



WARBRINGER

General Zentru'la

Chapter 1

The Cylinder of Taldryae

“Good to see you, General! Take a seat.”

“We don’t handle negotiations in person, Consul Wight.” The setting sun streamed into the windows of floor seventy, Taldryan Tower, Port Kasiya, the diversion that General Zentru’la did not need to make. The top floor’s panoramic views of the coastal city provided no tactical advantage whatsoever, and neither did the bright yellow lightning bolt across the Consul’s crimson armour. All spectacle, no practicality. That is why Appius got shot at so often. At least some lessons had been learned – he still wore his armour in his poorly positioned office.

“Well, er,” said the Consul as he looked up at Zentru’la, who had not taken a seat as directed, and stood, arms folded, in front of his desk. “I just wanted to give you the title of Warbringer.”

“Warbringer?”

“What, you don’t like it?”

Zentru’la shook his head in disbelief. How did Appius still think such aggrandising titles were important? Tension grew across the system as Taldryan converged on war with the Children of Mortis. Zentru’la needed to be with his own troops, preparing them for a war that seemed inevitable at this point. Yet here he was, in the Consul’s office, receiving pointless accolades. *Warbringer*.

“I don’t bring wars, Consul. You bring wars to me. I finish them for you.”

“So shall I call you Warfinisher instead?” Appius chuckled a little bit at his joke.

“Neither will stop a blaster bolt.”

Appius sighed as if giving up on a lost cause. “The title just symbolises your excellence in battle. It represents the role I need you to play in Taldryan’s military.”

“I hope you didn’t call me here just to give me a new title.”

“Right you are, General!” Appius reached for something underneath his desk. “Your new title comes with this shiny new toy.”

It was a fairly plain-looking item, a golden cylinder, barely the size of Appius’ large crimson-armoured palm. The Taldryan logo was embossed in the same red as the Consul’s armour. Zentru’la shivered at the sight of it without knowing why. He had this feeling there was just something... off about it. Appius placed it on the desk, gesturing for Zentru’la to take it. This seemed even more pointless than the Warbringer title.

“This little cylinder will grant you command over my new unit of elite troops. The Cohors Praetoria Taldryae! Handpicked them myself. The best of the best!”

“I prefer to train my own troops. The Vornskr Battalion are trained the way I want them to fight.”

Appius slouched back in his chair. “Look, General... I know this isn’t how you do things, but I’ll pay you to take them. They’re a new unit. They haven’t seen battle yet and I want them to learn under an experienced commander.”

“So they answer to whoever holds that?”

Appius nodded enthusiastically. “It’s made by alchemy! They’ll obey your every word and no one else’s! Great, right?”

Zentru’la finally picked up the cylinder. His contract with Taldryan was not just one to supply military support – Appius was also paying for Zentru’la’s military mind. He paused for a second, finding the right words. “There is no cheap substitute for genuine belief and trust in a commander, Wight. If your troops are answering to a magic trinket, then they are not truly your troops.”

Appius’ shoulders slumped. “I thought you’d like it. Your troops are always so organised, well controlled. I want the Cohors to be like yours.”

“That is because they believe in their commander.”

“You know how tense things are with the Children of Mortis. War could break out at any moment, and when it does, I want the Cohors to be ready for it. Can you at least help them prepare for war?”

“With all due respect, General, what the *hell* are you doing?” Masakado snarled, vicious canine teeth bared. His robotic hand drifted dangerously close to his sword.

Lilina walked beside the cyborg and gently ran her fingers over the hand that approached his sword. “Masakado.”

“He’s turning people into living weapons!” Masakado threw his hands up in the air. “That’s no different to the Collective experiments!”

“I recognise that artefact.” Masakado relaxed slightly at Lilina’s touch and serene voice. “That’s the Cylinder of Taldryae. I’m disappointed to see it in your hands, General.”

Returning to the *Harbinger* and explaining Appius’ request had gone even worse than he expected. *No different to the Collective experiments*. Masakado’s crackling voice echoed in Zentru’la’s mind. He hadn’t considered the parallels between the Cohors’ creation and Masakado’s past. Lilina had made excellent progress in helping Masakado control his anger. Had Zentru’la undone all of her hard work?

“I agree with both of you. I’d rather give this thing back to Appius in two pieces.”

Masakado’s hand drifted back to his sword. “I’ll do the honour.”

The Masakado that Zentru’la met two years prior would have struck by now. This was a different beast. This was not the psychotic, predatory, murderous rage Zentru’la was used to, but something more powerful. For once, he was angry for all the right reasons.

“Appius needs to learn to respect the troops under his command, bu-”

“So let me cut the thing in two and be do-

“BUT...” Masakado flinched at the force of Zentru’la’s interjection. “He needs to understand why. That is important. He’s our most reliable long-term client and we can’t afford t-”

“So that’s all this is about? Credits?”

“We need those credits to expand our forces and continue the fight against the Collective!”

“I’ve been fighting for you for free, General. So has Lilina. But I need to know we’re doing it for the right reasons. To put a stop to this sort of thing.”

Being lectured on principals by an assassin was bad enough. The worst thing was Masakado was right. The entire purpose of his team was to fight the Collective - to avenge Zentru’la’s daughter, to stop the experiments that plagued Masakado, and to protect the Force for Lilina.

“Appius will continue along this path whether or not we are involved, but he respects my knowledge in war. I will train his troops for him and leverage his respect for me to encourage a different path. I will not return the Cylinder to him until he learns to respect them.”

“I don’t like your choice, General,” said Masakado. “I will have no part in serving alongside this experiment.”

Zentru’la looked towards Lilina, who stood with her hands clasped in front of her. She shuffled awkwardly.

“I... I will continue Maskado’s training. Some time away from the field might do us both a lot of good. But you should be *very* careful when using that artefact. It’s a Taldryan Legend. Those who possess it for too long become consumed by bloodthirst.”

Chapter 2

Skyfall

“Isn’t that?”

“The Vornskr General?”

“What’s he doing here?”

“I heard he’s garrisoning troops here.”

Murmurs from Taldryan troops followed Zentru’la as he walked the corridors of the Kasiyan Shield Gate. The bright white lights from overhead shimmered in the pristine metallic surfaces of the brand-new Golan III space defence platform.

He had warned the Taldryan summit against this investment. Two hundred million credits spent yet only a single point of failure stood between the Taldryan capital and a potential attacker. Investing so many resources in a single piece of equipment placed a giant target on its weak points. History and two death star destructions had proven that. Had they learned nothing from the Empire’s defeat? Fancy new technology won a few battles, but intelligence and contingency plans won wars. Nonetheless, the summit *had* made the investment, and it was in Zentru’la’s best interests to protect his priority client.

“General Zentru’la.” An old man saluted. Zentru’la inclined his head downwards to make eye contact. Colonel Shin’s wispy thin white hair and voice became frailer every time Zentru’la saw him.

Zentru’la returned the salute. “How’s the training, Colonel?”

“Come see for yourself” The door behind Shin opened to the sound of blaster fire. Zentru’la entered the firing range, the only thing louder than the relentless screeching of blasters was the heavy clunk of his footsteps.

A small contingent of his Mudhorn Company, with heavy white armour with red trim and repeating blaster cannons unleashed their firepower on durasteel Jedi cutouts. “General!” shouted the biggest of them – a Zabrak with large, blunted horns and black patterning on his bronze skin with and a voice like a thermal detonator. With his chest puffed out like a gorilla, he was almost as big as Zentru’la. “Look at my guys! They’re doing great. I’ve got ‘em training 10 hours a day!”

“Good work, Mudhorn On-”

“And they have passion too! Unlike those *cobores* over there”

“Cobores?”

“That fossil out front keeps tryin’ a’ make ‘em rest.” Mudhorn One continued as if he hadn’t heard. “But we’ll fight til’ we drop dead! WE ARE THE MUDHORNS!” His armoured fist thundered against his chest. There was no doubting his commitment. The young commander would learn discretion over time.

“Show Colonel Shin some respect, Mudhorn One. He knows what he’s doing.”

“He’s about seventy! What does he know about fighting?”

“Enough to survive to seventy. Minds like him enable units like yours. Now get back to training.”

He walked slowly behind Mudhorns, observing their technique.

“Nice shot, Mudhorn Five.” The soldier had just bore a hole straight between the eyes of the target, but his subsequent shots drifted upwards towards the ceiling. Zentru’la approached him and adjusted his elbow position, pressing the stock into his shoulder. “But more pressure here to absorb the recoil.” He took a step back and watched Mudhorn Five land his first shot again, then narrowly miss the follow-up. “Better.”

“Eyes on the target, Mudhorn Eight.”

“No single shots, Jedi can block that all day.”

“Breathe out as you pull the trigger.”

“Perfect aim, Mudhorn Twelve,” he said as a Mudhorn soldier leased a stream of blaster fire into the Jedi’s centre of mass.

They had improved a lot since the last time Zentru’la saw them, which he could only assume was down to Mudhorn One’s dedication to training. But regardless of their technique, they had all made the same mistake. The Jedi target was just another humanoid to them. All the shots were aimed at the head and chest. He pictured Lilina’s stance in his mind, wishing she was there to demonstrate it.

“MUDHORNS!” The blaster fire from them fell silent. “You’re shooting Jedi! They can block your fire! Some can deflect it back at you! You do NOT want to be hit by your own shot! Embarrassing way to die. Aim for the legs. Harder to block, and if they do, they tend to deflect it at the floor.”

He carried on down the range to the Cohors, in sleek black commando armour, firing precision rifles at small training remotes. It was a good thing he wasn’t paying for the remotes out of the Vorsnkr Battalion funding. They fell like flies as shot after shot from the Cohors knocked them out of the air.

“Pick up the pace Cohors!” he called to the group as a whole. “You don’t always have this long to aim!”

“YES, WARBRINGER!” Every Cohors soldier called in perfect harmony.

And then the world shook, an explosion thundered, the station rocked, soldiers fell, Zentru’la stumbled, people screamed, sirens blared, Mudhorn troopers swore.

“WHAT THE FWEC WAS THAT!” Zentru’la got back to his feet. The floor was askew. The station was moving downwards. It should not have been. The Cohors returned to their feet but started to miss some of their targets as the station swayed. Zentru’la grabbed the Cylinder of Taldryae. “STOP TRAINING AND GET OUT OF HERE!”

Zentru’la and his forces charged out of the firing range. Fires raged across the station. The halls that mirrored the bright white light now reflected only roaring flame. There was pandemonium in the corridors. The sheer momentum of Zentru’la and the Mudhorns, followed shortly by the Cohors and Colonel Shin, cut

through the crowd.

The station began to accelerate faster. The floor became more unstable. Zentru'la's stomach churned as he felt it begin to rotate. He pushed himself off the wall for balance as he turned the corner into the hangar.

Half the ships in the hangar were on fire, on their sides or both. The rest weren't in much better condition. People scrambled to get on whatever was closest to them.

"EVERYONE ON TO A SENTINEL!" Zentru'la roared, sprinting onto one of his docked shuttles. It had taken four shuttles to move his forces to the Shield Gate. Only three were in one piece, the other's engine burned with a furious fire against a wall that threatened to become the floor. Seventy-five soldiers weren't going to make it.

The ship Zentru'la boarded filled up first. The pilot's seat buckled as he threw his tremendous weight into it and fired up the engine.

"This ship... can't take..." Colonel Shin's breath was drawn out in rags. Able to stand no longer, the venerable tactician slumped into the copilot seat. "No more."

"Screw that!" boomed Mudhorn One. "Mudhorns aren't all on and we've got Cohors on here!"

"No time... we need to go."

"Get the Cohors off! My men should die in combat!"

War... wasn't like that. War was unforgiving, cruel, and unfair. Losing men never became easier. Especially like this, to forces outside of his control. Nothing Zentru'la could say to Mudhorn One could have softened the blow. This was a lesson the young man could only learn by experience... a lesson Zentru'la and Shin had learned only too many times.

Zentru'la closed the boarding ramp.

"What are you doing! My men are left behind!"

"If we wait any longer we'll all go down with the station," said Shin, regaining his voice.

The ship screamed as it lifted more weight than it was designed for. Zentru'la wrangled it into cooperation. Beside him, one of his other Sentinels collided with a Taldryan ship. They both crashed to the floor in a ball of fire as Zentru'la's ship sped out into space. Another seventy-five men lost. Another seventy-five families broken.

It was only outside the station that Zentru'la saw the cause of the attack. A crystalline asteroid was on a collision course with Port Kasiya, shining crimson in the light of the Caelus star. Its sheer momentum had burst through the shield. No one could have been prepared for such an attack.

Children of Mortis ships swarmed towards Port Kasiya. The station slowly rotated as it picked up speed towards the planet. Zentru'la accelerated away from it as chunks of metal exploded from the station. Shrapnel the size of starfighters was blasted into space.

The shield gate had fallen.

Chapter 3

For the Fallen

“G14, get me a sitrep.”

But this was not *The Harbinger*. There was no voice in the walls, no computer linked to the Entire Database of the Inquisitorius for intelligence... and there was no Rohla Trugaim. If there was, Zentru’la wouldn’t have been in the pilot seat and the overburdened shuttle would have been doing gymnastics, smelling of alcohol.

“Enemy shuttles, 6 o’clock,” said Colonel Shin.

Zentru’la yanked the stick left. It felt like hours before the Sentinel shuttle responded to his order. The ship reluctantly began to turn in a slow, wide arc. Rohla would have made it doing loops and corkscrews.

The enemy shuttles did not give chase but continued on their path towards Port Kasiya. Their tactic was obvious and logical. It was exactly what Zentru’la would have done in their position. There was no point wasting time clearing up the space battle when they could swarm the surface. If Kasiya fell, the war was as good as over, and with the Shield Gate down, nothing was stopping them.

Zentru’la’s commlink beeped in his ear. “Gen’ral? What’d’we do now?”

“They’re coming, Rohla! Masakado needs to scout for Appius. Lilina should protect the civilians.”

“Forgettin’ someone?”

“Just get in the air and get shooting!” Zentru’la cut the commlink to focus on

flying the shuttle. He had almost a hundred people aboard, maybe more. The other surviving Sentinel shuttle followed his lead through space but found itself in the wrong place at the wrong time and was destroyed by a stray torpedo. This was no time to have his attention divided.

“I can’t believe we left so many behind.” Said a voice so quiet that it took Zentru’la a while to realise it was Mudhorn One.

There was a moment where nobody spoke before Shin rested his frail hand on Mudhorn One’s robust shoulders. “There was no other way,” Shin said softly. “We saved as many as we could.”

“I know...” He took a deep breath, his voice was on the verge of breaking. Then his hand thundered on the dashboard. “We have to get them back for this! Let’s hit them!”

Mudhorn One was back.

“Hotheadedness will get us all killed. We need to think carefu-”

“Careful? Loads of my troops just died for no reason! I want vengeance!”

Zentru’la was still scanning the battlefield as he just tried to avoid any allied or enemy craft. Mudhorn One and Shin’s arguments faded into the background noise as he formulated a plan. Shin was right - rash action based on emotion and not logic was a surefire way to get them all killed. And yet... as he arced around the station, catching a glimpse of the Mortis fleet out the side viewport... Mudhorn One had a point.

“Some of us have a wife and children to live for, Mudhorn One.”

“You’re just a coward!”

The bulk of the Mortis fleet had made a beeline towards the city, leaving their shuttle completely ignored. And with the Mudhorns and Cohors aboard... they had the men to cause some damage too.

“Shin.” The pair immediately stopped arguing as Zentru’la spoke. “That Quasar-fire.” Zentru’la heard the staccato rhythm of Shin’s fingers on a datapad.

“That’s the *Intruder*.”

“Yeah. A fighter carrier. So why did a load of shuttles just fly out of it?”

“Mortis are using it as a refuelling station.”

“So if we take that...”

“Then it will disrupt their supply lines to Kasiya.” It wasn’t much. But it was better than flying around aimlessly. And besides, Zentru’la had always been fond of the Quasar-fire, an Imperial that stored far more fighters than it had any right to given its size and cost.

“As long as I get to kill some Mortis scum I’m in.”

“Don’t worry Mudhorn One. That’s exactly what I need you for. Shin, take the ship. Dock us in the left-most hangar. Direct power to thrusters.” At full speed, he gave it about 2 minutes before they landed. “Mudhorn One, come with me.”

Zentru’la left the cockpit to see the troops as the ship accelerated. Every seat on the ship was taken, ten were standing. So that made eighty-five troops, about three-quarters of which were Mudhorns and the rest were Cohors.

“Mudhorn Company!” His percussive voice boomed through the ship so even Shin could hear it from the cockpit. “We all lost people today. Comrades. Allies. Friends. Mark my words. They will rue the day they attacked the Vornskr Battalion. They think they’ve trapped us here, over Kasiya. They have no idea what’s coming for them.”

“In one minute, we will land aboard an enemy carrier. The Mudhorns and I will secure one hangar. Our objective is to cause as much chaos as possible. We want all their attention on us! Then Shin will loop round to the other side with the Cohors and go straight for the bridge.”

“Our enemy possess powers we don’t understand. But I’ve killed Jedi Masters!! I’ve fought The Seer in the Darkness! If there’s one thing I’ve learned... it’s that everything dies if you shoot it enough! Just keep firing. Whatever you do, do not let up the pressure. Don’t give them space to breathe!”

The shuttle rotated as it entered the hangar and Zentru’la had a chance to scan the defence force. On any other military ship, marines would be swarming the hangar, but not here, not in the Mortis fleet. Twelve figures in black cloaks stood guard. The Mudhorns outnumbered the Sith almost five to one. There was no

cover.

“Lock and load, Mudhorns!” shouted Mudhorn One. The ship touched down.
“FOR THE FALLEN MUDHORNS!”

Chapter 4

The Intruder

Zentru'la and Mudhorn One were the first down the landing ramp, firing repeating cannons as they went. Mudhorn troops fanned out behind them, laying down a wave of fire. The cloaked Sith figures ignited crimson lightsabers.

So many bolts were fired it was impossible to tell which came from who. Most of the shots missed, covering the back of the hangar in superheated plasma. Some were haphazardly deflected, littering the floor, ceiling and walls in blaster fire. There were screams on both sides, as some shots got through the Sith defences, taking out the legs, killing three. Zentru'la felt a jolt to the chest as a blaster bolt hit him square on Beskar breastplate. The Sentinel's shields screamed as stray shots hit it as it left the hangar bay.

"Spread out!" Zentru'la screamed to his troops above the hum of lightsabers and the roaring of blasters. "Protect your allies!" There was no time for complex plans, or even to look back. The Sith advanced with superhuman speed. This fight was going to be chaos. There was no other way... and no other unit he'd want with him in a brawl.

Zentru'la charged at the nearest Sith. He heard the Sith let out a cold, mirthless laugh. Force users tended to do that before they realised their lightsabers didn't work. In battle, one must appear weak where one is strong. The Sith swung a lazy cut, clearly expecting an easy kill at the idiot charging into his lightsaber.

Zentru'la blocked the attack on his Beskar bracer and bundled the Sith to the ground. They both fell, their weapons scattering to the floor. Zentru'la landed on top, drew his pistol and fired three shots into the Sith's chest at point blank range.

He got back to his feet but was immediately knocked to the floor by an invisible push. From his back, he fired his pistol at the nearby Sith, but his shots were deflected into his armour, the wind knocked out of him. The Sith extended a hand towards him. It felt like being melted alive. Sparks of Force Lightning coursed over his armour and through to his skin. He screamed and writhed in pain. He couldn't even keep his eyes open. And then the pain stopped.

Mudhorn One stood over the downed Sith, blood splattered across his left fist and the Sith's nose. His lightsaber lay a few feet from him. Mudhorn One drew a pistol but the Sith was quicker, pushing him back with the Force and leaping to his feet. The lightsaber jumped off the floor, swooping for its master's hand. Zentru'la fired his pistol and the weapon exploded in a ball of plasma.

Mudhorn One grabbed the Sith around the waist, lifted him and slammed him on his head. Sith necks broke the same way as any other. Mudhorn One extended a hand and lifted Zentru'la to his feet.

"Thanks," Zentru'la said, patting him on the shoulder. "Great job."

"Anytime, General." The fighting had stopped. All twelve Sith were dead but at a heavy cost. Almost half of the remaining Mudhorn Company had fallen. Most of them had been cut clean in half. The armour of the others still smoked with blaster holes. Some of the survivors would be needing extensive cybernetic replacements of missing body parts. Even with half of his forces depleted for a mere twelve kills, Zentru'la was thankful the opponents were Sith Apprentices. Twelve fully trained Sith would have left his forces a lot worse off.

Zentru'la retrieved his repeater and walked among the bodies, identifying the troops they had lost. "We lost a lot of men."

"They died in combat, avenging their brothers," said Mudhorn One, following Zentru'la. "That is the way a Mudhorn should fall."

The blast door to the hangar was suddenly sent crashing off its hinges, nar-

rowly missing a Mudhorn trooper.

“WHAT IS THAT?”

It might have been human, once. Jagged red crystals protruded from the figure’s black armour. It walked as if its legs were broken. Its lightsaber shone a violent blood-red. The Mudhorns slowly backed away, their weapons held at the ready. Zentru’la turned to Lilina for insight... but she was not there, only Mudhorn Twelve, who was missing his right arm and held a pistol in his left. “General... if I die here... my mother...”

“We’ll take care of Evelyn. Focus on the fight.”

Masakado would have had a sword through its spine by now. But the Mudhorn’s hesitation gave it the initiative.

The lightning hit Zentru’la first. His body convulsed violently. Then it arced to the Mudhorns, jumping from troop to troop, washing over them like a tidal wave over a small village. But as it spread among Zentru’la’s remaining troops, the power weakened. Fighting the pain, he drew a thermal detonator and threw it at the crystal abomination.

It blocked the explosion with an invisible barrier, but the attack forced a break in the lightning. His troops opened fire, but it leapt into the air before the shots left the barrel. Mudhorn fire hit nothing but wall. The crystal beast landed in amongst them, swinging its lightsaber wildly, cutting down anyone within range. It fought like a demon, possessed by rage and hatred, making otherworldly noises.

The Mudhorns ran in any direction they could away from the beast. As it chased one down, the others fired at its back. The only shots that landed hit the other Mudhorn troops as the beast moved impossibly fast, dodging or blocking every blaster shot before it was even fired. Backing away was not working.

Zentru’la threw his repeater aside, slamming his shoulder into the Ascendant’s chest. They both fell. Zentru’la grabbed for its saber hand.

One hand forcing the creature’s head to the floor, he clutched its saber hand in a vice-grip, then wrenched the weapon from its grasp. He punched the Ascendant’s head into the hard floor, before finishing it with its lightsaber.

The Mudhorns whooped and cheered. Nothing inspired confidence like leading by example. But the Mudhorn's jubilation was Zentru'la's trepidation. If they were deploying Crystal Ascendants, capturing the ship just became a lot more difficult.

"Shin won't stand a chance against that thing without us," said Zentru'la, whose bracers had numerous lightsaber scratches that weren't there before. "Shin, retreat and rendezvous with us. Come in, Colonel Shin." Zentru'la double-tapped the commlink again, but it was no use. The electrical systems in his armour had been fried by the Force Lightning attack.

"Shin won't need telling, that coward'll retreat first chance he gets," said Mudhorn One in what might have been intended to comfort Zentru'la.

"He has a wife and children. He needs to survive for their sake."

"In battle, death or glory! RIGHT MUDHORNS?"

"HOO-RAH!" shouted the Mudhorns in unison.

"He used to be a lot like you. I hope you live long enough to be like him."

"Or long enough to be like you, General."

There were many things Zentru'la wanted to say about being like him - having a dead wife, dead children and fighting because it was all he had left. But there was no time for that. "We need to get to Colonel Shin. MUDHORNS! WITH ME!"

Chapter 5

In the Dark

Zentru'la and the Mudhorns entered the hangar to see a group of Cohors soldiers flying through the air, smashing into the opposite wall. The Ascendant advanced on them, lightsaber glowing a blood red. The Cohors sprung up in unison, firing on the Ascendant, but their fire dissipated against an invisible barrier. A stream of lightning sent them back to the floor with a blood-curdling scream.

“Open fire!” Zentru'la fired a volley of shots from his repeating cannon. The Mudhorns joined a split-second later. The creature roared in pain, turned towards Zentru'la's team and unleashed its pain into a wave of energy. Zentru'la was knocked back a few steps, his troops sent flying backwards.

Zentru'la fired more shots, but the approaching Ascendant deflected them with its lightsaber. The severed Cohors bodies that littered the room were a sign of what would happen to his troops unless he did something about it.

Zentru'la kept his finger locked on the trigger as he charged straight at the Ascendant. His shots were dissipated like the last. He threw his shoulder into the beast, but by the time he connected, it was no longer there. Zentru'la stumbled as the impact he was anticipating never came, and fell to the floor.

In a flash the ascendent was on him, slashing a lightsaber at his neck. Zentru'la rolled over and blocked it with his forearm. A blur of white and red flashed across his vision. The one-armed Mudhorn Twelve had wrestled the Ascendant

to the floor. His armour was not made of Beskar. A lightsaber blade pierced him through the heart.

At the same time, a volley of precision shots from the Cohors hit the beast in the back of the head. It fell to the ground with a thud of finality.

The creature killed, Zentru'la finally had time to scan the area. Of the enemy, twelve Sith lay dead beside their lightsabers. Over half of the Cohors had fallen in battle, the majority slain by lightsaber strikes. Yet Shin lay face down, his back still smoking with multiple blaster shots...

Zentru'la drew himself up to full height, the Cylinder of Taldryae clutched in his fist as he faced the Cohors. "What happened?"

One Cohors soldier stepped forward. "He tried to retreat. We carried out our orders."

Mudhorn One punched the Cohors soldier in the head with a solid thump. "HE WAS GIVING YOU ORDERS YOU MORONS!"

The other Cohors raised their blasters at Mudhorn One.

"ENOUGH!"

Mudhorn One helped the Cohors soldier to his feet. "Sorry General."

"We answer only to the Warbringer. Our orders were to take the ship. Colonel Shin's retreat contradicted the Warbringer's orders."

Zentru'la crouched over the body of his executive officer. He rolled him onto his back, and empty blue eyes stared into the ceiling. He slammed his fist against the floor. At that moment, he wanted to pick up his repeater and mow down the Cohors soldiers. Bound to the Cylinder of Taldryae, they wouldn't even resist. Then he remembered Lilina's warning - *those who possess the cylinder become consumed by bloodthirst.*

How he wished Masakado and Lilina were with him. There was simply no substitute for Lilina's power and wisdom, or Masakado's skill and cunning. Colonel Shin was among the few others the General truly trusted... and he lay dead at the hands of the Cohors.

This was not their fault. They acted how they had been conditioned to act...

simply followed their programming. He couldn't even blame Appius. Not really. Shin's death was on him. It was his blunder that had led the mission to derail, he could have kept his forces together, or taken the Cohors himself. Shin's death was avoidable had he made different choices.

Zentru'la took a tag from around Shin's neck and stored it in a pouch on his armour, trying not to think about the call he'd have to make to his wife and children. There were more pressing matters.

"We still need to take the bridge," said Zentru'la to his remaining team before specifically addressing the Mudhorns. "The Children of Mortis have killed hundreds of your brothers in arms today. But our mission is to capture this ship, *not* to massacre everyone on board. I know, Mudhorn One," he said hearing him grumble. "I'd rather kill them all too. But how many people here know how to fly a Quasar-Fire?" No one said anything. "We need their crew. We storm the bridge, make as much noise as possible, shoot the captain and anyone that fires back. The rest will surrender. Sometimes, breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting is the best approach."

The Sith and Ascendants slain in the hangars were the only combat personnel that Mortis had stationed on the *Intruder*. Their overconfidence led to the bridge, manned only by operations and tech specialists, being swarmed by Zentru'la's forces. The few that were brave enough to fight were quickly eliminated, and the rest very quickly laid down their arms, surrendering the *Intruder* to the Vornskr Battalion.

While his men celebrated their victory, Zentru'la hoped the disrupted supply line would save more Taldryan lives than he lost in the assault.

Chapter 6

The Legend

Wars came and went, but losses lasted forever. The war that would become known as the Ascension Conflict became immortalised in the history records.

“We won!” said Appius, smiling broadly, his helmet removed in his office in this time of peace as Zentru’la barged into his office. Two armed guards followed him in, but Appius waved them away. “So, how were the Cohors?”

“They were a liability on the battlefield.”

“L- Liability?” There was a pause as Appius didn’t quite know what to say, clearly he had expected glowing reviews. “But they’re the best of the best! I’ve seen them fight!”

“I never questioned their skill in battle,” Zentru’la rested his hand on Appius’ desk and the Consul instinctively moved back away from him. “They can fight battles, but they can’t fight wars.”

“What happened?”

“I gave them orders. The situation changed and they were unable to adapt. My second in command is now dead.”

“Shin? Shin got killed?”

Zentru’la nodded. “The Cohors shot him.”

“No-one batted an eyelash about the Republic’s clone army!” Appius put his hands on his hips as if he had just proved an important point.

“They were fighting an enemy even less human than themselves.”

“Oh yeah. Droids.”

“Even a droid can be programmed to use a knife or a gun. A soldier needs to learn to use his head. That’s why the Confederacy lost the Clone Wars. You can’t just control your troops with a magic toy. You need to inspire loyalty for your troops to be effective, real loyalty, and that comes from personality.

Appius smiled broadly. “I think I understand. They’re loyal to you because you’re a legend!”

“Legends are nothing but fiction. They mean nothing on the battlefield!”

“But it gives them something to believe in! And maybe that’s all they need!”

Something to believe in. Perhaps, finally, Appius understood what it meant to be a soldier – to believe in what you’re fighting for. Even a mercenary is fighting for something. Mudhorn One fights for the thrill of battle. Vornskr Seven fights to afford women. Mudhorn Twelve fought and died to pay for his dying mother’s medicine. Whether or not their pursuit was noble, all of his best men fought because they had something that they felt was worth fighting for.

Zentru’la returned the Cylinder to Appius. “That might be the wisest thing you ever said.”