**Kast-Coral Penthouse**

**Tokare**

**Three Days after the attack on Caelestis City.**

The planning and hosting of a major sporting event takes a considerable amount of time. Such large gatherings necessitate the coordination of a vast team of event coordinators, corporate sponsors, city officials, and venue representatives. What he had planned was a considerable undertaking in any political climate, but to execute this grand scheme in the middle of a civil war and on such short notice would take a miracle. When it comes to miracles, there is an unspoken threshold cultural and political power, combined with wealth, wherein miracles are no longer prayed for. They are simply bought.

Emily’s eyes went wide as she poured over the actualized cost report. The amounts on the invoices from local security firms were practically extortionate and the grease that needed to be applied to the local politicians and clerks approving the permits were quadruple what Sal-Mal Repulsor spent on legislative lubrication annually. Of all the expenses, the paltry purse of one million credits for the victor of the title fights was the only one that seemed low.

“Thran, my love, you have to understand...” she began.

“I do.” He said calmly, slipping the fine suit jacket from his shoulders and tossing it on the chair in the corner of the room.

“Well, I hope you know that this will need to come out of your pocket. The company cannot bury this amount of money in its books. We’re already overinflated.” Emily said, trying her best not to scold him.

“Yes, darling. I know.” He said, walking to the window to overlook the city of Tokare.

“Aren’t you worried about that? Did you even look at how much this cost?” she said, tapping her finger at the digits at the bottom of the report.

“No...and no.” he said, chuckling to himself.

“Thran...” she said, trying her best not to begin on a lecture about basic economic principles and fiscal responsibility.

“What?” he said, looking back over his shoulder at her.

“Well...” She bit her tongue, careful to find some positives “It was a lovely event...and we were able to get a tentative deal on the Quadranium mining rights. So, I guess it was worth the investment.” She said, faking a smile.

“You didn’t even look at the final profit margin statement.” He said, unbuttoning the top three buttons of his shirt.

“You’re right. I didn’t. Let’s have a little look at that right now.” She looked down at the datapad, swiping over to the appropriate page. She laughed to herself.

“Oh, I am sorry. Were you expecting that number to be red?” Thran said, smugly.

“Babe...It’s forty-seven credits.” She laughed.

“What color is it? I just don’t know. The suspense is killing me.” He teased

“Black. But babe this is just a projection.” She sighed.

“Yes. And a conservative one, or so I am told. Don’t you see what this means?” he asked.

“No. I don’t. Please...elucidate me.” She said, pushing back her chair from the desk.

“With pleasure. The rather...expedient nature of the planning of this event contributed to the increased costs. When this pesky civil war wraps up, we’ll be able to establish a regular pattern of events. Without the aforementioned additional costs, we have a highly profitable revenue stream. With, mind you, the added benefits of publicity for the company and the Empire at each event. Then, I press the Imperial coffers, via Kamjin’s new propaganda ministry, the Mission or whatever he’s calling it, to pay the up-front costs. It becomes a cash bantha in no time!” He began.

“Ok. I get it. But, to what end? We both know this isn’t about the money.” She said, cutting him off.

“I am so glad you’ve asked. Tiever has dug his heels in after that little debacle with the missile strike. Something about how the instability of relations between the Namaya and the Elayans being cause for concern in developing new industry. He’s so terribly shortsighted. I should have killed him when I had the chance. Alas, that time has passed. So, we’ll need to take a more...aggressive...approach to getting the Mining Consortium on board. That, my dear, will require that we have far greater cultural gravity and lots of money. Winning the hearts and minds of people with entertainment is a sure-fire way to get them to look the other way when we squeeze out Tiever and all those other robber barons. Plus, the money will be good and clean, mostly. I mean the Force knows these people need distractions from their miserable lives.”

“Don’t you think planning a hostile takeover of Elayan mining interests will bring more heat on you? With this civil war escalating by the minute, things are sure to get more dangerous. Do I need to remind you that just last week you were nearly blown up in a missile strike? And what about the UCE and the Namayan concerns? Neither are on board.” she said, tempering her anger.

“Oh, be still. “ he said, tipping over the carafe of dark liquid into a nearby tumbler. “The UCE answer to only the only authority they know; their own greed. Once we consolidate our grip on the manufacturing and resources markets, they will have no choice. To not join would be cutting themselves out final pot. They’ll join. The Dynasty surrendered their economic authority, the moment their so-called Queen chose martyrdom. When they all fall in line, the system major industrial concerns will all be operated by us.”

“And what happens when the Clan comes knocking and just takes everything? Your plan will be for naught.” She said.

“Unless that was part of the plan.” He said, tipping back his two finger pour of Namana Cognac. “See, Kamjin thinks he’s clever. He’s pushed this war, in secret, since Shadow was still on the throne. He thought people wouldn’t notice. I’ll give him credit; it was a clever little plan.”

“You can’t be serious.” She said.

“I don’t know the whole angle, but there is enough there for me to put the picture together. The old man has skeletons in his closet. He tried to bury most of them. Wise, I’ll admit. But these things have a nasty habit of coming back around.” Thran continued, pouring another drink.

“How do you know that?” She asked.

“We’ll say...personal experience. But, I have evidence. Did you really think Rayne and I were just defacing his office and stealing furniture for the fun of it?” Occasus inquired.

“Honestly, yes...” she said, enraptured by his unwraveling of the vast web he’d laid.

“Well, It was fun. But, that was not the reason for it all. I certainly didn’t need a new desk for myself. Besides, the man has horrible taste...Oak with brass? What is this, the High Republic Era? Let me paint a picture, my love. Imperial Intelligence went silent shortly after he took the position of Proconsul. Surely that must be coincidence and not that they’ve been too busy burying things for the new Emperor. You know, sweeping things under rugs, losing things in asteroid fields. That kind of thing. Logically then, any dirt on him had to be held in personal effects. He certainly didn’t make it easy to find. Ergo, the routine infiltration of his office. The stolen desks were just a distraction. It hit me around the time I found his wittle blankie in the vault. The old man so terribly sentimental about his youth. Such powerful emotions tied to his family, guilt of things done and things left undone from when he was a younger man...Those dead and those still breathing. Turns out...One of those piles of bones was buried in a terribly shallow grave and is working for the other side. A son who fancies himself a Jedi, of all things.”

“Now, He’s firmly earned the Viceroy’s blind obedience. He has a hold on the Empire. It’s the perfect time to move. Tie up all those loose ends. Now, the retired Empress, the only one who would have had unrestricted access to all of those intelligence files gets snatched up by some mercenaries? That’s a strange coincidence, don’t you think?” he said, leaning on the bar.

“I still don’t get it. What is your angle?” Emily said plainly.

“Ambition often has a way of creating strange blind spots in one’s ability to see what is happening around them. I’ve been feeding him ideas for months. Damn fool likes to tamper with other’s minds, but hasn’t the clarity of vision to perfect his own defenses. Getting in there myself was like taking clams from a Gungan. He’s doing half my work for me. I’ll sit on the pain that he’s taking credit for advancing the Empire. I can live with that.” Thran said with a grin so sharp that could split a blaster bolt.

“You see” he continued. “Zxyl is always watching. He sees the acquisitions. As much of a pesky little thorn as he is, the Regent is no moron. He’ll wait move on me until I have all the pieces in hand. Smoking blaster, so to speak. Then he can take me right to the Justicar. Hell, the Mando bastard would take me to the Grandmaster himself if he could. Or he might just swipe the entire racket for the Brotherhood itself. We wait on the last piece, the Balaerion thorolide Mines...The Clan takes the business, they take the assets...I let the little birdies keep telling him to expand, that Balaerion is rich with untapped resources. Then under the Clan banner they get the last piece. Then Zxyl has to move. Regent and duty and all that. The clan takes the heat. They’ll drag the Consul to trial, not me. I was acting on orders from the Emperor. I’m innocent, don’t you see? I didn’t go to that meeting in Corcova on my own volition, it was the will of the Emperor. So, I play nice, I cooperate. For now. I run his little Imperial Mission. I saddle up beside him. I’ve already got the Palpatines in my pocket. Then, I continue to spoon feed him into building my enterprise. When the time comes, Kamjin will burn along with his filthy Jedi progeny.” He said, tipping the bottle into his glass again.

“But what about the material? The mines...our construction project?” she asked.

“Caperion is but one system. Resources here are not a plentiful as it would seem. The mining and the manufacturing businesses serve to merely open the doors to other systems. When we reach out to the greater sector and region, I’ll actually have all of the resources. And there will be no one who can interfere. The Regent doesn’t have jurisdiction outside of the Caperion System. We can build quicker and we need not worry with the trifling politics of the Brotherhood. And with Kamjin disgraced and locked away in the Justicar’s vault, I reclaim my rightful throne. All of this...The years of planning is just phase one.” He said, crossing back over the room with his glass in hand.

“So, what comes next?” she said, standing from the desk and traversing the office floor to join him.

“Well. Rayne will come knocking soon. The Viceroy has been sending out pings constantly for the last day. I’ve timed her arrival with the fight. She’ll pull me away from the event. We will leave immediately. Cap and the boys already have all the intel on our little rescue mission. You do your thing with whomever was wise enough to accept our kind invitation. When I return, we must go to Huisan. The Namaya dance on the edge of ruin. The last pieces of the puzzle are there. We find Kamjin’s secrets and set the stage for the Elayan hogs to sell. Everything else will slot into place.” He said, lifting his arm to rest on her shoulder.

“Then?” she asked, resting her head on his arm.

“Phase two begins.” He said.

**Huican Spaceport**

**Seraph**

**Two Days Later**

The Lambda-Class Shuttle touched down with fluid grace. The hydraulic arms of the landing gear depressed as the full weight of the vessel came to rest on the ground. Billowing clouds of vapor erupted from the regulator valves, signaling that the loading ramp would soon open. A sharp hiss broke the relative silence among the Namayan National Guard standing as the welcoming party. Whirring actuators spun to life and the ramp below the shuttle’s primary hull descended.

Among the group of twenty or so who had gathered to welcome the representatives from Clan Scholae Palatinae were two lesser lords. The aristocracy of the Namayan people had been thrust into feverous jockeying for political position since the self-immolation and martyrdom of Queen Hui Jia. With the head of the Namayan dynasty gone, the various powers that hoped to unseat the de facto successor in House Sato had gone to extraordinary length to explore any option which may advance their position. Once such extraordinary option was this meeting.

House Thao and House Yasaan were widely regarded as midlevel players in the aristocracy. Both stood to gain heavily from this meeting. Kata Yasaan and Bin-Xiao Thao, the representatives of each respective house, were unsure who would emerge from the vessel. In their limited previous experience with Clan Scholae Palatinae, the Sith they had engaged with had ranged from cold-blooded killers to full blown psychopaths. Yasaan, the younger of the two, was struck immediately when his eyes were able to catch a glimpse of their contact. He turned to the other emissary from House Thao, raising an eyebrow and gently nudging her attention upon the figure.

He emerged from the vessel, laughing casually with the members of his entourage. The party of twelve was comprised of six personal security agents. They wore black armor that was reminiscent of the old Galactic Empire’s elite soldiers, without the helmets. Two blonde women were among the group, one of which stood in close proximity to the party leader. An alien, of some canid race, stood behind them. He meticulously poured through a data pad. Another individual, modestly dressed in a professional pantsuit, at the Canid’s side. The last member of the entourage was a Twi’lek girl, her pale yellow-green skin stood out among the predominantly human group.

Everything about his demeanor and presence was magnetic. All eyes were drawn to him. His eyes swept over the amassed crowd, assessing as if he were a predator. The lean man turned back to a beautiful blonde woman at his side, whispering something to her. She smiled to herself. His stride was large and it allowed them to cross the distance in a short time. It appeared incumbent upon the others to keep up with him.

“House Thao welcomes you to Namaya.” Bin-Xiao said, bowing slightly and opening her hands in a presenting gesture.

“House Yasaan also welcomes you.” Kata frantically added.

“You must be Bin-Xiao and you must be Kata.” He said, pointing to each as he recited their names.

It was not customary in this area of Seraph to call someone by their first name on first meeting. Kata was more enamored than offended at being called by name. Bin-Xiao was more of a traditionalist and her displeasure with his brazenness was apparent.

“Please excuse my forwardness, Lady Thao. I meant no offense. I am unfamiliar with many of your nation’s customs. If you would overlook this transgression, it would be most gracious of you. I hope that my visit will correct my ignorance of your people and their traditions and allow us to build a fruitful relationship.” The actor said, bowing his head slightly. “Please allow me to make a formal introduction.”

“I am Derc Kast, Son of House Kast, sired of Callus of House Kast. I come to you as a formal representative of the Imperial Mission of Scholae Palatinae. To my left, my wife, Emily Coral, Chairman and CEO of Sal-Mal Repulsor. To her left, Saris Aran, my business manager. To Emily’s right, Maarel Vencos, her personal secretary. And to my right, K’vin, my legal representative. We thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to meet with us. We come in the spirit of understanding and offer to you and your people any aid we can offer.” Thran said, gesturing to each of them.

Each member of his immediate retinue stepped forward, bowed slightly and exchanged a subtle handshake. Their hosts were people of prestige. All were better mannered than the core member of the group. Apologies would be made on his behalf and small gifts passed over. The gifts included a gilded bottle of Namana Cognac, a finely crafted metallic sculpture of the Scholae Palatinae’s Imperial cog, and a scroll case clad in fine red leather with delicate designs of dragons, swords and suns embossed upon it.

“Lady Thao, please excuse my husband’s uncouth behavior. I have come to represent Sal-Mal Repulsor, my husband, and myself. I ask that you accept these gifts as a symbol of good faith.” Emily said.

Bin-Xiao nodded, acquiescing to her introduction and presentation of gifts. Her soft blue eyes scanned the noblewoman. The representative of House Yasaan watched Emily inspect the elaborate silk kimono worn by this counterpart. Her gaze traced the outlines of the elaborate flowers and wading birds that comprised the pattern of the gown. Her soft smile suggested that she admired the noblewoman’s finely made clothing. Kata would make note of this for the customary gifts that were exchanged at the conclusion of a first meeting.

“Mr. Kast, it is with the utmost honor that we receive you. I am Bin-Xiao Thao, fifty seventh Marchioness of House Thao, Daughter of Xin Thao, fifty sixth Marquis of House Thao, Commander of the Namayan National Guard.”

“And I, Mr. Kast, am Kata Yasaan, fourteenth Baron of House Yasaan, Sired of Hiro Yasaan, Thirteenth Baron of House Yasaan, Under-Minister of Production and Adjunct Ambassador to Elaya. It is with the most esteemed pleasure that I receive you.” The younger Noble said, as he stepped forward and bowed.

“Is this your first visit to Namaya?” Bin-Xiao stated.

“It is. I have been told of the long history of your people, their dedication to the arts, martial prowess, and industriousness. I am incredibly eager to get to know the fine people of Namaya. It is quite an honor to be here.” Thran replied.

“Mr. Kast, if I may, the honor is ours. I am an incredible fan of your work. *The Rog Draft* is one of my most favorite holofilms. An artist such as yourself will perhaps find many kindred spirits among our people. I have many questions I would love to ask you, but I will save them until we have come to better know one another. Might I instead inquire, have you been on Seraph long?” Kata interjected, barely able to contain his excitement.

“Oh, my goodness. You are too kind.” The actor said, playing coy about the man’s proclamation of his fandom. “I have been on Seraph for some time. Emily and I maintain a residence in Tokare. When we heard about the woes of the people after the last war, we decided that we simply must do what we can to help them. We came to Seraph and kind of fell in love with it. The people of Tokare are so resilient, to bounce back from war like the have is truly astonishing. We hope that while we are here, we can perhaps find a way in which we can aid your people.”

“Perhaps we can discuss that when you’ve become better acquainted with our nation and our customs. For now, let us come to know each other better. We have arranged for a tour of the Huisan. We will provide you with accommodation for the duration of your visit, as is customary.” Bin-Xiao said, as she gestured for the party to follow.

The collective group of representatives of Namaya and Scholae Palatinae traversed the landing pads and refueling stations of the spaceport. As they left the utilitarian space of the cargo and passenger terminal, they were welcomed to the city limits with a massive wooden gate. It was constructed of two massive wooden beams, held aloft by two pillars. The top of third of the upper beam had been fitted with dark green grey slate shingles. The wood, which must have originated from massive trees, had been painted a vibrant shade of red. Complex joinery had been used to fit the pieces together without the need for conventional construction adhesives or fasteners. No doors protected the entranceway, but instead the gate seemed to be a symbolic portal into the market precincts of the city.

The group was ushered to a set of three awaiting landspeeders. The lesser members of the party joined the aristocrats waiting staff members in a second vehicle. Derc and Emily joined their hosts in the lead vehicle. The craft zoomed off into the city, through a maze of wood, paper and gold leaf. The buildings of Huican were so very different than those found in Tokare or Elaya. Instead of towering skyscrapers, each residence was a masterpiece of architecture in their own right. Huican was a sprawling labyrinth of alleys and avenues, which was full of life. Trees with brilliant pink flowers formed rows along certain key thoroughfares. The mass of buildings was routinely broken by gardens and ponds.

“What a beautiful city...” Emily remarked.

The aristocrats seemed to take turns as they pointed out landmarks and important cultural districts. They were offering a crash course on Namayan history, indulging in the pleasant routine of displaying their national pride. The journey took a leisurely pace through the city as they made their way to the outskirts of the city.

**Outskirts of Huican**

**Furetaka Tea House**

**One month Later**

“KANPAI!” shouted Kata.

“KANPAI!” Derc chanted in reply.

The fine porcelain cups clinked together and the two men tossed back the shot of grain wine. Kata wiped the spillage from the corner of his mouth. The pair had been drinking in the teahouse for hours. The Baron’s status among his peers had risen dramatically and they were celebrating that fact. The Namayan’s face was flush with the rosy color of drunkenness. His compatriot was not showing the same signs of intoxication. His youth was full of debauches a thousandfold greater than this casual drinking competition in a quiet tavern. Experience and a well-seasoned liver allowed him to maintain his head. He played up the moment anyhow.

The two men had become fast friends since Derc’s first arrival in Huisan. Weeks of wining and dining, attending art gallery premieres, local theater performances, and legitimate business discussions had been beneficial for both. The result of this corporate courting was that House Yasaan had openly accepted Scholae Palatinae’s assistance in resolving the matter of the Seraphii civil war. Several other minor houses had also bought into the promises that Scholae Palatinae had brought to Huisan.

Between negotiations, the Sith representative had been strategically molding the minds of the aristocracy. A quick meeting in private would begin with a reticent desire to advance a Houses position and would end with a Count or Baron touting the virtues of security, stability and prosperity that would be brought to Namaya by Scholae Palatinae. Not a soul among them had recognized that the beloved Holovid star that whispered in their ears was actively undermining the hierarchy of peerage with their nation.

“I tchose thish playsh becows it fannnnncy. So fanshy that old schmelly Ssssato even comes here. Shee supposed to come toniiight.” Kata said between burbles and hiccups.

“Yes, my friend, and how well you’ve done getting us reservations. You’ve brought Sato right to me, exactly as I asked. What an excellent friend you are. The Empire will be sure that House Yasaan sees the benefits that come with fealty.” Derc said, pouring himself another sip of grain wine into his small cup.

“Fer der Empaaah!” Kata said, nearly shouting.

The crowd of the teahouse had grown increasingly quiet as the head of House Yasaan grew more drunk. Patrons came and went as the hours of drinking continued. Derc, or as he was known to the people of Scholae Palatinae, Thran, outlasted Kata, who had drunk to the point of conscious unconsciousness. The small man had rested his head on the low table where they sat. He sang to himself, unintelligible words. Thran looked back over his shoulder, watching as several panicked waiters and waitresses hurried into a private room. They slipped behind the sliding door that separated the private salons from the main drinking hall.

He smiled at the barman, slipping a stack of credit chits across the lacquered wooden counter. The Sith stood up from his drinking post, patting his friend on the back. The barman nodded. He raised a hand to alert the other staff, who quickly and quietly began to usher their patrons out of the teahouse.

The Sith moved silently, his boots had been left at the front door. The mats on the floor deadened the sound of his steps. He approached the private room. He could sense the calm beating hearts of all eight people inside. Three were the staff members he’d seen just moments ago, who were undoubtedly tending to the nobles wild requests.

He admired for a moment the craftsmanship of the fine Kumiko patterns built into the eight panels of each wall section. It had taken months to construct this single wall. The Namaya were a people that understood that patience and attention to detail made simple things, like a sliding door, much more important. He smiled. His practiced art was deception and the same rules applied. He could see shadows of the people within through the mulberry paper that backed each panel. Three grew larger as the serving staff approached the exit.

The door creeped open. He was face to face with a short, round-faced man who gasped upon seeing him. Panicked, the three servants ran. The guards who had been attending to Leah Sato’s private meeting drew their blasters.

Thran extended a hand, ripping their weapons free from their grips. His lightsaber erupted with a tormented howl. A burning lance of bronze flame pierced through the torso of the closest man. The Sith took in a sharp breath, as if to breath in his victim’s soul as it vacated his body. Before the first could hit the floor, the second man was cleft from shoulder to hip. His smoldering torso fell into a tidy pile atop the first.

Leah Sato, betrayer of the House of Hui, appointed ruler of Namaya turned to flee. Her heart fluttered as she found herself unable to move. No matter how she tried, she could not fight against the unseen strength that held her fast. She watched as the severed head of her third guard rolled to a stop at her feet. She gasped.

“Leah Sato. I trust you know who I am and why I have come.” He said. “I will keep this brief. Tell me where I can find Nebulon and Lanis. Your cooperation would be much obliged.”

She stammered for an answer. Fear sunk its talons into the depth of her heart. This man, beautiful as he was, appeared as devilish as the oni of Namayan folklore. She could not speak. A voice, haunted and full of venom, took center stage in the play that was her inner mind. Her own thoughts were lost in its chilling words.

The other two individuals sat calmly. They watched on with horror as the Sith tortured their mistress’ mind. Seconds felt like hours. The two heads of Namayan government averted their eyes. Leah felt the grasping tendrils of the Sith’s presence stripping the secrets from her mind. She was helpless to stop it. She gasped as the presence suddenly vacated her mind. He had taken everything; memories from her childhood, the process of coercing Queen Hui Jia, the location of her co-conspirators, everything.

“Well, well.” Thran said. “You were brave to think you could liberate your people. Starting a war, banking on the strength of Namaya’s soldiers...But you were foolish to have turned against the Empire. You and I both know...Wars are fought on battlefields, but they are won in private rooms and business meetings.”

“Please don’t do this.” She said as tears began to stream down her face.

“Consider it a courtesy, Lady Sato. I could just as easily turn you over to the people of Namaya. Though, I suspect they would not give the same courtesy to a traitor as I would.”

“I had no choice.” She cried.

“Then your will is weaker than I had been led to believe...And there is no clemency for lacking the courage of one’s convictions. Goodbye, Miss Sato.” He said, cold as stone.

He raised his hand, extending his reach through the Force around her neck. Her feet kicked slightly and her eyes rolled back into her skull. He closed his fist in one quick motion. The snap of bone echoed through the teahouse. Leah Sato, high traitor to the Namayan Dynasty collapsed onto the tatami mats; dead. The Sith disengaged his lightsaber and the humming roar of its blade silenced. He turned to the two remaining souls.

“Yukan Ishii, of House Ishii. Wan Xi, of House Xi. The Empire thanks you for your service. We shall call on you again soon.” He said.