

Conquest of Deep Rock

27 years before the Massacre of Zulath there were some hostile encounters between the humans and the Lorgans. This Ghost Unit-assigned, PSU-backed operation by agent Captain Richard Sanders on Nagakira never appeared in the official reports of the Utopia Military. It is an eyewitness report by Corporal Anne Dalton, who was subsequently sworn to silence.

The soldiers' equipment rattled as the landing shuttle began its descent. Annie's HUD showed a transmission from the outside cameras so she could get a picture of the surroundings.

So this is the infamous Facility 6, she thought.

In the middle of the eternally gray expanse of the rocky surface of Nagakira, there was the lorgan mining site, which was often called Deep Rock because of its depth. The Lorgans had abandoned the planet and all its facilities after the people of Utopia discovered the world in the neighboring Kendar-System and sent some reconnaissance probes there. Being hostile to the Utopians, they destroyed all the technology and equipment they could find before they fled so that the humans could not examine it.

Deep Rock was the last mine where there were still Lorgans, as it contained the largest deposits of cobalt and copper on the planet. The troops of Utopia arrived there before the last lizard people could disappear, so they remained there in the mine and fired at everything that came near.

Annie was very nervous when she looked at the flat buildings and the strange construction machines. Although she had been a permanent member of the Omega 4 reconnaissance squadron for almost three years, they usually explored new worlds near the Nekon-Traverse border that were uninhabited. Active battles, especially against the Lorgans, she had hardly ever experienced before.

»Take it easy, Annie! You can do it! We go in there, secure room by room and surround the lizards. Then we'll wait for the K5 guys to come and do the rest. It'll be easy!«

This encouragement came from her good friend Veronica Sutherland, a veteran scout. Her bluish armor had several scratches and her helmet was still attached to the torso with hoses, although the oxygen supply for outboard operations was recently possible without it.

»That's easy for you to say. You used to be with the hunters. You can handle this stress ...«, she replied.

»The fear never goes away. But look on the bright side: we have the best leader there is. Who would have thought that this mission is so important that the PSU would send us the famous Captain Richard Sanders?«

»He's a very important man. If he's here, something's wrong.«

Annie had a bad feeling as she watched the man. He stood next to the pilot and looked straight ahead. He was wearing black armor, the latest model with experimental modifications. His black mustache trembled while his mouth formed silent words. His short black hair fluttered slightly in the breeze of the air conditioning.

Annie considered herself a rather inconspicuous woman. She was slim, had an ordinary face and usually hid her hair under a helmet. The

presence of Sanders made her very nervous because he was an agent who was highly respected in the military. Some of his missions were so secret that no one ever knew the details. Someone like that didn't go on a scouting mission just to kill a few scattered Lorgans. Still, he was there and he was in command.

»Prepare for landing,« he shouted in a strong, deep voice.

Veronica purred: »For this man, I would be prepared any time.«

Annie ignored her and took her rifle from the wall mount. She brought it into position and moved into the third row. When the shuttle touched down on the ground, the hatch opened and they ran off quickly and professionally to position themselves tactically in the area. She was happy about her grey armor because it gave her more camouflage.

While most of her unit secured smaller outbuildings, Richard waved and said via the communicator: »Dalton, Sutherland, Novac and Lira, you're coming with me!«

He was now wearing his helmet, and instead of a rifle, he had an old-fashioned pistol in his hand. He moved forward and signaled that they should surround the main entrance to the mine. Veronica pressed herself against the wall to the right of the door, while Annie took the left. They waited there until Captain Sanders had overridden the controls and the entrance was open. Nothing moved, so they entered. The intensive training at Camp Gamma had prepared her well for such situations. Her eyes immediately caught the most important points and she automatically checked two adjacent rooms while the Captain approached the reception desk.

He grabbed a small pot plant and threw it towards the computer, whereupon a small explosion shattered the counter.

»We are expected.«

Although the situation was not exactly pleasant, Annie now felt relief that they could draw on the experience of the decorated agent.

After moving through some adjacent rooms and disabling three more traps, they reached the main tunnel of the mine. It was a large room with no ceiling and a huge hole in the middle around which stable platforms had been built. Cranes transported the mined minerals and metals upwards for further processing.

The scout named Lira stepped to the edge to look down and was killed by a shot in the head. Snipers must have been waiting for them in the shaft.

»This is inconvenient. Take position around the shaft and wait for my command.«

Without waiting for a reaction, Richard Sanders ran towards the hole. He threw two grenades down, which a short time later produced a blindingly bright light. Annie could see how the visor on his helmet darkened. He attached a hook to a crane and jumped down. It took a few seconds before red lights flashed up and roaring Lorgans could be heard.

»All clear! Rope off and follow me!« it sounded upwards. Meanwhile, five comrades came from adjacent corridors and accompanied them.

With climbing gear, they carefully lowered themselves down the edge of the shaft. As soon as they reached the stable scaffolding that stretched down along the entire pit, they kept close to the wall so as not to be an easy target. Captain Sanders was a few floors below them and occasionally shot someone with his pistol.

Annie was running past a vent when the flap popped open and a huge, reddish Lorgan grabbed her by the throat. He squeezed her against

the railing with a painful slam. She wondered if he would strangle her, break her neck or throw her over the railing. Her rifle had fallen down and there was nothing she could do to stop the giant. Panic rose inside her and she fidgeted instinctively. A salvo struck everywhere in the alien's body and he fell to the ground lifeless.

She gasped and felt her pulse racing. This had almost been her end. She looked over at her comrades and said: »Thank you! I didn't see him coming!«

The muscular man named Novac replied: »That's what friends are for.« He tapped her on the shoulder and went ahead while Veronica handed her her rifle.

The way down was long, but Captain Sanders made sure they had no more surprises. They now understood why the place was called Deep Rock.

»Damn it! When does this shaft end? Even now I can't see the bottom ...«, one of the scouts marveled.

Annie was still busy with her near-death experience and said nothing because she did not trust her voice. They reached a gate that led into a larger cave that had been artificially created by the Lorgans. There, Richard Sanders stood and waited for her.

»This is tunnel 24. There is enemy technology in there that sends a signal. That means they're calling for help, and they probably have all the equipment still intact in there with them. This also means that most of the remaining Lorgans are holed up in there. So we're looking at a battle.«

Once again, panic swept through Annie, and even brave Veronica hummed and hawed in plain sight.

»I know you're scouts. Your job is reconnaissance, not war. But it's quite possible the enemy is expecting reinforcements or an exfiltration team. We cannot allow that to happen. The K5 unit won't be here for several hours at least. By then it may already be too late. That means we have to take care of it ourselves.«

Now even the male comrades in the unit, who otherwise presented themselves as fearless, were insecure and stepped from one foot to the other. Annie felt her heart beating so loudly that she wondered why it wasn't being heard over the comms.

»You're afraid, I can understand that. I am nervous myself. But in there is our current best chance to study and better understand the technology and physiology of our enemies. The more we know, the better we can protect ourselves against them. All of Utopia relies on us to succeed here and now. Lorgans are big and fierce, but they can be killed. Work together and remember: Use your surroundings to your advantage. Get ready!«

His speech had given her some courage, but her knees were shaking so badly that she almost fell down. She struggled to keep her rifle straight. Captain Sanders drew two grenades and held his hand over the switch that opened the gate.

»Spread out and take cover!«

He struck the switch and immediately threw the two grenades through the first crack. This time it was smoke grenades that restricted the enemy's field of vision. Energy projectiles flew around their ears as they ducked or pike-rolled behind protruding rock formations. Annie

had additional training in environmental analysis and immediately examined the room. Her visor scanned the shapes and she noticed several tactical options.

Some rock spikes protruded from the ceiling, some inactive explosives stood at the edge of the cave and she spotted a mining laser on a metal scaffold. She immediately passed the information on to the captain, who in turn used his modern HUD to mark the enemies. There were almost two dozen Lorgans with rifles and drill lasers. Veronica leaned next to Annie against a stone pillar and clasped her weapon.

»This is not what I had imagined this would be like!«

»I told you there was something wrong!« she returned and shot an enemy by hitting him right in the eye.

»Excellent shot, Corporal Dalton,« the captain praised, killing three of the enemies himself with his pistol. Despite its size, the weapon seemed to penetrate the thick scale skin of the lizards without any problems.

Two of their comrades were shot when they tried to change their cover. Another soldier died by a drilling laser that penetrated his armor. His partner jumped out and fired all his ammo at a hanging rock, which then fell down and crushed a scaffold. The debris killed five Lorgans at once, but the shooter was grabbed by one of the lizardmen and torn apart in the middle.

»Oh my God!«, Veronica screamed and crouched down in panic. Meanwhile, Annie did her best not to throw up into her own helmet. She saw that the aliens had them surrounded shortly. Captain Sanders would finish her off with the rest of the unit, but it would be too late for Veronica and her by then.

The young scout realized that there was only one chance to survive this fight. She bent down to Veronica and grabbed her by the shoulders.

»You gotta pull yourself together now, V! We only have a few moments left before they catch us if we don't get out of here! I have an idea, but I can't do it without you! Get up if you want to live!«

Her friend looked at her and for a moment Annie thought she had already accepted death. But then she grabbed her arm to stand up.

»All right, Annie! If we are going to die down here, then at least I will go down fighting! What do we do?«

After a short arrangement, Veronica threw herself out of her cover and fired right between the eyes of a Lorgan. This didn't kill him, but he staggered back and stumbled, only to be impaled by a broken scaffold strut. This distracted two other enemies enough for the captain to hit and kill them. This cleared a small corridor that Annie and Veronica used to run from their hiding place. Annie made a running jump from a ledge and grabbed the railing of a scaffolding. A shot hit her in the thigh and she screamed in pain but wouldn't let go.

With all her strength she hoisted herself up and let herself fall over the balustrade. Her leg burned like fire and she felt a hole in the armor as she ran over it with her glove. She looked to the side and saw Veronica being grabbed and held by a Lorgan. Another lizard man hit her head so hard that the helmet cracked.

»Shit! Annie! Help!«

The panicky screaming of her friend tore her out of her shock and she fought herself to her knees. In pain, she limped over to the mining laser and stood behind it. These devices were set up like gun emplacements so

that the worker had a foothold to fire. She now used this circumstance to target the two attackers.

Another blow broke Veronica's shoulder and she screamed even louder, but none of their comrades could aim properly because she was standing in a cavity.

Annie, however, had a clear field of fire and pulled the trigger. The strong high-power drill produced a yellow energy beam that burst the head of the attacking Lorgan. The other one let go of Veronica immediately and wanted to run away, but she caught him and pierced his chest. Some of the Lizardmen wanted to climb up to her on the scaffold, but the rest of the scouts and Captain Sanders shot her before one of them succeeded.

The noise continued for a few more minutes, but the second team entered the cave and turned the tide. Since no Lorgan wanted to surrender, they were all killed.

Annie's leg gave way and she fell on her butt. Therefore she crawled to the railing and leaned against it.

»Hey V! Are you still alive?« she cried.

After a short moment, the answer came back: »I hope so. Because if death hurts that much, that would really suck!«

»Amen, sister,« Annie gasped.

She watched the scouts secure the room. Meanwhile, she saw Richard Sanders inconspicuously searching the pockets of a Lorgan, taking out a small technical device and pocketing it. Whatever it was, he never mentioned it to anyone. She suspected that this object was the real reason why they had not been able to wait and why he participated in this mission at all. She never liked the secrecy of the PSU.

A few hours later, she was taken back to the surface on a stretcher by the K5 medics using one of the cranes. While waiting to be flown back to the ship in a shuttle, Captain Sanders came to her. He took off his helmet and looked at her in awe.

»Corporal Annie Dalton, right?«

»Sir, yes, sir.«

»You showed remarkable fighting spirit down there. I've seen a lot of action, but it's rare to see a soldier act as decisively in such a perilous situation as you did. The only reason your friend is still alive is that you saved her. That's something to be proud of.«

When he said this, they both looked over at the sleeping Veronica, who was lying on another stretcher.

»You demonstrated fighting spirit and leadership. I'm gonna recommend you for a promotion. People like you need to be supported.«

»Thank you, Captain. Did you find the item you were looking for down there?«

That question was dangerous because it made it clear that she had seen it and knew about it. Yet she couldn't help herself. He looked at her in surprise for a split second, but immediately his gaze returned to normal. He put one hand on her shoulder.

»Get some rest, Corporal. You've earned a long vacation.«

He grinned impishly and winked at her before he left. Annie watched him until he turned into a passageway. He knew she knew, but he seemed to trust her. She wouldn't say anything. Although the mission was a terrible experience for her, she would still mainly remember having fought at the side of this mysterious man.