

# STAR WARS

## Unwelcome Masquerade

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#11708

Competition Entry for Brotherhood Masquerade

## Prologue

"No."

That single word was followed by Atra pressing the override on the entryway. The panel hissed as it closed quickly in response. The Umbaran had already turned from it, hearing the solid thud as it locked into place. He rolled his neck to the side and yawned loudly, scratching at his bare chest. The sudden, persistent knocking on his door told him he hadn't deterred his interloper. Did no one have respect for sleeping anymore?

Atra winced as he stepped through a ray of light, the offensive brightness peeking through his blinds. They closed tightly together with a wave of his hand and a tug with the Force, freeing him from the cruelty of mid-day sun. The Umbaran collapsed onto the couch — large enough to be the focal point of his quarters — and closed his eyes tightly. At the same time, he heard the hiss of the entryway opening once more.

"Did you close the door on me?" The sing-song voice cut into Atra's ears like a knife.

"You have no proof, you didn't see a thing," he replied.

"I'm blind not deaf, dearie," Atyiru reminded him.

Atra turned his head to face the back of the couch. "Exactly," he mumbled against the fabric. "Didn't see it."

The Umbaran could hear the Miraluka practically skipping through his quarters. Her footsteps were light and fleeting, yet he managed to track them growing closer and then fading. *Don't do it*, he thought. Atyiru let out a triumphant sound as she yanked his blinds wide open. *She did it*.

A long, heavy breath escaped Atra's lungs and rushed out his nose. He didn't need to be looking to know the infuriatingly cheery woman had a smile plastered upon her face. She *always* had a smile. "You're going," Atyiru declared.

"Can't make me."

"Listen here, mopey." Atyiru's tone changed, becoming deadly serious. "You have come here of your own choice, and I allowed your transfer knowing exactly your intentions. While you're here, however, I **am** your Consul and you are going to do as I say."

"Got it?" she asked with her cheery tone firmly in place once more.

For several moments, Atra didn't so much as stir and Atyiru waited patiently. Eventually he let out another sigh and pushed himself up from the couch. He swung his legs around and planted them firmly on the ground to support himself. Atra leaned forward and raised an eyebrow while affixing the

silver haired woman with his grey-gold eyes. With the sun at her back she somehow managed to look even darker than her tanned skin would otherwise. He focused on her blindfold. That's where her eyes would have been... if she had any. Having a conversation with a Miraluka was always an awkward affair. Where *did* you look? Having trained under two Miraluka himself — Methyas and Mirado L'eonheart — Atra had decided on the center of the blindfold. It was a safe choice.

"You're trying to kill me, I know it," Atra said, his sarcasm almost tangible even with his lilting accent.

"It's just a party, silly."

"That's been organized with the remnants of Odan-Urr. At a 'neutral location'," Atra pointed out. "Even a Mon Calamari could see it's a trap."

"No traps, Atra. There are alternative methods to violence, and I have faith you'll see that someday."

"Not like I have a choice anyway," he muttered.

"Not even slightly," Atyiru said quickly.

Atra stared at the Consul of Arcona a while longer, cracking the knuckles of his right hand as he contemplated the situation. Picking your battles was an art of experience. That experience told him that it would be far more practical to go along with the Shadow Lady's whims. At least for the time being. The

Umbaran sighed again, something he had been doing with increasing frequency since his arrival within Arcona. "Fine, I'll do it," he grumbled and stood up from the couch.

"Great! Your outfit is in the closet," Atyiru chirped with a slight hop. She clasped her hands behind her and started for the door.

"Huh? Outfit?" Atra asked with a start, pausing at the opening to his bedroom. His head snapped around to look at Atyiru, but the entryway had already closed behind her.

## Chapter 1

*I was right, she's trying to kill me,* Atra thought with a groan.

The pounding bass of the synth music took on a percussive accompanying role to the migraine Atra was developing. His face remained locked in a permanent scowl as he was forced to squint. The flashing lights weren't exactly favorable to the Umbaran's sensitive eyesight. The Combat Master stood stoically off to the side of the main dance floor, situated immediately beside what he had identified as the punch bowl. He clutched a disposable cup full of the fluid in his hand. Beside him, the Consul of Clan Odan-Urr stood in a similar state. The Consul was quietly holding his punch with a grimace while dressed up like an aristocrat of some sort, judging by the colorful silks adorning him.

"Atra," Turel stated flatly.

"Sorenn."

A pregnant pause hung between them for several heartbeats before they took simultaneous sips of the — potentially spiked — punch. "So..." Atra dragged

out the word far longer than he needed to. "How long you planning on standing here?"

"Might as well consider yourself my plus one, Atra. Get cozy." The Sentinel couldn't keep a cocksure grin off his face.

Atra raised his eyebrow and cast Turel a sidelong glance. "That's unfortunate, our costumes completely clash."

"Oh, that's a costume? I thought you were going all natural." Turel motioned towards the Umbaran as he spoke. Specifically, the gesture was aimed at the prosthetic Devaronian horns protruding from Atra's forehead.

The Combat Master rolled his neck from side to side and adjusted the large, stiff collar of his silken cloak. The outfit he had been provided wasn't too uncomfortable at least. It was flashy, however, and the billowing cape was accompanied by faux duraplast armor stylized like some sort of infernal fable with black and gold trim. The sheer number of pointed edges on the outfit made it a hazard to anyone shorter than the Umbaran, which happened to be most of the occupants of the club. "We both know I'm not here willingly," Atra remarked.

"Which is why," Turel said, "you haven't been captured, interrogated, and executed."

Atra offered a grunt of acknowledgement, alongside a quick flick of his right eyebrow, as his response before taking another sip of his drink. "Awfully fatalistic sounding for a Jedi," he remarked.

"And you're awfully relaxed for a mass-murderer."

Again, Atra was left only able to offer a silent acknowledgement. The point was a moot one, not needing of debate between the two men that found themselves on quite opposite ground so far as the Brotherhood was concerned. The Combat Master turned his attention from Turel to the dance floor itself. If nothing else that evening, Atra intended to at least enjoy the view. And he was going to survive the party, that part was important too. It was good to have objectives.

There was a good mixture of men and women on the dance floor, mostly Human or Near-Human from what he could tell. They moved like a body of water in time with the beat of the synth-tune blaring through the speakers. The flow of their movements ebbed and then surged as the tempo changed. Their varying costumes became lost to the blur of their actions as hips swayed and limbs moved back and forth. Atra felt, while taking in the sight, like these people had found a way to escape from the realities of their daily struggles — if only for the moment.

"Careful, Inquisitor. Your humanity is showing."

Turel's voice broke through Atra's trance. He glanced towards the Consul with a questioning expression. "Your foot was tapping along with the music,"



Turel explained while gesturing with his cup. "Looks like you're not a golem after all."

Atra smirked, an idea forming in his head. He downed the last of his drink and crushed the cup in his grip before tossing it into the nearby receptacle. "Well, it is a party, is it not? Far be it from me to keep you trapped at the sidelines," the Combat Master intoned in mock guilt. With a flourish of his gaudy cloak, Atra made a show of making his way towards the dance floor.

"Oh, this'll be good. Like a gundark with two left feet," Turel mused. The Consul followed along with the other man, adhering to his self-imposed mission of keeping an eye on Atra. Well, as best he could as the crowd began to surge once more. Clubs weren't exactly kind to trackers on the best of days after all. If it weren't for the Combat Master's large form, Turel would have been having a hell of a time managing it.

Meanwhile, Atra took a chance to get a look at the others who had taken up residence on the outskirts. A stern-faced woman, Alethia Archenksova, sat in a booth off to the side. She seemed reluctant to become at ease, like so many others, but her face did soften — even if only subtly so — when Mar Sûl joined her at the table. The Combat Master's gaze continued onward, though he couldn't put names to each of the faces he found. The club had been an excellent choice in that regard. A mixture of Odan-Urr's band of traitors alongside the unaffiliated masses. Any info there was to be gained just by being there would be unreliable at best.

So, the circumstances of Atra being *voluntold* to attend by Atyiru had become more clear as time went on. There were no risks to be had with the Umbaran unarmed. Even if he tried something using other means, he would be brought to heel just by being outnumbered. It didn't even need mentioning that Turel was on him like a bad rash. Clearly, the Consul of Arcona intended for Atra to gain some kind of understanding throughout the party. A foolish endeavor. Atra's path was one he had chosen carefully, and no party was going to change that. Perhaps it was a stubborn stance to take, but it was the right one. At least, he believed so with zeal. The Combat Master would not be dissuaded.

What then was left to him? They had made it clear upon his arrival that Atra wasn't to leave until the last of them had departed. It was a security protocol in case he decided to attempt a coup of some kind. He could respect that, begrudgingly. What he needed then, caught in the shifting tide of the dance floor and the repressive heat of so many bodies close together, was vice.

The punch lacked the kind of kick Atra was accustomed to. His grey-gold eyes scanned the floor once more and spotted a server making their way through the crowd. The tray of drinks was too inviting to pass up, though he could have done without the strobe light that suddenly pulsed within his vision. Atra winced and closed one eye tightly. He reached out, both physically and through the Force, to pull two glasses from the server's tray. He caught them, not without some spillage, and cast Turel a grin.

The Umbaran took a testing swig of the substance in his right hand. The liquid was a dark purple with shimmering flakes throughout it. Frankly, Atra didn't have the foggiest idea what it was. The Combat Master breathed sharply

through his nose as the floral taste of the drink turned to fire within his throat. That was a kick he could appreciate. He decided to take in the scent of the second drink he had claimed, judging it before tasting.

The aroma set his senses alight, but he couldn't immediately place its origin. Atra gave it another deep inhale before his lip curled up in disgust. He had placed it all right. Atra recognized the scent as similar to the popular pumpkin spiced caf that was all the rage with Human women of late, especially in the winter seasons.

"Hey, Sorenn. This seems right up your alley," Atra called out, trying to be heard over music as it transitioned into yet another dance track. The Umbaran moved across the dance floor, shifting rhythmically along with the beat while navigating around a particularly curvy Twi'lek that had cozied up to him. Atra wasn't quite sure what her costume was supposed to be, but there wasn't very much fabric to it at all.

"Not a chance," Turel stated flatly once Atra reached him.

"You don't even know what it is."

"We're enemies, Atra. I know it's hard when confronted by my devilish good looks, but you shouldn't forget that."

Atra sighed, not wanting to engage Turel in a war of wits just then. Especially since he was at the absolute limits of his false extroversion. "I want to be here about as much as I want to be a eunuch. You don't want me here either."

Atra leaned close to be heard clearly. "I'd kill you... but that wouldn't be practical."

"You're not in a position to make threats," Turel replied calmly.

"Am I not?" Atra suddenly tossed the contents of the drinks towards Turel. He followed that up by smashing the two glasses together, letting them shatter into shards. The Combat Master winced slightly as he gripped a couple of the shards together. He could feel the sharp edge biting into his skin and the warmth of blood dripping from his hands. He stepped in closer to Turel. Almost touching. Atra brought up the makeshift weapon and pressed in towards Turel's throat only for the Consul to catch his wrist.

At the same moment, daggers appeared in the hands of several dancers nearby. They encircled Atra and pressed the weapons against his vitals in warning. "Guess not," Atra remarked, his visage held passive and cold. "I thought as much."

Again Atra's demeanor changed. He dropped the glass shard from his grasp, Turel's hold released him as well, and fell back slowly into a relaxed posture. "You can all put it back in your pants," the Combat Master announced dismissively, "was just proving a point."

He glanced around, making note of the patrons that had recoiled back from the altercation. They were clearly non-combatants while the others circled around him were part of Turel's retinue. Good to know.

"Was it good for you?" Turel inquired with a raised eyebrow. The Consul's hand rose towards his own neck, his fingers probing for any unnoticed injury. A shrug from the large Umbaran was his answer. "I'm sure you understand our position here, Atra."

"I do," Atra replied. "Which is why I had no interest in being here."

"Yeah. Atty has a way of, well, getting her way."

"No kidding."

The two men said nothing, merely nodding in quiet agreement at an indisputable fact. The silence was broken by Atra's sudden intake of breath and a long sigh through pursed lips. "So," Atra said, once more letting the word hang upon the air. The Combat Master tilted his head towards the Sentinels surrounding himself while gesturing, speaking with his eyes and mannerisms.

"You going to play nice with the other kids?" Turel asked.

"Well," Atra admitted, "that wouldn't be practical." A smirk pulled at the Umbaran's lips, knowing full well he had repeated his earlier words. "Now, I'm not quite the diva you are, Sorenn, so how 'bout we move out of the spotlight?"

"And here I was starting to worry you thought you were on my level." Turel's cocksure grin had returned and he waved off the others. Reluctantly, the daggers returned to their hidden sheathes and the music started up once more — the absence of which had somehow escaped Atra's notice. It seemed the same

generic loop could only play so many times before being relegated to white noise. The two men made their way from the dance floor, which was bustling once more, with Turel leading the way towards one of the free booths. It was near to those Atra had seen the other notable members of Odan-Urr.

"All right," the Combat Master announced as he battled with his costume in order to attain a comfortable posture upon the bench. "Let's talk."

"Talk?" Turel asked with a raised eyebrow.

"We both know that's why this was forced on us... and she'll know if we don't."

"Fair point," the Consul begrudgingly admitted. He raised his hand and signalled to the bar for a round of drinks.

"Oh sure, *now* you'll drink."

"Would you take one offered by me?"

Atra paused briefly with his arms folded across his chest. "That... fair point," he grumbled, falling on the same phrase Turel had used moments before. They both turned their gazes towards the dance floor once more as they awaited the server. Atra tried not to think too much in that silence. He couldn't afford to. His reality was far different from those lost in the music, and yet even more so than the members of Odan-Urr enjoying their brief respite from their daily struggle.

At the end of the night, they would all go home and take off their costumes. Atra didn't have that luxury. When he returned to his quarters, and was finally free of the infernal armor and prosthetics, he would be merely donning yet another mask. Order would be preserved, and he would chisel away at his very soul with sacrifice after sacrifice to preserve the structure of the Brotherhood. That was why he was a Grand Inquisitor.

"I have no illusions about what sort of *man* Pravus is," Atra began, his emphasis placed in such a way as to betray his desire to use another term. His eyes never left the dance floor, and he didn't care to read Turel's reactions. "What I cannot believe in is this galaxy's capacity to self-govern. There must be peace, Turel... of the everlasting sort. For that there must be order. There must restrictions."

The Combat Master paused as the server arrived, placing a glass in front of both men before leaving the pitcher behind. He shifted somewhat, fighting for comfort upon the bench of booth once more before turning to face Turel. To his surprise, the Consul was watching him carefully. Not with eyes of judgement, or a desire to argue, but something else. "Tyrants will be disposed of by the very system of governance they seek to dominate, but that system is to be protected," Atra continued.

Again, neither man spoke for what seemed like ages. Turel made the first move and grasped the pitcher sitting between them. The Consul poured the semi-transparent, blue liquid into each of their glasses before leaning back. "It

seems to me," Turel stated before taking hold of his glass, "like we've got a lot more to talk about than I thought."

"I guess so," Atra said before doing the same. For the first time that evening, the Combat Master didn't feel like he was wasting away waiting for the bell to toll.