with a few other members of the squad. And that’s when he saw where they were.

“This is a cruise line, Lord Lap’lamiz,” Raleien said as he turned to face Kamjin.

“Very *astute*, Lieutenant,” Kamjin replied with a grin.

He offered no further explanation, forcing Raleien to press further.

“What is our purpose in coming here?”

“You’ll see in a moment.” Kamjin nodded his head toward the interior of the cruise line offices.

A short, stocky Duros man in well cut coat and trousers seemed to hobble in his girth across the floor toward the door. He was not surprised to see Kamjin and his companions, leading Raleien to conclude that they were expected. The Loyalist sighed, but then returned to his focus. What was this man up to?

“Aah, Lord Lap’lamiz,” the Duros man said in a thick accent as he executed a flawless bow fit for a throne room.

“Eivan, good to see you. Is everything prepared?”

“Everything, my lord. To the letter!” Eivan, their Duros host and caretaker, responded in his thick Core Worlds accent.

Kamjin rubbed his hands together vigorously. “Excellent! And my things?”

“My lord, they’re already packed, as you had requested.”

“You’re a gem, Eivan.” Kamjin turned, surveying his bodyguards with a mischievous smile. “Troops, we’re all going on holiday. Our ship awaits.”

Raleien was stunned. They were *what*? Vacation? It had been mere weeks since the chaos of Dandoran and the aftermath of that encounter which had ripped across the galaxy. And now they were expected to escort this nobleman on his vacation? But he hadn’t said *his* vacation.

“Sir, you said *our* vacation. Do you mean –“

“You know, Lieutenant, you’re quicker than you look.”

“I’ve been told I look a bit like boulder, my Lord.”

Kamjin laughed heartily. “More of a Dorian passion fruit, but a boulder works.”

Raleien chuckled. He knew he wasn’t much to look at. Thick arms and chest, a grizzled, war-torn dark blue skin, and a corpulent frame. Beside the Grand Admiral he really did look like a spotty fruit or a jagged rock. But the Pantoran knew while he wasn’t built to look pretty, he was built to look dangerous.

“To your point though, yes,” Kamjin continued, “All of us here are due for some rest. Empress’s strict orders.”

“Is that wise, Grand Admiral?” Raleien asked.

The human man paused, meeting the Pantoran’s gaze with his own.

“Are you referring to our recent encounters off-world?”

Raleien nodded.

Kamjin placed his right hand on Raleien’s shoulder as he looked up into the older Pantoran’s eyes with his own sure gaze.

“Based on reports, something big is brewing. And we need to be fresh to face it. So, we’ll follow our orders and take the rest. Five days of it in a resort on Seraph.” He looked about the entire squad, catching each of their gazes, before turning back to Raleien. “Understood?”

A chorus of “Yes, sirs!” and salutes answered the Grand Admiral and he nodded, content with the response.

But something knowing had passed between Kamjin and his under officer. Raleien felt like the Sith Elder knew more about him then he let on publicly. Perhaps he had heart rumors about his *troubles*, as he called them. Dreams filled with screams of the dying and moans of the injured just beyond the muzzle of his blaster. Moments of hesitation in battle. Overwhelming emotions of anxiety and guilt appearing out of the blue and paralyzing him with shame. Shaking hands before battle. Some called it battle shock.

“All right, Eivan. To the shuttle!”

**Seraph, Nayama Islands, Grand Anantara Resort**

**39 ABY**

*5 hours later*

“Are you *serious*?!” Raleien shouted, enraged.

Kamjin had long since departed to his executive suite, leaving the remainder of his squad to be escorted to their rooms by Eivan. They had been led down a level to a single, medium sized suite suitable for a group of two to four people. The trouble was, they were a dozen lightly armed soldiers, each with their own bags of equipment and clothing for their supposedly relaxing trip.

“I’m sorry, but this is your room. It says so right here,” Eivan huffed, pointing at his trusted datapad.

“We’re at the best resort on this planet but a few soldiers can’t even have a few rooms to themselves?” Shouted one of the other squad members, a reliable Twi’lek sergeant by the name of Okee.

Eivan shook his head, clearly flustered with the encounter. “Lord Lap’lamiz had everything, and I mean *everything* arranged personally. And this is what he had asked for!”

“What was it I had asked for?”

The group turned to see Kamjin, dressed in flowing beige and gold embroidered robes suitable for the tropical, jungle-laden climate of the beautiful Nayama Islands.

“Your troops here are a little taken aback by their accommodations,” Eivan said, wiping his brow with a dirty handkerchief held in hands that looked akin to swollen boils.

Kamjin ran a hand through well groomed brown hair as he examined the well furnished and architecturally beautiful, yet clearly undersized suite in silence. Then he turned to his squad, looking puzzled.

“I don’t really see the problem here. It’s an amazing room!”

“With two beds, my Lord,” Okee grumbled.

“They have cots! And I made sure that your field cots were packed as well.”

“Lord Grand Admiral, we mean no offense.” Raleien paused, thinking of how to explain their predicament delicately to the aristocratic man before continuing in his deep, grumbling baritone. “It’s just – well, when we’re told were going on leave, we aren’t expecting to live like soldiers. We were expecting to, uh… live it up a little.”

Kamjin didn’t respond to Raleien. Instead, he turned to Eivan and said, “Everythings in order here. Be off with you, Eivan.” The Sith held up a hand to forestall any further protest from his troops. They were all silent.

“A pleasure doing business with you, my Lord.” Eivan bowed once more, glared at Raleien and the others in contempt before walking as briskly as his paunchy frame would allow down the hall and out of sight.

“Let me show you something,” Kamjin said, gesturing for the squad to follow them into the room.

They trailed after the noble Sith warrior, a group of soldiers who collectively had no clue in the galaxy what was going on. They saw the same small but beautiful suite they had been assigned all around them. But Kamjin pressed on, into one of the two decently sized bedroom. He stopped in front of one of the closets and opened the door. He stepped inside, placed his hands delicately in one of the shelves, and suddenly the wall beyond opened into another space. Raleien, at the front of the squad, could see a lit pathway of stairs.

“This, friends, leads into an executive suite adjacent to mine. Each of you will have your own room to yourself, and plenty of space to wander. I have booked the entire upper floor for us.”

“I’m – what?” Okee asked, aghast.

Kamjin snorted. “It’s not exactly for you, trooper. You see, I may have some friends, but I also have some enemies. The best way to avoid this mess is to book the whole floor and forget about it. There’s also a mobile command station located in the primary suite adjacent to mine, meaning you can carry out light close protection duties on my person.”

“I’m sorry we doubted you, Grand Admiral,” Raleien said. He bowed his head, abashed at his previous behaviour. “It was selfish of us to do so.”

Kamjin waved his hands dismissively. “No, no. That was part of it!. I’m not one of those Inquisitorius folk, but I know enough about spy craft to know that the best lies are those told using the truth. Your reaction was perfect! It sold the story to Eivan.”

“I thought Eivan may have been trustworthy if you were doing business –“

“Trooper Okee, remember when I say this: anyone who works purely for credits will *never* be trustworthy. Mercs, bounty hunters, many of them could be more trustworthy than our dear friend Eivan. His code is cash. He’ll take it from anywhere, and anyone, at any time. His service is hospitality and his primary, but not solitary means of getting paid. He would sell us out to someone else in a heartbeat.”

Raleien nodded, following the twisted clandestine logic of the scheme as it was explained.

Kamjin clapped.

“Anyway, we’re not here to worry about dying. Let’s drink!”