

It was cold. Far too cold for a man born and raised on a desert world. A strong wind blew in from the south biting deep into the big Humans bones. His hands and knees ached from the cold, the consequences of a life of warfare and old age creeping up on him, but he was used to it now and simply ignored the dull throbbing. His dark eyes scanned the dark night sky behind the tee shaped visor of his old battered helmet. The sky was dark, no moon hung in the sky, and the stars were bright and twinkling.

As time passed several of the stars began to twinkle brighter in the sky. Pulling the rangefinder on his helmet down he honed in on one of the objects and saw a fiery streak falling from the sky, a dark shape at its core. As it fell further the shape coalesced into a solid metal box slightly larger than a human. A drop pod, he'd seen them before. Hell, he'd ridden in them before.

Switching on the comm unit secreted within his helmet he said "Control, this is Zhen. I have contacts making touchdown south west of my position. Will move to intercept."

"Understood Commander." came the reply. "Good hunting."

As they began to drop below the horizon he pulled his helmet off revealing an aged and scarred face. He looked back at the squad of soldiers he had reluctantly agreed to lead. Most of them were young, refugees who had volunteered for service after the destruction of New Tython. For most this was the first time they'd seen anything even remotely like combat and the old Mandalorian could tell they were nervous. But there were two members of his squad that gave him hope that they had at least a slight chance of outperforming the incoming Satele forces.

The first was a man named Ganner Reth. Short and stocky with a mess of red hair he was a career soldier who had fought for the New Republic before settling on New Tython to retire. But the quiet life wasn't for him and a few short months after arriving he had joined the T.D.U.C. During the fall of New Tython he had been instrumental in saving the lives of hundreds of civilians as the city of Tanduran fell.

The other was one of the few members of the Chosen of Bacca who had survived the fall of New Tython. His name was Garrful, a seven foot tall Wookiee with chocolate brown fur covering his body from head to toe. Strapped across his chest were a pair of leather bandoliers holding ammunition for the large bowcaster cradled in his long shaggy arms and across his back was a wicked looking curved ryyk blade. His eyes were pointing skyward, his teeth bared in a silent snarl at the falling drop pods.

"Sergeant." called the old man.

The soldier trotted over and threw a casual salute to the larger man. "Yes sir." he said.

"Get the squad on their feet, we're oscar mike in five." said the Mandalorian.

“Yes sir.” said the Sergeant. “On your feet people, we’re moving out in five.”

As the soldiers rose to their feet and prepared themselves Darro turned and said “Alright people listen up. Remember this is an exercise, these people are our friends. I want your blasters set to stun, I don’t want anyone dying out there.” He turned away for a moment before turning back, a cheeky smile on his face, and said “That said, just because we’re firing stun bolts doesn’t mean we have to be thinking nice thoughts. I want you to get stuck in, keep your heads down and if we do make contact I expect you to kick there fracking teeth in. Do you understand me?”

The big Wookiee chuckled to himself as the Human soldiers whooped and hollered.

“Let’s move. Grarrful you’re on point.” said Darro.

The big Wookiee nodded and trotted off into the darkness, his heavy footfalls crunching in the snow. They trudged through the cold dark night for well over an hour before the big Wookiee froze and dropped to a knee. Darro raised his hand to stop the following soldiers and crept forward as quietly as he could in the hard packed snow.

“See something?” Darro asked.

The Wookiee growled out a short series of sounds that the old Human didn’t understand. But the slight shrug of his broad shoulders and the pointing of his hand into the darkness told Darro that the Wookiee wasn’t sure but there was something out their. Using hand signals Darro told Ganner to take three of the troops and loop around to the left. Darro approached the remaining soldiers and knelt before them.

As he removed his helmet he wiped sweat from his face and said “You three stay here Garrful and don’t do anything unless he does it first.” As they nodded understanding the Mandalorian said “You three with me.” before he rose and circled around to the right pulling his helmet on as he went.

There was something out there, a shape in the darkness but the old Human just couldn’t make it out. The quartet took cover behind a small snowbank hoping to shield themselves from whatever was out there.

“What’s the plan sir?” asked a young female soldier.

“When I move you move and be for anything.” he replied. Opening a comm channel to Grarrful and Ganner Darro said “Alright men, move in but take it slow.”

Darro rose to his feet, weapon raised and at the ready, followed moments later by the three soldiers under his command. The barrel of his T-21B swept left and right looking for targets but none emerged from the darkness. Suddenly a bolt of blue shot from the darkness several feet

above his head but it was enough to make the three young recruits behind him dive for cover and open fire. Darro dove himself, not out of fear but out of self preservation.

Over the comm he began to shout "Cease fire! Cease fire damnit!"

Slowly but surely the volume of fire decreased before it stopped altogether. He started chuckling to himself when he realised what had happened. One of the rookies following Ganner had seen Darros group emerge from the darkness. They'd panicked and opened fire causing Darros group to return fire.

"Is everyone alright?" he asked.

A handful of affirmatives rang out in the night before someone yelled "No!"

Pushing himself to his feet Darro trotted over to the source of the voice to see a young man clutching at his lower leg. Ganner knelt down beside the injured soldier and, as Darro approached them, turned and said "Broken leg sir."

Kneeling down Darro looked the young recruit in the eye and said "How you feeling soldier?"

"Embarrassed sir. And a little sore." replied the young man.

Placing a hand on the injured man's shoulder Darro said "No need to be embarrassed kid, i've done plenty of stupid things in combat myself." Darro rose to his feet and called over a pair of soldiers and said "I need you two to help him up and get him back to base. If you run into any Satele forces let them know he's injured but don't tell them anything else. Understood?"

"Yes sir." they replied almost in unison.

Heading back to the injured soldier Darro said "These two are gonna help you back to base."

"Yes sir." he replied. As Darro turned to walk away the young man said "Sir, i'm sorry."

Waving the apology away Darro said "Forget about it kid, you just get better."

As they pair picked their injured comrade up and headed for home Darro headed off towards the large shape of the Wookiee Garrful a short way off. The big warrior was staring at something sticking up out of the snow as smoke or steam billowed off it. As the old Mandalorian got to within a few feet of the object he finally got a good look at what the Wookiee had seen earlier. It was one of the Satele drop pods still hot from re-entry a pair of footprints leading away from it to the east.

Looking up at the Wookiee Darro asked "You think you can follow those?"

Grarrful considered for a moment before nodding his head and growling what Darro assumed was an affirmative. The Wookiee sniffed the air for a moment before trotting off into the night.

“We’ve got a trail people let’s move.” Darro called before sliding his helmet back on and chasing off after the Wookiee.

The remaining members of Darro unit took off after Grarrful in pursuit of the invading Satele forces. As the time passed the terrain began to change. What was once wide open tundra was beginning to become more uneven as, in the near distance, a small mountain range slowly increased in size. A few meters ahead the Wookiee had stopped as the single set of tracks became at least a dozen as the lone Satele soldier they were tracking had apparently met up with his friends.

Ganner came up beside Darro and said “If they’ve headed that way they’ve only got one way they can go.”

“And that is?” Darro asked.

“It’s a small canyon that cuts through the mountain, it’s the only way through the mountains for miles in either direction.” answered the Sergeant.

“Let’s move people, double time.” Darro shouted as he ran off in the direction of the canyon.

The group of Hoth soldiers, now numbering only nine, ran headlong through the night in a mad dash to catch up with their quarry. The cold featureless landscape whizzed by as they pushed their cold tired bodies to the limit. Off in the distance Darro could see a group of small shapes spread out in a line slowly trudging through the snow. The Mandalorian signalled for his unit to slow their rate of advance hoping not to signal the enemy of their arrival.

Slowly but surely they made up ground on the Satele soldiers until they were within firing range, but the wily old warrior chose not to strike. Instead he waited, slowly keeping pace with his quarry until they were about to enter the narrow canyon. As the Satele point man took his first cautious steps inside Darro and his squad opened fire taking the enemy by surprise. The first salvo took out half the Satele squad, their bodies dropping to the snow as tiny blue lightning bolts arced across their bodies. The remaining enemy soldiers turned and opened fire sending Darro’s unit leaping left and right looking for any semblance of cover they could find.

Taking cover behind a small snowdrift Darro took aim and opened fire, his stun blast missing it’s by less than a meter. The old Human dropped his head as a flurry of blasts came in on his position punching into the snow sending puffs of white powder into the air. He fired again, the blast hitting the mark, striking a Satele soldier in the chest dropping him to the ground. The

volume of fire from the Sateleians was dropping as Darros soldiers found the mark until, with a well aimed shot from the Wookiees bowcaster, the final enemy soldier dropped to the snow.

“Everyone alright?” yelled Darro.

Darro began to count the responses in his head. There should have been 9, there were only eight. Rising to his feet the Mandalorian began to scan the cramped battlefield until he spotted the still form of one of his rookies lying face down in the snow. As he knelt down beside them the old man rolled them over and saw a young female face dusted in snow. He brushed it off as gently as his gloved hands could manage before picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder.

Turning back to the still standing members of his unit he said “Take their power packs and then drag them into the canyon. It should protect them from the worst of the weather.”

Heading down into the canyon he gently placed the young woman on the ground and made her as comfortable as possible. One by one his troops moved the enemy into what little shelter there was when a call came over Darro’s comlink.

“This is Trepus base, Satele forces are attempting to gain entrance. All forces return to base immediately.” came a panicked voice through the small speaker in his helmet.

“We need to move now people, double time let’s move out.” the Mandalorian shouted as he sprinted off once again into the cold Solyiat night.