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“Got him,” Jarl Esser cried. He knew a fleeting moment of pride at the kill, one less threat to the camp.

“Nice,” Marceline said, not looking up from her work of scraping stone samples from a rock projecting from the jungle floor.

Jarl sighed. Why should she look up? She was a scientist, university trained on Earth itself. What was he but a high school dropout with a knack for mechanics? He hit the recall button and *Red Baron*, the last of his Teckki IX units, flew back to rejoin the dozen other basketball-sized minibots sitting on a nearby rock. The nine-inch hyperwasp that *Red Baron* had just killed tumbled from its pincers into the nearby vegetation. The rest of the squadron of Teckkis had wiped out a nest earlier. Jarl had been on the lookout for any rogue warriors returning late.

Marceline paused and looked up at him as if divining his thoughts. “Seriously, good work Jarl. If it wasn’t for you and your little army, life in the camp would be much rougher.”

Jarl blushed. The university girl was a few years older and it seemed an unbridgeable gap, heightened by the fact he was an undereducated colonial. Still, she was the closest person to his own age in the fifty-being outpost. There was also Barbicane, but the small, blue-skinned elfin alien was male, and hence of far less interest than Marceline.

“Thanks,” he fought a stammer and ran a hand through his thick, rough, blond hair. “I’m working on their “seek and destroy” programs, trying to kick their performance up a notch.”

“The Verminator and his army strike again,” she said with a grin, using the nicknames everyone had given for keeping the camp free of the persistent pests of Arronax V. He didn’t like that nickname except when she used it.

Marceline brushed a stray lock of dark-red hair that had escaped her cap, out of her pale face.

*She was pretty in an unconventional way, Jarl thought, with a face that practically vibrated with intelligence and good humor. Her long straight nose was balanced by full lips.* He was studying her so intently that he missed her next few words and had to ask her to repeat.

“I said that it’s a pity there weren’t better schools on Sherzad. You’re pretty bright, especially for someone who had to teach himself so much.”

Jarl shrugged and picked up a red and silver Teckki. The impeller had cooled off and its pincers were retracted into the ball-shaped body.

“Not much chance of that,” he said with a tinge of bitterness. “Sherzad is damn near a failed colony: crop failures, bad economy and the stasis plague. It was all we could do to keep the basics running, even with Confederation help.

“I was lucky. My dad taught me to read early and I grabbed every book I could when I wasn’t in front of a holo screen.

“Paper books,” Marceline whistled.

“Wood pulp we had,” Jarl said. “Computers and power were rationed.”

Marceline sealed a sample in a plastic bag and stood, brushing dirt off her knees. She was tall, but still a head below Jarl’s gangly two meters. “It must have been very hard growing up there.”

“Ah, others had it far worse,” he said. “At least I got enough to eat out on the farm. I’d have liked to go to one of the military schools, loved military history, but I didn’t have the money or the grades.”

“Still, I kind of ended up with my own little army here. Right, *Red Baron*?” he juggled the red minibot as Marceline laughed. The Teckki unit in his hand bleeped. Jarl checked the scanner hanging from his shoulder. A bloodskeeter was heading for them. “Whoops, back to work for me.”

“Me too,” she said

He tossed the red and silver Teckki into the air. Its impeller cut in. “Ok, *Red Baron*, tallyho.”

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After pulling his minibots in around the camp for night perimeter, Jarl took his dinner plate and looked for company on the hillock overlooking the campsite. He’d posted a flying Teckki and mini-panzer there to keep critters away from the mess tent. The mini-panzer resembled its namesake, turret, treads and all. He’d painted this one dark green and named it, *Patton*.

Marceline was sitting on a camp chair on the hillock. At her side was a critter Jarl’s minibots couldn’t chase away. Dan Stone looked up from the rock he was on and unfortunately not under. Stone was a biologist, handsome, about thirty and from one of the old Centauri colonies.

“Ah, the Verminator,” Stone said, equally glad to see Jarl by his expression.

“Dan was just telling me about an expedition he was on to the Glittering Caves on Mordreth,” Marceline said. “I’ve always wanted to go there.”

Jarl sat down despite Stone’s frown. “No. Arronax is the first off-planet tour for me.”

“Well,” Stone said. “You’re just a kid. I’m sure at some point you’ll go somewhere interesting, perhaps soon even. Shouldn’t you be killing a rat somewhere?”

“Dan,” Marceline protested.

Jarl balled a fist then consciously relaxed it. He knew he couldn’t just hit the older man unless Stone did something physical. *And he doesn’t need to do that*, Jarl thought. *He just makes me look silly with words and probably sillier if I did belt him.*

“Yeah,” Jarl said, standing and picking up his plate. “There’s always work for me to do.”

“Please stay,” Marceline said.

“Boy’s busy,” Stone said. “Besides, two’s company and three’s a crowd.”

Jarl stalked off, noting that for all her protestation, Marceline stayed behind with Stone.

*She’s just being nice to me, he thought. It doesn’t mean anything.*

He dumped his plate in the slop bin and made his way to the utility shed. He kept a bunk in there for when he felt like being alone, which was often. Jarl entered the shed and saw the lines of small machines on the floor and workbench: Teckki aerials, Krupp mini-panzers and a half-dozen amphibious models.

He drew himself up in self-mocking grandeur. “My army, attention.”

The machines whirred and clacked, waving armaments in a salute.

“I command you to seek out and destroy my enemy, Dan Stone, who has stolen your queen. Slay the villain.”

The machines waved their weapons as they searched their IFF datafiles and then stopped when Stone came up as “friend.” They sat inert, an army without a valid target. Jarl shook his head ruefully.

*I wonder if I could change that? Jarl thought. Maybe I can at least reclassify him from friend to off-limits vermin. Of course I wouldn’t actually do it, but it might be an interesting problem.* Jarl grabbed his mini-comp and pulled up the code. He spent the rest of the evening tinkering with it. It kept his mind off the image of Stone locked in an embrace with a willing Marceline.

Morning came and he awoke in the chair in which he’d drifted off. Life on the farm had gotten him used to waking in the predawn. It also gave him first and easy access to the shower. He threw heavier clothes on over his lean form since he planned to extend the “dawn patrol” as he

referred to his morning foray, a little farther from the camp. He could avoid Stone and Marceline that way.

Surrounded by a cloud of multi-colored Teckkis and trailed by four mini-panzers, Jarl set out. He grabbed a sandwich and coffee and walked out to the edge of the campsite.

To his surprise he found an elfin form waiting for him. Barbicane, the slender Drisnian, wore a jungle suit that clashed with his blue skin and gray hair. His sharp featured face and cat's eyes always held a sardonic expression. Jarl was not overly fond of the tart-tongued alien, but he was preferable to other company today.

Barbicane looked up at Jarl. He smiled, showing formidable canines in the delicate face. "Greetings, Verminator."

"Morning," Jarl said. "I was just starting out."

"Somebody always gets it on the dawn patrol," Barbicane intoned.

Jarl snorted a laugh. Barbicane had an unusual fascination with human war films. "More like some thing. Though there's somebody I could wish to see get it." He regretted uttering the words as soon as they left his lips.

"Ah, you refer to Mr. Stone? Your rival for the charms of the ravishing Marceline des Rosiers?"

"Forget I said anything, Barbicane." In an effort to divert the alien, he asked, "Do you find Marceline to be "ravishing?"

Barbicane smiled again. "No. She's too large and gives off all the wrong scents and signals for me. Still, I bear intelligence on the subject of Mr. Stone that you might want to hear."

Against his better judgement, Jarl asked. "What?"

“It seems that when Mr. Stone returned to the bachelor’s quarters last night, he was in a foul mood and sporting what you humans refer to you as a “shiner.”

“Is she alright?” Jarl demanded. If Stone had hurt Marceline, he was about to find out what sort of ass-whipping a colonial boy could deal out.

Barbicanne buffed his elegant, longish claws, a point of pride among his people, on his vest. “I took the liberty of making an inquiry with Mrs. Jessup, who, as you know, keeps minute observations of the camp.”

“Yeah,” Jarl grouched. “Town gossip under cover of being a counselor and psychologist.”

“She told me that Ms. des Rosier returned after ten, also in an ill humor and announced that the male half of your species “sucks” and should be neutered. Further, she was having some reconstituted ice cream and going to bed. Beyond the fact that her hair was slightly mussed, she seemed fine.”

“Barbicanne, my friend,” Jarl put a hand on the alien’s shoulder, “you bear glad tidings.”

“Then you may show your gratitude by escorting me to the swamps so I can collect some pederia. There are an inordinate number of evil creatures there who lust for Drisnian flesh. ”

“Hmnnn,” Jarl said. “A combined arms operations: sea, land and air. That’s no small task that you ask of me. I’ll have to split my forces in the face of an enemy of unknown size and intentions.”

“Your General Lee did it all the time.”

“Our General Custer did it once.”

Barbicanne raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t see that movie.”

“It was called “They died with their boots on.”

“So it did not work out well?”

“I suppose,” Jarl said, “that depends on what side you were on.”

“Doesn’t everything?”

“True. But since you’ve brought me such good news, I guess the least I can do is provide you with an escort.” Jarl pulled up his controller, hanging by a strap from his shoulder and placed a finger into it, making a direct contact so he could subvocalize to his machines.

“*Nautilus* and *Triton*, into the stream and head for Henly pond, provide area security. *Patton*, *Zhukov* and *Dayan* take a section of minipanzers each and provide security for Barbicane and myself. *Red Baron*, *Boyington* and *Sakai* take your sections and fly top cover. All other units slave to your subcontollers and patrol the camp in pattern Delta.”

The bushes rustled as the minipanzers and Teckki globes formed up on them. Jarl saw the meter-long, torpedo shapes of the amphibious units, *Triton* and *Nautilus* stumping toward the stream on crab legs that would retract as soon as they hit water.

Barbicane looked at the minipanzers and the Teckkis flying overhead like so many Christmas ornaments. “Excellent. Now I feel safe. Shall we go?”

The expedition to the swamp was uneventful for Barbicane. But for Jarl it was a campaign. His Teckkis tangled with hyperwasps and bloodskeeters. *Nautilus* fought a dinkagator in the pond, finally stinging it to death with its taser. The minpanzers treaded their way through tigerants, whose sharp pincers actually managed to damage the steel of their treads. Jarl kept Barbicane blissfully ignorant of the bushpig that stalked them until *Dayan* and *Patton* drove it off with flechettes.



They were heading back to camp mid-morning, when a rumble in the sky made them look up. Fortunately they were in a small clearing in the jungle and the canopy had thinned out.

A thousand meters above them, a silvery rocket balanced on a tail of flame. It could have used an impeller to descend but the flame would burn through the forest canopy.

“Recognize the type?” Jarl asked. No Confed ship was due for several months. He knew Barbicane had served for a tour in his planet’s military and had wider experience.

“Yes,” Barbicane said and despite the gulf between their species, there was no mistaking the grimness in his face. “It’s an old Conchirri scoutship. There are no markings on it so it does not belong to any member world of the Confederacy. I suspect it is a Drift Pirate. Our camp is in danger.

“Marceline,” Jarl whispered. “We’ve got to warn the camp.”

Barbicane looked up at him. “Surely they see it.”

Jarl shook his head. “They’re a bunch of academics from the old colonies or Earth itself. Not a soldier or spacer among them. They won’t think, *pirate*.”

Barbicane pulled out his com. “As I suspected, jammed.”

“Come on,” Jarl said. They raced along the path. Both were panting and had outrun the minibots when they reached the small hill over the campsite.

“What are they?” Jarl ducked behind a thick-boled Wexer tree and stared in horror at the camp clearing below. Smoke rose from the lab. Several tents had fallen as five tall black-skinned creatures, with slender limbs and barrel-shaped bodies, chased the scientists and doctors through the camp. They fired police tanglers and lasers.

“Solari,” Barbicane hissed, teeth very much in evidence. “My people have fought them off and on. No one knows their homeworld but it must be well into the Drift. They are insectoid and aggressive.”

“We’ve got to help the camp!”

“With what?” Barbicane snapped. “You’re an untrained boy and I have no weapons.”

A thin red beam lanced out among the fleeing scientists, herding rather than striking.

“As I feared,” Barbicane said. “They seek to capture, either for ransom or for slaves. Such educated minds are quite valuable.”

“Look,” Jarl said, pointing. “Some of our people made it to the wood line.”

“And some did not,” Barbicane cursed in his own language and pointed. Three bodies lay in the field as the five Solari surrounded the other scientists.

“Let’s get down there,” Jarl growled. He clutched his machete in one fist, his ancestor’s Viking blood shouting in his veins.

“We have no chance against them with these,” Barbicane waved his smaller tool.

“Humans cleaned out dire wolves and cave bears without much more.”

“I assume those animals didn’t use lasers and thermal imagers.”

“Nope.”

“Wonderful. We died with our boots on.” But Barbicane stood, and they moved cautiously into dense foliage.

At the bottom of the draw they found Dr. Warren and Vijithilaken in a copse of frond trees. Warren nursed a laser burn on his ribs.

“Jarl. Barbicane!”

“Thank god, you’re alive boy,” Warren said.

“Did anyone else get away?” Vijithilaken asked.

“We don’t know.” Jarl said. “Did either of you see Marceline?”

Both men shook their heads.

“Did the Solari follow you into the jungle?” Barbicane asked, looking behind them.

“The aliens, you mean. You know them?” Warren peered into the woods.

“Yes. Ruthless pirates and brigands. Slavers as well.”

“No,” Vijithilaken managed, “or I would never have made it.”

“Oh, God,” Warren said. “They have our people, our camp, all the food and medicine. Relief isn’t scheduled for months.”

“Our people will be dead or sold by then,” Barbicane said, hanging his head.

A snapping, crackling sound made them all spin in alarm. *Red Baron* floated nearby over the smoking shell of shark-spider.

“Thanks, Baron,” Jarl said automatically.

Barbicane stood suddenly, speaking excitedly in his own language

“What?” Jarl demanded. “Speak Standard.”

“Jarl, can you use your machines to locate any survivors who have escaped and guide them here? Perhaps even keep watch on our enemies?”

Hope flared in him. “Yes, I think so.”

He pulled up his controller and put his finger in to make the link. “Damn, I could use a keyboard and a real computer.” Slowly he altered the programs, trying desperately not to confuse the machines into immobility. He sent the Teckkis into the forest canopy, as far up as their impellers would take them, as the mini-panzers ground down the slope. *Nautilus*, he sent into the shallows by the camp.

Jarl tried to use *Patton's* cameras but the ground's-eye view was too confusing so he switched to *Red Baron*. The camp swam into focus. It was a shambles of burning prefab buildings and cut tents. He saw three bodies, two men and a woman. With a shock he recognized Dr. Jessup. An ashen taste filled his mouth as he recalled having called her a gossip.

A vibe through his controller called his attention back to the present and now, *Patton* had found two more escapees. As luck would have it, one was Dan Stone, the other was a geologist named Regan. Jarl used the small speaker in the min-panzer to order the pair to follow it back to them. He ordered the other units into a line around the camp.

Regan and Stone stumbled into the hollow with the others. Regan limped badly but still had her expensive porta comp riding on her hip. Jarl left them to Barbicane and spied on the camp through his minibots, helplessly watching as the Solari forced their prisoners behind barrier wire in an improvised corral. He finally spotted Marceline. She was unhurt but clearly frightened.

Jarl looked down at the field machete. *Tonight*, he promised himself. *If nothing better can be figured, I'll sneak in tonight.*

"We've got to get moving," he overheard Regan say. "We're still too close to the camp."

"And leave everyone prisoners?" Barbicane demanded.

"What choice do we have?" Stone said. "If we had any weapons..."

"Maybe we do," Jarl said. Seeing Stone brought back an idea.

"What?" Stone said.

"Give me your comp unit," Jarl said to Regan. "I've got an idea." The geologist handed him the unit with a dubious expression.

"What?" Stone repeated.

"Pray tell, General Custer," Barbicane added. "What is this plan?"

“I’ll let you know as soon as I’m sure it’s possible.

“Very well,” Barbicane sniffed. “Be mysterious.”

Jarl sat under a tree a little away from the others. Regan continued to argue for fleeing further, but the others, under Barbicane’s withering tongue, voted to stay. With a few leads from his trouble-pack, Jarl mated the computer and the controller. Though it was risky, he chanced linking to the base server and downloaded the files he’d worked on last night. Then he went to work on the minibots.

The Solari weren’t insects—nothing so big could be- but they weren’t a Confed species and hadn’t been programmed into the machine’s IFF. If he could distort the sensor parameters to make the Solari appear smaller, that, combined with the files he’d worked up in his fantasy of doing away with Stone, might allow the minibots to target the Solari.

An hour later he was wiping sweat from his brow and his hands were shaking but the delicate job of remotely reprogramming was done. “I’ll have to tell Stone how useful planning his murder was.” he muttered to himself.

“Did you say something, kid?” Stone asked.

“Nothing.”

Barbicane came over. The slender Drisnian toted a spear complete with rock point. He had also been busy. “Is your plan finally ready?”

“Yes. Barbicane how many Solari would be in that ship?”

“It is a six-being scoutship. They’ll take any prisoners away in stasis.”

“We’ve seen five at the camp,” Jarl mused. “Do you think they’ll return to the ship?”

Barbicane considered. “More likely the sixth will come to the camp. The ship will be defended by automatics. It would take special equipment to break into its armored hull.”

“Let’s hope, Jarl said. “Everyone gather round...”

Marceline sat next to Professor Corsu, the Okaran scientist and the only other alien in the camp besides Barbicane. The insectoid aliens had been wary of the huge bear-like Okaran. They evidently didn’t recognize the bulky alien as overweight and close to retirement and had bound his hands behind him with a tangler.

“My father would have known what to do,” Corsu said. “He was a hero in the Conchirri War.”

“Yes,” Marceline said. “I remember you telling me.” Everyone had heard Corsu’s stories about his father, whom he worshiped, and how he’d led the defense of his home-city, killing reptilian Conchirri with his bare hands.

“I should have fought,” Corsu said. “Father would have.”

“Then you’d have ended up dead with Jessup, Christo and Langrish.”

“Ah, poor Professor Jessup,” Corsu said. “They killed her and she would never have harmed a fly. She knew I was missing midwinter feast on my home world. Did you know that she made me a mid-winter pie? She wanted me to be Santa Claus in your mid-winter holiday so that I would not be lonely. It was such a good pie...”

Marceline realized with a shock that the huge Okaran was weeping. Tears welled in his huge eyes and rolled off his muzzle.

“Don’t give up hope,” she whispered.

“I should have fought,” he choked out. “My friend lies out there dead. Shot down for running. My father would have fought.” He turned away from her.

To give Corsu a little privacy she moved a bit away. The barrier wire had its light element on and she could see a tall alien studying her through the tracery of thin but lethal wires. She shuddered at its compound eyes. They had not spoken to the prisoners, communicating by gesture and speaking among themselves in a high, chittering tongue. The guard lost interest in her and stumped away.

Marceline sat by the streamside, well away from the wire. A splash attracted her attention and she got ready to run. There were other dangers besides slavers on Arronax V. But it was only one of Jarl’s amphibious minibots. The small, dark gray machine came out of the water slowly.

*God, poor Jarl*, she thought. The young colonist hadn’t been brought in. She didn’t know if he was dead or hiding in the jungle beyond. His minibots were still following their programs in mechanical imbecility. The machine crawled under the barrier wire, picking a low spot and improving it with its pincers. She watched with little interest wondering what the slavers made of it, then realized she was blocking their view of the machine. It started crawling toward her.

“Marceline, are you alright?” Jarl’s voice emanated from the torpedo shape.

*I’m going mad*, she thought, then shook herself. Of course he was using the machines.

“I’m OK,” she said, leaning over and whispering.

“Good. Now pay attention. There isn’t much time.”

Marceline listened as he outlined his plan. “It’s incredibly risky.”

“It’s the only chance,” Jarl said.

She nodded. “Follow me.” She led *Nautilus* to the other scientists. Professor Canavron, the camp’s leader was sitting next to Corsu and Dr Kana.

“I was a fool,” Canavron said for the hundredth time. “I should never have assumed the ship was friendly. You warned me and I should have listened.”

Kana looked at him; a bruise darkened her already dusky skin. “There’s no point in going over that now. We’ve got to organize an escape—”

“Professors,” Marceline interrupted and relayed what Jarl had told her. Even with the minisub as proof, they were at first reluctant to believe her. Others gathered around close enough to hear and to mask the sight of the mini-bot

“Jarl,” Canavron said. “It’s too dangerous. There must be some way to reason with them. Perhaps if we talk to them, try to negotiate—”

Doctor Kana reached across and slapped Canavron once. Everyone stared. Kana looked down at the small machine. “Jarl,” she said. “You’re in charge. Do what you need to do. We’ll be ready.” She stared around as if daring anyone to say otherwise.

“Yes, Jarl,” Corsu rumbled. “Have your machine cut my bonds. We will be ready.”

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In the forest, a mile away, Jarl felt the sickening weight of responsibility fall on his shoulders. It was up to him. If he failed, everyone would surely die. The others, even Barbicane, were looking to him. He closed his eyes long enough for a quick prayer. “OK, let’s go.”

Jarl signaled to his minibots. The minpanzers started forward behind their subcontollers *Patton*, *Zhukov* and *Dayan*. Above them the Teckkis slid forward on silent impellers. In the water near the camp, *Triton* and the other minisubs closed in on *Nautilus*. He slung the computer across his back on an improvised carrier and looked back. Stone and Barbicane stood. The others, too old or injured, were to stay behind.



“Good luck,” Regan called. Then it was time for Jarl to pick up spear and machete and start into the undergrowth.

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Marceline waited in the humid jungle air, the deafening sound of insects singing in her ears. It was well past midnight. The Solari, as Jarl had called them, seemed to be diurnal, with three going to sleep in the barracks and the other three guarding them. There’d been only one incident, a bushpig had raced into the camp, only to be shot by a guard. The aliens had gathered round, seeming amused by the creature’s charge.

Kana gestured at her watch. Everyone shut their eyes.

It seemed like forever, but suddenly the light element flared and sparked out in the barrier wire as the *Nautilus* and *Triton* cut the power cables. They could only hope the Solari’s night vision worked like a humans’ did.

Marceline opened her eyes, and joined the others in a rush for the machine shed. The guards shrieked in alarm and fired off a few wild shots. A man in front of Marceline went down with a cry and she fell headlong over him.

Minibots streaked out of the forest canopy as the mini-panzers charged from the undergrowth. The softball-like Teckkis dove at the Solari, pincers open and tasers sparking, while the minipanzers added steel darts to the fray. The machines gave the humans cover to reach the buildings, and the tools waiting to be made into makeshift weapons.

Corsu rose with an ear-shattering roar and lunged for the nearest Solari. Before the alien, stunned by the sheer volume of Corsu’s voice, could fire again, the Okaran crashed into the spindly Solari, wrapping his huge furred arms around the slaver. They rolled on the ground, battling back and forth. Corsu slammed his fist down on the Solari with a sound like an axe hitting wood. The

slaver managed another shot that crisped the fur on Corsu's side. But the old professor had buried his teeth in the alien's shoulder. He twisted the laser out of the Solari's grip but could not hold on to the weapon. They fought to a standing position, then Corsu, with a final mighty effort, lifted the Solari in a bear hug. With a sickening crack, the alien's bones snapped. It gave a high, warbling shriek and flopped lifeless to the ground.

But Corsu fell to his knees, clutching his chest.

"Professor!" Marceline screamed, scrambling toward the toppling Okaran. Corsu dropped over backward just as Marceline reached him.

"Did I get him?" he huffed; fists balled against his furred ribs.

"Yes, yes," she said. "Don't try to talk. I'll get help."

The Okaran's breath came in great gasps. "No child. It is too late. My heart..."

"Stay with me," she said.

"Alas, that I cannot. But do not worry, child. I will be with my father tonight and he will be proud of me. We shall see Mrs. Jessup and have some pie. It was such a good pie." His big eyes closed and his hands slid down to his sides.

Two Solari fled past Marceline. The leading one made it into the woods. The other went into the stream as humans armed with shovels and mattocks pursued. The Solari batted at a Teckki buzzing it then fired its laser at the charging humans, who scattered.

Suddenly the water around the Solari flashed. It shrilled in pain and fell. As the Solari thrashed and tossed in the shallows, Marceline could see two of Jarl's amphibians worry it with pincer and tasers. The water, lit by the electrical discharges, reddened.

*I won't feel a moment's pity,* Marceline thought. *I won't.* She put her face on Corfu's chest and wept

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Plugged into his augmented controller, Jarl sweated as he directed his machines in the desperate fight for the camp. He'd accounted for the three guards but three more Solari burst out of the barracks.

Jarl sent a wave of minpanzers and Teckkis straight at them to cover the running humans. Red lasers winked at the machines. The bright yellow Teckki, *Sakai*, exploded.

*Dayan* began to grind in a circle with a tread shot off. But the minipanzer's turrets spat back slugs and flechettes. The Teckki's pincers extended from their round bodies and cut into Solari flesh and armor as their tasers shocked away, driving the aliens to their knees. The machines pressed forward in dispassionate butchery. One Solari fell and another fled right into a volley of flares from the humans in the shed. It caught on fire and stumbled on a few steps further before collapsing. Suddenly Jarl lost the image as *Patton* took a hit.

Jarl switched to *Red Baron* but lost control of the battle for precious seconds.

"Damn," Jarl said, as *Red Baron* updated him. "A Solari broke away. He's heading for the ship. I'm calling the Teckkis, they're the only things that have a chance of catching him but there are only five still working. *Red Baron* is closest, but I'm not gaining on him."

"He must not make it to the vessel," Barbicane swore. "Come, follow me."

"Let the machines do it," Stone said. "It's too dangerous."

"We can't take the chance," Jarl said.

"Enough," Barbicane snarled, "are mechanical toys to do all our fighting for us? I have colleagues dead, cut down without mercy as they fled, and no avenging blow struck by me. Never!" Barbicane shook his spear at the amazed humans. "It will not pass me." He dashed off down the path.

Without looking at Stone, Jarl snatched up his weapons and raced after his suddenly warlike friend. “Damn it, Barbicane, wait up.”

He almost ran into the Drisnian.

“The path,” Barbicane said. “Cross it. We will take him from both sides.”

Jarl crossed over, looking nervously down the path. Nothing yet. He checked his controller. Most of the minibots were down, destroyed or damaged. The active ones were on their way to him. He hoped they could make it in time.

They couldn't. A Solari raced down the path, its long legs eating up ground. As it reached them, Barbicane lunged out, his Neolithic weapon burying itself in the alien's middle. The Solari shrielled and grabbed hold of the spear with one limb and brought the laser up.

Jarl howled, as his ancestors had once done leaping from longboats, and flung his weapon. The thrown spear missed but fouled the alien's gun-arm and its shot missed Barbicane, who let go of his own spear and rolled away. Jarl's desperate swing with his ceramic-bladed machete connected, but it only shattered on the Solari's helmet. He ran full tilt into the alien. It was like hitting a wall.

The Solari pulled out Barbicane's spear and turned toward Jarl. He grappled with the thing's gun arm, which felt like a hydraulic press. Barbicane charged back, only to be felled by a kick from the Solari. The laser's barrel turned toward Jarl.

The Solari jerked and shrieked. *Red Baron* looped back and bounced off the Solari's head, tasers sparking and pincers snapping.

Jarl reversed his grip on the alien's gun arm and the creature overbalanced, flipped over his shoulder. The laser flew off into the brush. He kicked the Solari in its compound eyes as it

struggled to rise, then snatched up the spear he'd thrown before and slammed it down with all his remaining strength. The alien gave a ghastly cry, limbs twitching like a dying spider, then fell still.

Jarl put his head back, "Yeeeeaaaahhhhhh!" All the pain and humiliation of a hardscabble lifetime went into that scream. It spiraled up until his throat went raw.

"Well done," Barbicane huffed painfully, both arms wrapped around his middle. "Our friends are avenged and we will live to tell about it."

Jarl looked away from the dead Solari. He knew he was supposed to feel nauseated, sad, or something. All he felt was tired. He leaned against a tree and checked his controller. The sturdy field unit was working but the interface was fuzzy with damage. Only three of his minibots still functioned but they told him two critical things. The other Solari were dead and accounted for, and Marceline was alive. He saw other Confed bodies lying still in the camp. The battle had not been one-sided after all.

A shriek split the humid jungle air. *Red Baron* sped off toward the sound. "More enemies?" Barbicane demanded, as he reached for his spear.

"No," Jarl said a few seconds later, his hand on the bedbug controller. "According to the *Baron*, Mr. Stone has stumbled into some leech-frogs."

"Ah," Barbicane said, "something that would not have happened had he fought beside us."

"Clearly."

"How unfortunate for him."

Another scream sounded.

"Guess I better let the *Baron* help him," Jarl said.

"If you feel you must," Barbicane leaned on his spear. "I would let him sicken the leeches."

\*

The next day, a weary Jarl sat on the hillock outside his shop. He'd worked through the night to get half of his units working. Pirates or no, the critters of Arronax remained hungry. Truth was, he was too keyed up to sleep. He'd killed for the first time and the boy he'd been seemed a million miles away. He was already beginning to miss that more innocent self. He looked up at the sound of footsteps on grass. Marceline.

She limped up and sat next to him. Her hair was a wreck and she was paler than usual.

"How are you?" he asked, after she remained silent.

"Not so good," she said. "They brought in Professors Jessup, Christo and Langrish. The biologists got them out of the swamp. Said it would be easier for them. I saw the bodies from a distance..." she gagged.

Jarl put an arm around her, wishing he knew what to say or do.

"We put them with Corsu and the others." she continued, shaking her head slowly.

"Everybody else, OK?"

"Dr. Kana's doing better with her burn. Stone," Marceline grimaced, "is still complaining that you left him to the leech-frogs."

"Do you believe that?"

"No, Jarl. You wouldn't do that."

"I might," he gave her a direct look. "I was jealous of him."

Marceline looked back. "You know you're too young for me."

"Not smart enough either," he said.

"Well, I don't know about that," she said. "But let me further your education in one area."

She leaned forward and kissed him. It was like inhaling champagne.

“You going to study hard?” she teased.

For an answer he kissed her.

The End