**Huisan, Capital of the Nayama Dynasty, Seraph, Caperion System**

**39 ABY**

 Along the western coast Huisan,the Nayama Dynasty’s alluring capital city, Raleien Sonavarret and three well dressed human subordinates were attending a Nayamian theatrical performance with their master.

The Pantoran soldier and his Praetorian companions – well, really, their superior – had been offered an exquisitely designed box seat to watch the show upon request of Queen Meihui, the monarch of the Nayama Dynasty. The loge itself was long and narrow, with nine well-padded and intricately carved chairs only appropriate for the most important guests. There was also a bar located closer to the door which was equipped with an unnerving number of alcoholic beverages, along with a dumbwaiter which could deliver food directly from a private kitchen. You could say this about the Nayamian’s: they were not a timorous people. Everything about the small space projected opulence, grandeur, and power.

Raleien *hated* theatre. He couldn’t remember why. He considered the question, allowing it to tumble idly through his mind. Was it the feeling of being trapped and enclosed in a box? Or perhaps it was being among so many people cheek by jowl, with barely enough room to stir.

Neither answer seemed to get to the heart of his displeasure for the dramatic arts, so he set the issue aside and returned his focus to his duties. It wasn’t wise to drift when on watch – that was the best time to stab someone in the back.

Seven of the nine seats were occupied. Kamjin Lap’lamiz, the Proconsul of Scholae Palatinae and their sworn charge, sat in the middle front row. To his left sat the Nayamian queen herself, resplendent in colourful and heavily embroidered robes the likes of which Raleien had never seen in all his days of traveling the galaxy. The remainder of the seats were filled with the queen’s attendants in matching garb to the monarch, and two of Raleien’s soldiers dressed in smart black and white suits designed for the occasion. The corpulent Pantoran loyalist, dressed in dark civilian formal ware, stood behind the seats, observing their surroundings with a keen viridescent gaze. The final member of his team stood outside, guarding the entrance. Askel – the person stuck outside – loved theatre, but they had drawn the short straw among the trio Raleien had chosen for this mission.

“…and we hope you enjoy the traditional performance,” Raleien overheard the Queen say as he returned his attention to the human Proconsul.

 *Her voice is beautiful*, Raleien thought. *Like the sound of chimes in a gentle spring breeze.*

 Chimes. The peal of bells ripped from their strings. A faint feel of cool wind caressing his scarred cheeks. The clang of metal against a duracrete floor intermixed with the high-pitched *whizz* of blaster fire. An astringent bouquet of smoke, blood and sweet, sickly burning offlesh.

And the endless torrent of screams.

 “I have no doubt I will,” He heard Kamjin reply through his shock.

 *What – is – happening*?

The brief rush of buried emotion and memory had hit Raleien with the ferocity of a slab avalanche fracturing the smooth white surface of a snow-capped peak. Yet the memories were gone. The images had faded almost instantaneously. But an intense discomfort had settled over the old soldier. Feelings long since buried lingered upon his troubled mind, which made it hard for him to focus.

With a start, he realized his hands were shaking. *Pull it together, fool*, Raleien growled at himself. He felt the trembles begin in his legs, as well. And – and was that the sound of blaster fire, again?

*No. Stop.*

He had lost track of conversation between his master and the queen. He could barely focus on anything. He took a few steps back and decided to lean against the bar. It was close enough to overhear all but the slightest whisper, and he still had a good view.

“What we are about to see is known as the Konh Mai, is it not?” He heard Kamjin ask pleasantly. They had still been on the topic of theatre.

 The queen nodded.

 “In our ancient language, Konh Mai translates to ‘dancing story’. The performers will craft a tale through music and movement alone,” she said.

 “No one speaks?” Kamjin replied.

 “Words aren’t necessary. They speak through dance and music.”

 The Adept looked like he was about to respond, but the soft buzz of hushed conversation from the crowded theatre abruptly ceased.

Movement below caught Raleien’s eye. A line of performers wearing intricate costumes emerged from backstage, passing between thick onyx curtains, and stepping into the bright stage light. There were ten people on stage organized in a wedge that faced the crowd. At its head, a woman in ruby coloured robes stood poised on the balls of her feet. She wore what appeared to be a ceramic mask decorated with rudimentary facial expressions in bland red and black ink. The others wore similar costumes, but her mask was the most unnerving. It was a lifeless half-smile on one side, while the paint appeared to have dripped masterfully on the other. It looked a to be an abstract caricature of a drooping, depressed face.

They began. *Thump thump!* The deep, rumbling bass drums matched the pulse of Raleien’s pumping heart. The performers moved with perfect martial precision, their movements efficient and flowing. Some sort of string quartet began. The notes were a delicate, almost angelic contrast to the deep, primal beats of the percussion section. A harp joined the chorus, a flutter of off-beat plucked tones drifting to balance the melodic canvass of the show. The performers walked counterclockwise, arms bent, legs outstretched and appearing to slide across the stage.

And last came some sort of flute. The high, bright sound was the final piece of the harmonic puzzle. The other instruments slowed and settled, moulded together by the sweet emittance of the wind instrument. This flute was to be the audience’s guide through the journey, while the other players set the scene with masterful delicacy and power. And the performer with the drooping mask, once in flawless step with their companions, now stood in the centre of a concentric ring of flowing cloth and dancing flesh, face lowered to the ground.

He had only been in a theatre one other time in his life – it was the reason why he hated it. Lines of Stormtroopers, a younger and more ruthless version of himself among them, had entered the open-top round building and tromped down their elaborate wooden steps.

*The audience began to scream. He heard chimes, part of the set, blow in the breeze. They – the Stormtroopers – turned to the performers, the audience, everyone – and squeezed the triggers on their blasters.*

Emotions roiled in Raleien. Memories surfaced. *Why now?* They were drawn out with every reverberation of the drums, every pluck of the damn harp, every moment of existence.

He howled inside. He did his best to keep control of his expression, but he knew his face was flushed a dark, navy blue in anger and sorrow.

As he watched the story unfold on stage – of the young woman, left side of her face in that smile, right side hidden as a monument to her tragic future – he almost felt like his own life was being played for the world to see. He saw himself, then, on that stage. He had been young when he had joined the Imperial legions. Young and ignorant about what he was about to do. About whom he was about to become. The last time he had smiled like that, it had been the day his mother and father had bid him farewell as he departed for basic training.

“These are our best performers,” Raleien heard Queen Meihui whisper as he fought to control himself. “Their skill is unrivaled.”

“It’s stunning,” said Kamjin with genuine approval. “And moving.”

“We’ve mastered the art of connection. It is meant to touch the deepest threads of our being. This, above all else my foreign lord, is our finest work.”

The Loyalist ripped his gaze from the performance and turned to leave the room. He managed to control his expressions, but he had no doubt that Kamjin might be able to *feel* his current state of mind. Raleien wasn’t sure if the Sith had those powers, but in his time with Scholae Palatinae learning about this brotherhood of dark Force users, he had heard of such a skill. Perhaps by moving further away he could mask the anguish and conflict he felt within and regain mastery over himself.

Poking his head out the door, Raleien said, “Take my post inside. I’ll watch the door.”

Askel didn’t ask questions. He nodded silently, and the two traded places. Askel went inside, and the Pantoran took his former position on the right side of the doorway.

*Breathe, lad. Just breathe.*

He did. He breathed in, and out. He focused entirely on the flow of air into and out of his slowly decaying, heavily scarred body. The drums boomed, the strings wailed, the brilliant harp cascaded, and the delicate flute led the audience on its merry quest through their minds.

Though the barrier between him and his trauma had cracked, the feelings of raw and helpless mania began to subside with each breath he released. Seconds passed, and the jumble of fuzzy memories fell back to the crevasse he had made for them, still trapped and unable to find release– at least not yet. The uncontrollable tension he felt in every tendon and fibre of his body eased, and the pressure he felt in his bloodstream dwindled until all returned to normal.

In the span of minutes, Raleien had felt he had been on the brink and back again. He really did feel fine. His connection to the performance, what it had been reaching into him to reveal, was lost.

 That’s why he hated theatre. It made him remember what he had done in the name of war and Empire. And it reminded him of the next war he had to fight. The war with himself. But today, he had a Pronconsul to protect. Tomorrow, perhaps, he might do something.

 Maybe.