

The Pinnacle, Spaceport

Aliso

Tension among the Clan hadn't been this high since the attack on Florrum. Slaves, under the watchful eyes of their various masters, ran past in formation, efficiently loading themselves onto the various transport vessels bound for the next battle. Even the Sith and Dark Jedi bounded by, carrying with them datapads of supplies or packs fit for battle, or perhaps leading troops themselves onto the vessels. But amid the chaos, Laren found himself sitting on a durasteel crate, his chin resting in the palm of his hand, which in turn was supported by his arm casually sitting atop his right leg. His expression was one of boredom, though if one looked closer, it was akin to someone experiencing a solemn reflection within themselves.

Before a battle, Laren would always retreat into himself within the heart of any activity. In this case, the spaceport offered him a moment of reprieve away from his responsibilities. He didn't reflect for any reasons to do with guilt or compassion, but rather he reflected on his own skills. As confident or ruthless as he could seem under fire, his former enslavement had constantly left him with a psyche that questioned his own abilities, and motives. He was asking himself questions like, *Why am I fighting for Plagueis?* and *Can I keep doing this?* In regards to his service under a warring Clan of Dark Side users.

"Pitiful," came the croon of a familiar female voice behind him.

Laren's golden orbs turned to look at the newcomer, seeing hair the colour of a burning flame, piercing emerald eyes, an amused expression and a pretty frame, arms folded under her considerable bosom.

"You witches and warlocks may have the Force, but many still have their own rituals as well," Laren said, anger bubbling, his scarred face contorted in annoyance.

"I wasn't talking about you," she replied candidly, taking a few steps and sitting opposite him on the large, durasteel crate. "I am talking about this entire situation."

"How is our fleet being decimated 'pitiful?'" Confused, he stood and walked to stand in front of his current and direct boss. "Where is the pity in the hundreds dead?"

"Slaves, mostly," she interrupted. Laren went on anyway.

“Where is the pity in the Clan reaching out to its allies, exposing its weakness to the rest of your damned Brotherhood? I feel as though you do not understand feelings, Lady Rhode.”

“As always, bounty hunter, you see yet you do not comprehend. I feel your anger, your hatred for the situation we’re in. And as much as I did not intend to ever allow you to live, let alone work as my direct second in command, you have proven yourself valuable.” She stood and rested a firm hand on his brown-robed shoulder. “It is pitiful to see an asset of such value questioning himself before a battle for our very existence.”

Within the course of mere weeks and months, their professional relationship had been nothing short of tumultuous. Laren, arguably, was a constant among them, having some skill in command and tactical expertise, though lacking in any political ambition beyond his ability to be paid enough to maintain a certain standard of living. Taranae, on the contrary, was near if not fully insane, her mood swings catching everyone off guard; yet she was intelligent, ambitious, and powerful, and most were right to fear her, including Laren. The fact that now, before this invasion on Capis, she was attempting to boost his confidence before battle meant something. He searched her eyes for what seemed like an eternity, and all he could find was sober thought and immense respect emanating from her gaze.

“You may not be able to feel the force, but the Force is a part of everything. Use your anger, Laren. Control it, force it to bend to your will, and use it to focus your mind in the battle to come. Our troops need their Aedile at their fittest.” She smiled and began striding away, inspecting the proceedings with her arms clasped behind her back. She turned briefly, however, and offered one last word.

“Let’s show the fools in Ajunta Pall how to wage war against our enemies. Be calculating and ruthless. We’ll speak again in one hour to discuss our plan of action.”

“By your command, Lady Rhode,” Laren bowed respectfully, slightly lower than usual to show he was serious, and when he rose again the Quaestor was lost amongst the crowds.

Let’s ship these fools into shape. We have a job to do.