

The first things Mikhail noticed when he slowly gained consciousness was the sound of a vent fan behind him slowly spinning. It droned on and on, every third *whumf* of air accompanied with a slight squeak of a loose screw. It would have driven him mad, if he wasn't on the edge of consciousness. Something about it was wrong though. Why was he so tired? He recalled what he could.

He turned in a letter to his handler, notifying them of a week-long vacation - and that they shouldn't expect to hear back from him during the time off. He packed his things, sent them to the shipping facility and made his way through town to make his shuttle flight out of the system. But... where was he?

He tried to lift his head, but his neck muscles apparently hadn't yet gotten the memo that he was awake yet. With some coaxing, he shifted his head up a few degrees and immediately felt a twinge of pain on the side of his throat. The pain was a familiar one. A needle? An IV? Did the shuttle crash? His hands twitched, and while it felt like something was around both his wrists, they felt fine. No reason an IV shouldn't be there or in his forearm.

The usually quick witted Arkanian struggled to piece things together, infact, he hadn't even noticed that his eyes were closed this whole time. After some will power, his eyelid cracked open, revealing a blasting beam of light in his face that he immediately recoiled from. The full body jerk didn't exactly move him however. Restraints at his wrist, biceps, and ankles held him in place. He was sitting.

He ventured to crack his eye open again, the bright blue crystal orb fighting against the eye watering light to focus on details around him. Metal slab, wall, screen. The screen was just bright white, and bore a scratch along its surface. It was dotted with flecks of something, staining it various colors in small splotches. Green, brown, red, black. It was disgusting, and Mikhail squirmed in his skin just looking at how filthy it was.

His eye drifted around, up and down. He was staring at a wall with a screen mounted on it. He couldn't turn his head, nor move much at all. Finally, adrenaline kicked into him. Spiking his core with a shot of pain as his muscles jolted, straining against the restraints. He went to curse, and gagged. There was something in his mouth, like a putty. It was dry and ragged against his tongue, seemingly sapping the liquid from his mouth and keeping him effectively silent at the same time. It's like he had a mouthful of clay.

A click behind him caused his heart rate to spike. The sound of a door swooshing open and clean footsteps against metal tiles drew goosebumps across his body. He couldn't move, not even to look at what might be coming. His nails dug into the leather wrap of the arm of his chair, leaving small marks as he tried once more to flex everything he had.

It didn't work.

So he relaxed, all tension gone from his muscles. His eyes close as his breathing slows. Whatever was behind him was waiting, only light shuffling could be heard as they did something he couldn't see.

*It was happening again*

His body jerked slightly as something touched his head. A fist curled into his black hair, clenched and pulling his head back an inch against a wooden plank. His nose wrinkled and he hissed in pain. The sudden scent of overly sweet fruit hit his nose. *Perfume? Unlikely, it reeked.* Despite not being able to pin the scent down, it unsettled Mikhail.

“Open the eyes.” A dry voice croaked from behind him. The Arkanian didn't respond, or even acknowledge the voice. He was too busy mentally readying himself for what might come. Placed firmly in his mind palace, things would hurt him, but he wouldn't break. He knew this.

“Open. Eyes.” The voice rasped, a hiss rising in their voice.

Mikhail clenched his jaw and took a breath, then spoke through his teeth. “Get it over with Schut-“ he was interrupted by the hand pushing his head forward until his throat was caught by the strap holding him there. He was then pulled back, head slamming into the wooden plank. He coughed on reflex, arms wanting to grab at his neck but unable.

The hand in his hair shifts to his face. He felt scaled, claws. They dug into his brow, and a warm trickle slipped down the side of his face, following his jawline. “Open. Or I rip out.”

With grit teeth and a curled lip, Mikhail's bright eyes opened. The crystal color flashed in defiance, glaring up to see a Trandoshan holding a dropper above his face. Before Mikhail could react an amber liquid was squirted into his eyes. He jerked and hissed in pain, the salty liquid stinging. He closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to get whatever it was out as fast as possible. The effort however drew an even louder hiss from the Lizard, and they dug their claws deeper into the Arkanian's brow.

The Trandoshan spoke under their breath, likely cursing the captive as they released their grip on his head. Mikhail hung his face forward as far as possible, the first thought coming to his mind was *\*Acid\**. But after a few moments, the stinging didn't seem to grow any worse and as he rapidly blinked his vision didn't seem to grow any worse either. Tears assisted in purging the fluid, streaking down his cheeks while he took a few deep breaths.

His mind raced with potential liquids that he could have just been blinded with. As his thoughts moved, they seemed to loosen. Untangling like threads loosened by a tailor's needle. Mikhail couldn't focus on anything, it was like he was suddenly submerged in a thick oil. The fog that descended upon him was pierced by a question from the lizard.

“What is your full name?”

The question parted the cloud just long enough for Mikhail to register it.

“Kadnikov Mikhail Petrovich”

\*Wait... why did I..\*

The distress from his willingness to answer the question was apparent. The Trandoshan sneered down at him as he stepped into peripheral view. They made a clicking noise in their throat. \*Laughing?\* Another question followed.

“And your home. Where?”

“Ar... Ark...” The Arkanian clenched his jaw, closing his eyes and fighting through the fog. He needed to focus. He took a few quick breaths, picturing the inside of the library he used to work in as a child. He pushed forward, trying to find a place in the isles of shelves but something was off. The labels, the spines of the books, they were blotched with ink. Blurred and nearly unreadable.

Another question ripped through the fog, but it didn't manage to penetrate into Mikhail's library. His lips stayed tight as he drew a book, then ran his fingers over its spine. He focused hard, and the words slowly formed onto leather. With no hesitation, he opened the book.

“I say once more. After, you wish you spoke, yes?” The lizard loomed closer, staring into the Arkanian's face. “Who is your commanding officer?”

Infuriatingly, the black haired captive stayed silent.

In his library, Mikhail studied the pages he had found, repeating them to himself and searing the words into his mind. \*First Order training: Surviving and Thwarting Enhanced Interrogations.\* It helped him previously, and it would again.

He was torn from the library then, by a sharp pain across his face. He gasped, eyes unfocused and looked around. Before he could comprehend much, a crunching impact landed in his gut. He lurched forward but was caught by the restraints.

“I warn no more. I ask once, you answer.” The scaled hand grips his jaw, raising Mikhail's face up towards the Trandoshan. “What security system does the Citadel use?”

Mikhail's eyes closed once more. He had been in this seat before. He would live, or he would die. Those were his options. But the decision wouldn't be made here, not right now. Now was where they softened him, where they would hurt him. He wouldn't escape yet, that would have to wait. In the meantime.. he was captured. Pain was to be expected. Torture was how these things went. And dwelling on it wouldn't be any good for him.

So he didn't. Mikhail retreated mentally, once more turning to his internal library. The Trandoshan was perfectly enraged by this, and made sure to take out his frustrations on the Arkanian. The Kadnikov could still feel the dull ring of pain as he was stuck, jabbed and sliced. But he held firm. Firm enough that when he was being jostled around, it took him a few moments to register - he was being moved.

He left the library, opening his eyes for a few moments to see black. A hood was around his head. He had hands on him, squeezing his shoulders, forearms and hair. Voices chirped around him as they shoved him to his feet and pushed him forward. *Three people*. He made a mental note. *Likely Trandoshan*.

Mikhail was shoved into a hallway, then down a metal stairway. He tried his best to mentally map the area they moved him, but the fog from earlier had descended upon him once more, making it hard to concentrate and walk at the same time. Despite his efforts, he was led through twists and turns until he lost his position in his mental map. Not that it mattered much, he didn't know if where he started was closer to the exit than where he was now.

Harsh hands shoved him into a cold room. Machines buzzed around Mikhail, beeping and clicking. He was pushed forward again until he collided with something - a table? - at gut level. He bent over it, gasping for air as his hood was torn off. He squinted through harsh light at what he was being pressed against. It was a table with two "wings" fitted with straps near the wrist and shoulders. Where the head would go was a mechanism that sent a chill through Mikhail's blood.

He was being pressed against a \*Mind Flayer\*.

The instant reaction to struggle against those holding him resulted in a fist thrown across his face. The Arkanian's vision dimmed, and when he next could open his eyes, they already had him on his back on the table. Clasps were closed around his ankles, and two Trandoshans were working on his wrists. A third was grinning eerily down at him from above, upside down from Mikhail's view.

"Wait.. You don't need to-"

"Too late. I said before, you ignore. You will wish you spoke." The lizard forced his head down into the slot between metal probes and strapped him down with a belt across his forehead. Panic rose through the Arkanian, breathing increased, heart rate spiked, his wide crystal eyes darted around the room, looking for something, anything that could help. There was nothing but stark white walls and cold metal machines.

He opened his mouth again to speak, but the hum from the machine around his head made him shut right up. He knew what was coming, and braced.

***Pain***

Crackling, popping, harsh pain erupted from the probes and seared the flesh by Mikhail's temples and crawled across the crystal on his cheek. His body jolted, tensed and spasmed. Thankfully, he couldn't feel most of his limbs. Nor could he think, or process much of anything. Still, it felt like an hour before the machine died down, letting Mikhail slump onto the table.

Everything was sore, everything ached, and his throat and mouth were dry as a desert. Was he screaming? It hurt to breathe.

Movement to his side caught his attention. Something was removing the straps around his forehead and right wrist. He cracked his eye open, peering up at the figure there. Through blurry eyes, he saw one of the Trandoshan that was escorting him earlier working on his straps. The faint noise of blaring alarms finally registered and with a glance around the room, he noticed it was dark and empty. *What happened?*

His eyes focused on the Trandoshan that had just unstrapped his hand. It seemed like they were in a hurry, and as they turned to start on his feet, pain coursed down Mikhail's arm. Now freed, it jerked and lurched forward on its own. It slipped around the lizard's hips and snagged the hilt of a vibro blade. It came free from its sheath with a hum, and the Trandoshan turned and instantly lunged for Mikhail.

Once more, his hand moved on its own, narrowly avoiding the grasping claws. The lizard's claws raked down his chest instead, drawing blood. Mikhail blinked, and his fist was suddenly against the throat of his captor, vibroblade buried to the hilt. Their eyes met in the darkness, both seeing the thermal figure of the other, both filled with surprise. But the Trandoshan didn't fall yet. They twisted, snarling a gurgling noise as they tried to reach for Mikhail's throat.

His fist jerked, dragging the blade to the side and opening a wound through the Lizard's neck. Another gurgling noise spewed warmth across Mikhail's face and torso, claws snagged his forearm and clawed, opening more oozing wounds and the Trandoshan collapsed, ripping the vibroblade out of his weakened grip.

Mikhail was shaking, soaked with both of their blood and frozen for a minute. No one burst into the room, no more alarms blared, it was just him. He took several deep breaths, examining his wounds. Nothing that would be lethal, as long as he could get some bandages soon. His eyes then shifted to his wrist and ankles. The ankles were easy enough to untie, if he could reach it. Unfortunately, his wrist was still strapped down and his elbow was pinned against the side of the table. He couldn't slip out of it, and the metal clasp wouldn't be possible to open with one hand, even with the aid of teeth.

A thought crossed his mind, of animals that would gnaw their own limbs off to escape a trap. But he couldn't. It could kill him, and -

His body started moving again, pain shooting through his nerves as the *Presence* in the crystal demanded he move.

He sat up, then rolled to his left where the clamp was. He pressed his freed arm against the pinned forearm with realization in his wide eyes.

### ***Crack***

He rolled further, snapping the trapped forearm at an angle.

When he once again opened his eyes he was dizzy, and the blood that had soaked through him had cooled. He look down at the bent arm still clasped in place. It was tingly, but otherwise already numbing. He cursed under his breath, not realizing tears streaked his face.

He carefully lifted his arm and pulled his wrist free from the clasp. There wasn't much he could do about the arm now, but he had to get out of this room. He sat up and unstrapped his ankles, swung his legs off the table, and shakily stood. He lurched forward, stumbling towards one of the laboratory sinks. He ran water, and splashed some into his mouth.

He recoiled at the taste of blood and spat it out, then rinsed it a few times before he could drink clean water. Distant noises of shouting, gunfire and rumbling drew his attention from the sink. Something was happening. He needed to get out.

After retrieving the vibroblade, he pushed into the hall and was surprised by the smoke that hung in the air. He didn't see or hear any fire, so its source was currently unknown. He covers his mouth and nose with his collar, trying not to breathe much of it in as he walks. He wandered, trying to follow the loose directions he could remember to a stairwell. Bodies were strewn across the steps, none in clothing he recognized. None but the Trandoshan that had originally squirted the liquid into his eyes.

He stared for a moment at their corpse, an uneasy familiarity with the whole scene rising from his stomach like bile. But he had to push on.

Clutching his broken arm and still holding the vibroblade, he continued walking through the facility, finding more dead bodies. More broken doors and ruined equipment. Gore caked his dress shoes as he approached what appeared to be an exit. Voices were outside. Potential Danger.

Nerves alight with adrenaline, he pushed through the doors, and nearly stumbled into the rolemaster that had inducted him into Arcona. Zusa jumped as well, turning the hilt of a saber towards him as he surprised her. He was a mess of blood, bruises, and scattered wounds. She wasn't much better off. She said something to him but his ears had started ringing. The confusion in his face must have been obvious because she turned and pointed towards a series of shuttles and a collection of other Arconan's. They were either geared up for a fight, or in a messy state like him.

He followed her directions, and stumbled towards one of the open shuttles. He almost tripped stepping inside but was caught by soft blue arms. He blinked at them as they guided him towards a makeshift hospital cot. Once he was lying, Mikhail looked up into the face of the Pantoran he knew as Nathan. Questions left his mouth but Mikhail couldn't understand them. His brain was too jumbled. Instead he lifted his arm, showing the swollen and slightly discolored left hand and the angle his forearm bent.

Nathan injected something into his neck, and eased his leather Jacket off his shoulder, exposing the red skin around the break in his arm. Natha's left hand met his, and he tried to squeeze. He knew what was coming. With a jerk Nathan set his arm, causing Mikhail to make a sound like a muted whimper. Finally his left hand could squeeze, and it did, holding Nathan there until his eyes slipped closed and his head fell against his pillow. Nathan was left to stare at their entwined hands, before prying the Arkanian's grip free to go continue helping others.