

The forest was quiet as I awoke from my short slumber. I began to work the kinks out of my neck as I emerge from my tent into the forest where I had pitched camp for the night. My responsibilities in Arcona had been reduced for the time being by the Consul's decree, and I had taken advantage of the free time to engage in some hunting on Eldar, one of the few passions I have that can make me feel truly alive.

The thrill of the hunt as I stalk my prey, my lungs burning as I held in air while I wait for the most opportune moment to strike. The sudden jolt of adrenaline as my prey is ambushed and begins to flee. And finally the spray of warm blood covering my face as I give them the coup de grace and cut their throats, another trophy to add to my collection.

Nothing else quite compares to that- except battle.

But for now, we are in an uneasy peace, even as we prepare to resist the reign of our Grand Master. Everyone was now scheming in the shadows, out for hidden glory, either for Darth Pravus' favor, that of the Dark Council, or for glory within their own clans.

It sickens me.

But it is a necessary evil. For Arcona was not strong enough to take on the Brotherhood and the other Clans all at once. So I obey the dictates of the Shadow Lady, and serve in whatever capacity she sees fit for me.

But I long for the day when we will be in open battle once more, and my claws can rip open our enemies' throats.

I let out a sigh and lower myself to the ground to begin my morning meditations. Such meditations weren't enough to soothe the warrior and hunter within me, but it was enough to take the edge off. So Atyiru says, anyway.

I began to open myself to the Force, drawing upon it and feeling its power beginning to flow into and out of me. But there was an uneasiness that hung in the air, and it took me a minute to figure out why. And then I realized.

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

Not even the birds were singing, nor any sign that there were wildlife in the area, even the insects were silent.

I leapt to my feet, my hands instantly grabbing my favored BlasTech E-11 blaster rifle as I open my senses, my eyes alert for any movement.

*Move!*

The warning came from the Force, and I reacted instantly, throwing myself sideways, just as a storm of blaster fire erupted. I quickly climb behind a fallen log and took cover, the acidic smoke from the sustained blaster fire beginning to fill the air.

Before I could even wonder who had dared to attack me, I could hear a voice booming over the fire, amplified by the Force.

“Keep Zakath pinned down and do not allow him to escape! We will kill him and the Grand Master will reward us for this!”

So, they knew who I am. And they attack in the name of the Grand Master. I could feel my lips curling upward, the rush of adrenaline flowing through my limbs as I raise my rifle. If they attack in the service of the Grand Master, they were either Loyalist fools or Inquisitorius agents. If they were the former, they would soon suffer a quick death.

If they were the latter...

I could feel my eyes beginning to glow as my hate began to manifest.

If they were Inquisitorius agents, they would be on my interrogation table before nightfall, and their masters will never hear from them again.

I cautiously began to reach out with the Force to gain my bearings, and to get an estimate of my enemies' positioning. I soon counted what appeared to be a small squad of mundane troops and a trio of weak Force-Sensitives.

In other words, they were outnumbered.

My smile broadened at the thought of battle as I crawled to the edge of the fallen log, taking a quick peek out toward where the firepower was coming from. I could catch hints of gleaming white armor and what appeared to be human men in black robes, their hands raised upward and toward me. And their hands...

Their hands were glowing red.

Before I could even narrow my eyes in suspicion, I was thrown backward by a massive jolt of Force energy and pinned into the ground.

*Die.*

The word was uttered with complete hatred through the Force and searing itself into my mind.

*You will bleed... and then you will die.*

The pressure of the Force energy holding me down began to steadily increase, as if it was intent on grinding me into the ground like one would crush a bug underneath one's heel. I could feel my scales beginning to crack and tear, all along my body.

*You are unworthy of life. You are Undesirable. You are dead!*

I could only let out a croak even as I could feel panic rising within me, my own blood beginning to pool under me as my flesh began to tear apart, my bones beginning to expose themselves in the tearing of flesh along my arms and legs.

*YOU. ARE. DE-*

And suddenly the immense power vanished, and sweet air rushed back into my lungs. I laid there for a long moment, just breathing deeply, drinking in the agony of my crippled body, and listening to the jeering of the Iron Legion troopers that were pouring firepower over my position.

Suddenly their jeering became panicked cries, and I could see the blaster fire disappear from above me, even though the sounds continued. Clearly the Inquisitorius had found something else to shoot at.

Their mistake.

I let out a hiss of pain as I roll over onto my chest and begin to raise myself up to my knees, crawling back to the fallen log where my blaster rifle was lying. Risking a peek over the log, I took stock of the situation. Quickly I noticed that the Inquisitorius agents were nowhere to be seen, and the Iron Legion troopers were almost shooting randomly.

I hiss as I raise my rifle and took aim, ignoring the searing pain coming from the open wounds on my arms. My eyes narrow as I pick out a Iron Legion trooper and aimed for his chest. A quick squeeze of the trigger, and a bolt of crimson energy blasted out, neatly hitting the trooper and sending him flying backward. I didn't even pause to savor the shot, already moving on to the next trooper. I was about to take the shot when the trooper quite suddenly lost his head.

Literally.

I blink as the trooper's body crumpled to the ground, his head flying away into the distance. A heartbeat later, a Sephi came into view, an old-fashioned sword in his hands. He didn't even pause but moved like air to the next target, impaling the soldier in the chest. I shook my head slightly and readjusted my aim, picking out the furthest target out and eliminating him.

In just a couple minutes, it was all over.

I kept my blaster squarely aimed at the chest of the Selphi as he turned toward me. He did not appear to be surprised, and instead took out a cloth to wipe away the blood that stained his blade.

"You can lower your weapon, friend. I am Arconan." He called out, his eyes squarely on the blade.

"Your name?" I growl out, even as I lowered my blaster a fraction, but still keeping it aimed in his direction.

“Tamashi Bloodfyre.”

After a moment of thinking, I grunt and lowered the rifle. Tamashi Bloodfyre was a name I recognized as one of the new arrivals to the Clan, and one that was not yet given a permanent assignment. The Sephi came closer, sheathing his sword and taking a look at my wounds.

“You will need medical attention soon,” He noted.

I hiss and shot him an annoyed look. Did my exposed bones tell him that? But I only grunted and rose fully to my feet, my tail twitching to and fro agitatedly.

“Firzt thingz firzt,” I said. “The black robed men- they are dead?”

“Yes, they fell first. They were so focused on their ritual and the troopers so focused on shooting you that they never saw me coming.” Tamashi said, a slight smile touching his pale lips as he raised his finger to point. “Their bodies are... over there.”

I growl and limp over in that direction. And indeed, three bodies- minus their heads- lay crumpled in a morbid circle, their hands still outstretched. I could still feel the dark power they wielded lingering on their bodies, like acrid smoke after a fire.

“Help me search the bodiez,” I said as I dropped to one knee, my claws reaching out to ruffle through their pockets.

To his credit, Tamashi didn’t ask why but instead followed my example, dropping to one knee and beginning to search through the second man’s pockets. Unfortunately, we came up empty handed. I growl as I rose back to my feet, spitting out a glob of black blood onto the dead man’s chest.

“They were Inquisitorius agents.” Tamashi said, glancing at the splattered blood, his nose wrinkling with distaste. “I overheard them at the spaceport when they commandeered this squad.”

“That much, I knew already,” I growl as I looked up at the Sephi warrior. “What I want to know iz what they were doing. The way they wielded the Force should have been too powerful for their weak selvez.”

“An excellent question,” Tamashi replied one hand cupping his chin thoughtfully. “I have sensed their weak powers- it should not have manifested this powerfully, even working together. This is something new.

“Yez,” I reply before looking downward at the bodies. “And this attack must be repaid.”

“Hmm?”

“The Inquisitoriu haz dared to attack uz openly,” I hiss out, blood dribbling down my chin as I choke out the words. “We will repay them for this treachery.”

“You have something in mind?”

"I do," I growl before beginning to sway on my feet. "Let's get out of here and me into a bacta tank, I have much to think on."

"Of course," Tamashi replied politely before nodding his head northward. "My speeder is parked over there; we can get to a med center quickly."

"Good."

It was but only a few minutes before I was bundled into the back of the speeder and left to my own thoughts while Tamashi drove back toward the spaceport, but my mind was already whirring. There were questions to be answered, such as how much power did the Inquisitorius wield in Arconan space? And that ritual- how were the weak Inquisitors able to incapacitate me with seemingly little effort? If it weren't for Tamashi's unexpected intervention, I would be dead.

That did not sit well with me. If the Inquisitorius was able to wield this much power in their weaker agents... how much power did their strongest wield?

My eyes glowed like hot coals as my mind came to one conclusion. Power would be needed to fight this. It would take time, and the convincing of the Arconan Summits, but a team could be formed to find out the source of the Inquisitorius' power, and then root them out. But first, I needed power of my own. And there was only one place I can begin.

My lips curved down into a twisted scowl as my thoughts turned once more to a part of my past that I would very soon be revisiting.

Nath would be pleased, I knew. My adoptive daughter hated my decision to leave them behind, calling it weakness, and that I was giving into the Shadow Lady. Perhaps she was right, after all. The Dark Side was strength, and I already wielded that. But I needed more. Craved more. And there was only one path that I could see that would grant me that. A path that I had once recanted and left behind for fear of what it was turning me into.

This time, I will not fear. This time, I will embrace the transformation, and control it.

I will become Sith again. And with the dark arts of the Sith under my command, I will convince the Arconan Summits that the power of the Inquisitorus needed to be discovered and made ours. A team would need to be formed to hunt down the dark sources of power and claim them for the Shadow Clan. And I already had a name picked out. A name that Nath had mentioned to me in one of her previous studies in her den on Port Ol'val.

We would be the Tal'mae'Ra. The true Black Hand of Arcona.

Just as the Inquisitorus served as the secret agents of the Grand Master, so would we serve as secret agents of Arcona, to acquire and gather power, and secretly rout the plans of the Inquisitorus at every turn. Until the time came to carry the battle to the Grand Master himself. And if I had my way, we would be the tip of the spear that drove into Pravus' black heart.

I smile.