

Red Skies

“ARCONA INVICTA!”

Even imprisoned in the bowels of Arcona’s Citadel he could hear the roar of those gathered in mourning. A battlecry of resistance. The ‘Lotus’. The group who condemned Arcona. Fools to the last. Every single one of them.

The chill of the fresh snow cooled his cell. Stone walls were like sheets of ice to the touch. Every breath lingered as a cloud, dispersed by whirls of frigid air that crept through the energy bars of the cell’s solitary window. The former Consul was reduced to huddling half-naked under a thin sheet, willing the Force through his body to stay warm. He had designed these cells during his tenure as Consul to be as uncomfortable a stay as possible. Frozen in winter; unbearably hot in the summer. How was he to know that he would be enduring these conditions a few short years later? The irony was not lost on him.

Wuntila had betrayed a loyal ally to protect his clan. Telona personified his efforts in cultivating the Estle-Eden Axis between Arcona and Tarentum. And with her murder at Wuntila’s hand, so his efforts were undone.

He had acted to safeguard the clan from Pravus’ wrath. There was no joy in despatching Telona. He had betrayed the Lotus to protect the lasting interest of the clan. This was home. Darkness take him if it was threatened again. But it had been in vain. He had been captured, and Arcona had cast aside all judgement and reason to support the Jedi, a group against which not five years earlier they had taken up arms during the invasion of New Tython. Traitors. As far as Wuntila was concerned, the funeral taking place for followers of the Lotus was unnecessary — a hole in the ground would have been more than sufficient.

The man once known as the Dragon of Selen threw his pathetic sheet aside and turned to sit on the edge of the bed, running a calloused hand through his untidy salt-and-pepper beard. “Guard!” He barked, his voice like churning gravel.

Nothing.

“Guard!”

Silence.

He wrapped the sheet across his shoulders and leaned back against the wall. He had spent the first few days of his confinement studying the energy gate that held him captive. Then he realised that he was attempting to outsmart his own design; the casing for the energy bars were purposefully contained within the hallway of the cell block and were controlled by a central terminal that had multiple failsafes in the event of power loss. Now he simply stared out between the bars and replayed the scenario leading up to his imprisonment, as he did during most of his waking hours. It was whilst he was engrossed in this reminiscence that three figures appeared through the bars of the cell.

One of the figures was tall, heavily-muscled and imposing. The others, slightly taller and noticeably bulkier, were two guards assigned to sit by the former Consul’s cell.

“You have a visitor,” one of the guards grumbled with some surprise.

“I’ll take it from here,” the tall visitor’s voice was deceptively youthful.

The other guard seemed startled. “I’m afraid that is not possible, my lord.”

“And why is that?”

“You’ll see.”

"Very well." The visitor nodded, and one of the guard lumbered off to the door control panel. The other guard reached for a pole hanging by the entrance to Wuntila's cell, at the end of which was a shock collar. With a twist of the handle the collar erupted in a flash of arcing electricity.

"Be careful, Boxra," Wuntila announced from the cell. "Remember what happened last time."

The guard's eyes narrowed as he look to the captive. "Please step aside, my lord." He motioned for the visitor to step back. With a snap, the energy gate dissipated.

The large guard dashed forward into the cell as Wuntila sprung to his feet, his eyes set on the doorway, and with raw energy inconceivable from the solemn figure from only moments ago. He batted the shock collar pole aside and darted around the guard, burying his extended fingers into the guard's abdomen with preternatural speed. The guard lurched wildly, swinging the pole with abandon, but Wuntila was already in the doorway... And then it hit him.

He had just stepped outside the threshold of his cell when his visitor, with equally supernatural speed, swung his shock baton in one fluid motion from his belt into Wuntila's jaw, engaging the baton before it connected. It was like being hit by a freighter. Dizziness. Pain. He numbly felt another shock collar being looped around his neck. The sensation was achingly familiar. He knew what to expect next.

Darkness.

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He awoke to his visitor sitting on the bolted-down chair in the corner of the cell. Wuntila groaned, his thick hand drifting automatically to his throbbing jaw.

"I brought you some warmer clothes and some scissors with which to neaten your beard." The visitor stood and proffered a bundle of clothing.

"Who are you?" Wuntila said numbly, taking the bundle.

"Rayze. Rayze Erinos. Son of Zandro, your former Consul." The man announced as he sat back in the chair.

"Well," Wuntila began as he wiped the blood from his lips with the corner of his sheet, "that is most unexpected. I knew only of Nadrin."

"Nadrin was no son of Zandro," Rayze said coolly. "A weak clone. My father would not have accepted him as a son, let alone a successor." The Erinos' tone was strangely matter-of-fact. "My apologies," the Erinos continued, rubbing his own jaw as Wuntila stood up and walked slowly across to the small wash basin to clean the blood from his face. "I'm sure you can understand."

"Of course..." In truth, he fought with the guards partly to protect his reputation, and partly out of boredom. Freedom was never the end-game. Still, this Rayze kid had saved him from a spell in solitary, if only for the duration of the visit. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"You have been summoned by the DIA," Rayze began. "Hence the clothes and scissors. We need to ensure you are somewhat presentable."

"And why have you been sent to collect me, of all the Shadesworn?" Wuntila asked with trepidation.

Rayze smiled. It was a knowing smile. A smile Wuntila recognised. It was Zandro's. "Because I asked."

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"Welcome, Dragon." Timeros' voice was equal parts platinum and poison. The Director of the DIA stood, nodded and stepped from behind his desk with an awkward speed.

"Thank you, Caesus. I appreciate you meeting me yourself, rather than sending one of the DIA's junior officers down to my cell."

Timeros nodded to Rayze by way of dismissal. The young Erinós bowed his head respectfully and receded into the shadows by the door of the Director's office. The Entar Adept extended his hand to the Dragon, who embraced Timeros' forearm tightly. "I'm afraid this is more a business meeting than a social one," Timeros said as he walked to a lavishly upholstered sofa in the centre of the office. He sat down with a hurried elegance and gestured to the sofa opposite, "please, take a seat."

Wuntila did as he was told, lowering his still-hefty frame into the chair. "Suffice it to say you have piqued my interest."

"Good. Because it has been decided that you shall serve your punishment." Timeros steepled his fingers and leant forward, narrow knees supporting narrower elbows.

Wuntila felt the anger ignite within him. He clenched his jaw. The metallic tang of blood overwhelmed his tastebuds. A reminder of his encounter with Rayze. "I shall be punished no further for acting to protect my clan." His voice was calm despite his inner turmoil.

"Listen very carefully. You have not been killed for your treason—"

"—I would call it sacrifice, not treason." Wuntila interjected.

"You have not been killed for your actions, Wuntila," Timeros continued. "To an extent I understand your actions were an extension of your devotion to Arcona. They were not, however, faithful to our alliance with Tarentum, nor were they conducive to Arcona's efforts in supporting the resistance." Timeros searched Wuntila's eyes for a glimmer of remorse. A hard stare was the only response.

"We could have protected the clan from Pravus. If we threw our support behind him, we would be his counsel not his quarry."

"Deep down you must have known that it was only a matter of time before Arcona became the object of Pravus and the Iron Legion's attention?" Timeros countered.

"It could have bought us precious time to mount a defence." Wuntila responded unwaveringly.

"You were once a man of conviction, my friend. Arcona is in your blood. Your abdomen bears a tattoo which reminds you of that commitment, as does mine. By standing against your Consul and peers, you stand against the ideal of the clan."

"My clan would never have been governed by Jedi and thieves. You were there, Timeros, on New Tython. You witnessed Zandro's death at the hands of the Jedi. The Jedi of Odan-Urr and their allies deserve more than Pravus' fury." Wuntila's eyes flicked to the shadowed figure standing stiffly by the doorway.

"Your clan has not changed." Timeros rose to his feet and clasped his hands behind his back. He began to pace. It was a telltale sign of his irritation, one of his only outward demonstrations of emotion. He brought himself to stand between the Dragon and Rayze, drawing Wuntila's eyes up to his own. "If you remember correctly, it was not the Jedi but the Mandalorians who pinned Zandro and Sashar down in the Ooroo Abbey. Their own people. And it was you who ordered the orbital bombardment which subsequently killed them. The clan is the same as it once was, Wuntila. The *di Tenebrous Arconae* still protect the clan. That is, all except you."

"My actions would have protected the clan had the Shadow Lady and the Scion not sided with the resistance." Wuntila bit back.

Timeros smiled. “And therein lies your undoing. You betray the wishes of your Shadow Lady. You fight with you Scion at any given opportunity—“

“—the man had me taken to Tarentum to answer for unfounded crimes, Caesus!”

“And I agree with his decision. As should you. He is your leader. You follow him and support him like the Arconae should. And if his decisions are deserving of question, you do so politely. It is time to move on, my old friend. You are no longer on trial. Do right by your clan. You have very few chances left at redemption...” Timeros’ unnervingly blue eyes narrowed, “... do not cast this one aside as you have the others.”

Timeros walked slowly back to the sofa and sat down gracefully. He picked up a data pad from the desk, tapped a few windows on the screen and handed it across the table to Wuntila. “Pravus is becoming a very real threat. He is developing a new piece of technology, probably a weapon. A number of scientists have been kidnapped and forced to work on this technology. This information, provided by a now-dead DIA informant, is all we have. You have an opportunity, Wuntila. An opportunity to make amends for your recent transgressions. Rayze is leaving at dawn with a small strike team comprised of Arcona’s brightest and best soldiers. This mission shall be called Operation: Red Skies. It is vital to the Lotus’ efforts. Go with him, report back your findings, and begin to repair the destruction you have wrought upon the Clan.”

Wuntila stared at the data pad intently. Timeros was right. He had killed Telona to protect the clan. The twisted logic made sense. At least, it did then... He shook his head to clear his thoughts. This was a chance at redemption. The Serpentine Throne reigned supreme. It was time one of its most loyal subjects returned to service.

“I accept your proposition, Caesus.” The Dragon rose, nodded to Timeros, and directed his attention to the shadow in the doorway. “And thank you, Rayze. I am in your debt.”

“That was my primary motivation,” the Erinos said as he stepped from the darkness. He winked at the Dragon and nodded to the Director of the DIA, “with your permission, your Excellency, I would escort Wuntila to the armoury and the barracks. He needs weaponry and an introduction to the team.”

“As you wish, young Erinos,” Timeros said, clearly apprehensive. He turned his attention back to Wuntila, “Keep yourself out of trouble, my friend. Use this lifeline wisely. It is your last...”

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Operation: Red Skies will continue...

END

By Wuntila Arconae