

- = Prologue = -

The Dark Hall

Solitary Block C

Antei

One Week Prior to Nicht Ka Invasion

Aidan Kincaid stared forward at nothing in particular. A set of translucent catheters ran from his wrist and disappeared somewhere into the stone wall of his cell. His sharp brown eyes were clouded over, no doubt the effects of the sedatives keeping his significant power in check. To my eyes, his angular features looked more gaunt and hallowed than usual and he looked to be in dire need of a shave.

The holding cell they had thrown Kincaid into was small. It could not have been more than eight-by-eight feet wide, carved and sand-blasted into the base of the mountain that served as the foundation of the Dark Hall. The low, sloping ceiling made it nearly impossible for even the average human to stand upright. The only door to the cell lacked any noticeable hinge, handle, or keyhole. A different part of my mind wondered at that, but was quickly drowned out beneath the sea of other pressing matters.

Tattered rags clung to his lean body that still showed signs of belonging to one of the most deadly fighters in the galaxy. I'd seen him in action, and wouldn't lie that I was disappointed we never met on Bergeren. Still, the prison was not designed for the body, but for the mind. Knowledge was power, and what the Taldryanite possessed had clearly been enough to warrant his current state of duress.

Kincaid had been stripped of everything--his robes, armor, sabers, and most notably his pride. He had, from what I'd discerned from Timeros' report of their mission on Begeren, come so close to cracking the whole conspiracy wide open, once and for all. They had the proof they needed, and then just like that, it was gone.

Something was off. I chewed on everything I had learned over the past week as I studied the "traitor" through the monitor feed of the observation room. It was the closest I was going to get. A pair of Nephilim, the soldiers of the Iron Throne, typed away at a command terminal and were monitoring the prisoner's vitals and IV's.

I'm not the diplomat that Wuntila was, but I know how to keep what few allies I have close and use my favors wisely. The Fist of the Brotherhood and I go back to the early stages of the Dark Crusade and served together on Krayiss II and Rhelg. He knows where my loyalties lie, and had little trouble getting me access. Valhavoc is good people.

Kincaid stirred and his head tilted upward so his face was center-frame on the security camera. I took a step closer, and if I hadn't known better I could have sworn he was looking right through the monitor and into my soul. I've known guilty men; hunted and sentenced them to death and things far worse.

There was no guilt on the Taldryanite's face. There was no smugness, no taunting serenity that traitors often displayed when they knew their mission had been completed successfully. There was only anger. Disgust. Frustration. Kincaid's cold and collected visage was a poor mask in his current state.

I knew a thing or two about masks. Kincaid knew. Knowledge was the ultimate power in the universe, and it was trapped within the confines of his isolation. The ultimate suffering, knowing the answer without the

means to use it for good. I felt a pang of guilt flood through me. I hold no love for Taldryan and its roster of elders and old folks. I will never forget what happened in the months leading up to the Tenth Great Jedi War, the humiliation I'd suffered at their hands. Shadow Taldrya was dead, though, and Benevolen had not been seen for a time. Kincaid was not Shadow, and Kincaid had gone out on a limb and protected one of my own back on Bothsrida. Kooki would have never held up against Sith Lord Esoteric. He could have let her die, but he chose to protect her instead. That earned him something, at least, by my books.

"You don't think he did it," a voice said from behind me.

I shook my head slightly without turning, my own stoic mask firmly in place. "Too convenient, too neat."

I decided right then that this had all been going on for too long. I want to say that my decision to do what I did came from my iron-clad resolve. In all honesty, looking back, I think I was simply too tired to care.

And so I called in a card I'd been saving for a rainy day. It seemed to be coming down pretty heavily these days.

-- Right Before Our Eyes --
Marick Arconae #10214

No Malice Palace
Night Club
Coronet City, Corellia
Three Days Prior to Nicht Ka Invasion

No Malice Palace wasn't a palace at all. It was an upper class establishment nestled away in the center of Corellia's capital city, pandering to the fading youth who had the means of either expensing their lives through rich heritage, or the rare few who earned their credits and needed an outlet. Some of these men and women had important, crucial jobs that helped the city operate and maintain its reputation. On the weekends, and at No Malice Palace, they could forget their young-adult lives and relive their wilder days. It always amused me to see investment bankers who probably made more than I did working for the Iron Throne thrashing and stomping about like drunken wompas.

The main area was a large dance floor that had been cleared aside. There was barely enough room to press through the crowd. The bars on each end of the dance floor were overrun by patrons pushing and shouldering past one another, each utilizing a mixture of polite, crude, and scandalous means to get the bartender's attentions.

The air smelled of spilled liquor, dirty sweat, and a cloud of overbearing musk. Even from the back area tables I had secured, the up-tempo, nonsensical music pounded from the house speakers, driving the patrons to dance and writhe and slam against each other in an almost barbaric manner. This, of course, lead to more spills, the occasional clatter of broken glass, and the barks of bravado as two burly bureaucratic children argued over a Twi'Lek dancer like she was a piece of meat. To make things even better, they were all in costumes of some sort. Apparently it was some sort of festive holiday. I guess I'm getting old, or something.

It all sickened me, so I kept my focus on the task at hand. What I was trying to pull off was bigger than anything I had attempted before. I've lead troops into battle to the point that it has become like breathing to me. This was different.

The first person to arrive couldn't have been more out of place. His grey-white hair was pulled back into a tail, matching his salt-and-pepper full goate. He wore a black tactical vest over a pair of simple cargo fatigues that screamed "former military". I had asked my guests to be discreet, hoping to avoid a gathering of cloaked and hooded Dark Jedi. I guess this was what the Quaestor of Tarentum viewed as "street clothes." He sidestepped a drunken patron and made his way to my table and sat down next to me.

"This better be important, Arconae," Scion Altera said gruffly. He looked me over once and shook his head.

"What?" I asked.

"A fox mask, really?"

I grunted and shrugged one shoulder, keeping my lips drawn in a tight, impassive line. Being the highly skilled and trained assassin that I am, I had chosen a half-mask that covered my face from the nose up. Clever, I know. That, combined with the red tint I added to my shoulder-length black hair blended perfectly with the casual business suit complete with the tie I'd chosen.

"Let's get this over with, I have better things to do than dither here," Scion explained.

"I won't take up too much time, sir, and I appreciate you honoring the Estele-Eden Axis for me despite your... distaste for my predecessors," I said in my best attempt at acknowledging the Quaestor's rank and status as a military officer. It was a small thing, but small things often had large effects. The respectful tone seemed to work on my peer, and so he folded his arms across his chest and waited.

Xen'Mordin Vismorsus was the second to arrive, and wore black slacks, black shirt, and a silver-gray overcoat. He had (thankfully) forgone his Sith Mask and looked rather unassuming with his brown hair and goate.

"Nice mask," was all he said as he nodded to me, extending a hand. We shook curtly before he sat down next to me, making sure he could see the rest of the bar.

Vivackus Kavon di Plagia looked relatively at ease when he joined the table, long midnight hair coming down to his waist over a white tanktop and loose fitting black pants. All lean and wiry muscle, he held a coat over one shoulder, and set it down next to him on the booth-seat. I noted a glint of silver that reminded me that while concealed, no one would have come to this meeting unarmed.

"Arconae," he said by way of curt greeting.

"Di Plagia," I replied in turn.

An older gentleman arrived shortly after, looking so out of place that even his plain clothes seemed off. He wore a brown tunic tucked into matching pants, laced boots and a gray cloak over his shoulders. His white head of hair and full beard hid some of the aged lines of his face, but still made him hard not to think a bit too old for the venue.

“Jedi,” Xen said coolly.

“Liam, hello,” I said primly.

The Quaestor of House Odan Urr looked around skeptically, as if expecting assassins to be jumping out of the shadows. I guess you did not live long as the leader of a Jedi House among a Dark Jedi Brotherhood by not being careful.

“All,” he said as he folded up his cloak and took up a seat next to Scion.

“That just leaves the tree and the Pantoran,” Altera mused.

I nodded and exchanged glances with Vivackus and Xen'Mordin. Both regarded me warily, but maintained their air of professionalism nonetheless.

Rian Aslar and Malik Sadow apparently arrived together. The Neti Consul had taken a convincingly humanoid form, loose cloth keeping him “modest.” The Consul of Taldryan was huge, all powerful muscle and imposing figure. Even in the simple clothes he wore, there was little doubt he could bend any of the remaining leaders in half with his bare hands.

“You have 20 minutes, Arconae,” the Pantoran said.

“He has a hair appointment,” Malik explained, his wooden face offering a slight smile.

Rian glanced sidelong at the Sadowan and narrowed his eyes ever so slightly.

“Alright, Marick,” Xen said once Rian and Malik had found their seats. “You called us here. Speak.”

“Hold up,” Liam said with a raised hand. “I understand the...lovely selection of venue for secrecy, but can you be sure that we are not being monitored?”

I didn't smile, but nodded as reassuringly as I could. “I've taken the necessary precautions. I have an experienced ‘Hazer masking this meeting from any prying eyes.’”

“Meaning?” Vivackus inquired.

“Meaning,” I replied, keeping my voice impassively flat. “Anyone looking at this table right now is seeing a group of drunken women taking “shots” and chanting along to the songs playing from the speakers while repeatedly asking each other, “How drunk am I?” and constantly exclaiming, “Woo!”

Everyone went quiet. After a pregnant pause, Xen'Mordin snorted. “An illusion then. It had to be ‘woo’ girls?”

I shrugged, and leaned casually back in my seat. See? I can be funny, sometimes. Take that, Atyiru.

“What's a ‘woo’ girl?” Liam asked quizzically. This time, more people let out slight chuckles. Even Scion managed a grin.

"Fellow Independent Leaders," I said more formally, letting an air of gravity slip into my voice. "For the last few years we've been pulled left and right by Ashen and his wars. We've done everything asked of us. We've put our pasts behind us and joined together against these One Sith foes. For all the healthy competition and the strength--"

--Arguable strength," Malik interjected solemnly.

"Arguable strength," I corrected myself as I bit down on my molars to bite back a more sharp retort. Malik and I have not always seen eye to eye when it comes to whether the Brotherhood was stronger now than it was ten years ago. To each his own, I guess.

"We have seen what it all a lots too. There is a traitor in our midst, and I'm going to bet that it's not one of us," I finished without flare, letting my words hang in the air.

"The Council has apprehended Aidan Kincaid. They've found the leak, problem solved," Scion explained. "What else is there to discuss?"

"He didn't do it," Rian replied sharply.

"You're his Consul, of course you'd say that," Vivackus replied.

"No, he's right. Kincaid didn't do it," I replied. This gave everyone pause. Arcona and Taldryan rarely agreed on anything. Silence lingered.

"It just doesn't add up," I continued. "Timeros tells things differently than the Council's report. Of course, no one is going to believe him. He's been labeled as a hindrance to the Brotherhood, a mad dog on a leash."

I felt my voice get a bit harsher at that. Timeros was my mentor, and while I blamed him for a lot of things I had become, I never would have been strong enough to face them without his tutelage. Talking about him in a negative light hurt a deeper part of me, but I had to make my point clear.

"And the Arconae don't exactly have the best reputation throughout the brotherhood," Scion added offhandedly. I shifted my eyes to him and stared daggers. He seemed to realize what he said as rude, and quickly added, "No offense, Marick."

I bit back a response and simply nodded. "You see the point. However, from what Timeros reported, the datapad that had the evidence to rout the traitor was destroyed by Dacien."

"The reports said that the datapad 'self-destructed,'" Malik corrected.

"Doesn't that seem a bit too convenient?" Scion countered, catching on to my line of thinking.

"According to Timeros, Dacien destroyed it after Kincaid had been removed from sight--," I started to explain.

"Timeros is lying, then," Vivackus sneered. "You Arconae are quick to throw fingers at Plag--"

I cut him off with a raised hand. Everyone shifted and went for one of their concealed weapons, but relaxed once they saw my empty hand palm out.

"You didn't let me finish," I said. "I don't think Timeros is wrong, but I also don't think that what he saw is indicative of him being the traitor."

"Seems pretty indicative to me," Scion grumbled.

"No, think about it," Liam chimed in. "Perhaps Dacien knew that the datapad would never make it to Muz without being tampered with by forensics. There is no telling what could have happened. Perhaps he instead kept the information for himself, and destroyed the evidence so as to give the impression to the traitor that we were blind to who the traitor actually was."

Another silence as the Jedi's words set in.

"That makes sense, actually," Vivackus said slowly. "I spoke with Aabs recently, and he hinted at similar notions."

"I have members working in almost every office, including the Praetor the Headmaster," I added. "And from my...discussion with him, I think it is safe to say that Dacien is not the traitor."

"You're really going to listen to anything that lunatic says?" Malik replied, obviously wary of the other notable Neti known more for his oddity than his rationale.

"That lunatic keeps obsessively detailed notes of everything that goes on in the Shadow Academy," came my flat retort. A few of the others murmured in agreement, each having gone up against the Praetor in some shape or form when discussing the semantics of members and their exams.

"Which leaves us where, then?" Xen asked.

"It's not Kincaid," Rian said firmly.

"It's not Dacien or Aabs..." Vivackus said resolutely, which lead to another discussion I half listened to.

My PDA buzzed in my pocket. The message was from Atyiru Entar, one of my Aediles.

Hey. Marick. Hey. Marick. Hey. Hey. Listen--

I sighed and pressed the delete button on the message, only to have another buzz vibrate in my pocket.

Marick, do you know where we keep the welding torches? Uh, I promise we didn't break anything, but I can't seem to find them.

I should file a patent for the mental eye-roll. I think I've perfected it. I started to type a message back, but had my attention drawn back to the conversation progressing. They had knocked off the rest of the Dark Councilors including Muz and Pravus from the list.

"We can rule out Valhavoc because of how close he is with Pravus," Scion added. "He didn't take up Deputy Grand Master for no reason."

"Which brings us back to Raken," Rian and Malik said in unison. They looked at each other sidelong and then nodded.

"It can't be Raken either," I said offhandedly. "Doesn't fit."

"Sure it does," Malik explained. "Disappeared frequently. As "Shadow Hand" he had all the resources he needed to move around as he pleased without scrutiny."

"It's too obvious though," I said, a bit of frustration leaking out of my impassive tone. "Nothing is ever that simple, Malik. You all know that by now."

Everyone let that settle in. I don't think anyone had ever seen me raise my voice before save for on the Battlefield. It surprised me to hear it myself. Something told me that Raken simply wasn't the traitor.

My pocket buzzed again, and as the others resumed debate, I checked it gingerly.

Marick, hello again! Don't worry about my previous message. The cutter was in the storage closet, right in front of my eyes. I can't believe I missed it!

I sighed this time and went to put my phone away. Something hard slapped me across the face, metaphorically speaking. Something I had overlooked. A simple truth. It was right in front of me the whole time. How could I have missed it? It was so *obvious*.

"It's Taig," I said slowly, my shoulders slumping at the implication. I removed my mask and ran my hands over my face.

The others all turned to look at me, seeing if I was serious.

"Impossible, Taig is never at any of the meetings or seen around..." Xen started to say but then let his thought trail off.

"He's been on the Dark Council for so long, through the last war, and since becoming Justicar is the only person that doesn't answer directly to Lord Ashen..." Liam added.

"Mother of..." Scion murmured.

"We don't have any proof," Vivackus said slowly. "Muz would never believe us. He's protective of his Justicar and has said in the past that his hands are tied from changing anything with the position..."

My mind raced for a solution. I turned to Rian, and the two of us seemed to come to the same conclusion.

"Can you ask *him*?" I asked carefully.

Rian was quiet and became thoughtful. "I don't know, do we have any other choice?"

"He's the only person that could provide proof. He does most of his work for him on the day to day...."

Rian nodded. "I will ask my Proconsul."

The unit leaders of the Dark Brotherhood looked from one to the other, each forming plans of their own for the coming days.

-=X=-

We filtered out one by one. As we left, I stopped by the hooded figure next to the door. The Mon Calamari waved a flipper, and I nodded my thanks to the Dark Jedi Master.

He knew how much I appreciated it. Words were wind, and so I left, wrapping the Force around me like a cloak and disappearing into the night.

-= End =-