

“Pick someone else.”

“No.”

“Literally anyone else.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the last thing they will expect.”

The Deputy Grand Master stood with arms folded across his chest as he fixed the long standing Master at Arms with a stoic stare. Howlader met his gaze with a furrowed brow and narrowed eyes.

“You have an entire network of spies and agents—”

“—all currently stretched to the breaking point running interference and counterintelligence. Or they’ve been captured or indisposed.”

“Clans?”

“All under duress.”

“Idris—”

“—front lines.”

“For Jac’s sake, Dacien,” Howlader swore.

“Cotelin is also not available,” Victae added without so much as blinking.

“Fine. But you owe me,” the Taldrya growled, his posture deflating in defeat.

Only then did the Deputy Grand Master let a small smile show.

“*Can’t believe I actually miss Mav,*” Howlader grumbled as he stormed off to grab his things.



Unknown Carrier Ship

Unknown Space

40 ABY

Infiltrating an enemy ranks was...surprisingly easy. All Howlader had to do, really, was step off a shuttle, announce his name and position as a Dark Councilor. He was granted an audience almost immediately, and taken directly to the “Noose”.

The noose, apparently, was actually just a Chiss member of the Truthers. The...Blade seekers? Something something gray wardens? He would have remembered better if they'd let him keep his stamp book and notary equipment. Those, along with his black-and-white patterned robes had been similarly confiscated.

They left him his mask, at least, which was nothing more than a black piece of fabric with eye holes that tied across the bridge of his nose and into a knot at the back of his head. Perhaps they thought it was some part of his identity. Why would anyone think that, though?

Either way, the Master at Arms was taken to an interrogation room and placed in a chair. He requested a beer. Something local, perhaps, as a means of showing his support to the organization's grassroot efforts. Surely, this would lead to some kind of common ground or peace.

His escort, however, apparently had never heard of an Imperial Pale Ale, a Dark Side Vanilla Porter, a Darth Malt, or even something as rudimentary as a Coruscant Light. He also asked Howlader not to call him “Shirley”.

Uncivilized brutes.

Howie waited impatiently in the metal chair they had sat him in. The room was bland and boring—all gray walls, a gray table, a tinted transparisteel glass viewpanel, and not much else. Finally, after what seemed like two Mav-meetings (forever) long, the door to the room opened. The Master at Arms remained seated, primly prepared to throw the weight of his position and station behind voicing his disappointment with his lodgings and treatment thus far.

The man who entered was a Chiss. Howie knew a few Chiss, but had trouble identifying any features on this one that would allow him to identify them out of a lineup of the ones he knew. A forgettable face, to be sure.

That was the only explanation that could justify the first thing the man did to piss the Master at Arms off.

The Chiss, who introduced himself as *Nuzo'rur'rourme*, immediately removed Howie's mask. He examined it, curious, then tied it around his own face, which, to be fair, made him instantly more memorable. So there was that, at least. Howie also realized now that there *was* something noticeable now that the Chiss was sitting in better lighting—the entire left half of his face had a very obvious burn scarring. Nice.

“Wait, Nuzo'rur'rourme...” Howlader repeated suddenly before lurching forward to place both hands on the table while narrowing his eyes. “Your core name is ‘Zorro’!? Really!? Did Mav put you up to this?”

Zorro did not seem to understand the holonet reference, or seem to have any idea what a “Mav” was. The Chiss simply blinked once, shrugged, then moved to sit across from the Dark Councilor.

“*Prophet* Howlader Taldrya,” Zorro started, but the way he pronounced the Elder rank seemed to carry a heavy air of skepticism.

“Just Howie,” the Dark Councilor replied curtly.

“Howie, then,” the Chiss conceded. “We know why you’ve come, and we have...ways to make you talk.”

This was supposed to be intimidating? Howie had made a career out of yelling at Dark Lords of the Sith and telling them that they were wrong. This had to be some kind of joke.

Howie didn't say anything of this, of course, so he just folded his arms across his chest and fixed his Chiss interrogator with the same look he reserved for Telaris when he dared the former Grand Master to “try him”.



Zorro—the man that the Truthwarden Grayblades referred to as “the Noose”—closed the cell door behind him slowly. Once he was sure the blastdoor had clicked and sealed into place, he let out a long exasperated sigh that broke down into a fit of light sobbing. With his back pressed to the door, he slid down into a crouching position and hugged his knees with his arms.

One of the guards—heavily armored and armed—approached and tilted her helmeted head to one side as she studied the interrogator.

“...is everything alright, sir?” she asked through the closed helmet's modulated voice box.

“...he knows nothing,” the Noose whispered. Then, realizing he was whispering, shakily rose back to his feet and tried to smooth out his uniform. “Literally, nothing,” he continued, looking into the guads visor with an almost haunted expression.

“He just...talked. About nothing. Truth serum? Ineffective. Mind probing through the Force? *Nothing*. Just recipes for cured meat and an eerily acute memory of service record medals handed out to members of the Brotherhood. Ten hours, and we have nothing from him. He has no understanding of how anything on Arx actually works. The Dark Ascent is just an indoor office with a turbo lift to him. The other Dark Councilors are ‘jackasses’, yet he enjoys their company anyway. And he seems to be obsessed with something called a ‘Mav’ and yelling at them. That’s it though. Nothing actually useful.”

The Chiss ran a hand through his once neatly combed hair. He removed the eye-mask and crumpled it up into a ball before throwing it off to the side. The guard just stood there, nodding her head quietly.

“He then asked for a datapad to scribe down intel he did know as a form of bartering. But...but...he typed with one finger. Just one. Letter by letter, one at a time, pecking his way towards a sentence. Do you know what it said when he was finally done?”

The guard shook her head.

“INVEST IN A MICRO-BREWER BEFORE TRYING TO CONQUER THE GALAXY!” the Chiss exclaimed, voice raising so that even the nearby guards turned their heads with curiosity. “And then he started to critique our policies for handling prisoners of war. He asked to see our privacy policy, and then repeatedly asked to speak to our head of ‘people’ development. What kind of code or cipher is that!?”

The Chiss shook his head and laughed a bit hysterically before regaining his composure.

“Send him back. Tell the commander we need to send him back to the Brotherhood. It’s...not worth it...”

The Chiss stormed off, mumbling and murmuring to himself.

The guard scratched the side of her helmet with a gloved finger. “Okay...”



The Master at Arms was dropped off on Arx's moon, which served as a trading port. They returned his mask, his cloak, and personal items and then retreated back to the rest of their fleet.

"Jackasses," he murmured as he stomped into a local cantina, ordered what was on tap, and asked to use a holocom to dial the Deputy Grand Master and inform him of everything he'd learned on his mission.

He was getting too old for this.