

Sands of Kintan

- by Arythain Telcontar

Smugglers caught on Ukian. Tried and executed. An arm of the infamous 'Black Star' pirates, gunned down attempting to flee their hideout in a moon of Onderon. All as it should be. The Abrion sector would soon be free of such scum, and Mandalorian Law would be respected properly.

Sipping his tea – a leaf mix from Selonia – the Warrior Eminence browsed further reports from the home sector. Until he began active operations on Kintan, he remained in charge of Mandalore both in name and duty. Only after reverting to realspace in the home system of the Nikto would governing duties pass to the Chancellor for the time being. Tyr was eager for that to happen. As Warrior Eminence, he was a soldier first and administrator second. Most governments would have considered it foolish for the chief executive to go to battle. Mandalorians considered it foolish any other way. They were supposed to *follow* the Eminence to honor – and how can you follow a man who is not in front of you?

And so, for this first exercise of Mandalorian might outside of Abrion, Tyr DeMeer would be where he belonged – at the forefront of the struggle, leading his men to victory and honor.

Activating the security protocols on his personal datapad – which included passwords, retinal and voice-pattern scanners, as well as a small explosive charge to destroy itself and its highly classified information should an attempt be made to tamper with it – Tyr DeMeer locked it away in a similarly guarded drawer. He then rose and stretched. The chrono on his desk indicated it would be little less than one half hour until they arrived, and he did not wish to be summoned to the bridge. It was part of his professional pride to always be on hand when his subordinates needed him. Straightening his uniform, the supreme leader of Mandalore left his quarters for the bridge.

The bridge of the *Apocalypse* had the blast shield down over the viewport, so the crew would not be distracted by the lightshow that was hyperspace. It also prevented catastrophic damage in the event of an ambush shortly after reversion to realspace. Of the two concerns, DeMeer cared greatly for the latter, and brushed off the former. Mandalorians had the finest discipline in the galaxy, and he trusted in that. Ambush, on the other hand, was a very real concern. The task force he commanded was following a call for help from Kintan, but there was the possibility that it was a trap. The Hutts were not likely to be pleased by a military power maturing on their very doorstep.

Tyr smiled lightly to himself. Come what may, this would be an opportunity to show the galaxy what Mandalore did best. A tall human man came up to DeMeer. It was Captain Malachi Nixus, the commander of the *MSS Apocalypse*. He saluted.

"Sir, we will arrive at Kintan in 25 minutes. The remaining teams will arrive shortly after us."

Tyr briefly wondered what the planetary government would think when the fearsomely-modified Carrack appeared in their orbit. With its increased weaponry and heavily armored hull, the *Apocalypse* was likely to be a match for anything in the neighborhood.

"Excellent, thank you Captain. Once we arrive make a full sensor sweep and prepare for battle. I don't expect any problems but it's best to be prepared."

"Indeed sir, I have already given that order. I will not forget what happened at Ukian."

Nixus said those last words with a grim face. Ukian had been the location for one of the first operations Nixus and Tyr had worked together on and it had not started well.

Tyr nodded. "Once we have gotten the first scan results and everything seems clear, hail the local government and inform them about our arrival, then take us down to the spaceport at the capital city of Kintinan. I'll take it from there."

"Understood sir, it will be taken care of."

"Good, also send orders to the rest of the force as they arrive to land at Kintinan and meet up for further instructions." Tyr checked the bridge chrono. "Its time to gear up now Captain. Take care of the ship."

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His claws clacking on the controls, Vong Gin'aal watched the chrono intently and brought his ship out of hyperspace precisely on time. Behind him, his communications assistant – a noghri named Bolpuhr – immediately went to work, monitoring and recording comm. traffic in case such records became pertinent.

"*Turn the ECM off, disable laser turrets and start landing procedure,*" Vong instructed his co-pilot, another noghri called Khabarakh. "*Hail the cosmoport service and send our identification codes and ship registry as well.*" There was no need for his translating droid to chime in. Like humans, Noghri did not have the requisite vocal equipment to speak Shyriiwook, but Vong's companions understood the wookiee language perfectly well.

In an emotionless voice, Bolpuhr repeated a message from the MSS *Apocalypse*, which was already descending from orbit.

"*Reply that we will be arriving shortly,*" Vong said, and then, "*Check all personal weapons and activate the droids...I feel we may need them soon.*" This last instruction was given to Barkhimkh, the third and final member of his team – also noghri.

Leaving the landing procedure in the capable hands of his team, Vong followed Barkimkh out of the cockpit. He needed to check his own equipment before they landed. He wanted to be fully suited up before the Eminence called them all to the inevitable briefing, planet-side.

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Kintan was preparing for war.

At the very least, their capital was. The city of Kintinan was swarming with soldiers. They were patrolling the streets on foot and in light combat vehicles, and others were digging up the parks to erect bunkers and foxholes. The Government building off to the north was being turned into a veritable fortress, Tyr saw. A spire had been erected on the roof with what seemed to be a turbolaser battery, and all along the outside walls were the concave dishes of emergency shield generators.

“Imminent military-scale threat from assembled pirate forces. Suspect the Hutts behind it all...” Tyr recalled the emergency broadcast which had been received at Abrion. Apparently it wasn't merely a lone alarmist with a hypercom. The Government of Kintan really did fear an invasion attempt.

Tyr resisted the urge to smile.

Despite the ship's great bulk, the pilot-on-duty of the *Apocalypse* put her down with nary a shudder. Tyr made a mental note to put the man up for a commendation. The main hatch opened and the boarding ramp extended from the floor to the ground. Kintinan lacked the facilities to house a ship like the *Apocalypse*, and so the authorities had directed the Mandalorian vessels to land in a field near their starport. As Tyr departed his ship, he caught sight of Commander Vong's *Harla* landing nearby as well. A glance upward told him that Andrew Panzer was not far behind. Other teams would be joining them on the ground soon.

Resplendent in his blood-red armor and trailed by his personal bodyguards, DeMeer waited patiently for his comrades to land. Vong exited his ship with his noghri. Seeing Mandalorian combat armor on a wookiee never failed to jar the Eminence. The sight was impressive to say the least – and the blaster rifle slung over Vong's shoulder was almost lost on his frame. He sighted his leader and strode over. How the noghri at his side managed to keep up without seeming to quicken their pace, Tyr would never figure out.

Andrew Panzer had landed more closely to the *Apocalypse*, and reached Tyr before Vong could. He wore armor identical to that of Tyr, in addition to carrying the same LJ-90 rifle. Beyond that, the similarities ceased. Panzer was of slightly sub-standard height for a human, and where Tyr was stately, he was grizzled. Tyr's smooth face was marked by a single proud scar (and Panzer was one of the few who knew its origin), but Andrew's was crisscrossed by dozens, and many wrinkles besides.

“Welcome to the *lovely* planet of Kintan sir. Looks like we're about ready to get on with this mission.” Panzer's voice matched his face, gravelly and hard. The sarcasm in his tone never reached his expression. Vong rumbled an agreement, both to what Panzer said, and to what he had implied.

Before Tyr could reply, the drone of fighter engines made them all check the sky. Starchasers, Tyr saw. Heavily armed, capable system-defense craft. Obviously sent out to check on the new arrivals – the *Apocalypse* often made locals nervous. As the landed Mandalorians began to assemble around him, he saw armed men - nearly two entire companies, and followed closely by several AT-PT's - leave the nearby Starport and approach the field. As the Starchasers circled overhead, he spoke quickly to his men.

“Attention! The planetary government of Kintan has requested our help, but we’ll likely be making them uneasy with all the weaponry we’re carrying. Everyone will stick close to the ships until I make contact with their government and find out what exactly is needed from us. Until further orders, I’m setting our operational perimeter at a one-hundred meter radius from the *Apocalypse*,” Tyr said with a slight smile.

The soldiers chuckled. An ‘operational perimeter’ of that size was like trying to tap-dance on a credit chit. Fortunately, they wouldn’t really be expected to do anything until they had additional orders.

Tyr eyeballed the approaching guards. “We’ll have company in moments. Form rank!”

With mechanical precision the Mandalorians sorted themselves by rank and file. Several neat lines were formed. Panzer and Vong remained in front with the Eminence.

The locals fanned out, surrounding the Mandalorians whom they outnumbered three-to-one, even without including the armored vehicles. The process was done skillfully enough, though certainly not up to Tyr’s standard. The dark part of his mind estimated that, were a firefight to break out at that moment, the Mandalorians still had an even-odds chance of wiping out the opposition – though with heavy losses. The AT-PT’s would be a challenge, but if the weapons officers on the *Apocalypse* weren’t asleep, those would be the first things they targeted. The soldiers would gun a retreat to the *Apocalypse* and from there it would be a simple matter of...

The Warrior Eminence quieted that part of his brain. There would be no violence here.

One man broke from the surrounding cordon of men and approached the Mandalorians. Tyr stepped forward to meet him, marking himself out as the leader. The Starchasers overhead did an unnecessary corkscrew – showoffs, Tyr though derisively - and looped around into a patrol circle.

"Greetings. I am Commander Devon Hoff," the garrison leader said. His uniform was fancier than the rest in case civilians couldn’t read the insignia on his shoulders. “I’m head of security in this sector of Kintinan.” Hoff surveyed the soldiers in front of him, who - taking no note of the hundreds of armed men covering them - stood inertly in their ranks. He locked eyes with Tyr again, and the Eminence thought he saw doubt in the other man’s expression. Tyr suppressed a smile as the other man continued to speak. “I’m sure you understand, we’ve got quite a few problems with crime on this planet. In fact, sometimes it seems that nobody comes here with any other purpose. A search is required

for all newly arrived vessels and personnel. Please lay down your weapons and allow the search to begin."

Tyr was puzzled. This wasn't the welcome he'd expected. "I am Tyr DeMeer, Warrior Eminence of the sovereign government of Mandalore. Our assistance was requested by the government of Kintan. We have no intention of criminal activities, you see."

Commander Hoff did not look impressed. "That may be, but no-one is exempt from the search – not even the Prime Minister himself. Lay down your weapons, if you please," he repeated. His hand very slowly drifted to his own holstered blaster, as if he expected trouble.

Tyr certainly had no intention of starting any. He turned to his men. "*Mandalii*, disarm!"

Immediately rifles slid from shoulders and fell to the ground, along with combat knives, sidearms, and other implements of violence. Tyr followed suit, except for one item he was sure a cursory search would miss. When the process was done, the Kintanians came through the rows of Mandalorians with bins and collected the arsenal. Tyr looked questioningly at Hoff, who assured him that once the search was completed their weapons would be returned.

Tyr nodded and once more turned to his men with an order. "Those of you piloting a ship, fall out of rank and allow the authorities to enter and search the vessel." He activated and spoke into his comm. unit. "Captain Nixus, the local authorities require a search of the *Apocalypse*. You will grant them entry and offer them whatever assistance is necessary."

The Captain's answer crackled through a moment later. "*Yes sir.*"

Commander Hoff nodded his appreciation and spoke to Tyr, though his eyes were still on the now-disarmed Mandalorian soldiers. "My thanks, sir. There is no need for us to wait in this field for the search to complete. I cannot offer accommodation for all your men, but won't you and your officers accompany me to the starport?"

The situation made Tyr uneasy. He did not wish to separate his troops from their commanders. He shook his head. "The offer is appreciated, but we prefer to remain with our men."

The Commander looked surprised at the refusal. A second of silence passed. "Please sir, I insist," he said, and then added, "It would be expected of me to escort guests of the minister to more comfortable quarters."

Tyr could not now refuse without being undiplomatic. As diplomacy was exactly the purpose of this expedition, he decided to override his sense of caution – to an extent. "Very well, Commander," he replied. "I and my ranking officers shall join you. Captain Scyld! You have the command."

“Sir! Yes sir!” the appointed man saluted.

Tyr was content that at least this way his men would not be leaderless. Scyld Strongfellow was the most experienced sharp-end leader with the expeditionary force. His instincts would serve well should an emergency come up.

“Lead on, Commander,” Tyr told Hoff.

Fifteen minutes found them out of the field and into a waiting room at the starport, smallish but opulent enough for a visiting dignitary. Tyr, Panzer, and the rest of the officers sat in comfortable leather seats sipping a locally brewed tea that was actually quite good – save only for Vong. The wookiee, by silent agreement, had taken a station near the door.

Commander Hoff occupied the room with them, and had ceased attempting to make polite conversation with his guests. He had spent the last ten minutes attempting to contact the Prime Minister’s office with no success. Every so often Tyr could hear the man mutter a curse as his call was once again placed on hold.

Vong grumbled a comment. *“Something is not right.”*

Tyr nodded curtly and replied in Mando’a. *“Agreed, but we can do nothing at this moment. Patience.”*

The expressions around the table darkened at their leader’s words. Inaction, as a rule, was disliked by the warriors of Mandalore.

Shortly after this exchange, Tyr heard the sound of many feet tramping down the hallway, growing louder by the moment. His men took note too, and by the door the wookiee perked up. Tyr shot him a look – *do nothing*, it implied.

The door opened, and a single man with the insignia of Lieutenant stepped in. Tyr immediately disliked him. Everything about him was off – from the sloppy salute he threw in the Commander’s direction to the way his eyes scanned each of the Mandalorians in turn, identifying and storing useful bits of data in order to maximize the use he might gain from them.

In short, the man reeked of corruption.

The Commander didn’t bother returning the salute, a telling omission from a man whom Tyr had observed to be quite meticulous about protocol.

“Lieutenant Sheffield. You have something for me?”

“Yes,” said the newcomer. “Sir. The search is finished – “

Already? wondered Tyr, wrinkling his brow. The *Apocalypse* was not a small ship, and there were several other freighter-sized ships in that field besides.

“Already?” asked the Commander in astonished tones, echoing Tyr’s thoughts. “And the results?”

The Lieutenant handed a datapad to his ranking officer. Hoff perused it for a moment, his eyes narrowing. He turned a sharp scowl upon Sheffield. “Not again. I thought we got past this. I thought -”

One of the officers, a Nikto, looks up at the Commander. “Sir, if the troopers found contraband it must be reported to Minister Dhaon Waris.” The words had a rehearsed feel, like dialogue from a poorly acted holovid.

The Commander’s face turned pink with anger. “I am well versed in the routine, *lieutenant*, so learn your place. I find it quite odd that contraband was found on every single one of these ships, given the fact that these people have offered to help us with our ‘problems.’”

The Lieutenant looked up. “Sir, these are mercenary scum,” – Tyr bristled inwardly at the slur – “What can they help us with our problems? You know the crooks who come in here. I find it very plausible that every single one of them was smuggling contraband. Our troopers found it, it *was* there.”

The commander seemed about to voice an angry reply, but he glanced in Tyr’s direction and swallowed the words. “Very well, I shall have them taken into custody. Now leave.”

The Lieutenant smiled contemptuously. “Yes sir. First of course, I must read the charges – as the law clearly states.”

“Then be quick.”

Here the Commander shot a look at Tyr. Though he was angry, the Warrior Eminence saw clearly the embarrassment in Hoff’s features. It was an expression that would not have been out of place on a Mandalorian – it was evident that Hoff considered these current events to somehow be his own fault, likely due to past failures.

A white knight in a corrupt government - No doubt a difficult life to live. Tyr thought, feeling a moment’s pity for the man before Sheffield stepped forward and proceeded to read his ridiculous charges.

“Onboard the Carrack cruiser *MSS Apocalypse*, several tonnes of spin-refined tibanna gas, one hundred grams of glitterstem spice as well as many illegal modifications were located; All of which are outlawed on Kintan. In accordance with local law you, Tyr DeMeer, are to be taken into the jail in the local garrison...”

Tyr ceased listening at this point. His anger had risen to the point where, had he paid any more attention, he risked an outburst that would likely only have harmed his position more. While the corrupt officer droned on about the various drugs and objects (even a biological weapon!) found aboard the Mandalorian ships, Tyr's mind raced ahead.

Tyr had no fear of serious reprisals. This was obviously a bail-money scam. Plant drugs (or simply concoct charges) and have the ship owners sent to prison for – naturally – a large cash bail. All funds would be diverted directly into the hands of the local crime syndicate. Such a scheme, however, required many complicit individuals to be highly placed in the system.

So it was true. Kintan was a planet for criminals. Underneath the table, Tyr's fist clenched. He resolved then and there that he would do whatever was necessary to purge this planet of the scum who would dare insult Mandalore.

Finally Sheffield was done, and Commander Hoff ordered him to leave the room. When they were once again alone, Commander Hoff turned to the Mandalorians.

“You all have my apologies for this. I must ask you to cooperate – my hands are bound, currently, by the law. I will go now to arrange proper holding cells for you as befits your status – there will be guards outside the door, I'm afraid. But you have my word; I will see this resolved correctly.”

“Not if we resolve it first,” Panzer muttered from next to Tyr as the Commander left the room. Leaving them alone, Tyr guessed, was a vote both of confidence and apology from the bedeviled Commander Hoff. Very well – the privacy could be used.

“What in the name of the First is ‘Republica Wrath?’” asked Panzer in Mando'a, citing the drug that had apparently been found aboard his ship.

“An illegal drug, no doubt,” responded Tyr. “And you are a bad man for having it.”

The rest of the officers chuckled tensely. Panzer merely scowled, keeping his eyes on his leader.

“What do we do now, sir?” asked one of the men – a dark-skinned Arcona by the name of Diomedes.

“We will be taken to prison and informed of the ‘lenient’ local judge giving us the option of posting bail. Once we have paid this bail, the entire thing will likely disappear... think of it as a tourism tax, levied by the crimelord who happens to control the city,” Tyr explained.

“Then it is illegitimate! We shall not pay!” said the indignant Arcona.

“We shall pay,” Tyr said, and then switched to Mando’a to offer out a proverb to his men. “*A coin in your left hand outshines the blade in your right.*”

Panzer smiled, and Vong rumbled his agreement as well. Tyr was about to continue laying out a ground plan when the door slid open, and soldiers entered to escort them to their cells.

The things I do for honor, thought Tyr. The Mandalorian officers had been taken to the most spacious cells in the Kintinan Garrison jail – which placed seven beings in a room roughly fifteen feet wide by ten feet deep. If they hadn’t been relieved of their armor they would not have all fit inside.

As the ranking officers, Tyr and Panzer were seated on the single pallet bed. The other five stood. For the first few minutes there had been conversation, but they had left off those attempts quickly. Though none would admit it, each and every Mandalorian – including Tyr himself – was too eager for further developments in their scenario to think about anything else.

Standing guard beyond the bars of their cell was a single security officer, a wookiee. He was occupying himself by polishing the barrel of a B-22 blaster pistol, obviously not a standard-issue weapon for this backwater police force. Sidling over as close as the intervening prison bars would allow him, Vong spoke softly in shyriiwook.

“We are both far from home, brother. Were you born here?”

Their guards looked up from his work, the cloth he had been using ceasing its motions along the barrel. Though his face showed annoyance at the interruption, Vong thought he discerned pleasure in the guard’s voice at hearing his natural language.

“No. I was taken from Home when I was an infant and enslaved by the Empire. I was brought here and freed by... fortuitous circumstances.” ‘Home’ was always Kashyyyk, to a Wookiee. *“And you? Were you born at Home?”*

“I was not... I was born on a world whose name I have long forgotten. The colony there was destroyed by pirates, and I was left to die. I was rescued by salvagers who came to pick amongst the ruin for valuables. A short time later I began fighting as a mercenary with various groups, until I was hired to fight against Mandalore. We lost, and I was captured. Eventually I came to love my captors as my family – I admired their honor, discipline, and respect for each other. They became my family. And now the criminals here have placed my family in this prison for profit. I long to rend their flesh, whoever they be.”

Something seemed to spark in the other wookiee’s eyes. He glanced towards Vong’s companions for a moment, taking in the hardened stares, the disciplined patience.

Meeting Vong's eyes again, he leaned forward and spoke in such a low whisper that even Vong had to struggle to make it out.

"You've been caught in Giechan's schemes, brother. The fat slug controls most of the planet. But brother," - and here he dropped his voice yet lower, *"Jenasyde can help you gain revenge. Cornelia can help you."*

A chill hit Vong's blood, as if the icy winds that blew above the treetops on Kashyyyk had decided to inhabit his heart. This wookiee was no brother. Vong didn't know exactly what 'Jenasyde' was, but it could only be a criminal syndicate – a rival, no doubt, to this 'Giechen' who currently held sway. And Cornelia... the leader, perhaps?

The Wookiee in him felt sorrow and even pity. The Mandalorian, however – and Vong was more Mandalorian than he was wookiee – immediately sentenced the criminal to death. And should the opportunity come to carry out the sentence, Vong would not hesitate.

For all his internal thoughts, his tone did not change. *"How?"* was all he replied.

Their guard began to answer but was interrupted by the entrance of Commander Hoff, who looked to be in none too good of a mood.

"You are all free to go," Hoff said without preamble. "Hawrrak, unlock the door and leave."

As the wookiee moved to follow the order, Hoff looked at Tyr and continued. "I have good news," he said in a tone that implied he could have added, 'and bad news...' but did not. "With the initial confirmation of your bail payment to satisfy the bad apples, I was able to pull a few strings and have all mention of these charges dropped. It's as if it never happened."

"As long as you overlook the tens of thousands of credits we have paid," replied Tyr. "But it is kind of you to go to such lengths to have these false charges disappear."

The acrimony in the Eminence's words was not lost on Hoff. Shaking his head sadly, he said, "Yes, and I once again apologize for this nonsense, as –" here he stopped, glancing towards Hawrrak who had not yet left as he'd been told. "Thank you, Hawrrak. Your work here is done."

The wookiee saluted and left reluctantly, giving Vong a significant glance before he turned to go. Hoff pretended not to notice, as did the other Mandalorians.

"As I was saying," continued Hoff, "As Giechan's syndicate tightens its grip on the planet, they are getting more and more bold with their petty schemes. What you fell prey

to is just one example amongst hundreds. Even I had to work through back channels to get anything done. It sickens me,” he said with another sorrowful shake of his head, “but if you aren’t a puppet master here, you’re a puppet.”

Tyr believed the man. The revulsion the Commander felt seemed to roll off him in waves, and once again DeMeer wondered at how such an honest being could have come about in this society.

“Tell me of this Giechan, Commander Hoff,” requested the Warrior Eminence.

“I imagine you’ve heard of – or maybe even met – his ilk before, sir,” the man replied. “He is the typical hutt – bold, clever, and rotten to the core. He’s attempting to bring Kintan into the greater Hutt fold and do away with the government entirely. That’s what the military buildup is about. His internal corruption wasn’t working fast enough for them, so the Hutt’s have brought together an army of mercenaries and pirates to take the planet by force.”

Tyr nodded. “And the message we received?”

“I don’t know,” Commander Hoff shrugged dramatically. “I hadn’t heard of any official message. It’s possible the Minister of Defense got some sort of plea out, but if so then you are the only ones to answer it.”

Panzer rose from the pallet bed and spoke. “I mean no offense, Commander. Your plight is unenviable, and I’m sure the Eminence would choose to help you right here and now. However, I think that everyone’s best option is for us to leave the planet and return with a full Mandalorian fleet. No pirate armada would dare face us.”

Hoff cringed, and Tyr knew he would not like what the man said next. “Yes... gentlemen, I do apologize. Your ships have been impounded – as collateral, the order stated, in case your funds did not prove enough to pay the bail.”

Tyr winced inside, but looked impassively at the Commander. “And what did our men have to say about this? I left over two hundred and fifty men in that field.”

“Your men have been detained in this very building. Unfortunately, they must stay here even as you are set free. The official statement was that the officers could be expected to behave as gentlemen, but allowing so many foreign soldiers loose in the city right now would not be...” Hoff trailed off for a moment as he searched for the exact words, “ah, yes. Would not be ‘conducive to the expeditious preparation of our defenses,’ was the phrase.”

“*Hostages*,” Tyr thought darkly. Whoever this Giechan was, he seemed to be well ahead of the Mandalorians at the moment – he had seemingly checked them at every turn. Tyr thought furiously.

“Very well, Commander. If those are the orders of the Government of Kintan, than we must abide by them,” Tyr said, inciting angry murmurs from his men – which he quickly silenced. “I would like to see my men, however.”

Hoff nodded quickly. “Of course, sir. Please follow me.”

They took a lift down to a subbasement level that was at best adequately lit and looked much like the interior of a battleship – tight corridors and durasteel walls. A short distance from the lift entrance, though, the walls gave way to a forest of prison bars, and Tyr could see that his men were being held in a mass cell. Nearly two hundred of them were in a single cell to his right, while the remainder – as well as the crew of the Apocalypse, including Captain Malachi - were directly across from their fellows. They all stood at attention when Tyr came into view, just as if they were not separated from him by prison walls.

“Mandalorians!” Tyr called. “Take heart. I and your commanders have been freed, and we shall now work to resolve this matter. It pains me to say that, for now, you must remain here. Rest, meditate. Wait. You shall be freed soon enough, and the enemies of Mandalore will fear their renewed foe.” Tyr saluted the imprisoned soldiers, and was heartened to see them returned the salute with crisp precision. There was no sign of demoralization in them. They obviously regarded their new abode as temporary in the extreme, a glitch in the mission that would soon be ironed out by their leaders. Such was the confidence that a Mandalorian officer could – and must – inspire.

The Captain he had left in charge of the soldiers, Scyld Strongfellow, moved to the front of the cell and saluted. He was with the larger group of men – a tactically influenced decision, Tyr was sure.

“Eminence, is there intel for me?”

Tyr shook his head regretfully. “I don’t have the time to explain, Scyld. I must ask you to remain with the men for now.”

Scyld nodded as if he’d expected the order.

“Keep them patient. If there are questions, assure them that my first thought is getting them out of this hole so they can face the enemy as is right and proper.”

“Of course, sir. We think nothing different.”

Tyr nodded. Scyld and he exchanged salutes once more, and then the free officers were escorted out by Commander Hoff.

Back on the top floors, he took them to a storage vault where their personal effects had been placed. He made sure that everything was restored to them, excepting only the

rifles. “Only Kintanian soldiers are allowed rifles in public. You may take your sidearms, but I’m afraid the heavier weapons must remain here.”

As he strapped on his armor once more – feeling as much relief as a naked man allowed clothes again – Tyr shrugged. If the officers were forced into a firefight without their soldiers, they’d have bigger problems than a lack of rifles. Their small arms would suffice for personal protection. Feeling the weight of his personal favorite weapon against his spine once more, the thought popped into Tyr’s mind that even his pistol wouldn’t be necessary for the more... pedestrian difficulties he might encounter.

The Commander escorted them to the entrance of the garrison building. “Here I must leave you, I’m afraid. I have many duties here, and I must see to them all if I wish to keep Giechan from sinking his fat fingers deeper into the city,” he said to Tyr.

“Very well, Commander. Thank you for your help – I bear you no ill will for these events. The guilty will pay for their crimes soon enough, and Mandalore will be holding the axe.”

A smile grew on Hoff’s face, amidst a worried expression. “Please be careful. I have no doubt you are very capable men, but as of now Giechan owns this city.”

“Of course, Commander. Do not fear for us. And Commander,” Tyr’s words made him turn back as he was about to leave them. “May I ask a favor? Could you please give this – “ here the Warrior Eminence handed Hoff a small round communicator device, a private link to but a single other device that Tyr himself carried – “to Captain Scyld who is now detained with my men? I don’t want to be out of touch with them,” Tyr said with a smile that bordered on devious.

Commander Hoff looked unsure. “Giving prisoners a comm. unit...”

Tyr interrupted that train of thought, leaning closer to the man. “Commander... I and my men have come to Kintan to risk our lives for your sake – or rather the sake of your people, who expect their government to protect them from just such a disgrace as has befallen myself and my soldiers. We have no intention of changing our minds, but surely you do not expect us to strive against our enemy at a greater disadvantage than we already are?”

Thinking over these words, Hoff suddenly gave a decisive nod of his head. “Of course, you are right. I’ll tell your Captain Strongfellow to hide the device – and I’ll do my best to see that their guards are all *my* men.”

“Thank you Commander. I wish the very best to you in the coming days.”

Commander Hoff left them there in front of the garrison building amidst the rest of the starport’s many comings and goings. Tyr immediately turned to his men, who were already listening for what his orders would be. He wasted no time getting to the point.

“Gentlemen, the plan is reconnaissance,” he said. “We must learn how much of this city is truly under Giechan’s control, especially the military and various other defense forces. Andrew, Diomedes - you two and I will go to the Government building to meet with the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister. If they are any sort of leaders, they’ll be able to tell us what we must know.” Here Tyr sighed and looked towards the towering Capitol building to the north. “Given the current state of affairs we are presented with, I hold no expectation as to their character. For this reason, the rest of you,” he indicated the other five officers, “will go into the city and conduct your own investigations. Exercise caution – as long as our men are held hostage, we cannot afford to have this Giechan take too much notice of us.

“Commander Vong, I’m tasking you and your noghri with finding out where our ships are being held,” Tyr motioned towards the field which was now conspicuously empty of any ship save the *Apocalypse*. “And what security is around them.”

Vong rumbled an affirmative. None of the Mandalorians present believed that the noghri had been taken prisoner, as they certainly hadn’t been present amongst the soldiers in the prison.

“To your orders, then. *Mandalii koté*.”

Six fists saluted on six chests, and then they all took various directions into the wide cityscape around them. Tyr and the two he had chosen to accompany him began their trek north.

Half an hour after their separation, Vong knew where the smaller Mandalorian ships were being held. It certainly hadn’t been difficult to locate the only storage hangar that had guards posted to it. Though it covered a large area, this star port was miniscule compared to those on more developed planets. Furthermore, his noghri team had replied immediately to his comm. hail – they had departed the *Harla* stealthily once Kintinan security forces began impounding the ships. Hiding amidst the tall grass of the field, they had waited patiently until Vong was able to contact them. Now they were helping the wookiee in surveilling the impound hangar.

The wookiee himself was several hundred meters away from the actual location. Not being particularly stealthy himself, he was sitting and enjoying a stimulating beverage at a dingy café whose only positive attribute, as far as Vong could tell, was a clear line of sight to the building where Vong’s ship was held. A fairly inconspicuous eyepiece gave him the ability to magnify the distant hangar. His noghri were closer – one on the roof of the building – and were coordinating with him via comm. link.

“*Windows, skylights?*” Vong asked into the device in his massive furred hand.

“Negative,” came the reply. *“Only possible ingress is a set of exhaust and ventilation shafts, but they are not large enough even for a noghri to use.”*

Only two entrances to the building, then. The massive central doors, and the smaller personnel entrance which was located right by them. Should the Mandalorians need entry in a hurry, stealth was out of the question.

Vong’s concentration was broken when he suddenly recognized one of the faces near the hangar. Manipulating the zoom levels of his eyepiece (an action that resembled scratching to a casual observer) Vong verified his initial thought. Lieutenant Sheffield was visiting the impound hangar, conversing with one of the guards. Vong did not have the equipment to overhear their words, nor could any of the noghri get close enough without being seen. Still...

Making a snap decision, Vong activated the comm. unit again. *“Khabarahk,”* he spoke to the noghri nearest the front of the building. *“You see the officer speaking with the guards, to the right of the bay doors?”*

Seconds later, the small grey sentient verified that he did.

“Shadow him when he leaves. The man is a corrupt official for the Giechan crime ring.”

Once Khabarahk acknowledged his new assignment, Vong leaned back in his seat and contemplated. He had learned all he could about the ships already, barring finding a way into the building – and short of the sudden and violent creation of a new entryway, that was unlikely.

Tyr’s orders had been to investigate the depth of the corruption. Where better to start than with the most evident corruption they had yet seen? Furthermore, Sheffield had insulted the Mandalorians, both personally and professionally. One way or another, Vong did not want to leave this planet while Sheffield lived.

Trailed by his men, Tyr mounted the steps to the Capitol building. It was an impressive structure, one that wouldn’t be out of place in a much richer society – except for the nearly-completed turbolaser tower jutting from the top.

“Horrible place for it,” Tyr mused. *“Will attract fire and drain power from the shield generators protecting the building. Perhaps it was Giechen’s influence to place it there?”* Tyr snorted. More likely the Kintanians were simply inexperienced at warfare.

Four guards flanked the doors. One stepped forward and spoke as Tyr approached them. *“Who are you, and what is your business here?”*

Tyr studied the shorter man imperiously. “I am Tyr DeMeer, Warrior Eminence of the Government of Mandalore. I am here to establish diplomatic ties with Kintan and, if necessary, offer aide in this situation. I will speak with the Prime Minister.”

To Tyr’s amusement, the guard looked properly cowed by his grand words, wordlessly stepping aside and casting a confused stare to his fellows. Tyr gave him no time to reconsider, entering immediately.

There was a great deal of activity within, and Tyr could tell immediately that something was amiss. It was with a sinking feeling that he walked up to a nikto behind a desk with the look of a petty bureaucrat.

The man looked up at the three Mandalorians. “Can I help you, gentlemen?”

Tyr nodded, introducing himself again. “I require an immediate meeting with your Prime Minister.”

At the mention of Mandalore, the man’s eyes had widened ever so slightly. Had Tyr finally found a man on this planet that was aware of the galaxy around them?

“Mandalore, yes indeed. A pleasure to have you here, your Eminence,” said the man in a well-rehearsed preamble. “I am afraid that we have a slight problem here, as you might be able to tell.” The nikto swept his hand around the room to indicate the hustle and bustle, most of it involving security guards and military. “Amidst all the construction work, someone has managed to slip into the building and kidnap the Defense Minister not one hour before you walked in. What with the military threat, the Prime Minister was immediately rushed to a secret bunker for his protection, and is quite unavailable.”

Tyr lifted an eyebrow in disbelief. Not only was the Prime Minister unable to meet with him, but the Defense Minister – the only other man Tyr had been led to believe would help them – had been outright kidnapped. Tyr’s anger began to grow. Mandalore had been led into quite a mess.

Ignoring the official’s apologies, Tyr turned around to leave. Perhaps more drastic measures would be needed. He had not gotten far, though, when he was intercepted by another official. This time, the nikto did not have the look of pettiness about him at all.

“Hello,” he said. “I am Ulo Nesk, and you are Tyr DeMeer of Mandalore. If you would please come with me, I need to speak with you in private.”

Tyr was suspicious. “And where shall we go?”

The man pointed to a door in the wall not fifty feet from where they stood. Tyr nodded slowly, and they were led to it. When Ulo opened the door Tyr studied it before entering. There did not seem to be any other entrance to the room, and so the Mandalorians entered followed closely by the mysterious nikto, who shut and locked the door behind them.

“Greetings again,” he said. “I am so glad you are here, and so would be the Minister Darren – the Defense Minister. Sadly as you now know...”

“He has been abducted,” Tyr supplied.

Ulo grunted sourly. “Indeed. I have no doubt Giechen the Hutt is behind it. Darren was one of the most powerful men in the government, and seemingly immune to bribes and blackmail. There’s nothing that angers a hutt like a lack of leverage.”

Tyr folded his arms, making it clear that he wished the nikto to come to the point. Clearing his throat, Ulo obliged. “I was the Minister’s senior aide. He told me about his message, and said that Mandalore was one of the governments most likely to come. I... I’m afraid I don’t know much about what he planned to do after you arrived, though. But sirs, if I can help you in any way I will.”

“I’m not sure how you can,” Tyr replied curtly. “Our soldiers are detained in the garrison, and our ships have been impounded.”

Ulo seemed to deflate. “Oh, dear. I am terribly sorry... and I don’t have the authority to change any of it, I don’t think. But I’ll try. Without the Minister, I’m afraid I have very little pull anymore. And it gets worse – because of the corruption, he kept all of our defense plans memorized in his head and wasn’t going to share them with the leaders until closer to the invasion. The Generals are drawing up emergency plans, but they will surely be leaked before the enemy gets here-“

Tyr held up his hand to forestall any more moaning from the man. It seemed as if this Minister Darren was pivotal to getting anything legitimate done around here. So be it, then. Before Mandalore had gathered enough influence to become the government of Abrion it had been a security force, and Tyr and his senior men had plenty of experience in investigations.

“Mr. Nesk, we are going to find your Minister Darren, and here is what we need...”

If it weren’t such a good place to have a covert meeting, the Nikto’s Son would have been a horrendous place to have a covert meeting. Most of the reasons why it was good were exactly what made Vong dislike it; it was loud, garishly lit and decorated, and crowded with all manner of sapient clientele such that not even a 7 meter tall armored wookiee like Vong stood out in particular.

Vong and one of the other Mandalorian officers, a squat Kel Dor Lt. Commander named Ichis, sat at a counter abutting the stage where a shapely female human was engaged in the awkward acrobatics that so much of the galaxy considered skillful dancing. Ichis had

doffed his armor in order to remain unnoticed – where he had stowed it, Vong didn't bother guessing.

“- the ants seem to be pretty clean,” Ichis was saying. “This boss of theirs has worked some fancy footwork to keep the disease out of it. But the birds are apparently another matter.”

The Kel Dor was speaking of the Kintanian armed forces, using simple code words to confuse listeners. ‘Ants’ were the Army, ‘birds’ the Navy. ‘Boss’ was the Minister of Defense that Tyr, Panzer, and Diomedes had gone to meet with.

Vong was about to ask further questions when the announcer's amplified voice interrupted every conversation in the bar simultaneously.

“Give it up for Techarra! And now, you lucky beings, it's time for the figure you've all been waiting for. Here tonight with her smashing once-a-week performance, it's Cooooooooooooooooornelia!”

Vong's eyes were drawn to the stage as a scantily clad twi'lek woman emerged from the curtains enshrouding the backstage area. She had taken a bare three steps into the room when she lifted one leg straight into the air, bent over backwards into a handstand, and gave a little hop with her hands until she was again facing the crowd – but upside down with both feet held effortlessly above her. Smiling brilliantly, she juxtaposed positions once again, now on her feet facing away from the audience. Ever so slowly her legs moved apart as she dropped into the splits. The crowd was going wild the entire time.

The words of their guard from the garrison prison came back to Vong. “*Jenasyde can help you gain revenge. Cornelia can help you.*” As he studied the sinuous creature onstage, Vong shook his head. It couldn't be.

And yet, under the guise of searching for a waitress, Vong saw that the majority of the bar's patrons were heavily armed in open defiance of the law – not that this was out of place in such areas, on any world. But something in the way the gathered miscreants watched her told Vong it was true. There was lust in some of their eyes, yes – but in others...

Admiration. Respect. Fear. Not the typical reactions to an exotic dancer. Sure enough, this was the ‘Cornelia’ the wookiee had spoken of.

Vong turned his attention back to the stage. Amidst the almost-frantic gyrations of her dance, the blue-skinned twi'lek met eyes with him once, twice, and again. Ichis noticed as well.

“It seems as if the lady has taken interest in you. Perhaps she needs another rug for her apartment?” the Commander needled – one of the few people who could make such jokes without fear of limb separation. Vong glanced at his fellow and nodded. “*It's the armor,*”

he rumbled in response. *“No female can resist it. We’re done here, Ichis. Return to your assignment.”*

Commander Ichis nodded as he finished his drink through the tube in his breathing mask. He saw the strange look in Vong’s eyes and could not have helped but connect it to the dancer before them – but he asked no questions. He merely stood and dropped enough credits on the table for the drink and a standard tip and departed the bar.

Vong sat through the rest of Cornelia’s performance – and the following encore – without seeing much of it. His mind was working quickly, and by the time she was done he had decided several things. Firstly, this Cornelia was either the leader or very close to it of Jenasyde, a criminal syndicate powerful enough to be a rival of Giechan the Hutt’s. Second, for some reason she was also an exotic dancer at a bar called ‘Nikto’s Son’ which made the place a likely center for the syndicate’s operations. Thirdly, she had already been told of the Mandalorians – likely by the wookiee who had guarded them.

This last point was tentative but likely. While Vong may have made an impressive sight, wookiees were not unknown on this planet and tough figures were hardly uncommon in cities filled with crime. She had paid too much attention to him – even during all the antics of her performance – for it to be merely a momentary interest. And so Vong waited.

Sure enough, before Cornelia had been offstage more than five minutes a large nikto walked over to the wookiee at the counter.

“Excuse me.. Cornelia was wondering if she could have the pleasure of your company for a few moments?”

Several nearby patrons gasped at this incredible honor – and perhaps, this incredibly rare occurrence. No doubt newcomers were rarely graced with face-to-face audiences with ‘the boss.’ Vong merely nodded and rose to follow the nikto who had delivered the message. He towered above most of the others in the tavern, and it was likely that they were all making note of his face – or rather his general appearance. Few outside their species could tell two wookiees apart. No matter. Vong rarely made plans depending on his anonymity.

He was taken to a back room by way of a series of dimly lit hallways. Inside waited Cornelia herself as well as two bodyguards – one a nikto, the other a powerfully built Duro. Both armored. Both armed.

Vong entered the room tentatively, making a point of glancing at each of the bodyguards. A powerful criminal leader would expect him to be afraid. Let her believe he was.

She smiled charmingly at his seeming unease.

“Please, don’t mind them. My position makes these two lugs necessary,” here she smiled at her minions as well, to take the sting from the insult. “But we both know I don’t mean you any harm. And you don’t mean me any. Isn’t that right?”

Vong reached to switch on the translating droid on his belt, but stopped at a forestalling gesture from Cornelia. “Don’t bother. I understand shyriiwook just fine.”

“Of course,” replied Vong. “*I take it your man at the starport told you of my situation?*”

“Indeed he did. I must say, Hawrrak was quite excited to find that you big, tough Mandalorians might be interested in helping us. I had my doubts, though. Do you really want to aid Jenasyde?”

“*I want Giechen and every one of his people dead,*” Vong replied simply, meaning every word of it.

Cornelia’s smile grew and she laughed in a way that was both femininely attractive and vicious – Vong could see why she was a leader, she had incredible charisma. She gave no sign of realizing that Vong had not actually answered her question, though.

“Well, then. I think we can help each other. It just so happens that Jenasyde would love to see the Lieutenant Sheffield dead as well. Unfortunately, none of my own can do the job – all the capable ones are too well known. And every time I try to bring in outside talent, they get arrested upon landing. If Sheffield were to disappear, a lot of Giechan’s ability to regulate traffic into and out of the city – and the planet for that matter – would disappear with him. Can you take care of him?”

“*I’d be happy to,*” Vong rumbled, and again he was telling the truth. “*But I will need some help. I assume Jenasyde has the capability to produce convincing identification?*” The look on Cornelia’s face told him that of course they could. “*Good. I will need an ID, complete with faked histories. And I will need to coordinate with your man Hawrrak.*”

Cornelia blinked as she took in his requests. “You already have a plan for dispatching the lieutenant? That’s quick work.”

Vong’s eyes narrowed as he smiled menacingly. “*I’ve been thinking about how to kill Sheffield from the first moment I was locked in a cell.*”

And again, he spoke truth.

The Minister’s office was a mess. Tyr saw the obvious signs of a struggle – a potted plant overturned, the clay pot cracked and dark brown loam spilling out onto the grey carpet. The contents of the desk had been scattered haphazardly onto the floor as well,

paperweights and fasteners strewn about the room – all of this told Tyr that someone had entered the office with hostile intent.

And of course the pockmarks of blaster fire on the walls, as well as the charred remains of a security camera, were clues as well.

Andrew Panzer was examining the door, checking for signs of forced entry. He found none. “No windows. Whoever took him might have had access.”

Tyr nodded curtly. “It would hardly surprise me. But how did they remove him? I doubt the Minister’s secretary was in on this as well – he would have been more careful, would have had someone loyal to him out there.”

Tyr was referring to the secretary’s desk which was directly outside the Minister’s office. Anyone entering to see the Minister would have walked right past that desk both coming and going. Right now, Diomedes Nacca was using the network terminal at that desk to help the investigation, aided by some temporary access ID’s arranged by Ulo Nesk.

Andrew was now across the room, looking at the blaster marks in the wall. “High-density, heavy penetration,” Panzer remarked. “That’s military-grade weaponry. Odd for a criminal. Even on a planet like this.”

“Not if this was an inside job. It could have been an officer who came and took him,” Tyr pointed out. “He could have been carrying his issued sidearm and no one would have noticed.”

Panzer was nodding along with Tyr’s words when he suddenly stopped, glancing to the door, the wall, and back again.

“This is wrong,” he said suddenly, indicated the wall with the char marks. “The door is almost directly across from these burns, and the desk is to the left of the door. If the kidnapper entered there, why was he firing at the wall?”

Tyr shrugged. “Perhaps the minister wasn’t at his desk.”

“Even then, these are heavy-duty blasts. Loud. No criminal working for a syndicate like Giechan’s would be that stupid. Additionally, wouldn’t they want to take him alive? A hutt knows the value of information, and the Minister of Defense would have a lot of that.”

Tyr considered. Andrew made some good points, but they needed far more information to make a clear picture. “Let’s go see what Diomedes has dug up.”

Outside the office, the Arcona was typing diligently away at the terminal, his large golden eyes partially lidded in concentration. At Tyr’s inquiry, he paused a moment and lifted his hand to indicate the screen.

“There is not much here, Eminence. Mr. Nesk was only able to get me a ‘dash twelve’ clearance, which is equivalent to a low-level functionary. I’ve managed to persuade the computer to show me some higher level items, though.” Diomedes’ slicing skills, though seldom used by Mandalore in any official capacity, often came in handy.

He continued. “Security feeds are useless. As you no doubt saw, the camera was blasted from an unseen angle before we can see anyone in the room. Everything before that is typical daily activity. A couple employees entering with office supplies, aides coming by. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Can you get a list of people who accessed the office?” Tyr asked, indicated the card reader on the door. Anyone entering – even those who had an appointment – would have been recorded by the building’s security protocols.

“Probably.”

“First, let us see the security films, Diomedes,” Panzer instructed. “Maybe we’ll catch something important that you missed.”

Nacca nodded, punching some keys and starting video feeds playing on the screen. They watched several minutes of video on high speed playback, covering an hour or two of real time.

“He goes for water often,” Panzer remarked, pointing to the water cooler in the office corner.

“Yes,” said Diomedes. “There are logged complaints by the Minister that his air-conditioning was not working, and that it was quite warm in the office.”

Tyr’s brow wrinkled. It hadn’t felt warm to him in there. Perhaps the Minister simply liked a cooler climate?

They once more left Diomedes to his task and entered the office. Both remarked that the air felt perfectly well adjusted. Tyr’s head swiveled constantly, cycling between the desk, the burn marks on the wall, and the rest of the office. Suddenly he walked over to the desk, raised his hand with the pointer finger extended to mimic a blaster, and pointed it at the blaster marks on the wall. Then he smiled.

“What is it?” asked Panzer.

“Two things. Firstly, those marks were not made by the attacker – they were made by the Minister, who must have kept a blaster in his desk. Secondly, the room temperature is controlled by a ceiling vent,” Tyr replied, still smiling.

Panzer's head jerked upwards to scan the ceiling. There, dead center about 12 feet above them, was a largish ventilation shaft. Had somebody dropped from it, they would have landed nearly in the path those blaster bolts had taken – though if any hit him, he hadn't left any sign behind. No blood stained the floor. Furthermore, before he had actually dropped out of the vent – while waiting for a time when the Minister was alone in the office – he would have blocked the airflow, causing the room below to heat up.

Andrew smiled as well, the smile of a hunter drawing closer to his prey. He reached for the grappling hook affixed to his belt, but Tyr forestalled him.

“Hold, Andrew. That vent will never support the grapple – it'll cut right through the cheap metal,” Tyr finished as he reached for his comlink, dialing in the connection that Ulo Nesk had given him. “Mr Nesk? Yes, Tyr DeMeer here. We've discovered the trail of the kidnapers, and we require a ladder in the Minister's office. At least ten feet tall. Thank you.”

As he replaced the comlink, Tyr saw that Andrew's arms were crossed over his chest, and he was shaking his head. The Warrior Eminence asked him what was wrong.

“The vent may be how he entered, but I don't think its how *they* left,” Andrew said, emphasizing the plural. “The kidnapper or kidnappers took the Minister with them, and even for two people, getting a third body into those vents in a manageable time would have been incredibly difficult. Even if that body was unconscious – or dead.”

“All true. But where else could they have left the room? Perhaps they had special equipment to help in the abduction.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a call from Diomedes outside, beckoning them to the terminal.

“Yes?” asked Tyr when they'd exited the office.

“Eminence, look at this,” The Arcona said, obviously excited. “I saw that there was a data stream after the camera was destroyed, and realized that the kidnapers hadn't managed to destroy the audio pickups – only the video recorders. There is still audio from when the event actually occurred!”

“Then let's hear it,” ordered Panzer before Tyr could say the same.

Diomedes punched a key and started the feed playing. At first there was video, showing the empty room with the Minister working at his desk. Suddenly there was a loud noise and the picture was interrupted, leaving only static – but the sound kept on playing. Tyr closed his eyes, trying to picture the events as he heard them.

A shout from the Minister, followed by a pair of thuds as two figures dropped into the room from above. Several shots were fired – four, Tyr noted, though there were only three marks in the wall – and then a dull ‘pop’ which confused him for a moment.

Panzer rescued his train of thought. “Blowgun,” the man observed. “They didn’t stun him, they used a poisoned dart.”

Eyes still closed, Tyr nodded. That was indeed the sound. The file stopped soon after, following some undecipherable murmuring by the men in the room and an odd scraping sound that Tyr could not figure out.

“Logs show destructive interference in the feed,” Diomedes explained. “The kidnappers activated an anti-eavesdropping device.”

“Any ideas on that last sound, Panzer?”

“None at the moment sir.”

Diomedes blinked. “It sounded like dragging to me, Eminence. Some piece of furniture or another.”

In a flash of realization, Tyr and Panzer shared a look of self-exasperation and rushed back into the office. The Minister’s desk was a large two-sided affair, forming a right-angled V that pointed to the far corner of the room. One side was pushed up against the wall, but marks on the carpet showed that recently the desk had been moved to the side.

“Too long since we’ve done this kind of work,” Panzer said with a shake of his head at their overlooking of such an obvious clue.

Tyr just took a hold of one part of the desk, indicating that Panzer should help him. Together they dragged the heavy piece of furniture away from the wall and then walked around it to have a look at anything they might have revealed.

A gaping hole large enough for a man to crawl through had been cut right into the durasteel wall. Behind the reach of the room’s illumination it was pitch-black, but Tyr assumed by the construction of the building that it led downwards through the maintenance crawlspaces.

“Andrew,” Tyr said as they both stood considering the hole in the wall. “I have a new theory as to how the kidnappers departed the office with the Minister.”

Andrew just grunted, though Tyr thought he could see a slight smile on the grizzled man’s face. Panzer, however, was too busy checking the battery pack in his blaster to give proper appreciation to Tyr’s joke.

Tyr called to Diomedes. “Nacca! Get me the blueprints for this building.”

Vong entered the garrison building for the second time that day – he was determined that, one way or another, this visit would not end with him in a jail cell. Approaching the front desk, he spoke to the guard behind it as his translator chimed out his words in a toneless mechanical voice.

“I would like to speak to Lieutenant Sheffield. I have some business with him. I was told that he is the right person for me to speak to.”

The guard barely even glanced at Vong. “Your name and the nature of your business?”

“I am Commander Vong Gin`aal and my business is not your concern,” Vong replied, letting his voice rise angrily in a growl that could be heard over the flat words of the translator.

The growl had the desired effect. The combination of an obviously irritable wookiee and Sheffield’s reputation convinced the guard that it was best not to inquire too deeply into the matter. The man tapped a button out of Vong’s sight behind the counter and spoke into a microphone. “Lieutenant Sheffield, there is someone to see you at the front desk.” Looking back to Vong, he indicated an area off to the side. “You may wait for him there.”

Flashing a sharp-toothed smile, Vong walked a few paces and waited. He was not there long before Sheffield showed up, looking as oily and snake-like as he had from the first. He stormed out of the corridor to Vong’s right, apparently annoyed at being called off duty.

“What do you want? This better be damn important - I was in the middle of an officers’ drill.”

“Perhaps,” thought Vong. *“But run by whom? Giechan?”* On the outside he merely nodded respectfully to the man and spoke in a measured voice so that Sheffield would not take his tone as threatening.

“First let me introduce myself. I am Commander Vong Gin`aal of Mandalore –“

“Yes, yes. I remember you from this morning. Your ships will not be released until we have received confirmation of the paid debts by your government – “ Sheffield interrupted, no doubt thinking he already saw the point of this visit. Vong cut him off in turn.

“That is not what concerns me, Lieutenant, my business is far more urgent. Still, this is not the place to talk – perhaps we could go to your office or some other private place?”

Vong looked significantly at the reception desk and the attendant.

The Lieutenant gave Vong a disbelieving look. "I'm going to have to ask for a bit more information than that, or I'm going back to my duties. Who sent you and why? You can at least tell me that."

Vong growled inwardly. Damn this man – he needed to scare him, get his attention. He decided to go for the blunt approach.

"Very well. You could say that in a certain way I was sent by someone named Cornelia, regarding an upcoming attempt on your life."

That certainly startled Sheffield. At the mention of Cornelia's name, his eyes opened a bit wider, and when Vong finished they jumped open further still. The Captain's hand jerked a bit towards the pistol on his belt, and Vong was ready to grab and snap the man's neck should that hand find its way any closer to the weapon.

"You had better explain yourself, wookiee, or you're going to be in a great deal of trouble."

"Of course, Lieutenant. I came here to help you after all – but are you sure you would like me to explain the entire situation – here?"

Sheffield became newly aware of the people around them, and the guard behind the desk. "No. Come with me."

As Vong hoped, Sheffield led him into his office and locked the door behind him. The room was on the second story of the building, with a large window facing the landing strips. If he wanted, the Mandalorian could have killed the man right there – but he would never have made it out of the building in that case.

"Have a seat," said Sheffield, seating himself behind the desk while indicating that Vong could place himself in front of it. The wookiee did so.

"Now, explain. And you had better make this good," commanded the corrupt officer, narrowing his eyes at Vong and folding his arms over his chest.

Vong nodded. *"First of all, I know that you work for Giechan, and we both know this no doubt makes you quite a few enemies –"*

Sheffield interrupted him again; a habit that Vong quickly decided would make killing the man all the more pleasant. "Fewer than I would have otherwise, I assure you. Giechan controls this city."

Inclining his head in agreement, Vong resumed his speech. *"That is part of why I've come. I am no fool, Sheffield. I can see that getting on Giechan's good side is the way to*

get ahead around here. For my part, I only wish to get off this planet, and for that I need access to my ship. Giechan can arrange this, yes?"

Sheffield nodded slowly.

"So when I hear of a plot to remove the 'chief internal operative' of Giechan's syndicate," continued Vong, flattering the man a bit, "I thought that helping this man to avoid his own untimely demise might be in my best interests."

"How is it that you, a newcomer to this planet with no friends and no contacts, happen to hear of such a plot?"

"I was in the right bar at the right time."

Sheffield snorted. "The Nikto's Son, no doubt. That's why you know of Cornelia."

"I learned about her at... another time, actually. While I was looking into this plot."

"And what did you learn? About both."

"That Cornelia, a top lieutenant in Jenasyde – "

"Lieutenant? You should check your information. She runs Jenasyde, as sure as the sun rises. There are no others besides her," Sheffield said.

Vong shrugged his massive shoulders. *"No matter. Whatever she is, she has hired a bounty hunter to kill you."*

"They've done that before. I always intercept them before they get on-planet. How did this one slip by me?"

Vong chuckled a bit, letting the irritation come through as menace in the laughter – although the dry tones of the translator stole most of the emotion from his words. *"Because he's better than you, I suppose."*

"Go on."

"It happens that I know the man they've brought in – one of the finest bounty hunters I know of. A wookiee by the name of Lowrrubbor. I had an unpleasant run-in with him. Unpleasant enough to make me forgive that you impounded my ship, and help you kill him."

Sheffield looked at Vong rather skeptically. "I can't say I have heard of this wookiee, and if what you say is true, that he is brilliant at his job, then I ask why you yourself are not dead. Can you tell me who else has Lowrunner tracked down? Anyone famous?"

“It’s understandable that you might not have heard about Lowrrubbor. You are not in the bounty hunter business, plus we have difficult times in the galaxy these days and there are a lot of bounty hunters. But tell me, do you think that this Cornelia would hire a bungler? I don’t think so. There is a reward for his head in 14 systems in the Core Worlds, plus the Inner and Outer Rim. And why I’m not dead? Maybe because nobody paid him to kill me, and I was just in the way.” Here Vong smiled wide and viciously. *“Or maybe because I’m better than him. Anyway, time is short. My information tells me that he is already on-planet and in the city. I don’t have the entire day to convince you, because I don’t want to be around you when he hits – unless you accept my help.”*

There was a war of sorts being fought on Sheffield’s face, between his inclination to distrust Vong and his love of his own life. Finally the man turned to his computer terminal, punching in a couple quick commands and reading the results.

“I see no files on the general network about this wookiee.”

“He’s a ghost,” Vong said. *“He pays to have his profiles regularly purged. He’s not your average wookiee – he uses stealth to get close to his targets, but when he finds them, the Sithspawn come out of the air ducts. The execution tends to be loud, explosive, and messy. He uses the ensuing confusion to escape.”*

Sheffield punched in another command, and suddenly went ghostly pale. “Oh, by the twin suns. He’s here, he’s in Kintinan!”

“Already? How do you know for sure?” Vong asked innocently.

“ID card swipes. Three of them, one here at the starport, and two others around the city. Name of Lowrrubbor, species wookiee.” Sheffield sounded truly rattled now, and Vong could see the coward that he was shining through.

Earlier that day, Vong had taken the ID that Cornelia had provided for him – in a very timely fashion – and come to the starport, using it to pass through the turnstiles instead of his real ID. He had then gone to a shady business place rumored to have black-market weapons dealings, and an eatery, and used the card at each. A sparse history, but a cowardly criminal who feared that someone was out to get him would see only confirmation of his fears. Vong had even removed his armor for the excursion, so any bystanders who could be found and questioned might indeed recall a wookiee at that time and place...

Feeding Sheffield’s fear, Vong feigned anxiety. *“That is not normal. He does not often go by his real name, nor does he display himself so openly. He must be expecting to finish this contract quickly.”*

“How quickly? How quickly do you think he’ll attack?”

“When and where was the last ID scan?”

Sheffield checked the screen. “Across town,” he answered, and then cursed. “At a well known gun dealer.”

Vong grunted. *“I don’t know. This is not usual procedure for him at all. But I’d bet my life that he’ll come for you within a day or two.”*

“Not today?”

“No, not a chance. He’s had no chance to gather information, to reconnoiter the area. Even if Cornelia has given him blueprints, a target profile, the whole works, he’ll want to see the kill zone for himself.”

Vong could see that his choice of vocabulary was agitating the Captain further. Excellent. *“We need to prepare, and quickly. We’ll need weaponry and armor. Preferably a high power rifle – he’ll come at you up close, but only a rifle will have the punch needed to take him down. Can you get me access to my weapons? And possibly find us grenades?”*

“Grenades? Yes, I can get your weapons to you, and secure appropriate equipment for myself. But grenades?”

“Trust me, we’ll be thankful for them. I have to leave you now. If he’s this close, I have preparations of my own to make.”

So shaken was the man that he no longer questioned Vong at all. To Sheffield’s mind, the entire world he’d carefully constructed – in which he was an invincible prince under an immortal emperor – had come crumbling down as soon as he thought there was a real threat to his life.

When Vong left the office, he did indeed go to make preparations – but not to help the man. Instead, Vong went to a dirty eatery near the starport and met with Hawrrak, the wookiee compatriot of Jenasyde, to explain to the latter his part in the plan to kill Lieutenant Sheffield.

There had been no hesitation in Tyr’s mind. They had no backup, but were sufficiently armed and armored. Furthermore, their quarry would not know that they were coming. The element of surprise was possibly the most valuable asset in warfare, and Tyr would not waste such a priceless gift. They had to move quickly.

All signs indicated that the minister had been whisked away to the sub-basement levels, and that is exactly where the Mandalorians found themselves. Diomedes was in the fore, using his superior vision to follow the tracks left in the dust – it was quite dim down here and they didn’t dare use flashlights for fear of giving themselves away. Tyr possessed a local area scanning device and had his eyes on the screen. Together the three armored

figures snuck noiselessly along in the dim, dusty tunnels below the Government building, following the trail of the kidnapers and their precious – and hopefully living – cargo.

After almost half an hour of silent stalking, Diomedes held up one hand in a signal to halt. He did this just as Tyr's scanner showed bio-readings up ahead, large enough for human-sized creatures. They had caught up. There was a small incline up ahead, as well as very old industrial crates – left over from the initial construction of the tunnels, most likely. The Arcona poked his head over one such crate, studied the scene ahead for a moment, and then rejoined his commanders.

“Four of them that I can see, but they are standing in front of an open door – there may be more on the other side,” he said quietly. “I think I see the minister. There's a large sack on the floor, it's not moving but it is large enough to hold a Nikto.”

Tyr wished he had some infrared vision goggles so that he could see for himself, but he had no such equipment and neither did his two comrades. The light was far too dim for his human eyes to make out anything more than a few feet ahead. “Why did they stop at the doorway?” he asked. His scanner indicated that their quarry had, in fact, halted.

“I cannot tell. Perhaps they are merely resting, perhaps communicating with superiors. Perhaps something else.”

Tyr nodded. It hardly mattered. They had caught their prey. “What manner of door?”

Diomedes looked again. “Large and heavy. Not quite a blast door, but solid looking. It could prove difficult to get through without heavy equipment.”

That decided it, Tyr thought. “We attack, then. We cannot allow them to take the minister beyond that door. Diomedes, lead us forward a bit to the cover closest them. How's your aim these days?”

“I have the Navy Markmanship Cross this year, just like the previous three,” the Arcona said with a smile.

“Good. You will stay back and make sure none of them get a hold of the minister. Andrew, you'll have my blaster as well. Get their attention, I'll flank from the left.”

Both the others nodded. All three crept as close to the criminals as they could. Two more crates stood in the tunnel about fifteen meters away from the enemy – a simple distance, Tyr reflected. Except, the criminals had ample cover as well and virtual safety only a few feet away – and it was still very dark. Move any closer, and they risked being seen before they could attack. However from this distance the light was still poor enough that Tyr and Andrew were at a severe disadvantage. The Mandalorians would have to be quick, and brutally efficient.

This, of course, is exactly what Mandalorians train to be.

Each of the armor-clad warriors took a position behind one of the empty cargo crates that littered the tunnel. Diomedes was to the far right, already taking careful aim at the one kidnapper close to the inert form they assumed – and hoped – was the minister. Tyr handed his blaster to Panzer and then moved to the left side, leaving Andrew in the center. The Warrior Eminence took a slow count of five, and then removed a tube from his belt. Striking the activator end on the floor Tyr immediately threw the flare down the right side of the tunnel, averting his eyes so the sudden light wouldn't blind him.

Diomedes fired before the flare had even left Tyr's hand, downing one Nikto with a shot straight through the eye. Andrew followed up a moment later with two rapid shots – the first missed, no doubt as Andrew still had to let his eyes adjust. The second angry red bolt struck home in the chest of another form who went down with a surprised cry. As the sputtering light flew through the air, the blaster in Diomedes' hands barked off another shot to teach another kidnapper the folly of trying to retrieve their prize. Shadows whirled and danced everywhere. Shouts rose from the opposite end of the tunnel as their prey grasped what was happening. The airborne brilliance drew closer to their enemy, finally illuminating them more than the firepower that Diomedes and Panzer were pouring down the hallway.

The flare hit the far wall and clattered to the floor, plunging the tunnel back into twilight as much of the light was blocked by the crates that both sides were using as cover. Due to the placement of the flare, the left side of the tunnel was still mostly in darkness. Perfect. Tyr hopped over the crate in front of him as discretely as he could. Blaster bolts ripped through the air to his right as he moved quickly down the hallway, keeping as low as he could.

He made it to the enemy without attracting any attention at all – every kidnapper firing wildly and ineffectually down towards the other two Mandalorians. Tyr was close enough now to see that there were only three left – his quickly scanning eyes counted four bodies lying on the floor besides the one covered in a sack. Some were still twitching, which was just as well. He'd like to question some of them himself once they were through with this.

Tyr leapt the hollow hunk of durasteel which sheltered one of the criminals. Landing next to his target, a quick blow from his open hand knocked the blaster from the Nikto's grasp and the followup from his fist crushed the man's windpipe. The kidnapper's eyes went wide as a pathetic squeak managed to eek past the shattered airways. Tyr was already moving on, his right hand moving to his back beneath the armor and grasping his favorite tool.

From a sheath cleverly concealed within the red shell of his Mandalorian encasement, Tyr smoothly pulled an elegantly curved combat blade. In the same motion he removed the gun arm of another man and whistled the sword around to cut the man across the eyes. The incoming blaster fire had stopped as the third figure – a twi'lek, as it turned out – finally became aware of doom closing in on him from the side.

Moments later Andrew and Diomedes appeared out of the gloom, still holding their smoking blasters and looking around at the carnage as Tyr checked the bodies of several others. All dead now – his fellows, as always, had lethal aim.

Andrew had picked up the flare and was studying the scene by its light. His gruff face took in the twi'lek's neatly bisected face and then turned to Diomedes. "I couldn't see," he stated. "How was he?"

Diomedes shrugged nonchalantly. "Rusty."

Wiping the gore from his blade before replacing it, hidden, at his back, Tyr mirrored the Arcona's shrug. "Too much running a government, not enough blade practice. Perhaps I should quit."

Neither of the other two asked him which he was talking about quitting. For Tyr, choosing between combat and breathing would have tested just how large his lungs were; but then, the same was true for just about any Mandalorian. It made running a government filled with them a unique challenge.

"Check the minister," Tyr said. "I'll see to this one," he indicated the Nikto he had left alive – though with blood running from his severed stump of an arm and the cut across his head, he might not be that way for long without medical care. Tyr tore a strip of cloth from a nearby corpse's clothing and tied it tightly around the arm as a tourniquet. The head wound was shallow enough not to worry about, but he wiped some of the blood away anyways. Tyr wasn't sure how long the criminal would be unconscious – minor head trauma wouldn't have kept him under for long, but the substantial blood loss made his immediate condition hard to judge. Either way, the Mandalorians needed to be out of this tunnel – for all they knew, the kidnappers had been awaiting company.

"Shut the door," Tyr commanded. "And block it as well as you can. Then let's get these two out of here."

There was a firestorm of activity when they managed to make their way back into the government building. Tyr contacted Ulo Nesk, who was delighted to see Minister Darren back and in seemingly good health. Medical assistance was needed for both the rescued Minister and the captured criminal, and several medics arrived quickly to take them both to a facility within the building. Ulo assured the Mandalorians that he would have hand-picked, loyal guards around to watch Darren while the minister was being treated, but Tyr still insisted that he, Panzer, and Diomedes would accompany Darren. The Warrior Eminence hadn't come all this way to let this very important nikto out of his sight now.

Vong climbed the flight of stairs to the Garrison's second floor slowly, his mind considering a thousand things at once.

The Warrior Eminence had contacted him the night before. They had recovered the Defense Minister, and the Mandalorians would soon be able to move more overtly. Vong had informed Tyr of his plans to deal with Sheffield – amongst others. The Eminence had warned him sternly not to place himself in undue danger.

“A thousand criminals are not worth your life, Commander. Not like this. Proceed with your plans, but do not place yourself at risk.” Those were the Eminence’s words. Of course, no operation was without risk, but Vong understood the message. ‘Do not die for revenge.’ Once upon a time, the wookiee would have done so without hesitation. Now, though, he needed to have a grander focus.

And that meant that he needed to get this right the first time.

Sheffield met him in the hallway outside the office. He was carrying Vong’s equipment – all of it, which made him look very strange. He gladly handed over the rifle, equipment belt, and even a few grenades. As he slung the LJ-90 back over his shoulder, Vong finally felt like his old self again.

Sheffield said little as they entered his office, and Vong suppressed a smile. The man before him was pale and scared; a far cry from the arrogant criminal that had so offended Vong in the first place. It was the first part of his revenge, and soon the damage would go from emotional and mental to physical. The plan was simple – Vong would convince Sheffield to leave the room for a moment, to use the computer in the office next door in case ‘Lowrubbor’ had a tap on this terminal. Vong himself would use the time to disable the security cameras in the area. Hawrrak would enter soon after...

Vong had barely stepped foot in the office before the window exploded inwards. The wookiee instinctively turned and knelt, using his broad armored back and the interposing mass of the desk to shield himself from the deadly flying shards. His eyes closed a moment in frustration. Hawrrak was early, the buffoon! The cameras were still active, anyone would be able to see what was happening; and Vong was supposedly here to help Sheffield...

The man behind him – still alive, having ducked nearly as fast as Vong – screamed in terror and shouted to his ‘comrade.’

“It’s Lowrubbor! He’s here!”

Vong’s eyes opened again. *Oh, really? I hadn’t noticed.* By the clans, he wanted to kill this inane little man. In the tiny space of time it took for the explosion to finish destroying the glass, he made his decision. As he stood, he turned and un-slung his rifle. Through the dust and smoke he saw Hawrrak rappel in through the now-empty window frame. The wookiee had a look of triumph on his face, and smiled at Vong as his feet landed inside the office.

The smile was innocent, friendly. The moron wasn't trying to kill both Vong and Sheffield – he was just too foolish to realize the error he'd made. Vong returned the smile – if with a different feeling – as he brought his rifle to bear.

Hawrrak quickly realized that his situation had changed for the worse. Surprise flooded the wookiee's eyes as he reversed his motion. Instead of bringing himself further into the office, he flung himself back out through the smoky entrance he'd made only moments before. The blast from the LJ-90 took him in the left side, vaporizing fur and frying flesh. An angry roar shook the air, though only a wookiee could have understood the notes of betrayal ringing through all the pain within it. It hardly mattered to Vong what Hawrrak felt – a criminal was a criminal.

Vong triggered another blast as his new prey fell from his sight, but it missed high. Another shot flashed through the air – Sheffield had finally gathered the presence of mind to start shooting as well. Little good it did, though. Vong rushed to the window and saw Hawrrak running for the corner of the building through a cluttered maze of building materials, fuel pipes, and vehicles. Vong had to give his fellow wookiee credit; even with the constitution of their kind, such a blow as he'd received would not be easy to shrug off.

The Mandalorian aimed and fired as Hawrrak neared the corner, but missed once more. In one smooth motion, Vong turned off his translator and triggered his commlink.

“Khabarahk,” he growled. *“The wookiee, running from the incident site. Dispatch and remove.”*

A double click from the speakers signaled that his order had been heard and acknowledged.

A shadow near the edge of building came alive just as the wookiee ran past. A long grey arm looped around a furry neck. A dagger struck home. The wookiee was dragged back into the darkness so far that even Vong could no longer see him.

He turned to Sheffield, growling about his prey escaping. His acting wasn't very good, but then again the man couldn't understand him, and signaled as much through his fearful panting breaths.

Faking confusion, Vong switch his translator back on. *“He got away, damnit. Are you alright?”* Once again, he was glad for the neutral tones of the mechanical voice. He couldn't bring himself to fake concern for the man.

“The... glass,” Sheffield panted out and indicated his side. Vong realized that not all of the man's pallor was from fear – he had been cut by the shrapnel of the imploding window. One of the wounds seemed more than superficial.

“Do you have medical supplies?” Vong asked, almost hoping the answer was ‘no’ so that he could still end the afternoon with Sheffield as a cooling corpse. Sadly, the Lieutenant nodded and moved painfully over to his desk, opening a bottom drawer and removed a fairly typical military medical kit. Vong went through the motions of helping the man, injecting a mild painkiller and applying the bacta-infused bandages.

Life could be so disappointing sometimes.

Even now Vong’s mind was working furiously. There must be some way to salvage this situation. Hawrrak had been eliminated, so Cornelia would not likely notice anything amiss immediately. Sheffield had yet more proof that Vong was on his side. Vong began to speak even before a plan had fully taken shape in his mind.

“Quickly, Lieutenant. We must move quickly. Do you have a place, a hideout? Somewhere Jenasyde does not know you would go? Close by?”

In his pain, Sheffield was ready to divulge anything to his ‘savoir.’ “Y... yes. A personal safehouse. But it’s not defensible...”

“We’re beyond that!” Vong snapped. “We don’t need defensible, we need *secret*. Lowrubbor may survive, and if he does he’ll try again. Your best bet is not to be found. Where is it? Wait. Don’t say it aloud. Here, punch the location into my datapad directly.”

Vong hid his glee as he watched Sheffield do as he was bidden, revealing the location of his hideout to the wookiee. Vong didn’t know what he was going to do yet, but he wanted to know where Sheffield was when he decided.

“Sneak out of the building, any way you know how. I’m going to follow Lowrubbor and see if I can’t finish him off. I’ll meet you here – “ Vong tapped his datapad, *“later. Stay safe until then.”*

Vong gave the lieutenant no time to question, making immediately for the window. The two-story drop jarred his legs but was nothing dangerous. He walked past the point where his noghri friend had intercepted Hawrrak. There was nothing there – no blood, no body, no noghri. As always, the small grey humanoid astounded with his competency. It was almost magical. Vong hustled past, his mind still churning over what exactly he was going to do now...

Tyr and the other Mandalorian officers – all of them except Vong who was currently difficult to contact – sat across from three niktos. The Defense Minister, Darren, his chief aide, Ulo Nesk, and one other being whom the Minister called his ‘chief of intelligence.’ From what little he’d heard from the man so far, Tyr had gathered that this person was in charge of running infiltration operations into the various crime rings.

The Minister was still pale and not completely recovered from his ordeal, but the nikto had walked out of the medical facility saying 'If I wait for you to heal me, it'll get us *all* killed.'

Tyr liked Darren already.

"I cannot thank you enough for coming to our aid, your Eminence," Darren was saying. "Nor can I apologize enough for what it has cost you."

"It has cost us nothing thus far," Tyr replied graciously. "Save some aggravation, and that serves only to illustrate all the more why we must help you. Having an entire planet held under the thumbs of such scum as Giechen and Jenasyde is outrageous."

"I agree. I have had to endure the current situation my entire life. I was on the verge of making real changes before this incident – which I cannot help but feel was the cause for our current emergency. We don't have much time. I estimate that we have at most two days before the Hutt pirate fleet arrives. They won't waste time on negotiations. They'll destroy any and all defenses, kill anyone in a uniform, and institute a grotesque martial lawlessness. In short, we have two days – if that – before all civilization on this planet ends."

Tyr wasn't entirely sure about that last bit – a barbaric planet wouldn't be much use to the hutts – but he saw no reason to dispute the Minister over such a small point. Whatever they ended up doing with Kintan, Hutt control of the planet was entirely disagreeable to Mandalore.

"Minister, I've sent out the call to all Mandalorian elements within response distance using your private holocomm. The signals were coded, so anyone intercepting them won't receive anything useful. But I warn you, Mandalore does not have enough forces in the area to make this a walk in the park for any of us."

Ulo Nesk looked saddened. It seemed he had expected Mandalorian involvement in the coming conflict to be something of a panacea. Tyr could have told him that in war, things are never so simple.

Darren was not surprised. "I knew as much before I even put out the first distress signal, your Eminence. Whatever assets you can bring will be great help, but I – "

Tyr's commlink crackled and interrupted the minister. Tyr looked an apology at Darren and answered. "DeMeer."

The others could hear a wookiee on the other side. Vong had finally decided to check in. "No, excellent work Commander. You know where he'll be?" More growling from the other side. "Excellent. Do not come to the palace. Get somewhere and wait, I'll contact you shortly."

Deactivating his commlink, Tyr looked again at the Minister. “I have some good news. One of my men, a wookiee named Vong Gin’aal, has killed one of Jenasyde’s operatives within the starport garrison and has managed to gain the trust of Giechen’s top man there, one Lieutenant Sheffield. Vong has instructed Sheffield to go to a safehouse until Vong can come to him.”

“Sheffield? Your agent has tricked *Sheffield* into trusting him? That man is one of the most paranoid people on Kintan!”

Tyr smiled. “Mandalorians do not waste time. Furthermore, Vong tells me that he does not believe Cornelia to be aware of these events. She was the one who told Vong to kill Sheffield, and has no reason to think he would not succeed.”

The Ministers practically hit the floor when it was mentioned that Vong had had contact with Cornelia.

“This... this is excellent, your eminence. In fact,” The minister’s face took on a far-away look and Tyr knew a plan was taking place in the nikto’s head. “In fact, I think we can use this. Our greatest weakness in the upcoming battle will be corruption – criminal elements have infiltrated many of our military units, and I have no doubt that when the time comes Giechan will order them to make trouble. I can’t honestly say how Cornelia will behave during the battle – she is both Giechan’s enemy and that of the government. I doubt she’ll be helpful, though. So, here is what we shall do...”

As Tyr listened to the Minister laying down his plans, a smile grew on his face that mirrored the ones on the faces of his officers. Yes, he most certainly did like Minister Darren.

Vong stood in full view of the approaching figures. He was in a back alley of the city, near the location where Sheffield had claimed his safehouse existed. Vong was about to visit Sheffield, and he’d invited friends. At least, those he’d invited assumed they were his friends. The number of mistaken assumptions people made about him since he’d landed on this aggravating planet were certainly piling up quickly.

No matter, Vong chuckled to himself. I’ll be rid of it all soon enough.

The blue twi’lek was now close enough to see his smile even in the darkness. “In a fine mood, my friend? No doubt finally closing the coffin on Sheffield makes you nearly as happy as it does me.” The vicious focus robbed none of the allure from Cornelia’s sultry voice. She too was dressed in armor – thin, form-fitting stuff which was cutting edge and must have cost an incredible amount. Not a problem. The men behind her were a mixed bunch – a combination of Jenasyde higher-ups who wanted to watch Sheffield die and minions who happened to be in Cornelia’s favor at the moment, Vong surmised. “I’m

sure you'll join us in celebrating back at the Nikto's Son once we're through here. I've got plenty more - hmm, shall we say business ventures? - to discuss with you."

So sure I'll be interested, Cornelia? Well, one more for the pile I suppose. Vong mused silently before replying to the dancer-cum-crime lord.

"I thank you for the offer, Cornelia, but I won't be joining you. In fact, to my great dismay, we won't be killing Sheffield tonight." He was dismayed, but orders after all were orders. *"Apologies."*

Cornelia immediately realized something was wrong, a reaction that Vong considered roughly one and a half days too late. "What are you talking about, wookiee?" All semblance of friendliness was gone from her voice, façade discarded. Here was the Cornelia that Jenasyde's underlings feared. Vong was underwhelmed.

"As it turns out, Cornelia, Sheffield will end up being rather valuable to the government when they dismantle Giechan's crime ring. Giechen is quite the manager and his operation is set up such that various cells can operate independently for long periods - Sheffield is one of the few who can link these cells to each other. So, you see, killing him would make that harder."

Cornelia hadn't quite gotten the picture, though it was taking shape fast for her. She had not yet made any hostile moves, and so Vong continued.

"You, on the other hand, do not have such a good outlook. I'm told that without you and a certain other pair of figures whom are behind you, Jenasyde will tear itself apart quite without any help. Put down your weapons, Cornelia, and order them to do the same. Honor demands that I give you that chance at least."

Cornelia managed to look both smug and wary simultaneously. "Does honor dictate that you throw away your life in order to deliver foolish ultimatums?"

"No, but it is a standard Mandalorian tactic to surround the enemy while they are focused on our emissary," Vong said with a predatory grin. On cue, several of the Mandalorian officers made themselves visible around the Jenasyders. *"Honor does not equate to stupidity, criminal."*

Cornelia's next act was poorly considered, though she never had time to realize it. She *was* quite fast, no doubts about that - her pistol made it out of the holster and had nearly leveled with Vong's face before blaster fire from all around took her apart, along with the criminals she had in tow.

"Excellent. Well done, Commander Vong. Are you ready for your next performance?" Tyr said as he stepped out from the shadows, his blaster pistol still smoking.

"Must I do all the work here, sir?" Vong griped good-naturedly.

“Don’t distinguish yourself so much next time, if you don’t want to be the point-man.” Tyr replied. Reaching underneath his armor at his back, he tossed Vong the sword he kept sheathed there. “Don’t have too much fun now.”

Scyld Strongfellow was winning.

He’d been asked by officers and soldiers of other militaries just what it was that set the Mandalorians apart. He’d fed them speeches about commitment, discipline, dedication... a load of bantha leavings, all of it. The secret to Mandalorian military supremacy was games.

And Scyld was winning.

The current game had no name – few of them did, really – and wasn’t one of the more popular ones. But they’d already played most of the others in the many hours they’d been in the jail. Just in case, Scyld had them sleeping in combat shifts, six hours off, eighteen on. He doubted it was necessary, but the men expected something from him. The current game had been going on for most of this shift, and it had to do with tactics and bricks. The garrison building was constructed from simple brickwork, and the bricks themselves were myriad shades of grey. Scyld had challenged the men to separate the bricks by shade and try to find tactical pictures within the walls. A circle of light bricks surrounding dark bricks, for example – though that one had been spotted over and over, and had finally been voted out for scoring purposes.

Scyld was in the final stages of pointing out his view of the classic Kel Dorian ‘seven-layered offensive screen’ when the door rattled, and the game was forgotten as every Mandalorian immediately stood to attention. The ones asleep took only moments longer. Whoever came through the door would be greeted by hundreds of attentive Mandalorian stares.

Captain Hoff entered and did not seem to notice the tableau. A grin split his face from ear to ear, and Scyld felt his spirits lift. Finally, no more games. It was time for business.

“Captain Scyld!” Hoff said merrily, tapping away at the cell keylock. “It is my distinct pleasure to finally say you – and your men – are free to go. Furthermore, I have a message from your Eminence,” he finished as he handed Scyld a datapad. The Mandalorian captain read the instructions within, noting the keywords that indicated the message was legitimate and not coerced – in short, that they were really what Tyr DeMeer required of him. Scyld’s smile grew as well. The real work was about to begin.

Vong marched through the dim hall, carrying a basket. Before he'd set out on this latest mission, one of the other officers – a human from Corellia – had told him he looked like the hero and the villain of a popular Corellian children's story all rolled into one with his red armor, hairy demeanor, and basket.. He'd given Vong the gist of the tale quickly, and it certainly didn't sound like children's fare to him.

"I never knew the Corellians told such fierce things to their young; A small girl on a journey to visit her elder - eaten by a wolf? Yes, a wonderful tale for a child." Vong thought to himself as he moved along.

The building was large and decrepit-looking from without, but inside turned out to be claustrophobic. When the corridors themselves were not cramped, there were crates and boxes strewn about. Deliberately, Vong had no doubt. This entire place had the feel of cunningly crafted chaos. Such deception was to be expected with a Hutt at the heart of the web.

The wookiee was stopped by two beings of a humanoid race that Vong did not recognize, as tall as he but rather willowy. They hefted weapons and spoke in basic, demanding to see what he carried.

"I'm expected," Vong said, showing them what he carried. Showing as little emotion as they had when they'd pointed their weapons at him, they nodded and waved him through the large metal door.

Beyond was an arena-like room, with seats all around the outside. Vong supposed that it might, in fact, be an arena at times. Right now, however, it was a throne room. Giechan the Hutt, the most powerful single figure on Kintan, lay upon his dais in the center, surrounded by courtiers and henchmen.

Despite the Mandalorian officer's well traveled life, this was the first time he had seen a Hutt in person. He was slightly impressed by how muscular the giant slug turned out to be, though he found the massive, flat face and tiny arms to be more amusing than the overall bulk was intimidating. Still, there must be some reason that such ridiculous beings had gained such notoriety as masterminds and criminal overlords, so Vong decided to give the thing the benefit of the doubt. He advanced into the room a ways until the Hutt held up his hand for the wookiee to halt.

Giechan spoke in a deep bellowing voice, a nearby droid translating for him. *"Greetings, wookiee. Welcome to my humble palace. I have heard you bring me a gift."*

Vong bowed in what he hoped was a stately manner. He had brought no weapons, knowing that he would be searched upon entering the warehouse, and so Giechan knew he was in no danger from the red-suited giant.

"Mighty Giechan," began Vong, figuring a bit of flattery never hurt. *"I do indeed have a gift for you. When I landed here, my ship was taken from me – by you – and I must admit*

that this angered me. However, when I approached the useless Cornelia, she too angered me, with her incompetence. And so...”

Vong opened the basket and tossed its contents to one of the Hutt’s courtiers, who held it up for his master to gaze upon. The hutt threw up his comically undersized arms and roared in laughter at Cornelia’s head with its features frozen in a death-snarl.

“It is Cornelia! The rumors were true! Wookiee, you impress me with your audacity. You shall have great rewards, and if you require new employment you have no farther to look.”

Vong bowed again, smiling now. *“Great Giechen, the offer is appreciated. Sadly, as I hear there is a war brewing and I do not wish to be in the middle of it,”* - Vong realized this was the first time in his entirely deceitful stay on this planet that he’d actually had to lie – *“I merely request my ship so that I can escape the impending havoc.”*

Laughter rumbled forth again from the Hutt. *“The war is more than brewing, my good assassin,”* Vong almost growled at the insult – *“It began only moments ago. It would be best if you remain here with me. This building will see it through the coming battle quite safely, I assure you.”*

Vong felt some alarm. This was exactly the sort of information he’d been sent to collect – along with accomplishing his main mission – but he certainly hadn’t expected that. Without time for any more grandstanding, he rested his hands on his belt – and just happened to press a button triggering a concealed commlink.

“Six meters north.”

Small but powerful, the device had the signal strength necessary to punch through the layers of duracrete that the building was constructed from. It transmitted Vong’s words as well as precise coordinates – to the MSS Apocalypse.

Giechan barely had the time to be puzzled by Vong’s words before his world ended in violent red light.

Onboard the flagship of the Mandalorian navy, Tyr DeMeer watched over the shoulder of his gunnery master. The *Apocalypse* was hundreds of meters above the surface of the city of Kintinan, hovering almost directly atop the mammoth warehouse complex purported to be the headquarters of Giechan the Hutt.

They were at the maximum altitude for this sort of work. Commander Vong had agreed that it was a good plan, but it was far too risky for Tyr’s liking. Undertaking operations of this scope on such short notice did not sit well with him. Still, Vong had been adamant – Tyr would not have wanted to cheat the wookiee out of a reward he so richly deserved. If

the reward was a bit unorthodox... well, that was the price he paid for leading Mandalorians.

The communicator crackled and Vong's voice came through loud and clear. "*Six meters north.*" The computer immediately processed that – as well as the set of coordinates it received along with the vocal transmission – and gave the gunner a targeting solution, which the professional adjusted only slightly before firing.

Every turbolaser battery aboard the Apocalypse that could be brought to bear on the proper coordinates roared in scarlet fury, unleashing devastating amounts of energy. Though the large guns were not made for pinpoint accuracy, they were close enough that nothing beyond two or three meters of the target needed to worry overmuch – though it would get extremely warm for a goodly distance beyond that.

After two salvos, the gunner stopped. "I think we got him."

Tyr nodded. "But did we get Vong as well? Bring us down, helmsman."

The Apocalypse righted itself – having been tipped along its axis to bring a greater part of its weaponry to bear – and descended back towards the planet surface. Every Mandalorian aboard hoped that a certain crazy wookiee had not, in fact, been barbecued along with their intended target.

He had never been quite so close to a bombardment. At least, not one carried out by his own comrades. Scyld knew that Commander Vong had been far, far closer... but then, the Commander had literally demanded the honor.

From the outside, the building was relatively unharmed. Some windows had been blown out by the sudden blast of super heated air, but the actual structure was undamaged from Scyld's view. The bombardment had been entirely surgical. Scyld hoped Vong had survived.

Beings of all types started leaving the building. Scyld sighed and, hefting his LJ-90, fired. All around him Mandalorians followed suit. Nobody was allowed to leave the building alive. The soldiers surrounding the building cut down many who fled, and then – on an order from Scyld – began to enter the building itself to hunt down any holdouts. And to find Vong, of course.

It had been a long time since Scyld had done this kind of work. It had been common enough during Mandalore's founding, when criminals and unsavory characters of all sorts had been chased out of Abrion. Few of them had any discipline in the face of a foe like the Mandalorians – and while the soldiers took little delight in the slaughter, a slaughter it must be. So the Mandalorians made their way corridor to corridor, room to room. Methodically, purposefully, and with surpassing precision they destroyed every shred of

Giechen's syndicate that remained within. A few hundred feet below, the same was being done by the most loyal of the city's security forces in the maintenance tunnels underground.

It was Scyld himself who encountered Commander Vong first. The wookiee was singed and covered in ash and dust, but unharmed. He carried a blaster rifle of anonymous make that Scyld did not recognize, no doubt taken from a corpse – or a soon-to-be corpse – after the barrage.

“Commander Scyld!” Vong shouted. *“We must leave here. Giechan said the invasion had already begun.”*

“What?” Scyld asked. “I’ve had no –” and of course, just then his commlink crackled.

“Commander, this is the Apocalypse. Break off your mission and retreat to landing zone for boarding. Repeat, abort current mission and fall back to landing zone.”

“Typical,” spat Scyld. “All right, you head out first Vong, take my rearguard with you and beat it for the Apocalypse. The rest of us will be right behind,” he said. It wasn’t technically an order, but within the Mandalorian armed forces no Naval officer would seek to question an Army commander in the pursuit of their mission – and vice versa. Respect for experience trumped respect for rank, which often confused outsiders.

The withdrawal from the warehouse was rapid and uneventful. Any scum that were still alive were too afraid to come out of hiding, even to take potshots at the red-clad angels of death that had only moments before been hunting them with single-minded ruthlessness. Vong hoped that, if any were alive, they knew just how lucky they were – and that the knowledge scared them right out of their current lifestyles. It was a scant chance perhaps, but a hope worth holding on to.

The landing field was a city square not actually large enough for the *Apocalypse* to touch down. The mighty Carrack itself hovered overhead while its entire complement of shuttles and landing craft ferried the arriving soldiers piecemeal back up.

Vong headed immediately for the bridge. Tyr was there, snapping orders. “Commander! Thank Providence. How was the view from inside?”

“Spectacular. I’ve never seen such a large creature simply evaporate. I take it you found out about the invasion.”

“Yes. We’ve had word from the Defense minister. All communications from their outlying satellites have ceased. Holonet communications have been blocked. It has most certainly begun. Get to the auxiliary bay. I have a shuttle waiting to take you and the rest of the officers here in personal ships back to Kintinan’s hangar – which is back in friendly hands. Await the signal – our fleet will rise together.”

Vong gave a quick nod and a salute, and knew that though Tyr returned them the Warrior Eminence's mind had already moved on. Since they had arrived on-planet, the leader of Mandalore had had to formulate far too many plans at a moment's notice. Tyr's brain's right hemisphere must be getting quite a workout, Vong mused – then furrowed his brow in trying to remember the specifics of human brain chemistry. Was it the right hemisphere?

He hurried onboard the shuttle as soon as he arrived in the bay, knowing he would be the last to board. As soon as he'd put foot inside, Panzer shouted to the pilot to takeoff. Vong saw with great pleasure that his gear had been placed aboard for him. Picking up his commlink – and hoping that shortband transmissions hadn't been blocked yet – he flashed a message to his Noghri to meet him at the hangar.

A mere fifteen minutes later, Vong was warming up the *Harla*. All systems went from cold to battle-ready in thirty seconds, a new record. His noghri took their battle stations as well, Bolpuhr manning the communications and scanners while the other two manned the weapons systems.

Only moments later, Tyr's voice sounded over the Fleet-wide com channel. "All Mandalorian vessels, ascend to low orbit. Tac-con and IFF data are being set to your ships now. Our priority targets are those designated 'skull.' Repeat, 'skulls' are priority targets. We will only engage other vessels when necessary. Standby for further orders – and fight with honor. *Apocalypse* out."

The *Harla* rose, and all around its brother and sister vessels rose with it. The mighty shadow of the *Apocalypse* could be seen further above. As one, the Mandalorian fleet rose to meet the devils that were even now making war in the heavens.

Tyr DeMeer surveyed his kingdom for a nanosecond. Time came to a standstill as he took in the bridge, the officers at their stations. Captain Nixus stood at his shoulder. The man was brimming with energy, Tyr could feel – he knew he should relinquish command of the *Apocalypse* back to its captain, but he just couldn't bring himself to. He got so few chances to be in combat anymore, so few chances to exercise his favorite skills. He was sure the captain would understand.

Time started again when Tyr barked out. "Tactical, give me a headcount on the foe, top to bottom."

The lieutenant in charge of scanners replied immediately. "eight capital-class ships sir, with one of those designated 'skull.' A Dreadnaught Heavy Cruiser. 54 freighter-class, with thirteen as 'skull.' Currently seventy fighter craft with more launching from enemy vessels. Currently twenty-three are 'skull.'"

"Pirates," Tyr muttered. "How did they get their hands on a Dreadnaught?"

Captain Nixus glanced at his leader. “They are backed by the Hutts. They’re sure to have connections that most of those scum do not share.”

“And let us be thankful that they do not,” Tyr replied, as he made a decision. “Helmsman, take us at the Dreadnaught, flank speed. Communications, order our other fleet elements to keep pace and screen the *Apocalypse*. Gunnery,” here Tyr walked over to the officer he spoke to. “My apologies, but your orders are to use only the port normal and starboard normal batteries until I authorize more.”

The Gunnery officer looked crest-fallen. As a heavily modified ship, The Carrack had far more firepower than her original template – as well as a reinforced hull, upgraded shield generators, and more powerful engines. Tyr had basically just tied his gunners’ hand behind their backs for the time being. Still, the man did not question his leader.

Returning to his place by Captain Nixus, he stood and watched the window. “Let’s rip their heart out,” he said.

“Don’t want to spook them with the extra batteries?” the Captain inquired, and Tyr nodded in confirmation. “I hope it works. We hardly read like an ‘off-the-line’ Carrack anymore.”

“With any luck they’ll behave like most pirates – only paying attention to how many guns we have,” Tyr said. “They’ll let us sidle right up next to them, confident they can beat us in a slugging match.”

“Technically, they still can,” Captain Nixus said with a smile. The *Apocalypse’s* extra shielding and armor put it on par with the Dreadnaught for durability, but the pirate flagship could still dish out a great deal more punishment.

Tyr let the Captain’s statement stand. Both knew that the Warrior Eminence had no intention to engage in a ‘slugging match.’

Harla accompanied the *Apocalypse* as it hurtled towards the largest ship in the pirate fleet – a dreadnaught that Vong’s IFF dubbed the “*Malignant*.”

“*Like a tumor*,” Vong rumbled. “*How appropriate*.”

Beside him, Bolpuhr smiled coldly. “Six bandits approaching, three-thirty high. Bombers, judging by mass and speed.”

The various Mandalorian officers in their personal craft were acting as a fighter screen for the *Apocalypse*, which lacked strike craft of its own. They had only recently joined serious battle, and for some reason the majority of the *Apocalypse’s* weaponry remained silent. Vong didn’t bother trying to guess the Eminence’s plans, being more concerned

with the hostile ships around him.

“Commander Ichis,” Vong said over the Mandalorian battle frequency. *“Form on my wing. We’ll take these bomber-craft approaching the Apocalypse.”*

“Roger,” came the confirmation, and Ichis’ ship, a Trilon Aggressor, fell into position. As one they veered to port and climbed relative to the general chaos around them. Their targets noticed them coming. Unlike a professional navy’s bombers, which would have done their best to reach their intended target, these turned to face the Mandalorians.

Ichis scored the first kill with a spectacular discharge of weaponry that incinerated one of the enemies and spooked the other five into jinking left – unfortunately, Vong’s gunners had anticipated the move and another fell to the *Harla’s* lasers.

Their foe’s rebuttal followed quickly, and lasers splashed on Vong’s forward shields. Warning alarms screamed as a concussion missile flashed past, fortunately fired too close to attain a proper homing signal. The missile was followed by the craft that fired it as Vong, Ichis, and their targets passed through the deadly head-to-head approach and all swooped around to begin the dogfight.

As it turned out, despite their recklessness the bomber pilots were not unskilled. Three of the remainders managed to latch onto Ichis’s tail as the Mandalorian put his craft through a series of spirals and turns to prevent any killing blows from passing through his shields. Vong brought the *Harla* around again to pursue the pursuers when a sharp blast rocked the freighter. The fourth bomber had fired off another point-blank missile, but this one had hit. The *Harla’s* rear shields were entirely down.

Vong pulled up immediately to prevent another such blow. *“Bolpuhr, engage ECM’s and even out our shields.”*

The *Harla’s* secret weapon was not her weaponry, but rather a sophisticated suite of countermeasures. As Bolpuhr flicked a switch, their freighter all but disappeared from nearby scanners for a brief moment as the *Harla* shunted through multiple IFF identities and scrambling techniques in a high-tech assault on their enemies’ electronic eyes. Vong watched as the bomber on their tail hesitated – and died, as those few moments of straight flight were all that was needed for the noghri in the turrets to annihilate him.

Vong turned back to Ichis, and came streaking across the Aggressor’s vector, placing the *Harla* momentarily in between his comrade and their enemies. Two more foes died in that pass, being too intent on trying to kill Ichis to avoid their own imminent doom. The third, realizing he was outclassed, broke off and ran. The Mandalorian’s did not pursue.

“Are you alright, Ichis?”

“Rear shields down, superficial damage to the hull. All systems optimal.”

Vong nodded, glad the few moments of delay had not cost Ichis anything. Having piloted Mandalorian landing shuttles for years, the kel dor had an incredible knack for making a fat ship dance with a light step.

The *Apocalypse* continued its approach, and as it drew within firing distance of the *Malignant*, both ships opened up – though the *Apocalypse* was still holding one arm behind its proverbial back. The *Malignant* hadn't even bothered reorienting itself, and was engaging both the Mandalorians and elements of the Kintan defense forces simultaneously, confident in its position as the meanest ship in the local space.

The voice of *Apocalypse's* captain, Nixus, came through over the command frequency. "All craft, your orders are to concentrate fire on the dreadnaught's starboard side. Disarm her. Repeat, target weaponry on the *Malignant's* starboard facing."

Vong relayed the orders to his gunners, and told them to prioritize any other craft trying to defend the *Malignant*. He'd use the pilot's weaponry to disable turrets on the dreadnaught. Like trained hawks, Vong and Ichis stooped on the *Malignant*, intent on picking her apart for their commander.

"Eminence, there are reports of landing craft reaching the planet," reported an officer from his station.

DeMeer nodded. "Best of luck to their army, then. It doesn't concern us yet." He glanced over the shoulder of another man, taking in a scanner's eye view of their primary target. Seeing what he wanted, he spoke to yet another officer. "Gunnery, previous orders rescinded. Use all available weaponry to engage the dreadnaught."

"Yes sir, thank you," came the acknowledgement, and DeMeer's orders were repeated to the various sections. A split second later the destructive energy being focused on the *Malignant* tripled. Tyr could almost hear the shouts on the bridge of the opposing ship as a target they thought they heavily outclassed suddenly became a far greater threat.

Soon enough though, the pirates showed that they had a few tricks up their sleeve as well. Two of the three Kintanian vessels on the other side of the *Malignant* ceased firing, and Tyr's brow furrowed. The *Malignant* began to roll, bringing its undamaged port guns to bear on the *Apocalypse*.

"Communications, hail those Kintanian vessels and find out what happened. Helsman, move us into the aft arc of the *Malignant* and do whatever you can to keep us there," Tyr snapped. The view changed as the *Apocalypse* flexed her legs and began to move to a less dangerous area.

The communications officer spoke up. “The *Righteous Cause* and *Son of Tselmani* are reporting widespread damage, sir. Sabotage. They aren’t the only ones – several other ships in the Kintan fleet are disabled.”

“Damn pirates,” Tyr breathed. *The Apocalypse* would soon feel the effects of the dreadnaught’s full attention. The tactical teams were doing a superb job with rolling and redirecting shield energy, but it wouldn’t be long before their shields were down entirely. Looking again at the scanner reading of the *Malignant*, Tyr’s attention seized upon a tiny detail. He stabbed his finger at the screen. “What’s the story here?”

The officer focused scans on the area, a hangar bay door. “It’s stuck open sir. Actuators are clearly destroyed.”

Tyr raised his head to look through the transpariteel window at the massive ship that dominated the view. From what he remembered of the layout of a dreadnaught, a large amount of their fire control systems were centered not far from that hangar.

And it was such a nice ship, too.

Orders flowed from the Warrior Eminence nearly without him needing to think about the words. “Gunnery! Shift all fire away from this location. Center on major turret banks, we’ll need all the time we can get and that means blunting their edge as much as possible. Comms, put out a call for help to nearby operational Kintan vessels.” Then he moved over to the command chair and keyed the internal speakers to take his voice to Captain Scyld and the troops onboard.

“Captain Scyld! All soldiers are to get to the shuttle bay immediately...”

“Escort a shuttle?” Vong growled disbelievingly. “*Ichis, did you hear the same?*”

“Correct, sir. I think the Eminence means to board the dreadnaught.”

Vong knew that the entirety of the Mandalorian soldiery aboard the *Apocalypse* came to about three-hundred beings. All very capable and well equipped – but there would be thousands of pirates onboard the dreadnaught.

The various Mandalorian vessels streaked back towards the *Apocalypse* from wherever they had been. Vong and Ichis and a couple others returned from harassing the *Malignant*, and several from where they had been engaging other elements of the pirate fleet.

There was a harrowing nanosecond as they flew between the sheets of turbolaser fire being traded by the Mandalorian and pirate flagships, but neither ship paid the freighters much mind, all their attention being focused on each other. Vong saw an explosion as

another of the pirate strike vessels attacking the *Apocalypse* was chastised by the big ship's laser cannons.

Vong watched as several shuttles were disgorged from the hangar bays. He and the rest of the friendly vessels took up flanking positions to deny any approaching enemy a clear shot at the valuable craft. There was little enough reason to worry – most of the enemy fighters and freighters in the area had long since been destroyed or chased off. Then again, when the lives of several hundred fellows were in your hands you didn't take unnecessary chances.

Sure enough, once the *Malignant* took notice of the approaching shuttles, Vong watched as several blips peeled off from a distant dogfight and screamed towards the Mandalorians. He ordered two of the escort vessels to intercept and delay them, and the rest of them continued on their way.

Vong saw their destination before long – a hangar which was apparently stuck open. As the shuttles made their way into the rather cramped landing space, Vong ordered the rest of the entourage back into the battle. They had to return to disarming the dreadnaught, or the *Apocalypse* would have to retreat before long. Vong would not see this battle end in such shame.

Captain Scyld and the rest of his Mandalorian troops piled out of the shuttles, fully encased in vacuum-rated armor. There was no atmosphere in the hangar bay, the mag fields long since having been disabled. Fortunately, the artificial gravity still worked.

The door to the rest of the ship was sealed. "Demolitions!" Scyld called out. A man came to the door with a shaped charge held ready, knowing what his Captain required of him. Breaching explosives sheared the hinges off the heavy metal portal, and the Mandalorians flooded through.

Captain Strongfellow ordered fifth platoon – a heavy weapons platoon – to remain behind and guard the hangar bay and their escape route. With their heavy equipment they should be able to hold off any number of enemies within the tight corridors. If they could not...

Scyld shook that possibility out of his head. It didn't matter – the mission was everything. Every soul aboard the *Apocalypse* was depending on them right now. From the schematics he had memorized in the short prep time they'd had, fire control for a large selection of the dreadnaughts turrets was only a few hundred meters from where he stood. In haste that was very atypical for a Mandalorian, he led his remaining five platoons along a route that should take him to their target – and came immediately to another locked door. "Demolitions!" he called again.

They passed through an intersection of three hallways, and Scyld ordered a squad to remain behind and keep a watch there. A few more steps and they came to another locked

door. “Demolitions!” Scyld called out yet again, and then, “Why don’t you stick up here with me,” once the door was blown. The Demolitions specialist saluted and Scyld could just imagine the wry grin on the man’s face behind the occluding helmet.

Three more doors had to be breached before they arrived, and not once in the intervening space did they see an enemy. There were two intersections covered by a squad each behind them, and no one had reported contact to their Captain. It was far too quiet.

Finally they came to their target destination. Heavy blast doors protected this crucial location, but the Mandalorians had the equipment to deal with them. High powered versions of the charges they’d been using all along the way were set up, along with powerful thermal paste would should help bust the seals along the edges. Waving his soldiers a respectful distance away, Captain Scyld gave the order.

A tremendous blast annihilated the door, but the entirety of its force was focused inward and all the Mandalorians heard was a great *thump* and *clang* as the charges lit off and the remaining piece of the door crashed inwards. Before the smoke had even begun to clear first and second platoons swarmed into the room – and were greeted by silence. No pirate gunners filled the seats, and the screens that should have been filled with targeting views of the *Apocalypse* were dark.

They knew we were coming, Scyld scolded himself. He had no idea where the backup fire control rooms onboard this type of ship were, so redirecting his assault to them was impossible. What other options did they have? No enemy contact so far... perhaps the pirates had hoped to avoid them altogether.

He’d make them pay attention, soon enough. He contacted the senior lieutenant in his company and relayed orders. The Mandalorian soldiers split up. Scyld would take First, Second, and third platoons and head straight for the bridge. The remainder, under the command of First Lieutenant Gelmi, would assault the auxiliary bridge to prevent the pirates from transferring control of the ship there when the primary bridge was taken.

“Move as fast as you can,” Scyld told Gelmi. “They won’t ignore us for long once they realize what our new objectives are.”

After receiving Strongfellow’s report, Tyr DeMeer took Captain Nixus aside. “The operation was a bust,” he confided. “The pirates had already moved operations to the backup facility, and we don’t know where that is. Scyld has decided to assault the bridge and attempt a direct takeover of the vessel.”

The Captain sighed. “That’s a long shot sir, even for Scyld’s company. Perhaps we should...”

The Captain didn't want to say it, but Tyr knew what he was going to suggest. *"Pull Scyld and his men out, gather our forces, and retreat."*

The battle was not going poorly for the majority of the Kintanese forces. The lack of interfering directions from Giechan had blunted much of the pirate's edge, and the acts of sabotage had not managed to bring it back. Much of the success of the natives, though, was due to the fact that the Mandalorians were tying up by far the most powerful element of the enemy fleet.

But they might not be able to tie it up for much longer. Shields were at critical stages. Reserve energy had long since been tapped, and now they had to start making the decision between continuing to recharge shields at optimal rates and continuing to utilize the entirety of their weaponry.

The only thing that was going well was the miscellaneous freighter vessels that Mandalore had. Those ships were having a heyday, harassing the dreadnaught and destroying any smaller craft they could find. But they were all-purpose craft, quasi-military private vessels. In the grand scheme of things, they had little tactical usage.

Retreat? Tyr mused. *It would be wise, no doubt. Kintan might even win this even after we're gone. There is no doubt that we've helped them tremendously.* His eyes narrowed. *But we didn't come to help them have a chance. Chances are not what Mandalorians deal in.*

Hoping that he was not dooming his people to death, he called out his orders. "Take our hyperdrive offline. Do the same with life support, and offline our port and starboard tertiary turbolasers. All discretionary energy is to be diverted to shields. We must give Scyld what time we can." *And that means surviving as long as we can.*

Captain Strongfellow had been very correct. The pirates were no longer ignoring them.

His men had made contact with what he could only assume were the 'soldiers' onboard the ship. They were poorly disciplined and only marginally equipped, but there were certainly a lot of them. The Mandalorians had been bogged down in sight of the bridge doors.

Time was of the essence. Scyld didn't know how things were going in the greater battle outside this ship, but he doubted the news would be good.

"Demolitions!" he called for what seemed the thousandth time that day. "Prepare your largest flash munition. Mandalorians, prepare to charge! We will gain the bridge! Sergeant Ulwe, you know what to do once the bridge is cleared, be quick about it."

Ulwe was the company's best slicer. If they could deliver him safely to the bridge, it would take him only moments to disable many of the ship's operations. Scyld had assigned four of his best men as bodyguards for the slicer, which was not something the rough-and-tough sergeant was used to having.

"Demolitions, go!"

A large object was tossed out into the hall, and bare moments later it detonated. Even with ears protected by their helmets, the blast set the Mandalorians' ears ringing. The pirates – who had been right next to the blast and unprotected – would be entirely deafened as well as blinded. Chances are the hearing of the closest ones would never recover – especially as only seconds later the Mandalorians charged down the hallway and left nothing alive as they passed.

Yet more explosives made short work of the doors, and a slaughter ensued as the disciplined soldiers swept into the bridge.

"Get to work sergeant!" Scyld shouted, and then issued other orders to guard any other access points into the bridge. Even as sergeant Ulwe sat at the captain's station, Captain Scyld and first platoon returned to the corridor to guard the main entryway.

No pirates came. The Mandalorian assault had broken their morale and none showed themselves. A moment passed, and then Scyld's commlink sparked.

"Captain! Security cameras show battle droids coming down the hall – destroyer droids, sir! Dozens!"

Captain Scyld felt his heart skip a beat. He squeezed his eyes shut for the barest of moments, and while they were shut he saw the future.

The Destroyer droids would come sweeping around the corners of the hallway. Mandalorian fire might manage to take down a few before they deployed their shields, but once that happened – his heavy weapons squad had the kind of firepower needed to punch through that protection, but dozens of the things would overwhelm them. Thanks to their ill-treatment of the pressure doors for the bridge they had nothing to shelter behind –

As the captain opened his eyes he saw it. Down the hallway there was another heavily reinforced blast door much like the one they had destroyed to access the bridge. Without thought, he got up and ran for it as fast as his armored legs would carry him. He could already hear the dreadful racket of the droids as they approached. His soldiers were calling out, asking the situation and some had already begun to follow – he didn't have the time to tell them to stay put.

He reached the door controls and hit the button for an emergency close just as the first of the Destroyers cleared the bend a few feet away. Behind him, the heavy door slammed

shut with dangerous speed and Scyld was stuck on the wrong side. The haze of a personal shield appeared around the droid as it unfolded, and as the first blaster bolt struck him in the gut Scyld pulled and activated his grenades. His last thought was of fire.

In a brief break from Mandalorian discipline, a short cheer went up when the *Malignant* ceased firing. Tyr did not join in, but neither did he rebuke the men at their stations who in any case returned directly to their duties.

“Continue fire upon her turret sections,” Tyr ordered, just in case it was a fluke. Then he walked over to the command chair and keyed up Captain Scyld’s frequency. He got only static. Doubt began to grow in his heart as he flipped channels to the general Army frequency.

First Lieutenant Gelmi, who commanded one of the platoons in Scyld’s company, was the one who answered him. At Tyr’s request for a status report, Gelmi told him that both bridges were held by the Mandalorians.

“They’ve begun trying to retake the auxiliary bridge, but the attempts are scattered and poor thus far – “

“What’s the status of Captain Scyld,” Tyr said with a hint of impatience. “I cannot reach him.”

There was a pause before the answer, and as always Tyr knew what it meant. Hesitation preceded all bad news even with the most hardened of soldiers. “I’m afraid that Captain Strongfellow is dead, sir. Destroyer droids had been sighted enroute to the main bridge. He reached a blast door and shut it before they could get through, but he remained on the other side. The main bridge is secure.”

Tyr nodded. “Good work, Lieutenant. Continue to hold the bridges. I will do what I can to get you additional manpower from the Kintan forces.”

“We’ll be fine, your eminence. The attacks began falling off when we threatened to start purging atmosphere from large sections of the ship.”

“Very good. You have an open channel if anything comes up – Tyr out.”

The Warrior Eminence turned away from the command chair. In a moment ever-so-brief, he broke with Mandalorian tradition and grieved before the battle was ended.

And then in a moment just as brief, put the whole thing from his mind. There was still work to be done.

“Helmsman, plot a course that will take us between those two ships,” he indicated the scanner blips of another pair of pirate capital ships. “Gunnery, rotate crews. Engineering, bring life support back but keep the hyperdrive off. Shore up our shields as best you can all around.”

With the *Malignant* out of action, the *Apocalypse* was once again the meanest thing in the skies. She was tired and bruised, but there was nothing left to challenge her supremacy.

The enemy would be wisest to run away, fast and far.

The Warrior Eminence Tyr DeMeer and a few of his men – Vong Gin’aal and Andrew Panzer amongst them – inspected the interior of the dreadnaught heavy cruiser formerly titled the *Malignant*. The enemy crew had been largely removed by the Kintan forces who had boarded, and the holdouts were being hunted by them and the Mandalorian soldiers both. The droids had been deactivated and would be either dismantled or reprogrammed to serve Kintan. The dreadnaught itself was being claimed by Mandalore.

Captain Scyld’s body had not been recovered. His grenades had detonated, and had not left much behind. Tyr had ordered whatever armor and equipment remained to be placed in a casket for military burial as per Mandalorian tradition.

Outside the ship, the battle had ended. Once the enemy had realized their greatest asset had been neutralized, most had broken order and fled. Some few elements regrouped and assaulted again, but it had been a foolish move and they were soon defeated. Patrol vessels were even now on their way to outlying facilities in the solar system to check for lingering pirate presence. All in all, Kintan was safe and secure – more so now than before the battle. Mandalore’s role in all this would be long remembered, both here and elsewhere. Defense Minister Warren had taken over as Prime Minister when several incriminating documents had surfaced placing his predecessor in league with the Hutts. He had already announced his pledge to rid Kintan of crime and corruption – sure to be a long and difficult road. Tyr had promised Mandalore’s support.

The Mandalorian officers had reached the bridge, and through the viewport they could see the framework of the shipyard where the dreadnaught was berthed and undergoing repairs. A little further off, the *Apocalypse* was receiving similar attention.

With a glance about the room – significantly larger than the bridge of the *Apocalypse* – Andrew Panzer grunted. “Too big. These ships are inefficient – we’ll need to do some redesign and refitting if we hope to operate it with a manageable level of manpower.”

Tyr nodded. “Yes. Even so, the *Strongfellow* is a fine ship. She will make Mandalore proud.”

Andrew and Vong both nodded, their eyes sad. Despite their grief, all knew that Scyld had died a good death. A soldier's death. His memory would endure, stories would be told of his valor and his skill – but his true legacy was the same as all the fallen in their service to Mandalore.

A legacy of Honor.