

Red Right Hand - Sweep the Decks
Wuntila Arconae (#8533)

Assault Craft
Far orbit of the moon Agenor
1000 Hours

The assault craft shook violently. Explosions on either side rocked the craft's hull and tested the vessel's engineering to its limit. Outside, a cacophony of blaster fire and detonating torpedoes drowned out the alarms ringing through the craft's hold. Some of the platoon had lost consciousness as a result of the G-forces, whilst others simply evacuated the contents of their stomachs onto the floor.

It had been a carefully orchestrated attack. Bombing runs had preceded the assault craft, disabling both the *Inferno's* starboard shields and hangar bay blast doors. Then sleeper cells took their toll. The *Shadow* had been damaged, and the *Darkest Night* was the culprit. Now the battle was in full swing. And the small assault craft was gliding right through the midst of the battle.

"Ninety seconds to deployment," a gravelled voice boomed through the craft's intercom system.

Wuntila wiped the sweat from his brow with a hamfisted hand and turned to the trooper to his left. "Get it all out now," the Arconan said as the trooper retched. "If you're not one-hundred percent when that door opens, I'll kill you myself." He raised a finger to the loading hatch at the aft of the vessel. He could not tell whether the trooper was frightened or simply nauseous as the colour drained from his face. Not that he cared.

The blue-skinned Arconan -- otherwise known as the Dragon for his fiery demeanour and ferocity in battle -- put on the helmet bearing the head of his namesake. It hissed as the airlock engaged, and the smell of vomit and sweat was replaced by the stale, dry air of his armour's breathing apparatus.

"Thirty seconds to deployment!" The voice boomed once more.

"Listen up!" Wuntila's voice thundered through the craft's intercom system as he strapped himself into his seat. "Our responsibility is to clear the hangar deck and work our way to the engine room of the *Inferno*. You shall pay no attention to that white-haired little Ryn. His words are poison. Estle City is your capital; Selen is your home. The Shadesworn are your family. They are your kin. They are your brothers and sisters--"

"Fifteen seconds to deployment!" the voice interjected over the transmission.

"--*You* are all Shadesworn. Fight with courage and die with honour. *Arcona Invicta!*" The words echoed through the intercom as the infantry drop pod was released from the assault craft and soared through space.

The drop pod drifted past the shield barrier and toward the hangar's electron wall. But before it was even halfway through, a torrent of missiles and blaster fire shook the hull, knocking it off course and twisting it mid-flight. The pod turned, its aft scraping along the wall of the hangar, ripping chunks of metal and pipework from the bulkhead. It turned again, crashing to the deck. Wrought metal was thrown into the air. Debris cast from the crash leapt up, felling those in the immediate vicinity. The pod came to rest on its side in the centre of the hangar, amidst dead bodies and damaged starfighters.

The loading door swung open. Spilling from the debris, the Arconan forces unleashed a volley of blaster fire. It was returned in kind by the *Inferno's* guards. And at the head of the Arconan platoon, a hulking, armoured mass. It swung a long, broad lightsaber almost effortlessly, redirecting blaster bolts and cleaving in two those who drifted too close.

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Agave-Class Picket - Valour's Fall
Star Destroyer Inferno, Portside
1005 Hours

The *Valour's Fall* skirted the battlefield cautiously. Whilst Dassac's starfighter wings were preoccupied in dogfights, the Star Destroyers could easily detect them if they drifted within range. It was vital the vessel remained untraceable, passed unnoticed.

"We're receiving word that pod zero one seven has boarded successfully, Sir." Commander Yamato turned to the Soulfire Strike Team Captain, Celahir Erinos Arconae.

"Very good. Is there a clear sign of shield realignment?" Celahir said, strapping a bicep guard to his right arm.

"Clear sign that they are focussing on the starboard side of the vessel, your Excellency."

"Good. Then we have our ticket to board. Initiate the manoeuvre, Commander." Celahir did not wait for a reply as he exited the bridge.

The Kiffar captain strolled out onto the operations deck, tightening the last strap on the gauntlet of his *Dar'Verd* Combat Environment Suit. For every Soulfire excursion, Celahir went through the same motion, starting at his left boot, over to the right, and then moving up his body, finishing with his right gauntlet. It was a soothing motion. It calmed him. A certainty amongst uncertainty.

"*Su cuy'gar, Alor'ad.*" Sashar said by way of formal greeting. The Adept walked up, grasping Celahir by the forearm and bringing him in for a brotherly embrace. "What's the news?"

"Ready yourself. We'll be moving soon enough." Celahir winked to his former mentor, who swiftly returned the gesture before disappearing into the armoury.

The Soulfire captain turned to the room and stopped for a moment, watching. Wes sat atop an upturned crate religiously sharpening his *Da'Vaab* butcher's cleaver; Nikola was leaning against the central table intensely studying the projection of the ensuing battle taking place outside the ship; and, Juda stood hunched over a worktable at the back of the room, feverishly packing and unpacking his medical supplies. Each of them had their own ways of preparing for battle. Each of them had their coping mechanisms.

Celahir's face became one of concentration. He pressed his hand against the subdermal implant by his ear. He nodded and stepped forward into the room. "*Verda*," the room stopped and listened with equal measures intent and respect, "I have just received word from Yamato that we shall be moving into position in the next few minutes. Finish up what you are doing and ready yourselves."

A chorus of agreement echoed within the room, and Celahir ducked back through the blast door toward his personal quarters.

Whether he agreed with it or not, the order had been clear: rescue the Rollmaster. Soulfire had been charged with the task. And Soulfire never refused a Consular request.

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Hangar Bay, Inferno
Far orbit of the moon Agenor
1020 Hours

"Brace!" The scream was nothing short of a whisper as the incoming missile hit the hull of the drop pod. An explosion. Fire and debris. Bodies were launched into the air and swiftly deposited to the floor, one atop the other, in a mass of charred flesh and blood.

Wuntila blinked the blurriness from his eyes and pushed himself up onto his knees. A shrill ringing faded into a distant clamour as a circle of enemies approached the dwindling platoon of Arconans. The Dragon pushed himself up onto his knees and shook his head, bringing his senses back into focus. He tapped into the Force, willing it through his body. Surrender was no option.

His fingers instinctively found the hilt of *Dragonsbreath* and blue fire leapt from its jaws. One of the *Inferno* guards ventured a little too close to the mound of wounded Arconans and the Dragon carved him from shoulder to hip. Only a few of the Arconan forces remained, a fireteam left in a platoon.

"Fall back!" the Arconae shouted, backpedalling into cover as the *Inferno* guard resumed their barrage of blaster fire. The remaining Arconan warriors fell into formation around him, occasionally sticking their blasters out beyond the wreck to loose a few bolts in response.

Thirteen. Thirteen men, Wuntila thought as he absentmindedly redirected a couple of incoming blaster rounds, *barely enough to infiltrate a light cargo ship, let alone this behemoth*. As his mind raced, another three of the Arconan platoon fell victim to an incoming grenade, hitting the deck in a mass of armour plating and pallid skin. *Ten*.

“What’s your ETA on the *Inferno*, extraction team?” Wuntila said, engaging the comlink on his Dragon’s helm.

No response. Needless to say it was not unexpected.

The Dragon dialled into the Arconan fleet frequency. “This is *Whiskey Alpha*. Come in. Facing heavy resistance in the mid-ship hangar. Under heavy fire. I repeat, under heavy fire. Urgent support required.”

“All units are engaged *Whiskey Alpha*,” the monotonous tone of a communications officer droned through his helmet, “I’m sorry to say you’re on your own.”

Wuntila looked around in desperation. There must be a way out. There must be a solution.

A salvo of blaster bolts. The *Inferno* guard pressed forward. Another Arconan soldier hit the deck clutching his shoulder and writhing in agony.

They were running out of time.

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Upper decks, Inferno
Far orbit of the moon Agenor
1019 Hours

“I don’t see why I had to carry him!” Wes exclaimed. A small, white-haired Ryn bounced around in a backpacking hanging from the Erinos’ heavily-muscled shoulders. “And why’d you keep the hand?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’d I keep the hand’? This is now a priceless relic. Something by which to remember our friend Trilsha.” Juda looked over his shoulder mid-run and smiled a wicked smile.

Soulfire had successfully retrieved the Ryn Rollmaster. They had defeated the mighty Trilsha. Or rather, Sashar had defeated the mighty Trilsha, with assistance from Wes and Celahir, and were now moving for the exfiltration site: the mid-ship hangar bay. Nikola was nursing a particularly gruesome leg injury, but Juda had patched him up well. The Erinos were talented when it came to looking after their own. And none more so than their resident medic.

"I hope that blue bastard has cleared the hangar. If not, he'll be answering to me." Wes mused angrily.

"I think he's the only Arconan who could equal you in size, Wes." Celahir said, vaulting nonchalantly through a half-closed blast door. Wes followed, albeit much more clumsily, followed by the rest of Soulfire. Sashar had stayed back to finish off the Zeltron Trilsha. He had given them the order to move to exfil. He would meet them on the hangar bay.

Celahir and what remained of Soulfire trailed around a corner, slid down the handrail of a narrow staircase by their arms, and spilled out into the cargo chamber adjacent to the hangar bay.

They peered out onto destruction. Arconan forces lay lifeless across the scarred steel deck, and a circle of guard at least ten men deep slowly drew in on the smoking husk of an infantry drop pod in the centre of the hangar.

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Hangar Bay, Inferno
Far orbit of the moon Agenor
1021 Hours

The bright white of an explosion flashed through the thick black smoke billowing from the wreckage in which Wuntila stood.

Panic ensued. *Inferno* guards fired blindly in the confusion, their own kin caught in the disarray. Cries flooded the hangar, swiftly stifled by lightsaber strikes and blaster bolts alike. Wuntila seized the opportunity.

The Dragon charged, the handful of men still in his command following close behind. He dropped his shoulder mid-charge, driving it deep into the chest of an oncoming *Inferno* guard. The guard shrieked in agony, a spray of fine blood bursting from his lips, but the Dragon pressed on unhampered.

A fifteen-strong contingent of the *Inferno* guard had regrouped. Their leader rallied more to their aid. Wuntila changed course. He ducked below an incoming blaster bolt, dodged an incoming guard, and straight-armed another, who hit the deck like a felled bantha. It was not until the Dragon was upon them that the contingent, in their disarray, realised their mistake...

It was an abattoir. A concentration of meat for carving. The Dragon saw red and delivered fire. His movements were a counterpoint to his condition; fluid, smooth, controlled. Precision cuts. It was over in an instant. Almost as quickly as he had entered the group, the last guard fell to the floor, hands clutching at the space where his head was once precariously balanced. All that was left was their captain.

The Dragon turned, his chest heaving as he gulped in oxygen, *Dragonsbreath* growling at his side. He stepped forward, almost calmly. Without a word, he drove the broad blade of his lightsaber deep into the captain's stomach. The captain's eyes widened in terror. His hands instinctively clutched at the blade, digits dropping to the floor as they were divorced from his palm. He looked up. Without as much as a regard for the pitiful being, Wuntila wrenched the blade from his stomach and drove it hard down across his torso, bisecting him from shoulder to hip.

The Arconae turned to see his remaining men stood off to the side of hangar watching with awe. And beside them were gathered what remained of Soulfire. He went to set off toward the group, but as he did a large hand clapped him on the shoulder.

"Good to see you again, Wun." the man stepped out in front of the Dragon with a wry smile on his face. Sashar. Wuntila's old Consul, and tutor in the art of leadership and war. "What's it been, three years?"

"Four," Wuntila nodded respectfully, "Not that I was counting. Your... *son* seems to have disappeared in my absence, however."

Sashar wrapped an arm across Wuntila's broad expanse of a back, guiding him toward the Arconans. "Let's just say he will not be bothering us for some time."

The two men strolled back into the group. Celahir gripped Sashar by the forearm, welcoming him back into the fold. Wuntila turned to his men, acknowledging their support with a respectful nod.

"Was that you? With the distraction and fire support?" The Dragon queried as he turned to face Soulfire.

"We help where we can." Juda smiled, holding up a pale crimson hand. Wuntila could not help but think that it likely belonged to a Zeltron not long ago.

"Well, thank you. Sincerely. We would not have made it out of there alive if you hadn't hit them from behind."

"There's a joke in there," Wes pointed out, looking particularly smug.

The Arconae was about to reply, but was caught off guard by the monotonous voice of the communications officer in his earpiece, "*Whiskey Alpha, come in. Whiskey Alpha, do you read?*"

"This is *Whiskey Alpha* receiving. Please continue," Wuntila replied.

"Mayday on the *Shadow*. Assistance required urgently."

Wuntila looked to Celahir, "Do you have an exfil organised?"

“Here any minute, Wun.” The Soulfire captain replied.

“Mind if we tag along?”

“Not at all,” Celahir replied.

“Good. Men,” Wuntila turned back to his remaining squad, “it doesn’t look like we’re finished yet. Ready up. Scavenge what you can. We have the Ryn--” the Arconae pointed to the white-haired creature still strapped to Wes’ back “--now let’s go protect our kin.”

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