

The Wild Hunt

Augur Xantros

11518

39 ABY, Imperial camp in the Jungle Belt, Ragnath, Caperion system

„Uncle Xantros, why are we here?” asked one of twins that accompanied their 'uncle'.

The Duros sighed silently and closed his eyes for a second. He heard that question for Force knows how many times in last few hours.

„Deus, your mom needs to spend some time alone,” answered the Augur. „She has a lot of work and she thought that you would enjoy some time away from boring quarters of the Imperial Palace.”

Xantros looked at the boys with his red eyes. What he said was true...at least, mostly. Shadow Nighthunter, mother of the twins and the Consul of Clan Scholae Palatinae, indeed had a lot of work. However, she had a lot of work all the time. It was a dark side of being an Empress. Powerful, influential, but also constantly busy. Even darker side of being an Empress was extremely high exposure to risk of all forms of attempts aimed to harm here. Certainly, she was a Sith and it was dangerous enough, but in a position of power that she held, she became a target of various enemies ranging from typical criminals through mad cultists to members of other Clans and external threats.

Recently, the Imperial Intelligence learned that a splinter faction of the Severian Principate decided to attack Clan Scholae Palatinae for its members not supporting them during the last Rite of Supremacy openly. While their forces had been decimated during the conflict, they still posed a threat as they could muster small teams to infiltrate the capital of the Imperial Clan and to strike within its heart. The intel suggested that they might attempt to assassinate Empress' sons as they claimed her to be directly responsible for actions of all members of the Clan. It was necessary to temporarily remove the twins from the Imperial Palace, but assigning a large group of guards would only bring attention to them. That was why it was decided that a single skilled guard that was completely loyal to the Empire would protect the boys until the problem would get solved. Certainly, no one really wanted to inform Artorias and Deus about the real reasons behind their trip to a distance outpost deep in a jungle.

„Just be careful, please” asked Xantros. „I am here to take care about you and I am not interested in looking for you.”

„I could play hide and seek with them, if you want to take a break,” said someone behind the Duros. „I know how a single kid can be tiring and you need to play with twins!”

The Augur looked around and noticed a Human soldier wearing an Imperial uniform, but there was something wrong about man's voice. It sounded a bit nervously as if the man could not wait to do something suspicious. Xantros focused on his interlocutor's mind and frowned, sensing that the man was somewhat averse towards him. It seemed that the man was driven by real or imagined harm he had suffered from members of Clan Scholae Palatinae, but the Duros could not sense anything more.

„I do not think it will be necessary, Corporal,” replied the Force Users. „I can handle boys on my own very well.”

He pulled out his blaster pistol from a holster and shot at the Human while still speaking. His target

moaned quietly and fell on the ground. Xantros looked at the soldier with contempt.

„Pathetic,” spoke the Augur. „If you wanted to kidnap the twins, you should have prepared better for it. You got what you deserved for being so clumsy in your attempt.”

The truth was that the man probably acted on a plan made on assumption that Reiden would be chosen to take care of the kids. Both luckily and unfortunately, depending on the perspective, 'uncle' Reiden had turned out to be too busy with his new duties as the Rollmaster of Clan Scholae Palatinae. Xantros was a secondary choice and it was publically claimed that Reiden would be the caretaker of the twins for the time of threat. Very few people was aware that actually the Duros would spend time with them.

„There are more of us,” grinned the fake Corporal. „One does not simply stop us.”

„Are you sure?” asked Xantros and reached the mind of dying man through the Force. „You will tell me all you know.”

The Augur was listening to the last words of the Human for few minutes, learning whole plan and identities of four other kidnappers involved in the operation aimed against Clan Scholae Palatinae. Once the man finished, the Duros looked around and grinned evilly. He had all information he needed to quickly eliminate the threat posed by kidnappers. It was going to be a quick and efficient hunt. He activated his lightsaber and decapitated his prisoner.

„Uncle Xantros, why did you kill this man?” asked Artorias calmly. He did not seem to be phased by what just happened.

„He wanted to harm you and I could not allow that to happen,” explained Xantros with dark humour. „Otherwise, I would be dead myself and your mom would be the responsible one for my terrible death.”

„I see,” replied Artorias. „Is the danger still present?”

„Yes, it is. It is why I need to leave you here alone for some time, let's say an hour or two,” answered the Augur. „But you need to promise me that you will not leave this place. Neither alone nor with anyone else than me.”

„As you wish, uncle Xantros,” confirmed both Artorias and Deus, even though the Duros was not fully convinced that they were telling the truth.

Still, he had to act quickly, before the enemies of the Empire would realize what was happening and would alter their plan. He vanished into thin air on eyes of confused twins and walked into the jungle. He had to move as quickly as he could, but he was aware that running would help his targets realize that he was around. Once he approached each kidnapper, he would need to move even more carefully so that his steps in lush grass and bushes would not alert his opponents.

Fortunately for the Duros, members of the hostile strike team were not very smart. They simply waited for silent death coming from hands of a killer that they could not see. Getting rid of his opponents was not a challenge at all. It was enough to move concealed through the Force and shot them from behind. Less than two hours later, they were all dead and the assassin was returning to the Imperial outpost, ready to get the twins back to the Imperial Palace and their mother.

As soon as he arrived at the outpost, he realized that something was wrong. He expected the twins

would do some mess, because they would be bored like a teenage son of a moist farmer on Tatooine, but there was no trace of kids at all.

„I see you are back,” spoke a Human that appeared in front of Xantros out of blue sky. „Good, these goons did not deserve to live any longer, but at least, they played their role and distracted you from the camp.”

„Where are the twins?” asked Xantros calmly. Though he was surprised by presence of the man that used some sort of masking equipment, there was nothing anger could do to improve his situation.

„Do you really think I would tell you?” asked the man, taking out a blaster rifle and aiming it at the Augur.

„Actually, I really think so,” answered the Duros and reached out for man's mind through the Force.

Few seconds later, the kidnapper looked to the right and noticed a giant rancor appearing from the thick forest and running towards him. It roared loudly, startling birds all around and making them fly away. The man dropped his blaster rifle and jumped away. The rancor reached him and roared again, suddenly vanishing into thin air.

„Actually, I am pretty sure you will tell me whatever I want to know,” repeated Xantros, looking at his unarmed enemy and grinning evilly. „We can do it an easy way, which is you bringing the twins back safe and sound, or a hard way, which would involve me sending you to the Netherealm and back. At least, your mind would be convinced that you made that trip and your safe return would not be guaranteed.”

What the Duros was well-aware of, people often did not fear death itself. They prized their sanity and sanctuary of their minds. Someone capable of influencing their thoughts and making them do stuff they would never do on their free will seemed to be the worst type of tormentor. Thus, experience of losing senses made them much more willing to cooperate and fulfill wishes of their oppressor. It was exactly such situation. The kidnapper realized that Xantros could turn the last moments of his life into a nightmare beyond his worst fears. The only thing he could wish for was swift death and it could be granted to him only if he cooperated with the Force User. Luckily for him, it turned out that the twins were left tied at a small warehouse on the edge of the outpost. No one would look there for them as it remained largely unused by soldiers assigned to the camp. The boys were a bit scared with the situation, but their fear immediately turned into joy and happiness as they noticed Xantros entering the warehouse and freeing them up.

„Good for you,” spoke the Augur. „You did keep your promise not to leave the outpost.”

„Thank you, uncle Xantros,” screamed both twins and hugged the Duros, who looked around embarrassed and smiled politely as he was not accustomed to showing and receiving signs of such affection. „You are the best uncle we have! Better even than Reiden!”