



# GRIMDARK FUTURE

## A FRESH START



SHORT STORY

# A FRESH START BY NATHAN MARCHAND

The dropship's landing gear whined under the hull's weight. Cyrus Zandar scratched the head of his Wolf-Dog, Tiberius. His canine companion was lying on his master's crumpled duster on the floor next to him, refusing to leave his side. Zandar didn't blame him. In this dimly lit briefing room, they were seated opposite a blank screen alongside the worst kind of strangers: fellow mercenaries. Three of them. A Gator, a Robot, and a Jackal.

All of them were retrained in their chairs.

The lights brightened as the door slid open, and in walked Colonel Rixxon with two armed HDF guards. He and Zandar exchanged burning glares, the colonel's cybernetic eyepatch glowing like a laser sight.

They glared at their captor while the Jackal spat on the floor.

Rixxon glanced down and stepped around the spit as he adjusted his uniform. "It's time I told you why I brought you here."

"You mean why you abducted us!" retorted the Gator, hissing.

The guards' rifles hummed, but Rixxon motioned for them to stop. "Calm yourself, Tiyaha," he said. "You may yet regain your freedom and make a sizable profit."

"Money is of little c-c-concern to me," injected the Robot, with an clear vocal glitch. "I just want you organic-c-cs to leave me alone."

"Believe me, H4K2, I want that as much as you," replied Rixxon.

The Jackal snorted. "Then get to your point!"

"With pleasure, Yerga," said Rixxon.

The colonel pulled a tablet from his pocket and tapped one of its buttons, activating the screen behind him, which displayed a mineralogical diagram of what appeared to be a green gem. "This is elekrite," he began, "a rare element that gives off radiation that disrupts scanners."

Zandar laughed.

Rixxon's single eye squinted at him. "Do you have something to say, Zandar?"

"Just that you would want the elekrite, because it would be a huge boon for smuggling."

Rixxon's knuckles cracked as he clenched his fist. His hand unclenched a few seconds later. "It is already assisting the Dark Elf Raiders for that very purpose. The HDF needs to find a way to counteract it."

Yerga snarled. "Then where are these damn rocks?"

"Here," Rixxon said, pointing at the floor.

"Where is here?" asked H4K2.

The colonel tapped another button on his tablet, and the screen switched to an image of a green planet. "Thasis." The computer zoomed into the image. "More specifically, the Obscura Expanse." The screen filled with dense jungle foliage and alien wildlife, including a huge multicoloured lizard with three purple tongues.

"It's a wilderness region on the planet that can't be penetrated by scanners, because it has a massive deposit of elekrite embedded in a certain species of fruit trees deep within it. We sent drones to investigate, but the radiation prevented them from gathering any usable data before their destruction."

"Such c-c-cruel abuse of machines!"

"Be still, my bleeding heart," said Rixxon sarcastically. He added, "Exploratory HDF squads were killed by the indigenous wildlife."

Zandar leaned forward in his chair. "What sort of wildlife?"

"Dragornases," replied Rixxon, pointing at the large lizard on the screen. "The Obscura is their territory."

"And what does this have to do with us?" asked Tiyaha.

"Simple. I want you to retrieve some elekrite," said Rixxon.

Zandar huffed. "You're sending four captives into unexplored territory where scanners don't work? I don't like your odds."

"Then it's a good thing you're an expert in 'old-fashioned' tracking," retorted Rixxon. "There's a reason I went to such trouble to ensure you heard out my job offer. You were a reliable scout until that unfortunate discharge of yours. If it weren't for your attitude, you might have made a decent assent."

Zandar felt the eyes of his fellow mercs burning into his skin.

"Fortunately for both of us, I'm not here to revisit the past," continued Rixxon. "Do this one last job and I'll see your records wiped clean. It's your chance for a fresh start, Zandar."

"And if we refuse?" asked Yerga.

The guards raised their rifles.

Yerga replied. "I'll do it."

"I c-c-concur," added H4K2.

Tiyaha said with a snarl. "Whatever you say."

Tiberius, sensing tension in the room, stood as Zandar stared at Rixxon. The Wolf-Dog's master petted him to prevent a reflexive attack. After a few seconds of thick silence, Zandar finally replied, "Mission accepted...*sir*."

The last word dripped with thinly veiled contempt.

Rixxon glanced at the guards, signalling them to lower their guns.

"Good," he said, switching off the screen with his tablet. "You will find your weapons waiting for you outside the dropship."

With a press of another button, the ship's hatch opened, revealing the wilderness outside.

The other three rose from their chairs, moving towards the exit, but Zandar lingered a moment, watching Rixxon. The old man's neck was nearly in arm's reach; it'd be so easy to settle the score.

Then he felt a gentle nibble on his wrist; Tiberius whined gently and pulled him towards the others. With a sigh, Zandar followed his Wolf-Dog's lead.

Soon after the four stepped out and gathered their weapons and gear, the dropship's engines ignited, and the vessel ascended with a mechanical roar. Hot wind stinking of exhaust assaulted Zandar's nostrils as the ship disappeared in the sky, leaving them in a yellow meadow surrounded by brightly coloured trees. The golden grass glistened with each wave of wind that whistled across its many blades. It took a moment for Thasis' natural air and the sounds of its wildlife to return.

Zandar adjusted his uniform; his first time wearing HDF insignia since his discharge. "Shall we get started on this fool's errand?"

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Yerga stepped toward Zandar, but Tiberius bared his teeth and growled at the Jackal. Yerga responded in kind until Zandar held his open hand in the Wolf-Dog's face to calm him.

"No one named you pack leader!" shot Yerga.

"Excuse me for thinking that the one who knows his way around the Frontier should be in charge!" retorted Zandar.

"I won't follow the scum who put me in prison to collect a bounty!" Tiyaha said with a snarl.

Zandar looked at the Gator. "I didn't recognise you. You were smuggling a Phasmin Biomimic for some exotic pet collector. Rixxon said your name was Tiyaha, right?"

The towering Gator lunged at Zandar. Zandar leapt back, drawing his gun but Tiberius leapt between them, barking. Tiyaha stopped abruptly as she saw the Wolf-Dog before her. Letting out a long breath, the Gator dropped her fighting stance as she narrowed her eyes at Zandar, who lowered his gun.

"You're lucky" Tiyaha said reluctantly. "I don't want to leave your pet without a master."

But they were interrupted by deep bellows and snapping wood. The group looked in the direction of the noises and saw a herd of lumbering lizards the size of HDF Combat Walkers rummaging through the trees.

"Dragornases," stated Zandar. "They're hunting."

"Are they carnivores?" asked Yerga.

"Not c-c-carnivores, but omnivores. At least, ac-c-cording to the HDF intelligence data I downloaded," added H4K2.

"These creatures are endangered and highly territorial," said Zandar. "I'd rather not fight them. I've dealt with poachers before, if you follow my lead we can catch them."

"A bit of experience doesn't make you the boss!" Yerga said, bearing her teeth.

"There is no gain from fighting, Jackal." Tiyaha spoke, glancing at Tiberius. "Give the human a chance."

"What else can we expect, H4K2?" asked Zandar.

The Robot tilted his head for a second as he processed petabytes of data. "Uncertain. Information on the wildlife in the Obsc-c-obscura is limited to what has been gleaned from Dark Elf poachers, who have been known to hunt Dragornases. They do not file reports."

"I should've figured," replied Zandar.

With Tiberius by his side, the former Pathfinder strode toward the jungle. "Off we go," he said, gesturing for the group to walk with him. "Stay alert."

H4K2 was the first to follow him. Then Tiyaha. And finally, Yerga.

The "squad" entered a thick forest of trees with leaves that spiralled sideways and upward, intertwining in knotted masses overhead. Shadows cast by the wooden giants darkened the hilly terrain. Birds with bright plumage flew above them while animals like three-antlered deer and salamanders the size of Tiberius scattered as Tiyaha angrily cut through the foliage with a machete. Swarms of insects, glowing like fireflies, buzzed around them, often biting any exposed skin. They ignored H4K2, of course.

They came to a valley beyond the first jungle. Waves of phosphorescent flowers fluttered in the wind. A few of the "spiral trees" ascended to islands floating several hundred metres above them. Zandar couldn't tell if the trees actually supported these landmasses. Tiyaha picked up a thick stick and slammed it against a tree trunk, which clanged almost like metal.

For several more hours, they hiked over hills and through another forest. Then they heard distant thunder.

"What is that?" asked Tiyaha.

Zandar cupped his hand over his ear and, a few seconds later, said, "A waterfall!"

He ran toward the sound, leading the group through thickets. A few minutes later, he shoved a huge leaf aside like a curtain to reveal a waterfall that flowed upward. The water rose over 150 metres into the air, where it stopped and fell to the ground as oversized droplets. But that rain couldn't touch anything within a ten-metre radius of the reversed falls.

"The hell is this?" blurted Zandar.

H4K2 walked up beside him. His eyes glowed as he scanned the falls for several seconds. "After c-c-c-cross-referencing data on the Obsc-c-cura with theoretic-c-cal physic-c-cs, my supposition would be this river drains into a gravitational anomaly."

"That would explain those floating islands," added Zandar.

"Why doesn't the water go all the way into space?" asked Yerga.

"It is c-c-c-caused by a unique radiation that dissipates at a certain altitude."

"What's the source of the radiation?" asked Zandar.

The Robot's eyes glowed again. "A mineral lodged in that c-c-cliff face. The only element in my databanks that it r-r-r-resembles...is elek-k-krite."

"We finally found it!" exclaimed Yerga.

"I said it *resembles* elek-k-krite. It is not what we seek."

"Then what is it?" enquired Zandar.

"Inc-c-conclusive. To borrow an idiom from you humans, one could c-c-call it 'fool's elek-k-krite.'"

"This loud-mouth thinks he's a pack leader!" spat Yerga, who put a clawed finger in Zandar's face. "Remind me, why we're suppose to follow you? Not that long ago you were Rixxon's lacky."

Tiberius growled at the Jackal, baring his fangs and arching his back. Zandar calmed him by putting a hand in front of his face.

"All the more reason to believe that I'm not on his side," Zandar replied. "He wouldn't have put me here if I liked me."

"Give me one good reason to trust you!" the Jackal shot back.

Zandar huffed. "You want the truth? Rixxon kicked me out for trying to report a smuggling ring he operates in secret!"

"Of course, that's why you arrested Tiyaha, then?" Yerga's eyes narrowed. "Your boss hates competition."

"I thought I was doing good out here back then... keeping order." Zandar looked away. "When I found out what I was being used for, I did everything I could. Rixxon just shifted the blame and there was no one out here to stop him..."

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Zandar glanced at his “teammates,” who looked at him in silence. Tiberius whimpered as he brushed Zandar’s leg.

“None of that matters,” Tiyaha grunted. “We’re all here now with the same goal. The scrawny little Human at least knows what he’s doing, you’re not a tracker Yerga.”

“We’re going to need to work together if we want to get through...” Zandar started before his words were interrupted by a distant thunder roared, far louder than a waterfall. From over a hill, white fog with lightning streaking through it rolled into the valley, rushing at the group like waters escaping a dam.

“An elec-c-ctric-c-cal storm!” sputtered H4K2.

Zandar surveyed the area for shelter, his face tingling as the ionized air pricked his skin. He felt the hairs on Tiberius stand on end like soldiers at attention.

“There!” Zandar shouted over the thunder a few seconds later, pointing at a cave mouth in a hill.

Yerga sprinted toward the cave, reaching it first. “Tiberius, go!”

Zandar commanded the Wolf-Dog, pointing at the Jackal, and his companion quickly obeyed. Tiyaha lumbered past Zandar, who looked over his shoulder just in time to see a stray lightning bolt hit H4K2. The Robot crumpled to the ground.

“Damn it!” blurted Zandar.

He dashed toward the Robot. Reaching him, Zandar wrapped H4K2’s arm around his neck and tried to stand, but it was like lifting a Tactical Walker. The sky darkened as the fog loomed over them. Zandar saw Tiyaha, his back to them, hesitate for a few seconds before clenching his fists and doubling back. Lightning bolts struck the ground ten metres behind the human and Robot, the thunder deafening. Zandar’s eyes met Tiyaha’s, and a few seconds later, the Gator hoisted the Robot onto his shoulders. They run to the cave.

Inside, Tiyaha laid the Robot onto the floor.

“H4K2, are you awake?” asked Zandar

No answer.

“Is he...dead?” Zandar asked Yerga, turning to the Jackal, who knelt down and pressed an ear to the Robot’s chest.

“No,” she replied. “I still hear his core humming.”

Tiyaha groaned. “Damn Robot...heavier than he looks.”

“At least you’re not talking about me,” said Zandar.

“You look heavy, too.”

A smile briefly flickered across the Gator’s face.

“You’re not bad... for a merc, anyway,” Zandar said.

“I do not think you are the best judge of character, considering your previous ‘employer’.” The Gator’s yellow eyes narrow as he glared at Zandar.

The former Pathfinder paused to ponder before standing up. “This is as good a place as any to rest. We’ll stay until the storm passes.”

H4K2 soon rebooted, and the four of them slept in shifts over the next 12 hours. As the storm’s thunder faded to a far-off rumble and sunlight entered the cave, they ventured out. The mammals among them still felt their hair stand on end, but aside from the

bioluminescence of the flowers, there were no other lasting effects from the storm.

Suddenly, Tiberius’ ears piqued, and he ran off. The four mercenaries followed the Wolf-Dog, who led them to a thicker patch of trees a half-kilometre away. Said trees wriggled and creaked, but not from the wind. The ground trembled under their feet. Zandar whistled at Tiberius, who returned to him.

Through the gaps in the brush, they saw the Dragornas herd standing on their hind legs to reach purple fruit the size of a human’s head hanging in the trees. With their three-pronged tongues, they plucked the morsels from the branches. Embedded in the trunks were glittering green crystals.

“Those gems are elek-k-krite,” said H4K2 quietly.

“I say we kill the animals and take the gems!” said Yerga, drawing a pistol that looked as though it had been put together from scrap.

Zandar paused for several seconds before saying, “This herd may be the last of their kind. They hid in the Obscura, because poachers are unwilling to brave this wilderness to hunt them.”

“Are you saying you want us to sneak past them?” Yerga said with her eyebrow raised.

“Yes.” Zandar replied, stone-faced.

Yerga nodded. “I’ll take point.”

“No.” Zandar replied shaking his head. “I have experience with animals like this.”

“Suit yourself.”

Zandar gave Yerga a small smile. Then he bent down to Tiberius, putting his pointer finger in front of his mouth. The Wolf-Dog nodded knowingly, drawing its tongue back into its mouth. Zandar straightened and waved for the group to follow him.

The squad slunk along the edge of the brush to keep out of sight. Zandar advised them to step lightly and stay upwind so the creatures couldn’t smell them. A few Dragornases wandered away after feeding, but most of the herd remained, still gathered around the trees with the elekrite.

Zandar primed his laser pistol, which hummed quietly.

“What happened to not fighting them?” whispered Tiyaha.

“I’m not,” Zandar whispered back.

He aimed his weapon upward and fired. The red beams cut through several branches, which fell, hitting the ground and, to Zandar’s disappointment, a few Dragornases with a loud crash. The lizards bellowed, the herd scattering as they searched for danger. But one of the Dragornases stood his ground and spotted the squad hiding in the foliage. It charged.

“Scatter!” Zandar shouted as the beast charged towards them.

His squad scattered. Zandar, Yerga, and Tiberius ran to the right and Tiyaha and H4K2 to the left as they circled around the Dragornas. Tiberius barked at the creature, but it ignored the Wolf-Dog. Zandar and Yerga fired laser shots in front of the Dragornas, startling it for a second, but it slowly advanced toward them.

Zandar saw H4K2 and Tiyaha raise their weapons to attack the Dragornas from behind, but he yelled, “No!”

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He looked at the Jackal. "Take Tiberius and get the elektrite in from those trees!"

Yerga nodded.

"Alright, Tiberius, go with her!" commanded Zandar, pointing at the Jackal.

The Wolf-Dog snorted defiantly.

Zandar knelt down, "Just trust me, Tibertius!"

"Wait!" interrupted Yerga.

She grunted at the Wolf-Dog, who looked at Zandar for approval. His master nodded.

The Jackal threw her head back and howled as she charged toward the tree. Zandar once again commanded the Wolf-Dog to follow Yerga, and this time Tiberius reluctantly obeyed.

"Tiyaha, cover them!" ordered Zandar.

The Gator nodded and fired warning shots at the herd of Dragornases, who roared in fear and confusion.

Yerga and Tiberius dashed between the Dragornas' legs, which caught the creature's attention, but Zandar fired a laser shot at its crest and yelled, "Eyes on me!" The Dragornas reared up and stomped the ground, shaking it. Zandar staggered, barely regaining his footing and jumping sideways before the Dragornas' massive feet could crush him.

Zandar heard Yerga howl again and looked in her direction by the elektrite embedded in the tree trunks. She and Tiberius were poised to run. Zandar motioned to H4K2, who produced a pair of grenades in two of his three hands while still holding a firearm in one.

The Robot triggered the bombs and tossed them in front of the Dragornas. The explosions startled the creature. The squad ran down the clearing the herd had trampled. But Zandar glanced over his shoulder and saw Dragornases stampeding after them, and they were gaining.

Zandar touched his pistol, but he didn't draw. He let out a deep breath as he sized up the rare and exquisite creature before him.

Suddenly, the roar of a dropship's engines hit their ears. Zandar looked up and saw it just above the trees. Some of the Dragornases scattered, but several others dug their heels in, unafraid. With an ear-shattering flash, the ship fired white-hot shells that struck the Dragornases, who screamed in agony before falling to the ground, dead. Turquoise blood and innards stained the dirt and plants.

The dropship landed a hundred metres from the Dragornases' bodies. A hatch opened, and out marched Rixxon with an Infantry Squad. The colonel crossed his arms, waiting.

Zandar holstered his gun, motioned for his comrades, and whistled for Tiberius. He removed the pouches from the Wolf-Dog's back.

He glanced at the Jackal, Robot, and Gator, then stepped toward Rixxon, Tiberius at his side.

"You followed us," said Zandar.

"I had to make sure you didn't betray me...again," replied Rixxon. Zandar winced.

"Now, give me the elektrite," demanded Rixxon, extending a hand. Zandar glanced at the dead bodies of the majestic creatures, then at the pouch in his hand. With a grunt, he threw it at Rixxon's feet.

"Take your bloody rocks!" Zandar spat before turning and walking back toward his fellow mercs, with Tiberius right behind him.

Rixxon picked up the pouch, looked at Zandar, and said, "Let's add a little more blood."

Zandar spun around. Rixxon and the Infantry Squad had weapons aimed at him and the others.

"You damned crook!" Zandar spat.

"I am not!" Rixxon shouted back, "Get him!"

Zandar dropped to his back as he drew his sidearm. A barrage of fire flew over him. Tiberius circled around Zandar, arching his back, and barked aggressively at the HDF squad.

Zandar levelled his pistol, aiming at Rixxon, but the colonel sidestepped behind an Infantry. Zandar's fellow mercs opened fire, shooting from behind him, the laser blasts burning through the air and sparking against the Infantry Squad's armour.

Zandar heard the familiar hum of triggered grenades, and three of them flew overhead toward the squad with shocking precision. Rixxon and the Infantry had no time to react as the grenades hit the ground and detonated. A cloud of Thasisinian dirt enveloped their enemies, leaving limp bodies.

Zandar shot to his feet. He glanced back and saw Tiyaha and Yerga with guns drawn, but H4K2's hands were empty.

*Those were his grenades*, thought Zandar. He nodded approvingly at the Robot who returned a simple nod in acknowledgement.

Zandar looked back and saw Rixxon, bloodied and exhausted, limping toward the dropship. He whistled at Tiberius, pointing at the colonel. The Wolf-Dog rushed at Rixxon, clutching the man's ankle with his teeth and tripping him with a violent thrash. The colonel grabbed a knife from his belt to stab Tiberius, but Zandar shot the blade out of Rixxon's hand.

Quickly, he stood over the colonel and whistled again, Tiberius releasing the Rixxon. Zandar pressed his weapon against Rixxon's sweaty forehead and squeezed against the trigger, feeling the pressure of the metal against his finger.

"You never intended to let us live!" he snapped.

"You're a fool if you thought I would!" the colonel shot back.

Zandar jabbed the gun into Rixxon's head, but the colonel denied him even a satisfying grunt.

Breathing hard, Rixxon said, "You have two choices, Cyrus. You can pull that trigger and be a wanted man for the rest of your damned life...Or you can put it down and turn in those other cretins and have your honour with the HDF restored. You've got a chance at a fresh start here, so what will it be?"

Zandar glared at the colonel for a long moment. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the three mercs who had watched his back for the last twenty-four hours. After years of disgrace and exile, of being a lone wolf surviving in the Frontier on scraps, he commanded a squad again.

He looked back at Rixxon. "I choose option three."

"What's that?"

Zandar pistol-whipped Rixxon in the head, throwing the colonel to the ground, unconscious.

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After taking a long breath to compose himself, Zandar looked back at the Jackal, Gator, and Robot. "Get in the dropship!"

The three glanced at each other in bewilderment.

"Come on!" insisted Zandar.

The five of them filed into the starship. Once inside, Zandar pressed a button on a wall panel, closing the hatch.

"What about Rixxon?" asked Tiyaha.

"Either the HDF will rescue him or the local wildlife will kill him before they get here," Zandar replied. "He's not my problem."

With that, Zandar beelined to the cockpit, where he sat in the pilot's seat and tapped a few buttons to ignite the dropship's engines. Tiberius jumped into the co-pilot's seat. Zandar smiled and patted the Wolf-Dog's head, saying, "Good boy!"

The other three entered the cockpit.

"What will you do now?" asked Yerga

"Get a fresh start." replied Zandar, "Rixxon's going to make sure I never see the stars of the Human Cluster except through a telescope but the Frontier is a big place. Maybe we can turn in some bounties on other poachers or even find enough evidence to bring down Rixxon. It's hard work but I think we've got a good team for it... if you'll join me."

H4K2 tilted his head for a second to process data. "I c-c-can see myself getting on with you organics. C-c-count me in."

Both Yerga and Tiyaha glanced at the Robot before looking back at Zandar and nodding.

"Let's hit the void."