

The rhythmic humming of the turbolift echoed with distant memories of a Consul's passing, the sombre occupants silent in the stiflingly cold atmosphere. Every nerve was on edge, every sense heightened, every reflex primed and every reaction on a hair trigger. For the purple Twi'lek standing behind dark cloaks, shapes she'd once considered her superiors and now, begrudgingly, realized were more akin to co-conspirators, the ride seemed to go on for eternity.

No-one said a word. No-one shifted. Like statues, stoic and purposeful, they rode the turbolift up through a hidden passageway into the Consul's chambers. Hands and senses were already primed around lightsaber hilts and blaster grips, the calls of high treason on their minds.

Tali wished it hadn't been like this. She wished the war had gone better, but desperate times called for desperate measures and if a word could be used to describe this venture, it would be that. *Desperate*.

The Consul had gone mad. Or at least that is what they told themselves. The burden of Consulship had never sat well with Kordath and after what happened to Zujenia in the devastating Collective terror bombings of 37 ABY, he'd never truly recovered. The failed reprisal attacks, the infighting, the paranoia, the rampant escapism into ever harder and more addictive substances... She'd hated every moment of it, but with each new travesty, each new low that he'd dragged their Clan through, he'd always convinced them it would all be worth it. Worth it for revenge, for payback, for a new chance at a clean slate.

And they'd all believed him.

It was on their heads as much as his, and today heads would roll.

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The turbolift pulled to a halt, the twin doors of the carriage opening with a hiss of pneumatics as a gentle fog of white rolled down over polished black stone. The small sepulchre, venerated to dark forces and nestled deep within the Citadel's stone cold bosom, was cool and still, not a single speck of dust lying upon the ancient stonework. Pristine and cold, jagged edges of chiseled basalt, the room contained a slowly pulsing aura of unwholesomeness akin to the dormant beat of a slumbering predator's heart.

The assembled paced through the room in silence, ancient visages lost to time and legend staring down at the grim procession as it snaked past pillars and plinths to the door. A tall man approached the console and swiped his badge, the locks whirring and clicking before granting them access, recognizing the Proconsul's authority.

All the while, the Twi'lek kept silent as did the others, not even sharing a thought as they each braced themselves for what was to come. Once they cornered the beast, there would be no going back.

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The Ryn had shut himself off many months ago and had the highest commanders of the AAF executed for treason. Little information seemed to go in and out of the Citadel anymore and beyond the delusional orders that came either far too late or demanded acts for which the Clan no longer had the resources, the Consul's grasp on the war was fleeting at best.

Despite all of that, the propaganda kept showing him standing tall against the invaders, the implacable phalanxes of cybernetic warriors and legions of Iron Throne stormtroopers. It was a show that had long since turned from being pointless into macabre and twisted as each month the recordings called for ever younger men and women to sign up and fight. Tali had seen a lad no older than thirteen standing outside the recruitment office, waiting for his time to step into an awaiting transport.

She knew she'd never forget the dead look in his eyes.

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The grim company pulled to a halt outside the Throne Room. They'd seen no guards anywhere, not even here. What had happened to the Consul's private guard, not even the Proconsul could say. It had taken a long while to convince him to join this cause, battling as he'd been across every front seemingly at once. Whatever the crazed Consul had decided for his guard, though, it did not seem to have been successful in keeping him safe.

The gathered exchanged glances, the moment of betrayal upon them. With solemn nods, they condemned their erstwhile friend and Consul to death, for the good of the Clan, and opened the doors.

A wafting cloud of rot surged forth from the sealed Throne Room, an unholy odor of sweat and filth, and rotting flesh. The Pantoran couldn't stomach the revulsion and retched upon the floor, even the Chiss finding it hard to breathe as he covered his mouth and regretted leaving his surgery mask behind.

As the shock of the putrid revelation wore off, the source of the stench became clear. As did the fate of the Consul's bodyguards. Lying scattered across the room in twisted poses, clutching their collars and frozen in agony, the rotting corpses of Arcona's finest littered the Throne Room like pustules upon a bloated corpse. Tali could only stare in horror at the sight, though other, more steeled among them did not waste their time and waded in among the dead.

As they filtered past the corpses, feet sticking to the floor run afoul with the juices of festering decomposition, it soon became clear what exactly had transpired. Etched in the black pillars, scraped with nail and claw, repeated over and over again until everywhere you looked the word would not escape your eyes; *Traitors*.

The Chiss knelt down to inspect one of the deceased, muttering something about a neurotoxin far more potent and insidious than dioxis. Fine enough to bypass even military grade filtration. Thankfully none seemed to linger, or they'd already have joined the deceased.

As they neared the Serpent Throne, picking their way past the final lines of corpses, the Proconsul narrowed his eyes and pulled out his saber, others following suite upon his lead. A shape, shrouded in perpetual darkness and shadow, sat upon the throne in a slumped heap, heedless of their presence. The perpetual shadows that always seemed to shroud the Serpent Throne parted reluctantly, uncovering a shape of blues and purples that made the Aedile shriek and the Chiss stifle a sadistic smirk.

The man who'd once been the Consul's guard and vallet lay strangled upon the throne, the word 'Traitor' carved into his broad chest with a wicked knife that had left the tissue scarred and burnt. The lifeless corpse was in a far lesser state of decay, however, hinting it had been a later addition to the macabre installation of paranoid slaughter.

"He's not here," the Proconsul determined, brushing aside the horrors with a mental shrug. He'd seen his fair share of death and deceit. This was nothing new, or so he kept telling himself.

"The Consul's chambers," the Chiss decreed. "He must be holed up there."

"Anywhere but here is preferable," agreed the Aedile, the pale Pantoran seeming to mirror her sentiment.

As one, they sat off for the Consul's personal chambers that lay mercifully far enough from the Throne Room to mute the seeping stench. They arrived to find the door ajar, candlelit illumination dancing through the gap while the faint sounds of rodent-esque shuffling and skittering filtered through the air. The smell, though far less morbid than in the Throne Room, was appalling and rank, laced with organic refuse and the sickly scent of vintage secretions.

*"Nae nae nae nae nae!"*

The sound of the angry Ryn pounding his furry fist on his desk was followed almost instantly with the telltale flutter-clatter of papers and datapads, hurried footsteps and sounds of dragged sheets of flimsiplast betraying someone else in the room, seeking to collect the scattered stationeries.

"This nae gonna work! Yer plan's karkin' groxshite!" the Consul raged.

"My deepest apologies, master. It won't happen again, I swear!" a sniveling voice replied, one which clearly did not belong in such a state of submission. However much he tried to sound placating, Bly could not entirely remove the strength and character of his voice.

"See that it won't, or you'll end up like tha' double-crossin' Chiss 'n tha rest of 'em!"

It was clear the Consul had finally lost it. There would be no redemption anymore. The conspirators acted as one, moving up to the door as they held out their lightsabers, charging up a bolt to blast the door off its hinges and...

“Ya gonna step in or nae?”

The words were clearly directed at them, and if anyone had had any doubt about it, the door being pulled open with a casual flick of the Ryn’s wrist left little room for interpretation. “Come in, come in, I nae got tha whole day...”

The Consul’s openness and nonchalantness caught them all by surprise and, as if dumbstruck by the absurdity of it all, the small group filed in while Bly finished picking up what Kordath had just swept off his desk. As they entered, the sources of the foul odors became rather evident as trays of half-finished meals lay scattered here and there, alongside countless crumpled up towels and jars of fluids Tali did not even wish to contemplate the origin of.

However disturbing such a sight might have been, it paled next to what had become of the Consul. Beady eyes stared at them from below a sunken brow, his keen intellect having been replaced by a paranoid sheen that mirrored his skittish and twitchy behavior. Ticks and spasms, minute but definitely there, kept wracking his body while his hands constantly rubbed one another in a paddling fashion, as if trying to console himself or wash away a smear that only kept getting worse.

Dressed in a deep red cape and little else, the Ryn’s fur had begun to fall off in patches, leaving him with a mottled appearance made worse by the matting of the remaining coat from a thick layer of greasy sweat. Pale and malnourished, it looked like he was on his last legs, but appearances could be deceiving. Especially with someone with his pedigree of ruses.

“C’mon then, speak up! Ya gonna just stand there like a buncha banthas? Thought I had a wordier Proconsul... who innae where he’s supposed ta be.” Kordath’s urgency seemed utterly out of place and the way he chastised his Proconsul, a man standing before him with armed allies clearly intent on violence, was beyond deranged. It seemed he’d lost the last of his senses.

“This has to stop, Kordath,” the Kiffar stated as calmly as he could manage. “For the sake of Arcona, we’re ending this insanity tonight.”

There was a long pause, Kordath staring intently at them before suddenly raising his hand approvingly. “Agreed!” he declared, pointing a filth encrusted claw at his Shade. “You’ve failed me fer tha last time, Bly!”

The man dropped to his knees, begging for mercy. “No, sir! I’ve always been nothing but faithful to you! Please, let me atone...”

“Enough!” the Kiffar growled, his patience wearing thin. “It is not him we’re after, *ex-Consul*, but you,” he stated coldly as he pointed his saber at the Ryn.

“Oh?” he inquired, curious for a moment before his tone darkened. “*Oh...*”

It seemed their threats had finally broke through to him. The Ryn stared at them all, one by one, his gaze piercing and venomous. “So it be treason, then...”

“There is no treason, Kord, only absolution. You’ve failed the Clan and for the Clan to live, you must die,” the Proconsul declared coldly.

“Karkin’ fool,” the Ryn growled, globs of foam dripping from his maw. “I AM the Clan! Can’t ya see?! All I’ve done fer ya? Ta keep yer all safe? Dunnae want that? Ta be safe? Ta keep yer loved ones safe?”

“You’ve kept no-one safe, Kordath... You’ve only signed our death-warrants,” the Aedile spat.

“You’re suffering from a pathological nervous breakdown. There is no known cure once it has advanced to this stage, I can only recommend euthanasia,” the Quaestor concurred.

“No, NO! Yer all wrong! I’ve kept ‘er safe, kept ‘er safe all this time! Bly, show ‘em! Show ‘em what we’ve been protectin’!” the Consul ranted, motioning feverishly for his Shade to pull back the curtains to a small bed tucked away into the corner of his quarters. As he unveiled the hospital bed and the patient, a collective ripple of gasps shot through the conspirators.

“Shae,” Tali whispered breathlessly. She’d survived the bombings where her stepmother had not.

But something wasn’t right. She could tell immediately and so could the doctor, his brow furrowing as he looked at the machines hooked up to her. One glance of the blank readings told him enough. A moment later the others began to sense it as well, or rather the lack of anything to sense.

The girl was cold and still. There was nothing left to save. Nothing to protect. She was as dead as Arcona’s future.

“You have failed, Kordath, just let it go and go quietly. Maybe someone will remember you after all is said and done...” the Kiffar sighed wearily, pointing his blade back at the Ryn. Knowing why he’d done all this did not excuse or change the fact he’d led them all to ruin; and had to die for his crimes.

“No, I will nae let yer take her from me!” Kordath spat, moving with preternatural dexterity to stand upon his desk and point a wicked knife back at him. On its own, the gesture would

have been pathetic, were it not for a hollow skittering that emanated from the vents all around them, the menacing sound following as a natural extension of the Consul's will.

The Arconans peered around themselves, expecting anything and everything but what came next. In a torrent of black carapace and tiny grabber arms, a veritable swarm of ID9 Seekers burst out from the vents and descended upon them. Lightsabers ignited in a flash of plasma and bolts of the same burst out from the Chiss' blaster, punching down the first of the droids before more met their ends with a saber through their guts.

But there were simply too many.

Talons raked into the defenders, slicing cloth and flesh alike in an avalanche of mechanical bodies and beady red photoreceptors. Screeching in binary as they threw themselves at the would-be murderers, the sheer volume and violence of the desperate attack overwhelmed the Jedi, Sith and Chiss alike.

The Aedile was the first to fall, her garments torn to shreds and her pale skin raked with deep gashes that bled profusely despite her best attempts to stem the flow with her anger. A sharp cry of pain slipped her lips as an ID9 slashed its talons at her heels, slicing the tendon and forcing her to her knees.

The insolent droid met its end a moment later as the furious redhead screamed in anger, but her powers were fleeting and soon all she could do was keep herself from bleeding out.

"Save her!" the Pantoran shouted at the Chiss. "She's going to bleed out!"

"We will be overwhelmed," the Quaestor replied coldly. "She knew the risks."

"You can't leave her!" she protested, dodging a charging droid and slicing it in twain as it passed her by.

"I can, if it means we all live..."

"Enough!" the Proconsul roared, focusing for a moment as he drew deep upon the Force and extended her will to the debris around him. Pieces of destroyed droids rose up, levitating in his telekinetic grasp, before shooting out in a hailstorm at the swarm of Seekers. The machines screamed in mechanical pain as the fusilade hit home, swatting them from the sky like insects, pinned by the remains of their own brethren in a rather morbid fashion.

The opening was enough for the Chiss to take the hint, dashing over to the bleeding Aedile and breaking out his medical supplies to patch her up. The redhead coughed blood, growling in pain and anger as she whispered a hoarse gurgle. "Fraking Skitters... Bane of my life..."

The Proconsul gasped for air, the telekinetic attack having drained much from him, leaving him vulnerable. He sensed the danger, but had no time to react as pain flashed across his back. The second gasp he took came out hollow and wheezing.

“I told ya, I’m keepin’ her safe!” Kordath screamed, eyes wild with fury as he pushed his dagger deeper into the Kiffar’s back. “And ya won’t take her from me!” Plunging the blade in again and again, the Sith knife dug through his armorweave cloak with sickening ease until the man slumped to the ground, bleeding profusely from a dozen or more holes in his back. “Bly! Take ‘em!” the Ryn called out, his Shade drawing his sidearm and opening fire on the defenceless Chiss.

The Quaestor fumbled for his blaster, hands slick with the Aedile’s blood and knowing instinctively he wouldn’t beat the Human to the draw. In an act of pure instinct, he threw himself upon the prone Aedile, covering her body with his own. Vancing in anticipation of the searing pain, the Chiss blinked in surprise and shock as the bolts never made contact, turning his head to see the Pantoran deflecting bolt after bolt and keeping them safe. “Get up!” she snapped. “We have to finish this, now! Tali, cover me!”

Pulling her sabers from the smoking remains of a pair of Skitters, the Twi’lek threw herself between her Pantoran commander and the crazed Ryn. His eyes were wild with pain and anguish, crazed by the losses he’d suffered until his mind had become unhinged. There was no logic behind his actions any longer and that blind fury made him utterly unpredictable to her senses.

“Ve don’t have to do this, Kordt. Just step down quietly and let others handle the Clan. There’s nothing you can do anymore…” she tried, but the sight in the tired Ryn’s eyes did not change. He was too far gone.

The response was a vicious screech and a cunning attempt to swipe at her leg that almost succeeded, were it not for a faint memory of him trying a similar tactic once before in training. The Twi’lek barely managed to maintain her footing, deftly sidestepping the swiping tail, but leaving her guard open momentarily.

Whether by design or bestial cunning, the Consul took the opening and swept in with his knife, attempting to stab the dagger into her gut like he’d done with the Proconsul’s back. Forced to a backfooting, Tali twisted aside once again to dodge his lunge, sweeping her blades around in an attempt to catch the Ryn on the follow-through, but the furred Consul broke into a roll that carried him beyond her sabers’ reach.

Hissing, he turned around to strike again, weaving left and right in a chaotic pattern the Twi’lek had no chance of predicting, before slicing at her ankles much like the Skitter that had taken out the Aedile. Tali had to use all the speed she could muster to counter the surprise move, forcing her back and against the Consul’s work desk as the dagger scantily missed her exposed tendon.

Her own counter was clumsy and easily dodged, the Ryn twisting and spinning wilder than a fighting Dug, as she tried to back away from the table. Catching signs of blaster fire and the flashes of the Pantoran’s saber as she and the Chiss cornered the Human Shade and took

him down, Tali was about to call out again for him to surrender when an explosion erupted from where the Shade had fallen.

The world around her was lost in cacophony, the Shade's dying act blasting half the Consul's office to smithereens and mortally wounding the ones responsible. Tali had no clue where her sabers had went, lost in the blast wave, as she crawled back to her feet. She could still feel it. Yes, *it*.

What had once been a friend, or at least the mate of a friend, was no longer a sentient being, but a wild beast. Kordath was already dead, all that remained was his crazed vessel. Eyes peering through the haze, she extended her senses, coughing as smoke choked her lungs.

She picked out the Pantoran, barely conscious, but alive. She sensed the Aedile, somehow still clinging to life, but fading fast. The Chiss, he was no more and the man who'd supposed to become the new Consul had become one with the Force, lying in a pool of his own blood.

But she didn't pick up the Ryn. Why? Surely he couldn't...?

She opened her eyes and saw the former Consul bounding for her, matted fur burnt and charred, long yellow nails exposed and murky eyes wild with vengeance. She let out an instinctive shriek, tossing her arms to the side and *willing* him aside. The Ryn slammed into what remained of his desk, but seemed to care little about such a minor obstruction. Leaping forward on all fours, he charged for her again, Tali scampering back to avoid him but tripping over debris and falling.

She reached for her holster, finding the grip of her blaster just as the Ryn leapt at her throat, his bloodshot eyes destined to be the last thing she'd ever see, before a cobalt blue bolt of plasma slammed into his side and dropped him like a bag of potatoes. A second and a third bolt followed, this hissing of his boiling flesh finally convincing the slender gunwoman to stop shooting.

Sliding her blaster back into its proper place at her belt, Yumni Ha observed the devastation with a calm, objective gaze as if surveying prime land. Turning her cold eyes to the Twi'lek she asked her a simple question that nonetheless she felt inclined to agree on.

"This makes me Consul, does it not?"