

## A tale of desire

The reflection of her perfect ivory cheekbones in the vidscreen held her for a moment, losing herself longingly in her own beauty until her reflection smiled back out at her. She snapped herself back into the moment. From somewhere she almost caught the sound of a seductive laugh; so faint it could be from halfway across the galaxy or perhaps drowned out by the sound of her own heart. The sigils on the screen swam back into sight, whatever the primitives had it produced a huge energy signature on the sensors, enough to blot out part of the screen and easily enough to recharge her ships. She needed that energy to get out of this hopeless backwater of a system. She wanted it so much she could feel it like a hunger. She touched the com-gem

“What do you see Laelon?”

The gem spoke back in the annoyingly ingratiating tones of her recon leader “Ma’am we have surveyed the area and they have some sort of Mon-keigh temple with Tau power control systems grafted on. Their hunter parties spotted us and we are drawing them away to the West. There are plenty of them but just typical hunter packs so they will not catch us.”

With a dismissive wave of the hand she cut the link, his sneering superiority annoyed her more than it impressed. She switched channels to the bridge

“Oreria, standard three-ship attack run. Have the support ship land and deploy the Cloud Dancers. Bring us in low and close and hit the retros as we approach the clearing just in front of that temple. No need to land we will drop in and deliver our surprise to them in person.”

She turned to the assembled raider teams, each of them lounging in the bay in a studied show of indifference to hide whatever plans they had to usurp her and become prince in her place.

“Right then, those primitives have a nice juicy power source and we want it. They are of course hopelessly slow and stupid but they probably have firearms from those idiot Tau so no messing around out there. We go out the hatch shooting and we get this done as quickly as possible, anyone stupid and slow enough to get shot might just want to die rather than face me afterwards. OK, power up and get ready.”

She braced her feet artfully as the nimble craft began to roll with surges of power as it skimmed over the tree covered ridge-lines. All around was the reassuring hum of superior technology springing into life as her teams readied for the jump. In a motion repeated ten-thousand times she checked each of her pistols and waved into life the humming jets strapped to her back. Then without warning the hatch blew and they were out, free, dropping from the skies like glittering twirling confetti.

Even as they fell her followers pivoted gracefully with their wings to rain laser blasts down onto the heads of the primitive creatures hunkered down in their little fox-holes. The surprise was so complete that the crude fools hardly even flinched at the sight. She looked away and down for a moment to pick her landing spot, no point losing her dignity with a poor landing for such a simple raid as this. With a perfectly measured blast of the jets she landed on her toes, pistols at the ready.

With the smoothness that can only come with centuries of practice she levelled the barrels at the crested head poking out of the nearest dugout and poisoned slivers sprayed out in a perfectly deadly pattern. And stopped, then dropped harmlessly to the ground only halfway to the target.

Only then did she begin to sense something awry. In her peripheral vision the lasblasters were blazing away but somehow the blasts were stopping short, little flashes of light playing out across an invisible barrier between them and their targets. There was some sort of forcefield blocking them. She was on the com-gem almost before her poisoned darts had fallen uselessly to the dirt

“Cloud Dancers get your lazy bodies over here, we need some heavy weapons...”

She was about to snap out more orders when the world in front of her began to change and shift. The barely clothed aliens began to rise up out of the dense foliage complete with their armoured foxholes. Only their hands seemed to move as their foxholes moved up above her eyeline, up above the height of the bushes, almost to the height of the trees revealing themselves not as crude bunkers but as the cockpits of mis-shapen but functional Tau battlesuits. Behind them the temple hummed with power as it shrugged off the fusillade of shots her reavers poured into the emerging threat; so much power that it had blinded her sensors to what was rising up in front of her now. So much power that her greed for it had blinded her.

The scrawny alien directly in front of her had a glint of pleasure in its eye as it flicked away at a few controls and a huge pile of alloys and armour unfolded beneath it into the distorted and modified yet utterly distinctive and horrifying form of a Tau Riptide. A weapon as large as one of her jetbikes swung round of its own accord, steered towards her by those damned Tau interceptor systems. Her hair stood on end as the stink of ionisation reached her nostrils, before she could turn and hit her jets the battlesuit automated systems kicked in. The laughter was clear now, a cruel suggestive laugh that chilled her soul and told her more clearly than the discharging weapon that her time had come. There was a flash of light and then nothing.

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The old shaper stepped around the bastions of the shield generator and looked out at her work. Some of the younger hunters were larking around with the captured techno-toys. She smiled at their deep-bred love of new technology to play with but paid them no mind as she walked over to the more mature warriors who were systematically walking among the fallen raiders and making very sure that all were dead.

“How is it my children?”

The oldest of them raised his crest in deference “Mother, we chased the survivors into the ambush at P’ten Trees where the ox riders dealt with them. One of their ships delayed to pick up the jet bike teams and was caught by the Warsphere, the other ships fled as soon as we sprung our ambush and managed to get away”.

She waved her hand dismissively “Small matter, the ships are of little use. What of my descendents?”

The scarred warrior conferred for a moment with his siblings “We lost six chasing their scouts, getting too impetuous and playing the part too much. Two ox died in the ambush but the riders live and will be healed in time. The war machines took only light damage, nothing that will need us to go begging to the Tau for spare parts and the pilots were unhurt behind the void shields.”

“Good.” She replied “I do not like the price they ask for their tech, it is better to sell to them if we must deal with them at all.”

She smiled and was about to speak again when one of the young hot-heads stalked forwards and threw down a jet-pack at her feet.

“What use are these grandmother? We cannot fly them, they are too unstable for us to control. The weapons are dead to us, they have some sort of biolock that stops us using them. Why should any of us die for useless junk.”

She could see from the way that he held his arm that he had broken it, probably trying to control the unstable jetpack. It was the pain that was speaking so she decided to be patient.

“Grandchild, these things are not for us. As you say we cannot use them, we are the scavenger kindred and if we can repair and rebuild the wreckage of war that does not always mean that we can use it.”

“Tonight there will be a victory feast and the fallen warriors will be honoured. Those who came to kill us and died have left us the greatest gift, in every cell of every fibre of the meat they leave us is the gift that they leave for our people. When we celebrate we will take that gift, we will thank them for it and we will devour the gift. Then in one K’kop or so a new generation will be born from our victory; a new kindred whose genetic code will unlock the biolocks, a new breed born with the reflexes to fly these things gracefully through the trees. This is how we are. Other races think themselves superior to us because they think themselves cleverer, or wiser, or more brutal than us – but we are kroot and we will feast upon them and adapt and all that we want of them will become us.”

He looked a little dumbfounded, she looked around and saw more of the young hunters drifting closer to listen.

“Never mind, this is the work of shapers and you are too young for that yet. Your time will come as mine did. All you need to know today is that there will be a feast tonight. Pack all these things away safely and when the young come of age you can tell them the story of today and how it is that they can use them when you cannot.”

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The reflection of the gems in his quills in the smooth vidscreen held him for a moment, then he clicked his beak with amusement. This only works when we look the part, he thought to himself, our victims only behave as we want because they think we are nothing more than the greed for trinkets. He scanned the datafile again, the Water Caste merchant had charged plenty for it but knowing your opponent was a priceless advantage. He looked around at his kindred, they had drifted into their

hunting groups and were standing quietly. He could sense the tension in them so with a flick of his clawed finger he opened the ship comms

“Alright brothers and sisters, listen. What we have here is your basic mining colony ripe for the plucking. Only this one is guarded because that piratical so-called rogue trader Xanadar has got everyone on edge with his stupidity. What we have on our side is we’ve got our cousins coming in darkside and in full comms blackout. We all know what that means, they bring the big toys and we bring all the flashy bling so that nobody sees them coming. So put your best warpaint on and look proper fierce because we are going in hot and hard and making lots of noise.”

He paused and then lowered his voice so that they would have to listen harder

“ Then we are getting right back out of trouble and playing keep-away because I don’t want to have to go explain to grandmother why any of you fools got yourself dead. They have Ogryn guards, I do not want to hear that any of you got brave and tried to tangle with them up close. Remember, our job is to keep eyes on us while our slower-witted parents and cousins cut a hole for their big slow machines to get in with big nasty guns. Then we can grab what we want afterwards.”

“ Questions? No? Good.”

“ We feast tonight.”

“Flight deck, expect defensive fire so hit the burners as soon as we come out of the webway. Skim the outside of that artificial atmosphere and we will drop. “

They waited, motionless like the hunters they were. Then the hatch blew and they fell on their prey.

Servitors rushed them, they danced away time and again blazing weapons cutting down the onrushing half-men. A plume of missile contrails was the first sign that his slow cousins had finally got their battlesuits in position, a sign that left the half-machine constructs confused and doomed in the crossfire. Out of the smoke larger forms lumbered forwards, kitted for war with great shields that shrugged off the laser blasts from his brothers. These ogres were what he had come for, the guards hired to protect some useless ores and metals. The chance for a new more mighty kindred that would not need mere servos to wield great weapons of war. Even as he signalled for the feint attack he wondered at the great muscles of these near-humans and a strange feeling awoke in him. He wanted what they had, he hungered for their flesh. Somewhere beyond his hearing, perhaps drowned out by the sounds of battle, a siren voice began to laugh.