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Realms of Mayhem

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SKALD, THE OATHBREAKER

Giants have inhabited the mountains and remote wilderness of the Seven Kingdoms since long before some of the peoples who now dwell there raised their first fortresses. Their origins remain uncertain, and few written accounts of their history survive, for giants have never developed a literary tradition of their own.

Unlike humans, dwarves, or elves, giants have never established great kingdoms or permanent cities. They live in small family groups, often separated by vast stretches of territory, leading simple lives shaped by their immense size, enormous appetites, and limited ability to manufacture tools.

Although their intelligence is often underestimated by other races, giants possess excellent memories, understand kinship and loyalty, and are capable of maintaining agreements over many years. Their temperaments, however, tend to be impulsive, and their culture places extraordinary value on physical strength.

Among giants, disputes over territory, food, or leadership are commonly settled through direct confrontation. A particularly powerful giant may become the leader of a community, although his position depends as much on his ability to provide food and protection as on his capacity to defeat rivals.

Their enormous bodies allow them to perform feats impossible for smaller creatures. They can uproot trees, lift stones weighing several tons, and bring down walls with their bare hands. Yet the same physical proportions impose considerable limitations. Their fingers are too large and clumsy to handle delicate instruments, leaving them unable to produce many of the objects they require.



This limitation has shaped much of their relationship with neighboring peoples, particularly their ancient association with the dwarves.

THE PACT OF STONE AND IRON

The earliest agreements between giants and dwarves probably arose from simple necessity.

The dwarven clans inhabiting the great mountain ranges discovered that these enormous creatures could accomplish in a few hours work that would otherwise demand weeks of labor. Giants moved immense blocks of stone, cleared obstructed mountain roads, and transported materials to places inaccessible to carts or beasts of burden.

In return, dwarven craftsmen provided them with tools, containers, ornaments, and weapons made specifically for their enormous proportions.

A giant could tear a boulder from a mountainside, but needed dwarven hands to turn it into a useful implement. He could bring down a tree with a single blow, yet would struggle to build a wagon or fashion a door from its timber.

The skill of dwarven artisans inspired particular admiration among many giants. Objects considered ordinary by other races appeared to them as marvels of craftsmanship that they could never hope to reproduce.

A well-made tool might remain with its owner throughout his life, while certain weapons passed from parents to their children, repaired and reinforced by successive generations of smiths.

Over time, these arrangements developed beyond the simple exchange of labor for goods.

Certain families of giants established lasting ties with dwarven clans. Their descendants continued to assist in fortress construction, quarrying, and the defense of mountain passes. In return, the dwarves undertook to supply food, maintain their equipment, and provide other necessities the giants could not easily obtain for themselves.

These agreements were passed down through generations. Although the two races understood obligations in very different ways, both placed considerable importance on keeping one's word.

The dwarves recorded their agreements in their archives. The giants simply remembered them.

Not all giants accepted this way of life. Many preferred to wander freely through the mountains, while others left their ancestral territories to serve as mercenaries in foreign armies. Their strength made them particularly valuable during sieges, where they could serve as living engines of war.Among those who most frequently sought their services were the barbarian tribes of Mayhem. For many giants, the promise of plentiful food, plunder, and opportunities for battle was difficult



to resist. The admiration these warriors showed for physical strength also drew giants into their ranks.

Few understood how dangerous that attraction could become.

SKALD, SON OF THE MOUNTAINS

Skald was born into a family of giants that had maintained ties with a dwarven clan for generations.

During his youth, he worked alongside the builders who expanded the clan's fortresses, carrying great blocks of stone and opening roads through the mountain crags.

Even among his own kind, Skald was exceptionally strong. He could lift loads that other giants could barely move, and his violent temperament drove him to demonstrate that superiority at every opportunity. Disputes with his own kind were frequent, and more than a few ended with his opponents badly injured.

The dwarves valued his labor, but they also knew his character. Skald was proud, impatient, and particularly sensitive to anything he perceived as disrespect. An order delivered too sharply could provoke an argument, and his fits of temper sometimes ended with tools or materials destroyed, leaving the craftsmen to repair the damage. Nevertheless, for many years he honored his obligations.

He had grown up among those artisans and knew their customs. He admired their buildings, enjoyed watching the work of their forges, and was particularly fascinated by the objects they made for him. Among all the dwarves of the clan, he shared a particularly close bond with an elderly master stonemason. The craftsman had known Skald's father and worked alongside him for many years. When the young giant reached

adulthood, he decided to create a weapon worthy of his extraordinary strength. He selected an enormous block of stone from the clan's quarries and spent weeks shaping it. He carved it into the head of a massive axe, reinforcing the stone with runes that would protect it from blows and prevent it from fracturing in battle.

Its haft was fashioned from a carefully selected tree trunk, worked and reinforced to withstand the weapon's tremendous weight. The result was something no giant could ever have made for himself. Skald was delighted.

From that day onward, he was rarely seen without the axe. He carried it during his travels, wielded it in fights against other giants, and proudly displayed it to anyone willing to admire it. It was the most precious possession he had ever received.

Skald answered the call, alongside other giants bound by agreements with the dwarves. He was entrusted with defending a narrow gorge that formed one of the principal entrances to the clan's territory. The giant accepted his duty and swore that no invader would pass.

During the first engagements, he fought with extraordinary ferocity. The barbarian warriors advanced behind great shields, but Skald shattered them with his stone axe. His blows struck down several enemies at once, forcing the survivors to scatter among the rocks.

After a day of fighting, the gorge was strewn with bodies, and the invaders withdrew. The dwarves celebrated their victory. Skald, however, paid little attention to their praise. He had enjoyed the fighting more than he cared to admit. The resistance of those warriors, their shouting, and their determination to



stand against him had stirred an excitement he had never known.

Unlike the dwarven workers, who valued his strength for what it could accomplish in their construction projects, the barbarians seemed to admire it for its own sake.

The following day, a small delegation approached the gorge beneath a flag of truce. It was led by the warlord himself. He had come to speak with Skald.

THE WARLORD'S PROMISES

The barbarian chieftain was a tall man, covered in scars and adorned with trophies from countless campaigns. Although Skald towered several times his height, he approached without showing fear The giant received him with his enormous axe in hand. He expected an offer of food, gold, or weapons in exchange for abandoning the dwarves. Other lords had tried to purchase his services in much the same way. But the warlord had something different in mind. He began by speaking of the previous day's battle. He described how the bravest warriors in his army had been unable

For many years, Skald continued working with the dwarves. His quarrels and outbursts never entirely disappeared, but the old stonemason knew how to deal with him, and the giant deeply respected the small craftsman's abilities.

Everything changed when a great barbarian horde appeared in the mountains.

THE COMING OF MAYHEM

The first reports spoke of plundered villages and destroyed border outposts. A confederation of barbarian tribes was advancing from the north, accompanied by monstrous creatures and warriors devoted to the dark gods of Mayhem. Their objective was the wealthy dwarven settlements deep within the mountain range, whose fortresses guarded mines, workshops, and storehouses filled with goods accumulated over generations.

The defenders began preparing the mountain passes. Garrisons were reinforced, and the clans summoned their allies.

to withstand Skald's blows. Some had died attempting to reach his legs. Others had abandoned their shields at the sight of his advance.

He spoke of the admiration Skald's strength had inspired among the tribes. Then he mentioned the gods. He claimed that the dark powers worshipped by the warriors of Mayhem had witnessed the battle. That their eyes had fallen upon Skald. Such extraordinary strength, he explained, could not be a matter of chance. It was a sign that the giant had been born for a destiny far greater than that of the others of his kind. Skald listened with growing interest. He had never imagined that the gods might concern themselves with him. He knew something of the religions of the smaller races, but understood little of their ceremonies and had never shown any interest in their priests.

Yet this man assured him that beings of immeasurable power knew of his existence. The warlord then pointed towards the dwarven fortresses. He asked why a warrior capable of destroying walls devoted his life to building them for others. Why he accepted orders from creatures that barely reached his knees. Why he spent his strength enriching craftsmen who could never hope to match him in battle.

Skald replied that the dwarves were his allies. His family had maintained agreements with them for generations, and those small creatures could manufacture things that no giant could make. The barbarian did not deny their skill. On the contrary, he admired the enormous axe Skald carried and acknowledged the craftsmanship required to create such a weapon. But he asked whether that skill justified a lifetime of obedience. The dwarves could build fortresses, he explained, but Skald possessed the power to destroy them. They could forge weapons, but needed warriors like him to wield them. They gathered wealth behind their walls because they feared those strong enough to take it from them. And Skald, despite being more powerful than any of them, was content to receive tools and food in payment for his labor.

The giant said nothing. He had never considered his relationship with the dwarves in such terms. Then the warlord revealed the true purpose of his visit. The gods of Mayhem had chosen him. If Skald abandoned his life of servitude and devoted his strength to their cause, he would receive rewards that no dwarven king could ever offer. Glory, riches, and command over entire armies. But that would only be the beginning. The barbarian assured him that, should he prove his worth through great conquests, the gods might raise him above every champion of the horde. Even above the warlord himself. When that day came, he declared, he would kneel before Skald without hesitation, for such was the will of the gods.

That promise impressed the giant more than anything else he had heard. Skald had known respect and fear, but no one had ever offered him such a position. For the first time, he imagined a world in which other creatures would no longer expect him to work for them, but would instead come before him to offer their obedience.

The warlord did not demand an immediate answer. Before departing, he warned Skald that the favor of the gods was not something to be taken lightly. They had



witnessed his strength and now awaited his decision. But they would not wait forever.

THE BROKEN OATH

During the following days, Skald paid little attention to his duties. The barbarian's words returned to him constantly. He began looking upon the dwarven fortresses with growing resentment. The very walls he had so often helped to raise now seemed reminders of a wasted life. The foremen's instructions became unbearable. The craftsmen's gratitude, which he had once accepted with satisfaction, began to seem an unworthy reward for his strength. He convinced himself that the dwarves had taken advantage of his ignorance. They had never offered him a throne, riches, or authority over other warriors. Only work, food, and objects from their workshops. The warlord, on the other hand, had spoken of a destiny ordained by the gods themselves.



When the barbarian returned to the gorge, Skald had already made his decision. He agreed to join the horde. The warlord welcomed him and promised him a place of honor among his warriors. But before Skald could march beside them, he would have to prove that he had abandoned his former obligations. The mountain pass had to be opened. Skald knew the dwarven defenses, the positions of the towers, and the paths that allowed travelers to bypass certain watchposts. He also knew that the defenders trusted him. He had sworn to keep that entrance closed for as long as the invasion lasted. But he now regarded his promise as insignificant beside the designs of the gods.

That night, he abandoned his post and tore down the barriers guarding the entrance to the gorge. The first barbarian warriors passed through before dawn. By the time the dwarves realized what had happened, the horde was already inside the mountains.

The garrisons began withdrawing towards their fortresses, while the clans sent messengers to warn their settlements. Skald watched the invaders advance without intervening. He had broken his oath, but he had not yet decided to raise his weapon against those who had been his allies.

The warlord had promised him glory and power. In Skald's imagination, the dwarves would abandon their fortresses, the barbarians would seize their treasures, and he would march on towards new conquests.

He had given little thought to what would happen to the craftsmen who remained in the army's path. He still possessed his axe. And he still remembered the old master who had carved it with affection.

THE RUNES OF DESTRUCTION

News of Skald's betrayal reached the dwarven fortresses before the first invaders. Among those who received it was the elderly master stonemason. At first, he refused to believe it. He had known the giant since childhood. He had worked with his father, witnessed his earliest quarrels, and spent countless hours teaching him the value of tools and the proper care of objects made by dwarven hands. But the reports left no room for doubt. Skald had abandoned the gorge and allowed the horde to pass.

The old craftsman then understood that the weapon he had created might now be used against his own people. When he had carved the axe many years before, he had inscribed numerous runes upon the stone to protect it from blows.

Among them, he had also included the traditional runes of severance, employed on certain weapons bestowed under oath. Those runes remained dormant for as long as the pact was honored, but could be awakened by the craftsman who had inscribed them.

Their purpose was simple: to prevent a weapon made to protect a clan from being turned against it. The old stonemason gathered the rune-keepers and went to the chamber where he preserved the records of his work. There he found Skald's name and the description of the weapon he had made for him. For a long while, he stared at the inscription. Then he spoke the words of severance.

Several leagues away, Skald was standing among the barbarian warriors when he felt a tremor run through the haft of his axe. At first, he thought the ground was shaking. Then he heard a crack. A fracture appeared across the stone head. Skald raised the weapon to examine it, bewildered. The runes began to glow, and fresh cracks spread across the surface. The stone, which had endured countless battles, suddenly split apart with a deafening report.





A great fragment of the axe head broke free and fell to the ground. The giant stood motionless, staring at the ruined weapon. He recognized those runes. He knew who had carved them. And he understood that the old master stonemason had destroyed his most treasured possession.

Surprise gave way to disbelief. Then came anger. Skald roared and struck the ground with the haft of his broken axe, driving back the warriors gathered around him. They had destroyed his weapon. The same dwarves he had served for years had used their secrets to punish him.

Hearing his cries, the warlord came to see what had happened. He examined the fractured stone and quickly understood. He made no attempt to calm the giant. Instead, he reminded Skald that the dwarves had concealed those runes within the weapon without telling him. Even while pretending to admire him, they had retained the power to take away what he valued most whenever they pleased. This, the warlord declared, was proof that they had never considered Skald their equal. He had been nothing more than a useful tool, valued only while he obeyed their commands.

The giant listened, gripping the broken haft of his axe. The barbarian then pointed towards the fortresses rising on the far side of the valley. There stood those who had humiliated him. There was the craftsman who had destroyed his weapon. And there Skald would have the opportunity to show the gods that no creature, however skilled its hands, had the right to defy the warrior they had chosen.

This time, the warlord needed to promise him nothing. Skald took his broken axe and marched towards the dwarven fortresses.

THE FALL OF THE FORTRESS

The defenders had managed to close the outer gates before the horde arrived. The walls were thick, and the approaches were guarded by towers from which dwarven crossbowmen could cover the mountain roads. Under ordinary circumstances, the fortress might have endured a lengthy siege. But its builders had never expected to defend it against Skald.

The giant knew the arrangement of the walls intimately. He had carried many of their stones and helped construct the pillars supporting the gates. He knew where the defenses were most vulnerable. And now he advanced towards them, wielding the remains of his axe.

The crossbowmen opened fire as he approached the first entrance. Skald barely slowed. He reached the gate and delivered a terrible blow. The timber splintered, and the iron bars reinforcing it began to buckle. A second strike tore part of it from its hinges. The third broke through.

The barbarian warriors poured in behind him. Skald advanced through courtyards he had crossed countless times before, striking down every defender who tried to stop him. Shields shattered beneath his weapon, and dwarven formations collapsed before they could establish an effective defense. He brought down a wall he had helped to build. He tore the doors from a storehouse where he had so often received his food. Then he turned towards the workshops.

His fury had overwhelmed every thought of the past. Craftsmen attempting to flee were caught by the warriors of the horde. Those who remained to defend the forges died beside their tools.

Skald continued destroying everything in his path. In his mind, every blow was an answer to the humiliation he had suffered. Every fallen wall proved that a giant's strength surpassed the works of those small artisans.

The warlord watched with satisfaction. Skald's fury had turned a fortress that might have resisted for months into an easy prize.

When the giant reached the great hall of the stonemasons, he found the old master who had made his axe. The dwarf stood beside one of the workbenches. He made no attempt to flee. Skald stopped before him, breathing heavily, the fractured weapon still in his hands.



For several moments, they stared at one another in silence. The giant raised the axe, showing him the broken stone. The old craftsman recognized his work. He did not apologize. Nor did he deny having spoken the words of severance. He reminded Skald that the weapon had been given to defend the clan, not destroy it. The giant accused him of concealing the runes and betraying his trust. The dwarf reminded him who had opened the mountain pass. Skald had no answer.

For a brief moment, his anger seemed to fade. But the sounds of fighting still echoed from the courtyards. The barbarian warriors were shouting his name and celebrating the destruction of the fortress. The old stonemason did not step back. Skald raised his weapon once more. And struck.

When he left the workshop, the master was dead, and the hall lay in ruins. The slaughter continued for hours. Only at nightfall, when the last pockets of resistance had been eliminated and the horde began dividing the spoils, did Skald finally cease fighting.

THE PRICE OF GLORY

The giant wandered through the streets of the ruined fortress. For the first time since the assault had begun, the silence allowed him to see what remained around him. He recognized the courtyards where he had worked in his youth. The cranes and scaffolds he had so often helped to raise lay shattered. The storehouses had been broken open, and the workshops plundered. In places, the remains of buildings were still burning.

Skald stopped before the ruins of the stonemasons' hall. He remembered the old master working on the enormous block of stone that would eventually become his axe. He remembered the weeks he had waited impatiently while the dwarf shaped the rock and carved the runes upon its surface. He also remembered the pride with which he had received the finished weapon. Then he looked at the fractured stone still in his grasp.

He had betrayed the dwarves because he wanted a life of glory and power. He had destroyed the fortress because he could not endure the humiliation of seeing his weapon broken. And now the master who had made it was dead.

Skald understood that he would never again see the old dwarf working in his workshop. For a long time, he remained motionless. He did not weep or ask forgiveness. Perhaps his pride prevented him. Perhaps he was still trying to convince himself that the dwarves had deserved their fate. But the satisfaction he had felt during the battle was gone.

When the barbarian warlord came looking for him, he found the giant sitting among the ruins, staring at his axe. The chieftain congratulated him on his victory. He assured Skald that the gods would be pleased and that the slaughter would be remembered as the first of his great deeds. Skald barely answered.

The barbarian continued speaking of future conquests, cities to be subdued, and the rewards awaiting the most powerful servants of Mayhem. The giant listened in silence. He had nowhere else to return. He had broken his family's pact, destroyed the fortress he had protected for so many years, and killed those who had known him since his youth. The possibility of leaving the horde had not entirely vanished, but Skald could no longer imagine what life might await him beyond it. And somewhere beneath his pride, the hope remained that the warlord had spoken the truth. That the gods had chosen him. That all this destruction would one day lead to the greatness he had been promised.

But the dark gods had already received their first reward. Skald's betrayal, his pride, and the blood shed in the dwarven forges had formed an offering far more valuable than any ceremony. In surrendering to his fury, the giant had given his soul to the powers of Mayhem. And such powers were not known to return what they had been given.

SKALD, GARGANT OF MAYHEM

Since the fall of that fortress, Skald has fought in countless campaigns alongside the hordes of Mayhem. His extraordinary strength has made him one of the most feared warriors in their armies. Wherever enemy defenses hold firm, the giant is sent to break them. His blows smash gates, bring down walls, and scatter entire formations. His name is celebrated among the barbarians, who regard him as living proof of the gods' favor.

Skald has come to share their conviction. Every victory strengthens his hope of finally receiving the rewards he was promised. He demands the mightiest opponents and claims a place at the forefront of battle, convinced that his exploits are bringing him closer to the destiny foretold by the warlord.

Yet the years have passed, and the gods have still not raised him above his masters. He continues to fight. He continues to obey... And he continues to wait.

Despite the many weapons captured during his campaigns, Skald has never abandoned the axe the dwarves made for him. Its stone head remains fractured, just as it was on the day the old master stonemason awakened the runes of destruction. The giant has never allowed anyone to repair it. Some warriors believe he keeps the broken weapon as a trophy of his first great conquest. Others claim its ruined appearance represents his contempt for the dwarves. Skald has never explained his reasons.

In the fortresses of the surviving clans, his name still appears among the greatest traitors in dwarven history. Their archives preserve the account of the mountain pass's fall, the destruction of the workshops, and the deaths of their inhabitants. They also contain records of the ancient alliances that bound families of giants to the mountain clans for generations. Among those documents remains an entry concerning the weapon made for Skald. The name of the master who carved it is still recorded beside that of the giant for whom it was created. The axe still exists.

Its owner continues to wield it against the fortresses of other peoples, awaiting a reward from gods who may never have intended to grant it. Skald had abandoned the dwarves because he no longer wished to serve creatures smaller than himself. Now he served powers far greater. And his servitude had no end.



SKALD, GARGANT OF MAYHEM

From the savage lands of the Realms of Mayhem comes Skald, a colossal giant whose sheer size and brutal strength make him a terrifying presence on the battlefield. Towering above lesser warriors, he smashes through enemy lines with raw force, leaving little more than shattered shields and broken ranks in his wake.



NEVERDUSK EMPIRE

The Free Companies

Soldiers Under Contract

War leaves behind more than ruined cities and fields covered with the dead. It also leaves soldiers. Veterans whose lords have fallen, regiments that no longer exist, and men who have spent so many years fighting that they know no other way to earn a living.

From these survivors emerged many of the mercenary companies that now serve the Neverdusk Empire.

Among them is the company of Othmar Rell, a former imperial infantry officer who left the army after his unit was abandoned during a disastrous retreat. Only a handful of his men survived, and those who returned with him chose to follow him into mercenary service. Over time, they were joined by veterans from other armies. Some had once fought on opposing sides, but all shared the experience of war and the need to find a new employer.

During their early years, they accepted contracts escorting caravans, protecting trade routes and defending small fortresses. Rell earned a reputation for strict discipline and meticulous attention to agreements. He refused any contract that did not provide compensation for the wounded and the families of those killed in service.

Their fortunes changed when a noble of Neverdusk hired the company to reinforce his troops during a frontier campaign.

The mercenaries soon proved their worth. They were experienced soldiers, capable of operating independently and accustomed to the hardships of prolonged campaigns. Their employer, in turn, proved remarkably reliable. He paid promptly and honoured every clause of their agreements.

Our Loyalty at a Price

During a particularly difficult withdrawal, Rell agreed to

hold a fortified pass while the imperial regiments abandoned their positions. He lost nearly a third of his men, but managed to keep the route open until the last wounded soldiers and supply wagons had reached safety.

THE MERCENARY COMPANIES BRING EXPERIENCED WARRIORS FROM DISTANT LANDS INTO IMPERIAL SERVICE, SELLING THEIR BLADES TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER

In recognition of their service, the noble granted the company the right to wear the imperial fleur-de-lis upon their green uniforms.

That was several decades ago.

Since then, the company has renewed its contracts with Neverdusk on numerous occasions. Many of its original soldiers have died or retired. Others have been replaced by their sons, who now serve beneath the same banner.

Rell remains in command. Age has diminished his strength, but neither his authority nor his ability to lead his men.

During his most recent audience with the noble who first employed them, he found the same face he remembered from his youth. His patron had not aged a single day and could barely recall that first campaign.

To the lord of Neverdusk, the company was merely one among many that had served his armies over the years.

To Rell, that first contract had marked the beginning of a service that had occupied nearly his entire life.

Yet his loyalty has never meant surrendering the independence of his men. The company retains its own officers, its own rules and the right to refuse new contracts. Its soldiers are mercenaries, not regular troops of the Empire.

And as long as Neverdusk continues to honour its agreements, they are likely to keep fighting beneath its banners.

NEVERDUSK EMPIRE MERCENARY COMPANIES

Not every soldier who marches beneath the Neverdusk banner fights for duty or honor. The Mercenary Companies bring experienced warriors from distant lands into imperial service, selling their blades to the highest bidder and adding versatility, character, and hardened battlefield experience to the army.



The Making of a Captain

The Last Order of Othmar Rell

Before becoming Grand Captain of the Free Companies, Othmar Rell served as an infantry officer in the Neverdusk Empire. For years, he carried out his duties with discipline and loyalty, earning the trust of his superiors and the respect of the men under his command.

His imperial career came to an end during a disastrous campaign on the frontier.



After a series of defeats, the Neverdusk army was forced to retreat towards a bridge that offered its only route to safety. Enemy forces were advancing rapidly, and if they reached the crossing before the retreat was complete, much of the army would be trapped.

Rell was ordered to hold the position with his company while the remaining troops withdrew.

His men fought for hours, repelling successive attacks as the wounded, the supply wagons and the last regiments crossed the river. But when the withdrawal was nearly complete, the nobles commanding the army made a terrible decision: the bridge was to be destroyed to prevent the enemy from continuing its pursuit.

Rell's company was still fighting on the far side. The bridge was demolished. There would be no reinforcements and no way back.

Rell understood that his men had been sacrificed to save the rest of the army. Yet he refused to order a final, pointless stand. Gathering those who remained, he took advantage of the enemy's confusion and managed to break through towards the hills.

For several days, the survivors moved through hostile territory, avoiding patrols and searching for a place to cross the river. When they finally reached the imperial lines, only a handful remained alive.

Their return caused considerable astonishment.

Many of the soldiers who had escaped thanks to their resistance came to welcome them. Some embraced the survivors; others personally thanked Rell for what his company had done. Among them were men he had known for years, comrades who would have died had his troops abandoned their position.

This only made what had happened harder to accept.

Rell harboured deep resentment towards the nobles who had chosen to abandon them. Yet he also knew that their decision had saved hundreds of lives. As an officer, he understood the military

necessity behind the order. As a captain, he could not forget the men who had died carrying it out.

In the end, he requested his discharge and left the imperial army.

He considered his duty to Neverdusk more than fulfilled. Never again would he allow others to decide when and where his soldiers should be sacrificed.

The survivors of his company followed him. Together, they began offering their services as mercenaries, gradually taking in veterans from other armies.

Rell never stopped fighting for Neverdusk, but from then on, he did so on his own terms. His contracts clearly established the obligations of both parties, compensation for the wounded, and provisions for the families of those killed in service.

His reputation grew over the following campaigns. Other mercenary captains began trusting him to negotiate joint contracts and command forces drawn from several companies. Eventually, his fellow soldiers recognised him as **Grand Captain of the Free Companies**.

It was not a rank bestowed by the Empire, but an authority granted by men who had freely chosen to follow him.

Rell continued to serve Neverdusk for many years. There was, however, one fundamental difference between his new life and his former career as an imperial officer.

From now on, he would decide for himself which battles were worth fighting.





THE SOLARIAN FORCE

THE LAST SIX KILOMETERS

I've never liked jungle planets. People think the problem is the insects, the diseases, or the predators. And yes, all of those certainly help turn a reconnaissance mission into a miserable experience. But the worst part is the trees. There are too many of them. A man can hide behind any one of them, and when you've spent six hours wading through knee-deep water, you start to suspect there's someone hiding behind every single one.

We had been walking for four hours that morning when Corporal Venn asked how much farther we had to go.

"Six kilometres."

"That's what you said two hours ago, Sergeant."

"And if you ask me again, it'll be seven tomorrow."

Venn laughed. He was the last man to do so for quite some time.

Our mission was simple. At least on paper, which is where most missions tend to be simple. A TSF reconnaissance team had disappeared three days earlier while investigating an old industrial facility in the planet's southern hemisphere. Their last transmission had been an automated distress signal accompanied by a set of coordinates. Nothing had been heard from them since. Well, not exactly. The signal was still broadcasting every forty-seven minutes. Nobody answered our calls, but the damned beacon kept working with admirable punctuality.

We had been sent to find the missing men, recover their records, and determine what had happened. Five men. One shuttle. Extraction scheduled for nightfall.

Command estimated that we could complete the operation in eight hours. I estimated that nobody at Command had ever seen a jungle.

My team consisted of Corporal Venn, my second-in-command; Kessler, our communications specialist; Mora, our medic and an expert at complaining about absolutely everything; and Rusk, the youngest of the group.

Rusk had been with us for six months. He was a good soldier, although he still had a habit of believing that officers always knew what they were doing. He'd grow out of it.

We found the first man shortly after midday. He was sitting against a tree trunk, half-hidden by the vegetation. He wore a TSF reconnaissance uniform and had his rifle resting across his legs. Mora knelt beside him.

"Dead. Approximately seventy hours."

“Cause?”

“Two hits to the chest. Conventional rounds. Close range.”

Venn examined the weapon.

“He never fired.”

That bothered me.

A soldier can die without firing a shot. Happens every day. But this man had his safety engaged, a full magazine, and his weapon carefully placed across his legs. Someone had arranged him like that. We found two more soldiers about a hundred metres farther on. They were lying beside a stream, partially covered with a camouflage sheet. All three had been shot at close range. None appeared to have put up a fight.

Kessler checked his receiver.

“Sergeant, the signal’s still active.”

“From here?”

“No. From the facility. About two kilometres away.”

“Identification?”

“The beacon belongs to the team we’re looking for.”

I looked back at the bodies.

“Well, someone’s taken it for a walk.”

Venn crouched beside one of the dead men.

“Think it was the insurgents?”

“Don’t know.”

“Could’ve ambushed them.”

“Could have. But insurgents usually take the weapons.”

I pointed at the three rifles.

“And they rarely bother making their victims comfortable.”

I ordered Mora to search the bodies and collect their identification tags. Then we transmitted a brief report. Command took almost ten minutes to respond: *“Continue mission. Absolute priority: recovery of records.”*

Not a single question about the dead. No instructions to recover the bodies. Just the records. I was beginning to suspect we were looking for something more important than anyone had told us.

The facility appeared between the trees an hour later. It was an industrial complex built beside a waterfall, probably to exploit the river’s flow. Several concrete structures rose out of the vegetation, connected by metal walkways and large pipelines. The jungle had reclaimed much of the place. Roots pushed through the walls, and some buildings had almost completely disappeared beneath the foliage. But it wasn’t abandoned. Two vehicles were parked beside the main building. A communications antenna had been installed on an elevated platform, and we spotted three armed men patrolling the perimeter.

Venn studied the complex through his binoculars.

“Pretty busy for a bunch of ruins.”

“Maybe they’re expecting tourists.”

“Doesn’t look very welcoming, Sergeant.”

“That’s why it’s cheap.”

Kessler crawled over to us.

“The beacon’s inside the central building. Very strong signal.”

“Anything else?”

“Several transmissions. Encrypted. Military equipment, but I don’t recognise the codes.”

That more or less ruled out ordinary scavengers. I ordered Rusk and Venn to cover the entrances while Kessler tried to identify whoever was using those frequencies. It took him less than five minutes.

“Sergeant, I think you should see this.”



He showed me one of the intercepted transmissions. The identifier belonged to a security company contracted by the colonial administration. I recognised the name. They had worked for the TSF during the planet's initial pacification operations.

"What are they doing here?" Mora asked.

"Good question."

"Should we contact Command?"

I looked at the facility again. I remembered the three bodies carefully arranged among the trees.

"Not yet."

We entered through an old maintenance duct. Rusk managed to force open a rusted hatch, and we followed a flooded corridor until we reached the lower levels of the main building. We found the transmitter in a control room. It was connected to an external power source, with its distress signal programmed to repeat automatically. Beside it stood several transport containers and two data terminals.

Kessler examined one of the terminals.

"Shipment records. Weapons, communications equipment, military components..."

"Destination?"

"Not listed. Just transport numbers and authorisations."

"Who's signing the authorisations?"

Kessler took a few seconds to answer.

"Officers from the colonial administration. Some of the contracts carry TSF supply codes."

Venn gave a low whistle.

"Someone's going to have a very bad afternoon."

"Assuming we get out of here," I replied.

Mora found a recording on the second terminal. It was security footage from four days earlier. We watched the reconnaissance team arrive. The men entered the facility accompanied by several guards. They appeared relaxed. An officer shook their hands, then the guards opened fire. The recording ended a few seconds later

Rusk kept staring at the screen.

"They murdered them."

Nobody answered. Kessler began copying the files onto a portable device. Then his receiver sounded. The distress signal was broadcasting again.

"Shut it down," I ordered.

Kessler leaned over the transmitter.

"One moment, Sergeant."

"What is it?"

"This isn't operating like a normal beacon. It's transmitting on several frequencies."

"How many?"

"Don't know. Some of them aren't even TSF frequencies."

I moved closer.

"Since when?"

"Since they switched it on."

That explained why the transmitter was still operating. Someone had wanted to make absolutely sure that the signal reached as far as possible. What I didn't know was who.

The first shots came from the northern end of the facility. At first, I thought our friends had decided to start the party early. Then we heard a second burst, much heavier, and the screaming began. Venn looked through a broken window.

"Sergeant, we've got a problem."

"Another one?"

"Kraghn, sir. At least a dozen."

I moved to the window. A group of those enormous green creatures was advancing between the outer structures, exchanging fire with the guards. One of the security vehicles was burning beside the main entrance. The Kraghn had pushed through the jungle and were taking positions among the ruins.

"Wonderful," I muttered.



"Orders, Sergeant?"

"Venn, if there's one thing worse than a mission in the jungle, it's having to fight a green enemy in it."

"Because of the camouflage, sir?"

"No, Venn. Because those bastards actually seem to enjoy the weather."

An explosion shook the building. Kessler looked up from the terminal.

"Sergeant, I've got the files."

"Good. We're leaving."

"I haven't managed to shut down the beacon yet."

I looked at the transmitter, then at the window. The Kraghn had come straight to the facility without needing to search the surrounding area.

"Leave it," I said. *"I think it's attracted enough attention already."*

We left through the maintenance duct, but the enemy had advanced much faster than I expected. Two Kraghn emerged from the trees when we had barely covered fifty metres. Rusk fired first. The nearest one dropped to his knees, and the second took cover behind a collapsed pipeline.

Venn and I fired at his position while Mora covered our flank. The engagement lasted less than twenty seconds. Far too much noise for twenty seconds.

"Move!" I ordered.

We ran towards the stream we'd crossed on our approach. The jungle, which had made our advance so difficult a few hours earlier, became our best protection. The vegetation prevented the Kraghn from exploiting their numerical advantage, and the narrow passages between the roots made it difficult for them to surround us. But they weren't stupid. Soon they began moving along both sides of the stream, forcing us to change positions constantly.

Halfway back, we lost Rusk. He didn't die. He sank into a patch of deep mud when an explosion tore away part of the riverbank. Venn managed to grab his harness before he disappeared beneath the water, but both men were left exposed.

Mora and I had to stop and cover them. A burst of gunfire caught me in the shoulder.The impact spun me around and sent me crashing against a tree trunk. For a few seconds, I couldn't feel my left arm. Mora knelt beside me.

"Can you move it?"

I tried. It hurt.

"I can move it."

"Then it's not broken."

"Excellent diagnosis. Remind me to recommend you for a medal."

He helped me to my feet. Venn and Rusk had managed to get clear of the mud.

"Can you keep going, Sergeant?" Venn asked.

"Of course. I'm just trying to enjoy the scenery."

We managed to contact our shuttle when we were approximately two kilometres from the extraction point. Kessler transmitted our coordinates and requested immediate pickup. The response came almost at once.

"Extraction authorised. Confirm recovery of records."

"Confirmed," I replied.

There was a pause.

"New orders. Destroy recovered records before extraction."

I looked at Kessler. He looked at me.

"Repeat that order," I said.

"Destroy all recovered devices. The information has been declared compromised."

"Negative. It contains evidence relating to the deaths of TSF personnel."

"Sergeant, you are receiving a direct order."

I stared at the transmitter for a few seconds.

"Understood."

I cut the connection. Venn raised an eyebrow.

"Are we going to destroy it?"

"No."

"Thought not."

Kessler placed the device in a waterproof bag.

"What if they ask?"

"We'll tell them we lost it."

"You think they'll believe that?"

"Kessler, we're in a jungle, being chased by Kraghn, with one wounded man and water up to our arses. If we can't manage to lose something under these circumstances, we ought to start worrying about our reputation."

The last five hundred metres were the worst. The Kraghn had managed to regroup several of their fighters and were advancing towards us from the north. The shuttle descended onto a small clearing surrounded by trees. Its defensive weapons opened fire on the enemy positions as we crossed the last stretch of open ground. Venn boarded first and helped Rusk inside. Kessler and Mora followed. I stayed beside the ramp, firing at the figures moving between the trees. A projectile struck the hull less than a metre from my head.

"Sergeant!" Venn shouted.

"Coming!"

I climbed aboard as the shuttle began to rise. The ramp closed behind me. I collapsed into one of the seats, exhausted. Mora started examining my shoulder.

"You're going to need treatment."

"And are you going to stop talking to me while you do it?"

"No."

"Then I'll keep the wound."

Through the small window, I watched the jungle disappear beneath the clouds. We had walked twelve kilometres. Six to get in. Six to

get out. And I had absolutely no intention of ever setting foot on that planet again.

During our ascent, Kessler managed to analyse part of the recovered data. The facility had served as a transit point for weapons diverted from the colony's military supplies. Some of that equipment ended up in the hands of insurgent groups that the administration officially claimed to be fighting. The reconnaissance team had discovered the operation. And someone had decided they couldn't be allowed to return and report it.

Still, a few questions remained. Who had modified the beacon to broadcast on so many frequencies? Had the soldiers done it themselves before they died? Or had someone deliberately tried to attract everyone who might be interested?

The Kraghn had followed that signal just as we had and judging by the determination with which they'd attacked the facility, they must have believed there was something worth finding.

Venn sat down beside me.

"What do you think the Kraghn were looking for, Sergeant?"

"Same thing we were, I suppose."

"And what was that?"

I looked at the small device resting on the table.

"Still don't know."

Venn was silent for a few seconds.

"Think they'll come back?"

"Venn, they chased us halfway through a jungle to get their hands on a box they didn't even know the contents of."

"That's a yes, then?"

"That's me telling you to check your rifle before we land."

Venn picked up his weapon and began inspecting it. I closed my eyes. I hadn't slept in thirty hours, and my shoulder was starting to hurt properly. For the first time all day, we were dry, safe, and far away from that damned jungle.

Then Kessler spoke from his terminal.

"Sergeant..."

I recognised the tone. I opened one eye.

"What?"

"I've just found something in the records."

"Can it wait?"

"I don't think so, sir."

I sighed.

"Go on."

"The distress beacon we found at the facility... it wasn't the only one."

I slowly sat upright.

"Explain."

Kessler projected a map of the southern hemisphere. Three red dots flashed on the planet's surface. All three were far from our area of operations. All three were broadcasting the same signal.

Venn looked at the map. Then he looked at me.

"Sergeant..."

"Don't even think about it."

"I was only going to ask..."

"I said don't even think about it."

But I already knew what he was going to ask and the worst part was that someone, somewhere, in a very comfortable office, was probably asking themselves exactly the same question.

"How many kilometres to the next one?"



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