



THE NEW JEDI ORDER

*RAGE OF THE
SHADOW WARRIORS*

**WHEN FEW STOOD
AGAINST MANY**

by David 'Corran Fett' H.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

With the Mandalorians:

Atross; Mandalorian commando, explosives expert (male Togorian)
Ronan Barec; Mandalorian commando, former special forces sniper (male human)
Goran Beviin; Mandalorian commando and bounty hunter (male human)*
Altair Jiriad; Mandalorian commando and armorsmith (male Kiffar)
Skira Jiriad; Mandalorian soldier, Altair's son (male human)
Sareth Karr; Mandalorian farmer, Ara's husband, (male human)
Kharritokh of clan Bakh'tor; Mandalorian commando, martial arts master (male Noghri)
Ara Norvath; Mandalorian commando and mercenary (female human)
Ayden Stone; Mandalorian commando, former professional bolo-ball player (male human)
Gladus Tite; Mandalorian commando, former outlaw, criminal and assassin (male human)
Ram Zerimar; Mandalorian commando sniper (male human)*

With the Yuuzhan Vong:

Tzekon Lian; subaltern (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Rulaak Tsun; commander (male Yuuzhan Vong)

Others:

Macos Fenix; bounty hunter (male human)
Salem Rios; lieutenant, Galactic Alliance Intelligence (male Feorin)

(save for Goran Beviin and Ram Zerimar, both official EU characters, all characters are Original Characters created by me, the author)*

PROLOGUE

This can't be happening.

The Twi'lek found himself in the most uncomfortable situation he had ever been in, and the muzzle of a heavy blaster pistol aimed at his forehead didn't quite aid to feeling any better.

"If there's one thing that disgusts me more than the *vongese* themselves," said the fierce woman holding the blaster, "then it's scum like *you*."

His lekku were trembling heavily and his face was sappy with sweat, but he still managed to hold his own in the conversation—he used to be a skilled ambassador, after all.

"That's ironic, you know," he countered, "coming from a member of a group of gun-for-hires who haven't too long ago been doing the dirty work for your loathed *vongese*, as you call them."

Even before finishing talking, the Twi'lek realized that it hadn't been such a good idea to insult the furious woman, and she made him pay for that.

"*Nar'sheb, hut'uun*. Don't push your luck, scumbag."

The Twi'lek could've never imagined that the last sound to hear in his life would be a rather tranquil, even harmonic one—but he did realize that the cold metallic dart piercing his carotid was not in the least harmonic as he faded into netherworld.

Half an hour before...

Ara Norvath immediately realized something was terribly wrong as the spaceliner jerkily dropped out of hyperspace. This sense only increased as the calm voice of one of the ship's stewardesses appeared on the comm-speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are currently experiencing technical problems with the hyperspace engines but this matter should be solved within an hour. Please remain calm and stay on your seats." The stewardess well managed to conceal the nervousness in her voice, but not well enough for Ara not to notice. "We apologize for the delay and we are offering free fresh drinks for everyone. Please be patient, and if you have any questions feel free to ask our staff."

Free drinks to keep the passengers unsuspecting? Ara thought, eyeing the other passengers who were hysterically in whispered conversation. *Now that's new.*

The Mandalorian woman wore a loose tunic and wide trousers well concealing the armor and gear she wore beneath them. Her helmet and weapons were in a bag in the cargo bay, but she wasn't unarmed—she still had a small combat knife and her gauntlets, and she was certain that both would be needed, soon.

Taking a spaceliner these days wasn't exactly the safest way to travel, even despite the fact that *Sundance*, an old Leonore C-3 passenger liner, had been modified with automatic quad-laser-turrets and turbolaser batteries.

Once more, Ara regretted having taken a civil craft from Denon to Contruum, instead of taking a ride with the starfighter of a befriended bounty hunter—no, Ara hadn't wanted to cause her friend any more troubles, after all he'd done for her. But that was another issue, and she had to deal with her decision.

She needed to find out what had hauled the ship out of hyperspace—hoping it weren't the Yuuzhan Vong—so she unstrapped herself, stood up and went to the corridor. She didn't get far before a Duros steward noticed her.

"Excuse me, madam," he said nervously, "but could you remain on your seat, please?"

"I can't," said Ara. "I'm not feeling well—I need to use the 'freshers.'"

"I—Of course, madam."

The Duros was even more irritable now, as if he knew she was lying. But, for her sake, he didn't ask any more questions, so she advanced through the corridor, and, well aware of the cautious eyes of the alien steward on her, she entered the ladies' refreshers.

In the cabin, she considered what to do next. If it was the Yuuzhan Vong who had pulled them out of hyperspace, then it could either be a lone dovin-basal mine—these days, thousands of them were still on often-used hyperspace routes—without any other Yuuzhan Vong craft in proximity, or

it was a mine together with a small force of Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers and transporters, only waiting to pitch into new stranded starships. If former, *Sundance's* crew had only to repair the hyperspace engine and hope they managed to escape before any Vong arrived. If latter, the spaceliner probably would've already started firing on the Vong, and the fact they hadn't made the first possibility the more plausible.

Ara knew there was a third option, though—one that she bristled to imagine it was the most probable. Rumors said that the Vong—and the usual pirates, but they had been doing this all the time, also before the invasion—weren't the only ones ambushing cargo-, refugee- and passenger transports; there were also the idiots who still believed the Vong would spare them when they allied with them: the Peace Brigade. And Ara had this uncomfortable feeling that it was this very scattered group of immoral traitors to the whole galaxy that was about to raid *Sundance* now—the over 1300 beings on the ship had to appear to be a good present to the Vong, after all.

Trying to clear her mind, Ara held her head under the refresher and let algid water pour down her face. She had, after all, not completely been lying to the Duros—she really wasn't in best health, although she had no idea why.

Then she halted, the water still flowing out of the faucet, as she heard and felt the dumb sound and rumble of another ship docking to the only airlock hatch of the spaceliner.

Here we go, Ara thought. Wonder what took 'em so long...

Grabbing her vibroblade, she leaned against the bulkhead and unlocked the door, but didn't open it. Going through a mental list of measures to take in such a situation, she decided it was best to wait—running out of the cabin and engage the enemy head over heels would only compromise her current advantage of a safe position; not to say she'd be dead before she could even touch one of them.

Whoever they are, that is...

It didn't take too long before the voice of the stewardess reappeared on the comm, no longer calm but hysterical and nervous now. She announced that the ship was being boarded, there were not enough combat-trained crewmembers to handle this and using to the escape pods was useless—thus implying every soul on this ship was doomed.

That was when the panic started, although not a single one of the raiders had yet showed up, and Ara could hear desperate shouts, cries and various alien expressions, along with the slight tremors of people stampeding senselessly through the corridors, not caring about anyone but themselves. Though, Ara was certain not everyone was going mad—there had to be some who did the exact difference: nothing. They probably just sat on their seats, stunned and experiencing a total blackout.

Ara didn't dare open the door just yet, to see what was going on on board and try to calm things down, but there was a lot of anger coming up on her, either way—for both the attackers and the crew of *Sundance*. Condemning the lives of over 1300 people just like that was an inhuman act. Unfortunately, the “need” to perform acts like this had inconveniently increased since the beginning of the Yuuzhan Vong invasion.

A sudden knock at the door, followed by someone cursing, brought her back from her thoughts to here-and-now.

“Open the door, whoever's in there!” a voice from outside called harshly—it didn't sound like one of the passengers.

It's already open, di'kut, she thought, pushed the button to open the door, reached out as it opened and put the human into a tight stranglehold, her vibroblade millimeters from his throat, and closed the door again.

“Woah,” the apparently unarmed man said, with honest shock and surprise on his dark-complected face. “Easy... you might—”

“Don't push it, *hut'uun,*” Ara said grimly. “Tell me any reason not to ruin your fancy suit with some ugly red blotches.”

The man sounded more than uneasy now, after realizing the fierce woman *was* serious, after all. “Well, for starters, there's, um, nothing I can think of, apart from the fact that my short career as a bounty hunter's come to an end, at last. Still, before I cease to be, I'd like to hear what scumbag didn't have the guts to take on me personally and sent another hunter instead.”

That answer caught Ara more than off-guard, as well as the other's slightly sarcastic tone. "Bounty hunter? What in the Emperor's Black Heart are you talking about? You're not from the Peace Brigade?"

It was to the man to be surprised now. "What?! You think I'm one of those Vong-glorifying bastards?! What is this, some kind of joke show? You could start releasing me already...."

Take that as a no. He might be saying the truth—after all, what should an unarmed Peace Brigader in finest business-suit do here, anyway? And if he was, he wouldn't try to deceive me 'cause his lads are right around the corner. But trust's good, control's better, so I better keep one or two eyes on him—just in case.

"False move, you're dead," she said, loosening the grip. "Understood?"

"I guess so," the man said, relieved. "Macos Fenix, by the way, would-be-notorious bounty hunter."

Before Ara could answer anything—not that she had intended to—the sound of a blaster clanged outside the cabin, followed by even more screams.

"Everyone who hasn't got his mouth shut by now," a guttural nonhuman voice shouted—maybe Devaronian or Twi'lek, Ara thought, "will have it shot by me."

That was, of course, and idle threat—the Brigade would need every single prisoner alive, so their blasters were probably set on stun.

However, it worked, and silence filled the scene, only to be broken again by the Brigader's voice.

"We bring you a gift. A gift that none of you can defy. You are among the few chosen ones to take the journey of the true path...."

"Yeah, yeah," Fenix said impatiently. "I'll show you 'true path', son of a murglak." He looked at Ara, who was tinkering with her vibroblade. "It doesn't happen you've got another one of those neat knives, does it?"

"You can have mine. I don't need it," she added as she noticed Fenix's confused gaze. "Wait for my mark—we don't know their numbers, so we need to take 'em quietly, and unseen."

"You know, I usually don't take orders, but you look like you know what you're saying, so I'll make an exception."

"I'm *flattered*," said Ara, rolling her eyes. "Now shut it."

She could well need her helmet and especially its thermal vision now, because miscalculating the figure of hostiles now might end her day sooner than she'd like it to. Nevertheless, she made an assumption of about two to three dozen Peace Brigaders on *Sundance*, take or leave a handful, and probably another handful still on their ship. These figures would make sense to Ara, did she ever plan to kidnap 1300 people on a ship like that, but Ara was a professional—and what she heard about the Peace Brigade stated *they* were not exactly professionals. But she decided to stick with her assumption, just in case.

No matter how many hostiles where on the ship, it was totally vital to be cautious and stealthy, to catch them off guard and prevent this from becoming a devastating gunfight with the odds against Ara and her new companion Fenix.

Finally deciding to do something, she pressed her ear against the door and listened closely. Apart from the still boasting Brigader, she could hear footsteps approaching. Turning her head to face the alerted bounty hunter, she gave him a sign to stand down and wait. As the footsteps passed by, she pressed the button to open the door.

It slid open with a hiss, quiet enough not to be noticed by the one who had just strode by, and Ara stepped out cautiously. The refreshers were in a side corridor that crossed the main corridor, so she was out of sight from the deck where the hostile leader was holding his speech.

She was surprised to see that the lights where dimmed and it was rather dark, what let her to the assumption that maybe some of the crew members hadn't been as inactive as she had thought and had switched to emergency power in order to have a small advantage when defending the ship against the intruders.

Crouching, she sneaked off to the bulkhead where the corridors crossed, leaned against it and took a brief look into the main passenger's deck.

The Brigader—a Twi'lek—had stopped talking and was giving orders to some of his men and then headed off to the bridge. Ara could make out seven armed Peace Brigaders in the shadowy illumination, most of them non-humans: Rodians, Devaronians, and she thought she could even

make out a Weequay, but she figured there were more of them she couldn't see—seven men against over 400 passengers was a risk even the Peace Brigade wouldn't take; or so Ara thought.

She decided to get back to Fenix and tell him about the plan she had in mind. As she looked at the cabin, she could see the overly swanky dressed bounty hunter cowering there, his dark brown eyes expectantly fixed on her. She could spot the urge to do something and the rage against the immortal Peace Brigade in his eyes, but also something else—something she couldn't quite place, something even more intense and emotional than what she could already see. There was something about that man that unsettled her, but she didn't know why. Ara just hoped she wouldn't need to find out the hard way.

She just wanted to go back to Fenix as a voice and approaching footsteps interrupted her. The voice had that distinctive, disgusting chirping sound of a Rodian, one that was mumbling in a jittery Huttese into a comlink. From the tense in his voice, Ara could tell that the conversation with the person on the other end of the line wasn't about to end very soon, especially not soon enough for her to take out the Rodian without getting the attention of the person on the com. Another problem was the fact that the side corridor with the refreshers was more illuminated than the main corridor and there was nothing to hide except from the cabin, and that was out of reach.

Just in time, she gave Fenix a mark to close the door and then, without further thinking and driven by her reflexes and intuition, she went the only way possible.

Up.

As the Rodian entered the corridor, he instantly froze. He shouted a few, nearly inaudibly fast spoken words into the comlink—it sounded something like "I got 'em." to Ara, but it could've just as well been a "Shut your sithspawned mouth, you disgusting *koochoo*." From the following action, as the Rodian smashed his comlink to the floor, she figured it was latter.

Now that the Rodian wasn't any longer communicating with one of his comrades, Ara decided to do something about him.

So she dropped to the floor behind the Peace Brigadier as soundlessly as possible. The alien apparently didn't notice her and was slowly approaching the door to the refreshers, his blaster rifle at the ready.

Ara had been dealing with lots of Rodians before, so she knew exactly their weak points, the major one being their necks. She grabbed his head and neck and jerked his green, sweaty face back, just about faintly enough not to kill him already, but so that another quick pull would do the trick.

"One sound," she threatened the nervous Rodian, "and you're dead mea—"

"Bring it on, bitch," suddenly a deep female voice said from behind her, the same time as she felt the cold metal of a blaster's muzzle pressed against her head.

Not *good*, the Mandalorian woman thought simply.

Slowly, Ara turned her head to face a female Bothan with near-purple pelt sprinkled with beige spots, whose toxic-green eyes made her appear more than surreal.

"And you would be...?" Ara asked.

"None of your business," said the Bothan harshly. "Now, would you kill that murglak already, or do you want me to shoot both of you?"

Me'ven?! The Mandalorian woman couldn't conceal her surprise—she was scowling in utter bewilderment. *What?! This is getting seriously ugly...*

That little shock could've nearly cost her life, but before the Bothan was about to open her mouth after a short time's silence, adrenaline flooded back into Ara's veins and she reacted. With a brief but forceful draft she twitched the Rodian's head back, and with a loud cracking sound his neck broke. She loosened her grip and the lifeless body plunged to the ground.

"So," she said after taking a few steps away from the Bothan woman, the blaster still aimed at her, "would you tell me why I just killed a useful informant?"

Ara hadn't brought up this issue before on purpose. Had she started an argument under the pressure of the death-threat about whether or not the Rodian was more useful alive, the Bothan might've lost her patience and just killed them both. However, the Bothan might still shoot her now.

"That slimy creature would've rather killed himself than speaking a single word of truth. And speaking of slimy creatures...." The Bothan woman hesitated, disgust spreading on her furry face. "I'm looking for *someone*."

“And this... *someone* might be...?”

“Macos Fenix.” She pronounced the name as though she had eaten something nauseous. “I doubt you’ve heard of him.”

Surprised once more, Ara couldn’t conceal her reaction, and thus decided to go another way with this.

“You’re right, I never heard of him.” She hesitated, closely observing the Bothan’s reaction. “But I met him.”

“You *met* him?! Where?”

“Here on board. I’ll lead you to him, under one condition: you’re aiding me to cleanse the ship from the scum.”

“Are you insane? There’s more than forty of those murglaks on the ship, and even a Corellian wouldn’t take the odds against that. I’m not playing along your little psycho game.”

“I’m sane enough to know that Fenix won’t be of much use for you when you two end up as mindless slaves once the crab-boys arrive. Anyway, where’d you get that figure from, forty?”

“I counted. I’ve been lurking around the airlock as forty-two entered, but there are probably still several of them on their vessel. But I’m not ready to die miserably in a battle where I’m more than outgunned.”

“You don’t exactly have a choice. Yuuzhan Vong slavery isn’t death—it’s worse.”

“Who says I’m gonna let myself get captured by those dungheads? No, not if I can do something about *that*. I’ll grab Fenix, steal their ship and...”

“And what? Leave thirteen-hundred passengers to their unholy fate?” Anger was rising in Ara again. *This Bothan’s no better than that pack of Vong-allying hut’uune.* “Not with me.”

“What you wanna do, girlie?” the Bothan inquired scornfully, lifting her blaster. “Spit at me?”

That first contemptuous ‘girlie’ made her nearly lose her temper, but then she noticed something in the background and could just about draw in her horns.

“Better,” she said as calmly as possible. “I don’t do anything at all.”

The Bothan woman didn’t even have time to shoot her a confused gaze. She collapsed to the floor, a vibroblade stuck deep in the hollow of her knee.

From the open cabin door, Ara could see Fenix stepping out and approaching. She knelt down to pick up the Bothan’s and the Rodian’s blasters and then felt the Bothan’s pulse. It was still beating.

“You’re good at throwing knives,” she said, looking up to Fenix, who bore a troubled look on his usually rather cheery face.

“Is she dead?” he asked, trying to sound sober.

“Nope, unconscious.”

“Damn. I aimed at her neck.”

So much about the fancy knife throwing, she thought, but something in his features and tone told Ara that his otherwise sarcastically meant comment wasn’t sarcastic at all.

“Who is she?” Ara asked cautiously.

There was a long moment’s silence as Fenix was staring into space, pondering about something that had to deeply touch him, before he finally spoke those few words, slowly, as if still half in his dream world.

“She used to be my wife.”

Ara didn’t say anything. Whatever she had said, it would’ve been misplaced, and she doubted Fenix would’ve actually received anything had she spoken up, anyway.

“It’s a long, boring and intricate story,” he said, nevertheless, slowly coming back to here-and-now. “Let’s just lock her up and get to the task at hand.”

And with that the bounty hunter grasped the Bothan woman and carried her into the empty cabin. Ara did the same with the dead Rodian, and then they relieved the two of their gear and locked up the cell, all without a single word.

They divided the weapons, Fenix wielding the Rodian’s blaster rifle and wearing the torso of the nonhuman’s light armor, and Ara, with her Mandalorian armor still covered under her clothes, took the light blaster pistol and the knife—she had wanted latter back because she could handle the blade better than Fenix.

Fully geared up, each ready to fight for their own agendas, the unlike team went to the door where the corridors passed and cautiously stepped out onto the main deck.

After taking a few steps into the shadows, Ara felt that they had done a terrible mistake. As she turned, her feelings proved themselves right. She was staring into the muzzles of six blaster rifles surrounding them.

“Put your weapons down at once,” a Weequay shouted, “and leave your hands where I can see them.”

Ara threw a certain glance at Fenix, who only nodded slightly. She hadn’t come this far to end up like that, no. The odds were against her, but with a little portion of luck, and the advantage of surprise, she should be able to manage this early threat.

She looked around, noting the position of every single of the seven men, and then decided to do something about it.

After a quick nod to Fenix, she ducked and fired a clean shot in the Weequay’s face, out of the low-energy blaster she had overcharged. Ara tossed the ineffective weapon away and shot a poisoned dart from her gauntlet into another Brigader’s throat, and it was only then that the others reacted. One of them, a Rodian, was stupid enough to fire a stun blast at Ara and missed her, instead hitting a Devaronian behind her, who went down cursing heavily in his native tongue.

Back-to-back with Fenix, she didn’t have time to check how many the bounty hunter had taken out, and continued fighting, now down to melee combat weapons, intending to spare her additional armor gear for later, when she needed it more. She grabbed her vibroblade, dodged another shot from the foolish Rodian and slung it into another Rodian’s chest, the one who had been scarcely missed by his comrade’s shot and now dropped lifelessly to the floor. Ara performed a roll to the dead Rodian’s body and retracted her blade, only to face the Rodian with the blaster as she stood up again.

Both opponents froze, plainly staring at each other, before a quiet ‘klik’ broke the silence and Ara noticed that the Rodian’s thumb had just tilted the switch from “stun” to “kill”, his black, faceted eyes still fixed on hers, his face deadpan like a Mandalorian’s helmet. Ara had never often watched holo-dramas, but the scene she faced now reminded her of these old cheesy gunslinger movies where the action culminated in a duel of the hero versus his arch-villain—something that was, of course, more than ridiculous, especially because the Rodian made a really poor villain, and Ara would’ve been close to laughing, hadn’t it been for the matter of life and death. But still, it was exactly like that, and each of them waited for the other to make a move.

After another minute—it seemed more like hours to Ara—she eventually made that move and feinted a gesture to shoot another dart from her gauntlets. Instead, she performed a cartwheel to the left, a fraction of a millisecond too late, as it turned out, because the Rodian’s reaction was faster than expected and the blaster bolt grazed her left calf. She lost balance and crashed inflexibly to the ground.

With her face down and the tremendous pain spreading from her leg making it hard for her to move, she didn’t notice what was going on around her. After a few seconds she noticed that something was wrong, the Rodian should’ve shot her by now.

As she finally managed to steady herself and get up, she could make out both Fenix and the Rodian with their hands up and their backs to her, and a handful of uniformed humans behind them, with E-11s at their ready. One of them was talking to them, but from the distance, Ara couldn’t hear what they were saying.

Meanwhile, the pain had dropped to an acceptable level and Ara cautiously got back on her feet and limped towards the others. As she approached, she could see all the passengers who, now more or less safe, at least for a while, had gathered around and watched the scene.

“...not one of them, how often have I got to repeat this?!” That was Fenix muttering at the man with the rank stripes, upset about being captured with a Peace Brigader and suspected to be one of them. “I don’t know how many of those kriffin’ dungheads are on this ship!”

Ara now recognized that the men were all staff members, probably the only ones able to handle a gun, and the man Fenix was talking to was most likely the captain. And the captain was just about to open his mouth to accuse Fenix of even more things as the Mandalorian woman interrupted.

“He speaks the truth, sir.” All of the sudden, all the attention—as well as all of the blaster rifles—was on her, and their leader sported a confused gaze. “Why should he and I be Peace Brigaders when we are fighting against them? The only member of the Peace Brigade here is that slimy Rodian.”

“And why,” the captain inquired skeptically, “should I know you aren’t lying?”

“Easy,” Fenix said. “He’s not on the list of passengers. You can check us, I’m Macos Fenix, and she’s...”

“Sarad Dyre,” Ara interjected. It wasn’t exactly a lie, because she was traveling incognito—she did have enemies, after all, ones of the sorts that would’ve mobilized a small armada and blasted a spaceliner with thirteen-hundred people aboard to shards, just to ensure they got her. “But we’re wasting our time with this nonsense. There are forty-two of them on the ship, minus the six we’ve taken out here and another one I got the information from. That leaves thirty-five, not counting the ones that should be still on their docked ship.”

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The captain scowled at her, but said nothing. He nodded to one of his men, who took a datapad from his belt and checked the list, nodding affirmatively to his superior.

“Alright, listen, everybody,” the captain spoke up after gathering words so that the other passengers could hear him as well. “Anybody who knows how to fight or to handle a gun will be of great help and will be significantly repaired when we’re through this. This is OUR ship, and we’ll make sure it stays that! Now, somebody lock up that scumbag,”—he was glancing at the Rodian now, disgust on his face—“and all volunteers grab any kind of weapon you can get!”

Ara wasn’t surprised to see only a handful step forward to fight alongside them—in these desperate times, everybody hold on their lives, always fearing for the worst and mostly caring only for themselves or their families. But still, it was a pity there were only so few—it would be easier had there been more, and then, perhaps, this whole situation could be solved without spilling further blood, both of the Peace Brigade and hostages they’d sooner or later be taking.

“Captain,” Ara said impatiently, “we’ve got to get moving—now! We best head towards the bridge, that’s where their leader was headed.”

Without waiting for the others, she walked ahead, well aware of Fenix on her tails.

At least someone...

Fortunately—or unfortunately—they didn’t come too far before the captain cried out “Wait!” and he, his men and the volunteers quickly caught up with the Mandalorian woman and her bounty hunter companion.

En route to the bridge, they went through another passenger deck—this time with less than a hundred people. They hit on a mere six Peace Brigaders, who weren’t really up for a fight after two of them had been stunned, and gave up—but not before one of them managed to send a call for reinforcements. On this deck, nearly another dozen of volunteers joined the group, although they were rather short of ranged weapons, now.

After interrogating one of the capitulators, Ara found out that on the last part to the bridge, there were only five other Brigaders, including their leader. So they decided to split up and only Ara and Fenix went on towards the bridge, while the captain and the others entrenched themselves and prepared a trap for the incoming reinforcements.

“So this is it, eh?” Fenix asked while they were cautiously walking through the corridors, avoiding spots that provided an ambush. “I never thought it’d get that easy.”

“It ain’t over, yet,” Ara muttered back, her tone implying that she wasn’t quite keen on chatting right now. For her sake, Fenix caught that and went on without further attempts of conversation.

After continuing for a few more steps, something came to her mind, that she should’ve thought of far earlier.

So the Brigaders we’ve blown sent a reinforcement call. But wait, this means that...

That was when guns started to pop out a few dozen meters away and began blazing all-around.

Instinctively, she sought cover, and the only she could find was a door right to her two meters ahead. She sprinted forward, opened the door and got inside, grabbing for one of the blasters she had picked up. All that went with a good portion of luck, what couldn’t quite be said about her new companion, Fenix. Before he could reach the door across from hers, one of the stray shots from their attackers hit the bounty hunter in his left lower leg, and in the motion, he couldn’t catch himself before collapsing to the floor. They still couldn’t be seen, apart from their blasters blazing blindly all over the place.

“I’d rather get moving,” Ara shouted out, eyeing Fenix’s attempts to get up again, however desperate and futile they were, “in case you don’t wanna end up like Byss Cheese once we’re out of this.”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” Fenix muttered back. “You know, I *could* use a hand...”

“Sure,” Ara said, firing a few blind shots towards the Peace Brigaders, not assuming or attempting to hit anyone. Nevertheless, she heard someone screaming, and the number of shots directed at them suddenly decreased. Ara couldn’t help but smirk, and then she quickly went out of the cabin, reached for Fenix, grabbed his hand and pulled him in. “Sorry ‘bout the mocking, I don’t usually tend to be kidding in situations like that...”

“It’s fine,” Fenix replied, grinning. “Unless I *do* end up like Byss Cheese in the end.”

At least I got what I wanted. Cheer him up and make him forget about the pain...

“So, how’s your leg?” she asked, serious again.

“It’s had better times, and I doubt I can walk too far. I really envy you, you know...”

“Envy me?!” Ara said doubtfully. “How’s that?”

“Well, it’s all yours now. You’re the one who gets all the fun of kicking the ass of them scumbags.”

“You sure nothing else got hit? Like... your head?”

Fenix hesitated, obviously trying to think of a good reply to that, but before he could, Ara had already slipped into the cabin across from him. So all he said was a sarcastic “Ha-ha...” before he began to examine his wound more closely.

Ara was rather confused, now that the shooting had stopped completely. She could hear voices from ahead, though, and she was wondering whether they had run out of ammo. The answer didn’t have her wait too long, as suddenly one of the Peace Brigaders left his cover and stepped into the gangway.

Immediately, Ara’s reflexes kicked in, she lifted the blaster, inhaled and held her breath, aimed at a chest and, almost gently, pulled the trigger. Only then did she realize that she had done something terribly awful, but it was too late. In shock, Ara gazed at the young female Devaronian, not even thirteen years old, who stared back at her, her wide-opened, tear-overflowed eyes in utter agony, her innocent lips choking out a few last words.

“You... killed... my father—”

Then she lowered her head, facing the big black hole in her chest, and collapsed to the ground.

“No!” Ara screamed out, bursting into tears. “I didn’t mean to...”

She walked over to the dead girl, dropped on her knees, trembling severely, and gently held onto the child’s small hand, sobbing about what she had done. *Take my life, instead. This just isn’t the way things were supposed to be. Those hut’uune don’t even balk at using their kids against us. If there was anything she could do to undo this, she would have. But there wasn’t.*

Then, suddenly, there were shots coming from behind her, and someone was yelling at her—probably Fenix—but Ara didn’t care, and didn’t react. She still couldn’t believe the gruesome act she had committed, and nothing, not even the danger of being killed now, could drag her thoughts away from that.

Only subconsciously, she noticed all the noise and the heat around her, and it was also her subconsciousness that told her to slip out of her reverie. Very, very slowly, her mind did, and more and more she became aware that the shooting had halted, the stench of ozone and burnt flesh still in the air. And then, Ara also began to feel the pain that was spreading from her left upper arm, but as she looked at it, she gladly noticed that it was only a graze.

She got back on her feet, picked up her pistol and observed the scene. In front of her, there were four Peace Brigader corpses, including the girl, lying on the ground, two of them with still smoke rising from their fresh wounds. Behind her, Fenix was lying on the floor, half in the cabin, half in the gangway, and he seemed more than freaked out, although apparently unhurt, what Ara was glad about.

“Kriff!” Fenix cursed as he looked at her. “What in the nine hells of Corellia was that all about?!”

Ara just gazed at him, deadpan, but didn’t offer a reply. “Four of five *chakaar’e* dead, that only leaves their leader.”

“Whoa, wait, wait, wait! Don’t you think...?” Fenix said. He hadn’t noticed that the agitated Mandalorian woman hadn’t exactly been talking to him, because she was already gone for good.

Rushing through the gangway, Ara didn’t even care about any other doors and traps, because she knew there was only one place where the last Peace Brigader could be, and that was the bridge. It was probably some sort of intuition that lead her there, because she couldn’t think of a rational reason.

The door to the cockpit wasn't even sealed, so she just stepped right in and immediately recognized the Twi'lek standing with his back to her over various consoles. He swirled around, a blaster pistol in his hand and fired a shot at her chest. The bolt hit the armor made of a fair amount of Mandalorian iron beneath her tunic, and the ever-so-forceful thrust only made her press on more frantically. The Peace Brigader's skills obviously lay elsewhere than in ranged combat, because anybody else would've kept on firing, but he just froze, and made it easy for Ara to punch away his weapon and thrust him to the ground.

"No, no, no!" the cowering Twi'lek begged under the pressure of a blaster pistol only inches away from his head. "Don't kill me!"

Ara hesitated and fixed the disgusting creature with what she imagined to be the most ferocious scowl she ever had put on.

"If there's one thing that disgusts me more than the *vongese* themselves," she said, "then it's scum like you."

"That's ironic, you know," replied the sappy-faced alien venturously, "coming from a member of a group of gun-for-hires who haven't too long ago been doing the dirty work for your loathed *vongese*, as you call them."

Of all things he could've said, the Peace Brigader had picked the very most thing that he should *not* have, and Ara didn't hesitate before she let him pay for that completely foolish and infelicitous boldness.

"*Nar'sheb, hut'uun*. Don't push your luck, scumbag."

And with that she lifted her left arm and released a silent saber-dart from her gauntlet, delivering the Twi'lek his ticket to netherworld.

CHOICES

CHAPTER I

Hotel Garridan, Contruum, 29 A.B.Y. – 46 months into the Yuuzhan Vong War

“Wait a second. Did I get this right? You actually got away by hijacking *their* ship? Wasn’t that crawling with Peace Brigaders?”

“Surprisingly, it wasn’t,” Macos Fenix replied. “After Sar—no, wait it’s Ara, not Sarad; I still can’t get over with her not telling me her name before the landing.” He shook his head. “Well, after Ara had taken out their leader—and his second-in-command, as it turned out later—and broadcasted that on the comms, the rest of those scumbags pretty hastily capitulated. As it emerged, a group of only forty-two Peace Brigaders had come to hijack the ship—and all 42 had been aboard *Sundance*. So, Ara decided to pilot the Peace Brigade’s freighter, since it was faster and she needed to get here as soon as possible.”

“So how come *you* are here as well?” his dialogue partner asked sarcastically. “Believe me, if I were you, I never would’ve done that....”

“Well... Ara knew I was on the run, so she invited me to come along. But why shouldn’t I have agreed? Tell me, Stone, is there something else I don’t know, yet, apart from the fact that she’s *Mandalorian*, just as everybody else, here?”

“Wait and see, *burc’ya*,” Ayden Stone answered, stood up and tapped comradely on the non-Mandalorian’s shoulder. “The meeting should begin in a few minutes, and I think you’re free to join in—only if you want, of course.”

“It’s not like I have a lot of other things to do....” Macos said, rose from the couch he had been sitting on and followed the Mandalorian soldier, who was wearing a full armor suit, armed to the teeth with an amount of weapons Macos didn’t even want to try counting.

Always ready for action, they are, Macos thought. *I wouldn’t want to run into one of those pals in the wrong alley at the wrong time...*

“So, what’s this meeting all about, again?” he asked after catching up with Stone. They were crossing the lobby of Hotel Garridan, a second-rate flophouse that didn’t catch much attraction, and the owners didn’t ask questions—*just what the Mandos need*, Macos thought.

“Impatient, are we?” the other just said, and then repeated his words from before. “Wait and see, *burc’ya*, wait and see.”

They headed upstairs now, towards a wide door adorned by a sign that read AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. Ayden Stone just carried on and as they were close, the door just slid up and revealed an ample room. Most noticeable was a large round table in the middle, with roughly twenty seats around, and all kinds of drinks in the middle. But even more eye-catching were the people in the room.

Before meeting Ara Norvath, Macos had barely even seen a single Mandalorian before, but now there were about twenty men and women in one room and at one time, everyone outright armed in their Mandalorian armor suits. It was an impressive sight, and Macos was glad about the fact that he wasn’t staring up the business-end of numerous kinds of weapons, as you usually had to expect when meeting so many of these ancient and ruthless warriors gathered at one place.

What surprised the former bounty hunter was that while they were all wearing about the same basic template of armor, each of their suits was unique, with very distinctive features, colors, markings and gadgets. One grim and old looking Mandalorian wore a black, dark-green-clad armor adorned by crimson bloodstripes on its left. The bearded man was even wearing a skirt, as Macos noticed amusedly, like apparently many of them did. Then there was a tall Togorian, also in a black armor, and a middle-aged man with a gray-golden color scheme and a baby’s hand imprint on the helmet lying before him on the table, Ara in her plain matte-olive armor. A small, but still reverential Noghri, didn’t have an armor like the others at all, merely a pair of pointy shin guards, blades stringed to his forearms, and a visorless helmet that he carried in his muscular arms. Macos wondered why he went so unprotected, with merely a loincloth version of the skirt others wore,

and a leathery battle vest. There were several other varieties in color and armor-modifications, but Macos's glance halted on one especially impressive and distinctive model.

The tall man's armor looked nothing like the others, and on first view, it was utmost terrifying: it still had the traditional breastplates and gauntlets, but from the shoulders, the elbows, the knees, the forearms and simply everywhere, long, black, organic-looking spikes jabbed out—it unpleasantly reminded Macos of a Yuuzhan Vong warrior's vonduun-crab-armor, and even the armor plates had the distinctive texture of the Vong-bred creatures' crust.

No, it doesn't remind me of a scarhead armor, he thought. It kriffing looks exactly like one!

And save for the Mandalorian's head and a few mechanical features, it really did—and with the helmet on, the man had to enrage any Yuuzhan Vong to a level that could simply not be wholesome. The Mandalorian soldier himself didn't look quite inviting, either—he had long dark-brown dreadlocks, a woolly beard, and a tanned face marked by a black, star-like tattoo around his left eye.

Probably Kiffar, Macos, the only non-Mandalorian in the room, thought.

"Eerie, isn't it?" the man said, having noticed Macos's awe, and went over to him, offering his hand. Next to him was a blond teenage boy in white armor, who was only a head shorter than his father. "Altair Jiriad, and this is my son Skira. You'd be Macos Fenix, right? Ara told me about you."

Macos hadn't noticed the boy before, and it surprised him to see a child on the meeting; he definitely needed to know more about that, but for now, he was more interested in the armor. So he just winked at Skira, politely took the father's hand and shook it—the strong grip didn't surprise him.

"Aye, that's me. Have you used that suit in battle, already?"

"Straight to the point—I like that." Jiriad smirked. "Unfortunately, I haven't. Can't wait to hear what the crab-boys have to say—or better *scream*—when they see it."

Macos smiled and wanted to ask more questions, but then Stone, who had been talking to a gray-haired, blue-armored Mandalorian in the meantime, came back and interrupted him.

"Everybody's here, so get a seat. It's beginning any moment, now."

The non-Mandalorian nodded, wondering why there wasn't a general announcement and only he was addressed, but he noticed that nonetheless, the other Mandalorians sat down and became silent, so he followed their example and took a seat next to Ara.

Only the Mandalorian in the deep blue battle-scarred armor, the one Stone had been talking to, was still standing, and he began.

"First of all, I'd like to introduce Macos Fen—"

The spokesman was interrupted as the door suddenly slid open and a helmeted Mandalorian, in a rust-colored armor that looked completely untouched, polished and *new*, strode in.

Macos instinctively glanced at Ara, the only person he halfway knew, but she was too startled to notice him—startled in a way he hadn't expected from a battle-experienced woman, and she had an expression on her face the bounty hunter couldn't really relate.

But she wasn't the only one who was surprised about the newcomer. The standing Mandalorian signaled the others to wait, walked over to the interrupter and began to talk to him in a low voice, so that the others couldn't hear them.

"What's this all about?" Macos quietly asked Ara.

"*Osi'kyr*. I don't have a clue why my husband's suddenly showing up here," she answered.

"Your husband? I knew there was something else you didn't tell me... but shouldn't you be glad to see him?"

"We had a deal that he looked after the kids while I was joining the ranks. He never used to be a good fighter, you know, and it's actually the first time I see him in his armor."

"Weird. So what's he doing here? It's obviously not about you 'cos he'd be here right now."

"We'll find out soon enough," Ara said—somehow, Macos knew that she didn't really want to talk about that topic, now, and she carried on. "Meanwhile, I can introduce everyone to you, if you don't mind."

The bounty hunter knew well not to raise the old topic, so he just said, "Sure, go ahead."

"Alright. Left to you is Stone, you should know him already; then there's our expert in all kinds of blow-stuff-up, the Togorian Atross; followed by Kharritokh of clan Bakh'tor, our little Noghri martial artist. The next one is Jiriad in his *vongyc* armor and his son Skira, followed by the siblings

Jorso and Kyra Sateda, and Tristan, all five from Clan Sateda. Tagren, Vhon, and the Clawdite Sinan are next. On my right are the snipers Ronan Barec and Ram Zerimar, and our blademaster Gladus.”

Macos recognized the last two. Ram was the one with the small hand imprint on his helmet, and Gladus was wearing the jet-black bloodstriped armor. He had very grim, unfriendly features, and graying buzz-cut brown hair, and a well-maintained combination moustache and goatee beard like Macos himself. His armor seemed to be designed to give place to as many knives, blades, and swords as possible, and an impressive scar scoring his forehead and his right eye definitely showed that he wasn’t scared of Yuuzhan Vong up close.

“And last but not least,” Ara continued and pointed at the gray-haired Mandalorian talking to her husband, “there’s Goran Beviin, and of course my husband Sareth.”

Macos wondered who was the older one, Beviin or Gladus.

“That Beviin bloke,” he asked, musing, “is he some sort of leader... your... *Mandalore*?”

“Mandalore?!” Ara laughed. “No, but he’s the one who called us here, probably on the behalf of Mandalore Fett. I don’t know why, but Beviin seems to—”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Macos interrupted. “Fett... as in *Boba Fett*?! Ain’t he still in business?”

“Boba Fett is our Mandalore. And yes, he’s also still a bounty hunter, if that’s what you mean. But many of us are mercenaries or bounty hunters—and farmers, smiths, security officers or anything else. That’s how we earn our living, after all. Don’t tell me you were thinking that we actually get *paid* for doing this—whatever *this* is, anyway.”

“No, but shouldn’t he have other... er... *duties*,” Macos said, slightly annoyed by the Mandalorian woman’s laughter, “as ruler of a whole civilization?”

“Ever since the beginning of the war,” Ayden Stone joined the conversation, “Fett has had more pressing things to attend to than hunting bounties. One being personally training a good bunch of *Mando’ade* and preparing a whole sector against the inevitable attack from the *vongese*. But when he’s not actually occupied fighting a war where the fate of our galaxy is at stake, he, too, has got to earn his money *somehow*.”

“Hmm...” Macos mused. “So why isn’t Fett here, then? I thought this was some sort of assembly of all the leading figures of the Mandalorians.”

“It’s not as easy as that,” Ara said. “There’s a lot to Mandalorian... civilization... that is difficult for *aruetiise* like you—outsiders, non-Mandalorians—to understand. It’s hard to explain, so if you really want to know what being a *Mando’ad* is all about, if you really want to understand our culture, then it’s best you become one.”

“You already told me that you don’t need to be born as a Mandalorian to be one, but *me* and becoming a *Mando*? Sure, a perky temptation, but I’ll definitely need a few nights taking counsel with my pillow on that one. Anyway, looks like Beviin’s done with your spouse—I’m starting to get edgy about what’s my role in all of this.”

Beviin had returned to the round table, seating himself this time, and Ara’s husband, Sareth, had also found a seat on the other side of the table. He searched eye-contact with Ara, but she tried to avoid it.

“Well, now,” Beviin began once more. “Things have changed. Not only have I now to introduce another one joining this round, but also do I have bad news. Sareth Karr here—” Beviin pointed at Karr and the other Mandalorians saluted politely, but from their expressions, Macos could tell that they were not all that content about another newcomer. “—came to me with the information that the *vongese* are mobilizing a large force—a good part of their whole fleet, actually—headed here, to Contruum. Rumor has it they’re coming from a big battle on Mon Calamari, although with the HoloNet down, we can’t be sure. Anyhow, they ain’t the only ones who want a piece of the cake. The Galactic Alliance already has a good amount of capital ships in orbit, not to talk about the military base on one of the moons, and intel says more are en route. We suspect they are finally planning to get a strike at Coruscant, and odds are high they’ll be using Contruum as a staging point for their forces. Our dilemma now is that the *Mand’alor* has called to arms for the liberation of Gyndine, but I doubt I’m alone thinking that we shouldn’t leave Contruum exposed to the crab-boys. They’ll be here sooner than Alliance reinforcements and their fleet will have crushed any resistance by then. If Contruum is in Vong hand, then the GA’s whole plan is smashed and the liberation of Coruscant will be even more delayed—and after more than five *shabla* years of war, nobody wants that.”

“Five years we *wasted* fighting for the wrong side!” someone interjected. It was Gladus speaking, and he looked dead serious.

So rumors are true, Macos thought. *The Vong paid enough to get even the Mandalorians on their payroll.*

“Look, Gladus, it’s not like you’re the only one feeling that way,” Beviin tried to calm him down. “But it’s also not like we had a choice. You think a few hundred warriors, however skilled they might be, would’ve made a difference?”

“A few hundred warriors? The Mandalore only had to call every single Mandalorian to arms, man, woman or child—we are all trained and ready to fight, once there’s a need to—and we would have made a stand!”

“And risk extinction, once more? This is not th—”

A fist slammed on the table, and everyone’s attention was suddenly on Ronan Barec, the Mandalorian with curly black hair a few seats next to Gladus.

“*Ne’johaa!*” he exclaimed. “Cut it, both of you! It’s not like either of you can change what has happened, but *right now*, we can do something about it! Working together with the crab-boys, as reluctant as that may have been, we got an insight into their strengths and weaknesses like no one else ever would, and when they turned on us and attacked Mandalore, we *made* our stand! Never before had so few stood against so many, and never before had a world so swiftly, so successfully parried a *vongyc* invasion. And we *still* have that advantage. If we stop arguing about our mistakes in the past, we still *can* make a difference! Now pull yourselves together and get back at the task at hand.”

That call left some impression, and it took a moment’s silence and hesitation before both Beviin and Gladus leaned back, but latter not without shooting a grim glance over at Barec, a glance that bore an inscrutable and utmost personal emotion. Macos couldn’t imagine why there was a rivalry between the two Mandalorians, but he wasn’t exactly keen on finding out, either.

“To come to the point,” Beviin carried on after gathering himself, “I’m very thankful and glad that yet so many of you have made it here, but now it’s up to what to do next. I’m going to Gyndine because the *Mand’alor* needs me there, and anybody who wants to accompany me is free to do so—but you can just as well stay here on Contruum and help in the defense of the planet. It’ll take the *vongese* at least another 72 hours to get here, if Karr’s information is valid, so you should have plenty of time for preparation. Everyone who’s going to Gyndine: takeoff is in three hours. And for now, *haili cetare, vode, oya!*”

With that, Beviin lifted his mug for a toast, and after everybody followed his example and called out, “*Oya! Oya, manda!*” he stood up and left the room.

Something told Macos that this announcement was a lot shorter than it would’ve been without the interruption, and he also wondered why Beviin had completely forgotten to address him.

“So, what about me?” he asked into the round. A few Mandalorians were in quiet conversation, and Ara had already left the table too, and walked to the windows, where her husband, Karr, joined her shortly. Next to Macos was Ram Zerimar, now, and since Stone was also preoccupied, the star sniper answered him.

“That’s completely up to you, *burc’ya*. Any additional fighting hand would be a great asset, but you can always just leave us for good. Whatever’s up your alley, pal.”

“So you’d just lemme go right away?” Macos asked skeptically. “With all that insight in your plans? Information can be a real aurodium-mine, if sold to the right people, y’know....”

Ram just laughed. “You wouldn’t dare blackmail us. Besides, who tells you our intel’s valid, and that we haven’t made all up to trap whoever you’re giving our ‘plans.’”

So that’s why the objectives were kept rather brief, Macos thought and sighed deeply but said nothing—he hadn’t been completely serious, anyway.

“Well, I think I’ve still got enough time to consider it. So for now, I’m just joining your party.”

“...joining your party,” said the *aruetii*.

Joining our party, of course, Ronan Barec thought. *One false move, chakaar, and I can promise, your head will be exactly one head shorter.*

He didn’t know why he bore such an aversion against the non-Mandalorian, and he reckoned that his suspicion might be totally misplaced. He had known Ara Norvath long enough to know he

could trust her judgment, but that didn't mean that he could completely trust this Macos Fenix. After all he had experienced in the last few months, Ronan knew well enough to be mindful of any possible threat and to be prepared for everything.

Ret'lini. *Just in case.*

He took one last mouthful from the mug he had contemplatively been holding in both hands, then sat it on the table and put his helmet on. After that he stood up and walked out of the room.

Even before the beginning of this meeting on, Ronan had known that he would not go to Gyndine, and now he knew he needed another talk with Beviin.

About the newcomers.

About the operations.

About the subjects Beviin had *not* addressed in the gathering.

Yuuzhan Vong warship UNDYING AGONY, darkspace

Yuuzhan Vong subaltern Tzekon Lian hurried to the villip chamber. There was a call incoming for him which he had been anxiously waiting for. After entering through the organic membrane that contracted to let him through, Lian was immediately forwarded to his villip by a communications officer.

But the subaltern simply ignored him—he didn't need that inferior creature to show him the way; actually, he didn't need him at all, so he ordered him out of the chamber.

He needed to be alone.

With disgust spreading everywhere in his body, he looked at the villip that had already converted to the shape of his contact's head—a *human male* head. *An infidel's head*, he thought, nauseated.

"You should pray it is good news you are bringing," said Lian to the man, with a tone that allowed no mistaking.

"Oh, it is good news," the other replied confidently. *Maybe too confident*, Lian thought. "Several Mandalorians are staying on Contruum, awaiting your attack."

"That was expected, but there is nothing new about that information!"

"This was only the beginning. The majority of the Mandalorians is heading to Gyndine, in a foolish attempt to conquer it. With only a few reinforcements to your fleet there, you can—"

"It is up to *me*," Lian shouted at the infidel, "what I do with this information! We will crush them, and you will get your payment as usual. Now get out of my sight!"

With that, the villip shifted back its usual shape, and Tzekon Lian left the chamber, with a satisfied feeling having replaced the disgust.

Good news, indeed, he thought. *Those abominations among abominations called 'Mandalorians' will soon be no more.*

PACK OF LIES

CHAPTER II

Zo'Kalo Plaza, Contruum – about two hours after the meeting

Ronan Barec was surprised to see so much activity on the plaza. The place really sprawled with life, and hundreds of species of all kinds were busy going after their jobs, filling their leisure time, enjoying themselves. It was more than unusual to see such an untouched everyday life going on in these desperate times of war—even on a planet like Contruum that had remained unnoticed and unaccounted for by the Yuuzhan Vong until late into the invasion.

Until now, Ronan thought.

He and a part of his group—Zerimar, Jiriad, Jiriad's son, Tristan and Gladus—were taking a last walk through the city before splitting up for their respective destinations. Most pedestrians made way for them as they noticed the weapon-laden, armored Mandalorians and parted in awe—some even took to their heels, especially when they saw Jiriad in his Vong-like armor. Ronan wondered how the people would behave if they were here without the armor, in plain clothes—he figured that only Gladus with his massive size and grim, scarred face might catch some attention.

Or, maybe he and Tristan, Ronan thought sarcastically.

Norac Tristan, the sixth Mandalorian in the lot with dark orange-clad armor, was barely more than five and a half feet tall. While Gladus resembled more the Togorian Atross in size—who was very small for his species, with not even eight feet height—, Tristan was better to be compared to the Noghri Kharritokh. Ironically, though, the Togorian and the Noghri worked as the perfect two-man team.

“So you still haven’t switched to a Verp, eh?” asked Ram Zerimar, who was striding next to Ronan. Behind them, Tristan was chatting with Skira, while Gladus and Jiriad were silent, forming the rear guard.

“A Verp sniper rifle... a weapon so accurately and magnificently constructed that it can only be made by a Verpine craftsman,” Ronan answered. “But that carries one of the weaknesses that the rifle shares with its makers—it’s way too fragile to be of use when a scarbutt comes up close and personal. Ain’t worth its heavy price when it’s prone to break apart in an instant.”

“*Pare sol!* I thought your job was to *prevent* the scarbutt from coming up *close*.” Ronan couldn’t miss Zerimar’s mocking undertone.

“That’s why you’re the star sniper, Ram.” Ronan chuckled. “I’m just your average marksman.”

“A marksman with an affinity for bayonets.” Zerimar pointed at the heavily customized EE-23 sniper carbine Ronan carried over his back. “And you do a blasted lot of good with *that*, especially with the bayonet.”

“Gets the job done, and doesn’t break to pieces when I use it as a club,” came Ronan’s brief reply. In former times, he would have argued for hours and hours with Zerimar about the advantages and disadvantages of their weapons of choice, but right now, he wasn’t in the mood. He wondered when the last time he had been in the *right mood* was. *Probably any time before Dubrillion...* he shuddered to think. The events of Dubrillion, especially the high bodycount on their side, had changed him—and not in an especially positive way.

“It’d be interesting to see how a brute force marksman like Ronan,” Tristan piped up, who had caught up with them, “and a more... delicate sniper like Ram would team up.”

“Well, I’m sure *Ron’ika* and I work together seamlessly, but I’m afraid, not this time. My call’s to Gyndine.”

“One question, Ram,” young Skira asked, relieving Ronan of the need for a reply. Although already fifteen years old and considered a grown man by Mando reckoning, his father Jiriad said that Skira had still one final trial to pass before celebrating *verd’goten*—his coming of age, the completion of his training as warrior. “Why’s your sidearm double-barreled?”

The kid—no, the young man, Ronan told himself—truly showed that he was different than “normal” boys of his age. He seemed to be very mature, although one could argue if being able to fight and being interested and skilled in deadly weapons was an element that made you adult. Yet,

his curiosity showed that he wasn't completely through his youth, and apparently, Ronan wasn't the only one thinking so.

"You know, *ad'ika*," Zerimar turned to Skira and replied with a warm voice, "sometimes I think you should be out there looking for a girl and enjoying life rather than joining us in this brutal thing called war, risking your own precious life. Don't take it as an insult, lad, I know you're quite your father's son; I got a son myself, after all—" He pointed to the small handprint on his helmet. "—but *shab*, there are better times for a child to grow up." He hesitated for a moment. "Now, to answer your question: before the war began, I had sported a standard-issue blaster pistol. But blasters turned out to be not of much use against the *vongese* and their crab-armors, so I did some customizing and modifying. The result is that blaster/slugthrower-hybrid."

Ronan couldn't conceal a grin. Like Zerimar, he had had his own sidearm, a powerful and accurate Merr-Sonn P-7 hand blaster, customized by Siege Takomir, an immensely talented weapons technician. It now supported slug rounds, in addition to the usual power cells that fed the blaster. Concededly, however, the ability to fire both rounds simultaneously, like with Zerimar's double-barreled pistol, was indeed original.

"*Kandosii*," Skira said. "So the upper barrel fires slugs, and the lower one blaster bolts? I really need to get myself one of those."

"Or a whole shipment, for that matter," Jiriad commented from behind. They were still meandering through the crowded plaza, but now headed back to the hotel. "How come we can't talk about anything that's not about the war, for once?"

Good point, vod, good point, Ronan thought. Jiriad, although a formidable warrior, was not at all fond of all the fighting and bloodshed, but he, like pretty much everyone else, didn't have much of a choice.

"Make a call," Gladus Tite's deep, harsh voice broke the silence. "What top—"

Ronan swiftly spun around to confront the tall man with his rudeness, but all he faced was Gladus's massive back. Having drawn his sidearm and his attention focused on something or someone in the distance, the tall man had left the conversation as soon as he entered it. In one brisk motion, one of Gladus's knives suddenly was in his hand, and vanished from it just as quickly. The blade was soaring through the air, aimed at a Wookiee about four dozen meters ahead of them. The tall, hairy alien had already turned around and was just about to make a run, but he was too slow—the blade cut deep into his throat.

"*Wayii!*" Jiriad exclaimed as the body dropped to the ground and pedestrians began to scream out loud in horror. "What the *shab* was that all about?!"

But Gladus didn't bother and hurried to the fallen Wookiee. All the attention was now on the Mandalorians, and the pedestrians had formed a circle around them with more and more curious onlookers rallying to the scene. Some were gazing in shock, others seemed to be amused and happy about some action and diversion in their everyday life.

Meanwhile, Ronan and the others had also caught up with Gladus, who had squatted near the body, his hand apparently taking the Wookiee's pulse.

"*Di'kut!*" It was Jiriad talking, again, and from the sharp tone in his voice Ronan could clearly tell that he wasn't in the best mood. "You can't just walk around and slice up people at your whim. Ronan should've le—"

"*K'uur, Al'buir!*" Skira hushed his father and pointed at Gladus. "Look!"

After a sardonic glance at his son, Jiriad reluctantly lowered his head to make out what the other was doing. Ronan and the others had already spotted it: Gladus wasn't checking for the alien's pulse, he was fumbling around on the Wookiee's face, waiting for something to happen. And then, suddenly, as he touched the creature's nose, skin and pelt started to peel off in a weird fashion.

Osik!

Bit by bit, it revealed sallow, tattooed and scarred skin on a bony skull—the head of an apparently high-ranked Yuuzhan Vong warrior, counting by his scars and deformations.

"*Osi'kyr!* That's a *shabla* scarbutt!" came Tristan's exclamation, expressing what everybody was thinking.

"It was a *shabla* scarbutt," Zerimar stated, not much less surprised. "And a karking sly one at that. Cloaking under a Wookiee pelt is *new*. Mind telling us how you spotted him, Tite?"

"Ever heard of the Yuuzhan Vong hunter droids?" Gladus posed a counter question.

“Those walking skeletons that drive the crab-boys mad? I do.”

Gladus stood up and tapped on his helmet visor. The furry gablith masquer was now lying around the fully uncovered Yuuzhan Vong corpse, the knife still stuck in the throat.

“I got my hands on their photo-filters, figured it’d be useful to have a visor-mode that detects cloaked Vong. Sure looks like it is.”

“Then why—” started Tristan before he was interrupted.

“This ain’t the right place to talk,” Ronan interjected over their shared helmet comlink channel, and nodded towards the growing crowd. The figure of people who had been amused about the fight had highly decreased by now. “Let’s get rolling back to the hotel.”

“What about the scarhead?” asked Skira.

“It’s just a matter of time before the police show up, and if there are any other Vong spies here, we’d rather not be around.”

Everyone apart from Gladus acknowledged and retreated from the scene, but the relentless former assassin went back to the body, retrieved this knife and pulled the Yuuzhan Vong up by his hair. With a swift stroke, a bundle of hair and skin was sliced off. The body dropped back on the ground as Gladus caught up with the others.

Everyone glanced at Gladus, but said nothing—unlike the spectators who sent rude shouts after them as they headed back to Hotel Garridan.

Ronan grimaced under his helmet. Taking scalps had become an all-too-common hobby for many a *Mando’ad*. Showing off scalps on one’s armor had a trigger effect on Vong eyes. Much like Jiriad’s armor, that literally had to scream “*blasphemy!*” to any Yuuzhan Vong.

Hotel Garridan, Contruum – 15 minutes later

“This womp rat wouldn’t have talked, anyway,” Gladus rabidly responded to Beviin’s confrontation.

“There are... ways,” Beviin replied as calmly as possible. He was utmost irritated about Ronan’s report. But the older Mandalorian did a great job at staying focused—he wasn’t one of Fett’s most trusted lieutenants without reason, after all. Some of the younger soldiers even jokingly called Beviin ‘*al’gaan*’—from *Mand’alor* and *gaan* for “hand”.

“The crab-boys are pretty much immune to pain,” Gladus sighed with a scornful tone in his deep voice.

“What about drugs?” Jiriad objected. “Nerve killers worked more or less great against them... well, at least against *some* vongese.”

Only for some, indeed, Ronan thought. The malfunctioning toxic gas had proven to be full of mostly not-so-convenient surprises on Dubrillion. It had been used to take out an army of Vong there, but it only killed some, stunned others. And some of the stunned ones who had awoken again had nearly cost Fett his life if it hadn’t been for Ronan.

“Fine. Let’s start developing drugs that actually *work* against Yuuzhan Vong, shall we?” Gladus snorted. “It’s not like we’re short of time...”

For once, Ronan agreed with Gladus. While killing the Vong right away might have been a bit of a precipitous action, there wasn’t much else that could’ve been done. Tracking the disguised alien’s movement and eventually razing a whole Yuuzhan Vong underground network had no longer been an option—undoubtedly, the spy had already spotted them; not that wearing full Mandalorian armor suits was the best means of staying undetected in the first place. The other option, rendering the Vong unconscious and later interrogating him, had indeed been available, but it would’ve been nothing but a waste of time. Time that was better spent on undercover missions to track down other Yuuzhan Vong spies.

“I think it’s up to *us*, anyway, what we do with this new gained information,” Ronan finally interposed. “And all of you should stop dwelling on things that can’t be undone—you should hear yourselves.” He looked in the round with a reprehensive look, eyeing the three of them closely.

The four men weren’t the only ones at the table, there was still a part of the group staying on Contruum present, except Ara, her husband Sareth and the dark-complected *aruetii* Macos, who were elsewhere in the room. The others, like Zerimar, Tristan and Ayden Stone, had already taken their leave, only waiting for Beviin to join them for the departure to Gyndine.

“Ronan is right.” Beviin finally broke the silence. “It’s up to you lot—I shouldn’t even be here anymore. *Pirunir sur’haaise! Oya!*”

Everyone raised their fists or mugs in the air and repeated Beviin's exclamation as he parted. "Oya! Oya manda!" Ronan, too, stood up and caught up with Beviin outside.

"Do me a favor and keep an eye or two on Tite," said Beviin, frowning. "I'm not alone saying that I have done lots of things I regretted later. Questionable things, bad things. But that's nothing compared to what that... man... has done. Nobody should be in company with him."

"What is it with you and Gladus?!" Ronan retorted huffishly. "I know you don't endorse my decision bringing recruiting him, but there's no need to remind me every *di'kutla* time! I've had it up to *there*." He gestured with his flat hand over his throat.

"Tite is the one and only instability factor in this group," Beviin growled back just as harshly. "If you still live to listen to me when Tite has turned against us, I'll remind you of my words."

"You keep saying that all the time. Gladus will be as calm as a nerf with me around, that much I can assure you," Ronan added with a little less tension.

"I'll take your word on that, *burc'ya*." Beviin paused, his mind apparently elsewhere. "Watch your back, *ner vod*, things could get ugly if that Vong armada really shows up."

And with a pat on Ronan's back and the farewell "*Re'turcye mhi!*" he parted.

Macos Fenix turned away from the table to the large window, enjoying the view on the green spots and the shiny blue lake in a park just across the street. With interest, he was watching a limmie game a group of youngsters were playing on the green. It was a funny coincidence, because Ayden Stone had told him that limmie was many a Mandalorian's favorite game, and Stone himself had used to be a professional player before the war.

Macos had been listening to the report of the Mandalorian team that had just encountered a Yuuzhan Vong, before he left the round as they started discussing about things that didn't really appeal his interest. In the last few hours after the actual meeting, he had been talking to some of them about all kinds of topics that had given him a slight bit of insight into the Mandalorian spirit and their habits. Eventually, however, he felt he needed a timeout—after all, he was the only non-Mandalorian present, and this fact made him feel a little uncomfortable. Although none of them seemed to have a problem with an outsider among them.

With emphasis on seem, he reminded himself. *Those Mandalorians are skilled in pretty much everything, so why not also in the concealment of their true feelings?*

A few steps away from him, Ara and Sareth were sitting on a comfortable couch, doing what they had been doing for the last few hours: talking and arguing about all sorts of things. *They arguably haven't seen each other for one long time, to have such a thorough chat*, Macos thought. While knowing that this shouldn't concern him, he somehow felt responsible for the tough Mandalorian woman—he couldn't but think that she was a *woman*, after all, and he found it somehow ironic that she was risking her life each day in this cruel war, while her husband was doing the job you'd normally expect a woman to do.

But what does normal mean in those times, anyway?

Behind him he heard a now familiar bellowing—"Oya manda", a Mandalorian expression of solidarity and perpetuity as he had learned from Ara. As he turned around, he saw the blue-armored Mandalorian, Beviin, rising and ambling out of the room, a moment later followed by Ronan Barec. Macos was just about to turn back to the window as he noticed the gaze Gladus was shooting at Barec. It was the same gaze Macos had seen before when Barec had rebuked the grim swordsman in the meeting. Macos didn't need to be a genius to tell that this was prone to cause trouble in the future—and surely not in the too late future.

"It's got to be quite a bit of a yawn for you here, eh?" Ara's voice surprised him from behind. He turned his head to look at her as she stepped next to him and noticed that her husband Sareth was approaching the table in the background.

"Err... quite the contrary, actually," Macos responded, confused. "Things like that don't tend to happen to me every day, y'know. Things like being welcomed with open arms by *Mandalorians*." He pronounced the last word like it was something cabalistic and awe-inspiring.

Ara chuckled. "Oh, come on! We're not that... *special*."

Macos already wanted to remark something silly, but just at that moment, Barec reentered the room, what brought him on another topic.

"What's with this fella... Barec?"

“Ronan? He used to be quite a talkative and nice guy, but ever since the liberation of Dubrillion he’s become a bit moody and is seldom to talk up, unless totally necessary.” Barec had now returned to the table, talking to Sareth, and every now and then, they glanced over at him and Ara.

“It probably doesn’t concern me, but is it because of Gladus?”

“Tite? No, he has nothing to do with it—although there is another feud between the two, one that indeed doesn’t concern you.” Her tone made clear that no further questions be asked about that.

“Why you call him Tite?”

She gave him an amused glance. “That’s his name. Gladus Tite.”

“My bad. Everybody says just ‘Gladus’, so you had me there for a moment. Anyhow, you’re right, I should keep my curiosity in restraints. My big mouth will sooner or later get me killed.”

This released a bit of Ara’s tension as she laughed again. “You bet. The voice is man’s most powerful weapon, after all, but many are so unwise to forget the recoil that any weapon causes.”

At least I’m still good enough at easing the mood, Macos thought, relieved. Arguing with a capricious Mandalorian woman wasn’t something he’d like to do excessively long.

“What a wise speech.” He gave her a wink. “Especially for—”

He was cut off by a knock at the door. Instinctively, he drew his blaster, only to dazzlingly notice that he was the only one reacting in that manner.

Oh come on, ye lazy folk!

In the meantime, he had sought cover behind a wall, where he leaned against with his back, and crouched down, carefully risking a few glances around the corner. The Mandalorians still hadn’t lifted a finger, but every one of them was eyeing *him* with surprise, and even *amusement*.

Fierfek! You can’t be serious—you are the ones that should be laughed at! he thought, utterly confused and irritated by the lack of action among galaxy’s greatest warrior culture.

There was another knock, more forceful and louder this time, before finally somebody else reacted—not in the way Macos had expected or hoped, however.

“*Udesii, burc’ya,*” Ara said in a low voice after approaching the non-Mandalorian. “Ease off, lad, or else you’ll lose any chance of getting at least *some* respect from the others.”

“But....”

“An enemy wouldn’t knock. And even then, by now the door would have been smashed open and hostiles entered all guns blazing.” She was talking slowly, as if he was a small child that still had to learn a lot of things. “No, the only threat is some jumpy ex-bounty hunter with his weapons drawn, who’s about to do something very stupid very soon.”

Macos opened his mouth to respond to her confrontation, but then decided it was better to keep it shut. He mumbled something through his clenched teeth, silently cursed his stupidity and lowered the gun. Grouchily, he cursed again, this time aloud, as it knocked for the third time. Right now, everybody and everything seemed to have turned against him.

“Who is it?” Barec demanded over the comlink on the table. Still nobody made an effort to stand up and open the door.

So they are cautious, after all, Macos thought dryly.

“Galactic Alliance Intelligence,” a male voice responded, a voice that had an unfamiliar guttural sound to it. “We want to talk to you about....”

“Enter,” Ronan just said and cut him off. He pressed a button on the table and the doors opened, revealing a single casually dressed jet-black Nautolan officer—or was it a Feeorin? Macos had never been able to tell the two species apart. After hesitating for a moment at the sight of half a dozen armed and armored men, he eventually stepped in and approached the group around the table at slow pace.

Macos stepped away from the wall, eyeing the alien officer cautiously as the doors shut behind him. The former bounty hunter was holding his blaster easefully, lowered but ready to strike at any moment, his gaze fixed on the Feeorin—he was now rather sure Rios was a Feeorin, reckoning that Nautolans wouldn’t have black skin. Ara glanced at him, nodding at his sidearm, and he reluctantly holstered the weapon in a loose hold. With a firm grip, his hand was still on the knob, however.

The man wasn’t wearing a uniform or anything that could prove he was from the GAI in the first place—he could easily just be another scarhead hidden under one of their weird organic cloakers.

As the Feorin was close to the table, it wasn't Barec who stood up, strangely enough, but Jiriad—the Mandalorian in the Vong vonduun crab armor imitation.

Heh. That's clever. If there's a Vong beneath that black skin, then the odds are high he'll literally jump out of his skin. Macos smirked and eased the grip around his gun; a little.

Bewildered, the Feorin halted with surprise, and Macos could only guess that shock was written in his face; he couldn't see it from behind. But the officer wasn't showing the reaction a Yuuzhan Vong would have shown, even if he was most trained in suppressing his hate against the 'infidels', because he recollected himself only a moment's notice later.

"Lieutenant Salem Rios," the Galactic Alliance officer said, offering his hand. Jiriad completely ignored the gesture, so the other took it back without complaining. Macos could—now that he had also approached the table—however see that his expression was completely unemotional, what told him that Rios was *not* unemotional at all.

"ID," Jiriad said plainly. "It's standard procedure, don't take it personal, *burc'ya*," he added as Rios tarried ruminatively, but in a tone that spoke another language than his 'kind' words.

Macos's hold tightened again as the Feorin reached into his jacket and handed his ID-card over to Jiriad, who in turn gave it to his son at the table. Skira inserted the chip into a datapad and after a short time, he nodded to his father, who returned the card to its owner, with a slightly more affable look in his face. Then, Jiriad returned to the table and sat down, leaving Rios standing there alone, and once more a little baffled.

"You were sayin'?" Barec took the word, now, seated in a chair faced at Rios, arms crossed and definitely not having in mind to offer the GA lieutenant a seat. It surprised Macos to see such hostility from the Mandalorians. It was unexpected, especially coming from Barec.

"Um... I'm here to discuss murder one of you committed a few hours ago."

"What? Don't you approve us taking out a *shabla* crab-boy?"

"Well, to boot, a Vong has never been disguised as a Wookiee before, and then there's the question how you were able to spot that there was a scarhead beneath the fur in the first place."

"Point being...?"

"I was just about to get to that," Rios replied, irritated. "The Galactic Alliance could use your cooperation. Where one filthy Vong spy is lurking around, there's just another whole lot in hiding." *Well, we figured that much*, Macos thought sarcastically. "And since you apparently have the better resources to detect cloaked Yuuzhan Vong, wiping all Vong activity off this planet shouldn't be too hard a task to accomplish with your assistance."

Barec laughed. "You need us to the dirty work for you?! Can you even *afford* us?"

This got the Feorin hesitating for a moment. "Did I say something about payment?" He looked in the round, his glance halting on Macos for an instant, before returning to Barec. "I did not. We're allies, remember?"

"Of course. You didn't want to have the *shab* to do with us as we risked our lives trying to feed you with first-hand intel on the *vongese*. Now you think it goes without saying for us to meet your demands? What kind of nonsense is this? We're fighting a common enemy, more doesn't need to be said. You want our help, so shoot a bid!"

Whoa, Macos thought. *That guy's got one serious problem with the GA.*

"I could arrest each and every one of you for blackmail and collaboration with the enemy!" Rios barked. "You will—"

"Don't you kriffing dare insult us, *mir'sheb*," Jiriad hissed back, deadpan. "There are things you can say and there are those you can't. What you just said is *not* a thing you can say."

"*Ne'johha*," Barec interjected. "We don't want to make a habit of things here; somebody might end up with a smoking hole in his head. It was a test, and you passed. We were planning to do something about the Vong network, anyway, and although we'd still like to do it our way, we wouldn't refuse a hand or two. We could also need camouflage fatigues, our armor suits don't exactly do the best job for staying undetected."

The middle-aged Mandalorian didn't cease to surprise or impress Macos, today. Barec shifted so swiftly from different moods and positions that the bounty hunter shuddered to think how the man acted on the battlefield—he had not only to be a most skilled fighter, but also a brilliant tactician.

Rios apparently shared his surprise as he exhaled sharply. "Fierfek! This was all just teasing to find out whether 'I am who I pretend to be'?! You guys are...."

“Watch it, *burc’ya*,” Jiriad interrupted him harshly, with nearly as much sternness in his voice as before. “My point stands. This doesn’t make us best pals.”

“Alright, alright. I’m sorry, the other Mandalorians I’ve dealt with so far made me forget that not all of you are equal. Anyhow, you’ll get your demands, and I’m personally offering my services; *if* you share your information about how you’re detecting cloaked Vong.”

Macos couldn’t but smirk about that. *You’ll look surprised when you find out that we scrounged that technique from you.* He should’ve better concealed the smile, though, as he embarrassedly noticed that his reaction was out of place. The Mandalorians were probably thinking the same thing, but nobody showed. And unfortunately, the GA lieutenant noticed that.

“What’s so funny?”

“Um... if I were you, I’d not be offering my services to the very group of people who’s just taken me for a ride.” Once more, Macos was glad to have the gift of the gab. But he’d talked himself out of more hairy situations before, anyway. “But it’s up to you, anyway.”

Rios just shot him a fierce gaze, before Barec eventually answered, “Let’s call it a deal, then?”

The Feorin nodded and shook the hand Barec had offered him. “I’ll arrange everything and will be back in...,” he said and looked at his chrono, “... one and a half hours, if that’s okay with you.”

Barec acknowledged with a nod, and Rios left.

At least I’m no longer the only non-Mando, here, Macos thought as the door shut behind the Feorin.

Yuuzhan Vong warship UNDYING AGONY, darkspace

“They took the bait.”

“Very well,” Tzekon Lian replied to the report and cut off the villip connection. “Now we will crush them, both on Contruum and Gyndine.”

With a satisfied smile he left the villip chamber.

TRIALS AND ERRORS

CHAPTER III

Zo'Kalo Plaza, Contruum – two hours later

When he had been here three hours earlier, Ronan hadn't expected to be to Zo'Kalo Plaza so soon again. The sun had already begun its descent to make place for the night, but the activity on the plaza hadn't ceased yet. Once more, that feeling of the calm before the storm struck Ronan, it seemed to be hovering everywhere: on the catwalks, over the streets, under the flickering neon-lights of shops and buildings, more and more of which were beginning to open up the later the evening grew. The people here had to know that they would not stay untouched by the war forever, but did their best to ignore it. *The storm's coming sooner than you'd think...*

This time, however, they merged into the crowd without drawing any looks at all, even when the rancor of a man Gladus Tite was had still been with them. The team was disguised in loose-fitting casual clothing, most were still wearing their armor underneath, and bags with helmets and gauntlets swung over their shoulders. Unconcealed weapons like blasters and vibroswords were holstered to thighs and under shoulders, or in their owner's hands.

About half an hour ago, the group of Mandalorians, plus Fenix and Rios, had split up to follow different leads.

"Rumor has it," the GA lieutenant had announced, "there's a bunch of Peace Brigaders hiding right under our noses. We've been searching for their lair for the past few weeks, but they managed to keep a low profile. We already feared they had grown smart, but when word spread of a handful of Mandalorians in town and a Vong spy dead—" Rios had shot a glance at Gladus walking behind him, "—they jittered like a herd of nek dogs thrown into a cage with a krayt dragon. Sheesh, it's amazing they even reacted that soon, but all the better for us." He had turned and motioned the group to stop before continuing. "We had a lot of leads and potential spots, but our boys managed to narrow it down to two locations: the Open Palm, a dubious cantina—at least as dubious as its name, I'd guess—in the western suburbs, and a storehouse not far from here in the southwest. We'd best split up and check them out."

And so they had. After Rios had transferred the coordinates to their datapads, Ara, Sareth, Gladus and Fenix had left for the warehouse, with Rios, Jiriad, Skira and Ronan left heading to the pub. Communication was provided by nearly invisible beads in the ear as comlinks, so one group could catch up with the other once a discovery was made.

Striding next to Ronan, Altair Jiriad was now groaning. "Hmpf... my new armor will never see a Vong taking to his heels and making a run for it if it goes on like that."

Ronan suppressed a snigger. Armorer of both Ronan, Gladus, and of course his own armor, Jiriad was now the only one who couldn't disguise his armor under the clothes—the spikes would have pierced the fabric and stood out like abnormal skin mutations. He was going in pretty much unprotected now.

"I've told you to bring your old one," Ronan said. "But your pride wouldn't listen to me...."

"Pride...? No. If I wanted my armor to be an object to show off, I would've forged a shiny, blinding sample that would have exceeded everything ever seen before. Now I forged a dull, ugly and *vongyc* one that even scares the *osik* out of me every now and then when I open my locker to put it on. *Shab*, it's supposed to make a Vong jump out of his scarred and deformed skin, not *me*! And now it looks like it's gonna end up as an exhibit, after all." He growled sullenly, shaking the long dreadlocks out of his tanned face.

"Once we have 'em," Ronan reassured him with a mocking glance, "you can sprint back to the hotel and grab your armor. You'll probably be missing the fight then, though...."

Jiriad mumbled something inaudible and quickened his pace. Ronan wondered if he was working on a reply, but was interrupted by Rios, who had been chatting with Skira.

"We're close," the Feorin announced, and his gaze lingered over the three Mandalorians. "You probably won't like this, but you better stay here until I've observed the situation inside."

"You hit the mark," Ronan retorted harshly. "We don't like this. We haven't come here to lob about uselessly."

They had long left the plaza and entered one of the murkier and filthier parts of the city, where the kind of pedestrians had changed from businessmen, traders, and officers to smugglers, drunkards, homeless people, and the all other usual kind of scum.

As they turned the corner of a run-down barber shop, which grew into a wide alley, they were welcomed by the sight of what looked like a stray garbage dump in front of an abandoned industrial building, with a small doorway and a flickering white neon-logo above it, barely visible through the thick green dust. The logo showed an outstretched human hand that looked like it had been taken from the Peace Brigade symbol, only that the scarred counterpart of a Yuuzhan Vong hand was lacking. Below it ran outlined, unlit Huttese letters that read OPEN PALM INN. Ronan assessed that the alley was a dead end, although the pub had to have a back door.

Skira was the first to halt in front of a pile of trash over a manhole cover that reeked of death, vermin, urine and various dung, all in a nauseating mixture. Ronan grimaced and wrinkled his nose—he would give anything for his helmet's airfilters now. Jiriad's son lifted his collar over the nose, but the others didn't bother.

The young man with coarse, curly blond hair and a short, bristly goatee was carrying a pair of darkened goggles, which he put on, shifting his view over the whole expanse of the building front. "Don't have to do either," Skira said as he lifted the goggles to rest on his forehead again. "I can make out at least a handful of Vong signatures, and more so about a dozen of other species that probably are our sought Peace Brigaders."

Now it was Rios who grimaced as he stared to Skira. The teenager's special goggles were fitted with the same electronic visor mode that Gladus had used to spot the disguised Vong shortly before; the same visor mode utilized by Yuuzhan Vong Hunter droids of the Galactic Alliance. Extremely interested and skilled in computers and tech, Skira had been working with Gladus on implementing that visual sensor in his tech-laden goggles ever since Rios's departure from the hotel. The Intelligence officer hadn't exactly been delighted when the "big secret of detecting cloaked crab-boys" had turned out to be nothing new at all—it actually was a technology the GA already had at their disposal for a long time.

"Tell the others to get their butts over here ASAP, then," Rios demanded. "I'm going in anyway."

And before anyone could intervene, the Feeorin had vanished through the smog.

Ronan still didn't like it, but the lieutenant was probably doing the right thing. Numbers could deceive, and when the Feeorin agent was inside, he could at least assess the condition and armament of their opponents, what would only be of advantage for the group. Many of them were probably drunk or high on drugs, anyway.

Meanwhile, Jiriad had called the other half of the group, which would be arrive in half an hour. The dreadlocked Kiffar took his son aside and moved out of Ronan's earshot. It was a thing between father and son, something that didn't concern him. From the way the two were conversing, however, he could tell that it was of utmost importance to Jiriad.

After a few minutes, Rios returned from the cantina. He stood silently next to Ronan, waiting for the two to finish their conversation. Shortly, they did and approached Ronan and Rios, after Jiriad had reassuringly patted his son on the back. He nodded to Rios to report.

"Alright," the black-complected Feeorin said. His comlink was active, so the other group got the report as well. "I counted a total of thirteen individuals in the pub, probably a handful more are in adjoining rooms that are restricted for the normal patrons. Four humans, two of them unusually tall, a Wookiee, two Klatooinians—I'll bet my officer license those latter five are scarheads—an Elomin, three Nikto, an Aqualish and a Twi'lek. All males, and save for the suspected Vong, they aren't exactly sober. Their weaponry looks rather modest, nothing bigger than a heavy blaster pistol, but there could be larger arms under the counter or in other rooms. Mobilizing a police force to seize them is probably out of question, they'll surely notice, so I say we wait for the other bunch of you to get here and go in. Nobody will mourn a pack of Vong spies and kriffing collaborators take a trip below the ground, but we should try to leave at least one or two alive for interrogation."

Ronan nodded silently. The group would be here any minute, and they all had the possibility to use non-lethal means of taking out the *chakaar'e*. Nevertheless, he noticed that Rios chose his

words carefully, not to upset the Mandalorians. Ronan doubted Galactic Alliance Intelligence approved of a pile of corpses—instead of living suspects full of information—under normal conditions, but going in with a party of Mandos was not commonly taken as *normal condition*.

Rios looked around as nobody replied, but then Jiriad motioned him to cut the connection.

“That’s not how we do it,” Altair said after Rios complied. “There’s only one of us going in, and he’s going in *now*.” He gestured to his son. “Skira still hasn’t gone through the one final trial to become a man and a warrior, and now the time’s ripe for his *verd’goten*. Six *Mando’ade* is overkill for only a heap of *osik’la* drunkards, anyway.” The tone in his voice implied a finality that made clear he could not be convinced otherwise.

It didn’t exactly surprise Ronan, he had been expecting something along those lines after the private conversation between father and son. He gave Skira an approving pat on the shoulder. The young man was two years over the standard age when the *verd’goten*, the trials for the rite of passage, was usually celebrated, returning a boy or a girl a grown man or woman and true *Mando’ad*, Son or Daughter of Mandalore. Although Skira had already passed the majority of tests, Jiriad had kept one final task for his boy before he would recognize him as an adult. And now the time was ripe, like Jiriad had put it, for the boy to undergo the final trial, a test that was under real field conditions and not to be taken lightly. It was a lethal task, one that even a grown Mando warrior shouldn’t underestimate, but the fact that the hostiles were only halfway conscious and battle-ready, as well as the advantage of surprise on Skira’s side, made it an assignment that was not impossible to accomplish. And if Skira thought it too hard, he could easily refuse, after all.

Rios obviously thought otherwise as he frowned disapprovingly. But how could an *aruetii*, and outsider, ever understand?

“This time it’s me who doesn’t like it,” the Feeorin said with an ever-so-slight tone of desperation in his guttural voice, “but it’s too late for me to stop you from it, anyway, isn’t it?” He swallowed hard.

Jiriad ignored him and rested his hands on Skira’s shoulders, looking his son in the eye with a caring, fatherly glance to encourage him. After what seemed like hours, the boy gave a slight nod and turned to the cantina. All what needed to be said had been said, there was no need for further words.

Jiriad turned to Ronan with glittering wet eyes while his son disappeared through the dense smoke, just like Rios had a couple of minutes before.

“He will make your clan proud,” Ronan said to his friend as they heard the dull hiss of the opening door in the distance. “*Kaysh ven piruni sur’haaise*.” He will make their eyes water.

Ronan gave him a comradely pat on the back as another hiss indicated the door had slid shut. The young man was on his own now.

Now that he contemplated about it again, Ronan thought that maybe it wasn’t such a good idea at all. He had a bad feeling about this. Things were going too smoothly, too easily, too obvious that it could be wholesome. And then there was the fact that the whole location literally smelled of an ambush, being a dead end, easy to observe, and all. But it was Skira’s and Jiriad’s decision, nobody else had a word in their choices.

Silently, the three of them approached the cantina and went into a corner a few meters away from the door, trying to avoid the reeking garbage.

There was nothing to do but wait for the door to open again. Who came out, however, was another question entirely.

If Skira was in danger, he’d call for help over their shared comm frequency. Or at least that was what Ronan hoped Jiriad had told his son.

The nauseating stink already reached Macos Fenix’s nose before he and the other three—Ara, her husband and Gladus—even turned the corner to the alley in which the cantina lay. Salem Rios’s statement that this was a *dubious* place was a sheer understatement, and what the ex-bounty hunter saw could not in any way be called a “cantina.”

Trying to ignore the reek as best as he could, he caught up with the other three through the green, gloomy smog, while avoiding to step into heaps of garbage and dung.

What in the Nine Hells of Corellia is this place?

He figured that the answer was as simple as his question: what else could you expect from a bar swarming with Peace Brigaders?

He could make out three figures leaning against a wall in a corner several meters away from the door. *Three figures? Wait. Shouldn't that be four figures?*

The only ones he saw were Ronan Barec, Altair Jiriad and Salem Rios. *But...*

"Where's Skira?" Sareth Karr, Ara's husband, finished his thought. "Isn't he supposed to be with you?"

Nobody said a word. Barec flashed a thumb at the door.

Oh, you've got to be kidding me!

Macos looked at Sareth, Ara and Gladus, but found nothing in their expressions that conveyed his own feelings. They seemed to approve on the boy going into a lair crawling with enemies, all on his own.

Kark it, those Mandos are driving me crazy...

"What's going on?" he asked hectically. "Why didn't he wait for us?" No one answered. "Hello?! You've just sent a young man to certain death! And all you bunch can do is nod silently and look away. What is it with you people?!"

Ara glared at him furiously. She wasn't the only one, and Macos started to regret his words.

But he didn't give a damn. There was a teenager in a pub of drunken criminals and a handful of Yuuzhan Vong, and if the ever-so-great Mandalorians didn't want to do something about it, then Macos would take matters into his own hands.

He scowled at them one last time. He drew his heavy blaster pistol and headed for the door.

He managed only a few steps before something heavy jerked at his shoulders and he crashed to the ground, back first. Macos spun to see the giant figure of Gladus Tite looming over him. The mountain of a man reached down and forcefully grabbed both of Macos's upper arms with a grip like iron pincers. Then the bearded man yanked him upright and pushed him back into the corner, pressing his arms tightly to his back.

"You wanna get in there and die a miserable death?" the deep, harsh voice whispered from behind. "That's fine with me, but you don't put Skira's life in jeopardy."

Macos was nonplussed. Now it was *him* who was about to die in there. He could just about keep himself from bursting out laughing at this ridiculousness.

But then Ara stepped forward and narrowed her eyes on him, with an expression he couldn't quite place.

"Altair's son has been waiting for this for over *two years*," she said in a strict, deadpan tone. "When he steps out of that door," she pointed at the Palm's entrance, "the boy returns a grown adult, a fully trained warrior and a true Son of Mandalore by Mando reckoning. And *you*—" Her eyes narrowed even more, to an extent Macos hadn't imagined physically possible. "—are not going to spoil his final rite of passage. The *verd'goten* is a matter between the child and his parents only. *No one* interferes."

"But he is going to *die* in there. You can't just...." His words trailed off as his determination faded. He glances over the shoulder, only to stare into the ice in Gladus's dark, poison-green eyes. That daunted him even more—like everything else in this strange man's totally unemotional behavior.

"But the odds...." he started as he faced Ara again. "Everything is against him. Where is the glory in dying for nothing, when his comrades are right around the corner to help him survive? There is no martyrdom in fighting a bunch of filthy, low-life scumbags."

"Better watch your mouth," Ara retorted, "it will get you killed sooner than you'd like to think." She paused, and then continued with a little less tension, "It is the decision of Skira and Altair alone, and there is no going back. We can't ask you to understand our customs, but we do ask you respect them. If you can't, then go back right where you came from." With finality, she pointed to the exit of the alley.

"I... I..." Macos said, "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to upset you—any of you." He looked in the round of deadpan faces. They had been watching with folded arms. "I better keep my mouth shut for now."

"Finally a sound decision," came Tite's harsh voice as he released Macos.

It was only when the ex-bounty hunter turned to retrieve his blaster that he heard shouts, damped blaster shots and punches coming from the inside every now and then. At least that meant the boy was still alive, otherwise the fight would be over.

If only we could check on his status...

He suppressed a curse as he went to a wall and leaned against it, next to Rios, turning away from the Mandalorians but keeping an eye on the doorway. When he leaned down to rest his hands on his knees, more out of desperation than of fatigue, a thought struck him. There was a possibility to check Skira's status, he just needed to figure out his personal frequency so that the others wouldn't hear him.

But before he could work on anything, the sound of something hard hitting the door from the inside sounded from the cantina, and everyone left the corner to form a half circle a handful of meters in front of the door. Macos looked at the others and frowned, but they didn't pay attention to him and had their weapons drawn. Sareth and Ara even tore the tunics from their armor suits and put on the helmets and wrist-guards that had been stuffed in their bags.

After the thud against the door, there was only silence, which meant that this was close to be over. The rusty door slid open with a hiss.

It took Macos a moment to realize that he had dropped his blaster and raised both hands to his mouth in shock. What he saw was not good at all.

In the doorway stood a red-complected Nikto, wearing what looked like an ancient Imperial uniform. The wrinkled alien was holding up a long vibrodagger over his head in triumph, an evil smile on his creasy face.

The only sound audible at present was the humming of the Nikto's weapon. The alien's smile soon turned into a boiling expression of shock and anger at the sight of the Mandalorians. Now Macos noticed that blood was dripping from the dagger.

Shock was written into everyone's face as well—save for Tite, who was wearing his standard deadpan mask. Most of all, on Jiriad's face, whose eyes were wide open. The father of a son who he had probably sent to his doom was on his knees, his back crooked and grace destroyed.

But then another sound broke the silence. The sound of a blaster. And the sound was coming from *behind* the Peace Brigadier, from the inside of the Open Palm.

Once more, the Nikto's expression changed, now into a look of horror. Then smoke soared from the alien's back, and his body dropped to the ground with a dull thump.

Macos saw Jiriad raise his head with reignited fire in his eyes, as through the doorway stepped his son.

Ronan was a little puzzled why nobody had shot the Nikto when they had first spotted him. Probably because the whole situation was more than odd, and he had been taken off-guard himself.

He felt for Altair, as the father of a now grown man managed to get back on his feet, tears of joy in his eyes. Father and son were gazing at each other intimately, but nobody moved.

"*K'oyaci!* This night will be celebrated and long remembered!" Jiriad called out, his voice filled with pride. "*Kandosii bora, Skir'ika!* Come to me, *ner verd'ad*, you are now a warrior like the rest of us. I never should have had you wait that long. *Mar'e*, now that you are a man, I have a task of great importance for you."

Skira put up a wide grin. "What? Like twice the heap of *di'kutla chakaar'e?*"

For the flicker of a second, there was a dark blur behind the young Mandalorian, but it was enough to pump the adrenaline into Ronan's veins. With that came the odd sensation that time was beginning to slow down.

With no notable sound whatsoever, an unidentifiable black *thing* came flashing out of Skira's torso, together with a splash of crimson red blood. Skira never had a chance to get a look at his attacker, or to express any emotion whatsoever. He died instantly. Supported by the black object reaching out of his chest, right where his heart sat, however, the body did not drop.

And then Ronan realized in shock what the object was. A perverse mutation of an amphistaff that looked like it had come straight out of a nightmare, its serpent-like head baring its teeth and spitting a bit of poison to the ground.

An icy chill crawled up the marksman's spine as he made out who the attacker was: a broadshouldered Yuuzhan Vong warrior, no six feet tall—what could be considered small for a

Vong. He completely lacked the common vonduun-crab armor, wearing nothing but a waist-wrap. His skin, however, looked very unusual in itself and was smeared with what appeared to be black blood—Yuuzhan Vong blood. Long, claw-like talons pierced out of the unusual warrior’s knuckles, and he was holding an odd version of a coufee in his other hand. On his scarred face sat the same evil grin as on the Nikto before, but he did not at all seem scared by the sight of half a dozen Mandalorians.

Ronan glanced at Altair. He felt guilty for not feeling anything for the boy’s death, yet. *It’s gotta be the adrenaline.* A silent cry was forming on Jiriad’s lips, his features a haunting display of blank horror, unable to even force a sound, as though he was choking for air as he dropped back onto his knees. Tears were running down his tanned face, but in his eyes burned an all-devouring fury that seemed to be a culmination of all the suffering, the pain and the wrath the now broken man had endured in his life. And all that rage was directed straight at the Yuuzhan Vong. At all Yuuzhan Vong.

Everyone else had his weapons trained on the single scarhead, shock and dismay written on their faces, but they didn’t fire. The abomination of a Vong was still holding Skira’s corpse as though it was a living shield—only that it was dead. Ronan had to shudder at the misplaced and morbid thought.

The first one to break the silence was Gladus, whose face was, for once, not deadpan. He did not, however, show signs of shock or fear, like everyone else did. There was an every-so-slight touch of reverence, even *satisfaction* in his expression.

Ronan scowled. *That’s the expression of a man who’s finally found a worthy adversary.*

“Slayers. I’ve seen them before, on Caluula.” Gladus’s deep voice sounded as though it was coming from somewhere far away, not from the burly man next to Ronan. “They’re like Jedi. Only better...”

His voice trailed off as he noticed that Jiriad had struggled back to his feet, in his hands a long, thin object wrapped in lines. His *beskad*, Ronan recognized, his traditional Mandalorian saber, an ancient weapon rarely seen nowadays. The only other persons who sported one Ronan knew were Goran Beviin and Gladus Tite.

Only then Ronan realized what Altair Jiriad was up to. The burning rage around his pupils was embanked by the expanding white of his eyes, and they were sparkling with a hint of frenzy. Ronan’s old friend was thirsty. Thirsty for blood.

Simultaneously with Gladus, Ronan stormed towards the rabid Kiffar. His sword was unwrapped now, and he raised it above his head, eventually managing to get a sound through his sore throat.

And what a sound.

His ear-piercing scream of pain and wrath was beyond anything Ronan had ever heard, and it even seemed to frighten the ever-so-mighty Yuuzhan Vong Slayer.

Before the two men could reach Jiriad, the scarhead finally hauled his thick amphistaff out of Skira’s chest and pushed the body to the ground. Even while the body was falling, the Vong stepped out into the open, to the left of the door, and raised his amphistaff in a defensive stance.

And then another Slayer appeared through the doorway, posing himself opposite to his next-of-kin in the same posture.

Not. Good.

Jiriad must have missed that, because he carried on and was about to waste his life in a futile attempt to attack the deadly Vong breeds. Just in time, Gladus and Ronan managed to reach and detain him, dragging him back into the half circle. Altair’s screams did not cease, though.

After what seemed like a lifetime, the broken man finally stopped his struggles to escape the grip and dropped on his back. The screams were now replaced by quiet sobs as the Mandalorian writhed on the ground, mourning for his killed son.

To say it shocked Ronan to see a man, a *warrior*, so utterly broken was an understatement. Jiriad’s rage against the Vong nearly converted to Ronan as he felt his own blood boil in fury. That was what the Yuuzhan Vong were doing to them. That, and worse, was what they were doing to the *whole galaxy*.

But Ronan had enough experience in this to know that his emotions would get him killed in a situation like this. Rarely encountered before, the Slayers were an unknown quantity, and when even a man like Gladus Tite had a kind of respect for them, then he had all good reason to shiver.

He wasn't an especially good swordfighter, anyway. Gladus, on the other hand, had killed Jedi before Ronan had even been able to carry the weight of a sword.

Gladus was taking a few steps forward, his face once more unemotional, his eyes predator-like fixed on the scarheads, who remained waiting like stiff statues for the Mandalorians to make their move. Gladus was holding his own *beskad's* scabbard in both hands now, slowly turning to face the group behind him. His expression showed determination and had an ordering feel to it.

He said one word.

"Run!"

Then the bearded Mandalorian drew his short saber and threw the sheath to the side. He lifted the heavy sword out of pure Mandalorian iron to a stance that was completely unfamiliar to Ronan, and outstretched his left arm to wink the Slayers to him. But he was still hesitating.

He's mad! Two of those Vong'jetii are too much for him to take.

But Ronan didn't bother. If Gladus wanted a challenge, Ronan wouldn't hold him up. But he didn't exactly want to be around when the Slayers cut down the expert swordsman and went to prey on the others.

He would follow Gladus's order.

Tite still hadn't opened his hand to beckon the Slayers, probably waiting for the others to leave before he started the fight. And even as Ronan turned to do just that, time seemed to slow down again as a high dose of adrenaline flooded into his arteries.

The reason were three different volleys of shots banging and rocketing through the dense smog behind them, searing the air as they flew past the group of Mandos, past Gladus and straight towards the Slayers. One of the rounds was of high-energetic blaster fire, the distinctive whine of which made a cog register in Ronan's brain, but he was too busy to further think about it. The two other rounds were nearly soundless, one a hardly visible, extremely accelerated particle that had to have been fired from a Verpine shattergun. The last round was in fact invisible and had only caught Ronan's attention because of the air it had sent swirling around a narrow path in the dense smoke. What weapon had fired it, however, he did not know, and right now didn't exactly care to know, either. As a sniper, Ronan simply had a trained eye and recognized these few details within the second it took the shots to pounce on the Slayers' amphistaffs.

With a speed that would have even made a Jedi gaze in awe, the two biologically advanced Yuuzhan Vong raised their organic weapons to deflect the bolts, in a fashion just like a Jedi would. Ronan had never seen a Vong perform an action like that before, let aside any other kind of being.

The blaster round was sent stray into a building by the Vong on the left, where it deflagrated harmlessly. The two other rounds, however, got through. The other Vong did indeed raise his amphistaff in time to catch the shattergun's projectile, but the slug was so fast and tiny that it pierced the organic equivalent to a lightsaber and came out on the other side, however slowed down enough to just bounce off the Slayer's protective skin uselessly, leaving nothing but a bruise.

The Slayer on the left was not so lucky. While he had deflected the first blaster bolt, he did—self-explanatory—not see the invisible one coming. Ronan didn't see it either, but when a thud hit the Vong's shoulder and nearly sent him swirling around, he knew the shot had hit the mark. The injured Vong barked something in the guttural Vong language and teamed up with the other one to advance on Gladus, who no longer had the need for beckoning anyone.

Ronan looked at the others and motioned them not to fire—the reflected bolts could hit one of them.

He beckoned the group to make a run, as much as he regretted to. Gladus would be able to hold the Vong long enough, and then there were also the three mysterious shooters whose weapons had proven to be surprisingly effective against those Jedi-like Vong.

Now, as he turned to the alley exit, he saw three figures in distinctive Mandalorian armor step through the gloomy dust, and it struck him why the blaster shot had sounded so familiar—it was the peculiar whine of a BlasTech EL-20 carbine that had been modified with a "disintegrate"

setting, and Ronan knew of only one Mandalorian who carried such a weapon: Eclan Graven¹, a Mandalore-born mercenary he'd occasionally worked with in the past.

His thoughts were confirmed an instant later as his eyes registered the sober black stripes decorating the distinctive dark blue supercommando armor of the lead figure; Graven's personal identification markings.

He did not recognize the two next to Eclan, but he figured they had to be Kaz Koban, a reclusive armorsmith he didn't know much about except through hearsay, and Joras Navhett, a wisecracking explosives fanatic clad in shrill yellow armor with fanglike black stripes. Navhett was sporting the suspected Verp, while the Wookiee-sized Koban toted a heavily customized blaster rifle that looked tiny in his massive arms, and from the looks of it had started its life as a Clone Wars-era DC-15.

Of the three, Ronan knew only Graven personally, and not especially well, all things considered, but trusted him nonetheless. The other two were a different story. Ronan liked to keep himself up to date on the doings and personal histories of any and all Mandalorian mercs whom he might find useful to recruit for specific missions, but he knew less than he would have liked about either Koban or Navhett, except that that the one was rarely known to leave his home in a converted Imperial junkyard, and the other was an especially eccentric member of the powerful Navhett clan. All three had been operating together independently of other Mandalorian forces since just before the war, and no one ever really knew exactly when, where or why they'd turn up next.

Well, today's just full of surprises, Ronan thought, admittedly a little baffled. And it wasn't exactly every day that something surprised the former special forces commando. But now the three newcomers had caught up with him, and other thoughts occupied his mind.

"Get moving," Graven grunted as he passed by, not stopping for introductions, "the scarheads are *mine*."

While the others continued to withdraw, Ronan stood still as the three charged ahead to meet the enemy. Having just swung his rifle over his back, Graven was grabbing a cylindrical object from his belt, and with a sharp *snap-hiss*, the flash of a scarlet-bladed lightsaber leaped into fiery life in Eclan's hand.

Yuuzhan Vong warship UNDYING AGONY, darkspace

Tzekon Lian struggled with himself as he paced the organic corridors towards the bridge. Commander Rulaak Tsun, commander of the *Undying Agony* and supervisor on counter-Mandalorian operations, would not be pleased with the news.

Lian himself had only just received them a handful of minutes ago, but not from the mole among the Mandalorians: a filthy Peace Brigadier had reported that they had been detected. So much was good news because that had been the plan, but what happened then had infuriated Tzekon Lian so much that he had grabbed his coufee and sliced the villip in two halves.

He paced through the door membrane the instant it started to retract, and approached the commander, who was currently busy on the bridge. Lian interrupted him anyway.

"What is it?" Rulaak Tsun grunted.

"We can forget Contruum," Tzekon Lian started his report, "and should focus all our attention on smashing them here on Gyndine. They are supposed to arrive soon, after all."

"Tell me what happened on Contruum, *subaltern!*" The commander was rather barking than talking now. "NOW!"

Lian gulped, but didn't waver. "They got the bait, but instead of devouring it with a single bite, they vivisected it and only snapped the tasty parts." He paused, wondering if his metaphoric speech was such a good idea. "Only one Brigadier and the two Slayers survived, so far, but latter are in jeopardy and face additional reinforcements to the hostile group." He paused, not feeling able to actually phrase this. "One of them is a *Jeedai*."

¹ Eclan Graven and Kaz Koban are characters created by [Quiet Mandalorian](#); Joras Navhett is a character by [Kenobi Kid](#)

THE MAVERICK, THE ODDBALL AND THE DEADEYE

CHAPTER IV

In front of the OPEN PALM INN, Contruum

It took Ronan a moment to take in the oddity of the scene, and assure himself it was for real.

After he had first bumped into Eclan Graven a few years ago and worked with him on a job, he had been quick to learn that the Mandalorian bounty hunter was a trustworthy person. But for Ronan, trust wasn't earned lightly, especially not because back then he had still been with the Shirok police special operations department, ShenCresh Ops. One of the main tasks of his unit had been to deal with the widest variety of criminals, and the gun-for-hire Graven didn't have the cleanest slate. In his research on Graven's background, Ronan had dug deep enough to find out about Eclan's short-lived Jedi training. On the few other occasions he had worked with him again, however, Ronan had never addressed Graven on that particular bit of his past.

But now there he was, charging at one of the Slayers, his red lightsaber gripped, not in the manner of a typical Jedi, but in that of the classic Mandalorian swordsman.

Ronan wasn't the only one to be taken aback at the sight. The two Yuuzhan Vong had stopped dead at the spectacle of the Mandalorian Jedi.

But while Ronan was left in passive marvel, Graven's two companions had already taken position behind a knocked-over garbage container and were nailing the Slayer Eclan was closing on with a heavy barrage of blaster and slugthrower fire while they still could.

A question was starting to form in Ronan's mind as to why they hadn't also taken the other Slayer in their line of fire, but the answer revealed itself to him before he had even finished the thought.

Gladus was already in combat with the Yuuzhan Vong who had slain Skira, and although Ronan appreciated that the former assassin was in to avenge the murder of his brother-in-arms's son, he didn't regard it as Gladus's wisest decision. His opponent was the taller and apparently more skilled Slayer of the two. But Gladus had started taking action only fractions of a second after "the cavalry" had arrived—as a matter of fact, right after Kaz Koban's invisible blaster bolt had nearly pivoted the Slayer around—and so he had the advantage of surprise on his side, at least for the beginning of their duel. And Gladus's reaction to the sudden change of circumstances, exceptionally quick for a "normal" man, reminded Ronan of his lack thereof.

Snap out of it, you're getting out of practice.

With this advice from his military-drilled mind, Ronan eventually managed to break the chains of his bafflement and let the instinct and experience gained by many years of training and engagement gain control of him.

The first thing he did was to tear off his disguise clothes and to put on both helmet and gauntlets from his backpack, while carefully watching the action that was under way several dozen meters ahead of him, in front of the battered Open Palm Inn.

Koban and Navhett had since halted their suppressing fire, as Graven was now in a blindingly fast duel with the second Slayer, pacing and dancing back and forth as his opponent leaped and somersaulted all around him. The Mandalorian Jedi was working to confuse his opponent by sudden, but fluid changes of fighting styles and stances. Time and again, their moves put enough distance between them to give Graven's companions a chance to hose down the Vong with further precision fire. The shots were mainly coming from Koban, and each of his invisible blaster bolts did a number on the Slayer, confusing him and making him lose focus. Nevertheless, that didn't take him down, didn't even cause any serious wounds.

Gladus wasn't having quite such an "easy" time without the Force as his aide, and despite being a remarkably athletic and acrobatic man for his large, muscle-packed build and advanced age, he couldn't quite cope with the seemingly supernatural abilities of his genetically modified adversary.

He was in more need of support than Graven, and although Koban, whose expertise at sharpshooting was apparently second only to his skill at armorsmithing, was trying to get shots at

Gladus's Slayer as well, he could only truly focus on one target at a time. And there was still Joras Navhett, who had just abandoned his Verp in favor of two vicious-looking vibroknives that popped out of his wristguards. He was glancing over at Gladus's duel, already making efforts to stand up. But something seemed to make Navhett change his mind, as he shook his helmeted head and reversed the action, snapping the blades back and retrieving his shattergun. At least, he gave a salvo from it while he still had a clean shot.

It was for Ronan now to come to Gladus's aid. The former special forces sniper had donned his helmet and activated visual filters to improve his sight through the dense dust, and in the increasing darkness of the dawning night. Unslinging his EE-23, he rummaged through his belt pouches for a high caliber ammo pack. Once he found it, he rammed it into the rifle's mag, and pushed the capacitor that switched the gun from energy to particle mode. Ronan didn't know the Slayer's armor in detail, but it was surely nothing less protective than vonduun crab shells. Nonetheless, he wasn't going to take chances with the highest caliber ammo, either. Too large a projectile might only send fragments ricocheting everywhere when it hit solid armor, shrapnel that could still inflict blunt trauma wounds on his comrades even if it couldn't penetrate their *beskar'gam*.

While steadily moving backwards to gather distance from the fights, he adjusted the marksman rifle via further switches and knurls for medium-caliber fire, set the effective range to below 150 meters, and decreased the velocity to the prevent bullets from shattering on impact and causing ricochets. He could have completed all that a lot quicker hadn't there been his aversion for excessive use of technical gizmos. BlasTech did offer the possibility to wire EE-23 modular weapon systems to armor suit systems such as a Mandalorian supercommando armor, but Ronan preferred to leave things like that to his own skill and manual control rather than to a computer. That was also why he went without the use of a 360-degree peripheral vision that usually came with every "good" Mandalorian helmet. He wanted to have all his focus on his natural field of view, and didn't relish being distracted by the overflow of input caused by electronically augmented senses. Some might call that narrow-minded, since their helmet gizmos worked for them all right, but they weren't professional snipers, and probably for a reason.

Now that he had finished prepping his weapon, Ronan crouched down and peered through the rifle's scope to zoom in on Gladus. Once he had a crisp image and saw that the two were too close to each other to get a safe shot, he swiveled the crosshair over to Graven. The lightsaber-wielding Mandalorian was currently in mid-air, while the Slayer was performing a series of backflips. Ronan saw his chance. Focusing on the target, he breathed in deeply, then held his breath and gently squeezed the trigger.

As expected, the recoil was remarkable, but not quite powerful enough to unbalance him. For once, he was grateful for his helmet gadgets, as the audio filters dampened the raucous uproar of discharge. Checking through his scope again, he could confirm a hit, if an immensely close one.

A fraction of a heartbeat before the Vong had come up from his last flip, Ronan had fired at where he had anticipated the warrior's chest to be when the shot reached him. A headshot would have been best, but Ronan didn't take chances. He had aimed for center mass, and was lucky that the projectile still hit the Slayer's ribs, because an inch more to the right and it would have been nothing but a graze. The impact had sent the Yuuzhan Vong whirling to the ground, face first, and as he struggled to get up again, his head spun around in fury, trying to make out where the shot had come from.

There was no visible wound any longer, even though Ronan had seen blood spatter when the shot had hit, but it gave Graven the edge to act on it, and act on it he did. But the Slayer dodged the vibroknife hurled at his throat with an extraordinary reaction. Ronan would've had a beautiful shot now, but his carbine was still charging up.

"Kark it!" he cursed silently. But he had himself to blame, potent firepower didn't come without its costs—long waits for the next shot were one of them.

Navhett and Koban, however, didn't have that disadvantage, and they were quick to show that to the Slayer, who didn't get an opportunity to focus again. The barrage hit him like a ronto kick, and he barely managed to block some of the Verp projectiles with his amphistaff, much less the invisible blaster rounds.

But that mutated osik of a crab-boy ain't dumb, Ronan realized as the Slayer started evasive action, once he was on his feet again. A faint click from his weapon told Ronan that it had fully charged up, but the timing of the rifle almost seemed to be mocking him. With unpredictable leaps and rolls, the Vong became impossible to hit, and within a matter of seconds, he was engaged with Graven again, setting a pace that the Force-user barely managed to keep up with, and never putting enough distance between them to make a good target.

Well here's the news, your enemy's adaptable, too...

Ronan allowed himself a brief sigh before he took the other duel in his sights again. It wasn't likely that the other Slayer had noticed his companion's change of tactics, seeing that he was busy himself. But Gladus and the Slayer were as close as they could get in their harsh sword play, and both already showed several ugly bruises.

There was no chance to get a shot this way, especially not while Ronan was on the same level as his target. He needed to find an elevated position to get a drop on the Slayers from above. He released the scope, and gave the buildings nearby another look. He didn't need to look far before he spotted it. An old factory building of sorts on the left side of the alley had an emergency stairway coming from the roof of the four-storied structure. And that was just what he needed, as it would get him also closer, at least below a hundred meters from the duels, what was perfect for an urban environment like this.

So he sprinted to the ladder, but it started at least three feet above him, and didn't appear to be extendable from below. Yet he could not waste time to find a switch now, and without further hesitation, Ronan slung his rifle over his shoulder and jumped, grabbing the lowest rung with both hands and steadily clambering his way up. The rusty durasteel strained and groaned under his rhythmic climbing motions, but eventually he reached the lowest level of the stairway. Dusting off his gloves, he started to make his way up the stairs, when the comm crackled.

"Ronan, this is Ara," a steady female voice replaced the noise, "we've made it to an abandoned storehouse a few blocks down, and Altair's already recovering, at least after we pumped enough sedative to tranquilize a reek into him. He stopped screaming long enough to say he wants something from you."

"Listen, Ara, I don't have time fo—"

"He's *very* pressing," she interrupted. "Says he wants Skira's body back, and more importantly, he wants you to keep that Slayer *alive*."

Great. Now an enraged father who's lost it starts demanding personal revenge. Just what I need.

Ronan had since reached the roof and was looking for a good spot to go prone, toting his rifle again.

"That ain't exactly a possibility, you can tell him. Gladus is on him, and it won't stop until one or the other of 'em has bit the dust. And Altair's not gonna get 'lucky' and see Gladus lose the fight." He paused, as he hadn't found a good position, yet. There was a low wall running the edge of the ceiling to prevent people from just stepping into the depth, but it also prevented any proper prone positions. "Actually, maybe he will, if I don't help him out. Listen, we'll get Skira's body once this is over, but there's no way that Slayer makes it out alive, he's too much of an unknown quantity."

"And that's *why* Altair wants him alive," Ara retorted swiftly, "so that we can make these new *jetiyvongese* a *known* quantity."

Ronan grimaced. He didn't like her tone, but Altair was right, even though that surely wasn't his main reason.

"I'm sorry, but I can't contact Gladus now, he hasn't donned his helmet. He really needs supporting fire, and he needs it *now*. I don't care whether that *shabla* Vong makes it or not, but I won't let one of us die because of him. I'd love to get my hands one of 'em as badly as Altair, but right now, that's out of question. I'll get back to you when this is over, but I don't have time for this now. Ronan out."

He had headed back to the stairway during the conversation, and was now lying flat on the durasteel grill of the top platform, steadying his rifle on the edge, and taking aim through the scope. The EE-23's rangefinder readout said ninety-four meters, an excellent distance. He could see that Graven's fight had even gathered pace now, with his opponent nearly running mad, but neither could gain the upper hand. Gladus, however, was more and more driven back by the Vong

warrior, but at least their combat allowed more distance between each other, and that should give Ronan an opening. Right now, however, they were too closely engaged, so he just watched.

Gladus was wielding his heavy *beskad* in one hand, letting him land blows both swift and with a good deal of power behind them. He nearly scored as many hits on his foe as the Slayer on him, but as Ronan zoomed in after one such blow, he could see the wound vanishing from the Vong's thick, supple skin within a matter of seconds.

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"Regener-kriffing-ating skin?!" Ronan blew a brief whistle through his teeth. *Osik. Looks like I have to go for headshots, after all. Their scarred heads don't look like they have the same level of protection.*

But he didn't have an opportunity for a shot like that, yet, in either of the duels, so once more he was forced into passive observation. Though, this might perhaps be worth something later on, since his helmet and his rifle's scope were still A/V recording everything he was seeing through either of them.

The Slayer was just using his monstrous amphistaff as a whip to lash out at Gladus's feet, when the large Mandalorian somersaulted into the air, bringing down his *beskad* on the Vong's left shoulder. The bulky alien managed to avoid that swipe, but as he dodged with a brief backwards cartwheel, his amphistaff was still in loose whip form, and was swinging up into the air, where it crossed the way of Gladus's strike. The Mandalorian's sword connected with the most vulnerable part of the elastic organic weapon, and promptly severed its serpent-like head. As Gladus's feet reconnected with the ground, the Slayer was long back on his, his short coufee drawn and the slack, dying amphistaff switched to the left.

To stop the Vong from attacking and catching Gladus off guard, Ronan used the opening. Once again, he focused and unhurriedly squeezed the trigger. But he didn't hit. The Slayer had simply ducked to avoid the shot. In an incredible, jaw-dropping reaction.

Ronan scowled. *Okay, no more headshots for now, waste of ammo...*

But that little distraction for the Slayer had been enough to give Gladus an opening in turn. Clasp his *beskad* two-handed, the bearded man darted ahead. He feinted with an attack to the left, but ducked under the lashed-out amphistaff, and came up from his roll on the Slayer's left instead. Too swift for Ronan to properly make out, Gladus brought down his sword, slashing through the Vong's left forearm.

The last thing Ronan perceived was an ear-shattering scream of outrage—not of pain, so much was evident—from the alien, before his attention was drawn elsewhere. In the corner of the crosshair, Ronan had made out a slow motion, one that couldn't be related to the duels. And it wasn't, as he realized after swaying the reticule to the door of the Open Palm and zooming in. An ugly, shabby human man covered in blood was indolently crawling through the open entrance, one of his arms raised high, using only one to pull himself onward.

Ronan swallowed hard. In his lifted hand, the Peace Brigader was holding a primed thermal detonator, his thumb pressed onto the activator, clearly on dead man's switch. And no one save Ronan had noticed him, but he was dangerously close to Eclan and the Slayer, whose fight was going on as ferociously as ever. The wounded Brigader seemed unable to hurl the grenade, however, and was steadily crawling towards the two. But that spawned a plan in Ronan's mind.

With a few voice-issued commands, Ronan established a short-ranged directional comm connection, after releasing the scope and tilting his head in the direction of the two Mandalorian mercenaries. Since the connection was directional, Ronan made sure that no one else could pick up the comm traffic other than the receiver he was directly looking at, which in this case was Kaz Koban.

"Koban, this is Ronan, the bloke on that catwalk," he spoke into the internal helmet comlink. "I need to talk to Graven, so please send me the data of your comm channel over another directional link ASAP."

A few dozen meters away from him on the ground, Koban's helmet turned to face Ronan. There was a brief nod, and an instant later the frequency and password of the three mercs' shared comm channel popped up on Ronan's HUD. Koban added, "There you go."

"Vor'e, Koban," Ronan thanked him after logging into the new channel, then turned his head back to the scope and zoomed in once more. "Graven, do you copy? Barec here. This won't take much time."

“Better... make sure it doesn’t,” Graven’s voice came back after a few moments, delayed by sharp in- and exhales and the unsteady hiss of his lightsaber, “cause I don’t... *have time.*”

“I need you to drive that Slayer back towards the Inn, there’s a downed Brigader with a prepped dead-man-wired thermo who’s real jumpy to play suicide bomber on you. Point is, I have him in my crosshairs, and once that Vong’s in a safe radius, I can make sure the *dead* man’s going to trigger off the detonator.”

“Sounds like a blast, Barec. Just tell me... when I better run.”

With that, Eclan left the conversation to turn his attention back to working on the Slayer. Through the scope, Ronan saw Graven quickening his pace while he put a good bit more force behind his strikes, but the Slayer managed to keep up with him—he barely even budged.

Meanwhile, the injured Peace Brigader had made a few feet progress out of the Palm’s entrance, but not enough to get into the proximity of the duelers. There was no telling what blast radius this particular thermal detonator had, but at least five meters were standard. If it was more, however...

Well, then it’s going to get hot for you, Graven.

“You might want to keep your Jedi sense extra cautious,” Ronan added over the comm. “*Ret’lini, burc’ya.*” Just in case.

He didn’t get a reply from Graven, but he hadn’t expected one. The other Mandalorian was making headway of his own, now, using blows that required extra acrobatics to dodge. But the Slayer was savvy enough not to give way easily, having learned the dire consequences earlier. So, Eclan had to stay close to him to forge ahead, and he was doing so quite nimbly. Meter by meter, they were advancing towards the Open Palm Inn, sometimes dropping back but overall, getting closer and closer. Exhaustion was starting to show in the movement of both of them, as the fight had been going on for quite a while now, and it was clear that this was coming to a close; however, the Slayer was less likely to be the first to lose by exhaustion, why it was about time someone dealt with him.

But within in a few seconds, all the progress the Mandalorian Jedi had made was rendered useless, as the Slayer managed to land a slam with his left, so hard that it sent Graven a few feet flying. And to avoid an upcoming attack, Eclan had to retreat even further after getting back to his feet, increasing the distance to the Open Palm tremendously.

“Ronan... we’ve got to... end this... now!” Graven commed, the strain in his voice obvious even through the interference. “I’m not making... any headway... here, and your swordsman’s... being... overpowered!”

“If you got any ideas, I’d love to hear them!” Ronan responded, jacking another round—this time, the largest caliber he had—into the chamber.

“You could try... shooting... the frelling scarhead....”

“No can do,” Ronan insisted. “The way you two are dancing about I’d be liable to hit you instead of the crab-boy, and—”

“Just *do it!*” Graven’s voice thundered in his ears with a horrible sense of finality.

Swallowing, Ronan peered through his sights at the Slayer once more, exhaled and fired, certain that the slug would take the wildly weaving Graven full in the helmet rather than hitting its intended target. But suddenly, Graven was gone, and the Vong was soaring backwards, a fine black mist marking where Ronan’s shot had struck him.

For what seemed an impossibly long moment, the Slayer appeared to hang in the air, stunned, but not any worse for wear than the last time Ronan had shot him—

—and then Ronan had to struggle to find hold on the guard-rail, as the staircase was trembling so hard that it could have been right above the epicenter of a gigantic earthquake. A tremendous roar and burst of light had come out of nowhere to swallow up the Vong and everything else that he had been able to see through his sniper sight in a single blinding flash.

As best as he could on the quivering, groaning durasteel construction, Ronan stood up to peer down into the alley. Koban was tossing aside the massive tube of what could only be some sort of anti-armor missile. Of the Slayer, there was no sign save scorched, smoldering earth, and wisps of acrid black smoke.

“Holy Kad Ha’rangir!” Ronan breathed. “Koban, you have any more of those?”

“Nope,” came the terse response, “just the one.”

“Pity. Would’ve been swe—”

The tremors on the staircase had just calmed down, as another white cloud blossomed in the distance. Fractions of a second after he heard the explosion of the thermal detonator, Ronan felt the catwalk buckle beneath him, and he was sent into a momentary state of hovering in mid-air as the rusty construction lost its hold to the building and sacked down more than two meters, crashing hard into the duracrete below.

Ronan dropped unluckily and felt a surge of pain spreading from his backside, which had hit the solid durasteel grill. But he didn't get time to get back on his feet, the momentum dragged the stairway even further to the ground and sent it toppling over. Thanks to the torque of inertia, however, Ronan remained in his position momentarily and managed to grab the rail that was now above him with both hands, his legs tucked up tight. As the top of the staircase connected with the ground, the collision shook the construction so hard that the Mandalorian lost his grip and fell the last meter onto duracrete below, but still managed to absorb a bit of the impact in a sideways role. All had happened so fast that Ronan hadn't even been able to voice a cry or curse, and now that his whole body ached, and he lay there doubled up and numb, he couldn't either.

Several drumming heartbeats later, his body started to recover from the stun. "Ouch," he eventually cursed, slowly struggling back on his feet. Dizzily, he shambled around, looking for his carbine.

Out of nowhere, the voice of Eclan Graven appeared. "Kriff, Barec, you okay?"

A little relief spread in Ronan, making him forget about his hurting body for a moment. "So that explosion didn't take you out then, Graven. Thought it killed you."

"You're not getting so lucky, *burc'ya*," Navhett piped up. "Ec planned it all and got away in one *ori'kandosii* leap before y'even pulled the trigger. Sweet shootin', by the way, gave Kaz the chance to show off his big guns." The last sentence ended in a quiet chuckle.

"You're all right, then?" Graven repeated soberly. He had caught up with Ronan, and Navhett was also coming.

"Just a few bruises," Ronan said. "But I'll be feeling that tailbone of mine for the next few days..." Grimacing under the visor, he rubbed the aforementioned part of his body. At least it didn't feel broken.

As he looked up again, he could see Navhett in his shrill, fang-striped armor examining a long black-clad rifle with bayonet. "Nice piece o' work, *ner vod*. I seen a Mini-Tak version of this some time ago, pretty nasty firepower." His head was tilted and he was holding the weapon away from his body, as though admiring it—but without his facial expression, that was hard to tell. "And of course, it had a beautiful grenade launcher."

Ronan didn't really know what to say, so he just took his EE-23 as the other handed it to him, giving a brief nod in thanks.

"Where's Koban?" he asked as he noticed that the mountain of a man in Mandalorian armor wasn't around. "Speaking of which... *fierfek!*"

His eyes had darted to where he had last seen Gladus. He couldn't believe that he had totally forgotten about his comrade. From the distance, and in the misty darkness, he could only see the silhouette of a kneeling figure. Even zooming in didn't help, so he started a sprint, not caring whether the two mercs were catching up or not. After a few meters, a grotesque image presented itself.

Two mutilated bodies were lying on the dirt-covered duracrete lane, next to which two severed forearms and a decapitated head lay. Everything was covered in crimson and black blood. Fortunately, the head wasn't Gladus's, but he had lost his left forearm, and evidently his consciousness as well. Koban was leaning over him, an open medpack to his side, and a syringe at the ready.

"Koban, what's his status?" Ronan commed the other sniper.

"Unconscious," Koban grunted. "Poisoned coufee."

"Oh, that's just great," Ronan muttered. "He'll be needing medical attention, then, ASAP."

"Not if that poison's the same as amphistaff venom, he doesn't," Eclan's voice crackled over the comm as Ronan skidded to a halt in front of the giant Mando-turned-field medic and his prostrate patient. "Kaz can neutralize it, maybe, but he's probably going to have problems with the dose. We've only managed to acquire a tiny bit of the stuff and we're still trying to figure out exactly how much will work without depleting our entire supply in the process."

“Great. Have you found out anything useful yet?” Ronan inquired, urgency tinting his voice with sarcasm.

“We’ve got the dosage worked out for male humans from Joras’ size up to Kaz’s, if that’s any help,” Eclan commed back, slightly irritated.

Ronan’s gaze lingered on the kneeling Mandalorian’s oversized frame. “I don’t see the problem, he’s only a little smaller than you, Koban,” he pointed out, cutting the comm link and switching to direct speech over external helmet speakers.

“He’s thicker,” Koban muttered.

“Just give him everything you’ve got then... an overdose won’t kill him, will it?”

“No,” Koban responded, in a tone of voice that somehow managed to simultaneously provide Ronan with a negative answer to both his request and his question.

The ex-commando involuntarily stepped a pace closer, raising his left in warning. “This ain’t about money, *burc’ya*, it’s about saving a life. If that antivenin’s hard to come by, I get it; you’ll get enough compensation to fill a Hutt’s freighter with that antidote, if that’s all you’re worried about. Now would you kindly give him the shot?” It was more an order than a request.

“When I say it’s rare, I *mean* it’s rare,” Graven interjected, having since caught up with Ronan. “You’ll be lucky to get your hands on enough of it to fill a small medpack. We don’t even know if it works on him, and later on another man’s gonna die because—”

“Oh, just leave it, ya big lug,” Navhett’s voice suddenly piped up. “Give him the shot. At the very least it’ll help you figure out how big a dose you’d need for yourself, supposing you ever have to use it.”

Eclan and Ronan exchanged glances. Koban’s face was unreadable behind the grim mask of his helmet, but it wouldn’t have taken a Jedi to see that he wasn’t anywhere near happy. Still, after a few seconds of silence, the massive Mando shifted, bending over Gladus again and injecting the antidote through the brachial artery of his right arm.

“It’ll take a while to work,” Graven explained, as Koban began putting his tools back into the medpack. “You’d better move his body, unless you plan on selling tickets.”

Ronan nodded briefly. “Ara, this is it, at least for now,” he contacted the others over the comlink. “Tell Rios to find us a place to stay for the night, I don’t think the Garridan’s safe any longer. Bring everyone else back here, we’ve got to get the bodies of Skira and Gladus out of here. And no questions right now, please.”

“Will do, Ronan,” she replied, complying without objections. The comlink went dead.

Ronan took off his helmet and placed it under his arm. Involuntarily, he had to wrinkle his nose due to the disgusting stench in the air, and realized that removing the bucket hadn’t been such a good idea, but donning it again would’ve made him look all the more ludicrous.

“I called back the rest of my team,” he announced to three mercs, “then we’re heading to a safe house. What about you, lads?”

It was Graven who took the floor. “We didn’t come here to fight Slayers, as much fun as that was. We just happened to be in the right place at the right time, but we still have some things of our own that need taking care of.”

“Whatever they may be...” mumbled Navhett, shaking his head slowly.

“Well, *vor entye*, then, I guess,” Ronan addressed Eclan again. “Not only for saving Gladus’s *shebs*, you also ensured the Slayers didn’t come after the rest of us. I don’t know what made show up here, and I don’t wanna know. I’m just grateful that you did, me and my team owe you one.” He looked into the round of three Mandalorian soldiers of fortune, all tending to their equipment, getting ready to move on. “All of you.”

“*Ba’gedet’ye, burc’ya*,” Graven asserted, raising his head slightly. “I don’t like open debts, though...”

Ronan pondered for a few moments. Then he looked down to the blood-smeared ground. “Let me offer you a slice of the cake then. Unless you’ve dealt with ‘em before, I think you’d like to get your hands on some Slayer parts as much as we do. I’m sure a sample of their regenerating skin could be put to some good use... since Koban left nothing but dust of your Slayer, take whatever you need here—just leave the crab-boy’s coufee and his forearm untouched, I reckon Gladus might like to keep ‘em.” Both Koban and Navhett had looked up from their preparations, the T-slits of their

visors staring blankly at Ronan. “I know, it’s all a tad macabre, but it’s all I can think of as compensation for now, *burc’yase*.”

After a few heartbeats, Graven gave the sniper a brief nod. “That’s a big favor, sharing trophies. Should be satisfactory enough....”

While he was talking, Eclan’s two companions left their equipment to crouch down before the mutilated Slayer corpse. Navhett was poking a pointy vibroblade into the supple chest tissue, while his burly companion had grasped the tattooed severed head of the Yuuzhan Vong by its long, greasy hair.

“Oh, *suuure*,” Navhett said as he noticed Koban’s action. “You’d like to keep that, big fella, now wouldn’t ya?”

The massive Mandalorian ignored him, and gazed at Ronan quizzically instead.

“You can take it, all right—just one thing,” Ronan acknowledged. He stepped forward to approach Koban, producing a short vibroknife from his belt. The scarred head looked rather tiny in the Mandalorian’s enormous gloved hands as he was turning and examining it. Ronan motioned Koban to hold it firm, and then he seized the jet-black hair, resting his knife on the pallid forehead. Although he had never taken a scalp before, Ronan managed to retrieve it with one brisk gash.

“Keeping that for Gladus as well,” he explained to Koban after shoving the knife back into his belt. Then Ronan retrieved a small cloth bag from one of his pouches, and carefully wrapped the coufee, the Slayer’s severed forearm, and the scalp in there, and laid it to the ground next to the still unconscious Gladus.

While Koban did the same with his own new trophy, Ronan walked back over to Graven. Navhett had since joined as well, casually toting what was left of the Slayer’s body over his shoulder.

“We’ll let you know when, or if, we get some results back from this,” Eclan announced. “The war may be over soon, but that doesn’t mean work for guys like us is getting short. See you around, Ronan Barec.”

Tapping two gloved fingers in a nonchalant salute on his helmet, Graven turned on his heels to wander off through the dense smog. After both giving respectful nods to Ronan, Navhett and Koban headed off after their companion.

Aye, that’s Eclan Graven and his mavericks...

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

CHAPTER V

Contruum – three hours later

Ronan let his gaze drift through the cramped apartment. Sareth and Macos were dozing on the cold duracrete floor, while Ara was struggling to stay awake in a massive, uncomfortable-looking armchair by a long bed. Gladus was lying on it, no longer unconscious but in deep slumber.

Shortly after they had reached the safe house—or safe *apartment*—which Rios had procured for them, the old blademaster had regained consciousness. But even though Graven’s antivenin had worked, Gladus was in awful shape. The 2-1B unit that the GAI lieutenant had brought along had had to anesthetize Gladus again, in order to work on the numerous other wounds inflicted by the Slayer, especially the severed forearm. The diagnosis hadn’t been good news. While not impossible, surgically reattaching the amputated limb would bear the danger of another infection, and Gladus might never be able to use his hand the same way again. Thus, he had to get a cybernetic hand prosthesis, but that would take time. And since they couldn’t just decide on it for Gladus, Ronan and the others had to wait for him to recover.

“Anything exciting from your little scouting trip?” Ara’s strained voice broke the silence. Her weary eyes looked up to Ronan, and she couldn’t stifle a long yawn.

“All quiet and cozy,” he answered, shrugged and finally stepped out of the door frame. “Not too surprising, this time of day.” The door hissed shut behind him as he approached the kitchen.

As he returned with a cup of hot stim team, he grabbed an empty chair and sat down in front of Ara. He took a few sips.

“How’s he coping with it?” he asked, nodding towards the adjacent room separated by a closed door. Jiriad was in there, with Skira’s body.

“He’s a broken man. I’m not sure he’ll ever recover from the loss,” Ara said. “He was having big plans for Skira’s future? Now his entire world has collapsed.”

“Aye... He waited so long with Skira’s *verd’goten* because he wanted to make sure the young man was able to protect his little daughter and his mother from *any* threat, especially in these desperate times. Altair didn’t take him along to Raxus Prime for no good reason. He taught Skira to fight harder than many a grown man. He showed that back at the Open Palm. And then the *vongese* come and commit the most *hut’uunla* action I’ve ever witnessed.” Ronan paused, taking a long draft from the steaming tea, gazing into the distance. “Saying that I feel with Altair doesn’t even get close to it...”

Silence ruled for the next few minutes, apart from sporadic snores coming from the dormant men on the floor, and the constant hum of electronics and of the idle 2-1B droid. After a while, Ara leaned forward but kept on looking down. “It’ll take a while before he’s ready to tell Scotah.”

Scotah Nakoyr—Jiriad’s wife and a second cousin of Ronan’s—was at their home in Keldabe with their seven-year-old daughter, Zoja. The skilled mechanic ran a small workshop for repairing and upgrading speeders, speeder bikes and swoops, in the same building as her husband’s smithy. She would take the news as hard as him, mainly out of compassion with him, as he had always had the closer bond to their adopted son.

Ever so slowly, the loss was getting to Ronan as well. The fatigue from the battle and the exhausting aftereffects of the adrenaline had only done so much to dampen his emotions. Altair’s family was the closest thing to a family Ronan had himself. The Jiriad kids called him *Ron’vodu*—uncle Ronan—an expression especially Skira had been using frequently. Their relation could have been closer, but even from the best friends Ronan tried to stay emotionally detached, a tragic habit he had to thank his time in ShenCresh Ops for—too many brothers-in-arms, closest of friends, had he lost then. But it always got to him.

First Dubrillion, and now this. He could feel that another chunk of his soul had been ripped from deep out of his chest, a void that never ceased growing. The agony was not nearly physical, it was physical. It hurt.

Ronan raised his head, weary. Ara had eventually dozed off. He envied her. He was incredibly tired, more exhausted than he should have been, but there was no chance he could find sleep. Not in this state. He had to suppress a groan as he rose from the chair. The tailbone he had crashed on earlier today was making itself felt. Ronan ignored the pain and set his cup on a low table. His hands were trembling, slightly.

As he walked towards the 2-1B unit, the droid awoke from standby and turned to him, the sad expression on his durasteel face illuminated by dim yellow photoreceptors. *They should've gone for a less gaunt, skull-like face. It doesn't really help the sick when they're presented with such a creepy-looking droid when they wake up.*

"Ah, Master Barec," the medical unit announced, "I've been waiting to talk to you alone. Your friend here has a really unique physiology."

That might have gotten his interest at another hour, but now he just replied with an incurious "Uhuh...."

"For his considerable skills in swordfighting, and the agility required for that, Master Tite has a physique too sturdy and muscular. I have taken various blood and DNA tests on him." The droid took a little overly dramatic break. "I detected traces of *Nagai* blood, possibly third generation. One of his great-grandparents must have been a full-blooded Nagai."

Now *that* got Ronan's interest. "At least that'd explain his affinity for knives and blades... But *shab*, what the *osik* does that have to do with your therapy? You're supposed to make him ready to fight again, not conduct DNA tests to trace his kriffing bloodline."

The 2-1B raised an arm in defense, a treat far too human for Ronan's liking. "Master Barec, I merely—"

"Better hope you haven't told anyone but me about this. Otherwise I'll make sure that nothing but a heap of scrap metal will be left of you after you've finished treating him. I can't have the GA gathering personal data of my men. *Shab*, you aren't even supposed to know his full name, let alone his fighting preferences."

"My apologies, sir," the droid offered. "Lieutenant Rios supplied me with a full GA database file of Gladus Tite, to give him the best treatment possible under consideration of his medical history. I must say, the record is immensely incomplete, but that isn't totally surprising due to his... special background. But there was a mention of unnatural abilities for his physiology, so I conducted a few tests to complete the file. It is only for the benefit of Master Tite."

Ronan grimaced. He would bet his modified *Firespray* that before a certain Mandalorian slicer had paid Gladus's record sheet a visit, the file must have featured an immensely vast amount of data. Without the asylum Ronan had granted Gladus not even a half-year ago, the face of the former assassin would still be on dozens—if not hundreds—of wanted lists throughout the galaxy.

He shook his head. He couldn't say he was a fan of the Galactic Alliance, and although Rios seemed nice enough, there was definitely a memory wipe in order for the prying—or spying—2-1B. But that had to wait until it got Gladus back to his feet. For now, Ronan would keep that little detail about Gladus a secret. The Nagai had been both enemies and allies of the Mandalorians at a time—but *then again, who hasn't?*

The former commando didn't owe the 2-1B unit a reply, although the surgical droid appeared to be expecting one. He left it for good, striding away from Gladus's improvised sickbed.

The first thing Ronan glimpsed as he gently pushed open the door into the small adjacent room, was a long table under the only window, on which lay the covered body of Skira. Jiriad was sitting on a chair, the torso of his own vonduun-crab armor imitation in hand—he had donned the rest of it again. He didn't look up as Ronan walked in and seated himself. The armorsmith removed a small plate from his flak vest, a dark object which he put onto the couch and picked up a smaller, similar-shaped white piece instead.

Ronan knew right away what the fellow Mandalorian was doing. Jiriad had taken the center piece of Skira's white breastplates, commonly called the chest diamond, to replace his own by it. It was common Mandalorian tradition to take armor pieces of fallen loved ones or close friends, and carry them as symbols of remembrance, keepsakes that ensured the fallen one was never forgotten. Some Mandalorians had whole patchwork armors due to that tradition, while others just kept the tokens at their homes, in their ships, or carried them along in pouches. In Jiriad's case, it was the diamond, the armor piece with the probably most sentimental value, as it was closest to the heart.

Ronan's hand involuntarily went to his artistic belt buckle. It bore the intricate crest of the Jatt family, the Devaronian family where Mandalorian tactician Trynic Jatt had come from. Ronan had removed the buckle from Jatt's weapon belt before leaving his corpse to the flames on one of the many pyres over the battlefield on Dubrillion. He had lost a great friend and comrade there, and keeping a symbolic item like that was the best way to honor him.

Detaching himself from his reveries, Ronan glanced back at the armorer. Jiriad had since fastened Skira's diamond piece to his own armor, and hauled the spiked and armored flak vest over his thick dreadlocks. The white center piece looked too small in comparison to the rest of his abstract torso protection. With only fifteen years, Skira hadn't been fully grown, yet, and his armor had still been nothing but a temporary duraplast protection.

Finally, Jiriad met Ronan's eyes. Ronan gave him the most encouraging nod he could. Suddenly, the sniper felt he shouldn't have interrupted this utterly intimate and personal ceremony. But the Kiffar didn't seem bothered, and maybe he appreciated the company.

The Mandalorian father went over to his son and pulled down the blankets to the waist. It didn't shock Ronan to see that the smith hadn't cleaned up the corpse. Skira's clothing was covered by mud and dirt, dried splashes of blood—black and red—on his face. The sweat from the fights still glued his hair to the forehead.

Jiriad had his own chest diamond in hand, and as he was placing it on his son's armor, Ronan got up and stood next to his friend. When Altair was done, he knelt down and placed both hands on Skira's chest, one over another. Ronan put his right on the Kiffar's shoulder.

"*Ni su'cuyi, gar kyr'adyc, ni partayli, gar Darasuum, Skira,*" Jiriad recited in slow and measured words. I'm still alive, you are dead. I remember you, so you are eternal.

By reciting this daily, Altair committed himself to immortalizing his son. It was a straightforward ritual—Mandalorians never wasted many words, and a fellow *Mando'ad* would always understand the spiritual value.

They remained in their position for a while, before Jiriad eventually got back on his feet. His tanned face no longer showed traces of tears, and as their glances met, Ronan caught glimpses of reignited flames in Altair's dark brown eyes.

"If you want a time out," Ronan offered, face to face with him, "spend some time with your family back home, don't let anyone keep you, *ner vod*. I might even come with you, *shab...*"

"No," came Jiriad's brief but determined reply. "Zoja and Scotah will not be safe before every single *vongyc hut'uun* in this galaxy is dead. I can't protect them sitting on my butts in Keldabe, waiting for it to solve itself."

Ronan wasn't able to find words. The loss of a lost one could change you forever, and if Jiriad's way to deal with it was to go for vengeance, it was his call. Everyone who couldn't accept that it was an utmost personal thing could not be considered a friend. And Ronan did accept it. Not only because Altair was his friend, but because he had been on the brink to do the same thing more than once himself. Revenge was a powerful thing, it took a lot of character strength not to be controlled by it. Ronan didn't trust himself to have that strength, but as far as he could judge, Altair Jiriad did.

He gave him a brisk but measured nod, one that conveyed far more than approval and support. They kept their eyes locked for several more seconds before Ronan knelt down before Skira as well, reciting the same words his father had.

The sniper was still on his knees as the door was gently pushed open and Ara entered. She hesitated for a moment, and then said, "Gladus is awake."

Less than a minute later, the three had gathered around the injured swordsman's bed.

"Fierfek," Gladus mumbled with an even raspier voice than usual. He was moving the stump of his forearm through the air, his eyes fixed on it. The 2-1B unit didn't stop him. "That sensitive heap of scrap just broke me the news." The droid was standing next to the bench, the ever inculpable face gazing from patient to visitors.

"We're sorry, Gladus," Ara started, "but seems there's no other way to—"

"Spare me your pity," the scarred and bearded ex-assassin interrupted her, shaking his head slowly. He didn't nearly seem as drained or weary as Ronan would have expected him to be. "I'm not fretting about it—it just annoys me that I have to go through the whole procedure again."

Ara exchanged a baffled glance with Ronan. "Come again?"

“That blasted scarbutt could’ve just as well hit two inches to the left. Then my old synthetic hand could be replaced with a new one, easy job when all the neural synapses already exist.” He paused, realizing that his explanation hit on a wall of perplexity from the others. “What, didn’t tinheadie tell ya? The majority of my cut-off hand was already cybernetic, that’s why I chose to use it as a blocker for the Slayer’s attack in the first place. Trouble is, I missed and he hit flesh and bone instead of metal and circuits. Talk about irony. But it allowed me to go for his head, and that one worked out quite nicely.”

“Oh,” Ara and Ronan exclaimed simultaneously. *His secrets don’t stop there*, Ronan mused. Jiriad was standing passively next to them, not paying real attention. Gladus noticed.

“How’s it going, big fella?” he addressed the Kiffar. “I did what I could to give that karking coward of a crab-boy what he deserved. It’s an awful way to die, and I’m sorry for your loss, *ner vod*.”

That was probably the first time Ronan heard Gladus use a *Mando’a* word. *Never thought that cold-blooded killer could be sentimental*.

“Reminds me....” Ronan said and fetched a cloth bag from the table. He retrieved the coufee, the severed forearm and the scalp of the Slayer, and showed the objects to Gladus and Jiriad. “These are yours, Gladus.”

The former assassin eyed the items, slightly startled. “Give the scalp to Altair, I owe him at least that much after stealing his kill. I’d have left the Slayer in one piece if there was a possibility, but there’s only so much we can do about an unknown enemy. Just give me that dagger, and do whatever you feel like with the forearm. I sure don’t want it replacing mine.”

Ronan laid the coufee and the severed limb on the bed, but as he wanted to hand the scalp over to the dreadlocked Mandalorian, Jiriad refused with a lifted hand.

“It’s your rightful kill, Gladus, one that tells of great skill,” he said. “You made sure that Skira’s death wasn’t in vain, and I would never have bested that... creature myself. I’m in your debt, *ner vod*.”

He’s coping with the loss all right, Ronan thought, a little shocked. *It takes quite some to talk about such a loss so soon, and straightforward at that*. While Altair had never lost a loved one before, he was dealing with it exceptionally well. Ronan just hoped for his friend that he didn’t simply pretend to be “fine”.

He spotted the hint of a nod, a lopsided smirk from Gladus to Jiriad, who had since found a seat on Ara’s armchair by the bed. “Your call,” the blademaster started, “ju—”

“Apologies, Masters,” the 2-1B interrupted. “I see this is a happy reunion, but you’re still my patient, Master Tite, and we will need to get you to a medical station in order to work on your synthetic forearm.”

Ronan laid the scalp next to the other Slayer items and closed in two steps on the med droid. “Medical station?” he demanded, his voice pure ice. “As in ‘medcenter’? No way, tinnie. Gladus stays right where we can see what you’re doing to him. That’s nowhere but *here*.”

The droid didn’t respond for a while, and due to its lack of facial expressions, it was hard to tell what was going on in its logic circuits. Then it looked down, and up again. “All right. If you can spend another day to wait for it, it’s not for me to decide. Bringing him to a medcenter, however, would speed up the whole issue tremendously.”

Nice way to end the argument with another argument. Stupid droids...

“It’s all right, Ronan,” Gladus said. “I’m a big fella now, I can look after myself. I’m only slowing you down, anyway, and it’s merely a hand.” He motioned to the 2-1B. “Get started.” The med droid gave Ronan another glance, then it attended to the necessary preparations.

“Hmm... still, somebody needs to go with you,” Ronan muttered. “Ara, can you wake up Sareth?”

She complied and approached the two dormant men on the floor.

“So, what’s the next step of action?” Jiriad inquired with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “Apart from—”

A loud curse from Ara interrupted him, and he and Ronan spun their heads around.

“*Osik*,” she grumbled. “Ysee that?” She was pointing at a heap of cloth, bags, vests and other things Sareth and Macos had tossed to the floor before going to sleep. The heap was quaking, as though a living thing was moving or trembling beneath it. Ara started to rummage through the medley while Ronan and Altair were approaching.

“What is it?” Ronan began, but then he saw it. Ara had pulled out a head-shaped object from one of the bags, and stripped away the cloth it was wrapped in. A meaty, brain-like object with short tendrils at the bottom, and it was vibrating heavily. It was unmistakable—it was a villip, a Yuuzhan Vong biot used for long-range communication.

Ara cast the living piece of technology back into the heap and drew her weapon, a long and elegant Bluebolt blaster. Ronan just about managed to jerk her arm away before she could release a shot.

“No!” he roared. “It may still be of use. They won’t know we found it unless we respond.” He paused, aware of Ara scowling at him, panting. “Whose bag is it?”

She forcefully freed herself from Ronan’s grip and, instead of holstering her blaster again and responding, she stood up and went over to Fenix. The weapon gripped with both hands, she aimed at the sleeping man’s face.

“Don’t kid yourself, Ara,” Ronan said. “That’s not his bag.”

Ara swirled around, fire in her glassy eyes. Reluctantly, she lowered the blaster, bringing the aim to bear on the head of Sareth. The head of her husband. With ice in her voice, she spoke hoarsely, giving the sleeping man a kick with her boot.

“Rise and shine, you *hut’uunla* piece of *osik*.”

Yuuzhan Vong warship UNDYING AGONY, space

The membrane of the door hadn’t even fully contracted when Tzekon Lian stormed right through it, holding a stiffened amphistaff with both hands. A low-ranked officer was sitting in front of a wide assembly of villips.

“Face me!” Lian ordered with a bark. The young Yuuzhan Vong’s head spun around. “There is a reason we agreed with our informant that only he contact us, not the other way round. Us raising him on the villip would bear the danger of blowing his cover.”

The comm officer didn’t even get the chance to open his mouth. The living serpentine weapon nearly effortlessly penetrated a gap between two ribs and first pierced a lung and then his heart, before it came out of his back again, like a lance jabbed through a training ragdoll.

“Let us pray to the gods that you just didn’t compromise it all.”

TORN

CHAPTER VI

Forward cargo hold, assault shuttle MILODON: en route to staging point somewhere outside Gyndine system

The blow knocked all air out of him as he was spun around and swirled down. He just about managed to get his arms up in protection as he crash-landed on the deck, hard. Enraged, he struggled back to his feet and faced his opponent, breathing rabidly. For a Mandalorian, a bolo-ball match, even a training session, was *war*. Ayden Stone danced around a little on the spot, like a boxer skipping to warm up, and glanced over the shoulder at his Noghri teammate. They were playing a two-on-two match, and Atross, the sturdy Togorian, just had charged into Stone, shoulders first, breaking the defense to score a goal with the ball.

“Wait for it,” came Fell Tagren’s scornful shout. He played in Atross’s team, and was making a pause Ayden’s reply. But nothing came. “Hah, so the grand ‘Rockfall’ finally admits it,” Tagren continued. “He’s only the champ as long as he’s playing in the ‘human league’.” Glancing at the few spectators, he grinned nonchalantly.

Ayden shook his head in quiet amusement. “Look who’s talking,” he said. His team had lost, all right, but the others had only won thanks to Atross; Tagren had contributed next to nothing to their victory. “Kay, looks like this round’s going to you,” Ayden resumed with a sarcastic grimace. “I’m out for today, the rematch’s gotta wait.”

“There goes the champion...” Tagren chuckled, but accompanied Stone to the bench. Atross and Kharritokh, the Noghri, both shrugged and stayed in the makeshift arena. The forward hold didn’t really offer the space needed for a bolo-ball game, but nobody cared as long as they had a good amount of fun playing.

Ayden nearly emptied a water bottle thirstily and splashed the rest over his face. Enjoying the cooling effect, he leaned back on the bench. Tagren sat down next to him.

“No, well played, *ner vod*,” he said less aloud. “Good thing that Togorians loathe this sport. Otherwise they’d be galactic champions. How’d you get Atross to play with us in the first place?”

Stone shrugged. “Guess he realized it was the quickest way to get some space for *this*.” He nodded towards the two nonhumans. Still in nothing more than unprotected jumpsuits, the two had since prepared for another kind of training. Atross was casually twirling a short wooden stick in his hands, waiting for Kharritokh to finish wrapping his wrists.

For any stranger, this would look like a fight with more than uneven odds. But Ayden knew better. The Noghri and the Togorian were an exceptionally well-rehearsed two-man team, perfect partners not only in battle. With at least four heads difference in height, and even a larger gap in body mass, they *were* an unlikely team, but they were complementing one another like no other.

You can’t wish for better training circumstances, Ayden pondered. *What better way to learn the advantages and disadvantages of fighting a differently sized opponent than this?* It reminded him of a childhood tale of the Ewok and the Gorax, and how the young Ewok eventually managed to best and defeat the giant beast with nothing but a primitive slingshot. And Kharritokh was still the best fighter in unarmed combat he knew. Ayden had seen the two train before on several occasions, they varied gear and armament each time, and the Noghri had defeated his tall companion in the majority of the fights.

As he broke free from his reveries, Ayden saw that they had already started. Atross was going for Kharritokh’s torso in a long swing with the stick, but the Noghri dodged in a roll and came out of it feet first, ramming them into Atross’s shins. The Togorian’s legs buckled, but he managed to keep his balance. Atross feinted to swirl around, what Kharritokh instinctively responded to with another roll. He was barely back on his feet when the stick connected with the hollows of his knees, and he toppled over. Even from the distance, Ayden could hear the Noghri exhale sharply as his back hit the floor.

But Kharritokh didn’t back down. He whirled to the side instead, avoiding a follow-up strike from the stick, and jumped back to his feet, coming up inside the Togorian’s reach. Unable to use his

weapon, Atross withdrew a few steps to bring his left down on the Noghri's face, but the short martial artist was faster. He rammed his shoulder into Atross's thighs, and from what Ayden could tell, the Noghri probably put his entire bodyweight behind the charge. The instant the Togorian's balance began to waver, the Noghri stepped to his opponent's side, and accelerated his fall by kicking a foot into Atross's shin and bringing down both elbows on his back. Atross fell like a tree trunk, and with a thump his large body thudded onto the deck. He roared rabidly, but Kharritokh didn't give him a chance to get up again. The Noghri was on his back, one hand pressing down the furred head while the sharp claws of the other hand hovered millimeters away from Atross's throat.

Ayden was once again amazed at Kharritokh's speed. The whole training fight had been over in a matter of seconds, and had it been a real fight, Atross would be dead now. The two fighters were already back on their feet, talking, but Ayden couldn't hear what they said over the loud cheers and applause from the others in the hold. He only saw how Atross picked up the stick and gave it into the Noghri's hands, when he was distracted by a brute rumble from the left.

A few meters beside the bench, Norac Tristan was sitting on the deck, and by his side, a large ball of fur had just uncurled, revealing a four-legged canine animal. The rumble was more of a yawn, and short, sharp fangs dominated the now wide-open mouth. It was a vornskr, and the lack of a tail showed that it had been tamed. But it wasn't Tristan's pet; it belonged to Kharritokh and was more of a mount and battle companion than a pet. Rukh, how it had been named in honor of Rukh, the Noghri Death Commando who had killed Grand Admiral Thrawn, was a rather large specimen, large enough that Kharritokh could ride on its back in battle. Ayden had once seen that in combat against the Vong, and it was an intimidating sight—even *gotta be for the Vong*, he thought. Rukh was a tough creature, numerous scars and a raw build showed that. The vornskr's fur bristled as it spotted Kharritokh fighting, but apart from a short hiss, it didn't show any reaction—Rukh was clever enough to know that it would get punished in some way if it disrupted a training fight between its master and his Togorian friend.

The two were still fighting, but Ayden stopped watching. He longed for a few minutes under a sonic shower, but that was a no can do. The old *Bantha*-class assault shuttle wasn't a luxury liner, its refreshers had nothing more than a toilet and a sink. On the way to his locker, he stopped a few moments to rub Rukh's neck. The large creature had very long fur, what made it look even more intimidating. Its crimson eyes fixed on Ayden's during the caress, and it began a deep purr.

"Gotta hand you over to Norac, sorry."

Tristan shot him a grimace as he walked by, but when Ayden reached his locker, the comm speaker signal sounded and the voice of Jorso Sateda, their pilot, clanged in the hold.

"Sorry to spoil the fun, *vode*, but we'll be out of hyperspace in ten. So you better get suited up, everyone."

Great. Ayden rolled his eyes. Now he had to cope with an even briefer visit to the 'fresher than planned.

Safe house, Contruum

"Why? Just tell me, Sareth. *Why* did you do it?"

Ronan could only presume what had to be going on inside Ara. He knew he was furious. But in her voice, he could also make out a trace of terror, of sadness and, most of all, of despair. She was looming over her husband, a husband who was strapped to a chair propped up in the middle of the room; a husband who had betrayed them all, but most of all, his wife.

"You're not the man I married. You're not the father of my children. I look away for an instant... and when I turn back, I see a weak *chakaar*. An *aruatii*." She had to pause to clear her throat, her voice had become hoarse. "An *aruetyc hut'uun*." There she had said it. She had called him a traitor, and a *coward*—the worst insult for a Mandalorian. "*Dar*—"

"Ara." Sareth looked ashen, thick blood gushing from his freshly broken nose. He was trembling, breath heavy. "Let me... explain. The Vong... there is no stopping... them. Sooner or later, we *will* be... overwhelmed, slaughtered... enslaved, just like the rest of the galaxy. No way out... is that what you want for our children? A life as a mutated... brainless slave?"

"Open your eyes, Sareth! The war is over, nearly. The GA's fleet is en route for Coruscant, you said so yourself. Their *whole* fleet. The crab-boys are history."

“Don’t... kid yourself. They’ll need a miracle... now, to retake Coruscant. Or a superweapon. We both know that miracles... don’t occur at our convenience, if they... do at all. And the... pathetic Jedi don’t have the... guts to use a superweapon, even *if* they had one.” He coughed heavily. Ara hadn’t shaken him up tenderly. “I made a choice. To protect my family. When ensuring at least... some kind of future for my children meant to betray a... few strangers, the—”

“Strangers? *Strangers?*” Ara’s voice was pure ice, tainted with contempt. “You *betrayed* your *vode*, your brothers and sisters. They are family, too. And you think the *vongese* let you in live in peace after they wipe out every *Mando’ad* in the galaxy? Let you raise a nice little bunch of kids, a nice little bunch of *new* Mandos?” She looked over her shoulder, glancing at Jiriad. He was standing a short distance behind beside Ronan; both had their arms folded. She glared back at her husband. “Remember Skira?”

Ronan took a step closer. He could hear Sareth’s gulp. “He... he wasn’t planned—”

“No?” the former commando said. He had to pull himself together not to lash out at the man. “Well that’s inconvenient now, isn’t it? Since we were *all planned* to walk into that trap. Without Graven’s help, we’d be corpses now. Thanks to you.” He was starting to get impatient. “What else did you tell them?”

“Noth—”

In an instant, Ronan was by the chair, both hands clasping Sareth’s bloodied vest. Ara wanted to intervene, but he just shot a glare back. *No. You can have your pick at him later.* They had a lot of good men and women out there, and if Sareth had leaked any other information, he had to get it out of him. *And pronto.*

“Aye, like we’re such big players. Cut the *osik, di’kut.*” He tightened the grip and pulled. “*What else* did you tell them?”

Ara’s husband didn’t even open his mouth. *Alright, you asked for it.* Ronan brought his foot up under the chair in a jolt. The light metal construction dropped backwards, and two impacts were audible, as the back of the chair crashed down, followed by the back of Sareth’s head.

“Don’t you get it?” Ronan said, leaning over the moaning man. “It’s end of the line. You won’t get to see your kids again, and neither your Vong contacts. You cooperate, however, and we may do some reconsidering.” He bent his knees and squatted, looking into Sareth’s face up close. It had swollen up around the broken nose, making him look like a boxer knocked out for good. *We’ve only just started.* “I’m not asking again. You better hope you haven’t told them about Gyndine. That’d give the term ‘surprise attack’ a whole new unhealthy twist.”

Ronan watched closely for any ever-so-minor reaction from Sareth. At the mention of Gyndine, his trembles ebbed down a little, and Ronan could spot him squint slightly. *Fierfek.* He straightened up again, walked a few steps, and then returned to the chair. *They’re flying right into an ambush.*

“You can’t keep... my kids from me,” Sareth said with a voice strained from agony. “I did th—”

“But I can,” Ara muttered. “*Dar’manda* and *shuk’la riduurok* is hard, but *dar’buir...*”

Sareth winced and swallowed hard. In the same breath, Ara had divorced him, made him and outcast and threatened him with being disowned by his children. Ronan could see the realization dawn on the man’s battered face. He had lost everything, and he could only save a fragment of that by cooperating now. He was looking up to Ara, his expression one of begging, but also of unyielding defiance. He wanted her mercy, but didn’t offer anything in return to earn it.

“Altair, you can take over,” Ronan said. “I have to warn off our Gyndine task force, they’re probably walking right into one big trap. Get as much out of him as you can.” Usually, he would have handed that to Gladus, a man better suited for such a dirty task. But the former assassin hadn’t lost a son and now had the person responsible sitting right in the same room as him. Jiriad would do just fine with the interrogation.

The Kiffar had already approached, anger written into his tanned face, as Ara grabbed his arm to stop him. She looked him in the eye with grim determination.

“No. I’ll do it.” She bent over her now ex-husband and jerked the chair back upright.

Ronan could nearly sense her inner struggle, but it was starting to crystallize which part of her was winning. Her grim warrior side, the side of her that had seen all the misery in the war, that drove her to the edge of despair. But Ara still had the strength to keep up the fight, and he admired that in her. But this, her husband’s ultimate betrayal, was too much. Sareth would get to feel the full broadside of all the remorseless emotions that had built up in her over the years and decades.

Ara pulled out a short dagger, and Ronan turned away. He shook his head on his way to the other end of the room. Sareth's behavior both intrigued and puzzled him. The man was a traitor to his own family, in his belief of saving them. And yet he didn't give out his information, now that they had found out. He didn't take his chance at the small measure of redemption they offered him. *Either the crab-boys have done a pretty good brainwash on him, or he's gone mental.* Ronan frowned. Wars did that to people, even to the best.

He reached the table in the corner, where he had put his gear. Fenix sat in a chair next to it, elbows propped up on his knees, looking dispirited watching the events. He hadn't said a word since he had been woken by the noise, and while Ronan was glad of the absence of his bothering curiosity, he wasn't sure if not something else had shaken up the man. But right now, he didn't care.

He grabbed his helmet and donned it, powering up its internal systems. With a few voice-issued commands, he remotely accessed his *Firespray's* hyperwave transceiver, and while the interstellar link was being established, Ronan consulted the chrono in the edge of his HUD. If everything went according to plan, most of the forces gathering at the rendezvous point outside Gyndine system had arrived ten minutes ago. They were to wait another three hours for the stragglers before making the jump to the Vong-occupied planet.

I'm still on time. Building up the link was taking its time. *Nemesis*, Ronan's ship, had top-grade communications equipment on board, so he wasn't used to waiting. With the HoloNet down or largely out of commission—thanks to the Vong—hyperwave and hypercomm had to suffice, but at least they worked—*usually*. Sometimes, a connection was established within a matter of seconds, sometimes it took minutes. And sometimes, it didn't work at all.

Ronan decided to use the wait to check on Gladus. The burly man was still on his sickbed, but the 2-1B had been deactivated for the time being—even with the planned memory wipe, the droid could still pick up classified intel and broadcast it before they got a chance to erase it. No, the unit would definitely experience a close encounter with an unsubtle EMP charge once Gladus was patched up.

"I take it Karr won't be the one to babysit me now, after all." The assassin's voice was still hoarse, but the color was starting to get back into his grained face. He was recovering exceptionally well. "So, what's your nice police conscience say about slotting the traitor?"

Ronan grunted. "You just keep asking for it, *burc'ya*. It'll come down to Fenix and Rios watching your backside, I can tell ya." He shook his head, slowly. "As for Karr... it'll depend on how much he leaked. But ultimately, it's Ara's call."

"She's not giving him the subtle treatment now." Gladus's brow furrowed, slightly—it was as far as he got to a real grimace.

Ronan took another glance at his HUD's readout—still nothing. He glanced at Ara and Jiriad on the other side of the room. Her blade was hovering millimeters from Sareth's face, and with the other hand, she was twisting one of his fingers as if to break it. Ronan called to get their attention, and as they looked up, he waved a finger to beckon them over. The interrogation had to wait.

"We may have to leave this rock in a hurry," he began when they had approached. "You saw what's going on, Gyndine looks like one textbook ambush now. If I can't get a secure channel to the task force within the next few minutes, I'll have to inform them the old fashioned way. And that means *flying*, at full throttle. Even at top speed, it's gonna take a good four hours to get there. That's one hour too late, they'll long have jumped into the system." He scanned their faces, which was a bit odd since he still wore the helmet. "What I'm saying is that this is more than just a courier run; at best, it's a rescue or reinforcement mission. If worst comes to worst, however, we'll only arrive to pick up the debris." Ara and Jiriad exchanged troubled glances. "*Nemesis's* engines are already warming up, though it'll take some time to get to the spaceport. I'll need at least Sareth on board."

"I'll come," Ara stated without hesitation. Then she went back to her former husband and started to prepare him for transport.

Ronan glanced at Jiriad, and then Gladus. He motioned to the injured man. "You can either come along in your current state, or get your arm fixed and catch up later. Ara's *Gladiator* is still gonna be here."

Gladus looked down at the stump of his arm. “A one-handed gunner’s not gonna be much use on your ship. I’m staying.”

Ronan turned to Jiriad to address him, but something in his helmet HUD caught his attention. “*Shab.*” For a moment, the connection icon showed static, then a garbled bar appeared with the message LINK COULD NOT BE ESTABLISHED. CONNECTION TIMEOUT. He jerked the helmet off and nearly slammed it to the floor, but caught himself. It was no use to try again.

Jiriad stared at him, his expression a mix of anxiety, tentativeness and suppressed anger. Ronan could guess what was brooding in him. Either he stayed to take care of his son’s remains and informing his family, or he accompanied them for payback to the Vong—and perhaps also to Sareth. He glanced from the adjacent room back to Ronan. “Count me in.”

The sniper gave him an appreciative nod and started to stuff his gear into a bag.

“Alright, that’s it. Let’s hustle, people.”

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