

I won't pretend to get philosophical on my views on warfare. I have, since my arrival in Arcona, been nothing more than a tool to be molded. My skills have been honed and tweaked to serve the needs of the Shadow Clan. I am today a result of those who came before me. Every breath I take, every action I make, is for Arcona. And thus, I am responsible for every action...and every action has consequences.

>> Arcona Proconsul Logs

> Krayiss II

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THE CHANGING WINDS

Marick arconae #10214

Ziost Fiction - Special Forces

The Hapan's cool eyes shifted from the datapad in his hand to the viewport of the *Eye of the Abyss II*. Staring out into the void of space, Marick Arconae felt the quiet before the storm more heavily than he ever had in the past. Krayiss II was a distant memory, but if he focused, he could re-live each planet from the Dark Crusade as easily as if he were standing on its surface.

Krayiss II is where it all began. Had it really been a year since engaging head to head with Taldryan for Arcona's first true test since victory on New Tython? The bitter taste of failure fused with the dry, crusty air of Krayiss II would never leave him. Arcona had allowed themselves to become complacent and paid the price.

Defeat.

The icy winds of Rhelg held more pleasant memories. Despite the numbing cold, it had been a rallying of Arcona's might that Marick was proud to have been a part of. Rhelg had been a bigger turning point for Clan Arcona than most realized. Not only was it a true testament that Arcona's rise was no accident or fluke of nature, but it showed that even in the face of insurmountable odds, the Shadow Clan could prevail. Yet even that small ray of hope had been squashed with Wuntila's trial and subsequent demotion. The case had been a distraction to the Consul Emeritus, and few would ever know how the consequences created a ripple in the rest of the Arcona Summit.

Victory?

Wuntila and Marick continued forward, tackling Bchargebba and then Svolten without hesitation. The Hapan's efforts even earned his promotion to Primarch; one of Marick's few goals in his dedication to Clan Arcona and the Brotherhood. And yet, with the demotion of Wuntila still hanging in the air, the very man who had helped raise Marick to where he stood, it still felt hollow and empty. There was simply no joy to be held in the accomplishment.

There was little time to lament, however, as Wuntila was heavily injured at the conclusion of their mission on Svolten. Everything fell into Marick's hands then. Everything had changed.

Victory?

Kalsunor was his first true test. Ambushed en route to their planet of conquest, the Arcona

recon team had been left stranded on a dying space station. Through equal parts cunning and luck they had survived the encounter. Arcona squeezed out victory against the rising tide that was the Ascendent House.

Victory, but at what cost?

Wuntila's injury had kept him sidelined for most of the fight, and the Arconan Summit was still reeling from the sudden shift of power behind closed doors. It had been up to Marick to hold everything together, and the events had started to take their toll on the young leader. The mantle of responsibility sat solely on his shoulders. He was no longer a weapon for Arcona. He was the hand that guided it.

I never wanted this.

Everything was changing. Time seemed to blur everything into one long, tiring string of events for Marick. And yet, time was not a luxury the Shadow Lord could afford. When the *Abyss II* reached its destination, there would be no more time for discussion or debate. The chaos of battle had been all that the members of Arcona had been allowed to know over the course of the year- and in that chaos, somehow, they had thrived. Planet after planet fell to the Arconan warfront.

On the one hand, this was just another battle in a neverending sea of warfare. On the other, everything rested on the events of Ziost.

The Consul glanced down at Kira, who looked up at him with a stoic calm that usually mirrored his own. Through their connection through the Force, he could sense her resolve. She understood.

Marick scratched the white Cythraul behind the ears and silently thanked her for the reminder of who he *needed* to be. Weakness had long been removed from his vocabulary and demeanor. Wuntila and the Arconae had seen to that. Marick slid the datapad into the folds of his *Invicta* robes and let his hands clasp together behind his back as he straightened his posture, eyes hardening like sapphires. He let his frustrations bubble beneath the surface of his stoic mask, letting them fuel the fires of his resolve into a brilliant aura of light.

Mejas. Timeros. Sashar. Zandro. Wuntila. He was no longer a servant of Arcona. He would now be mentioned in the same breath as the leaders who had shaped Arcona into the power it was today.

You want me to do this? So be it.

Marick let himself slip into the Heart of Stone, hardening his resolve like a sheet of cortosis. He leaned forward and tapped a series of keys, making sure he was broadcasting out over the entire Arcona *First Fleet*. "Arconans! Prepare for victory!"

His voice did not waiver. It had iron in it. He leaned back and looked back out into the distance out the viewport.

There will be plenty of time for introspection after the Crusade was over.

Or would there? Did it ever truly end?

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"We're looking at another ice planet, Marick," Legorii said slowly, studying the data on the

briefing screen in front of them. “We play it just like Rhelg?”

Marick nodded once at his Proconsul. “Just like Rhelg. Make sure the troopers are properly equipped and the survival gear is being rationed out throughout the LAAT/i’s. If anyone gets shot down again, I want them found immediately and with means of holding out.”

“As you say, sir,” the Anzat replied, making a few quick notes on his datapad.

“Is it Zee-ost, or Zoi-st?”

“Zee-” Marick started to answer, but was cut off as a knock came from the door.

“Enter,” The Consul said, hands clasping smoothly behind his back. Kira sat off to the side, her eyes never leaving the entrance to the Captain’s Cabin, her canine face serious. Next to her, Timeros sat with his finger idly tapping the hilt of his lightsaber, mimicking the Cythraul’s expression. He looked cold, cautious and calculating as always.

A young man with short, dark hair entered. He was tall for a human and had a set of scars on his face, one crossing between his eyes and the other passing just under his left eye. Marrek Gunstinson: one of the rising Jedi Hunters from Qel-Droma.

“Yes, Gunstinson?” Marick said formally.

“Sir!” the Qel-Droman snapped to attention, almost spilling the drink he had been carrying like a precious relic. “As requested I brought you imported Garqi-jasmine-mint-tea cooked at exactly eighty-two degrees celsius and steeped for exactly four-and-a-half minutes.” He rattled off with militaristic efficiency.

“Thank you,” the Hapan said calmly, accepting the steaming mug. “How is your training progressing?”

The Jedi Hunter puffed up proudly. “Sir, it is progressing well, sir. I will not let you down on Ziost.”

Marick nodded once. “I have no doubts, Gunstinson. Dismissed.”

Marrek smiled proudly and pounded his fist against his chest in salute before turning to leave.

Marick blew on the mug of tea before inhaling the aroma. He slowly raised the mug to his lips.

“--Are you sure that is wise,” Timeros’s voice cut through the room like a sudden gust of wind distributing a tranquil forest.

Marick paused before touching his lips to the mug and then lowered it slowly while turning to face his mentor. “You still don’t trust the boy, do you?”

“I don’t trust anyone,” the Adept replied firmly.

“Montresor’s departure was tough on him. Boys like that are impressionable, and he was very attached to his Master,” Legorii added.

“Be that as it may,” Marick said slowly. “I’ve had an Oblivion Agent trailing him every step of the way, and Etah has been keeping an eye on him as well.” Timeros rolled his eyes at the mention of the Gate Warden, but he offered no comment.

“Isolating the boy could work against us as well. He’s loyal to the cause,” the Consul continued. “And despite what the Arconae think, Monty leaving for Plagueis is a needed step in the right direction. He would not lower himself by trying to use the boy against us. He’s not like that.”

Timeros and Legorii shared a look of doubt but offered no counter.

“And besides,” Marick said, slowly moving the cups to his lips to take a sip, eyes locking onto Timeros. “You yourself conditioned me to be able to handle over sixty of the galaxy’s most dangerous toxins.”

Timeros shrugged, got to his feet and grabbed a datapad from Legorii as the two began to discuss battle preparations.

Marick drank a long sip from the mug and sighed. It was mellow with the taste of fresh cut spring flowers spewing across a babbling brook, and just a hint of mint. There were few things that the Consul took pleasure in, but tea had become one of them. He wasn’t exactly sure why he had become fascinated with the imported leaves, but he enjoyed their effect much more than the love-hate relationship he had maintained with caff.

The sudden taste of pepper and cloves washed over the Hapan’s palette, completely overpowering the mellow, floral undertones. He coughed once, and felt a sudden wave of suppressed emotion flood through his conscious, jostling him out of the Heart of Stone. A brief sense of vertigo crashed over the Consul as he braced himself against the table. It passed as quickly as it came, but Marick still lowered himself into a chair.

Kira whimpered and darted to her masters side, Timeros and Legorii both joining her.

“What happened?” Legorii asked, placing a hand on Marick’s shoulder.

“I don’t know. Ugh, clove. I hate clove.” The Consul spat onto his Proconsul’s boot.

“Hey!” the Anzat growled.

“What? I need to get the taste out of my mouth. Those boots look atrocious on you anyway. How do you even fight in them?” Marick’s usually stoic face had been replaced by a furrowed brow and a look of disgust. He pointed at Legorii’s longsword. “And why do you still carry around that primitive weapon when you have your lightsaber?”

Legorii opened his mouth to speak, but stopped, then looked at Timeros. The Adept leaned in and stared Marick in the eye, studying his face intently.

“Like something you see?” Marick said quickly. Too easily. There was no hesitation or thought.

“It’s not what I see, it’s what I’m not seeing,” Timeros said slowly. “He’s not able to maintain Heart of Stone.” The Adept flared his aura of terror, focusing its efforts solely on his former apprentice.

Marick sneered and clutched the sides of his head. “Get away you freak! Stop!”

Timeros let the aura drop instantly, and he could see the tension in Marick’s shoulders release as he lowered his hands.

“It’s your fault I had to learn Heart of Stone in the first place!” Marick sneered, his voice escalating louder than Legorii or Timeros were accustomed to.

“What do you think it is?” Legorii asked, concern setting over his alien features.

“I don’t know. Fetch Atyiru and take up command at the helm. Have Ernordeth and Valtiere secure the boy and take him to my quarters. I will question him myself.” Timeros spoke calmly and steadily and with the authority and confidence of a former Consul, Combat Master, and Director of the Dajora Intelligence Agency.

Legorii nodded and left.

“You have been poisoned, sir.” Timeros said flatly.

“Of course it’s poison,” Marick growled. “It wasn’t from the boy though. We know exactly who did this.”

Timeros lifted an eyebrow. “Who?”

“Solus. It has to be Solus.”

“Solus Gar was reported missing in action after Kalsunor. You know that.”

“Perfect excuse,” Marick crossed his arms.

“The boy brought the tea, the evidence is pretty clear.”

Marick shook his head. “Too obvious,”

“You just don’t want it to be Monty that’s behind it.”

“Sithspit, it has to be Solu-”

The door slid open and Atyiru Entar stormed in carrying her medical kit against her chest. Her braided hair trailed behind her and settled between her shoulder blades as she rushed over to Marick and Timeros.

“What happened?” she demanded, absentmindedly pushing Timeros aside.

Marick watched the exchange blankly as Timeros wordlessly stepped away. If any other living being had tried to push Timeros Entar Arconae, they would be sprawled out dead on the floor in the blink of an eye. Somehow, the woman had avoided that fate.

“I do not know. It does not look like elmshade poisoning”

The Miraluka nodded and grabbed a hold of the Hapan’s wrist and checked his pulse, then moved her fingers towards his neck to the same. She pressed the back of her hand against his forehead and then looked directly into each of his eyes. “Follow my hand, and try not to move your head.”

“I’m fine, it was just a little bit of vertigo,” Marick said, clearly growing agitated with being treated like a child in a doctor’s office.

“Hush, Marry, and tell me-”

Marick’s anger flared and he grabbed a hold of the woman’s wrist. “You will address me by my proper name and title, woman.” Marick’s voice snapped with venom.

Atyiru rocked back, and bit her lip. She was not sure if she should be offended, or concerned.

“Those robes are too revealing. Do you want to be a Dark Jedi, or a street-walker?”

Atyiru’s cheeks flushed, but before she could do anything, Timeros reached out a hand and cupped Marick behind the head. It wasn’t a hard hit, but one he had used repeatedly in training the young Hapan. Marick winced and anger flared momentarily in his eyes before recognizing the look on his mentors face. Atyiru stifled a giggle. After training with Marick for so long and being scolded repeatedly, it was nice to see the Consul still got the same treatment from *his* teacher.

“I...wasn’t supposed to say that out loud, was I?” Marick asked sheepishly, his anger fading as quickly as it had come.

“No,” Timeros said bluntly.

Atyiru looked over at the mug of tea and picked it up and sniffed it. She nodded and then paled

as realization crept over her. “Marick,” she asked carefully, not wanting to upset him. He looked at her and gave his attention, so she continued. “Does your mouth taste of clove and pepper?”

“Yes,” The Hapan said with a glower towards the direction of his tea mug. He frowned, and the gesture was so out of place on his boyish features that it almost looked childish. “It was supposed to have a hint of mint...”

Atyiru choked back her laughter, remembered the situation, and immediately put her medic-face back on. “Well, I know what it is,” she sighed.

Timeros tilted his head.

“It’s called a *clove-spike*. It’s a variation of ‘*nightvape*... but altered through Sith Alchemy. It is incredibly rare because of the treatment process and the plant root is only found on Aeother-”

“What exactly does it do?” Timeros interjected, uninterested in the poison’s pedigree.

“Well...you know how when you are drunk, you...” Atyiru started to explain.

“I don’t feel drunk,” Marick said, scratching the back of his head, then messing with a few strands of his dark hair. The gesture was so relaxed and natural, yet still looked odd coming from the usual statuesque Consul.

“It’s not like being drunk, but you know how when you get drunk you are...more inclined to act without thinking?”

“You mean like that time Mav challenged Pravus to a drinking contest, and I had to hold his hair back while he puked out an entire bottle of Corellian Whiskey after realizing that Grand Masters have an infinite tolerance?” Marick asked quickly with a boyish grin.

“Yes...just like that?” Atyiru nodded. Timeros narrowed his eyes.

“What, you guys didn’t know? Oh...right. Voice staff thing. I guess I wasn’t supposed to mention that,” Marick’s voice trailed off and he looked down at the ground. He noticed Kira for the first time looking up at him, smiled again and ruffled the furr on either side of her face. The Cythraul nuzzled against her masters hands and then rested her head in his lap, still attentive to everything going on in the room.

“I see,” Timeros said slowly. “He lacks any form of filter to his thoughts.”

Atyiru nodded and looked back at the Consul, unconsciously biting her thumbnail.

“Is there a cure?” Timeros asked.

“Well, it’s not like a regular poison, so a purgative wouldn’t work to flush it out. Antivenom won’t have much effect either and even my Force-Healing would not do much against alchemy like this. There are principles at work here beyond even my medical knowledge.”

“I would prefer not to,” Marick said, raising a hand. “The purgative, that is...if my vote counts.”

Timeros and Atyiru ignored their Consul, who, after a moment, seemed content to let his objection drop. “It could take anywhere from six-to-eight hours to run its course. There might also be some minor relapses. I’m sorry... there are a lot of variables that are beyond my knowledge.”

Timeros did not give any indication of his reaction to the news. He simply looked off to the side and into the distance, his mind mechanically calculating his next move. “So, we have the leader of the largest and most powerful unit in the Dark Jedi in the Brotherhood with unknown alchemy inside of him

that prevents him from having any social filters.”

Timeros ran a hand across his face and pointed at Atyiru. “Alright. You are going to stay here with him.. Do not let him leave.” The Miraluka nodded. “Also, do not allow Socorra, Teroch, or Sanguinius in here.” Tim paused. “Or Cethgus, for that matter.”

“Cethgus?” Marick perked up. “Where is that good-for-nothing meat head? I swear to Slice if we could fit a second thought into his head, sparks would ignite and he’d be an unstoppable force of nature.”

Timeros pointed at his Consul, signaling him to let it drop. Marick folded his arms across his chest, and frowned. “Marick, I want you to stay here and limit your interactions with external objects and people. Listen to whatever Atty says. Understood?”

“Why would I listen to a woma-ow!” Marick felt a pinch in his neck and looked to see a tiny needle had punctured his skin. He looked back up at Atty and slouched in his chair.

“Don’t worry, brother. I will watch over him,” she said with a smile as she put the sedative away.

Timeros nodded and turned to leave. As the door closed, he overheard Atty laughing.

“This is great. I can tell you all about the new boots I got while shop-”

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Timeros strode down the corridor of the *Abbyss II* towards his personal quarters. Two Oblivion agents stood sentry, moving aside as the Arconae approached. Tim entered the small, spartan room to see Marrek Gunstinson sitting with a look of confusion on his face.

“Lord Timeros,” Marrek said, rising to his feet and saluting. “What’s going on, they told me you had some questions for me? Did you require my services, sir?”

Timeros simply narrowed his eyes and let his aura of terror permeate freely. The room seemed to grow colder for the Jedi Hunter, sound disappearing into a space-like vacuum. A chill shot through his body, numbing his muscles. When Timeros spoke, it was ethereal and haunting, like a specter.

“*Where did you get the ‘nightvape?’*” The Adept asked bluntly.

“T-the what?” Marrek stammered, wishing he had his rifle with him. Not that it would have done much good. He clenched his fist and tried to fight to keep his calm.

“*I will only ask one more time. Where did you get the toxin from that you used to poison the Consul?*” Timeros asked again. He knew that a direct route was rarely the way to conduct an interrogation, but time was of the essence, and a Jedi Hunter had little defense against a Dark Jedi Adept.

“I...something happened to the Lord Consul? I didn’t do anything...” Marrek started to say, fear gripping at his throat and threatening to strangle the life out of him. “I was told by the Lord Consul to fetch his tea for him. I went to Gin at the bar downstairs in the ‘mess and he helped me brew and pour the tea to Marick’s specifications. I wanted to make sure it was still hot, so I ran as fast as I could without spilling any to bring it the Lord Consul. I’m sorry...did I do something wrong, was it not to his

satisfaction?”

Timeros let the Journeyman’s words sink in and slowly let his aura of terror fade away. He could read a person better than most, and knew hopeless honesty when he saw it. Marrek relaxed visibly, but was noticeably pale with a thin sheen of sweat streaked across his brow.

“Gin helped you prepare the tea?”

“Yes sir,” Marrek said slowly.

“Alright. You are to remain here until I get back. Someone has poisoned the Consul and I intend to get to the bottom of it. You *remain here* until I say otherwise.” He stressed again.

“Understood?”

“Yes s-sir.” Marrek nodded.

Timeros turned and left without another word.

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“What do you mean you don’t know where he went?” Timeros sneered. Kell, the assistant cook aboard the *Abyss II*, stared at the ground, shifting uneasily from foot to foot.

“Gin didn’t say anything when he left,” the aging Corellian explained. “I don’t follow him when he takes a piss, and I ‘aint his keeper.”

Timeros furrowed his brow in warning but was cut off before he could question the assistant further. Something flashed across his peripheral vision: a slender man with a hawk-like nose, dark hair, and a white linen apron tied around his neck. Gin.

The cook was off in a dash before Timeros could yell for him to stop. The Adept grit his teeth and shoved past Kell to make chase, barking orders into his comm. Gin ducked around a winding turn and barely missed tackling a female crew member. Timeros did not bother dodging the woman and instead brushed her to the side with the Force like stay branch in a forest.

Nobody had time for that.

Gin turned another corner and made his way towards the hangar bay. He would have prepared an escape route prior, and there was no telling who else could have been a spy within the *Abyss II*. Such was war. As the cook entered the hangar bay, he was met with a clothesline in the form of the extended arm of a burly Zabrak. Gin hit the floor hard, the back of his skull colliding cleanly with the metal door-way.

“No running in the hangar bay,” Cethgus said offhandedly, lifting the unconscious cook up over one of his broad shoulders.

Timeros came to a halt and looked blankly at his brother. “Please tell me you didn’t kill him.”

Cethgus frowned. “Of course I didn’t. He did hit his head though pretty hard...”

The Adept sighed, but motioned for Cethgus to bring the body. “Have one of the Oblivion Agents wake him. I need to have a little chat with him in private.

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Gin slumped bonelessly in the chair he had been bound to. His eyes were glossed over and drool leaked out of the corner of each side of his mouth. Slowly, the hawk-like nose and long dark hair shifted away into a bald, pale head with an epidermis that looked closer to paper than skin. The nose became nearly non-existent, and the eyes became recessed slits. Few people got to see a Shi'do in its natural form, but Timeros knew all too well. The shapeshifters were common in the infiltration and espionage business the DIA handled.

“So, that confirms it,” Cethgus said. “I’ve never seen you push someone that hard, I don’t think he’s ever going to be right in the head after that...”

Timeros shrugged nonchalantly. “He said that Montresor of House Plagueis hired him. Gin has been dead for weeks. This clears the boy, but the fact still remains. I was right.”

The Adept was about to turn to leave, but felt a hand grab at the side of his sleeve.

“Something still is not right,” Invictus said, meeting Timeros’ cold eyes with his own. The Chiss had watched the interrogation carefully, taking note of the infiltrators mannerisms and tone.

Invictus patted down the Shi’ido’s body and found a credit-chit. It looked to be unassuming, and the engraving was faded away. Upon closer inspection, Invictus’ eyes widened. The engraving was that of a trio of crescents, each tip with its own set of smaller crescents. “House Marka Ragnos,” he explained. “Hard to see, but I’d know it anywhere.”

Timeros took the chit and studied it. Then he remembered something Atyiru had mentioned earlier that he had completely overlooked.

“The plant root is only found on Aeotheran,” the medic had tried to say.

“Naga Sadow,” Timeros said in a harsh whisper.

I was wrong. Perhaps things are changing, and my own hatred blinded me to the truth.

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Timeros knocked on the door to the Captain’s Quarters.

“Come in--” Atyiru started to say.

“--Don’t come in!” Marick yelled.

The Adept entered anyway. Marick tried to pull a hood over his head, but realized that he wore none. The result ended up drawing more attention to his hair, which now sat neatly braided in a similar fashion to Atyiru’s.

“Not. A. Word.” Marick growled, locking eyes with his former Master.

“I think it’s an upgrade, personally,” Atyiru beamed.

“You don’t have eyes,” Marick grumbled.

Atyiru waved the comment off and grinned from ear to ear at her brother. Timeros just sighed and handed her the credit chit they had pulled from the infiltrator.

“Are you familiar with a Rosh Nyine?” Timeros asked his Consul.

Marick nodded. “Aedile of Marka Ragnos working under Teu.”

“Former Aedile now,” Timeros corrected. “Aside from hiring an assassin to infiltrate Arcona, he

apparently angered the entire Naga Sadow Summit with his attitude.”

Marick took the information in and nodded slowly.

“Why wouldn’t the assassin just try and kill you?” Atyiru asked cautiously.

Marick’s temper didn’t flare. “It would have been too risky. If anything happened to me, the investigation would be too obvious and cause a bigger stir with the Dark Council. The investigation would have eventually traced it back to Sadow, and I don’t think even Lord Ashen’s fondness of his former Clan would save them from his wrath in that case.”

Timeros nodded slowly. “And the *‘nightvape* variant was meant to lead you into simply making poor judgment calls in the battle ahead. I am loathe to admit, but it was a brilliant move. Perhaps we should-”

Marick held up a hand and stood on his own for the first time since ingesting the toxin. True to his earlier words, the Hapan’s body had been conditioned over the years to handle toxins and his understanding of the Force allowed him to better process the alchemy running a muck inside him.

“No. We do not need to lower ourselves to their level. Arcona is no longer the ‘pup under the table fighting for scraps,” The Consul said, his features hardening.

“We are the First Clan. And we will simply win by being better than the rest.”

Timeros and Atyiru looked at each other and then bowed their heads.

“As you say, Lord Consul,” the Entars said in unison.