

February Battleteam Fiction – Styx: *Homecoming*

Selen was a planet of unrivalled beauty. It was a sapphire gleaming in the warm glow of the sun. Sky blue seas gave way to bone-white beaches. Emerald isles gave way to fertile coastal plains which, in turn, blossomed into thick, rich forests. It was a place of natural wonder; a planet of unassuming splendour, nestled away in the most unknown regions of the universe. It was Dajorra's crown. And it played host to one of the most powerful organisations in the galaxy.

A small freighter flew low over the treetops. It danced between the trees, avoiding stray branches that had broken free from the forest canopy. In the distance, a mountainous ridge bisected an island dividing the forest below.

"We shall be approaching Estle City imminently, Your Excellency," the freighter's captain announced, strapping himself in. He was respectful in his deference despite his youthful appearance. "You should prepare for landing."

A towering, hooded figure nodded slowly, retreating into the cockpit's small antechamber. He was followed by a hulking, wolf-like creature. It ambled through the doorway after the hooded man and proceeded into a crate set back into wall of the antechamber. An electron wall hissed shut, keeping the creature contained. The hooded man strapped himself in and watched as the city began to materialise in the rock face ahead. It was hewn into the rock, a city of stone, and on the plateau overlooking the city was a citadel, seemingly carved from obsidian. If Selen was the crown of Dajorra, Estle was its jewel. A jewel expertly cut and mounted for all to see.

"Are you sure it is time, Sire?" the captain's metallic voice rang in the hooded man's earpiece.

"It is time enough, Lysander," the man replied.

The freighter flew beyond Estle City and below into a set of tunnels that cut through the mountainside. Age had dulled the stone, rounding corners and softening the light, but the trip was no less perilous. While the freighter was relatively small, it was a bulky, cumbersome ship, difficult to manoeuvre and perpetually needing repair. Still, Lysander's experience more than made up for his youth. The freighter easily traversed the narrow tunnel system, strafing between oncoming vehicles, before emerging out into the open plains on the other side of the mountain. They circled round and entered a waiting pattern above the spaceport below.

"This is Giletta Spaceport, please state your name, cargo and security clearance." A monotonous voice rang through the ship's console.

"Captain Lysander of the *rigger*-class light freighter, *Saracen*. Cargo is personnel. Non-commercial. Security clearance is: 'Whiskey Alpha Zero One', please confirm."

"Captain Lysander, please confirm: 'Whiskey Alpha Zero One'." The monotonous voice became more animated.

"Confirm, Giletta." Lysander said, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

A helmeted face suddenly appeared in front of the cockpit's viewport, a projection from the video comlink. "This code is restricted. Please disclose how it came into your possession. Be warned: If you do not comply, direct measures will be taken."

The captain shook his head, "this code is being used legitimately. The cargo I am carrying warrants it."

The helmeted flight controller's eyes narrowed. Behind him two sets of legs appeared. "Please proceed to quarantine dock zero one seven. I repeat, please proceed to quarantine dock zero one seven. You will be submitted to further questioning."

"As you wish." Lysander cut the holocall short. He tuned his earpiece to the ship's private frequency, "are you always this much trouble, Your Excellency?"

"Unfortunately so," the hooded man replied, his voice tense, uneasy.

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Lysander strolled calmly down the boarding ramp. He was an athletic build, well-muscled, yet lean and lithe. His skin was pale, almost translucent, and thick black hair ran like a river over his shoulders and down to the small of his back. At his narrow hips swung a DH-17 blaster pistol. Something the cadre of space port officials waiting at the bottom of the boarding ramp were quick to notice.

"Surrender all weaponry immediately!" one of the armed officials shouted, "We shall warn you only once!"

Lysander smiled and continued down the ramp unchecked.

"This is your final warning—" the official's bark was swiftly interrupted.

"—There will be none of that!" The hooded man snapped as he strolled down the boarding ramp and came to a halt next to Lysander. His cloak billowed behind him in the valley wind. For a moment, the space port officials had not noticed the creature padding down the ramp behind.

Fear. Panic. Desperation. These fleeting emotions, these glimpses into the mind, were as clear as the morning sun on the official's face as the creature stepped out from behind the two men. The official levelled his weapon at the creature, his arm shaking uncontrollably. The creature stepped forward growling. Its lips curled to reveal porcelain daggers as long as a man's finger.

"Kilvin, heel!" The hooded man's shout was like a gunshot in the night. The creature turned, padded softly back to the hooded man, and sat at his feet surveying the area.

"Enough of this," a tall, silver-haired man stepped forward. "Please confirm why you are using a restricted code. This code is reserved only for Whiskey Alpha."

"Because, Lieutenant Colonel Malay, it is my code." The man stepped forward, pulling the hood from his head to reveal cerulean skin, piercing blue eyes, chiselled cheekbones and thick, salt-and-pepper hair with a matching goatee. "I am Whisky Alpha; I am Wuntila Arconae."

“Your Excellency, I... I did not know.” The silver-haired man known as Malay bowed in respect.

“You were not to know,” the blue-skinned man began to walk toward the entranceway to the space port. “I would like an audience before the Serpentine Throne. Please send a message forward to the Citadel. I expect to be greeted upon arrival.”

“Yes, yes of course, Your Excellency.” The silver-haired man turned to a subordinate, “you heard the man, boy! Get a message up to the Citadel at once!”

Wuntila Arconae was veritable bull of a man – over half-a-foot taller than Lysander and twice as wide. He turned to the ship’s captain, clapped the younger man on the shoulder with a broad, callused hand and withdrew a datapad from his belt. “Have the port officials unload our belongings. I shall send word of where they are to be delivered forthwith. In the mean time, stay with the ship. I shall be in touch.”

“Not a problem. I’ll try not to get in trouble.” Lysander grinned a plotting grin.

“You will not try. You will succeed.” Wuntila’s steely blue eyes cut through to Lysander’s very core. “You will stay with the ship. You will do as you are ordered. And if you fail, I shall have to find another captain. Is that clear?”

“So no fun.” Lysander retorted, now leaning against one of the hydraulic arms of the boarding ramp.

“Exactly. No fun.” Wuntila turned, eyeing Lysander for a lingering moment, before flicking the hood back over his face. He shouted out almost absentmindedly, “Kilvin, with me.” Not that he needed to – the creature had already begun to fall in step behind.

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The Citadel was a grand place. A place of order. A place of structure. But it had ghosts.

It had been damaged not too long ago, that much was clear. The rest of the city had also suffered. Wuntila was surprised he had not noticed it upon his arrival in Estle, but he had been gone for a very long time. *Too long*, Wuntila thought.

He negotiated the warren of corridors in the Citadel with ease. He took shortcuts through seemingly dead-end passages, along steam-vent walkways and through the barracks. He paid little attention to those who stopped, those who stared. A few faces he knew, but most were not familiar. He came to a stop only when he reached the doors to the Throne Room. They were monoliths in obsidian, three feet thick, and packed with barring mechanisms. They could withstand everything but a direct hit from an Imperial Star Destroyer. He smiled then, a plate-like hand caressing the cold stone as if tracing the lines of a lover’s face.

The doors swung open. And once inside he was again greeted by an overwhelming sense of tainted nostalgia. It was all the same, but it had all changed. The fire that burned along the rear wall behind the Serpentine Throne was no longer blue, as was the custom when he was here last. So too,

had the layout been changed; the tactical readout displays and battle screens had been removed in favour of a more minimalist design. It was not in-keeping with Wuntila's preference for precision military management, but he nonetheless approved. His eyes then instinctively moved towards the throne at the room's heart. An empty throne, situated between two of the intricately carved pillars that ran the length of the room.

It was a monument. Seemingly hewn from a single block of dark marble, it was highlighted by tall flames licking the far wall beyond. Two serpents wove their way up the tall back of the throne, their tails coiled tightly around its feet. A carved emblem, spiked and scythe-like, adorned the throne's peak.

As he moved toward the dais upon which the Serpentine Throne was perched a small cadre of eleven guards stepped forward in a wedge formation, their armour entirely black except for the white number '1' on the left pauldron.

The group stopped just short of Wuntila, and the guard on point stepped forward. "Please state your name and your business," his voice echoed through the room.

"Wuntila Arconae. I am here for an audience with the Consul."

"Let him pass, Commander Sol," a voice commanded. It was lilting, musical. The words appeared to have been spoken by the room itself. And then the illusion dissipated. Wuntila watched cautiously as the space between the two pillars flanking the throne seemed to wilt, a shimmering curtain falling away to reveal an almost identical scene. The only difference was the throne. Upon it now sat a delicate woman, long white hair and a bright cloth wrap under her brows acting as a counterpoint to her warm, sun-kissed complexion. A smile burned bright on her face.

Wuntila strode forward and the commander stepped aside after a nod from the throne. He stopped just shy of the dais, kneeling down to bow respectfully. "Lord Consul, Atyiru."

"Lady," Atyiru responded, her smile turning to a smirk. "Lady Consul."

"Forgive me," Wuntila began, rising to his full height, "I mean no insult."

"Of course you don't, Wun." Atyiru rose from the throne and glided forward. Her legs seemed not to move, yet her body swayed with an alluring grace. She was divine. Elegance personified. "It's been a long time, Dragon. Too long."

"Forgive me, Shadow Lady. Whilst I serve Arcona in both name and in nature, there were some personal matters that could not go unattended." Wuntila smiled then. It was a genuine smile, one of very few. But Atyiru had witnessed it before. She returned the gesture, floating down the steps of the dais and embracing the bulky man with a warmth known only between friends.

"You have changed." Atyiru noted. And changed he had. The Shadow Lady had noticed it the minute he walked through the doors. This change was compounded by Wuntila's calmness. His aspect had changed; Commander Sol would not be alive had he met the Wuntila of past – the Dragon of Selen.

"I have," Wuntila said, his eyes the same cold, steely blue, "but for the better."

“You are needed, Wun.” Atyiru said, beginning a slow, stroll around him. “There are threats. Something is simmering in the darkness. It will build, albeit slowly. But it will reach a crescendo. And when it does, I want you in its way.”

“Of course, my lady.” Wuntila bowed respectfully, his body unmoving from his spot in front of the dais, despite Atyiru’s continued circuit of the spot in which he stood.

“You will travel to Port Ol’Val. You will join the members of Styx, a new cadre of Arconans.” she stopped. Her nose was barely three quarters up Wuntila’s chest, but he felt the power in her voice, the aura in her presence. “They have had some trouble. The *Broken Blade* has fallen into some... suspicious hands. A group of mutineers. You will assist Styx in retrieving the vessel and afford them the opportunity to use the vessel in the manner for which it was intended. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” Wuntila bowed low a final time. Atyiru smiled, patting the Arconae delicately on the arm. She turned, glided back up the dais, and resumed her place at Arcona’s heart. She nodded, and the Dragon spun on the ball of his foot and marched from the throne room.

People jumped and steered clear of the approaching wall of muscle as he dialled into *Saracen*. “Lysander, do you copy? Over.”

“Loud and clear.” His voice had the tell-tale tone of a smirk.

“Change of plan. Get the gear back on the *Saracen*. We’re heading for Port Ol’Val.”

“Wait, what?” Lysander retorted. Wuntila smiled as his pilot’s voice dropped from amused to irritated.

“We are going to meet our new unit: *Styx*. Be ready on the double.”

“Your Excellenc-“ The words were snipped as the connection was ceased on the *Saracen*’s end.

It’s good to be home, Wuntila thought as he stepped out onto the courtyard overlooking Estle. *It’s good to be home*.

END

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