**Cadomai System, Cadomai Prme, Northern Continent, 22 kilometres southeast of the southern end of the mountain range, Ground Force Mobile Command Centre**

**39 ABY**

The door to the makeshift command centre burst open. Heavily armoured soldiers, officers, veterans all, looked up from their work at entrant. A crisp tundra gust blasted the already flushed faces of the troops within before a guard outside slammed the door shut. They watched an exhausted messenger in scorched light armour, the sigil of the Corporate Sector’s Ground Forces emblazoned on the right breast, rush to centre of the room where a large hologram of a small battle played out before a small cadre of senior staff.

The Duros messenger stood with a datapad outstretched toward the portly Pantoran flag officer who held command. He ignored the stream of viscous green blood that ran down the left side of his head and waited diligently for the older officer to address him.

“Report,” Raleien Sonavarret snapped in his deep bass rumble, eyes fixed on the holographic combat on the circular table before him.

“Captain Kol reports heavy resistance from the *Remnant* forces at checkpoint three, sir. They’ve got some sort of artillery emplacement keeping Dorn company from advancing, and they still haven’t taken out the jamming device that’s preventing direct communication.”

Raleien nodded, thoughtful. They had figured the left flank would be troublesome. His adversaries today were good. Not good enough to have ruled the galaxy like their forebears, but still well trained.

He gestured for the messenger to set the datapad on a command console nearby. The messenger complied, then returned to fatigued martial stance.

“Continue.”

“Sir, the captain is looking for direction. Should he continue advancing to eliminate the threat, with the potential for heavy casualties, or should he pursue an alternate course of action?”

The old Pantoran soldier cupped his thick chin with a scarred, cerulean hand. His emerald eyes never diverted from the moving azure holographic projection before him as he considered a response.

“I recommend Dorn company pull back to checkpoint two, sir,” interjected Captain Helon, one of his human adjutants.

Her dark eyes regarded Raleien with an earned confidence. She was young to hold her rank at twenty-nine years old, and certainly a budding tactician. Her skill was such that it might not be long before the New Republic take notice and try to cherry-pick her from the Authority. The Pantoran had come to trust her insight on martial affairs very quickly. She also had a special knack for armoured engagements.

In this case, however, Raleien knew her counsel was too cautious. Their current campaign against these *Remnant* scoundrels required aggression and momentum. They could not pull any troops back unless there was no other option. That option being their men were being killed faster than they could divert more troops to help.

“I disagree, colonel. Our best course is to continue the assault. Perhaps we could activate one of our reserve companies,” Captain Oken, his other aid, said through their vocal emulator. They were an older Ithorian member of the Ground Forces who had been promoted from the lower ranks.

Oken Ifost and Nurama Helon often presented opposite opinions, but the two never butted heads. They were the absolute jackpot of a core command team. They took their role as the Fifth Expeditionary Regiment’s command staff with a rare balance of humility, grit, and intellect any commander would beg for. And they genuinely respected one another and their crotchety old boss, which was a bonus. Both of their insights had been invaluable during this brief campaign against the First Order remnants, known to them simply as the *Remnant*.

“You make a good point, Ifost. Perhaps we should call in another bombing run?”

“Last run didn’t work as near as we can tell. We could’ve asked the Fleet to focus fire on the mountains and blow them out of the sky, but our orders are to do minimal planetary damage. Something about not drawing undue ire from the New Republic and the Snivvian government or some such,” Oken said.

“Damn politics,” the human woman spat. “Makes our job more difficult every time.”

Oken nodded. “That it does. Almost as difficult as this emplacement the *Remnant* managed to setup. Smart of them to do that.”

*Smart of them indeed,* Raleien thought as he allowed his subordinates to speak among themselves. *Almost premeditated. We thought we backed them into a corner in these mountains, but I’m beginning to suspect we don’t control the battlefield as firmly as we believed.*

“They weren’t in the mountains this whole time, though. We drove them there. How did the orbital bombardment miss the guns that are now in this emplacement?” Helon asked the messenger. It seemed she also thought along the same lines as he did.

“It is likely they were alerted to the fleet’s presence before we arrived in orbit. They have the sensors for it. Captain Kol suspects the *Remnant* forces took refuge in one of the subterranean cavern systems. Those are the one’s the Snivvians live in. Scans from the fleet in orbit couldn’t penetrate through the mountain range prior to the assault, but the captain suspects they – um…”. The messenger paused; discomfort clearly etched on his face. “The captain suspects they cleared out a small town and dug in.”

Raleien nodded at the messenger’s words, unsurprised and unperturbed. Cleared out meant they had murdered the entire town and swept the bodies aside. It was a tried-and-true Imperial tactic. He himself had done the same in the past, during his time with the Empire. And now he found himself in the employ of those who hunted down these so-called First Order acolytes for violations of Corporate Sector space.

He heard Helon and Oken continue to question the messenger for information. As they did so, the Pantoran pressed a blue button on a small console and the holographic image shifted to display the part of the battle they currently discussed. He saw Kol and his men in cover behind sharp boulders and small hills, with a line of Stormtroopers a few hundred metres north of their position, the summit of the nearest mountain at their backs. Explosions ripped the virtual ground into blue polygons and sent bodies tumbling through the air, out of sight of the visual stream provided by the fleet above. Raleien thought he could almost pinpoint where those shells were firing from.

*What to do*, he thought as he watched the ebb and flow of this particular engagement. He allowed his mind to drift, to think of topics beyond those merely strategic. His mastery of warfare was not absolute, but decades of lived experience and learning allowed him to develop, test and scrap stratagems in the dominant part of his mind while he engaged in fastidious self-reflection upon his life. He often considered his station, and his responsibilities, and just how in the ten frozen hells he was still alive after all these years.

In the aftermath of the Resistance’s triumph over the First Order, many in the galaxy had been swept up in efforts to eradicate any remaining zealots spread across known space. Until recently, Raleien had managed to stay out it, preferring to work as a small time mercenary or bounty hunter. Of course, that meant there were other conflicts which nearly swallowed him whole. He had almost been swept up in a conflict on Dandoran. At the time, he had been in the willing employ of a renegade band of criminals turned freedom fighters called the Tenixir Revenants. But instead of being deployed to the Hutt outpost world, an agent from the Corporate Sector Authority had observed Raleien execute a hit-and-run attack on a Severian Principate aligned bank a few weeks earlier. The Corporate Sector had taken notice of his tactical prowess and offered him a fast-tracked commission to their expeditionary forces. He had accepted immediately, and only heard of the legendary horrors and tales of Sith and Jedi doing battle through the grapevine.

The commission in the Ground Forces had felt like the start of a new path, and a significant one. Though something in the back of the old soldier’s mind told him that while he strode down this new path, another might have once been available to him. It was lost, now, in the endless momentum of time. Even so, the feeling lingered deep within him, locked away and ever present as his own, deeply suppressed trauma. Yet like both, he ignored it for the moment.

Suddenly, pieces on the proverbial game board clicked into place, and in his mind’s eye he knew what to do to push the battle forward.

“…should we even consider deploying more troopers if they’re just going to get torn apart like –“

Raleien raised a hand. That was all. Yet both his advisors fell silent and waited for him to speak.

The flag officer looked away from the table and locked gazes with the messenger.

“These are the captain’s orders. He is to hold position for as long as possible to draw the attention of the *Remnant* scum. We’ll activate Grek company, who have a sizable force of assault armour and sappers. They will flank further west of checkpoint three.” He paused and operated the table’s console, bringing up a topographic map of the battlefield. He plotted a green line to show the projected route for Grek company, while the map was also populated with current friendly and enemy positions in blue and red, respectively. “Captain Harlow will sweep west and infiltrate the subterranean complex, thereby relieving Kol from the emplacements currently pounding his position. Once relieved, if the remainder of Dorn is in fighting order, they’re free to advance and assist Grek with clearing the mountain. Together, they should be a match for that position.”

“Understood sir!”

“And remember - take no prisoners.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Not so fast, messenger,” Helon cut in. “You’re bleeding badly from your head. Go get patched up at the med tent, and then return to the fight. We’ll have someone else deliver the message.”

“Yes ma’am!”

The Duros saluted and exited the command centre.

“We’ll see your orders done, sir,” Oken said.

“Good. Notify me when Grek company moves out.”

The command centre became a hive of activity as Helon and Oken began passing orders to the other subordinates in the room. Raleien smiled as he listened to the two senior adjutants bark orders and see his vision done. They were going to go far, those two. Assuming they lived.

Life. He had never suspected the trajectory of his own miserable existence would have him serve an Empire in his youth, and then serve one of innumerable armed institutions in the galaxy who sought to violently crush the final embers of imperialism from existence in the waning years of his life. The irony was not lost on the colonel. Part of him thought he should have felt conflicted during his current venture. He was, some might argue, effectively eradicating his natural allies, those who yearned for a new order.

Raleien didn’t see it that way. Though some rumours claimed this former First Order had been the brainchild of the long-dead emperor, the Pantoran didn’t believe them. Emperor Palpatine had delivered – for a time – peace and stability. It had cost Raleien any chance of redemption or forgiveness for the atrocities he had committed, but he did accept that the former Empire had briefly achieved this goal. The First Order had never come close. And any order which could not successfully exert its power over the galaxy did not deserve the mantle of imperial dominance.

This mission to crush these *Remnant* cowards was not just a duty put forth by Ground Force command for violating the non-aggression policy in the Corporate Sector. Nor was it some moral quest to seek redemption. This was hunt of the weak and undeserving. It was a cull of the fake and forsaken. He would burn and destroy and kill every last soldier whose existence sullied the name and legacy of Empire if it was the last thing he did. Or, at least, he would die trying.

Nearby, an explosion ripped through the small Ground Forces camp. Raleien felt the ground shake and heard the cries of the dying. It seemed the *Remnants* had pinpointed their command centre. It wasn’t the first time.

It was time to move and oversee the battle from a mobile position. Any good battle commander knew it was foolish to put oneself in harm’s way. Staying mobile for a time would be the safest course.

As Raleien gathered his helmet and weapons and left the command centre, which was being rapidly dismantled by his soldiers, he stopped to consider that feeling of possibility as the ground nearby erupted. That sense of possibility gnawed at his thoughts, distracting him now in truth. He experienced a powerful wave of *déjà vu* that translated in a deep foreboding. It was almost as if he felt somewhere else and some*when* else. He felt pulled between two existences, unsure of which he resided within.

Then nothing. He felt normal, the sense of otherness having disappeared entirely. The hard-packed snow of the tundra felt firm beneath his feet. The cold glacial air he breathed was invigorating, even as it nipped at his resistant blue skin. He felt, unlike he had for a long time, truly alive and *present* in his reality.

Renewed in his place and purpose in life, Raleien returned to the important task of killing cowards.