



THE NEW JEDI ORDER

*RAGE OF THE
SHADOW WARRIORS*

RUNNER

By Corran Fett

A plethora of rain is pouring down my visor while I'm running as if a loose reek was after me, making it hard for me to see where I'm actually heading to. That field of man-tall stems of some Yuuzhan Vong-bred type of crop does not quite aid to that, either.

But it's not as if I actually need to see what's *ahead* of me, anyway. Most of the time, I'm turning my head to see what's *behind* me.

And behind me is a relentless horde of enraged Yuuzhan Vong, throwing thud and razor bugs, coufees and even their amphistaffs after me. Much to my well-fare, most of them are either badly-aimed because of the heavy wind and rain, or are absorbed by the dense crops. I, too, am trying to get a shot at my chasers every now and then, but I can't take the time to aim, run and watch my steps simultaneously, so only few shots hit the aliens chasing me down.

I've been running like that for nearly half an hour, now, and it's getting me quite out of breath—despite my intensive training for the last seven years. Also, I'm not so lucky that all of the thrown Vong weapons miss me—one amphistaff got so close that it was able to spit some acid toxin on my back. The venom went right through my ever-so-thoroughly-crafted armor plates and corroded deep into my flesh.

Must... get... outta here! NOW!

My ship had crashed on this Force-forsaken planet, and regarding the recent luck I had, there is probably no way to get off this rock at all. Apart from manning some *vongyc* craft, of course—something I wouldn't even dream to be capable of.

Exhausted as I am, I start to rethink my situation. I'll probably be dead soon, anyway, so why carry on running? I could just as well turn on my heels and start to fight those *shabla* scarbutts.

But just as I'm about to stop to turn around and fight them, another thought comes into my mind. I haven't come here without a purpose, but in the last half hour, I must have forgotten what that purpose was: I have come here to gather as much intel on the Yuuzhan Vong fortifications on this planet, for the upcoming invasion. After the crash, everything had been messed up, and I could just about do my job and get out of there—or rather 'try to get of there', for it hasn't worked out, not so far. Still, I see no way to complete my mission here. Without any possibility of leaving this planet, I can hardly do anything that might be considered 'rational', now. And although this intel I gathered here is essential for our operation, my superiors can still send someone else to do the job again.

And instead of dying by a stab in the back, I decide to make one last stand and take as many of those Vongese with me as possible.

Having stopped running, I swiftly turn around and aim at the first Yuuzhan Vong that comes into view, as calmly as possible. Knowing I only got a few shots before my chasers are so close that the blaster rifle is no longer of good use, I am quick to pull the trigger. I don't even hesitate to see the blast if the blast hits or not, my aim already on the next target. After proceeding likewise with four more Vong, my blaster fails me and I need to reload. While doing so, I'm checking how many of the shots hit: only one of the targets is down, one slightly injured, with the others as vital and rabid as ever, although the volume of their cussing has significantly increased.

"*Fierfek!*" I curse aloud, blaming the heavy weather for my bad shots. It's getting harder to see through the raindrop-blotched visor of my helmet by the minute, and I start to wonder why it never occurred to anyone to add something like a screen-wiper to the visor, or anything else to keep the water off it.

As I'm putting a new energy-cell into the magazine, I realize that I should've better used the time to draw my sword and prepare for close combat, but now, it's already too late to do so.

Screaming out some ghastly, inaudible cries of rage, two Yuuzhan Vong attack me simultaneously—one with an amphistaff and the other with a coufee, both aiming for vulnerable spots in my body armor.

Deciding against parrying the strokes with my armored gauntlets, I attempt to perform a backflip. Partially, I succeed with kicking my right foot into the head of the taller Vong, but then my other foot is caught by the head of the whip-like amphistaff, and I'm dropping to the ground like an incapacitated bantha, and all air is thrust out of my lungs.

That's not how I planned this to be...

I have just enough power to roll to my left, before another amphistaff jabs into the soil, right where my head has been milliseconds ago.

Uh-oh... that was too close.

Now that I'm able to breathe again, I perform a sudden roll forward, drawing my in the motion. As I come to a crouch again, I send the blade slicing through the knees of the Vong to my right.

Being just about in my element with my saber drawn, I perform a few more or less elegant moves and bring the scarheads in a small radius to the ground.

It is the first time that I'm using my self-forged scimitar out of Mandalorian iron against the Yuuzhan Vong, and I'm surprised how much the dozens of folding- and nano-sharpening procedures affect to the smooth flow and cutting quality of the curved traditional *beskad*. It's not driven by a vibro-emitter, but I got the impression it's still cutting way better through Vong crab armor than any vibroblade I've ever used before. But still, this won't make me invincible against the Vong—it just keeps me alive a *little* longer.

And just about now a razor bug hits me directly under the left shoulder-plate, slicing right through it. It doesn't come out on the other side, staying stuck deep in the flesh—and all of that with a high amount of dark crimson blood spattering out of the wound, only to be washed away again by the heavy rain.

The Vong, of course, use my distraction to take on me with more thrown bugs and amphistaff stabs, rapidly multiplying my wounds. Fortunately, all of them are more or less minor, so I can get up again and parry most strokes single-handedly with my blade.

I need to get out of here! It's getting *really* urgent.

After tossing a thermal-detonator set on fifteen seconds into the turmoil, I start running again—what proves not to be so easy any more, for those 'minor hits' are not as minor as I was lead to believe. Completely losing my former elegance and style, I slice, push, stab, roll and sprint my way out of the bulk, having trouble to remain on my feet. I manage to breach the barrier of scarred *vongyc* warriors just in time for not to be caught by the main explosion.

Still, the detonation throws me off my feet, and I can still feel all too much of the heat—without my set of Mandalorian armor, I'd be a roasted heap of scarred and cauterized flesh right now, like all the flattened scarheads around me.

Just as I'm making slow progress to get on my feet again, the comm pipes up:

"... Altair Jiriad ... r status? Hang on, we ... out of here..." That's all I can understand, the rest is only a lot of inaudible noise.

I want to respond, but evidently it's my comm that's malfunctioning, not the connection.

Alright. The caller knew my name, and he's probably about to give me a lift off this vile chunk of a planet. But still, I couldn't get an ETA or a specific extraction point. He won't have a lot of time to spend for searching for me, and I can't contact him. So, there's help out there, but it's most likely of no use, then.

Udesii, utreekov, *snap out of it. You're not getting left behind.*

Fortunately, my upcoming little schizophrenic argument is aborted by the odd buzz of another razor bug grazing my helmet, close enough to paralyze my helmet circuits, giving me that weird blue display of ion-emission, just as if an EMP-nade just hit me.

That little living, Vong-bread weapon totally stunned me—literally: on the one hand, there is that amazingly blue light-spectacle, on the other hand, there is that paralyzing feeling that's forcing me to jerk off my helmet as fast as possible. And as I finally get loose of the helmet that's already narrowing and blurring my view—thanks to that *ori'jate* rain—the bucket happens to find purchase in the ugly face of another warrior who was about to stab me to death with his coufee. In a way, this makes me even more grateful for the razor bug disabling my helmet, and for a second, a slight smirk appears on my face. And after all, I'm still seeing everything fuzzy and am wobbling around like a drunk spice-junky in a gutter somewhere on the lower levels of Nar Shaddaa.

Udesii, verd. *Recollect yourself, or you will die.* Yep, that's my sanity piping up. It tends to be useful every now and then.

Taking this as a good advice, I focus, and the fuzziness and disorientation starts to vanish. I try to get an overview of the situation: I can see an enormous black crate with burned Yuuzhan Vong, parts of Yuuzhan Vong and partially glimmering crop-stems everywhere, and the wind is blowing a reek like a mix of garbage dump, crematorium and morgue over to me. The fire is already extinguished by that insanely pouring rain, which has by now rendered my long ponytailed

dreadlocks soaking wet and is turning the crate into a swampy pool of mud, what forces the dozens of Vong that are still around to take another path to get to me.

With my mind now fully operational again, I consider a way to make the best of the situation. Both sanity and instinct say: go for a run!

Not spending too much time pondering about that, I do so and start to run as fast as my wounds allow. Taking a quick first look at my shoulder, I start to realize how bad it is. Also, with a closer look on it, I eventually feel the incredible pain spreading from there—somewhat must've prevented me from feeling it earlier, and maybe I should've waited with an examination until the time allowed it, because now, it slows me even more down.

I can't stand that much longer, but I can't fight, either, so I must find some cover where I'm safe for at least a short while. However, this means running even faster, since I've got to outrun my followers first, to distract them.

I'm doubling my speed, but not one of the Yuuzhan Vong appears to be falling back.

New plan: a trap or a diversion?

'Go through the gear you have at your disposal and make the best of it.' *Heh, that's what Cadoc used to tell everyone when it came to improvisation. Alright, let's do it.*

My saber and the blaster rifle won't be of any help for laying a trap. Grenades? Three thermal detonators left. Fibercord whip with grappling device? Could be useful, though I'll need trees for that.

Damnit. If I still had my helmet, I could set one det on low energy, so that it could still be deflected by my armor, but from the distance it would look like I'm blasted. Rangir! I'll have to find a way to do it manually, it's my only chance of getting out of here. Still needing some trees, though.

As I'm looking ahead of me, over the field, a broad smile appears on my face.

Wayii! Today's my lucky day! I should've played sabacc and not be running for my life on some vile no-name planet.

Only a few dozen meters ahead of me is a small forest that is just excellent for my needs. I'm picking two thermal detonators from my weapon belt, setting the first on low energy and 15 seconds, the second one on high energy and 5 seconds.

I turn around, seeing lots of Vong only a few dozen meters away, and just as I'm lifting my right arm with my thumb already on the trigger, a hurled coufee breaches the air and slices through my right hand in the same instance as I'm pushing the thumb through. I initially intended to toss the high-energy det on my enemies and use the other one on me, but with the dagger-like weapon in my hand, I can't toss anything at all, and the detonator falls to the ground.

Cursing worse than ever before, I'm turning back to the forest and start a sprint like I've never performed before. As the countdown clock in my head reaches four seconds, I jump. The shockwave of the explosion speeds me up and expands my flight by about twenty meters. I'm feeling an incredible heat rising up my legs and I land on my chest, hard. Although being utterly out of breath again, I can just about turn around and grab my legs on the wet ground, thus killing the fire they caught, and then turn around again, so that the rain can cool down my flash burns.

Lying near-unconscious on the ground for quite a while, I try to tell myself the get up again, but I can't.

I can't. I realize that this must be the end. I can feel footsteps of several Yuuzhan Vong as they assemble in a circle around me.

I can't. I failed. I am not worthy to be a Mandalorian.

'You are not. At least turn around to see your murderers. You wouldn't be worthy to be a Son of Mandalore if you let yourself get killed like that, lying on your chest, exposing your back to your attackers,' somebody—or is it me?—seems to be telling me.

Whoever it is, it seems to be a fair deal. I'm dead, anyway, so there shouldn't be a problem with turning around and facing my murderers.

About a dozen Yuuzhan Vong with their ugly, scarred and yet so human-like faces are staring down at me, and just as many amphistaffs are hovering mere centimeters over my throat.

I am dead. I failed. I didn't do as I was ordered. Our whole operation will be severely compromised, now.

But why don't they kill me? I'm thinking as seconds, if not minutes, passed by. The Vong aren't doing anything at all. They are just standing there, staring down at me.

They wouldn't...?! Or would they?! These hu'tuune are going to keep me alive and sacrifice me to their di'kutla gods!

I'm cautiously lifting my arms, but the Vong are still not reacting. I take a look at my right hand. It looks awful, and the coufee is still stuck in it.

I'd rather kill myself than being sacrificed to their so-called 'gods'!

I grab the Vong-bred dagger's hilt with my left hand, and watch the reaction of the Vong.

PAGE | 5 Nothing, yet.

Alright. You can do this. This is an honorable death. Do it for the glory of the great Mandalore.

But somehow, I can't force myself to do this. I just can't.

K'atini, hu'tuun! Do it!

"No!" a voice from somewhere behind me is shouting. "*Ke'pare!*"

What's this? My sanity, again?! Anyway, I'll do it, and I'll do it NOW!

I finally can finally get myself to pull the coufee out of my hand, and I'm already striking out with my left, aiming at my throat.

One last time, I study the reaction of the Vong. And it's unlike anything I would've expected: they are no longer staring down at me, they are no longer aiming their organic staffs at me. They are actually looking in agony and fear at something behind me!

I'm already wondering what it is that they are seeing, but then I see a red light and hear the emission of several blaster rifles, followed by the screams and display of my surrounding Yuuzhan Vong falling down on the ground, one after another.

However, one of them—the one with the most scars, deformations and tattoos, probably their leader—isn't paralyzed by what's happening here, and is striking out his amphistaff to stab me into my throat. With all my remaining force, I roll up and to the left, ramming the coufee into the hollow of his knee.

It's funny for me that mere seconds ago, I was just attempting to do the same as the Vong leader: stab into my throat.

I bet that is called 'irony of fate', I think, smiling.

I now can make out a Kuati gunship, used by my fellow Mandalorians, hovering in front of the forest, with warriors in the troop hold firing at targets behind me.

I can also see two Mandalorians, both with specific medic signs, approaching me with a stretcher.

"*Mar'e*", I say as they are putting me on the stretcher. "At last!"

"Sorry 'bout the delay, had some troubles with local coralskipper squadrons," one of them replies, as they are lifting the stretcher into the gunship. "Both of our sister-ships are down. I hope you're worth the efforts."

Taking one last look at that exotic, and now with corpses filled field of battle, at that rainy, unappealing planet I don't even know the name of, I say:

"Me too, *ner vod*, me too."

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