

The upper floors of the Pinnacle on Aliso were dark and quiet at this time of night. Those halls, not very well traveled even during the height of the day, were virtually deserted now. Only the most senior figures within the Ascendant Clan were able to access these highly restricted floors, with the very summit of the tower open only to the Consul. The penultimate floor, below the private chambers of the Dread Lord, were also open to the Dread Lord's Wrath, the serving Proconsul of Clan Plagueis.

The two that held those roles, Selika Roh di Plagia and Alaris Jinn di Plagia, were both aware of the growing threat posed by the forces that had made their appearance on Dandoran nearly a year ago. Whispers and tidbits had been reaching the intelligence services employed by the Clan as well as the fringe contacts that Selika had developed during her time as Herald aboard the Godless Matron. The picture that those whispers painted was a confusing one that had yet to become clear, but Selika knew that unity in the face of this impending crisis was paramount.

Which was why she could not believe what she found herself confronted with. The glow from the active holo terminal in one of the antechambers off the main command center was subtle yet evident. As she drew nearer she could hear a voice speaking quietly, but it was a voice she could easily recognize. The Rutian Twi'lek that served as her second was sitting at the holoterminal, his back to the door. The face on the other end of the connection was itself just as familiar to Selika from her time serving on the Dark Council.

"So, that's all the information you have for me on Plagueian fleet deployments in the system?" Marick Tyris Arconae asked over the holo connection.

"Yes," Alaris answered. "You have everything you need to act when the time is right."

"And I should trust you?" Marick asked the Twi'lek, his eyes narrowing at his apparent distrust at the information that had fallen into his lap.

"You know as well as I do that the Dread Lord is incapable of seeing the so-called Ascendant Clan through this upcoming threat," Alaris spat. "Selika is weak. Whatever else I may think, I always remember where my true friends are."

Marick's demeanor seemed to soften a bit, the shared history between the two obviously doing much to allay his initial suspicion.

"Then the Shadow Clan thanks you for your ongoing service," the Arconae said. "What else can you tell me about the static defenses that you have recently expanded?"

Selika whirled and quietly stalked away from the virulent act of betrayal she had just witnessed. She had always known that Alaris was a schemer, it was something of a commonality that they shared. She could always assume that he was playing an angle, because she herself would be doing the same. It was something that made him a known quantity in some ways, that he was always looking out for his own best interests. But to betray the Clan to the *Arconans* of all people, this would call for something more than simple retribution...

The tall towers of the Aliso Stock Exchange were dwarfed by the Pinnacle, but they still allowed Alaris a view of the entire city. He spent more time here in his suite than at the Pinnacle and today was no exception. The day was a good trading day thus far. Billions of credits were

being moved with ease between the hands of skilled brokers and Alaris had managed to accumulate a five percent margin bump.

He rolled his wrist, eyeing the deep brown liquor within the glass he held. Setting the glass on a coaster next to his computer console he spun around and with a flick of his wrist activated the view screens behind him. The screens immediately came to life, giving him a view of the trading floor. He eyed the usual suspects and their staff. The usual rabble were yelling and pointing, as if that ever did anything valuable.

He was about to flick off the screen and head down for the final bell when he eyed a cloaked figure making trades that he hadn't seen before at the exchange. He couldn't make out a face at a wide angle and so focused it in for identification.

"Computer, isolate grid three, subsection seven-a."

The screen shimmered for a moment and then focused on an area with a few traders and the cloaked figure. They were doing a very good job hiding their face, which in this business rarely meant anything but something malevolent. They had a trade pad in their hand and were frantically making trades.

An alert sounded from behind Alaris. He instinctively spun to look at his desk console. Four major holdings were taking sudden hits. The twi'lek's five percent bump was starting to dwindle. Alaris checked the clock; twenty-three minutes to close. He didn't want to upset the trade market by shutting it down, but this was not good.

He spun in his chair again. "Computer, spin camera angle to 60%. Maintain focus on grid three, subsection seven-a."

If he hadn't already been sitting, he would have collapsed. The figure was doing an excellent job hiding their face, but it was very, very clear who it was.

"What the hell are you doing, Selika?"

He grabbed his comlink and signaled his new commando droid. "Threeowun. There's an attempted short on the floor. Close on G3S7A, identify Selika Roh."

He could see the droid approaching the Consul from across the trade floor from the monitors and he identified the exact moment that Selika realized that she had been made. She calmly closed her pad and turned to the exit. A few well placed mind tricks and she slipped past security.

It was not twenty minutes later when Alaris burst through the doors into Selika's office. "What in the Sam Hell do you think you're doing?"

The Consul of Plagueis looked up from the reports she was skimming through and leapt over the desk ready to kill. "Me?"

"I set this financial system up to benefit the entire Clan, Selika, you included. Your personal coffers should be overflowing with credits." Alaris was steamed. "The Clan was set for a huge bump until you walked in and attempted to short the entire exchange."

"I have literally no patience to speak with a traitor." Selika looked like she was ready to rip Alaris's throat out with her bare hands.

Alaris was taken aback. "Excuse me?!"

While the two senior leaders of Plagueis were bickering, Arden Karn walked in seemingly unnoticed. Just behind him was Kz'set, himself a former member of Plagueis' leadership. As the Human and Twi'lek were about at each other's throats, Kz'set looked to Arden.

"They really don't know?"

Arden simply shrugged. "I figured one of the two of them would have worked it out by now. Guess I'll have to tell them."

Kz'set shook his head in response just as Arden shouted at the Dread Lord and Wrath.

"You two are such gullible moof-milkers! It's been a bloody droid all along."

Both Selika and Alaris stopped mid-rant and turned to face Arden. Each gave him their own version of the you-better-have-an-explanation look but said nothing. Arden gestured to Kz'set who handed each of them a datapad.

"I've been tracking a sophisticated infiltration droid for several dayzzz." The Verpine stated in his typical buzzing. "Holo emitters, voice modulators, and quite a bit of snark I might add. I first was suspicious when I spotted 'Arden' in Hak's with middle shelf whisky."

"Not my place or my drink." Arden added in case the others had forgotten.

The Verpine nodded and continued. "Once I mentioned it to Arden, he started working with Reg'ik to screen and reroute outgoing communications and data transfers in order to feed it misinformation while I used my...unique expertise to track and either turn or neutralize the droid."

Alaris scowled. "You've been monitoring comms? OUR comms? How?"

Arden smirked. "I was working with two skilled slicers, not to mention Ronovi was not very thorough in cleaning out my command codes."

Alaris raised a threatening finger at Arden but Selika interrupted before the Twi'lek could speak. "But I saw him speaking to..."

"Me." Kz'set interrupted. "And it was probably the droid you saw. I guess I was a more convincing Marrick than I thought."

"Once we were aware of the droid, Reg and I made sure nothing more sensitive than a food order left the Pinnacle without being intercepted, aside from those with the misinformation we fed it." Arden continued. "After that particular transmission, we decided to put a stop to the droid right there."

"It's dormant in my lab right now." Kz'set added.

Both Alaris and Selika glared at each other for several seconds before turning their glares back at Kz'set and Arden. Neither could speak for a moment but it was eventually Selika that said what they were probably both thinking.

"You mean to tell me that there's been a droid impersonator running about playing both of us for fools for days and you're only now telling us?"

"Couldn't tip our hands until we could reliably track it. Had to make sure we weren't inadvertently warning it." Kz'set explained.

"Besides, I have to admit it was fun watching you two squirm." Arden added. "For what it's worth, I had my credits on you to figure it out first." Arden nodded in Selika's direction.

"I thought the blue one would. Guess the Bothan won." Kz'set said with a smirk.

Both the Dread Lord and Wrath stood there wordlessly fuming for several seconds before Alaris glared at Arden and said angrily. "I'm not a moof-milker!"

Arden looked at Kz'set. "Pretty sure he is."
Kz'set simply nodded. "Fact."