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**THE NEW JEDI ORDER**

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*RAGE OF THE  
SHADOW WARRIORS*

**HONOR  
GUARD**

By Corran Fett

## **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

*With the Mandalorians:*

Atross; Mandalorian supercommando, explosives expert (male Togorian)  
Kharritokh of clan Bakh'tor; Mandalorian supercommando, martial arts expert (male Noghri)  
Ronan Barec; Mandalorian supercommando, ex-special forces sniper (male human)  
Boba Fett; Mandalore and bounty hunter (male human)  
Grimes; Mandalorian supercommando, explosives expert (male human)  
Trynic Jatt; Mandalorian supercommando, tactician (male Devaronian)  
Ara Norvath; Mandalorian supercommando (female human)  
Fell Tagren; Mandalorian soldier (male human)  
Katin 'Thor' Tyark; Mandalorian supercommando, pilot (male human)  
Ayden Stone; Mandalorian supercommando (male human)

*With the Yuuzhan Vong:*

Nas Choka; warmaster (male Yuuzhan Vong)  
Ny'ong Yutt; subaltern (male Yuuzhan Vong)  
Uunas Shai; commander of the Yuuzhan Vong base on Dubrillion (male Yuuzhan Vong)  
Yaggath Sonnog; second-in-command on Dubrillion (male Yuuzhan Vong)

*Others:*

Kir Kanos; former Emperor's Royal Guard (male human)

## PROLOGUE

“Barec... something tells me I know that name,” Boba Fett said contemplatively after looking up from the list of recruits volunteering for the Mandalorian Protectors, founded by Fenn Shysa and continued now by the new Mandalore, Boba Fett.

“My father was Cayne Barec, if that helps you, sir,” the young recruit replied.

“Yes. Yes it helps indeed. He was a good man, your father.” Boba seemed to remember back in time. “But now let’s see what we have here,” Fett said and looked back on the list. “I see, you are from Shogun and have made you a name as a police special forces marksman there. Your qualifications in sniper rifles are very good,” he spoke up, so that the other recruits could hear him better, “but to become a real Mandalorian supercommando, one must master every weapon and every gadget as if it was his only specialty. Since you are such a precise shot,” now he spoke to young Barec again, “you will train the others in marksmanship.”

“Very good, *Mand’alor*.” The only twenty-three years old recruit’s voice was filled with proud. He went to the others who already had been through and waited.

It was an honor for the young Ronan Barec to serve under one of the greatest warriors and the best bounty hunter in the whole galaxy. Although Fenn Shysa, the old Mandalore, had already called for recruits, Ronan hadn’t caught too much attention on it, but when Boba Fett succeeded Shysa and had visited the planets in the Mandalore Sector, calling for volunteers to join the new Mandalorian army Fett wanted to extend, Ronan had left everything behind and enrolled himself.

Ronan Barec was a tall young man, broad-shouldered and strong muscled, with a face that seemed too grim for his age. The man was a soldier and no matter to his youth he had fought many criminals and terrorists on his home world Shogun and had been highly awarded for his skills in high-ranged weapons. When serving the local police he had always had a military short haircut, but now, nearly two months after he had left the police forces, his hair was nearly shoulder-length and tousled, what made him look even more like a rogue.

With the age of 17, Ronan had joined the police and had quickly made a career into the special forces of the local police. Cayne Barec, Ronan’s father, had been trainer for the Emperor’s Royal Guards for the time of the New Order, and so he had been a master of several martial arts like Echani and even Teräs Käsi. He had tried to train his son in those combat arts, but Ronan had never been too interested in melee combat. He had always preferred precise high-ranged weapons like sniper-rifles, and even before joining the police, he had become a real professional in those weapons.

Later that day, Boba Fett assigned the recruits to several groups. Those who couldn’t handle sniper rifles very well were assigned to Ronan; those who were not so good at explosives came to Atross, a huge Togorian, whose pelt was partially burned from detonations; and those who needed training in martial arts, like Ronan, who now regretted that he hadn’t paid much attention to his father’s lessons, to a small but obviously very dangerous and agile Noghri, called Kharritokh of clan Bakh’tor.

After the training-groups were assigned, Boba Fett was very content with what he had: 51 new recruits, nearly everyone with battle experience from either military, police or else. Not everyone came from a planet in the Mandalore Sector, and there weren’t only humans, but also Togorians, Noghri, Devaronians, Barabels and even a tall Wookiee. How latter would fit in a Mandalorian armor was another question. For a start, the number was small, but Fett knew, that in time, they would become more and more and eventually the Mandalorian clans would come back to life. There were also still a lot of mercenaries and bounty hunters from Mandalore Sector around, many with a proper *Mando* training that either were already halfway working for, or rather with him, or would join, if the payment was high enough, sooner or later.

“You all are experienced soldiers, but even if you are from Mandalore, you are not Mandalorians,” Boba started. “Over sixty years, the old Mandalorians have only been mercenaries, assassins, bounty hunters and so on—so to say, scum. My predecessor, Fenn Shysa, has already done a great step in reuniting the Mandalorian clans, but since there is no real state of war or a real need for an

army, many clanmembers are still doing their old jobs, earning what they need for their and their families' survival. I myself am still in bounty hunting business, and probably will stay as long as my new purpose permits it, but I can say that we should still start training a small army, even if it's only for mercenary work, first. Because only as a unit we are strong, and we won't let others destroy that unit again. In the next years, we will bring the Mandalorian Protectors back to life, and the galaxy will get to know us once more."

### SEVEN YEARS LATER

Ronan Barec looked over the mess hall, where over three hundred T-shaped helmets looked anxiously to Boba Fett, awaiting him to begin. As one of the Mandalorian Protectors' best and experienced warriors, Ronan had the honor to stand right behind Boba Fett on the podium, next to him four other experienced warriors: the human bounty hunter Goran Beviin, who seemed to have a rather good relation to the Mandalore, the Togorian Atross, whose black and red armor fitted very well to his dark brown pelt, the small Noghri Kharritokh, whose armor only consisted in a chest-plate, the gauntlets and his forearm plates, and the Devaronian Trynic Jatt, whose short horns looked out of two holes in his black Mandalorian helmet. Only few of the Mandalorians were not helmeted and if still, only non-human races like Wookiees, Barabels and Togorians. All of those warriors gathered here had recently given proof that the Mandalorians were fully back at their strength, ready to participate in the ongoing war between the extragalactic invaders, the Yuuzhan Vong, and the rest of the galaxy.

"From the beginning of the invasion," Boba Fett finally began to speak, "we have been involved, working on the side of the Vong, what, after all, was an act that's moral issues have been strongly questionable and questioned. But, also from the beginning of the invasion, we have been knowing that sooner or later, the *Vongese* would break our 'contract' and wipe out the Mandalore Sector, just as they have done it with a too big part of the galaxy already. But instead of fighting them from the beginning on, as reason would suggest, I chose to get us, the Mandalorians, as much time as possible to get to know the enemy, and to prepare—to prepare for the inevitable assault on our sector. And with the intel on the scarheads could gather in the last three years, we more than successfully—no, nearly *effortlessly*—repelled the Yuuzhan Vong assault on Mandalore last week. Just as we had expected, they broke the contract, and much for our sake, they did it 'later', so that we were more than victorious and experienced only minor losses, compared to the losses of the Yuuzhan Vong. And I am more than proud of every single one of you—you are putting Jaster Mereel's heritage to a great honor, and finally, after a too long period, we are back at our strength, back to show the galaxy who we, the Mandalorians, are. We will not only surprise the whole galaxy by our 'comeback', but we will show the scarheads who this galaxy belongs to! Those pain-loving freaks will get to know how real pain feels like! They will get to know *US!*"

The Mandalore's speech was received by a forceful "OYA!", followed by an immense applause and even more cries and shouts of rejoicing, in all languages, that ebbed away without a notion of the Mandalore—the Mandalorians were disciplined enough for that—as Goran Beviin stepped forward, next to Fett and began to speak:

"We will send several task forces to occupied planets and liberate them. Additional task forces will be sent to often-used routes of the Vong, to intercept their vessels—in case of troop transports, or any transports for that matter, they will be destroyed, and in case of frigates and other warships, they will be boarded and taken—we can well need Vong vessels for distraction or infiltration in the future. Our forces are only few, but we are Mandalorians and we know how to fight! When I first entered one of their flagships in the beginning of the invasion, I swore to hunt down every single crab-boy in this galaxy! Too long have I needed to fight with them, instead of fighting against them! But now's the time, and they'll pay for what they did to *our* galaxy! But to come to the actual briefing, I'll introduce you to Ronan Barec who will lead the first decisive mission."

Now, Ronan stepped forward and spoke to the Mandalorians: "We will send a task force of forty supercommandos and sixty usual Mandalorians to Dubrillion, one of the *Vongese*' main strongholds and headquarters, and retake it. Intel tells us that there are about one ten thousand Vong on that planet, so our odds are 1 to 10. But the odds were about the same in the Battle of Mandalore, where we have been outnumbered, as well. But we possess the right tactics, and we are not outgunned. We have the advantage of surprise, and we are Mandalorians! This is a guerrilla

war, a kind of warfare the scarheads most likely don't know yet, but we will teach them—and we will show them the hard way.”

“You all obviously wonder why I don't lead the first op,” now Boba Fett spoke again, “but I do— together with Goran Beviin and another dozen warriors, we will lay trap for the Vong frigate *Unfailing Punishment*, a vessel that one of our spies has reported lately in the Null system. I can hardly ask you to do your best—I know you will do, just as you did recently. Nevertheless, show yourselves worthy for the legacy of the Mandalorians. Show those scarheads what *real* pain feels like!”

## CHAPTER I

The long blue stripes converged to single white stars and the ships of the Mandalorian task force *Final Uprising* jumped out of hyperspace, close to *Lando's Folly*, the asteroid belt of Deestrillion and Dubrillion. The *Pursuer* Enforcement scout ship that had been sent here two days ago and had made sure that no Yuuzhan Vong ships would be in the space where the task force had left hyperspace, was awaiting them.

The task force consisted in the Mandalorian Dungeon Ship *Spar's Legacy*, with two KDY AIAT/i light infantry assault transporters aboard, a dozen *Pursuer* Enforcement Ships and two *Firespray* Attack and Patrol ships: Boba Fett's *Slave I* and Ronan Barec's *Nemesis*. The plan was that the assault transporters would land on Dubrillion, escorted by the *Neo-Crusaders*, the squadron of *Pursuers*, and the *Nemesis*. The *Spar's Legacy* would remain in the asteroid belt—later accompanied by the *Crusaders* returning from the surface—and be the mobile base of the task force.

"Show those scarheads who Mandalorians are!" Boba Fett's harsh voice came out of Ronan Barec's helmet com-link. He switched the channel and spoke to the landing forces:

"You heard the *Mand'ador*! Let's do this clean and quick. *Oya! Oya manda!*"

"*Oya!*" the proud voices of over a hundred combat-ready and adrenaline-pushed Mandalorians resounded, sounding like a single voice. "*Oya manda!*"

Ronan kicked in the *Nemesis's* engines and maneuvered with full throttle through the asteroid belt, right in direction to Dubrillion.

Fourteen other ships followed him.

"Sir, we have a meteor shower incoming over the isle the infidels called *So'tara*," a young, low-ranked Yuuzhan Vong communications officer who had just entered the commanding office of the Yuuzhan Vong headquarter, reported to Uunas Shai, the commander of the Yuuzhan Vong base on Dubrillion.

Uunas Shai looked into the officer's eyes, with a glance filled with anger about the warrior disturbing the commander without notifying himself.

"Excuse me, sir," the communications officer said obsequiously, averting Uunas Shai's eyes, "but we should ..."

"I know very well what to do, *officer*," the commander said enraged. "How many meteorites have been sighted?"

"A... About fifteen, sir."

"Very well. Send in a squadron of *yorik-ets* to monitor the event."

"It will be done, sir."

"Sir, we have lost contact to the pilots of the *yorik-ets*," the communications officer said half an hour later.

"Then send in another squadron, fool," Uunas Shai said furiously. "Together with a warrior platoon led by Ny'ong Yutt. He is one of my best warriors and he will know what to do in that situation," he added.

"Yes, sir."

Ny'ong Yutt felt a strong shake as the *yorik-trema* transport carrier landed on the island of *So'tara*. The membrane in front of him opened and he stepped, together with 35 warriors, out of the ship.

"We have landed and will now investigate the island and the crash site," he spoke to the villip on his shoulder.

He took the amphistaff wound around his forearm, forced it to harden itself into a deadly staff and ordered the warriors to secure the landing site and to move on cautiously.

Ny'ong Yutt could see lots of smoke all over the isle around the estimated crash site of the meteorites but no smoke over the crash site itself. *I have a bad feeling about this*, he thought.

He turned his head to the other villip on his shoulder that was connected to the leader of the coralskipper-squadron and scared noticed, that the villip had turned into a pale yellow tone, what signalized that no connection to its opposite existed any longer.

*Strange. I haven't heard any explosions since I arrived.*

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The yorik-trema had landed only moments after the coralskippers had passed their landing site. *Is it possible that they have been destroyed before we actually landed?* he thought with disbelief. But this was the only possible reason. Aboard the ship they wouldn't have heard any explosions because the ship itself let no sounds from the outside into the cargo hold. *The pilot must have seen the explosions. I better ask him before it's too late.*

As he was just in the turn, he realized that it was already too late.

Ny'ong Yutt smelled ozone behind him, quickly ended his turn and brought up his amphistaff in a defensive position, but it was useless.

The last thing he saw was a slightly glowing dot that approached in near light speed to a point between his eyes.

Then there was only darkness and pain.

Incredibly terrible pain.

## CHAPTER II

Ronan Barec was very content.

The anti-air SCSK-S4 rockets had taken out the coralskippers silently with miniature-black-holes that were not hearable for humans and, what was more important, for Yuuzhan Vong. The Vong in the troop transport-equal hadn't even noticed that their escort had been eliminated from one moment to another.

"Bit by your own weapons, scarheads," Ronan said. "That's something you'd better get used to in future. But you don't stand a chance against us, anyway."

Ronan had given the Yuuzhan Vong leader some time to think about what happened to the skips before he had ordered the Mandalorians to take out the whole platoon. All Vong were dead, except one. The most scarred Vong of all, the leader, who Ronan had taken out himself with a new weapon which fired a bullet that attacked the nerve system of a Yuuzhan Vong warrior and let him feel the worst pain he could experience in life.

Usually, the insane pain made the warrior unconscious, but Ronan better wanted to be sure that he and the Mandalorians wouldn't be discovered as those and ordered his men to let their holo-projectors activated.

The holo made one look like a random Yuuzhan Vong: some with more, others with less scars and tattoos. The projector even covered the warriors' rifles and jetpacks and each solider could hold a small device that projected a holo of an amphistaff. The only thing that could reveal this nearly perfect camouflage was that most of the Mandalorians could not speak the language of the Yuuzhan Vong. Only Ronan and some other leaders like Atross and Trynic Jatt had a tyzowym in their ears that made them able to speak perfect and fluent Yuuzhan Vong.

Ronan went to the incapacitated body of the Yuuzhan Vong leader and got even more satisfied. The villip on the warrior's shoulder was still alive.

*The operation is proceeding perfectly, he thought. A bit too perfect for my sake, though. We better keep our eyes open.*

Just moments after Ronan had arrived, the villip began to transform in an utterly ugly and dire scarred face with a flat forehead and a nose that was more like a dent than a ridge on the Yuuzhan Vong's face.

"How is the mission proceeding, Ny'ong Yutt?" it began to speak in an odd-sounding, but somehow familiar and understandable tone for Ronan.

"Excuse me, sir, but Ny'ong Yutt died in battle. I am Royn Brede and the highest ranked warrior now. We eliminated the threat but had to take some losses on our side as well."

*We eliminated the threat, indeed.* Ronan smirked behind his visor. *But we have no losses yet, di'kut.*

"You have done well, Royn Brede. I can guarantee you a promotion as soon as you are back. Now return to the base and report in, warrior."

"Very good, sir," Ronan answered and interrupted the connection by petting the villip. He put the organic communicator in a cloth and fastened it on his weapon-belt.

"Put him on a small isle and make sure that he doesn't awake until four or three days," he ordered a Mandalorian near him, pointing on the body of Ny'ong Yutt.

Then he left the unconscious Scarhead for good and entered the Yuuzhan Vong troop transport, where thirty-six disguised Mandalorians were already stationed. These thirty-six warriors were the best and most elite of the Mandalorian Protectors—their platoon was called *Honor Guards*, as in the most skilled warriors who had the privilege to be around the Mandalore and guard and fight for him with their lives—and would have the most difficult part of the operation. Under the lead of Ronan, they would infiltrate the main Yuuzhan Vong base on Dubrillion and cut the other bases off supplies and support. Most of the coralskippers and ships on the planet were stationed in this base as well and they could be blown up on ground far easier than in skies or in space.

Ronan went over to the cockpit where his best pilot was already acquainting himself with the controls and Yuuzhan Vong bio-technology. His helmet was fastened on his back—he had no



jetpack—and on his head, which still looked like a scarhead, was a bulky hood that was connected with a weird organic cable-alike to the ship itself.

“Are you ready, Thor?” Ronan asked the pilot.

“Ready as always, sir,” Katin ‘Thor’ Tyark said. On the holographic Yuuzhan Vong face, his smile looked more as if he was about to vomit. “I can fly this rock wherever you want—or at least anywhere on this planet. It apparently can’t fly in space.”

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“Okay. Let the engines warm up, Katin,” Ronan said sarcastically.

Katin Tyark, nicknamed Thor, was one of Ronan’s best men, but he was also a good friend and some kind of mentor in a certain way. In the recruitment phase, Thor had learned how to use a sniper from Ronan, and Ronan on the other hand had learned some flying-tricks from the former TIE-fighter-pilot of the feared Imperial 181<sup>st</sup> Imperial Fighter Wing. Honoring his old squadron, his armor was matte black with blood-red stripes on both sides—just as the 181<sup>st</sup> had on their uniforms and TIE-fighters. Thor, as one of the oldest Mandalorians in the mid-forties, was always in a good mood and an excellent pilot. He had always enriched Ronan’s lesson with funny comments and had made his own lessons always airy.

Now, Thor was challenged with flying an outer-galaxy-ship that used bio-technology one could hardly imagine. But Ronan knew that Thor would win the challenge.

Ronan went back into the troop hold of the organic ship and looked into the 36 different faces of ugly, scarred Yuuzhan Vong warriors. *They look freaking real, man.* Ronan shuddered to think. *And I sure wouldn’t want them to be on the other side...*

“We will take off to the scarhead base now. You are the best of the best and you know what to do. Show those *chakaar’e* that we are Mandalorians, and that we will fight.”

More words weren’t needed to be said. They knew what to do and they knew how to do it. They were the perfect warriors. They didn’t even need a last push or a war-cry—something that less experienced teams in the Mandalorian forces barely could understand.

The scarred faces just nodded ghostly.

Ronan was just checking his EE-23s/YVK sniper rifle when they could eventually make out the Yuuzhan Vong base in distance. For fifteen minutes he had been sitting in the cockpit, watching the water of pass by under them, while the living ship was flying over the giant oceans of Dubrillion. Finally, they could see the main continent after few little islands on their way from the isle of *So’tara* to the Yuuzhan Vong base on the continent.

The base looked gigantic. Even from a distance of at least twenty clicks, you could make out the plants of growing coralskipppers, the high buildings that looked like a mushroom upside down and the huge organic ships in and around an enormous hangar-like building.

*Won’t get easy after all,* Ronan thought.

He stood up and walked back into the troop hold where now the thirty-six Yuuzhan Vong warriors had been replaced through thirty-six elite Mandalorian Protectors. Briefly after the take-off from *So’tara* they had deactivated their cloaking-devices to save energy for the mission.

“The Yuuzhan Vong base is in sight. Prepare to assault, Mandalorians,” Ronan ordered them. Again, not many words needed to be said.

The only affirmation to his order consisted in the re-activation of their Yuuzhan Vong disguises. Once more, he shivered with the utterly real-looking holos. *Whoever has invented these devices earns a medal.*

We went back to the cockpit and noticed that the base looked even bigger now as they had approached to three clicks.

“Land right there in this hangar,” Ronan said, pointing on the huge organic warehouse-like building. “And try to land so that you block the other big ships their way out of the hangar.”

“Very good, sir,” Thor replied. “Ready to kick some asses of ten thousand Scarheads, sir.”

“Yeah, yeah, but leave me some, will you?” Ronan said, smiling.

Somehow, Tyark managed to maneuver the bulky rock like a small and agile starfighter into the hangar. He landed in a way that the exit of the troop hold looked just towards the hangar, the rest of the ship covering the troops from the outside.

Together with Thor and two other Mandalorians, Ronan left the cockpit and went right to the membrane that was the “gate” to the hangar.

“You know the rules: no blasters, no explosives. We have to take ‘em out silently,” was Ronan’s last order before he made the membrane open itself and stepped out.

Noticing no sign of confirmation from his men, he blamed himself for always repeating things they would do also without his repetitions, anyway. *They are elite, man... believe it or not.*

The building was at least five-hundred meters long and a hundred meters wide.

And it was filled with Yuuzhan Vong.

With lots of them.

*Cannon fodder*, Ronan thought.

## CHAPTER III

Pain.

Yuuzhan Vong usually worshipped pain.

But the pain Ny'ong Yutt experienced was beyond all imagination. It felt as if his whole nervous system exploded and burnt on endlessly. On the other hand, it felt like his nervous system was frozen to the minimum of coldness. The pain was so insane that it made him unconscious, but even in unconsciousness he could still feel it.

The only thing Ny'ong Yutt wanted was to die. To die a quick and painless death to redeem him from his suffering.

But this was the one and only thing he was not able to do. Or at least not *allowed* to do.

Trynic Jatt looked down on the numb body of the suffering Yuuzhan Vong leader. Jatt knew what the Vong suffered—he was one of the developers of this new pain-bullet. Jatt also knew that the Yuuzhan Vong leader would already have cried his soul out of his scarred body if not the special toxin prevented that.

Jatt had ordered to put the senseless Yuuzhan Vong on a small isle from where he couldn't escape. He had other plans with him when the main mission was finished.

Trynic Jatt went back to the landing site on the isle of *So'tara* and watched the Mandalorians enter the two KDY AIAT/i troop transporters. The gunships with their troop holds for 50 soldiers per ship and an armament that could easily beat an attack frigate, were the perfect transporters you could get. Next to them, closer to the trees, was Ronan Barec's *Nemesis* standing with activated cloaking device that made it look like a huge rock. In addition, Barec had added some plants to make the disguise look more real. If you didn't know there was a ship, you could hardly believe it.

The objective was that each gunship would fly to one of the smaller Yuuzhan Vong bases on the other side of the planet, far away from the main base, drop the Mandalorian soldiers off and come back to the isle. The two platoons of Mandalorians would start a distraction attack on both bases and make the Yuuzhan Vong peel off their forces from the main base and so make the job for Ronan Barec's *Honor Guards* easier.

Trynic Jatt would command the platoon *Crusaders* to the nearer base, secure the position and make the Yuuzhan Vong base to a stronghold for the Mandalorians. Atross and Kharritokh would lead the attack on the farer base, destroy it and move on to the next base in direction to Jatt's stronghold, and ultimately the main base.

The Devaronian eventually entered the AIAT/i *Warrior's Claw* after all thirty-six Mandalorians of his platoon had entered. The gunship took off and flew to its destination: the second largest Yuuzhan Vong base on Dubrillion.

Ronan Barec walked over to the next Yuuzhan Vong warrior, the one with the most scars and tattoos that indicated a higher rank.

"I see, you were successful on your mission," the Yuuzhan Vong started.

"Yes we are", Ronan said and interrupted the scarhead with a strike of his as an amphistaff disguised vibroblade. He hit directly in the Vong's weak point under his armpit.

Simultaneously with the Yuuzhan Vong leader, forty corpses of dead Yuuzhan Vong fell on the floor. Five seconds later, fifty other Yuuzhan Vong accompanied them.

Ronan's cloaking-device was already deactivated as he drew his carbine and shot hostiles that were farer away with silent "pain-bullets".

In mere seconds, the Mandalorians had taken out at least two companies of outer-galactic enemies—what meant about three hundred Yuuzhan Vong -, only with vibroblades and silent rifles—and the advantage of surprise. The only hearable sounds were short and quiet gurgles, followed by rumblings when dead bodies hit the ground.

Ronan scanned the hangar with his life-sign-scan and found only a dozen survivors that were quickly finished off by his bullets and slashes of deadly vibroblades.

He went back to the transporter where the Mandalorians were gathering themselves and securing the position. A Mandalorian, whose armor indicated that he was a medic, approached Ronan and reported: "No casualties, except two warriors who have been badly hit by thud and razor bugs, sir. The bugs mainly hit the armor but a few razor bugs have found its weak points. They survive, but I don't think they should fight any longer, sir."

"Let them do what they want to," Ronan replied. "If they feel fit enough to move on, they shall do so. We need every warrior we can get."

"Yes, sir," the medic said and went back to the wounded warriors.

"What's the situation, Ara?" Ronan asked his second-in-command.

"Position cleared and under control, Ronan," Ara Norvath, one of the few female Mandalorians, reported. "We are ready to move on as soon as we got contact from the *Crusaders*."

Ronan nodded and checked his carbine. He had fired a full round of pain-bullets and he knew that each of them had hit the mark.

*Better spare those bullets. This is going to be a long day...*

The *Warrior's Claw* shook badly as the first Yuuzhan Vong projectile hit it. The gunship's shields and armor were very strong and could stand a Yuuzhan Vong attack and avoid a critical damage for long, but a shake could hardly be prevented, especially in atmosphere.

The three dual-laser turrets came in action and quickly eliminated the threat.

The copilot fired a concussion missile in a crowd of Yuuzhan Vong throwing thud and razor bugs at the ship that were easily deflected by its shield. The gunship landed and the *Crusaders* rapidly deployed and cleared the area. The *Warrior's Claw* eliminated a few major threats like other mobs of hostiles and heavy weapon positions before they retreated and left the platoon do their job.

"Move, move, move, Mandalorians," Trynic Jatt called out, waving his hand. "We have a job to do."

Like the others, Ayden Stone confirmed with a double comm-click and reloaded his archaic, but very effective Golan Arms XM-550c projectile carbine with mounted flechette thrower attachment. For Stone, this was the ultimate rifle to kill a Yuuzhan Vong fast and efficiently. The armor-piercing bullet was fired with an incredible speed that penetrated the Vonduun crab armor of the Yuuzhan Vong easily. The best thing of all was that the bullet exploded after breaching the armor in a way it only damaged the body and not the armor—so that a Yuuzhan Vong had to take off his armor to treat his wound. The only problem of this old slugthrower was its very bad condition—not that Stone hadn't maintained it good enough; it was just very, very old—and it always failed when Stone needed it most. For that case, Stone still had his sidearm and his armor gadgets, but neither was in any way as effective as his carbine.

The small, organic buildings in the Yuuzhan Vong base seemed to be just everywhere and every second several Yuuzhan Vong left their buildings and approached the Mandalorians, obviously ready to fight.

*Well, we've been ready to fight ever since, hu'tuune,* Ayden Stone thought and aimed carefully at the nearest hostile.

A loud discharge of his weapon sounded, damped by his helmet systems, when Stone pulled the trigger and a bullet breached the air, so fast that it burned it and looked like a usual blaster bolt from the distance, rapidly approaching the chest plate of the Yuuzhan Vong warrior.

A sudden, quiet "clack" sounded when the bullet breached the living armor, nanoseconds later followed by an explosion that was only a bit louder. The Yuuzhan Vong waved his arms to his chest, fell on his knees and eventually barged down to the ground.

Only the adrenaline had made Stone able to hear and see this moment so clearly. In fact, between the time he pulled the trigger and when the body hit the ground only a mere second had passed.

He aimed to the next target and gave him a full dose of flechette bolts. He then tossed a thermal detonator right into a dozen of hostiles that had come too close for his sake and saw them trying to jump away, what was obviously completely useless. Once more, Stone was amazed at the pure accuracy and efficiency that made thermal detonators such notorious weapons. Inside the explosion-radius of the grenade, everything was totally destroyed, but outside the radius, everything remained totally untouched, just as if nothing had happened.

His visor made itself transparent again after it had turned near to opacity to shield Stone's eyes from the blindingly bright explosion and he looked around.

Thirty-six Mandalorians stood around the dropping site, each of them on his feet and seemingly unharmed. They were surrounded by about two hundred, partially badly by explosions deformed corpses of dead Yuuzhan Vong, all in a radius of about half a mile.

*Now, this base is cleared,* Stone marveled.

**PAGE | 13** "Well done, *Crusaders*," Trynic Jatt complimented his warriors. "Now let's secure this base and call back the *Warrior's Claw*. We have a stronghold to raise."

"Sureshot, this is Warlord," he added over comm. "Position cleared and under control. You can proceed as planned. Over and Out."

## CHAPTER IV

“Sureshot, this is Warlord. Position cleared and under control. You can proceed as ...”

*What’s that?*, Ronan wondered.

Jatt’s signal was suddenly gone, replaced by crackling static and noise.

“Warlord, do you copy? I repeat: Do you copy, Warlord?”

Only static answered him.

Rangir! *Why doesn’t he respond?!*

“*Honor Guards*, we have a problem,” Ronan called out. “We’ve lost contact to the *Crusaders*. But they did their job and obviously got the scarheads’ attention. We will finish our mission here and then look for them. Meanwhile, the *Lancers* will have to hurry up and reinforce on our new stronghold.”

The warriors confirmed with simple nods. There was nothing to be said at all.

Ronan went to the two wounded Mandalorians and asked them: “So, do you guys want to fight on or stay here until the situation is under control?”

“We will fight, sir,” one of them reported. “A true Mandalorian isn’t slowed down by a mere flesh wound. And actually, it would be more dangerous to stay here than moving on, sir.”

“Correct, soldier,” was Ronan’s only response.

“Are all detonators planted, Grimes?” he then asked is explosives expert over comm.

“We’re just finishing the last ship, sir. Ready to move on in two minutes,” Grimes responded.

“Very well...”

A sudden explosion interrupted Ronan. He turned around and saw the transporter they had arrived with standing in flames, revealing a Yuuzhan Vong equal to an AT-AT-walker behind it, spitting flame-bolts on the hangar’s entrance. The bodies of three Mandalorians that had been badly hit by the explosion lay around the ship, burning as well.

“You better hurry up,” he told Grimes. “We have hard contact.”

“Heavy fire on that walker. All others, retreat through the back door,” Ronan ordered his men.

“Sir, there is no ‘back door,’” Darmen, a Mandalorian near to him equipped with a rocket-launcher, said confused.

“Really?” he asked, eyeing the soldier’s heavy weapon.

“Ah, well,” the soldier—who looked like he had just waited for Ronan to ask—replied, aimed his rocket-launcher at the wall on the other end of the hangar and squeezed the trigger, releasing a concussion missile that soared into the wall, creating a perfect hole. Other Mandalorians already approached the ‘back door’ and cleared the position outside.

Ronan turned back to the entrance and saw his men firing missiles and grenades on the walker-alike. But somehow, the walker withstood the attack, for the particles didn’t hit the weird creature and disappeared in small anomalies.

*Now they have these dovin-basals already in their ground ‘pets’... weird.*

“All dets ready, sir,” Grimes reported.

“Retreat, Mandalorians!” Ronan ordered the warriors that where still in the building, after confirming Grimes with a nod. “We don’t want to be in here when the fireworks start.”

To say that Ayden Stone was angry would be a sheer understatement. He was *furios*, that for was sure.

The *Crusaders* had fallen into an ambush like it stands in the book. The Yuuzhan Vong had buried themselves under the ground, waited until their comrades were nothing more than corpses, and then they had risen from below the hills of dead Vong, just as if they were zombies. Several Mandalorians had fallen prey to the ambush, among them their leader, Trynic Jatt, who had taken lots of hostiles with him to death. The platoon of formerly 36 men had been rapidly reduced to roundabout 20 warriors, or less.

The worst of all was that the higher ranked Mandalorians had stood pretty near to the corpses-hills and so all four sergeants had been killed. After the survivors had regrouped, there were only

two more corporals alive, Ayden Stone and Fell Tagren. They had made Tagren to their makeshift lead and eventually returned to battle.

Stone was cautiously approaching the place of the ambush, together with his new squad of eight men, and scanned the site with his life-sign-visor. He could see about fifty hostiles and reported that number to Tagren, whose squad was approaching from the other direction.

Then he turned around to his own squad and told them:

“We must re-occupy this base. You are the more or less lucky survivors of the ambush and you showed courage and skills in fighting our attackers. You are the best we still have, and I want you to show that to these *hu’tuunla* crab-boys. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” his squad replied.

“What do you do?”

“We show these *hu’tuunla* crab-boys that we are Mandalorians, sir!”

“Darn right, squad. *Oya*,” he ordered.

Stone checked his carbine one more time and hoped that it wouldn’t fail him again. In the ambush, he would’ve nearly been killed, just because his old slugthrower hadn’t wanted to fire.

He pointed his squad to move on and approached the ambush site. The Yuuzhan Vong didn’t seem to notice either Tagren’s or his squad, so they could get very close without getting recognized.

Stone aimed his carbine to the nearest hostile, while the rest of his squad selected their opponents with their bunch of grenades, rocket launchers and flechette throwers.

As soon as he had a clear shot, Stone asked Tagren if his squad was ready. The new leader confirmed and ordered to fire at will.

And then, the odds changed, and a new ambush began.

The remaining *Crusaders* could take out half of the enemies without a response from the Vong, but the scarheads rapidly took cover and defended themselves.

The Vong were throwing their amphistaffs, razor bugs and thud bugs at the Mandalorians, who countered with grenades, missiles and blasts of blaster-fire and projectiles.

The battle proceeded quite balanced until the Yuuzhan Vong realized that they had no chance against their attackers in ranged combat. They left their cover and ran over to the Mandalorians, amphistaffs and coufees ready to strike.

But Ayden Stone didn’t want the Yuuzhan Vong to reach them and give them an opportunity to gain an advantage, so he carefully aimed his slugthrower on the approaching hostiles and pulled the trigger of the flechette thrower.

Nothing happened. He pulled it again, but the carbine didn’t do anything.

“*Haar’chak!*” he cursed under his breath and drew his sidearm.

*Bad luck*, Stone thought as he realized that the Yuuzhan Vong had already come too close, even for his low-range blaster pistol.

So he threw his just drawn sidearm away and extended the vibroblades in his gauntlets, preparing for the attack of three Yuuzhan Vong that were enclosing on him.

But there never came an attack.

The warriors had already made their organic blades to staffs, as a sudden explosion blew all three of them high in the air. A hundred meters behind the position where they just had stood a moment ago, Stone could make out about thirty Mandalorians, one of them, a strongly built Togorian without the T-shaped helmet, was aiming a grenade thrower over to Stone, with a smile on his cat-like face.

Relieved, Stone retracted his vibroblades and walked over to the Togorian.

“As you can see, the reinforcements have arrived,” Atross reported sarcastically.

“*Mar’e*. It was just about time,” Tagren, who was already with Atross, said. “Thanks for getting us out of this mess.”

“I guess your attack proceeded more as planned as ours, didn’t it?” Stone asked.

“We hit on nearly no resistance and only lost five men. We cleared the base as fast as possible and then came here with one of the AIAT/is,” Kharritokh, the co-leader of the *Lancer*-platoon reported. Stone hadn’t noticed the small Noghri before and was surprised that the warrior had showed up without being detected.

Stone looked more closely at Kharritokh and saw most of his body covered with dark red blood.

“Are you wou-,” he started and then interrupted himself as he noticed that the Noghri had no wounds at all—the blood was from killed Yuuzhan Vong. “Sorry, never mind,” he excused himself respectively.

*This little grey fella’s got some skill, man!*

“We better get a move on,” Tagren said. “This base is full of surprises, and I don’t want to be here when the next one shows up. We better get hold of another stronghold.”

“Agreed,” Atross said. “Have you heard anything from the *Honor Guards*?”

“Not ye-,” Stone started to say and then was interrupted by a click of his commlink.

“This is Sureshot,” the voice of Ronan Barec came out of their comms. “We just blew up the hangar and will now move on to the coralskipper-growing plant. What’s your status, Halberdier?”

“We just met the *Crusaders* and will now move on to the next base and try to make up our stronghold there,” Atross replied.

“Confirmed,” Barec said. “Next status-report in three hours. And good luck, Halberdier.”

“You too, Sureshot. Over.”



## CHAPTER V

Uunas Shai was totally surprised by a sudden explosion coming from the hangar. He went to one of his communication officers and asked: "Status report. What happened out there? Send a unit to the hangar to investigate the situation."

"We already sent one, sir," the officer replied. "But there is no hangar anymore where our troops can be sent to."

"So you want to tell me that we just lost all of our larger ships?" Uunas Shai said, boiled with rage.

"Y... Yes, sir," the communications officer answered anxiously.

"So we know their target. They want to destroy our ships and yorik-ets when they're still on ground. What do we do in such a situation, officer?"

"We set a trap at the growing plants, sir," the officer said uncertainly.

"Yes, we set a trap there. And what else do we do? We get all our coralskippers airborne," Uunas Shai answered his own question. "And when they are trapped, we will sent a squadron of coralskippers there and decimate them. Now hurry up. The enemies don't wait for our move."

"Yes, sir!"

*They will pay for what they did, Uunas Shai thought. But they are worthy sacrifices, so we should take try to take as many of them alive. I better lead this operation myself.*

"Hurry up," Ronan ordered his men. "I bet those scarheads smelled our objective and will set a trap at the growing plants. We must be there before they are, blow it up and then set an ambush for them."

They confirmed with comm clicks. Ronan checked the remaining distance to their target with his rangefinder. *Three clicks. I'd prefer a fast airspeeder to walking right now...*

"Sir, we have a problem," Grimes, who walked next to Ronan, said. "We haven't got enough explosives to blow all of the coralskippers up. We need the *Warrior's Claw*. They have enough gear there to blow up half of the planet."

"*Fierfek!* That's the last thing we needed," Ronan said, upset. "The *Claw* can't reach us here without risking heavy anti-air fire. We have to take out the anti-air canon-alikes on their whole way to our position. Is there enough ordnance for that, Grimes?"

"Yes, but then we have nothing more to blow up the coralskippers," the explosives expert said. "If something goes wrong, we're stuck here without ammo and arms. The risk is too high, sir."

"Right. So we need the *Lancers* and *Crusaders* to leave their stronghold and make their way here. They should have enough explosives to take the growing plants out, haven't they?"

"Yes, but it would take too long until they arrive. I don't know how fast the Scarheads are to set up a trap, but I'm sure they are fast enough."

"Not if we set an ambush before they get there," Ronan said, smiling. "We should have enough ammo to defend the growing plants, haven't we?"

"Yes, we have."

"Very well. Contact the *Lancers* and *Crusaders*," Ronan ordered his comm-officer. "We need reinforcements."

Uunas Shai and his company of Yuuzhan Vong warriors had to walk to the growing plants on foot because no *yorik-trema* transport carrier had survived the detonation. They now had approached the first plant and cautiously awaited new orders.

"Move on, warriors," Uunas Shai ordered them. "We have to set the trap before they arrive."

The warriors went on and hid in the environment, when a sudden bolt breached the air and hit the leading warrior right in his head. They searched cover at once and threw thud bugs in the direction where the blast had come from.

Uunas Shai could see more blasts of fire, which hit nearly all of the thud bugs before they were near enough to be a real threat. The commander of the Yuuzhan Vong was surprised by the sheer precision of the shots of their enemies.

*Those infidels are really worthy, he thought, not without a bit of fear of losing this battle. But they are outnumbered and don't stand a chance against the wrath of the Yuuzhan Vong and Yun-Yammka.*

"Take as many as possible alive," he ordered his warriors, while making his amphistaff transform into an agile snake. "Cover me," he said and ran right into the bushes where the shots came from.

A blaster bolt hit his Vunduun-crab armor on his left shoulder, but it wasn't strong enough to be really dangerous. Uunas Shai enjoyed the pain that burned like fire in his shoulder and used it to feed his wrath even more.

The first enemy he could see was in silver and golden armor, wielding a big rifle with a bayonet under its muzzle.

*I hope this is their leader, he thought. Always take off the enemy's head. first.*

Uunas Shai made his living weapon transform into a staff and threw it right at his enemy's shoulder.

"Incoming," Ronan shouted out when he saw a heavily scarred Yuuzhan Vong warrior rapidly approaching him. He aimed his sniper rifle at the scarhead's head, but then realized that the distance was too short for getting a precise shot.

So he activated the vibro-emitter on his rifle's bayonet and waited the Yuuzhan Vong to attack.

The Vong, who was obviously the highest ranked on battlefield, counting by his high amount of scars and tattoos, suddenly threw his amphistaff as a spear at Ronan's shoulder, but the Mandalorian ducked and rammed his rifle into the living weapon.

Pierced by the bayonet, the amphistaff flagged and died seemingly. Ronan couldn't get his carbine out again and threw it away, preparing for the Yuuzhan Vong's attack.

The scarhead, obviously surprised that his main weapon was useless now, drew his dagger-like weapon, a *coufee*, and lunged out, attempting to slash Ronan's throat.

Ronan extended the vibroblades in his right gauntlet and parried the stroke. Then he rammed his left in the scarhead's armpit and fired a wrist dart, which worked on the same way as the pain bullets.

The Yuuzhan Vong leader collapsed and kissed the dust.

Ronan retracted his vibroblades and pulled his EE-23 out of the dead amphistaff.

"Status?" he asked Norvath, his adjutant, over comm.

"Three men down and one heavily injured. I don't think he'll make it. But the enemy's losses are higher. They came with two hundred men and only a quarter is still alive," Ara answered. "Wait. They are withdrawing, sir. I think we hit them pretty hard."

"The *Vongese* will call for reinforcements, if they haven't already done so. We better find another position. What amount of coralskippers can be blown up, Grimes?"

"Two growing plants, sir," the explosives expert replied. "But there are still three more to go then. When we take out the two now, then the others will be alarmed and probably get airborne."

"They will be alarmed, anyway. Blow up as many as possible before they get into the air," Ronan ordered. Grimes confirmed with a double comm-click and half of the *Honor Guards* went off to the growing plants.

"Halberdier, come in. We could need you here," Ronan contacted the *Lancers*.

"Bad news, Ronan," Atross replied. "We have hard contact-" blaster bolts on the other side of the commlink interrupted him, "- and probably won't make it in time. Sorry, sir."

"Copy that, Atross," Ronan said. "Good luck."

"You too, sir. Halberdier out."

*Fierfek! Why can't anything go as planned?! Ronan thought desperately. But there is one way we can handle this situation.*

He ordered his comm-officer to him and then arranged a long-range commlink to the *Spar's Legacy* in orbit.

"*Mand'alor*, this is Ronan Barec. We could need some reinforcements here, sir."

"Copy that," Boba Fett's harsh voice answered him. "I'll take care of that myself."

## CHAPTER VI

“Sir, the surviving troops have just arrived,” the communications officer reported to Yaggath Sonnog, the highest ranked Yuuzhan Vong warrior in the base.

“Send the commander in,” Yaggath Sonnog said. This was actually a rather unusual order, but since the commander didn’t appear on his own, the other needed to get him here.

Shortly after his order was executed, a badly injured low-ranked Yuuzhan Vong warrior entered the building.

“Where is Uunas Shai?” Sonnog asked, taken off guard by that announcement.

“He died in battle, sir. That makes you our new commander,” the subaltern, called Val Choka, reported. “Our ambush hasn’t worked. The infidels were already there when we arrived. They trapped us, there. They were totally outnumbered, but only forty of our two hundred warriors survived. We estimate their troop strength on thirty men, sir.”

“Thirty men?! And we still can’t beat them with a seven times as big force?! Could you identify them? Are those infidels from the former New Republic? Who are they?”

“We don’t know, sir. We only saw schemes of enemies slaying our files. But whatever or whoever they are, sir, they are warriors like I’ve never seen before. To be honest, I’d set them on the same step with those *Jeedai*—or even on a higher step, sir. The only chance to beat them is sending in all our forces, sir.”

“All of them?” Yaggath Sonnog asked disgustedly. “Are you insane? We have over ten thousand warriors on this planet. No matter how good they fight, they can’t stand a chance against one tenth of our troops!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that, sir. We know that these thirty soldiers aren’t the only ones on this planet. We have heard of an attack on the nearest base, sir. I bet those are the same warriors there.”

“Do not question my orders, warrior! Send in one thousand warriors to the growing plants. And you will lead them. Then we will see who is right,” Yaggath Sonnog ordered.

Val Choka only nodded and attended his duties.

*Yun-Yammka, please tell me that he isn’t right. If our enemies really-*

“Sir, we got another meteorite incoming,” the communications officer suddenly interrupted Yaggath Sonnog’s thoughts. “It just breached the atmosphere and is heading towards the growing plants.”

“Can you confirm that it is a meteorite?”

“Not really, sir. It is too far away to get a good visual on it.— Wait! It seems like the meteorite is breaking in parts.”

“Those are no parts,” Yaggath Sonnog said desperately. “Those are missiles, and the meteorite is a hostile ship.”

“How do you know that sir?” the communications officer said astonished. “It isn’t even close enough for us to get a visual on it, and...”

“It is close enough now, officer.”

“You’re right, sir,” the officer admitted after checking his villips. “It is a small abomination ship that is firing missiles and green fire into the plants. It looks like a big insect, sir.”

“Bring it down!” Yaggath Sonnog ordered. “It cannot reach the ground. All fire on that abomination. Hurry!”

Boba Fett didn’t bother the plasma bullets that were coming from all directions, trying to bring his ship down. The shots were easily absorbed by the ship’s hull out of pure Mandalorian iron—and that only when they bypassed the high-energy particle shields of his fighter, what was unlikely.

The two twin low-energy-turbolaser cannons of the small attack-ship were devastating all ground and buildings beneath it, the powerful anti-air SCSK-S4 rockets bringing down the coralskippers sent to intercept him.

The *Gauntlet*, as Fett called his newest ship, was a heavily modified MandalMotors *StarViper* assault fighter, equipped with weaponry that could outrun a Star Destroyer with ease. The two twin low-energy turbolaser cannons and the hull reinforced with Mandalorian iron had cost Boba Fett most of his money, but it was more than worth it. The low-energy turbolaser cannons were more powerful than any heavy laser cannon and the damage caused was even more truculent. The *Gauntlet* resembled a “modern” Basilisk War Droid more than any other spacecraft—not without a droid mind like the old traditional Mandalorian invasion machines.

Somehow, Fett was nearly as much linked to the *Gauntlet* as to his old ship, which had already been owned by his father, the *Slave I*. The *StarViper*-fighter actually had an artificial intelligence that allowed it to operate completely on its own. Not that Boba would need that, but he always went on the safe way. But the bond to his ship had something special, he had to admit—not as special as to his first ship, but still more than any of his other ships, yet.

The coralskipper growing plants had now come close enough that Boba could deploy the concussion charges and finish the job of the *Honor Guards*. The explosions quickly razed the plants to the ground.

“Barec, come in,” Fett said over comm.

“Thanks for clearing things up, sir,” Ronan commed back. “But we got another problem: about one thousand Scarheads are approaching the plants. And we have only thirty men left.”

“What about the *Lancers* and *Crusaders*? Shouldn’t they be here right now?”

“No. When we discovered the Yuuzhan Vong moving, we ordered them to stay where they were, in order to fall in the back of the Vong troops, later.”

“That’s a good choice,” Fett said, while destroying more and more buildings in the hostile base. The anti-air projectiles from ground were still trying to penetrate the particle shields of the *Gauntlet*, but Boba Fett knew that when it went on like that, they ultimately would breach his defenses and bring the heavy fighter down.

“Tell me when you need me, Barec,” Fett said. “I have to get rid of something here, first.”

“Won’t be too long, sir. Barec out.”

“Why isn’t this abomination down, yet?” Yaggath Sonnog asked furiously. “Haven’t I ordered you to bring it down *before* it reaches the plants?! Now, all our coralskippers are dead and the plants destroyed.”

“Sir, it seems to be resistant against our bolts,” a warrior answered him.

“Then double your efforts and use *grutchins*!” Sonnog said and went to the semi-transparent membrane-wall of the building.

The abomination fighter looked more like a fire-breathing insect, which was spitting green flames all round it, destroying everything that came in sight. It reminded Yaggath Sonnog of the *bsellikk* bug in his home-galaxy, whose feelers squirted green toxin into the enemy’s eyes, thus making the enemy unable to fight and see the bug anymore, making it an easy task for the insect to finish its enemy off.

Suddenly, Yaggath Sonnog remembered a legend he had heard a long time ago, on the long voyage to the new galaxy. It had been about the first encounters of the Yuuzhan Vong in this galaxy. A *yorik-strohna* scout ship—camouflaged as a small asteroid—had been investigating the space near a planet with an asteroid belt, when suddenly an insect-like infidel ship had appeared, firing on the scout ship and several other asteroids. The scout ship had thrown off its asteroid hull and fled, followed by the insect-like ship. The Yuuzhan Vong craft had defended itself and obviously surprised the attacking abomination, and then jumped into darkspace. The attacker had chased it up top the edge of the galaxy and then left it for good. This had, according to the legend, made the Yuuzhan Vong wait for a better time to show up in the galaxy.

The reason why Yaggath Sonnog thought of that was because the described insect-like attacking infidel ship had similarities with the infidel abomination now attacking the base on Dubrillion.

*Can it be possible that there is some relation between those two ships?* he thought doubtfully. *Maybe we have waited too long and those enemies are back now, to let us pay for what we did to their galaxy?*

He stopped thinking about that. It was heresy. The gods had found this new galaxy and the warriors weren't allowed to question their gods' decisions. If the gods wanted sacrifices, the Yuuzhan Vong would give them.

Yaggath Sonnog made the membrane totally transparent to see what the infidel fighter was doing. But he couldn't see it anywhere.

At least not before the abomination suddenly appeared directly in front of the window, its 'feelers' starting to spit the green fire ...

*Right into the enemy's eyes...* was Yaggath Sonnog's last thought before he became one with the flames.

"We could need you here now, sir," Ronan said to Boba Fett over comm.

The Yuuzhan Vong had already approached to fire-range and were throwing their usual first waves of thud and razor bugs. The Mandalorians countered with blaster bolts, grenades, thermal detonators, armor piercing ACPs (Accelerated Charged Particles) and pain bullets.

Until now, the Mandalorians had the advantage of better and more precise ranged weapons, as well as better ground and cover, but when the Yuuzhan Vong had come close enough for melee combat, former advantage would turn into a disadvantage, and the sheer number of scarheads would eventually mean victory for them.

"Give me one more second," Fett replied. "I'm just taking out the last anti-air building, or whatever the *Vongese* call that."

His words were followed by a big explosion, which Ronan could hear before he could see it, because Fett had kept the comm-channel open.

"Alright, what you do need me for, Barec?" the Mandalore asked.

"We need you to take out one thousand scarheads, sir," Ronan answered and then fired a round of pain bullets at the nearest enemies. "Sorry, I must correct me: nine-hundred and ninety-three scarheads."

"Very well," Fett answered. "Stay away, Mandalorians. Your built-in filters will protect you from the toxins, but the density of the fog will take all sight."

Ronan pointed his men to retreat, finished off some more Yuuzhan Vong and then waited for Boba Fett to release his *special* missiles. Using the same toxin as the pain bullets, the missiles released a gas that hit the Yuuzhan Vong nervous system hard and fast. Strikingly called *nervekillers*, those toxins were the direct opposite of painkillers.

Boba Fett released the missile on the nearest group of Yuuzhan Vong and it exploded in the air, releasing the deadly toxins. Three more missiles at other places finished it.

Ronan already wanted to thank Fett when suddenly Atross reported over comm: "Good job, *Mand'ador*, but we have nine thousand more scarheads in our neck. And I bet you haven't got any more of those missiles, have you?"

## CHAPTER VII

Ny'ong Yutt still felt the incredible pain, but he was conscious again. Bit by bit, the pain decreased, and the Yuuzhan Vong could see and feel again.

He got up and looked around. The small isle he was on was the only land in a range of about five kilometers. Elsewhere, there was only water. A lot of water.

Ny'ong Yutt could barely remember what had happened. He had exited the *yorik-trema* with his troops and they had moved on to the crash-site, when they had fallen into an ambush and he had been shot down by a new kind of weapon he wouldn't even have tried to imagine. He had not been able to make out who his attackers were, but there was one thing he knew for sure: they were neither soldiers of the infidel New Republic Defense Force nor of the Imperial Remnants or else factions. They were a new enemy—one that couldn't just be easily dismissed.

*Those infidels—whoever they are—probably came here to occupy the planet, Ny'ong Yutt thought. And I don't doubt they will succeed in that. I have to get off here and tell the Warmaster about this new threat. But how? I can't even escape from this small isle...*

Ny'ong Yutt was more than desperate, and the still existing pain—not as strong as before, but still above all levels, even for a Yuuzhan Vong—didn't help it.

It was impossible for him to swim to the next island—the one where the new enemies had landed. The isle he was on had nothing to offer what could make him able to build a raft. There was only grass on it, nothing more.

So he had to wait until a patrol ship came, and, with a bit of luck, notice him.

And he knew that it could already be too late then.

“Good job, sir, but we have nine thousand more scarheads in our neck,” the excited, purring voice of Atross came out of Ronan's commlink. “And I bet you haven't got any more of those missiles, have you?”

“We still have a squadron of *Pursuers*, two KDY drop ships, the *Slave I* and the *Nemesis* at our proposal,” Ronan said calmly. “That should be enough firepower to take them out *twice*.”

“I agree,” Boba Fett commented with his usual harsh voice. “But we need to get all scarheads to one position in order to take them out with one single stroke.”

“Might I add,” a rather unfamiliar voice—Ronan thought it was Ayden Stone, one of the surviving *Crusaders*—said, “that they still have some aircrafts functioning? I highly doubt they won't use them.”

“I say we send the *Pursuers* to cause a distraction attack on the hostile ships and use the heavy gunships to bomb the land troops,” Ronan suggested.

“That's how we do it,” Fett said approvingly. “Send the *Warrior's Claw* back to the *Legacy* and pack it with as many missiles and bombs as possible. Thor, you will take the *Claw* and then lead the *Pursuers* to attack,” he ordered the experienced pilot over comm.

“Affirmative,” Katin ‘Thor’ Tyark said and called the *Warrior's Claw* for pick-up. It was on the island where the Mandalorians had landed again and had to pick up Thor before takeoff.

“ETA is two hours, sir,” Ronan reported to Mandalore. “Until then, it's going to get hot down here. We better join at the plants and then hold the position.”

“I will give you cover, *Lancers*,” Fett said and maneuvered the *Gauntlet* to *Lancers'* and *Crusaders'* position.

Ronan watched the *StarViper* attack ship head to the hostile front, deploying the second *nervekiller*-missile and burning turbolaser-fire into the enemy lines.

His *Honor Guards* had nothing to do right now but waiting for the *Lancers'* and *Crusaders'* arrival, and so Ronan enjoyed every little bit of this short time of rest.

The first time since his arrival on Dubrillion, Ronan actually had time to think about the operation so far. It hadn't all gone as planned, but they had reached their main objective and taken out the main base and the growing plants.

Ronan was surprised that yet so many Mandalorians had made it so far. *Boba Fett has done a great job in rejoining them*, he thought. *No other army or military unit in the galaxy would have come so far with so few troops.*

On the other side of the battlefield, there was no time to rest.

There was a fierce battle going on, and the Mandalorians could just quite defend themselves and retreat, while the Yuuzhan Vong were marching forward, ignoring the turbolaser blasts from the *Gauntlet*. The Vong didn't mind losses in this battle. Their attackers had to be killed by all means. The Vong had transformed from more or less honorable warriors to raging animals that couldn't be stopped by anything.

All that didn't really help Ayden Stone in his fight. His old slugthrower was out of ammo and he had now to use his hidden weapons.

*Such as my nifty wrist-mounted flamethrower.*

Ayden loved that weapon. It wasn't very clean or precise, but even more effective, especially against Yuuzhan Vong.

The waves of flames hold the Yuuzhan Vong off, but others followed, stepping over their dead comrades, throwing plasma eels, thud and razor bugs all around them. It was hard for most of the Mandalorians to avoid hits, and many got hurt and some even deadly injured. It wasn't a fair fight after all.

Boba Fett's attempts to help were only useful against the Yuuzhan Vong that weren't near to the Mandalorians, and the others could still fought on in close quarters, where Fett couldn't risk hitting his own men.

Ayden Stone unleashed one more burst of bright flames before he deactivated the fierce and deadly weapon. The fuel tank was nearly empty, and Ayden needed the remaining fuel for his jetpack. He was one of the few Mandalorians—a Mandalorian supercommando, actually—who actually had a jetpack. All the higher ranked supercommandos had one, and also all of the *Lancers*, who were specialized in airborne combat. The reason why they hadn't used them yet was simple: they had to spare them for a better purpose.

Ayden Stone knew that now the time for a better purpose had come.

"Get airborne, Mandalorians!" he ordered. His low rank didn't matter—the others followed his order with pleasure; ranks generally didn't really matter to Mandalorians—they still fought well without anybody having leading rolls, apart from Mandalore and other high-ranked supercommandos.

Only three quarters of the Mandalorians had a jetpack, but most of them airlifted others and so could withdraw from the frontline easily.

While he was waiting until most of the Mandalorians had retreated, Stone fired wrist darts at the still approaching Yuuzhan Vong, hitting them hard in their faces.

*Another nice gadget*, he thought, smiling about the deadly weapon, which was only really deadly when it hit a Yuuzhan Vong's face. It simply blew the outer-galactican's head off.

He checked the situation and noticed that he could accompany his comrades now.

He tossed one last thermal detonator at his enemies, then turned around and activated the jetpack while running as fast as his feet allowed him to. The sudden boost lifted him from the ground and he enjoyed the short moment of flying longer than it actually took.

It was about a kilometer from his current position to the growing plants, and he feared that there wasn't enough fuel for the whole distance.

Just as he had estimated, two hundred meters before he reached the plants, the low-fuel-alarm rang off and Ayden slowly maneuvered down to ground.

He hit the ground harder than he had wanted to, rolled over and began to sprint the last meters to the plants.

The *Honor Guards* had already set up a stable defense line and trenches to keep the position. They even had mounted several E-web heavy laser cannons, mortars and rotary guns. Stone jumped into one of the trenches where the other leaders were.

"Ayden Stone reporting for duty, sirs," he said breathlessly. He wondered why this little action had made him so exhausted. "All Mandalorians have retreated, but most of us are out of ammo and fuel. You don't happen to have some of that here, do you?"

“Unfortunately, we don’t have much ammo remaining, either,” Ronan, who had taken off his matte silver helmet, said. He was pouring some water on his military short shaved hair, taking a last refreshment before the battle began. “We have to wait for the *Claw*’s return, what should be in about one and half an hour.”

“*K’atini*,” Ayden cursed in *Mando’a*. “How the *shab* can we be able to hold off the crab-boys for so long?”

“By being Mandalorians,” Ronan answered, grinning, and took a mouthful of water from his bottle. “We still have our Mandalore up there. Give up now, and we’ll never make it.”

“Yes, sir,” Ayden answered doubtfully. *I guess he’s right and it’s just me*, he thought. *But I still have a bad feeling about this...*

A silhouette of a small ship showed up on the horizon, and Ny’ong Yutt’s hope came back. The silhouette became clearer and eventually he could make out the vessel as a small Yuuzhan Vong patrol ship.

Still, there was something about it that didn’t feel right. What should a patrol ship do here, while on the other side of the planet a fierce battle was fought?

But Ny’ong Yutt had no choice, after all. No matter who the passengers where, it was his only chance to get off that small isle he had been put on.

If the passengers were the infidel warriors, it would be an honor for Ny’ong Yutt to die by their hands. After all, they had showed themselves worthy—more than worthy.

The patrol ship seemed to see him and approached slowly, without any noise as Ny’ong Yutt was used to. The infidel abomination ships were all too loud—something that Ny’ong Yutt hated most about the abominations the infidels used instead of living beings that the glorious gods had given the Yuuzhan Vong.

The ship was very close now and a membrane opened, revealing a Yuuzhan Vong warrior behind it.

“Are you the only survivor, sir?” he cried out.

“Yes, I am,” Ny’ong Yutt answered furiously. “Now get me off this isle, warrior!”

“Sorry sir, yes,” the warrior answered and ordered the pilot something Yutt couldn’t understand. The ship came down close enough that Ny’ong Yutt could climb up, with some help from the warrior inside.

He ignored the warrior and ordered the ship’s pilot: “Get me off this planet as quickly as possible. I have to tell the Warmaster about this new threat.”

Instead of the pilot, the warrior answered him. “That’s impossible, sir. We need you in battle. You are our highest ranked warrior, and without lead I doubt we have a chance against those infidels. Besides, this patrol ship can’t survive in space, sir—in case you forgot that.”

“I know that it dies in space, warrior,” Ny’ong Yutt said raging. “Now, get me to the main base. And give me a status report en route.”

“Yes, sir!”

The pilot turned the ship in direction to the base and accelerated. It would take half an hour to the base, and on the way, Ny’ong Yutt was told the situation.

It didn’t sound too good after all. *Not that I wouldn’t have expected that*, he thought. *They seem to be very honorable enemies...*

“We have three small ships that just came out of hyperspace, sir,” an officer from the *Legacy* reported to Boba Fett, who was still flying the *Gauntlet* over the Yuuzhan Vong troops, its turbolaser cannons unceasingly blasting the hostiles without any mercy.

“They’re all *Skipray* blastboats, sir,” the officer answered to Fett’s unasked question. “The leading one is establishing contact with us.”

“Who is it?” Fett asked. “Let’s hope it’s not someone from this vile heap of scumbags called Peace Brigade.”

“It’s Kir Kanos, sir, and he wants to talk to you.”



## CHAPTER VIII

"Ronan, this is Thor," Katin's voice came out of Ronan's helmet commlink. "The *Pursuers* are armed and ready to escort the *Claw* back to the planet. ETA thirteen minutes."

"Copy that, Katin," Ronan answered. "And good luck. Ronan out."

*It's just about time that our reinforcements arrive*, he thought, looking over the battlefield, the still approaching Yuuzhan Vong and his warriors doing their best to hold them back.

Ronan walked out of the command tent and went to the nearest trench, aiming his left arm at the approaching hostiles, waiting for them to get close enough to unleash the devastating fire burst of his wrist-mounted flamethrower. Ronan's carbine was already out of ammo, and he had to use his armor enhancements and hidden weapons now, like the flamethrower and rocket darts that were most effective against Yuuzhan Vong heads, blowing them actually off a Vong's shoulders.

The battle was getting more and more desperate for the Mandalorians, who were totally outnumbered, and now outgunned, as well. The Yuuzhan Vong didn't care very much about casualties, and were stepping over their fallen comrades like an endless stream of scarred warriors.

Ronan avoided some razor bugs that had been thrown at him and then activated the flamethrower. The hostiles rapidly fell prey to the unstoppable wall of fire, not being able to do anything against it.

From all sides, Mandalorians were firing rocket darts and blaster bursts—as far as they still had ammo, what most hadn't anymore —, launching concussion missiles and flamethrowers and hurling thermal grenades at the attackers, some even fighting with vibroswords and other melee weapons in close combat with the Yuuzhan Vong, taking scalps from beaten enemies. But overall, all their efforts were useless—sooner or later, the Mandalorians would be completely out of ammo and had to fight the Vong with melee weapons and their bare hands. Even then, and Ronan was sure about that, they would still be able to hold off the Yuuzhan Vong for a while, but ultimately, the sheer number of enemies would beat the Mandalorians.

So, Ronan thought, while firing his last rocket darts at some close attackers, all of the shots hitting the mark, *something has to change now...*

But he didn't know what to do, and the only thing was to wait for a better time. Now, he had to fight, and maybe die honorable, taking as many of the Vong with him as possible.

Ronan fired the last rocket dart at a badly scarred Yuuzhan Vong that was just striking out with his amphistaff, attempting to use it as a spear and throwing it into Ronan's throat. But Ronan was too fast for the Yuuzhan Vong warrior, and the rocket dart hit the scarred warrior's head, forcing it to explode and leaving the Yuuzhan Vong headless. The sweep was still strong enough for the living spear to glide out of the dead warrior's hands and drill itself into the ground, followed by the headless corpse that hit the ground only seconds later.

Ronan turned away and checked his weapons. The Heads-Up-Display (HUD) of his helmet showed him that only one thermal grenade was remaining and the fuel tank was very close to empty. His sidearms, his carbine and all other weapons were totally out of ammo, and he didn't want to waste the last bit of fuel for the flamethrower. He still had his jetpack and the concussion missile mounted on it and wanted to save that, as well as the grenade, for later.

So, he had to admit that the martial arts lesson from his father would've helped him in the following combat, more than he wanted to image. His father had been an excellent fighter, and Ronan wasn't bad at melee and close combat at all, but he could've been a lot better. His father had always told him that his lessons would one day save Ronan's life, rather than any of his skills in ranged combat, or more precisely, his talent with sniper rifles. Ronan had only gone through the basic course in Kharritokh's martial arts trainings, and he really hoped that this would be enough to stand the Yuuzhan Vong in the following battle.

*Kark, snap out of it!* Ronan told himself. *Stop worrying about this nonsense and start fighting, soldier!*

So he jumped out of the trench and ran over to the next Yuuzhan Vong, his carbine readied and the bayonet's vibro-emitter activated. The hostile never saw it coming, and Ronan landed a clean

strike into the invader's belly. Pulling his rifle out of the corpse, he watched the dying body falling over, hitting the ground with a dull noise. He didn't care about the slowly dying by bleeding Yuuzhan Vong any longer and went on.

The next Yuuzhan Vong had already seen him and was holding his amphistaff ready to parry Ronan's strike, but latter never wanted to attack the enemy this way. Instead, he fired the fibercord whip from his right gauntlet and made the grappling device wrap around his opponent's lower legs. Ronan did all of this while running, and he didn't stop after the Yuuzhan Vong's feet had been grappled, but continued running and thus throwing the warrior off his feet. The Vong landed hard on his back, and Ronan could clearly hear the Yuuzhan Vong's neck breaking. After rejecting the whipcord, he went on to the next hostile.

This time, Ronan didn't have the element of surprise anymore, and this time, it was not him who attacked. The Yuuzhan Vong drew his coufee, a dagger-like weapon the Vong used as a secondary weapon to the amphistaff, and threw it at Ronan, who could just avoid a critical hit at his shoulder, but still the dagger streaked an unarmored part of his shoulder and caused a rather big flesh wound. Slowed down by the unexpected attack, Ronan could hardly parry his opponent's next strike with the amphistaff. He kept the Yuuzhan Vong at distance and extended his vibroblades in his forearm wrist gauntlets, preparing himself for the next attack. But for some reason, his opponent didn't attack and only waited in defense pose. Though knowing that he was in disadvantage when attacking now, Ronan deked a kick with his foot, which would throw his opponent off-balance, but then rammed his left vibroblade right into the Vong's face, hitting him badly. As expected, his opponent let the amphistaff go and quickly lifted both hands up to the deep wound in his face. Ronan used the chance and rammed his carbine's bayonet into the enemy's armpit.

He pulled it out of the falling corpse and allowed himself a short rest. He looked at the timer in an edge of his HUD he had set for reinforcement's arrival: 00:06:23

"Mand'alor, this is Barec," he said to Fett over comm. "It's still six minutes before reinforcements arrive, and I don't think we can hold our position any longer."

"Don't worry, Barec," Fett said calmly.

A loud burst from the sky interrupted him, and Ronan looked up. Three small ships were coming from the sky, blasting the frontlines with bursts of heavy laser fire.

"Here go your reinforcements," an unfamiliar voice said. "This is Kir Kanos, and I guess you could need some help down there, eh?"

## CHAPTER IX

“All Mandalorians, retreat! Get back into the trenches,” Ronan ordered his men. “Kir Kanos is here, and he’s going to blow up the whole front line. Move it!”

Ronan himself left the battlefield and activated his jetpack. The last bit of the fuel carried him up to the place where Kir Kanos’s three *Skipray* blastboats had landed. Ronan walked over to the dozen soldiers Kanos had brought with him and turned to the brawny, tall man in crimson red armor, who obviously was Kir Kanos. The soldiers all looked prepared and ready for battle, well trained and experienced, just as you had to expect of men that followed Kir Kanos, one of the most notorious and respected fighters in the former Empire.

Kanos in person was a former member of the Emperor’s Royal Guards, not to say the last of them. He had killed the treacherous Carnor Jax, another former Royal Guard who had claimed himself to be the new Emperor several years ago. Kanos had made himself many enemies, but he still was totally loyal to the long-dead Emperor Palpatine, yet attempting to follow his orders. In the past years, Kanos had disappeared, nobody really knowing if he was still alive. But when the Yuuzhan Vong had become a threat for the Imperial Remnants, Kanos reappeared and fought for the Empire again. His hatred towards the Yuuzhan Vong was well known, and Ronan thought that the Vong indeed had to fear this fierce and honorable warrior.

Now, Kanos was here on Dubrillion, a planet near to the Imperial Remnants. He had heard about an attack on the Yuuzhan Vong base there and figured it to be a great opportunity to fight the Vong. He hadn’t known that Mandalorians were attacking Dubrillion, but he had heard that Boba Fett was involved, a man Kanos respected as a great warrior like himself.

“I guess you are Ronan Barec then,” Kanos started. “Does it happen you’re related to Cayne Barec?”

“It actually does happen, in some way... he was my father. I already figured you might know him from your days as a Royal Guard.”

“That’s right. And he was really your father? Well, that even adds to my respect to you, after what Fett told me about you. Cayne Barec was a great man—one of the best instructors ever to train us, back in the academy on Yinchorr. He was, however, not my supervisor there... most of the time, another trainer was taking care of my cadre. What was a pity, actually, ‘cause I always had more respect for the highly-experienced Mandalorian warrior your father was. If you’re truly his heir, I’ll be glad to fight alongside you.” Kanos patted him on his back. “But now, let’s get back to topic: I brought lots of ammo and explosives with me, figuring it’d be of rather good use to you, wouldn’t it?”

“I had never wanted to learn so much from my father back in the days I was a young boy, so will see.” Ronan answered, proud.

*Heh. I wouldn’t have figured this meeting to proceed this way—I’d have never thought the great Kir Kanos would be the one to honor me, rather than the other way round.*

“Still, thanks,” he continued. “And you’re right: we’re close to losing this battle, and our reinforcements still haven’t arrived, so we could need all we can get right now. Do you have enough explosives to blow the whole front line?”

“Yes, we should have enough. Krom?” Kanos asked one of his men, who nodded in response. “Okay, we have enough,” he said, now to Ronan again. “So, what are you planning?”

“We still got five minutes before the reinforcements arrive. That should be enough time to plant the explosives in the trenches and retreat. This should force the scarheads to move on, and just when they are close enough, we set off the charges. That gives our bombers a clear target, and we can get rid of most of the Vong pretty quickly that way.”

“Agreed,” Kanos said. “My men will plant the charges while your soldiers give us cover. Your men can get new ammo meanwhile.”

Both leaders gave their orders to their men and attended their duties. Ronan took some energy packs for his rifle and then searched for a good sniping-position. He found one and lay down to the ground, started shooting distant Yuuzhan Vong and thus covering the other soldiers.

Meanwhile, the trap was being set.

The small patrol ship reached the base, and Ny'ong Yutt could see the disaster the infidels had caused. The growing plants were mere black holes now, the hangar building was destroyed, and most of the buildings all where only ruins any longer. And Ny'ong Yutt could see thousands of Yuuzhan Vong warriors marching towards the enemy position, pointlessly, as far as he could judge it from what he saw. The infidels were no more than sixty men, and eight thousand Yuuzhan Vong still had no chance against them? Ny'ong Yutt's respect for the attackers grew more and more.

"Land here," he ordered the pilot and the patrol ship hovered down to the ground, landing smoothly.

Ny'ong Yutt jumped out and went to the highest ranked warrior on the battlefield.

"What are you doing?" Ny'ong Yutt asked his inferior. "You're wasting our men and still don't see that we have no chance to defeat the infidels that way."

"I'm ready to die, sir, if you want to punish me for my faults," the warrior answered. "But I have to tell you that the infidel attackers are already withdrawing, and we are close to winning."

"Your punishment has to be delayed. We need all warriors in battle right now. And if your warriors are really close to winning still has to be proven. Now, follow me to the front line," he ordered some warriors around him. "I want to observe the situation myself."

He re-entered the patrol ship with five more warriors and ordered the pilot to fly to the front. Seconds later, they landed again, and Ny'ong Yutt could indeed see the enemies withdrawing.

"I guess you were right," he admitted to his inferior. "The infidels have crawled back into their holes, waiting for their extermination."

He didn't really believe his own words. His experienced warrior's instinct told him that something was wrong. Most of the infidels had indeed left the trenches and only a few were still fighting, also retreating slowly. But Ny'ong Yutt didn't know what to do else, and so he ordered his men to storm the trenches.

The warriors followed his orders and sprinted towards to hostile position, unleashing the fiercest war cries Ny'ong Yutt had ever heard. The wrath of his warriors was incredible and seemed to be unstoppable.

The last remaining infidels saw the Yuuzhan Vong coming and backed down, too. Ny'ong Yutt's warriors jumped into the trenches, stabbing their amphistaffs everywhere, not killing any hostiles at all, since there weren't any more of them left.

Ny'ong Yutt already thought the situation was clear now, when a sudden quake heavily shook the ground and threw him off feet. Cursing, he landed hard on his back, not realizing that this quake had just saved his life. He tried to look up, but all he could see was enormous explosions above the trenches. The ground still shook badly, and Yuuzhan Vong bodies and body parts were catapulted into the air as if they were mere rag dolls.

Too late, Ny'ong Yutt was realizing that he should have listened to his instinct.

"Now that was one *big* boom," Ayden Stone said astonished.

"Indeed," Ronan answered. "And in thirty seconds, the *Claw* arrives. Seems to be our lucky hour right now."

"Yeah," Stone said and took a mouthful of water from his field bottle. He was enjoying the short time of rest.

"I'm sending my *Skiprays* airborne again," Kir Kanos said. "Together with Fett's *StarViper*, the two gunships and your squadron of *Pursuers*, the *Scarheads* should be history, soon."

"This is Thor," the comm interrupted him, followed by a loud sound of a gunship flyby. Ayden Stone looked up and could see the *Warrior's Claw* and the *Pursuers* flying over them, followed by the three *Skipray* blastboats that had just taken off. "Ready to kick some ass, Ronan."

"Proceed as planned, Thor", Boba Fett's harsh voice came out of the comm, and the *Gauntlet* accompanied the other ships. "Everybody enjoy the show down there."

"Very good, *Mand'alor!*" Ronan said cheerfully. "So, we just have to wait for them to finish their job and then clean the mess after that," he said to the gathered Mandalorians.

Before they could respond anything, the show began.

The two KDY AIAT/i-drop ships deployed napalm bombs, which burned a huge aisle into the enemy lines, and the bombs were followed by two dozen Mandalorian parachute troopers, equipped with extra fuel tanks for jetpack and flamethrowers. Those who hadn't died with the first wave of napalm impact were quickly finished of by the devastating walls of fire coming from the troopers.

The *Skipray* blastboats were shooting concussion missiles into the enemy lines, taking out more than a hundred with each explosion. The *Gauntlet* was still burning green tubrolaser fire into the enemies, and the *Pursuers* were taking out the last ships and coralskippers of the Vong.

The whole battlefield was filled with green, red, orange and yellow blasts, walls of fire burning high into the sky, filling it with thick black smoke. It was a really amazing display of fireworks, and if you could skip the fact of thousands of lives of beings dying due to that beauty, you could really enjoy it.

Ayden Stone thought it was inhuman to do so, but he knew that the Yuuzhan Vong would do the same, or even worse to innocent citizens of the New Republic without turning a hair. *They deserve it more than anything. They pay for what they did to our galaxy, and this is only the first step in doing so.*

The 'show' didn't last for long, but the result was even more striking: about ten thousand Yuuzhan Vong had been taken out and only few would have survived that. The remaining Mandalorian infantry would finish off the last survivors, and then the mission would be done. Dubrillion, a main Yuuzhan Vong base in the galaxy, would be free again.

But what could one mere victory mean in such a fierce war? It meant hope, something that wasn't often seen those times. This was only the first step to a greater good.

This was the first step of the Rage of the Shadow Warriors.

## CHAPTER X

The Mandalorians waited for the ships to come back and land before going back to the battlefield. The parachute troopers had already come back, and Boba Fett exited the *Gauntlet* the first time since his arrival on Dubrillion.

He walked over to Kir Kanos, who was preparing himself for the upcoming battle.

“I wonder why we’ve never met before, Kir Kanos,” Fett said and offered his hand.

Kanos took his hand and shook it with a strong grip. “Me too. But we should delay the talk on later. There’s still a battle to finish out there.”

“Good point. Barec, what’s the situation?” he asked the leader of operation.

“You’ve done a great job there,” Ronan answered. “Nearly all of the Vong are dead, and the few survivors shouldn’t be a threat anymore. Our mission was successful, but as Kir Kanos pointed out, it isn’t finished quite yet. I suggest we send the *Honor Guards* together with Kanos’s men. That should be enough.”

“You heard him right, Mandalorians,” the Mandalore said to the gathered soldiers, who were equipping themselves with ammo, arms and other supplies Kanos and the two gunships had brought with them. “But we don’t want to risk anything, especially not so close to the end. Take Tracyn Squad and the last *Crusaders* with you, Ronan. And equip as many of the *Guards* with jetpacks as possible.”

Ronan just nodded and gave Boba Fett’s orders over to his soldiers, readying them for battle.

“I guess your men can keep up with my boys, can’t they?” Boba asked Kanos.

“As far as I’ve seen your Mandalorians fight, not quite, but they’re still very good men,” Kanos answered. “They should be good enough for your purposes.”

“Very well, then. See you on the other side of the battlefield,” Fett said and went back to his ship, putting on his jetpack and taking additional ammo and grenades.

He preferred to be prepared for everything.

Ayden Stone checked his fuel display one last time and saw the tank filled up to all limits. This time, he would need all the fuel for his jetpack and couldn’t waste it for the flamethrower, and because of that he demounted the flamethrower-attachment from his wrist gauntlet and replaced it through an additional vibroblade-attachment.

Together with the *Crusaders* and Tracyn Squad, one of the two parachute trooper squads that had been deployed by the gunships, he formed up on the front line, awaiting Ronan Barec’s further orders.

Left to them were Kir Kanos soldiers, each of them wearing customized mercenary armor, some with helmets, other without, and in front of them stood Kir Kanos himself in his crimson red armor, the red cape waving in the wind. Although Kanos was carrying a blaster rifle, Stone knew that he would switch to his double-bladed vibrosword he was famous for.

Right to them was Ronan Barec’s elite platoon of supercommandos standing. With only four of them lost in battle, they still were the largest unit with thirty-two soldiers. The small number of losses showed even more, what elite and great warriors they were. Ayden Stone himself had been one of them some time ago, before he got promoted to lead a squad of non-supercommando Mandalorian soldiers. Now, all of his nine men were dead, all fallen prey to the Yuuzhan Vong ambush back in the first base the *Crusaders* had conquered. He hadn’t thought about his lost men before, and he wondered why he thought about them now.

*Let’s hope this isn’t a bad omen, he thought. I can’t need that right now. I must stay focused on my task and can’t get disturbed by something like that. Not now.*

He forced himself to forget that for now and turned his attention back to the current task.

“This is the last battle before our ultimate victory, *Mando’ade*—at least for our victory on this planet,” Ronan said. “Not many *Vongese* have made it, and we will finish off the last of them, without taking any more losses on our side.”

He hesitated to let his words appeal and then went on. "So, let's do this quick and clean. Move out, Mandalorians!"

Fifty soldiers activated their jetpacks, the Mandalorians airlifting Kir Kanos and his men, and took off into the air, advancing to the burned and smoking, with corpses of dead Yuuzhan Vong covered, battlefield.

The *Crusaders* and Tracyn Squad arrived first and let Kanos and his men to the ground in some distance to a group of several hundred surviving Yuuzhan Vong.

Kanos had already started running towards the hostiles, when Stone suddenly came in mind why he had thought of his lost men only seconds before. The ground covered with corpses was perfect for an ambush like the one that had cost most of the *Crusaders* their lives.

"Look out, Kanos," he advised the former guardsman over comm, but it was already too late.

About two dozens of Yuuzhan Vong suddenly appeared all around Kanos, who could just react with a few quick bursts from his rifle, all of them missing their targets. Stone could see Kanos throwing his blaster away and drawing something that looked like a club from the distance, but Kanos held it more like a staff. Even from the distance, Stone could hear Kanos shout at the Yuuzhan Vong: "Embrace the pain, scarheads!"

The Mandalorian used his rifle scope to magnify the view and now could see Kanos ram the club with one end into a Yuuzhan Vong's throat. He could just see a blade coming out of the neck on the Vong's back and then knew that this was Kanos's vibrosword, not a club, as he had thought at first.

Ayden Stone wanted to shoot some of Kanos's opponents, but they all were in too close proximity and it there was to possibility of hitting Kanos. So he just watched the former Royal Guardsman fight.

Even through the scope, he couldn't see any more than a red blur and one Yuuzhan Vong after another going down to the ground. Seconds later, the blur became Kir Kanos again, and Stone could see the former Royal Guard taking out the last two opponents with a clean sweep of his double-bladed vibrosword in both Yuuzhan Vongs' throats. Kanos retracted the blades, put the hilt back to his weapon belt and picked up his rifle from the ground.

When Stone approached Kir Kanos, he was totally astonished. *Has this man just really taken out thirty scarheads?! I can't believe it...*

"You better believe it, lad," Kanos said, smiling, as though he could read Stone's mind. "And even through your helmet I can see your mouth wide open. Better shut it before your jaw falls off."

"I..." Stone tried to say before noticing his mouth not being open, at all. "You..." And then he broke out into laughter.

Kir Kanos just grinned widely and pointed to the group of Yuuzhan Vong that was rapidly running towards them, shouting incomprehensible words, which obviously ought to be fearsome war cries, but Stone wasn't even feared by them in the slightest.

"Shut up and fight," the former Royal Guardsman shouted over to him and fired a few shots into the advancing mob of hostiles.

Together with everyone on the battlefield, Ayden Stone followed Kir Kanos's advice and fought.

The battle was short, since most of the Vong could be killed before becoming real threats in close combat, and after a few long minutes of fight, the Mandalorians, Kir Kanos and his soldiers could return to their temporary base and celebrate their victory.

On the other side of the battlefield, Ny'ong Yutt awoke, but wisely stayed in his current pose, lying on the ground. He looked up in the sky and could see the infidel soldiers flying over him with their abominations of machines, which spitted fire to keep them in the air.

He didn't know what to do. Most likely, all ships on the planet had been destroyed, and he wouldn't have any chance to get off planet soon enough to inform the Warmaster of this new threat.

But then he thought of the weapon by which he had been sent to unconsciousness at the very beginning of the infidel occupation again.

*I can hardly be the only one they took out with this weapon. And when I can awake again, others probably can as well. So there is still hope...*

## CHAPTER XI

When Ronan returned back to the base and landed together with the others, he could feel the Mandalorians' pride and enthusiasm about their victory, and Kir Kanos's men were already bringing drinks and ale from their *Skipray*-blastboats. Some Mandalorians took off their helmets and joined in, simply sitting down to the ground around small fireplaces.

When seeing the fires, Ronan noticed that the night had begun to dawn and the sun was going down, leaving a beautifully colored red sunset. But it wasn't only beautiful; the crimson-red colors actually reminded Ronan of the blood spilled and the lives of comrades perished to make this victory possible. He suddenly thought it was wrong to celebrate without giving the dead a last honor. He looked around and saw that he was, by far, not the only one who thought so. He could see the cheerless faces of his men, desperate of the loss of so many friends, squadmates or even brothers.

But Ronan also saw that their will to fight hadn't vanished after all. They were all true Mandalorians, and Ronan thought Boba Fett could be very proud of his 'private army', as Fett's all-time arch-enemy Han Solo had called it not too long ago on the Mandalorian training base on Raxus Prime.

*Thinking of Fett... where the hell is the Mandalore?!*

He walked over to Kanos, who was sitting at a fire with his men and some Mandalorians, all of them with bottles and mugs in their hands. Ronan thought that at least Kanos wouldn't start to drink now, but then he noticed those bottles and cups being merely filled with water. *Fresh water, actually*, he thought when he saw the glass and aluminum surfaces were moist with dew.

The men around the fire greeted him with respectful nods, and when he sat down next to Kir Kanos, and the ex-Royal Guard even tapped him comradely on his shoulder.

"Great job your men did there," Kanos said, while Ronan was picking up a bottle from the ground and then took a mouthful of the cool, refreshing drink. "I am sorry about your losses, though. Half of your men dead isn't quite the good sum of all things, though I have to keep in mind that it was those one-hundred warriors who took out an enemy force about a hundred times stronger than theirs. Fett must be very proud of that army he has built up there."

"Well, thanks," Ronan answered, "and, err... I guess it doesn't happen you know where Fett is, either, do you?"

"Nope. I was actually just about to ask you the same question. Before we departed, he said something like 'See you on the other side of the battlefield.', though I don't think he was serious about that."

"Yeah," was Ronan's only reply. *Weird, isn't it? We're celebrating here without the man who started all ...*

"Fancy fighting, there, sir," Ayden Stone, who had just come to their fireplace, said to Kir Kanos. "To be honest, I never thought you'd ever make it against that bunch of scarbutts, but, fortunately, I guessed wrong. Glad to have you with us here, sir."

"No respect in the elder warriors, eh?" Kanos said, smiling widely. "And don't call me 'sir'—it only makes me feel even older."

"Alright, er, Kanos!"

"So, what do we do now?" Stone asked. "Isn't it a bit dangerous to stay on enemy ground? I mean, there is still the possibility that some crab-boys survived and sent something like a distress call. In that case, it could get *very* hot in here."

"First of all," Ronan answered, "this is *our* ground, now. And other *Vongese* won't come here before they get to know more about us. We have destroyed all possibilities for the scarheads to communicate, and even if some could survive and call for reinforcements, it would still be enough time for us to retreat. Though this case is pretty unlikely, after all."

"Whatever you say, sir," Stone said. "But don't say I didn't warn you *when* it comes to such a situation ..."



The young Mandalorian was obviously expecting an answer, but after getting none, he realized this topic was shut and began a chat with one of Kanos's men.

*This Stone is a weird guy, Ronan thought. As the sole survivor of his squad, he seems to be very pessimistic. Without doubt, he can't get over the loss of his men. But what if he is right and yet some Vong survived? I can't say now ... and I couldn't do anything about it, anyway. If this is to be our destiny, it is and can't be prevented.*

"I always wondered," Ronan said to Kir Kanos, "how you gathered those men there. Are they mercs or are they loyal followers to you? I actually doubt the first, since a warrior of your reputation doesn't really need bodyguards, does he?"

"Well, actually," Kanos answered, "they're a bit of both. I was not the only one who heard of the attack on Dubrillion, and when I decided to go there, several soldiers came to me and offered their service. They aren't really 'my men' as you call them. Some are here because of I am here, others are just here with me because they would've come anyway, and now accompany us because a big team is always stronger than a smaller group or a single man. I paid none of them, they are all volunteers, and I know most of them from other 'trips' like this."

"Ah, sounds good enough. Although, in my opinion, this part about 'team better than a single man' does depend."

"Yes, indeed. But only in particular cases, not in general. I guess many of you Mandalorians are such an exception."

"I guess you're talking of Boba Fett here, eh? You, too, would be such an 'exception', in my humble opinion. I've got to quote Stone here: 'fancy fighting' with those dozens of scarbutts back on the battlefield. I only know few men who would have survived that—now, I know one more. But anyway, how shall we call 'your men', then?"

"Whatever you want," Kanos said, smiling. "But I guess 'Kanos's men' is still the easiest."

"Alright," Ronan said and took another sip.

He then put the bottle back on the ground, put his helmet on and stood up. "I'm searching Fett, now. I already tired to comm him, but got no response. Enjoy the further celebrations, everyone," he said and went away to the burned black holes, where, not too long ago, the trenches had been.

It was too dark for him to see the other side of the battlefield, even with his rangefinder, so he activated the low-light mode and swept the distance for a moving being.

After a while, he realized that the low-light mode was useless, and he switched to infrared-mode.

*Fett, you or'dinii,* he thought, shocked.

And what he saw didn't please him in the least.

He couldn't only see a glowing red dot of Boba Fett, but he could see lots of blue shapes representing incapacitated Yuuzhan Vong. Actually, there was nothing to worry about that—pain bullets and nerve killers made Vong unconscious for the rest of their lives. The problem was, however, that among those blue shapes were several red shapes.

Ronan knew far too well that latter represented conscious Vong—and there were *lots* of them.

## CHAPTER XII

Boba Fett well knew that he was surrounded by dozens of Yuuzhan Vong warriors and even more of their reptilian soldier slaves, the Chazrach.

Despite his knowledge about that, he did not move a foot to retreat this obviously desperate situation. Boba Fett, still the galaxy's most notorious and best bounty hunter, had not earned his reputation without reason. But even a great Mandalorian warrior like Fett—who had even become Mandalore—could not possibly hope to stand a chance against a hostile force outnumbering and outgunning him by far.

Fett well knew about that, too.

"Come and get me, scarheads," he said more to himself than anybody else—no one could hear him, anyway, neither over comm nor through his sealed helmet. "The old fossil won't make it easy for you ugly scarbutts, I can promise."

The first group of hostiles, a bunch of undifferentiated, primitive-looking scaled Chazrach and two fierce but heavily deformed and tattooed Yuuzhan Vong warriors leading them, were approaching slowly and cautiously towards Fett, not unlike predators circling and weighing their odds against a prey larger than themselves and not encountered before. If not for the serious situation, Fett would have found the advancing enemies, apparently still numb and dizzy from the aftereffects of the nerve killer toxin, hilarious to look at. They rather looked like tumbling undead figures in the dark and misty night, ridiculously reminding of moronic cyborg armies in mediocre horror holodramas. At least for the Chazrachs this statement was quite true, but with the Yuuzhan Vong warriors, it was another story completely: the two of them were looking even scarier in the dark than usual, and they seemed to be more enraged and filled with wrath than any other opponent Fett had ever encountered before. Maybe this was another aftereffect of the toxin, maybe another reason—Boba Fett didn't really want to know it.

What he did know was that such a level of fury made the Vong capable of things one could hardly imagine. And with every single conscious Yuuzhan Vong in such a mood, the Mandalore's odds began to wither, if not vanish altogether.

*Let's hope some of my boys noticed my absence and started to search me. And they better get a move, he thought when the Vong were nearly close enough to engage. I don't want the only thing they can find of me to be my corpse—or maybe even less than that.*

Then the attack came—together with the stand of Mandalore.

From all directions, couffees and amphistaffs were hauled at Boba Fett, who literally betook himself to flight by activating his jetpack. Once catapulted into the air, he saw that he had guessed right: the Chazrach had all headed towards the place where Fett had been mere seconds ago and eventually crashed into each other—some already mortally hit by their comrades' thrown weapons.

Fett watched the heap of Vong-bred creatures growing large enough, before triggering the satchel charge he had buried there earlier.

The charge, filled with extremely efficient flechette projectiles, detonated in two steps. In the first, tiny explosion, the soil atop of the satchel was blown away. The second and proper explosion perforated all the Chazrach in close perimeter with small shards that detonated after piercing the thin vonduun-crab armor.

Boba Fett landed in some distance and watched the caused chaos among the reptoids. Most of the reptilian soldiers were dead or close to dying by their mortal wounds, but much to Fett's regret, the two Yuuzhan Vong warriors had survived, and others were already approaching. This time, there were more Vong than Chazrach, and the former were looking even more wrathful than their comrades, who now had spotted the Mandalorian.

Fett didn't wait for their attack. He sprinted towards them, avoiding the thrown amphistaffs and, once he was close enough, fired a rocket dart right into the first Vong's face. The scarred head exploded, blowing flesh, gore and slimy parts of the Vong's brain all over the place.

And as the decapitated alien's body dropped to the ground, his comrade had now come close enough for melee combat and unleashed a powerful slash with his coufee, aimed at Fett's belly.

Unfortunately for the alien warrior, this body part was very well armored with an extra layer of Mandalorian iron and easily absorbed the dagger-equivalent. Fett used his opponent's confusion and kicked his armored boot into the warrior's right knee. The loud cracking sound indicated that the Vong's knee was broken, but somehow, the warrior could still hold his balance and attempt a second strike with his coufee. Fett avoided this blow by ducking and rolling away, getting up again behind his opponent. He quickly ejected the vibroblade in his right forearm gauntlet and before the alien could turn around, the humming blade connected with an unprotected part on the Vong's back. This time, Fett's opponent could no longer keep himself steady and fell over, thudding on the ground.

Fett finished the Yuuzhan Vong off with a clean headshot from his sidearm. He grimaced as he looked at the blaster pistol in his hand. *I'm getting old*, he thought as he realized that he must have accidentally dropped his EE-3 earlier, but now didn't have the time to look for it. By now, it had become even darker and mistier since, and he could see several tall silhouettes emerging from the thick fog that made it hard to see any further than fifty meters. Fett activated his thermal vision and could see still lots of hostiles standing—and he knew he had to think of a save solution to solve this problem, before they could come close enough for close combat. What, after all, proved not to be too difficult—he was still full enough of ammo, fuel and grenades to take out most of them from distance.

Since Fett could hardly see his enemies, they would have troubles to see him as well. He still had two concussion mines and another flechette satchel charge, all of what he soon planted all around him. That should prevent most of the hostiles from getting near, before the bounty hunter was ready for them.

All he could do now was to wait for the inevitable. He prepared his flamethrower for the upcoming assault and already put his thumb on the trigger for the mines.

From all sides, more and more Yuuzhan Vong were emerging from the fog, with a slow but safe heading on him. This time, the Vong moved took a more tactical approach, taking cover everywhere possible and trying to stay out of Fett's range of fire, which had been shortened with the loss of his EE-3, anyway.

The first bunch had already advanced to one of the concussion mines and Fett was just about to press the trigger, when a sudden fizzing noise breached the air, followed by about a dozen of similar sounds. Fett could only guess what this had been, but as the group of Vong he had targeted was one after another falling inanimately to ground, he knew that those brief sounds had been near-silent projectile bullets from a heavily modified EE-23—a marksman's rifle roughly based on his own EE-3, that was only used by one man Boba knew: Ronan Barec, one of the most promising soldiers under his command.

Fett used his helmet's rangefinder and zoomed to a spot where another tall figure just had emerged from the thick fog. Fett could clearly make out that the figure's features were not those of a Yuuzhan Vong, but bore the distinctive resemblance of a Mandalorian supercommando armor. The figure made another two steps out of the fog, and now Fett could make out the golden and silver markings and the trademark black brassard of Ronan Barec, whose rifle was steadily trained on a target behind Fett, smoke from the last shot still soaring from its barrel.

Obviously realizing that he made too clear a target himself, the elite marksman lay down on the ground behind a small otherworldly plant that made for a makeshift cover. Barec was taking careful aim for other hostiles, each bullet he fired hit dead in the mark.

Too late, Boba Fett realized that he had been distracted and hadn't noticed the other Vong passing his mines, now giving way to a full-scale assault from all sides.

Reacting like a real warrior had to, the old Mandalorian was quick to unleash devastating waves of fire from his gauntlet-mounted flamethrower, while spinning around and spreading the fire in a circle around him. The expanding wall of fire stopped most of his attackers, and Fett deactivated the destructive weapon, sparing the remaining fuel for the following ascension with his jetpack.

He landed a few meters away from the fire and sprinted towards Ronan, who had already come back to his feet and was now giving Boba helpful blasts of curtain fire, this time with salvos of blaster bolts. One could hardly say *curtain fire* when speaking of Ronan Barec, though, since still an amazingly high percentage of the shots hit their targets—not always deadly, as usual with shots of the highly experienced marksman, but at least they hit.

Fett fired a few blind shots over his shoulder before he finally caught up with Ronan, who was already slowly retreating.

“That’s quite an unconventional way to celebrate our victory, sir,” Ronan announced. “We better get back to the camp where you can see how a proper celebration looks like.”

“Thanks for your help, Ronan,” Fett answered, “but it’s in vain. There are too many of them. My comm seems to be jammed and I can’t call for reinforcements. We’ve got to get through this on our own.”

“Aye, sir, my comm’s off as well. Could you make out the number of surviving hostiles?”

“Nope, but they’re far too many. Somehow, the nerve killer toxin didn’t work with every Vong—some, most likely most of them, died, but others survived, as you will hardly fail to see.” He gestured to the corpse-filled battlefield.

“That’s awkward, but now’s not the time to talk,” Ronan said with a pressing tone, pointing with his head towards the advancing line of Chazrach and Yuuzhan Vong warriors.

“You’re right,” Fett admitted. Fierfek, *I’m already beginning to forget to stay on target*, he thought. Nevertheless, he was not old enough to stay distracted for too long, and was thus fast to forget about this thought and to focus on the task at hand. “Ammo status?”

“Three thermal dets, two concussion charges, one flechette nade, five energy packs, one mag of pain bullets and a full fuel tank left. Without Kanos, I wouldn’t have *anything* save for my vibroblade.”

“Good enough. Hand me the charges and the flechette grenade.”

Ronan nodded and handed over the explosives to Fett, who planted the charges in close perimeter around them, while the younger Mandalorian was providing backup. Fett covered each charge with soil and set the time fuses to two minutes each.

It was a cheap method of getting rid of the threat, Fett had to admit, but the two Mandalorians were barely in the position to choose a more honorable way.

Boba Fett had never much liked explosives, but he had never had to fight so many enemies on that open a battlefield before. And for masses of hostiles, weapons of mass destruction were far more useful than the normal light weaponry he was used to.

“Um, sir, a bit faster perhaps?” Ronan interrupted Fett’s reverie. “They’re all over the place.”

“Done,” Boba answered. “Time’s on your HUD.”

Ronan just nodded and seemed to be taking a look into the edge of his visor, but Fett couldn’t tell for sure. What he could see, were the red digits in the corner of his visor, counting down ever-so-soberly.

00:01:52, 00:01:51, 00:01:50, ...

“Airlift at oh-oh-fifteen. And spare the dets for later,” he told Ronan, who was just about hurl a thermal detonator at a group of Chazrach, which had advanced up to a dangerously close perimeter. But then, on Fett’s command, he put the detonator back on his weapon belt and fired a few rocket darts at the line of Yuuzhan Vong slave soldiers.

Back to back, the two Mandalorians took out one hostile after another, but it would not take long before they lost their position. Until then, they had to fight harder than ever, for they had to ensure that they escaped just at the proper time and that as many Vong as possible fell victim to the detonation.

Boba took another look at the countdown:

00:01:17

*Damnit, even time seems to be against us—why am I setting the timer to such a ridiculously long period, anyway?*

Mere milliseconds later, his thoughts were, *Easy, you’ve had worse before, you’re going to manage this.*

He then looked on his fuel readout and saw that there was still a bit left for a last wave of fire against the ever advancing enemies. There was no need for him to spare the rest; it would not be enough for their retreat, and so he could well “waste” it on his foes. Ronan still had a full tank, far enough for both of them, and an airlift wasn’t too difficult, even though it was usually done with two people with jetpacks carrying one without jetpack. In this case, Ronan would have to take the job of two men, but that should not be a problem for a Mandalorian like him.

The fuel in Fett's tank was just enough for a fire-burst of five seconds, but the impact on the outer-galactic warriors was still very satisfying. The flames spread from the first and closest line of Chazrach to the second and third lines behind it, causing quite a bit of chaos and panic among the Yuuzhan Vongs' reptilian slaves.

However, much to Fett's disapproval, it did not stop them totally. For the fraction of a second, the former bounty hunter was distracted with taking a look at the countdown, but that was still enough time for a thrown razor bug to hit a weak, unarmored spot in Fett's left haunch. The impact of the razor bug alone was not strong enough to completely penetrate the Mandalore's thick bodysuit and reach the skin, but unfortunately, a stray thud bug happened to hit the same spot an instance later. The impact of the second insect's detonation was strong enough to drill parts of the razor bug deep into Fett's flesh, and the old bounty hunter nearly screamed when the sharp particles bruised his kidney.

Ronan first noticed that something had happened when he realized that his comrade's shots had halted. He turned around to see what was going on and could just make out the older Mandalorian's body hitting the ground, hard.

Somehow, he could no longer see the Yuuzhan Vong still approaching them, nor the timer continuously counting down. The only thing he could see was Fett's body lying on the ground in front of him—the body of the greatest bounty hunter ever, one of the most admirable and respected—or feared—men in the galaxy, one of the best and most honorable fighters that had ever lived.

Ronan could not accept what he saw. He could not accept that the man he had always looked up to, the man that had resurrected the Mandalorians from the dead, was now lying there in front of him, totally helpless.

Bit by bit, his mind started to come back online, and he realized that his blackout might possibly be the reason for the death of both of them.

The first thing he could make out again were the Chazrach and Yuuzhan Vong who now had approached so close that Ronan could nearly see them in the darkness without the visor's low-light-mode.

The second thing were the red numbers in the edge of his HUD, changing from high counts to lower counts, and that in an alarmingly fast speed.

00:00:23, 00:00:22, 00:00:21

And then, suddenly everything became as clear as never before.

The darkness vanished and he could see everything in a clear, bright light. He could see the faces of every single alien enemy that was fiercely awaiting his next move, he could hear the steps of armored boots in a far distance, he could hear the short beeps coming from three small bumps in the soil around him.

00:00:15, 00:00:14, 00:00:13

And then, he suddenly knew exactly what to do next. He did not even realize himself stepping forward, bowing down and removing the older Mandalorian's jetpack. He did not realize that he was seizing Boba Fett's back and activating his own jetpack.

And, he did not realize that the countdown had already reached zero.

00:00:00

## CHAPTER XIII

'BOOM'

Pieces of shrapnel, soil, flesh and blood were thrown into the air, together with flechette projectiles and the bright explosion of the charges.

Corpses and limbs of Yuuzhan Vong and Chazrach soldiers flew around like rag dolls, crashing dozens of meters away into the ground, those who had survived the explosion dying by the heavy fractures caused by the impact of hitting the surface.

And out of all those things blown up, one object got higher into the air than all others. This 'object' was consisting in two Mandalorian warriors, catapulted into the air by a single jetpack, plus the thrust of the explosion speeding them up.

Ronan Barec could hardly recognize what was going on. He was hit by pieces of shrapnel, but most of them were held off by his armor—he worried more about the already injured Boba Fett than himself. Fett was not as well armored as Ronan, and especially the Mandalore's legs were exposed, so the younger Mandalorian tried to protect those as good as possible.

Ronan had also to manage to get their flight back under control, for they were just flying uncontrollably around, fortunately not towards the ground, but that would come, sooner or later. He adjusted the directional thrusters and slowed the whole flight down slightly, but it was still hard to control against the turbulences.

He did a few more things to get them back on track, and when he finally regained control of the jetpack and stabilized their flight, he was suddenly shocked by a too familiar sound; the low-fuel-alarm of his jetpack. He took a short look into the corner of his visor, and saw the fuel meter lower than he had liked it to be.

This was a real problem, since they were high in the sky now, and the fuel wouldn't last long enough to bring them down without a scratch.

*This is going to be a hard landing,* Ronan thought as tried to maneuver them down.

Not too far away from the place where the explosion had just gone off, Ny'ong Yutt was still lying on the ground. He had not regrouped with his soldiers, since he wanted to stay alive as long as possible, to report to his superiors about the new threat.

But now, as he heard and felt the explosion, he stood up and watched the spectacle. Away from the major explosion, an infidel was flying into the air, powered by an abomination that was spitting more fire towards the ground—the ground covered with Yuuzhan Vong, Chazrach and body parts of either.

The Yuuzhan Vong warrior watched the infidel warrior flying uncontrolled through the turbulences, already hoping that the enemy was dead, as the target finally caught itself and got back on track. Ny'ong Yutt looked closer now, and could see the infidel carrying another armored human on his shoulder.

*They must be the best warriors of all the infidels here,* he thought respectfully, thinking of the dozens of his kind they had already taken out, and that they were still alive. *It shall be an honor for me to kill them.*

Ny'ong Yutt himself was one of the best Yuuzhan Vong warriors ever to be on Dubrillion, and he doubted that those infidels would stand a chance against him. He had seen them fight, but that had always been against low-ranked warriors or even Chazrach slaves—they would be no match for him.

Now that he thought about it, he wondered why he had waited for so long to fight. He doubtlessly would've been able to eliminate them earlier, and would've been able to contact the Warmaster even sooner.

*But the honor of killing them single-handedly is far greater than killing them with backup-troops,* he thought. *The Warmaster will greatly promote me when I present him those infidels' heads.*

He took another look into the sky, at the infidels, and saw that they were slowly gliding down to the ground.

*Can it get better? I'll finish them off once they reached the ground.*

And it could get better: suddenly, the fire out of the first infidel's back stopped spitting, and their falling speed highly increased. They were falling several meters before they hard hit the ground, only a few meters away from him. Ny'ong Yutt could hear one of them screaming, and saw his chance had come.

*Now you're going to pay for what you've done to my kind and to Dubrillion!*

Driven by eternal wrath and vengeance for his fallen comrades, he swiftly sprinted towards the hostiles, his amphistaff ready.

The conscious infidel had already sat up, but the other one, that seemed to be wounded, was still lying on the ground.

The conscious one didn't seem to see him coming, so Ny'ong Yutt just jumped into the air, stroke off with his staff and then smashed the organic weapon down to his enemy's throat.

While doing that, in the corner of his eye, he saw the apparently unconscious infidel pointing with his finger at him.

And in the instant of a second, the other enemy warrior got up, parried his strike, gripped Ny'ong Yutt's right arm and his left shoulder and rammed his knee into the Yuuzhan Vong's belly.

Ny'ong Yutt only smiled about the little pain, and about his enemy's mistake: if the Yuuzhan Vong had been a human, the strike would have worked, but the Yuuzhan Vong warrior was hardly hurt by this strike. He packed his enemy's leg with his left, jerking it near and thus throwing the infidel on his back. His opponent just freed his foot from the Vong's hand and got back onto his feet, extending shining claws from his hands.

Ny'ong Yutt could feel his enemy's will to fight, even though he could not see the infidel's face through the fierce-looking T-shaped helmet. He seized his amphistaff's grip with both hands and waited for his opponent to attack.

But the attack didn't come.

Instead, the other warrior took his helmet off, threw it away and stepped closer, so that Ny'ong Yutt could see his face—the face of true warrior, with scars here and there, and short, curly hair. His armored opponent was as fierce looking as it was possible for a human—and the eyes staring at him with pure anger only aided to that.

“So here we are,” the infidel said in perfect Yuuzhan Vong. “Face to face. Commander versus commander. We're settling this battle in the old way. You win, we're leaving Dubrillion, I win, we're getting Dubrillion.”

The Yuuzhan Vong just nodded, confused. Would he have paid more attention to the infidel's words, he would have realized that either way, Dubrillion, and especially Ny'ong Yutt himself, would be lost.

*And I thought they were honorable warriors...?!*

“Don't you talk, infidel-scum, fight like a real warrior!” Ny'ong Yutt was very enraged by the fact that his opponent was cowardly talking, not fighting, and so he attacked with his amphistaff.

The hostile warrior didn't reply and remained calm, easily parrying the stroke.

“We are the Mandalorians,” the infidel carried on, while parrying several more strikes from Ny'ong Yutt. “We've been waiting for too long, now, and finally are here to let you pay for what you did to our galaxy.”

The still speaking infidel only made the Yuuzhan Vong warrior even angrier. *Why don't you just shut up and fight for your life?!* He drew his coufee and threw it at the armored warrior.

“You want me to shut up?” the Mandalorian, as he called himself, asked after dodging the thrown dagger-like weapon. “You are even more of a race of *di'kutla* scumbags as I had estimated. I thought you would have at least some sort of sense for honor, but apparently, I was wrong. Therefore, I can't do anything but let you die, *hu'tuun*.”

Ny'ong Yutt only laughed and made another strike with his amphistaff, but said nothing.

*This infidel really thinks he's got a chance against me? Hilarious!*

His armored opponent also parried that stroke and then finally went from defensive to offensive. Although he had awaited such an attack, Ny'ong Yutt was totally overthrown by it. In a swift series of kicks, bashes, blows, slaps and more kicks, the infidel warrior knocked him off-balance, relieving him of his weapon and eventually throwing him to the ground. But instead of finishing him off, his foe just stepped back.

“This is your last chance, Vong.”

*VONG?! How does he dare insult me?!!*

Boiling with a rage greater than he had ever experienced, Ny’ong Yutt jumped up, flinging himself on the so-called Mandalorian, grabbing his throat with both strong hands.

The infidel gasped, angst appearing on his face—but only shortly, before a broad smile appeared on his face.

*What the...?! Ny’ong Yutt thought, before finally feeling the strange pain in his stomach.*

As he lightened his grip and looked down, he could see the bayonet of his foe’s rifle stuck in his belly. And now it was to him to angst-ridden. He wanted to fasten his grip again, but then he felt an even stronger pain in his stomach, in addition to hearing a loud noise, seeing a red flash and smelling stink of burning flesh. He could see infidel thrusting him away, and he landed hard on his back.

Lying badly injured on the ground, Ny’ong Yutt once more reconsidered his opinion of those infidel warriors. Driven by his rage, he had totally forgotten what respect of his hostiles he actually had—he had once more underestimated them, just as he had overestimated himself. Unfortunately for him, he would never again have a choice to do things right. He was dead, or at least close to, and he well knew it.

The infidel was just disgustedly looking down on him, his smile having long disappeared and been replaced by an utterly grim expression. The former so talkative ‘Mandalorian’ was silent now, putting his helmet back on, and then going away, shouldering his incapacitated comrade and leaving the Yuuzhan Vong for good.

“Come back, you coward,” the Yuuzhan Vong said in a last wave of anger. “You call us dishonorable, but you yourself leave your enemy bleeding behind—and that is honorable?! Finish me off, you bloody bastard.”

He could just see the infidel warrior continuing walking, not showing any sign of hearing Ny’ong Yutt, and the Yuuzhan Vong warrior finally realized it was over.

*So this is how it ends? The honor of dying in battle is refused for me? Instead, I have to die by mere bleeding?*

Ny’ong Yutt could not stand that. For a Yuuzhan Vong, death by injury was the highest indignity possible. There were better ways to die, and the Yuuzhan Vong warrior already knew how he could die a more honorable death.

He searched to the place where he had thrown his coufee to, found it and crawled there.

“Forgive me, Yun-Yammka,” he said. “I failed you, and all the other gods.”

Then he grabbed the coufee and stabbed it into his heart.

“Are you alright, *Mand’alor*?” Ronan asked his leader on their way to the camp.

“More or less,” Boba Fett, who was hanging over Ronan Barec’s shoulders, said. “Thanks for saving my life, Ronan. I owe you one.”

“No you don’t—not any longer. Without you, I’d be a head shorter now, so thanks, sir.”

Boba Fett just shook his head and remained silent for the rest of their trip.

Having not walked very far, they met Kir Kanos and several Mandalorian soldiers. A few of them went to Ronan to take care of Boba Fett, one of them a medic who immediately examined Fett’s wounds.

“What happened?” Kanos asked, looking over the wounded ex-bounty hunter. “We heard an explosion and moved out to see what was going on.”

“Well, Fett was just fighting dozens, if not hundreds, of Yuuzhan Vong and those slave soldiers, when I came and kicked him out—more or less, for we nearly blew up ourselves,” Ronan answered sarcastically. “But I think that’s all of them—we should send a dropship to scan the battlefield with thermal sensors for any survivors, but I doubt that there are any more Scarheads alive.”

“Oh, guess we’ve missed a lot of action, here,” Ayden Stone piped up. “Glad you made it, anyway.”

“Yeah, me too,” Kanos said and turned to the medical officer. “But now, let’s get back to the base and get a proper treatment for Fett.”

“He’s stable,” the medic answered the unasked question, “but you’re right. We should get him a good care ASAP, or he’ll lose his kidney.”

“Alright,” Ronan said, “let’s get moving, then.”



## CHAPTER XIV

“So this is it, eh?” Ayden Stone asked Ronan Barec en route to the camp. “All crab-boys dead, planet liberated, battle won?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” answered Ronan, “but yes, we’re victorious. We conquered one of the Vong’s main bases in the galaxy, but we’re not quite done with Dubrillion, yet. The Yuuzhan Vong will, sooner or later, return to this planet and attempt to re-capture it. The problem is just that we don’t have enough men to establish a stronghold here and hold it. Thus, we’ve got to prevent the Vong from coming back to Dubrillion by quickly moving on to the next Yuuzhan Vong-occupied planet and keeping them busy.”

“Sounds good enough for me—though it’s not like I’ve got anything to say, in the first place,” the younger Mandalorian kidded.

“You should have, if you ask me,” said Kir Kanos, who had been walking behind them with his men. “You pretty much earned your spurs in this battle, that’s what I say. But this is free for your superiors to decide, anyway.” Before Stone could reply, Kanos turned to Ronan. “You say you don’t have enough men to defend Dubrillion; well, as it happens, I know a certain party who *does*. This way, all of us benefit from it: your men can get some rest and don’t have to move like non-battle-weary fighting nomads from one battle to another, and the Empire -”

“We may not be ‘non-battle-weary,’” Ronan interrupted slightly discomposd, “but that’s just what we—the Mandalorians—are: fighting nomads.”

“Oh... I didn’t want to insult you, it’s just -”

“No offense taken,” Stone said, “but I think Kanos is right: not even we can fight properly without some rest. We don’t have to wait too long before moving on to the next battle, but we don’t have to go freeing Coruscant in this very instant, either.”

“Well, fair enough,” said Ronan, “it’s just... we should leave it to Fett to decide about that.”

“Sure,” Kanos said. “It was just a suggestion.”

No one seemed to be willing to reply, so they silently moved on. The wounded Boba Fett was steadied on a stretcher carried by two medical officers—ahead of them was a small group of Mandalorians who led the way, just as there were Mandalorians behind, as well as Kir Kanos and his men.

Just as Ayden Stone went to talk to some of Kanos’s soldiers, as all of them suddenly looked up into the sky, following a loud buzzing sound, as if a giant insect had risen from the ground.

“*Haar’chak!*” Stone cursed. *That’s not an insect—that’s an osik’la coralskipper.*

Stone wasn’t the only one to curse; everybody was startled by the coralskipper that had just started about a kilometer and a half away, and was now quickly rising into the sky. Some of Kanos’s men and one Mandalorian shot a few rounds at the skip, but the others knew better: it was useless; the Vong ship was out of range.

Stone looked over to Ronan, who seemed to be talking via comm with the men at the camp and *Spar’s Legacy*. However, Stone quickly got a view of the situation: they could not intercept the coralskipper—the *Legacy* had no more fighters on board, the ship itself was too slow to be a threat for the skip, and the Pursuers on ground could not reach the Yuuzhan Vong craft fast enough.

*I thought they were all dead, Stone thought furiously. And even if somebody survived, how could he get a coralskipper?*

“They must’ve had an emergency basement somewhere below the ground that we oversaw,” Kir Kanos suddenly said, and once more Kanos appeared to have read Stone’s mind. “Let’s hope this basement wasn’t assigned with more scarheads.”

*This guy really gives me the creeps, Stone thought, unsettled. First, he appears out of nowhere to come to help us, and then he gets my thoughts clearly without me saying anything.*

The coralskipper had already disappeared from view by the time Ronan finished reporting over his helmet-com and turned back to Stone and Kanos.

Ronan's shake of the head was enough a sign that Ayden Stone had been right: the coralskipper was gone for good. Nothing could stop it any longer; not even Kanos's *Skiprays* could start fast enough to be of any threat to the skip.

"It's not too bad," Ayden Stone broke the silence, try to lighten the mood. "The Vong will -"

"We'll see whether it's good or not when we're fighting the scarheads next time," Ronan interrupted him in harsh tone. Something must have upset him, and it sure wasn't only the coralskipper—and thus, Stone remained silent.

"Move on, Mandalorians," Ronan ordered, and they went on.

Dawn was already breaking as the group arrived at the temporary camp. Boba Fett and Ronan Barec—who had also several minor wounds from shrapnel and thud- and razor-bug hits—were immediately transferred into a medical tent—which was already filled with several casualties—and treated.

After being treated and having a look on Fett's status, Ronan reunited with his men.

Fell Tagren, the Togorian Atross and the Noghri Kharritokh—the leaders of the remaining *Crusaders* and *Lancers*—and some of their soldiers were assembled around a small fire, over which they were roasting nerf steaks and other food Kir Kanos and his men had brought with them, and drinking some traditional Mandalorian *ne'tra gal*, black ale the last ship from the *Legacy* had supplied them with.

As Ronan joined them and Atross handed him a mug of ale, they all clinked glasses and called out with vigorous voices "*Oya! Mhi parji!*". Although all of them obviously knew this wasn't their final victory, they all celebrated as if though was—they were glad the battle was finally over.

After a bit of chatter with his men, Ronan left them for good and went to the end of the camp, only meters away from the battlefield, which was still covered with corpses—corpses of Yuuzhan Vong and their slave warriors, but not of Mandalorians or Kanos's mercenaries.

In their absence, the others—medics and affiliated soldiers—had already returned to the battlefield to recover the dead—or, if their bodies where no longer a whole, only the armor or parts of it—and brought them to small pyres beside the camp, where Ronan now was heading.

There was a small pyre for every single of the deceased, and some of them were still worked on, but overall, it was close to finishing. In front of them, Ronan could make out a total of about forty to fifty corpses (judging by numbers, that figure represented more men than a platoon had), none of them covered with a coat. Only two of the bodies lacked their former owner's heads, the others were in a more or less good condition: deep holes and blood-blotches everywhere in and on their armored and unarmored parts, some with coufees and amphistaffs still stuck in the flesh, others with whole limbs missing. Several Mandalorians stood in front of their former friends, comrades or relatives, taking off their most untouched possessions—like whole armors, helmets, buckles or gauntlets—with them as a memorial, then lifting the deceased on their private pyres and igniting them. The scenery was unique: in the background, you could still see the fires and smoke from the battlefield rising into the sky, and in the foreground, you could see lots of individual fires, releasing the *Manda*—a Mandalorian's soul—into eternity, and all of that in the twilight of dawn.

It was shocking for Ronan to see that so many hadn't made it, just as well as the pure damnability of the blemished bodies: Alaric Thanos, Gaiden Shinji, Evor, Aleya Jatuus, Drystan, Hiram, ... all of them had been good soldiers, but the list was too long.

Most shocking of all was the fact that one of his former best friends in the Mandalorian Protectors, the Devaronian Trynic Jatt, was lying there dead, and no one could be seen taking care of him. Ronan hadn't thought about the losses much, until now; and the loss of a good friend was even harder now. He hadn't spared a thought on his old friend until now, either—when it had happened, Ronan had more important things in mind than mourning the dead, but now, it hit him harder than he had expected. It wasn't the first time he had ever lost a friend—his former job as a police special operative had been dangerous, and had cost some of his comrades—some close to him, others not—their lives. He couldn't have blamed himself for their deaths back then, because he had been a simple soldier and not a leader, but now that he was responsible for so many, the loss weighed a lot harder.

He went over to the Devaronian's corpse and looked for something that could be taken as a memorial. The black armor was pierced by stabs from amphistaff, and thus didn't make a good

piece. Ronan would've liked to take the helmet, but as it wasn't there; the artistic buckle with an intricate crest had to suffice. He removed his helmet, put it on the ground beside his old friend, took the buckle into his both hands and knelt down to recite a traditional Mandalorian poem, one that some might define as a prayer. Once finished, he put the buckle into one of his belt cases, put his helmet back on and carried Trynic Jatt's body onto the pile in front of him. Using the last fuel from his flamethrower, he ignited the pyre and stepped back, watching in dolefulness.

"It's a mess, isn't it?" a familiar voice sounded from behind him.

For once, Ronan's battle-experienced instinct didn't make him turn around and aim at the 'stranger': he just turned around slowly and saw a limping Boba Fett advancing to him.

"*Mand'alor*... I didn't expect you to be back on your feet so soon again, sir," he said slightly surprised.

"It takes more than that to take out an old fossil like me *that* easily. Thanks for your concern, anyway," the older chuckled. It wasn't usual for Boba Fett to tell jokes. He was definitely trying to lighten Ronan's mood, he thought, and it even seemed to be working. A little.

"You're right, it *is* a mess. Most of the non-supercommando warriors weren't meant to see the day, but also too many of the supercommandos. We've got to stress the trainings for new recruits, and only take the best into battles of this scale. A near 40-percent loss can't happen again, or we're soon history, once more. We were lucky this time, but the Yuuzhan Vong won't hesitate and let themselves be defeated so easily, again."

"Yes, and that's why we have to push on as quickly as possible. Kir Kanos came to me a short while ago, offering the Empire's help in holding Dubrillion, and I accepted. We'll wait until they arrive, thus giving our men their required rest, and then continue with hitting them there, where they don't expect it. As long as we've got the element of surprise, we need to use it."

Ronan just nodded.

He turned back to the pile where he had placed the Devaronian. The wood was still burning, but the corpse had already vanished to ash. Once the fire had burned out, the ashes would be scattered by the wind over the whole battlefield, thus giving the Mandalorian the last honor.

"We should leave the dead for good, *Ron'ika*, and get back to the living. Our purpose is not finished, yet."

## EPILOGUE

“A low warrior, a battle tactician of Domain Lian called Tzekon Lian, wants to speak with you, Warmaster,” a guard near the organic portal announced. “He says he’s the only survivor from Dubrillion.”

“Dubrillion,” Nas Choka, the Warmaster of the Yuuzhan Vong, said in a sharp tone. It was not clear for others whether this was a question, an exclamation or just a spoken thought. For Nas Choka, it was all three.

*This can only mean bad news, he thought.*

“Bring him in,” he ordered.

Following the Warmaster’s orders, the guard went through the portal and returned with a nearly unscarred young warrior, who, however, didn’t seem to care on either his low rank or age—his eccentric, taut walk and his mimic showed otherwise; it showed determination, and some sort of pride, what seemed completely illogical to Nas Choka.

*Who does he think he is?! My successor? He can hope to get out of this meeting alive!*

Tzekon Lian was just wise enough to kneel down before the Warmaster and lower his head—otherwise, he would have been liquidated at once.

“Speak,” Nas Choka ordered harshly.

“I bring worst news from Dubrillion, Warmaster. Our base has fallen.”

“And how, by the gods, could that have happened?!”

“Two days ago, a small force of infidels arrived at Dubrillion. Not suspecting a threat from this small group of unbelievers, we sent a platoon of our best fighters to investigate their, by a shower of meteorites concealed arrival, but none of them returned. Only an hour later, two of our strongholds were wrecked, hundreds of fellow warriors were dead, and the infidels were still nearly unharmed. After them destroying our plants for coralskippers and eliminating the main base, we were finally able to push them back a bit, before they got reinforcements and took out other thousands of Chazrach and Yuuzhan Vong. We were by far outnumbering them, but in the end, nearly every single Yuuzhan Vong on the planet was dead, due to an airborne attack and soldiers spitting fire everywhere; apart from a few like me, who had been stationed in a hidden outpost. From there, we were analyzing the battle, at least before the whole company there decided to move out and take hold of the infidels, thinking they had an advantage after analyzing the infidels—but, however, they miserably failed, although still having twice as many troops as the infidels. Only a handful of warriors, including me, remained at the outpost. We had one coralskipper there, for emergency, and so we decided to send one of us to report to the Yuuzhan Vong fleet what had happened there: me. The others are probably dead, already, so I am the only survivor from this battle.”

Until now, Nas Choka had listened silently, having decided to let the young warrior speak his last words. But with more and more Tzekon Lian reported, the Warmaster’s fury had risen more and more. Deciding against his original plan of killing his inferior right now, he decided to let him live at least a little longer, and said enraged:

“Fett!” he screamed in a guttural voice. “It can only be him and the Mandalorians. Boba Fett and his little private army. Unlike Nom Anor’s report about them had stated, this was to be expected. They proved to be reliable allies in the last few years, but now they prove to be fierce and serious enemies. They victoriously defended their capital planet against us, hitting us hard and unexpected.” Until now, he had been talking more to himself than his inferior, but now he turned back to Tzekon Lian. “But he doesn’t cease to impress. A small force of his warriors taking out a full of more than ten-thousand troops on one of our main forts in this galaxy?! Are you insane?! Not even *Jeedai* could have accomplished something like *that!* But I should’ve known it better. Fett isn’t to be taken lightly.”

“Those Mandalorians, as you call them,” Tzekon Lian said cautiously, trying to avoid the Warmaster’s wrath, “were fighting better than any we have ever seen—their skills even outshine many *Jeedai*, from what we could survey.”

"*I know that!*" Nas Choka was screaming again. The defeat at the Battle of Mandalore was still outraging him. But he forced himself to calm down—slightly. "What was their strength?" Being in rage was not useful in such a situation—he had to think clear and rational, not driven by emotion, now.

"Not more than 150 warriors, Warmaster."

"Such a small force?! In the years serving us they should've had enough time to build a way bigger army. Let's just hope they don't ally with the *Jeedai*, or they'll pose an even greater threat."

"In addition to the information provided to me by other warriors who had been working together with them, I was able to gather some on their past. They, and especially Fett, seem to have a grudge against the *Jeedai*, so that should not be a threat. And, if what my informants are right, it could've been this very race of warriors, the ancient, war-loving Mandalorians, that had prevented us from invading this galaxy earlier. It is only a legend, but more than four-thousand years ago, an infidel abomination had driven one of our first *yorik-strohna* out of this galaxy. And, on Dubrillion, an abomination quite similar to that described in the legend, has also wreaked havoc among our lines."

"Old news, inferior. And I have heard of that 'legend'," Nas Choka answered, more contemplative than enraged, now. "Boba Fett and an even tinier crew of his infidel soldiers have just a day prior to the defeat at Dubrillion attacked on of our patrol frigates in the Null sector. We found the *Unfailing Punishment* driving abandoned in space, and as we investigated it, we found every single Yuuzhan Vong on the ship dead, most of them without their scalps—and latter is definitely a sign of Mandalorians involved. We have been observing the Mandalorians as closely as possible, but it seems as though they are using utterly different tactics against us than against other infidels."

A thought struck him and he called one of the guards: "Bring Commander Rulaak Tsun to me."

"Warmaster," Tzekon Lian spoke up again, after the guard had left the room, "if I might have a word."

"Speak!"

"I think if I and possible survivors from the Battle of Mandalore work together, we could analyze the Mandalorians' tactics and set off the required countermeasures to fight them. We should also train divisions specialized on struggles against those infidels."

"Do you really think, shamed being," Nas Choka said, furious again, "that I haven't thought of that before?! Commander Rulaak Tsun was a lieutenant at the Battle of Mandalore and one of the few survivors, and I promoted him in order to do said thing, train warriors with tactics to counter the Mandalorians."

"I beg your pardon, then, grea-," Tzekon Lian started to say, but was interrupted by the opening door-membrane, with the guard and a tall Yuuzhan Vong warrior stepping in, who seemed to have far too less scars and implants for his high rank—nevertheless, he already wore the command cloak, connected via fresh claw-implants into his shoulder, and he also had no longer an amphistaff coiled up his arm, but a *tsaisi*, the "Baton of Rank".

"Warmaster," Rulaak Tsun said and knelt down in front of Nas Choka, next to Tzekon Lian.

"What is your demand?"

"The Mandalorians have struck again, crushed our forces on Dubrillion. The tactician Tzekon Lian here was the last survivor and could escape to bring the bad news. I am just about to promote him to the rank of a subaltern, with special status as an advisor and tactician for your division, providing vital intel on the Mandalorians' tactics on Dubrillion."

"As you demand, Great Warmaster."

"Now, Tzekon Lian, I therefore promote you to the rank of a subaltern. Do not even dare to fail me."

Tzekon Lian, still kneeling, didn't show any emotion. He seemed not at all to be surprised about his promotion, as if he had just foreseen that.

"Now leave," Nas Choka ordered the new subaltern, who hastily exited the room.

"Keep an eye on him." He now spoke to the commander again. "Either he proves to be competent, or just the opposite, and will be a threat to our own good."

"As you wish, warmaster."

Also dismissing the commander, Nas Choka rose from his throne, heading to the transparent membrane of his war room in the main headquarter of the Yuuzhan Vong on Yuuzhan'Tar.

The terraforming of the planet was still in progress, and here and there, you could still see remains of abominations, but overall, the planet was flooding with color and flora, looking far different from the dull grey that had dominated its appearance before the terraforming.

While looking at the yellow sunset, Nas Choka thought about what he had just learned in the past few minutes.

*The Mandalorians are posing to be a far greater threat than formerly estimated. But no matter how good they may fight, they do not stand against the Will of the Gods. Those infidel warriors are just another tiny insect on the body of a strong Yuuzhan Vong warrior that only waits to be scrunched,* the Warmaster thought. *Maybe, it's an insect with a strongly hurting sting that can make his limbs go numb, but it's still no threat to the overall-condition of the warrior.*

What Nas Choka didn't think of, however, was that there were also insects in this galaxy with deadly toxins that *did* affect the overall-condition of a Yuuzhan Vong, for it was not the sting that was the danger, but the toxin that was spread from the sting.

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