The Wheel, 27 ABY

Hyle Alihandross’s life had changed beyond any recognition over the past three years, and so had the galaxy. The destruction of Serpindal had heralded the unimaginable, a full scale invasion of the Galaxy from beyond. The billions of deaths had also triggered his own sensitivity to the Force, and while the Galaxy burned, he had been studying on Yavin IV to put his newfound abilities to good use for the war effort. The war had come to Yavin a few months previously. He had helped to cover the evacuation, and had been knighted. The entire system was packed with ships, which themselves were packed with panicked people fleeing the alien onslaught.

Hyle’ first assignment as a Jedi knight was to work with the Senate’s Refugee organisation to ensure that the wheel remained viable as a waystation and transport hub. He had been plagued with new visions since his arrival, of the Wheel as a holed, lifeless shell. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the Yuuzhan Vong attacked, but they didn’t know when.

Although the Ten Thousand Credit Landing fee had been waived, those who had come from ships with no one on board with that kind of money in their account were basically left to fend for themselves, receiving no assistance except that provided by SELCORE and charitable residents such as Hyle’s own family. Ships would arrive laden with supplies, and leave with refugees onboard. Apart from convoy escort accompanying the supply and evacuation convoys, the stations had only its own defences and ten corvettes for protection.

Thanks to pressure from Hyle and SELCORE officials, the Administrators had grudgingly allowed the posting of a Republic Navy taskforce beyond the system limits in case of an attack. Hyle however wanted the station as ready s possible for the inevitable, breaking up the least spaceworthy incoming vessels for scrap and parts for repairs and upgrades. Efforts to persuade the Administrators to retain people with combat or engineering experience to assist with upgrades and defence had come to nothing, and Hyle had come to accept that they were as ready as they were ever going to be.

“You should put Helaine on the next convoy.” Hyle said, as always.

“You do know she’s sitting right next to you, and can hear you, right?” Said his younger sister.

“Besides, I’ve been living here longer than anywhere else, so that makes this place home, right?”

“That and the only family we have left are at the front or refugees themselves.” Their father said, referring to his own brother in law, who commanded a Battlecruiser, and his sister’s children.

“Exactly, so where would I go?” Helaine asked. The truth was that none them wanted to leave, nor wished the others to leave either.

“The *Namora* arrived earlier today with the convoy, you could always stay with Sablo’s family, maybe catch up with his son, what’s his name? Mickle?”

“Nickle. His name’s Nickle.” Helaine said, blushing “Beside’s he’s training to be a pilot, like his dad.”

For the first time, their father was supportive of Hyle’s idea.

“The Holkers are good people, Helaine, the best, Hyle trusted Sablo with his own life for two years.”

“What?! You’re sending me away right now, without even a by your leave?!” Helaine shouted.

“Easy, the convoy won’t be leaving for another two days, besides arranging passangers at this kind of short notice isn’t easy. Even if Sablo agrees to it, the chances are he won’t be able to take you until the next run.” Hyle pointed out.

Helaine said nothing, finishing her lunch in silence. The chime to their quaters rang.

 “Alihandross.” Dvart said into the commlink he had pulled from his breast pocket

“My apologies Master Jedi.” A Colonial accented female voice issued from the device,

“But there’s something you need to see. Right now.”

“You’ll be needed to talk to my son.”

“I’ll send it to his datapad now.”

Hyle reached into the inner pockt of his robes and opened the message. It was an audio file.

“*Toprawa,* this is Polearm Two.”

“Go ahead Major Docker.”

“We’ve sighted a large Vong force headed for your position, estimate arrival in three hour.”

“I guess that’s put paid to sending me to the Holkers.” Helaine aid.

“Forget it. The convoy will be doing an emergency evac, and I want you on the first transport that docks. Both of you.”

“What about the shop, what about repairs to the station.” Their father protested

“Who’s going to repair the arrivals’ ships if you’re killed?” Hyle retorted.

“Dad’s right, they’ll need everyone they can get to keep this station and it operations intact, especially after whatever happens today.” Helaine said.

“What about you?”

“Like you said, I’ll be on the *Namora* and half way to Holstice by the time the Vong get here.”

“The *Namora’s* staying here, she’ll be stocking up on torps and joining the fighter screen.”

The house comm chimed

“Attention all personel, this is an emergency evacuation, all visitors, residents, and staff report to the landing bays. All crew report to emergency stations.”

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Helaine was on the last transport to leave the system. Their father had been ordered to stay and pitch in with the repair teams, and Hyle found himself once again onboard the *Namora*, manning the YT-2000 Freighter’s ventral turret. “Good to have you back Hyle.” Sablo Holker had said. “Now we can man both turrets and our engineer can effect field repairs at the same time. We’ll need all the help we can get. Speaking, of, I’m getting contacts emerging from Hyperspace.”

The fleet looked impressive but Hyle knew that most of the Republic’s most modern ships were concentrated in the Core or major centres of trade or industry. Aside from their main command ships, a Nebula Class, and the *Monitor*, a Mediator Class Battlecruiser, most of the fleet were designs dating back to the earliest days of the New Republic.

The Yuuzhan Vong Fleet was based around one of their recycling/manufacturing ships. It also included one of their interdictors. It seemed the enemy’s intention was not only to conquer Maldrood, but also to capture as much in the way of resources and people as possible, hence the attack on the Sector’s main traffic hub.

“All ships, this is the *Monitor*, we are reading major hyperspace disturbances in the system, it’s starting.”

 Beta Gorgon was an empty system, there were no planets hid or manoeuvre behind, so any battle would be brutal slugging match. Hyle checked the sensor display, their fighter groups were in position, and the best armed civilian ships had joined the Wheel’s own defence fleet to prevent any attacks on the station itself. A blip on the display winked out. First blood to us. Hyle thought.

The enemy fleet was closing, slowly and seemingly inexorably. A flash in the distance and another blip vanished. “One of ours.” Hyle said.

“Attention *Kota* fighters, regroup at checkpoint Thesh and reinforce the wheel protection force. The *Kota*, an antiquated MC80B cruiser from the earliest days of the new republic. Even modernised she was much more use as a carrier than in the battle line.

He glanced at the sensor display, three mass contacts closing fast. No transponder. He trained the turret round, following their flight path, and squeezed both triggers.

“Vinzer, any trouble coming our way from topside?” No response, he assumed the enemy were all coming from below.

“Good shooting Hyle.” Holker said. Hyle trained the turret round to the station itself. A bigger group of enemy snubcraft, some f them looked like boarding vessels from the size. The whole ship seemed to lurch, only he wasn’t on the ship anymore. Debris was floating all around him, corpses too. Starlight, harsh and constant. The airlocks were open.

“Hyle, did you hear me? I said we’re engaging the main attack group.”

“I heard you cap. Put me through to the station.”

“What.”

“They need to know.”

“Know what?” Holker asked, confused. He did as Hyle asked regardless

“Wheel Command, be advised, the Vong aren’t trying to destroy or capture the station, send all the security personnel you can spare to environment and life support, they’re going to try to space everyone on board.”

“How do you know? Who is this?”
“This is Jedi Alihandross, and I just saw it happen.”

The fighter screen repositioned itself. The *Namora* shuddered under the impact of their enemies’ strange, organic weapons. But the shields held.

“I need to see them off.” Hyle said.

“But we’re in the middle of a battle.” Holker observed.

“Fly me close to one of the open landing bays, open the airlock without draining the air, the decompression could throw me across.”

“Are you crazy?”
“No. Just desperate.”

“Is there a difference?”

“Not really.”

The YT-2000 freighter swung round, hugging the surface of the space station until they found a landing bay.

Hyle stood in the airlock, weapons at the ready.

“Standby, approaching target.” Sablo Holker said, warily.

The airlock opened, the suddent rush of air forcing the breath from his lungs as if he’d been kicked by a bantha. Tumbling in a directionless freefall, Hyle observed the noiseless battle, the explosions, the stars, which didn’t twinkle without an atmosphere to refract the light. It was over in seconds as he pssed through the atmospheric shield and hid the deck. Hard.

He staggered to his feet and synched his datapad to the station’s computer. As he had predicted, Lifesupport and environmental controls were under heavy attack, and the latter was closer. Immersing himself in the force, he made his way to the sound of blasterfire, ghosting like a wraith.

The first Vong didn’t even see him coming. He activated his lightabre, a bright lance of orange balefire protruding through the alien’s throat. A shot from his pistol into the face of another at point blank range. The element of surprise was lost, and the remaining Vong turned to face him, amphistaffs at the ready.

“Jeedai.” One of them growled. Before going down in a hail of blasterfire, seemingly oblivious to the existing threat of the station’s security forces. Another boarder took a vicious swing at Hyle’s head.

He parried, but the snakelike weapon coiled its way around the blade of his own lightsabre. Summoning strength through the force, Hyle punched his opponent in the throat, who collapsed, choking. The security detachment were running to his aid how, beating their assailants with stun batons.

“Thanks sir, we owe you one, you and the Republic.” Their leader said. Then the corridor vanished in a brief flash of superheated plasma.

“Are you alright sir?” The man asked. Hyle found himself propped up against a bulkhead.

“Change of plan, send everyone you can spare to the powerplant, they’re tried blowing out the crew, now they’re trying to blow the whole station.”

The engineering crew put up a fight, but they weren’t soldiers. Bodies lay slumped at workstations, blasters in stiff, cold hands. There were perhaps half a dozen left, who had barricaded themselves in the master control room. The enemy however, were taking a more direct approach, somehow combining the power generated by their amphistaffs to generate a cutting beam to get to the reactor itself. A flurry of shots, cutting down three of the intruders, but their weapons seemed unperturbed by the loss of their masters. Four surving Vong rose to their feet, weapons at the ready. They were outnumbered, but superbly armed and armoured, and now they were fighting back, strange projectiles filling the ozone reeking air. The security detail’s ranks were thinning as men and women fell some wounds were cauterised, others were not. One man continued to shoot wildly, even though corrosive venom spat from an amphistaff had blocked his vision as it caked the faceplate of his helmet.

Hyle charged forward, lightsabre in one hand, table leg in a another, bringing the latter own with brutal force on one of the amphistaffs laid on the deck as an improves cutting torch. One of the intruder lashed out, the symbiotic weapon cracking like a whip. A hasty parry, and a ripost barely penetrating the armour. The alien did not so much as grunt in pain at the tip of the lightsabre burned its chest. A vicious backswing scored across the creatures ribs and it snarled, more in rage than pain. Another thrust to face, swatted aside by the living weapon this warrior bore. A feigned stumble, and the warrior drew back its staff, ready to deliver the killing blow, which never landed. Twisting his sabre in his grip, the crossguard went through his assailant’s left eye.

The spot where the enemy had attempted to drill buckled and flexed ominuously. “Quick, the that patched up before it gives.” Hyle keyed his wrist com. “Master-Com, any more intruder.”

“Negative Jedi Alihandross, although we have more pressing matters, there is a large bioship approximately the size of an Imperial Star destroyer approaching the station. It made a micro jump and is now in our defensive perimeter, we lack the weaponry to destroy it.”

“Can our fleet microjump on top of it?”

So this was it, they were trapped. The enemy wanted to eliminate all resistance in the mid rim while it was cutting the region off from any further assistance.

Hyle checked his datapad, now looking at the cockpit feed from the *Namora.* He keyed the fleetwide frequency into his comm.

“All available units, this is the Wheel, we require immediate assistance.”

“We don’t have the numbers to take it on, we’ll be cut to ribbons before what’s let f the rest of the fleet gets here, it’s suicide.” Sablo Holker said.

“All wings form on me.” He added.

“Belay that *Namora*.”

“The is the *Busted Flush,* I have an idea, have the main fleet concentrate on knocking out their interdictors.”

“So what do we do?” Asked Holker

“Stay alive and deal with this big one’s fghter and escorts, in precisely that order.”

Suprisingly, the Monitor and he main fleet seemed to heed this lowly customs cutter captain’s suggestion.

“Message from flaghip, Interdictors destroyed.”

“Acknowledged. Stand by.” Said the *Busted Flush’s* Captain.

The small corvette turned to the massive bioship. And then it happend, a great urge of motion, as if the ship were making the jump to hyperpace, which it was, except it never did. The impact from the speed of the collision broke the enemy ship in two. Hyle stareble blankly a the screen of his datapad, barely comprehending or believing what he had witnessed.

“This is Master-Com. Sensor indicate the Vuuzhan Vong are disengaging.”

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“So what happens now?” Dvart asked, pouring a generous shot of rum for himself and his son.

“The Wheel Route stays open. For now.” Hyle said, taking a sip.

“And?” Prompted Dvart.
“That depends.

“On what?”

Hyle poured himself another shot.

“Whether High command is willing or able to send reinforcements, what’s left of the fleet’s needed to defend New Holstice, and won’t be riding to the rescue in the even of another attack, not without major backup.”

“So?”

“So patrols continue, and if the enemy deploys in force before reinforcements arrive, we evacuate the Wheel and then void it. The Vong will simply ignore it then, it’s just dead metal to them. In the mean time, the Republic still gets supplies and manpower from the mid rim, and we’ll need both?”

“I got a message from Helaine and Layara.” Dvart said, to lighten the mood.

“Holstice is big, quiet and dirty Heline says.”

“And Layara?” Hyle asked.

“She thinks Helaine might have a touch of planet fever and wants to know what the hell my wife and I were thinking raising kids on space stations.”

Hyle smiled.

“So what happens to you?”

“The Republic will dedicate all the resources it can spare towards keeping the Wheel Route open, and that includes yours truly. So you’re stuck with me until further notice.”
“Well, it could be worse son.”