

## Full Frontal Assault

A submission for the fiction competition: **The Unchained Malady: Full Frontal Assault**

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Zruta Dysian was busy with his usual morning routine when the klaxon sounded aboard the newest Star Destroyer in Taldryan's arsenal. The military man's usual early morning jog turned into a brisk sprint as he raced towards his private quarters. The *Axios* was no different from any other ship in the Taldryan Navy at first glance. It was grey and frightfully dull, both inside and in, much like every other Star Destroyer Zruta ever served on. What made this one special, however, was the *gift* from the Severian Principate. A Kyber-powered turbo lazer made this particular vessel the pride and joy of the Taldryan fleet, and when the hallways began blinking red, everyone on board knew something was up.

Zruta slammed the access card on the panel as a pair of durasteel blast doors opened with a *swoosh*, followed very quickly by loud, snappy barking from a larger than life beast within.

"Easy, Buddy. It's just me."

The Arx wolf's sensitive ears twitched as its behaviour did a one-eighty. Tongue out, tail wagging, big beady eyes and its head slightly cocked to the side, the animal watched patiently as its Rattataki master collected his gear. The room was immaculate. Every detail and angle perfectly placed, ensuring the Rattataki knew where everything was.

*Preparation is the key to success.* Zruta mused to himself. They were his father's words, some of the many that the Commander lived by in his day to day life. He quickly stockpiled his equipment and prepared himself, starting with his pristine, white armor. Following that was his Amban rifle which he strapped to his back. Then his grenades, dart shooter, and flamethrower followed suit. Last but by no means least we're the special treats made specifically for Buddy.

*Buddy would never forgive me if I forgot those.*

Even so, something was missing. Zruta knew what it was, yet it wasn't in the place he left it. His side table drawer.

"Come on. Where are you?"

The Rattataki Loyalist searched frantically under his bed, and in the surrounding room. This was not like him, but he knew exactly who it was like. He turned to see Buddy with the blaster in his mouth. If Zruta didn't know any better, he could have sworn the wolf did it on purpose just to mess with him. Regardless, the Loyalist took the blaster from Buddy's mouth, wiped the sticky slobber from the handle, and holstered the weapon at his hip.

"Come on, Buddy. Let's get moving."

The military man left the room with the large wolf following behind. The klaxon blared as loud as ever, flashing red as various crew and personnel ran from one side of the hallway down to the other, a Togruta with her hand round her communicator was yelling obscenities at the top of her lungs, whilst another was oddly jubilant at the chance to *blow something up*.

*"All personnel report to your stations immediately. We are arriving in the Orian System shortly."*

"Junior!" Voiced a loud, disgruntled soldier. A vein bulged at the top of Zruta's bald head. Thankfully, it was hidden away being his helmet. The pale Human Male ran towards the Commander with intent purpose.

"The General wants to see you," the soldier informed loudly, and instantly, Zruta's heart plummeted into his gut. The hairs on his arms stood on end as a cold sweat began to form on his brow. Buddy glanced up to his master, the wolf's senses picking up on the sudden shift in the tall Rattataki. Zruta swallowed the lump in his throat and forced himself to answer.

"Right. Well, I'll report to him at once."

Zruta gestured with a brief salute and began to pace in the opposite direction, not bothering to wait for a salute back. Buddy followed closely at his sides as the pair narrowly avoided the waves of traffic coming from the other direction.

"Frakk, frakk, frakk..." Zruta muttered under his breath, thankfully quiet enough that no-one could hear him over the alarm. The Rattataki reached the nearby elevator which had just opened as two other troopers stepped inside.

"Hold the elevator!" the Commander yelled out. It seemed his cry was heard, as one of the troopers held it for him. Zruta graciously entered with the Arx wolf following at his heels, never missing a step.

"Thanks."

Zruta received and in return, though the sight of the large beast perturbed the two other men, their bodies tensing as they glanced at each other. Buddy just stared back at them, tongue out, bearing his canines in a display of - *do anything and I will bite you.* -

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**Command Bridge**  
**The *Axios***  
**39 ABY**

The scene upstairs was nothing like the one on the levels below. The atmosphere was relatively calm, as was to be expected from the big-wigs who ran the ship itself. Terminals that displayed the ship's vital systems were entrenched on either side of a long walkway with

those in charge of them communicating orders via headsets. Zruta stepped out into the command bridge with his heart beating into his throat. Without realising it, he clenched his fists before taking a deep breath.

Whatever the General wanted must have been important, and the man himself stood with his arms behind his back, seemingly staring out into the hyperspace void of white and blue.

Zruta's boots clanged against the durasteel plating of the walkway as he approached with Buddy's tapping right behind. Some at the sides glanced at the unusual sight of an animal up this high on the destroyer, but we're either too busy to comment, or simply didn't care.

"Sir," Zruta voiced, clearing his throat. "You wanted to see me?"

The General spun to face the white-armoured Weapon Specialist. A small smile appeared on the older military man's pale white face. Grey eyes gleamed back at Zruta, whilst the long vertical scar drew most people's attention to it, the younger Rattataki was used to it.

"Zruta, yes. I did. Come, we need to talk in private."

The Commander did as ordered and followed the General into a secluded side room. It was spacious, luxurious, and worthy of a man of the older Rattataki's status. Buddy instantly made himself at home by taking over a shaded spot under a nearby desk, curling up and nuzzling into his fur.

"Is there something wrong, sir?" Zruta asked cautiously.

"On the contrary, nothing's wrong. I..."

The General paused.

"Take off your helmet. You don't need to be so formal around me, son."

Zruta hesitated for a moment before carefully removing said helmet from his head, revealing a complexion as pale as the General's before him. Matching grey eyes shine back at each other.

"It's like looking into a mirror," the older Rattataki couldn't help but comment. "I know I keep saying it, but you really are a spitting image of me when I was your age. It's a shame, your mother was always the better looking one. I hoped you would look more like her."

"Sir, if you don't mind..."

"Zruta, I am your father and there's no-one else around," the General interrupted, sternness radiating in each word.

The Commander swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Father," Zruta said hesitantly. "Is there a reason you called me here?"

"As a matter of fact, there is. Our scouts have located Unchained forces landing on Sepros Major. You've been selected to lead a team and intercept them," the General spoke with crystal clear clarity without missing a beat. Meanwhile, Zruta couldn't stop his eyes from going wide as his heart swam with joy.

*I'm being given a shot!* The Weapons Specialist thought to himself. Zruta unconsciously stood proud with a small smile on his face. Yet, when he saw the look in his father's eyes, it all dropped like a heavy sack of credits.

"Why are you upset? I thought you would be proud of me," the Commander inquired to his father, who helped himself to a cup of caf-stim from the nearby coffee machine. The hard fragrance of the, quite frankly appalling, beverage pierced into Zruta's nostrils instantly and made the Rattataki wince.

"I *am* proud, Zruta. Believe me, my boy. You make me proud every day I get to lay my eyes on you," the senior Dysian took a sip of the rancid coffee, scrunching his face as the sour taste graced his mouth.

"Then what's wrong? You don't seem very happy."

It was rare for Zruta to be this bold with the man he looked up to and idolised more than anything. All the son ever wanted was to make his father proud of him, to serve just like he did, but create his own path. Zruta Dysian Sr responded with a pained, yet forced smile on his face.

"Have I ever told you what I wish I'd known when I was your age? I dreamed of glory just like you. I wanted to make a name for myself. I was a Commander just like you and was given authority over my own team of men and women in the Emperor's Hammer before the Exodus." The General paused, a far-away look appeared on his face. "I led my men straight into a massacre and watched them die with my own eyes. I was shamed, demoted, and have had to live with the guilt every single day ever since."

"Why are you telling me this?" Zruta Junior spoke softly. This was a side of his father he'd never seen before. The older Rattataki was also so self-assured and confident. This display of vulnerability sent shivers down the younger man's spine.

"Because I want you to know what you are getting yourself into, Zruta. Sometimes you have no control who lives and who dies. You can plan, and plan, and plan, but when faced with reality even the best-laid plans can come unstuck. You've studied under the greatest tactical minds this Brotherhood has to offer, on my request. If anyone can pull this off, it's you. If I didn't think you could do it, I wouldn't send you, my son, my flesh and blood, onto the front lines against an enemy that ravaged Taldryan's home system."

The room fell eerily silent. The General's impassioned speech still rang in the Commander's ears as he processed everything he just heard.

"Zruta," the older man said softly. "Just be careful, ok? I'm your General, but I'm also your father. I have every right to be concerned."

Zruta cracked a smile for the first time since he entered the room, if only to give his father the reassurance he needed.

"I will. I promise."

"I know you will," the General confirmed. "That is all. You are dismissed."

Zruta gave his father a hearty salute before he spun to leave the room. He clicked his fingers, the snap summoning Buddy to his side instantly. They left the room post-haste and left the General to stir in his thoughts and feelings. The old Rattataki downed his caf-stim and let out a deep breath before composing himself. Zruta's father left the room shortly afterwards to take full command of the *Axios* once again.

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Sepros Major, Gamuslag, it didn't matter what you called it, this dust ball that called itself a moon was inhospitable at the best of times and a death trap at the worst. The outpouring of nauseous gasses from Sepros' largest moon's younger days left a hot, metallic tint in the air whenever Zruta and his team breathed it in. The temperature fluctuated from barely tolerable to hot and back again from the rumoured magma rivers that supposedly flowed underneath the hard, rocky surface.

*It has to be blisteringly hot, doesn't it?* The Rattataki thought to himself as for perhaps the fifteenth time in the last hour. He checked on his canine companion and gave him water for perhaps the twentieth. They would have made it to the Unchained camp by now if only Zruta hadn't kept stopping to tend to Buddy's needs, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the other ninety-nine men and women under his command.

Tensions were high, and Zruta could feel their stares like knives being aimed at his back. He paid it no attention for now.

"Sir, permission to speak."

Not that he had much of a choice.

"Permission granted, Major Prest, but make it brief," Zruta responded bluntly.

"Sir, everyone is tired and thirsty. We should have made contact with the Unchained an hour ago. Was bringing the mutt really necessary?"

If the female Fallen didn't know any better, she could have sworn she saw the Arx Wolf bare its teeth at her after what she said.

"Where I go, he goes," Zruta answered bluntly. "Besides, we will be arriving at our given coordinates shortly."

"Would it not be better to simply leave it behind? It's a wild animal, after all. It's dragging us down and delaying the mission, and if it barks it will alert the enemy of our presence."

Zruta's head snapped instantly towards the Fallen as he quickly rose back to his feet.

"Major, let me ask you something. Who's in charge here?" The Commander voiced loud enough for the group of trained soldiers to hear.

"You, si-"

"Me, yes. That's correct," Zruta interrupted with irritation highly palpable in his tone. "You would do well to remember your place. You all would. I'm the Commander here, I'm the one in charge, and I'm the one you will all listen to. Am I understood?"

Silence.

"I said, am I understood!?" Zruta barked loudly. Getting disgruntled confirmations from the troops under his command. Buddy glanced to the Commander, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as it snarled towards the large group.

Satisfied that he was heard, Zruta began to march towards their destination again as Buddy followed closely by his side. Though the Commander couldn't help but shake the uneasy feeling that dropped into his gut.

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*It's no wonder they were so hard to find.*

Zruta had to admire their tactical ingenuity. Whoever it was that decided to make camp in one of the many craters that covered the moon's surface was a genius. Despite the battle worn surface that was scarred and marred from numerous confrontations with the Sadowan Warhost Army, the Unchained located somewhere they could regain their composure and continue their attack when ready.

That's why Zruta and his team were here, to reinforce the Warhost and provide whatever support was required. Bodies still scattered the terrain from both sides of the conflict. Thankfully, this wasn't Zruta's first time surveying a battlefield. The Collective's attack on Arx left permanent reminders in the back of the Rattataki's mind of what an enemy on your home turf can do. Zruta involuntarily shuddered.

*I don't ever want to see that again.*

Buddy's ears twitched, sensing his master's apprehension. Zruta's eyes widened and his heart pounded harder in his chest as they finally reached the crater.

*As clever as their idea was, there's still one fault with it.*

It was a fault that Zruta planned to exploit to the highest degree. As much as the crater hid them from drones, ships, or the majority of scouting equipment, it did nothing to gain them a tactical advantage. Zruta had the high ground, he knew that, and he planned to take full advantage of it.

The Commander raised his right hand into the air and made a circle with his index finger. Without a word, the ninety-nine slowly began to circle the vast crater like a pack of vornskrs ready to pounce. All one-hundred men and women spread out in a wide circle, and clutched their BlasTech rifles. Buddy whined lowly beside the Rattataki, who gently patted the Arx Wolf's head to give him the comfort he needed.

"It's ok, boy. Everything will go to plan."

It seemed to appease the Arx wolf for now as he went prone next to the Weapons Specialist. Zruta retrieved his specialised rifle, a weapon handcrafted by the best forgers in the Brotherhood and peered down the length of the scope. Every man and woman along the perimeter of the crater followed suit. Through the lense, Zruta followed the silhouettes of Unchained officers and soldiers. Tents and military equipment lay around in organised clumps for their eventual re-emergence.

*A shame it's never going to happen.*

Zruta's grey eye locked onto one particular man that separated himself from the others. Not just by distance, but by the attire he wore. Medals adorned the man's outfit, and he carried himself in a way that demanded respect from all of his subordinates. This, the Commander determined, was the leading officer of this Unchained assault. The Rattataki flicked a small lever on his rifle, gently placed his index finger on the trigger, then...

A loud echo ruptured from the barrel as a beam of yellow plasma soared into the crater below. The noise made Zruta's target recoil from shock. The Unchained officer was struck in his chest as his body was baptized before his troop's very eyes. All that remained of the man was a pile of ash that scattered into the wind.

*Any second now...* Zruta mused. Sure enough, the Unchained began yelling. Orders barks from Commanders and Majors alike. The army below scrambled to collect their gear and form some kind of counteroffensive. Thankfully, Zruta and his team of expert marksmen caught them by surprise. The team used Zruta's first shot as the signal to open fire on any living thing down below. Bodies began to pile up rapidly, and the Taldryan Commander realised he underestimated just how numerous they were. His team were outnumbered. At least ten, no, fifteen-to-one, and they couldn't target everyone at once. Blaster bolts rose as bodies continued to fall. Zruta and his team were thankfully covered by the terrain and high ground advantage they accumulated. One of his team shot at a collection of explosive fuel barrels which exploded, sending shrapnel into the unprotected flesh of nearby Unchained soldiers.

One by one the Unchained were gunned down, and it seemed that Zruta's massive numbers disadvantage did nothing to turn the tide in the Unchained's favor. It justified everything the

Rattataki was taught. It wasn't always the strongest who won, but the smartest. The most tactically sound would always dominate.

Unfortunately, Zruta failed to register the arrival of reinforcements until it was too late. The Rattataki accounted for every situation, and had a plan for nearly every scenario.

Except for one, and the Taldryan military man only noticed it when the Arx Wolf barked towards something behind him.

The Taldryan Loyalist was *promised* there would be no Unchained reinforcements. He was told he could focus on the enemy in their little hidey-hole. From what he was told, the Unchained would take at least a couple of hours to mobilize any kind of infantry drop.

The Commander's eyes shot open as realisation dawned on him. The delays he caused allowed the Unchained to gather their resources, and now his entire battalion was in trouble. They were exposed, out in the open and spread apart like cattle for the slaughter. Zruta instinctively placed his ricochet disk in front of him and used it as a shield, deflecting any stray blaster fire aimed at himself or Buddy.

Unfortunately, they were vastly outmanned, outgunned and outmaneuvered. Zruta quickly realised the army in the crater was nothing more than a mere distraction. His forces scrambled away to whatever form of cover they could find. Some tried to flee, hoping to escape the bloodshed with their lives only to be shot down before the Commander's eyes.

"No! Do not flee! Find cover and hold your positions! I repeat, find cover and hold your positions!"

The Rattataki might as well have been talking to thin air. His command over his troops was diminished, their lack of respect apparent, and no matter what Dysian barked down his communicator, they refused to listen. It was every man and woman for themselves.

Zruta unclipped a circular device from his belt and pressed the button at the top. Bright red lights began to blink, becoming increasingly rapid as the Loyalist lobbed it in the general direction of blaster fire. Screams entered the pale-skinned soldier's ears, so the Taldryan Loyalist knew he'd hit something or someone.

As the Taldryan Commander glanced from side to side, he knew he was the last one left. Zruta had failed.

*Father warned me and I didn't listen.*

Buddy practically planted himself into Zruta for both safety and comfort from the noise surrounding him.

"I'm sorry, Buddy."

What else could Zruta say? The Commander wanted to grab glory by his neck and make it his bitch, and he royally frakked up.

*Hell only knows what my father will think when he finds out.*

Then suddenly, it was like his prayers were answered as explosions rang around him. At first he was afraid, petrified even. But his eyes could just make out the silhouette of the Sadowan Warhost Army in the distance.

"BUDDY, LET'S GO!"

Under the cover of supporting blaster fire, both the Commander and the Arx wolf broke into a sprint as they made for safety behind the Sadowan attack force. Suddenly, Zruta was knocked off balance by what felt like an invisible leash around his torso. In seconds, the Commander flew across the battlefield and crashed ribs-first into a large stone boulder. The Loyalist winced and gasped, every little movement caused pain in his chest. His breathing becoming heavier, his heart throbbing in his ears.

Broken, cracked, and splintered. Whatever state his ribs were in was not a good one. Zruta could barely move as water formed in his eyes. The silhouette of a dark-robed figure loomed up above him, holding a cylindrical object in their hand.

***Snap-hiss!***

A red lightsaber blade pierced through the chaos of warfare and was sighted through the Rattataki's peripheral vision. The figure raised the weapon and readied to cleave Zruta's head from his shoulders, though the Loyalist was spared that cruel fate for the moment when Buddy launched itself at its master's would-be attacker. The giant Arx wolf tackled the Unchained Sith to the ground and sunk its teeth into the dark-sider's arm.

Buddy latched on so tightly that he managed to draw blood from the wound, the Sith struggled against the wolf's vicious might, but managed to free himself with a well-timed roll. With his lightsaber still firmly in his grasp, the Sith kicked the wolf with augmented power as Buddy yelped in pain.

***BUDDY!***

The Commander's eyes went wide and he gritted his teeth together. He reached for his sidearm, conveniently located at his hip. Then, just as the Sith was about to execute his beloved companion, Zruta pulled the trigger.

A single shot soared and collided with the back of the Sith's head. The Force user collapsed to the ground instantly, with Buddy still beside him.

***Buddy...***

The last thing Zruta saw before his world faded to black, was the Sadowan Warhost Army rushing towards him.

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**The *Axios***  
**Orian System**  
**39 ABY**

General Zruta Dysian read the datapad again, and again, and again. Yet no matter how hard he read the basic letters over and over again, he still hoped that by some miracle, the words would change.

They didn't, and with a heavy heart filled with grief for the lives lost on this day, there was only one person he could turn to. His son, the lone survivor along with his pet wolf. The elder Rattataki rubbed his s eye's with one hand.

*It's times like these I wish I stayed retired.*

The mission might have been considered a success, but at what cost? Was it worth the ninety-nine other men and women? The ones he now had to write to their families, apologizing for *his* son's frakk up?

Zruta Dysian Sr was a mixed bag of emotions that lurked underneath a hard, stoic exterior that was beaten into him from decades of service. Yet, even he couldn't stop the roiling anger that filled his gut from spreading throughout him. The General activated the communicator on his wrist before

"Once *Commander* Dysian has stepped out of his bacta tank, inform him to come see me immediately for a debriefing with his pet. I wish to teach my son a lesson."

The General ended communication before the soldiers on the other end had any chance to reply. The Rattataki released a heavy sigh as he stared upon the visage of Sepros Major out the window.

**-END-**

