***No Escape***

Kuarek jai Kolpruum could see a resemblance in Augua’tah to his home of Kalee. The air was thick with humidity, and the land masses covered in sand and tropical flora. The island that his battalion occupied was a strategic one that had been cleared of the local humans, Nautolans, and Ongree who had settled the area. Shunted to the fringe beaches and artificial, surf-battered platforms, these beings were relegated to labor duties for the garrison when they weren’t bartering amongst themselves.

It was a waste of time, the warrior thought as he regarded their settlement from atop a shaded rise in the sandy turf, broad-leafed trees swaying gently in the breeze. The shadows from the sunlight that eked its way through the thick, cloudy atmosphere, played over the soldier’s cloak and bone helmet, making the artful red paint that adorned the natural armor all the more intimidating to look upon.

A Kaleesh was a warrior, first and foremost, and Kuarek was no exception to this rule; a fact that he took quiet pride in. The large defensive ion cannon behind him; the duracrete fortress with its turbolaser and laser cannon batteries; they were all meaningless without those of his caste.

*“Kuarek jai Kolpruum, the patrol is returning. Nothing to report. How fares your reconnaissance?”*

He drew a hand to the radio earpiece to respond to the party that he had left the bastion with for the routine patrols. “Nothing to report; just the same as normal here on the beach.”

*“Understood. Try not to be too long.”*

“I won’t,” he said, closing the comm link. The other Kaleesh had retained their honor and pride within this Dominion, but their methods were strict and sterile. Even if it was pointless, these patrols were a way for his people to escape the cold confines of the fortress and practice what were coming to be called “the old ways.”

It was a heavy sigh that finally broke him away from the freedom of the beach view and the warmth of the jungle, turning to return to the barracks and the slate gray walls. The toughened leather of his feet had touched earth no more than a dozen times when the general comm channel came to life in his ear.

*“Contact, eighty kilometers. Unidentified single vessel on direct course for the island. Guns, track target. Send fighters to intercept.”*

The deep *crack* of the cannons began to echo through the trees, a slight shudder in the ground as the anti-air fire intensified. If the Dominion had one thing in spades, it was their technology, and Kuarek was confident in their ability to destroy one lone vessel. After several long moments though, the sounds of the bastion’s guns seemed to fall silent for half a heartbeat.

*“Incoming orbital fire!”*

In the next moment, the sky itself seemed to grow a sickening mixture of green and red as holes seemed to spread wide like some great creature’s maw to spew forth deadly flashes of energy. These holes in the clouds became a pox on the sky-borne water vapor as the first opening was quickly joined by dozens more. No longer was the deafening noise from the Dominion cannons, their almost melodic snap replaced by the deafening booms of high explosive impact on the island’s surface. The forest was ripped asunder, the foliage bursting into flam against the superheated energies’ influence.

All this after only two steps since the screech over the comms unit.

A nearby shot took the Kaleesh warrior off his feet, the shockwave toppling tree trunks and sending shards of vegetation and burning wood pulp into the swirling air. Only narrowly did he avoid being crushed by a falling palm, still supine in the soft, sandy dirt. A swathe had been torn through the trees, and he could see the bastion’s ion cannon attempting to reposition itself on the assailant, the shimmer of the energy shields quickly clawing up from the ground to protect the garrison. *We may yet survive this*, he thought, only to see his prediction shatter as a series of energy streaks tore through the fragile superstructure of the ion cannon. The fire of the explosion seemed to fill the whole of the interior of the bastion, while the barrel of the cannon was launched over the walls, red bubbling metal trailing behind as it crashed into a distant part of the forest.

*What is this madness?* As the bombardment subsided, a new menace trailed through the clouds: burning wreckage from large spacecraft tore through the clouds, careening into the water and island alike in sickening crashes. Those that hit the water exploded in a cloud of steam as the superheated metal broke apart on contact with the cool waves, while the pieces that made landfall set alight fresh fires in the sweltering forest.

On a whim, the soldier shot a glance over his shoulder to the civilian settlement and noted that, aside from falling debris, it had taken little to no damage. *They avoided the civilians? So that is their game.* If he could so much as find a few more of his brethren, then Kuarek knew he could hold of this “hearts and minds” campaign that he could see in his mind’s eye. Collecting up his rifle, he took to his feet and made quick progress through the forest toward what remained of the Dominion fortress. Embers and ash alike flitted through the air, eerily like snow, while the sounds of waves on the distant shores beat against the island with furious violence from the large pieces of wreckage that had disturbed the waters.

Within his wiry frame, he could feel his blood boiling as the excitement grew. This was the sort of conflict only heard of in stories and songs among the Kaleesh tribes. The stuff of legends; of gods. Despite the fear of something crashing down on his head, the warrior reveled at the opportunity laid before him.

Arriving at the bastion, however, Kuarek quickly discovered this battle might be somewhat harder won than he anticipated. The duracrete walls were shattered, leaving gaping holes in the defenses, and only a few remaining cannons even remotely serviceable, none of which had any sort of viable target. The other structures had fared no better, the skeletal remains of the ion cannon serving as an awesome backdrop to the burning shells of the barracks and armories that had only minutes earlier been so neatly arranged and bustling with life. The only life within there now was a bedraggled handful of the Dominion’s favored peoples, most bloody, and many missing at least one leg or arm. Most were mere corpses that littered the area in various states and contortions.

The sight of two other Kaleesh of his patrol gave Kuarek fresh hope, and they half ran, half limped toward him. “You survived!”

“You as well, I see.”

“That ship they were tracking… It was no strike craft. It was a scout, sighting in the orbital guns.”

“How did they get this close?” the other warrior asked no one in particular.

“What matters is that they are here, and thus we have a battle to fight.”

The duo nodded. “The ship was moving for the beach last we saw, but with all the smoke and steam, and the systems hit in the bombardment, it was difficult to tell.”

“Let’s not waste time, then,” Kuarek said, raising his rifle in a gesture that beckoned the others to follow.

It was difficult going, with the forest burning around them and smoke choking the already thick, humid air. It dulled their senses that would have otherwise been keen and able to sense their foe long before the enemy would see or hear them. He motioned the others to spread out as they approached the beach, checking the ammunition in his slugthrower as they neared the end of the tree line – or at least, what was left of it.

Clear as day, the ship was sitting squat on the beach: a small shuttle with over a dozen soldiers that the warriors recognized as part of the Sadowan war host. They had all received the briefings from the Dominion higher-ups, and knew what to look for.

*Easy prey*, Kuarek thought as he quickly sighted his rifle and fired.

One soldier fell in a heap, yet when his fellows turned to face the shooter, the other two Kaleesh closed the distance with their Lig swords and Shoni spears. Among the throng, blasters rang out, and one of the warriors was felled with an acute burst of fire from one of the offworlders. The other Kaleesh tore through three of the Sadowan troops before they could even properly react, covered with careful shots from the woods. It was only a concentrated fusillade of counter-fire that stalled Kuarek’s actions. It was enough for the invaders to draw away from the melee and bring down the other warrior with close-range blaster fire.

Now alone, Kuarek cursed himself for being so rash, offering a quick prayer that his brethren would ascend to the heavens easily while he turned and ran to the shelter of the woods and the fire. The air was uncomfortable under his bone mask, as the very temperature of the gas seared his lungs, but there was nowhere else to go to fight this desperate battle.

“The team is landed,” he heard a female voice from the beach as he ducked behind a tree. “I’ve got troops down that need immediate medical attention. I’m leaving the medics here while the rest of us move in to secure the stronghold.”

*That’s right*, he thought, his breath becoming a quiet, pained wheeze, *walk right to me and meet your fate.* No sooner had the warrior leveled his rifle than he saw the silhouette of the female. He grinned beneath his mask, but the woman dove behind her own tree just as he pulled the trigger. Another pair of the invaders’ soldiers breached the rise off the beach and fired their blasters at where they thought they had seen the muzzle flash, only to hit wide of where Kuarek was. The smaller one went down with a yelp that had the air of femininity, while the other yelled in a voice that had more depth to it. Kuarek’s senses were finally acclimating to the fires.

A soft breeze sifted through the remains of the jungle, and a shift in the scents turned the warrior’s attention. A brief moment of surprise erupted when a massive shard of metal crashed into the woods only a few dozen meters away, sending up a shockwave of heat and shrapnel – both natural and artificial. It was through this shockwave that the Sadowan soldier that he had heard charged forward, trying to catch the Kaleesh off-guard. It was a vain attempt, as he stepped aside and, in drawing his Lig sword, swiped away the bayonet-tipped muzzle of the human’s blaster. He was about to bring the blade back across the soldier’s spine, but was forced to dodge at the sight of a red energy bolt in his peripheral vision.

He could hear the footsteps of the other soldiers fanning out, but they weren’t concerned with this fight. Their goal was the stronghold. Another burst of orbital fire came down in the center of the distant structure, leaving Kuarek to wonder how much of a fight the invaders would even find. *No more of these games.* He spun, bringing the sword around in a sickening arc to slice down to the bone of the man’s thigh, taking a blaster from the hidden assailant in a shoulder blade.

Ignoring the flames, the wounded soldier, and falling debris alike, the warrior moved through the once lush jungle floor, now reduced to ash and green fragments, toward this nuisance. *Fight me, coward, and see your invasion fall.* Another shot rang out, but the impervium of his sword only glowed hot on the flat of his impervium blade.

“Fight me!”

Almost as though answering his call, the female stepped out from behind her tree, less than fifty meters away, sighting down her blaster with cold, steely eyes. His heart beat at its fastest since the battle’s start, breaking into a charge at the apparent mercenary – judging by the attire. The woman fired, but as he moved to block, Kuarek realized that it was not him that she was aiming at. The burning branch that landed on him, searing his flesh and stinging his eyes behind the bone mask, was her true target.

The Kaleesh kept charging despite the pain, honing in on her through his infrared vision rather than normal sight, but the woman ducked under him, tripping up his legs with a solid strike to his shins with the stock of her rifle. The fresh pain sent him sprawling, but he moved to recover with the practiced grace of his people. It mattered little, as he felt his sword hand burst to shreds as his opponent shot it away.

When his eyes finally adjusted, he could see the woman in all her features – red skin and short, dark hair – standing over him with the muzzle of her weapon indicating just how quick his death would be if he continued to fight. Beyond her, in the swirling skies of Agua’tah, whole ships were falling from the sky, while distant flickers of light showed other islands falling under the same trap as his bastion had. The clouds themselves were sending forth a storm of fire and death, and Kuarek suddenly found the Dominion to be a poor umbrella. It seemed almost a relief when his vision began to cloud and the world grew dimmer, the pain in his shoulder revealing itself for the mortal wound it was. That foolish charge of his had only hastened his death.

“This is Qek-Aurek-one-four-three-six-niner,” the Zeltron said over her comm unit. “My team is landed and taking the fortifications. The others of the Shroud should be completing their own sorties soon.” Her eyes turned away from the movements of her troops and back to the Kaleesh, noticing his imminent departure. “Frack! Medic!”

She was almost tender, how she cradled the warrior’s head, screaming for a medic. The Kaleesh knew she did not truly care for his life; he was more valuable alive, as a prisoner. Still, it seemed all to peaceful, staring into her features that suddenly seemed so pretty, while the world about and sky above burned.