

The Mild Bunch

Short story by Mark Newbold
Two years after **Episode IV – A New Hope**

Telfen City, Entall

Two years after the Battle of Yavin

The ground trembled as the All Terrain Armoured Transport smashed its way down the main street of Telfen, the fourth largest city on Entall. Walls shook, masonry, plaster and bricks rained down, trees shook free their leaves, birds tumbled confused from the skies as the impact of the Imperial assault blistered through the streets. The populace ran in all directions, confusion clouding their minds as shock troops of Stormtroopers and buzzing blurs of speeder bikes swirled around in all directions. From above T.I.E fighters and bombers threw down laser fire upon the city, as punishment for its refusal to yield beneath the Imperial war machine. It was the purest portrait of chaos imaginable.

Huddled together under the remains of a large sloop shelter five elderly men hunkered down, as close to each other as they could stand so as to hear each other speak. The first, a frazzled looking old coot called Elgendy cupped his hand over his ear to distil the other men's words through the hail of destruction outside and shouted a question.

“So? What do you think?”

He received an angry frown for his troubles from a tall and impossibly thin human known only as the Corporal.

“What do I think? You're even crazier than I thought, and believe me, that's saying something.”

The third man, a professorial type called Mixer scratched his head and twirled the piece of chak root between his teeth as he fumbled through a batch of flims and shuffled them into order.

“I believe the statistical possibility of such an attack happening on Entall after recent Imperial activity, coupled with increased Rebel Alliance attacks and reports of smuggling in the locality is in the area of 2750-to-1. Which I needn't remind you is analogous to the possibility - ”

“Of you shutting up!” yelled the Corporal angrily, casting a glance at the destruction outside their shelter. He grabbed the arm of the man next to him, a rotund man with a permanent smile etched across his face. “Rikkles, can you make a diversion?”

Rikkles' cheeks grew even redder as he stifled a belly laugh and nodded his head enthusiastically.

“Oh I guarantee it! I'll make those Imperials forget what century they're in!”

“Good, good, that's what we want to hear.” The fifth, a self-important man named Tofff nodded slowly and gazed around the rest of the grouping. “We'll make those Imps rue the day they ever set foot on Entall.”

“I'll make them wish they'd never been cloned.” Said Elgendy, peering out again and watching the hind legs of the walker stomp down the street. He turned back to his friends. “Remember our gambit on Yotil? When we tried to take out Jostenn at his Canopy Base?”

“I remember it well.” Said the Corporal, a glazed look of pleasure landing on his otherwise red and angry features. “We showed him who was boss.”

Elgendy nodded enthusiastically.

“Right. Well what's say we do the same here.”

Mixer paused his nervous flim shuffling and furrowed his eyebrows.

“Need I remind you the odds on that.” He dug a small computer from his deep pockets and began furiously tapping numbers and equations into it while his four companions collectively rolled their eyes and tutted in annoyance. “This isn't a rag tag smuggling fleet, this is the Imperial Army.” He turned the screen of the mini-comp to face his friends. “And with the best will in the galaxy I don't think even we can argue with odds like that.”

The Corporal glanced at Mixer, and then round at Rikkles and Tofff who all shared the same expression. He knew this gang of soldiers as well as he knew himself. They were the original members of the Fighting Indigos, and had been together for over eighty years. Their motto wasn't *In They Go!* for nothing - if there was a way, they'd find it and that even if the odds were stacked highly against them, they had the smarts and the know-how to pull through. After all, they always had before. Renegade droids, rogue Jedi, ganglords, Clonetroopers, Stormtroopers: they'd all fallen before them, in one-way or another. And with almost four hundred collective years of military knowledge stored in their skulls the Corporal didn't fear the huge war machine that stamped its

way into downtown Telfen. In fact he pitied it.

"The Yotil Gambit it is then." He stood to a crouch and his compatriots followed. They all watched the AT-AT's rear section lurch down the street and nodded at each other as they hunkered in. "Alright gentlemen, let's remind ourselves of the plan."

Canopy Base, Yotil, Seventy-four years ago The year Duze Jostenn took control of the Setnin Underworld

"It's too big, we'll never take it down!"

The Corporal threw a glare at his frazzled subordinate Elgendy and frowned.

"You take too much stock in what you *can't* achieve instead of what you *can*. It's not the size of a thing that determines strength, it's the intent. You think a well-placed shot can't take out a bantha?" He checked through the sites of his rifle and shook his head. "Think again."

Mixer leaned forward towards the Corporal and rustled a bunch of flims as the shadows above grew darker and the volume louder.

"Just a brief reminder that a freighter of that size and configuration is designed to withstand the heavy rigours of constant hyperspace travel. A shot from a blaster rifle will likely cause nothing but a scratch to the paint work."

The Corporal shook his head again as he squinted through the sights and began to depress the trigger.

"You have such little faith. We're the Fighting Indigos. I don't know what detachments you boys came from, but I'll wager you haven't seen much action."

Tofff puffed out his chest as he gripped his blaster and adjusted his sitting position.

"I'll have you know that I've been involved in a number of major engagements." He paused for a second before remembering his station. "Sir."

"I'm sure you have," replied the Corporal. "But *seeing* a battle and being actively involved are two entirely different things." He glanced at Rikkles, the only other previous member of the Fighting Indigos, who sat smirking beside him.

"It sure is sir. A world of difference." He held back a chuckle as he looked up at the freighter flying directly above, swinging in for a landing at the Canopy Base of Setnins newly crowned ganglord Duze Jostenn. The Corporal took aim once more and let fly with a shot that buzzed as it passed through shields designed for blaster bolts, and at once his men realised that he was using a slug thrower. The shot hit hard, cutting through the plating and hitting vital systems inside. The freighter began to veer and career from side to side, unsteadily losing its trajectory and swaying towards the sharp rocks that surrounded the main cover of Canopy Base before suddenly slamming into the ground and exploding in a conflagration of flame and metal. The group all ducked for cover as the explosion swept over their heads, and Elgendy peered out to see stunned and concussed operatives of Duze Jostenn lying on the rocky ground. The Corporal checked his four men and nodded over his shoulder, back towards their waiting drop ship two clicks away, and safety.

"Come on. The Yotil government will be more than satisfied with our work here. Jostenn is dead and his threat to peace and order is nullified. Let's go."

They all stood to leave and began to run down a shallow hill back towards their ship when first Rikkles, then Toff and Mixer stopped their run. The Corporal and Elgendy both turned and glared at them.

"Come on men, are you mad?" whispered Elgendy loudly as he waved for them to follow. "We haven't got time to sight-see."

"I believe that we'll have plenty of time to see the local attractions." Said Toff sadly as he motioned towards the eight men on either side of the ridge that ran along their path, heavy blaster weapons trained directly at them. Elgendy looked at the Corporal as his superior lowered his rifle and slowly did the same.

"Well I envisaged a better ending for us than this." Said Toff as he straightened his jacket and paced the small cell again. Rikkles twiddled his thumbs and raised his eyebrows, smiling at some personal joke as Elgendy ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

"Nothing's ending. We work for the government. We're soldiers." He turned a look at the Corporal. "We're

the Fighting Indigos. We're merely being detained. Governments sign conventions for situations like this you know."

"And I doubt people like these have heard of them." Said the Corporal wearily as he stood to his feet and walked to the cell door. They'd been holed up for three hours, marched here in silence as the flaming wreckage of the freighter continued to sporadically explode in the distance. He hoped, for the sake of the Setnin Sector, that Duze Jostenn had been aboard and the threat to sector security had been eliminated. But he also knew how slippery characters like Jostenn could be, and how elusive and charmed their lives were. More than likely a double had been terminated, and the real man was weighing up his security options. Mixer motioned for the others to listen.

"I estimate a seventy eight percent chance that Jostenn is alive and well and deciding what to do with us this very minute."

"And what do you think he'll do with us?" asked the Corporal, turning back to his men with an angry expression on his face. "Pummel us into submission with statistics?" Mixer gave this C.O a sorry look and lowered his head. The Corporal chided himself for his own lack of control and clasped his hands together. "We're soldiers, held under duress in a secret stronghold. The Yotil government knows who we are and why we're here. Believe me, there is nothing to concern yourselves about."

"What do you mean they've *never heard of us?*" exploded the Corporal as he gripped the bars of their prison cell and gritted his teeth. "*They* hired for this mission." He gave the guard a look of utter confusion and disbelief. "Call them again. Tell them the Fighting Indigos are being held against their will."

The man looked blankly back at the Corporal as if he was insane.

"Listen, this is a prison, not a phone-in request show. If Mister Jostenn wants you to contact anyone, then you'll be told." The guard stepped away from the bars and checked back. "Indigo you say? Like, *in-dey-go?*"

"Precisely. In *they* go. We get sent on the jobs others are too cowardly to attempt."

"Or too smart." Said the guard as he closed the outer prison door. The Corporal let go of the bars and moved away back to his men. He managed to contain his annoyance and sat in silence on the edge of one of the three beds next to Rikkles. Finally, Mixer broke the quiet.

"Well at least we know one thing."

"And what's that?" replied Elgendy with a tired edge to his voice. Mixer shuffled his handful of flims and cleared his voice.

"Jostenn *is* alive."

The Corporal gave Elgendy and Toff a resigned glance.

"So we even managed to fail in our mission."

Elgendy looked between his feet to the floor below.

"Cold comfort if we end up dead anyway."

The Corporal snapped a hard look at his new second officer.

"We're soldiers. We get paid to die for causes. Any honourable soldier should be prepared to die for a cause."

"Even if it's one you don't believe in?"

"You don't believe in freedom from tyranny?"

Elgendy stood and stared down at his C.O.

"I don't believe that a gangster is a threat to the stability of the sector, no. His actions won't affect the lives of everyone in Setnin, that's absurd." He shook his head at the Corporal. "You've lost perspective."

The Corporal snapped his head around and glared a hole right through Elgendy.

"One day this galaxy won't be so safe. What will you do then, eh?" The Corporal gritted his teeth as he stepped towards his subordinate, and Toff edged closer to the two men, anticipating trouble. "Will you make a stand, or sit back and leave the action to better men than you?"

At first Elgendy gave the Corporal a quizzical look, as if he couldn't believe what he had just said, and then threw out a hard fist right onto the jaw of his C.O, knocking him flat to the floor before diving on top of him and raining punches onto him. Toff moved in to pull them apart, as did Rikkles. Mixer remained on the bed shuffling flims and watching as the guards assembled at the end of the hallway and approached with nightsticks and restraints.

“Here come the percentages.” He coughed as the barred door was unlocked and four guards poured in, grabbing collars and yanking the men apart. Elgendy’s face was a picture of rage and he struggled in the guards grip.

“I’ll not have him say those things about me! Not him, not here!” He lurched forward towards the Corporal. “I won’t have him call me a coward!”

“Take a good look in the mirror and see one for yourself!” replied the Corporal, yanking himself free of the guard. The four guards exchanged glances, preparing to handcuff the group, and turned to see Mixer stand from the bed and raise his hands in the air.

“I have it!” he laughed, clasping his hands as they lowered from above his head and grinning at his friends. Rikkles returned the grin and shook his head in confusion.

“Have what?”

“The answer, the answer!” Mixer moved around the eight men in the centre of the cell and when out of eye line with any of the guards gave the Corporal a quick wink. The Corporal knew what that particular gesture meant – they were in the clear. Silently he swung a punch at the closest guard and watched his three men do the same to their opponents. Four bodies slumped to the ground, all decked by sweet punches, and Mixer checked the corridor again.

“Fifty four percent chance that we’ll all get into the guard uniforms before the next shift arrives in,” he checked the chrono on the wall opposite. “Four minutes forty seconds.” Mixer stepped across the corridor through the open door and into the guards’ quarters, lifting a spare uniform from a hangar that was hooked over the top of the door.

Elgendy nodded as he began to undress the guard and glanced up at the Corporal, who was nursing an increasingly swelling bruise on his jaw.

“You knew that was a ruse, right?”

The Corporal nodded and gave his underling a sly wink.

“Of course. We don’t rehearse this nonsense for nothing.”

It was darkening outside as the five uniformed men walked cautiously out of the cell area, Mixer in the centre tapping away at his statistical probabilities, and strode briskly towards the hangar area where they hoped a suitable transport would be available to steal. The Corporal scanned the area with hawk-like eyes, spotting potential obstacles and enemies as Rikkles and Toff checked behind them, aware that an attack would likely come soon when the unconscious bodies of the guards were found. Elgendy steered the troop towards the entrance to the hangar area of Canopy Base, his eyes on one of the four towering pinnacles of the natural formation that were draped with an enormous tarpaulin that covered a collection of buildings, huts, permanent and temporary shelters, all circled around Duze Jostenns main building and his outdoor work area, raised like a dais in the very cool centre of the canopy. Elgendy could see two guards lazily leaning against the doorway, one smoking a cigarillo and the other engrossed in a datapad. They scarcely acknowledged the five as they coolly walked through the doorway and into the long, narrow hangar area. Mixer glanced around and motioned towards a low, broad speeder that would accommodate them all. The Corporal nodded and the five swung towards it.

“Any idea how we’re going to evade our pursuers?” Asked Elgendy as he watched Rikkles crack the lock and slide into the main seat. The Corporal shook his head and checked around.

“Maybe luck is on our side and we won’t be pursued.”

Tofff gave them both a weary glance.

“Your sense of humour is admirable sir.”

“Well we’ve got to come out of this job with something intact.”

They began to clamber in to the speeder, though not so fast as to draw attention. Once inside, The Corporal slid the canopy shut and gunned the engine. Elgendy checked the console and eyed his superior.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer me to drive? I am a class three rated pilot.”

The Corporal gave a half grin as they began to pull away towards the tall hangar doors and into the open area beneath the canopy above.

“I think I can manage to take us two clicks without much bother.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth that a line of guards simultaneously turned and formed a rough,

swiftly tightening line that blocked their path. The Corporal frowned as his calmness evaporated and he gripped the steering vanes. Mixer leaned forward, flims as ever ready in his hands.

“If we attempt an escape now I predict a seventy-six percent probability of success. However, if we delay that ratio dwindles to...” He checked his datapad. “Forty-two.”

“Then it’s definitely time to go.” Shouted The Corporal as he revved the engine and sped forward towards the line of men, sickeningly aware that the huge hangar doors were beginning to descend.

“The door sir!” Said Tofff calmly, prying the vice-like grip of Elgendy from his arm, who gave him an embarrassed glance.

“Sorry.”

“Alright old bean, no harm done.”

The door continued to roll shut, the light outside diminishing rapidly as beads of sweat grew on the five men’s brows.

“It’s been a pleasure men.” Said the Corporal unexpectedly, and his compatriots all gave him a surprised look as the swoop skimmed the very bottom of the doors, ripping the roof of the speeder clean off, and sped away from the shade of the canopy and onto the winding path that trailed away from Duze Jostenns Canopy Base. Elgendy gave his C.O. a long look.

“Didn’t you think we were going to make it?”

The Corporal smiled as the cooled air of Yotil rushed by and soothed him. They were the Fighting Indigos and nothing could stop them. Not war, not deception, not even the passing of time.

“Of course I did. I was simply telling you men what a pleasure it’s been serving with you.” He draped a hand out of the speeder as their transport rushed into view. “And thank heavens it still is.”

Telfen City, Entall, Seventy-four years later Two years after the Battle of Yavin

“Aim above the knee joint, just on to the thigh, that should weaken it.”

Elgendy tried his damndest not to give the Corporal a filthy look as he lined up the limpet mine deployer, a bazooka-style weapon that would propel the mine onto the AT-AT. He lined up the knee joint o his cross hairs and let fly, sending a second one for good measure to land right beside it. The Corporal patted him on the shoulder for his excellent aim.

“Didn’t realise you’d loaded a second mine. Good shot.”

Mixer checked his statistics again as the walker lurched forward another enormous foot.

“That second mine has improved our odds significantly,” He checked outside as the AT-AT began to move past them. “Of course, it’s increased the odds of it dropping onto us.”

The Corporal raised an eyebrow as the Imperial war machine cast a long shadow over them in their hiding hole.

“How long did you set the charges?”

Elgendy looked at Tofff who was busy scanning the area for other Imperial troops. Tofff, sensing the quiet, turned.

“Ten seconds, just li – ”

The explosion ripped the hind leg off the walker like tissue paper and the huge machine dropped back onto its side and began to fall towards them.

“Time to go!” shouted The Corporal as the five elderly men scabbled out of their hiding hole and ran for safer cover as the AT-AT crashed to the ground with a heavy metallic thud. Confusion reigned as troops came from nearby patrols to see where the attack had come from, sweeping the area with the rifles, ready to shoot up the town if given any more provocation.

But the Fighting Indigos were already on their way out, ducking into the safety of the sewer tunnels and wending their way towards their escape, like they had done so many times before. Other groups had taken their name, taken their ideas and succeeded their heritage but there was no other squad with the experience and guile of the originals and the best.

The Fighting Indigos.