

“Get him up.”

A pair of hulking metal pincers pulled Ellac off the ground by his shoulders, his feet dangling in the air. Blood trickled from his nose, running down over his mouth and dripping from his chin onto the arms of the hauler droid that held him.

“You know, it’s not everyday someone breaks into my hideout, lays waste to my defenses, and kills my men,” A voice spoke from somewhere behind the droid. “But it’s even rarer that someone does it carrying one of these.”

The droid’s servos wheezed as it turned toward the voice so that Ellac could see his lightsaber held in the hands of the man who spoke. He knew the Devaronian’s face well from seeing it plastered on bounties and gang graffiti, the leader of the Gruesome Gundarks, O’mar Poto.

Ellac spat a bit of blood that had run into his mouth as he looked up at the self-proclaimed “Pirate King”, sitting on his throne which looked to be pieced together from an array of disassembled droid parts and a seat taken from the cockpit of a ship. On either side of the throne stood two chromium statues of O’mar, raising a sword to the air in an triumphant stance. “Well done Pato, you’ve taken my lightsaber. Bring it over here and I’ll show you how to use it.”

O’mar smirked, turning the weapon in his hands. “I appreciate the offer, but unfortunately I’ll have to decline,” he said, laying back into his “throne”, crossing his heel over his other knee.

“I wasn’t asking.” Ellac looked back at the droid that grasped him, letting out a sharp whistle.

On command, the Sith’s ID-9 seeker droid dropped down onto the hauler unit from a grate in the ceiling. Blue electrical arcs shot out from a prod on the ID-9 into the larger droid’s processor.

The hauler seized as sparks flew from its circuits, trembling in place before slumping forward. Ellac dropped to the ground, ducking behind the fried hunk of metal to avoid the plasma bolts raining down on him from O’mar’s blaster.

The Devaronian fired as fast as he could, burning holes into the droid’s durasteel plating until his blaster overheated, steam drifting up from the red hot end of the weapon. “That’s a neat trick! But I’m afraid I’ve still got your lightsaber, and there aren’t many people who can stop a blaster bolt mid-air.”

“I don’t need to stop a bolt that you can’t fire.” Ellac extended his hands towards the hauler droid’s husk, concentrating the Force around its frame for a moment before sending it hurtling toward the pirate. O’mar dove to the side just before the droid crashed through his throne, his blaster clattering off to the side as he hit the ground.

O’mar scrambled to his feet, Ellac’s hilt still in the pirate’s grasp. “I don’t need a blaster, I have *this!*” The red blade ignited in the Devaronian’s hands, causing him to flinch.

“Then by all means, *try*,” Ellac sneered, spreading his hands in front of him, gesturing to the open floor between them.

The man let out a yell as he charged at the Sith, swinging the blade down over his shoulder with all of his weight.

Ellac redirected O’mar’s hands to the side, bringing his knee up into his attacker’s stomach. O’mar gasped, dropping to the ground as the Knight plucked the hilt from his hands. “And so falls the ‘Pirate-King’,” Ellac said, bringing the tip of his lightsaber to rest under O’mar’s chin. “Where can I find Sota?”

The Devaronian’s eyes went wide. “S-Sota? I can’t, no- I can’t.”

Ellac sighed, twisting his wrist, bringing his blade to singe O’mar’s shoulder. “Tell me where the Hutt is, Pato!”

O’mar yelped in pain, falling onto his back. “No way man, no way! Do you know what he’ll do to me if he finds out I snitched?”

Ellac stooped down, his mechanical arm shooting out to grab O’mar by the throat. “I will pull your bones apart at the joints if you don’t tell me where I can find Sota the Hutt!”

The pirate kicked and thrashed, gasping for air as he clawed at the metal hand around his neck, but refused to answer. His body twitched with one last convulsive jerk before going slack, the last of his air used up.

“Shame.” Ellac cast aside the vacant carcass, standing back up. “Ryku!,” he said with another sharp whistle.

His ID-9 floated over to him with a low binary hum, perching on his shoulder before crawling down to mount on his back.

The Knight clipped his lightsaber to his belt as he made his way back to the entrance of the lair. “Now we have to start all over.”

“Doot boo weep boop doo,” Ryku beeped out behind him.

“I don’t know yet. O’mar Pato was the last solid lead I had. With him dead, Sato will know someone’s poking around and he’ll slink back into his hole like the worm he is.”

“Boop wee doot?”

Ellac squinted as he emerged from the dim island hideout, the midday Sesid sun beaming down on his still-adjusting eye. “No, when we get back to Seraph, I want you to dig into Imperial records: Anything you can find on Hutt cartels, their known bases of operations, any involved business partners or associates... Sota can’t hide forever...”

The ringing chime of his holocommunicator interrupted his train of thought. Ellac slipped the discus device from his belt, the blue figure of his shuttle pilot flickering to life as he activated it.

“My Lord, you have an incoming transmission from *‘the Palpatine’*, Sir. This is a Priority One signal. Patching you through now.”

The blue image flickered out for a moment before shimmering back on, the image of the pilot now replaced with the Emperor himself, Kamjin Lap’lamiz.

Ellac nodded his head to the reigning member of the Empire, gritting his teeth as he pushed himself to follow protocol. “Emperor Lap’lamiz, this is a surprise.”

“No need for formalities, Ellac, though I’m pleased to see that you haven’t forsaken your manners.” Kamjin got that sly little smirk Ellac had come to realize only meant bad things for him.

“If this isn’t a formal summons, then what is it?” Ellac let his shoulders drop a little, releasing some of the tension in his body.

“I wanted to personally deliver the news to you. Clan Scholae Palatinae has been invited out to Club Antonia on Uluv to share a few drinks, make some wagers, and enjoy music from a special guest they’re bringing in for us.” Kamjin said, still smiling.

The corners of Ellac’s mouth curled down at the thought of spending all night in a bar subjected to the drunken hazing of his upper-clansmen. “Thanks but no thanks. I don’t like Cantina’s.”

“It wasn’t a request, *your Emperor commands it.*,” Kamjin said, folding his hand in front of him. “The Clan has been extended an invitation, one we would seem ungrateful for if we do not accept. *Don’t disappoint me, Ellac.*”

Ellac grit his teeth again as he begrudgingly accepted his new orders. “As you wish.”

“Splendid! I’m glad to see we understand each other.” Kamjin clapped his hands together. “Now if you’ll excuse me, there are a few matters that require my attention before the celebration tonight. I’ll leave you to get cleaned up,” he said, pointing at his nose and mouth implying the dried blood caked onto Ellac’s face.

Ellac’s hand instinctively reached up to touch his mouth.

Kamjin nodded and the hazy blue image fizzled out.

“Looks like we’re not going back to Seraph yet, Ryku.” Ellac walked over to the edge of the landing platform where his shuttle awaited him, dipping his sleeve into the water surrounding the island. “See if you can tap into the archives from the shuttle,” he said, walking back to the ship as he used his damp sleeve to wipe the blood from his face.

The pilots inside nodded at Ellac as he entered the cockpit. “My Lord, the Emperor transmitted this to you after you disconnected.” A picture of the official invitation to Club Antonio and a voucher for a free Hutt Horizon drink appeared above his holo communicator.

Ellac glared at voucher before deactivating the device again. “It seems we’re heading to Uluv. Set a course for the Caperion system.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

The engines roared as the Lambda shuttle lifted from the ground, the vertically folded wings extending down to the sides of the vessel as it shot off into the stars, leaving the Sesid island view behind them.

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The street outside the entrance to the club radiated with bright neon light that shone down from the lights above the door. Ellac could hear the bassy music booming from inside as he reluctantly approached the line of people waiting their turn to get in.

“Why am I doing this?,” He muttered to himself, before immediately hearing Kamjin’s words echo in his head, “*Don’t disappoint me.*”

With a deep sigh, Ellac bypassed the line of waiting patrons, drawing their hateful gazes as he approached the burly Cathar bouncer at the door. “My name is Ellac Conrat, I belong to Clan Scholae Palatinae,” he said, lifting the edge of his cloak to reveal the round metal insignia of the Imperial Cog hanging from his belt. He lifted his holoprojector, pulling up the invitation that Kamjin sent him. “I was told I’m expected.”

The Cathar grimaced, baring his fangs with a low growl as he pulled out a ticket from the roll in his hand. “Give them this at the bar for that free drink,” he said before letting the Knight pass.

Ellac nodded to the bouncer, accepting the ticket as he stepped inside, the smell of smoke and alcohol rushing to his nose as the booming music rattled his teeth. A bright violet light emanated from the high ceiling, illuminating the party scene that was Club Antonia.

To his right, he saw the overcrowded bar, a large area that receded into the wall. The long counter stretched across the entire length of the in-set room, serving as both a convenient place to grab a drink *and* the only thing separating the servers from the drunken mob that was their patrons.

At the far side of the Cantina lay the entertainer's stage, an angular platform that shared the space with the dining area and dance floor at the center of the room. The stage somehow glowed even brighter than the rest of the room, decorated with shimmering diamonds and neon tube lights that arched up from the base of one wall, across the ceiling, and down to the other side. An energetic band of musicians and dancers had taken the stage before Ellac arrived, and were playing an arrangement that had quickly become the source of the Sith's throbbing headache.

Adjacent to the stage and dance floor, to the left of the room, sat at least five rows of game tables and betting rings, which only seemed to attract more foot traffic as more people grabbed their drinks.

Ellac stood at the top of the steps that preceded the dining area, battling his deepest instinct to leave. He showed up, he made an appearance. Per Kamjin's orders, he fulfilled his requirement. But he knew that wasn't an option.

A hand on his shoulder interrupted his inner dialogue.

"Ellac! Didn't think you'd come." A man's voice said to his left.

The Knight turned his head, finding Reiden standing beside him. "If it was up to me, I wouldn't have."

"Kamjin?," Reiden asked knowingly.

"Who else?," Ellac said, watching as the band began their next song and the patrons on the dance floor shouted with excitement. Speaking of our Emperor, have you seen him?"

"No, I just got here. I saw Kah'ri outside but I think he stopped to talk to one of the other patrons and I haven't seen anyone else from the clan yet." Reiden said, looking back towards the entrance. After a moment, he turned back towards the bar. "Well, I'm going for a drink. Care to join me?"

"No, thanks. I'm gonna take a look around for the others," Ellac replied abruptly.

Reiden chuckled as he watched the Knight glare out into the crowd. "Suit yourself," he said with a shrug. "If you need me, you know where I'll be." The Adept pat Ellac's arm before making his way down to the bar.

The noise from the crowd melded with the music, echoing around the club until Ellac could feel the sound in his chest. "Just a few hours, Ellac. Just a few hours," he murmured, stepping down into the fray of drunks and spiced up patrons. As he pushed through the crowd, he reflexively caught a stray blue hand by the wrist as it reached out for his face. The drunk Twi'lek woman it was attached to pulled herself toward Ellac, fumbling over her own feet as his grip on her arm set her off balance.

"Chuba Uba. Choy oid uta-sha eye?," she mumbled, struggling to touch his eyepatch with her restrained hand.

From the corner of his eye, Ellac noticed three men he recognized sitting at a nearby table, completely losing it at the sight of the Twi'lek woman trying to grab his face.

Ellac growled, pushing her arm away, sending the woman stumbling back into the crowd to find someone else's face to grab. "Sykes, Thran... Kamjin," he said, nodding at the three at the table.

"Making new friends, I see," Kamjin laughed, raising a glass to the Knight as he approached the table. "Have a seat, young Conrat."

Sykes leaned forward, tapping his cigarette on the ashtray sitting on the table. "She seemed to like you, Ellac. You should've introduced yourself," he jeered.

"Hilarious," Ellac said, taking one of the empty chairs from the table.

"Don't be so touchy, no one likes an asshole," Sykes scolded, sticking his smoke back into his mouth. "Have a couple drinks. For tonight, relax."

Kamjin frowned at his empty glass, rattling the ice around. "Speaking of drinks, I'm going to go get another one. Ellac, give me that ticket for the free Hutt Horizon you got at the door," he said, reaching his hand out toward his subordinate.

"Why?" Ellac squinted at Kamjin, but still reached into his pocket to retrieve the ticket.

"Because you're going to have a drink and stop making the rest of us miserable. No one here wants to deal with your emotional constipation. Now give me the ticket."

Ellac reluctantly passed the piece of paper to the man, who took it, slipped off to the bar, and returned within minutes.

A tall glass of a hazy yellow liquid slid across, stopping in front of the Knight. The three men leaned forward, staring at Ellac until he grabbed the drink.

"Bottoms up," Kamjin said, raising his own as the four Imperials tipped their glasses up."