

The Warriors' Goodbye

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Miseo N'Benga was blind from the day the canopy on her fighter got hit by a Vasudan laser. The cabin slowly leaked air for 6 hours it took the rescue party to find her disabled ship, and the lack of oxygen did its dirty deed. In her early 30-ies, one of the best pilot on the GTC Invincible, her life was all but finished. Her hate for the Vasudan was so great that, after the peace treaty, she was sent to a post as far as possible from any possible Vasudan contact.

As war with Shivans progressed badly for Humans and Vasudans, Miseo smoldered with impatience, stuck as a commander in a repair and R&R facility on planet Clavius in Betelguse system. Nothing much happened there, except for an occasional visit from some GTD or a scout vessel in need for repair and rest for her crew. Her brain was somewhat patched with one of early cyber-neuro chips, so she had 40% vision in black and white, but that was enough for backwater post officer, so the upgrade she was scheduled for never took place.

"Damn!", a small handheld computer slammed on the far wall of her office. Seconds later she pressed the comm button on her desk. "All officers in CO's room, on the double!"

Five minutes later the four men, Francois Jarreau, Defence officer, Valerii Solovinski, Chief Medical officer, Jamal Sangoq, Chief maintenance, and supply officer, and Mark Francis, Miseo's First officer looked across the desk at a 34 year old, tall black-oriental woman with long red hair, and almost unseeing green eyes.

"I just got", she addressed them, anger clearly drawn on her once lovely face," a message from our half assed HQ. It seems that the Shivs have blasted some Vasudan planet, and the rescued are being sent here, because it's closest, and we have enough space for the bastards. Mark, you'll handle the Vasudans. You all understand why I do not have the heartiest wish to see the gray things near me." The men nodded understandingly. Rarely you could find a human who wasn't afflicted with hate or at least distrust for Vasudans. Fourteen years was a long time, and a couple of months of forced friendship wasn't enough for old wounds to heal, so the officers left the room silently, as Miseo went to the window. Oh how she wanted to see the orange colors of the glorious sunsets on Clavius, the warm yellow rays falling on her hands, and not only another shade of gray for her eyes. She pressed her forehead against the glass, as tears streamed down her cheeks.

The leader of Vasudans was, as Mark Francis found out, a towering gray male, wounded in the last disaster that befell his people, and with a prosthetic leg which dated from some time ago. He was the first to emerge from the shuttle, curious faces of children crowding the door behind his back. Mark was shocked to see quite a few human kids among them, communicating with their alien peers with excitement and fear on their faces.

"Sar'aah", introduced himself the Vasudan leader, "once before in the rank of lieutenant colonel in the Vasudan Navy, now just the self appointed leader of the remnants of a joined Human – Vasudan colony on Galatheos Prime." He stuck his hand out, and Mark found it easy enough to shake the hand of this alien. Sar'aah was speaking without the translator, his voice thick with alien sounds, but he was clearly trying and doing a fine job of it.

"Commander Mark Francis, sir. I'll show you and your people to the accommodations we prepared." He stepped aside pointing at the barracks with his hand. Not being able to precisely read alien facial expression, he guessed Sar'aah was surprised.

"A Commander. Hmmm, and your commanding officer was.."

“Lieutenant Colonel Miseo N’Benga send you her regards, and regrets that she wasn’t able to welcome you herself.”

“Thank her on the hospitality in my name, Commander. But tell me, how come a lieutenant colonel commands this place, I mean...” the Vasudan was puzzled, and stopped in mid-walk as they entered the building complex.

Mark interrupted him for the second time. “The rank is purely honorary, she would not be able to conduct any combat missions, no more than you would, sir.”

“Oh, I see. In the face of one own’s misfortune, one tends to forget the sorrow Shivans spread all over the Universe.”

“I’m sorry to say that she was incapacitated before Shivans came into picture, if you know what I mean, sir”, Mark stressed the last word trying to shame the alien into stopping his questions.

“Ah, a companion of mine, as I too am the veteran of that sorrowful 14 year mistake. Now I really would like to meet her.”

“I’ll see what can be done about that...”, Mark started.

“...but you doubt it. I understand.” Not so alien as I expected, thought Mark, as the Sar’aah turned away to organize the distribution of rooms among, as Mark now saw, a group that mainly consisted of Human and Vasudan children.

Two days later, however, the meeting took place. Sar’aah knocked on the door of Miseo’s office, and she stiffened as he squeezed his skeletal shape in.

“What is the meaning of this?” She jumped back from the table, almost overturning the chair. “You, you...” her face went deadly pale.

“First of all, I came to pay my respects. It is most unfortunate that you and I have to meet under these circumstances, I guess behind the stick of a fighter craft would be more appropriate. However, the people that I brought from our devastated planet are running short on supplies.”

Miseo had regained some sort of composure, but her lips were still trembling with rage and hate. “So, Vasudan, what can I do?”

“Please, Colonel, or Sar’aah, would be enough.” One of the things that shook her the most was that this Vasudan spoke better standard English than most of the people Miseo knew, and he wasn’t even using the translator. The tall alien somehow sat in the chair opposing her, his prosthetic leg an island of white plastic amidst gray bark-like skin.

“Look, colonel, I know you suffered a great deal, and Vasudans are the ones to blame for that, but don’t you think we have the same grudges against Humans. Have you not killed us the same way we killed you. Have our loved ones not died in your raiding parties that destroyed transports, not bothering to scan them for signs of life. I for one lost my whole family that way. And I can claim more than 30 lives of human pilots after that. So imagine my horror when finally you and us found out that the reason for beginning the war was a stupid misunderstanding. My way after that was the one of atonement, trying to build bridges, not to burn them. Can you not forgive us, the way we forgive you.”

The long monologue gave Miseo time to gather her wits. Although she hated the guts of the creature in front of her, he had some points. The war they were fighting together, was much more horrible than the one they fought against each other. The half mechanical creatures called Shivans had no other purpose than total destruction of life. And there were human children in the camp, this Vasudan saved from the ashes of Galatheos Prime.

“The forgiving part may take much longer for some of us. However the things at hand first. Shivans are closing the shipping routes. The last transport came three days ago, and we share the same fate, Colonel. Trust me, I’m not holding back on you.”

“Us talking is bigger reason for me to come, than to complain. I wanted to offer whatever assistance a couple of us elders in the group can give you. Maybe some farming, or maintenance; a couple of my males were in the army, and know about machines.”

“Colonel, thank you for your offer, but ... I don’t...”, she hesitated. “Well OK, we would need some help in hydroponic farms now that we have more mouths to feed.”

He stood up. “Thank you. I’ll coordinate with your Commander, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll be grateful, colonel.”

As the Vasudan went out, she started to shake slightly, from the amount of self-control she had to exert. Yet it was destined for them to meet the same evening. The Shivans have jumped into the system at the same time the purple sun went behind the mountain ridges to the east of the compound.

Human officers were gathered around the holographic representation of the system as Sar’aah came in with one of the younger Vasudans.

“Sar’aah.” Miseo acknowledged his arrival with the slight nod of her head.

“Colonel, this is a sad occasion to meet. This is Kn’bith, he will be my legs. If you allow me, I’ll stay here, I’m not good at walking these days.”

Not believing, the humans saw a smile on alien’s face.

“If the situation was different, I would not have you on this planet, colonel. But it is not, and we’re all stuck here. I... we all need your expertise.”

“How can I help you?”

“Shivans destroyed your planet. How did they do it. We have no delusions that they will destroy the repair station. Hell, there are only five fighters out there, and they disobeyed my orders to head for the jump point. The fools are rushing to face the Shivans, and although I believe in heroics, five Athena fighters against a Lucifer class destroyer... you see my point.”

“Yes, I do. Now, to the business at hand. Shivans bombarded Galatheos Prime with some sort of energy weapons that vaporized all organic tissue.”

“Yes, but you escaped. How?”

“Your concept of luck played a role. And of course we too believe in heroes. The remnants of ours and your fighter squadrons put up a desperate fight to allow us to get to the jump point. No help there in this case, I’m afraid.”

Mark jumped in. “The communications are cut off, we can’t call for help...”, the communicator on the table blared to life:

“This is Petra Carlei from GTT Poseidon. The Shivans are attacking the station. We are coming down, I need landing coordinates!”

Mark grabbed the communicator and guided the transporter down as the rest of them talked about taking the personnel from the base to the mountains.

The morning found the bunch of humans and aliens on the way from the valley in which the camp was set. Children, both Human and Vasudan, on the run again after only a couple of days, made much less noise Miseo expected, the older ones helping in carrying food and weapons they were able to take from the facility. Lieutenant Carlei, before landing high in the hills informed them that the Lucifer was pulling out from the orbit, towards the jump point. That was no relief, they clearly saw burning trails of descending ships up in the sky.

“What the hell are they doing?”, wondered security officer Jarreau.

“Invasion”, said Sar’ aah. The word chilled them to the bone. “Until today they tried with orbital bombardment, and there were always some survivors who managed to escape. I guess they will try something different this time. This is a small enough place, and they will have to train their troops in gravity.”

“Then we’ll have to organize some kind of defense. Jarreau, does anyone know anything about ground combat?”, obviously Miseo was at her best in crisis situations.

“We have enough pulse/projection rifles for all of us. But, we do not have any ground and air support. The good part is that no one saw any Shivan atmospheric crafts. We’ll have to find good place to fortify ourselves, to make them come at us in small numbers.”

“Ok, the fifty of us will fortify in a suitable position. Valerii, you’ll take the children and move to the north. GTT Poseidon is somewhere there, try to meet with them and wait, maybe you’ll have the chance to make it for the jump point.”

“But..”

“No buts, you’re not a combat officer..”

“Yes but I’m trained medical officer..”

She took him by the upper part of his arm and led him away a couple of paces.

“Do you really think we will need a doctor?”

“Well ..”

“Exactly, we’re doing this for the children, so they could have a life we did not. I need to have a person I can trust in charge of them, so I could use my mind elsewhere. That makes the volunteer, soldier. Pack up and be ready to go in 10 minutes. I’ll talk with Sar’ aah to send one of the Vasudans

with you to take care of the alien kids, but you to are it.”

“Yes, mam!”, the blond Russian saluted this brave woman.

Their plans went in literal smoke, as new Shivan assault craft started landing south of Poseidon’s position. Lieutenant Carlei was still on the air, so they haven’t found her yet, but any hope of getting there was shattered.

“OK, we’re it”, Miseo concluded, sitting in a cave they found at the end of a steep gulley. The cliffs on both sides rose hundreds of meters vertically up, narrowing at the bottom to a passage barely suited for one man. She has sent a Vasudan up to post as a scout, and to let them know when the Shivs started coming for them. Then she made provisions for the children, and with Sar’aah and Mark organized a defense plan, distributed what little provisions they had and fell exhausted to the ground. As Sar’aah approached, she managed a faint smile.

“I guess you’re stuck with us. From the pan and into the fire, if you know...”

“Yes I know your proverb, we too have many like yours but they will lose much in translation. To tell you another thing, I’d rather be here with you, than ...”

“Now you’re lying.”

“No, I’m a warrior. My wound has put me out of action for good, and I was prepared, but not content, to die a civilian death. Then we met. I know you hate me as much as a person can, but in spite of all that you did everything you could for us and our children. If that’s the way you treat your enemies, you must be formidable with your friends, and the next days would be a great shame, because you know as well as I do that no one would walk out of here alive. That is why I say what I do. I do not know any other being I would rather have the honor to die alongside.”

“I appreciate your belief in me, but get this: I don’t intend to die, and I intend to keep everyone I can alive, including you, so don’t try any suicidal stunts, like those Hammer of Light fanatics. My ancestors were big into fanaticism, and believed in sacrificing oneself for the greater ideals. These children, and believe me I’m doing this not for anyone else, but for the children, deserve to have better luck than we did. Getting killed does not help that cause.”

The Vasudan straightened up, towering over her full half meter, and saluted, human style.

“Yes, mam!”

“Cut that! We need to get some rest. Can you organize the watch, I believe my eyes are closing by themselves.”

“Of course”, he said. Yet he did not leave immediately, but waited until she was soundly asleep, then covered her with one of the few blankets they had.

“How sad“, he muttered in Vasudan, “that the human like this is so wounded in her body and soul that the scars hinder the person that is so formidable.”

They came at night. Silently scraping along countryside on their five mechanical legs, their sensors scanning for any trace of warmth a body emits. Their brains programmed to kill anything alive, in need for more brains to power the millions of mechanical shells that awaited at their home planet. Shivans were sterile, the only way to reproduce a race was deeply etched in their programming.

KILL, GET NEW BRAINS, REPROGRAM THEM. Humans and Vasudan were only a minor irritation to the Main Consciousness, the mother of all Shivan thought, and action. She had met many before and slaughtered them, then incorporated their brains and knowledge into her race of mechanical monsters. But these were not the same as the others. They were vital, they committed numerous acts of unbelievable courage and self-sacrifice to stop her. And they were almost succeeding. The number of fresh brains was running low, the old ones being destroyed by these puny little creatures in great numbers every day. So she had to change tactics. She had to get live Humans to fuel the shells, so their knowledge could be used against others from their race.

This planet was far away from the main battlefields, poorly defended, and she ordered her minions to change tactics. Ground assault. Kill almost everyone, but get me live human specimen.

Miseo woke up with the sound of pulse rifles playing their deadly song. As she jumped up, Sar'aah was at her side with a rifle in his hands.

"Here", he tossed her the gun, "the Shivans are coming, and we were wrong. Their legs are strong enough to climb cliffs.

Miseo checked the battery pack, and it was full." Let's go kill us some Shivan bastards." Then she turned to the Vasudan. "I think you never expected to finish fighting in the dust when you joined your fleet. It was so clinical to fly a fighter, newer saw no blood, no mess."

Vasudan nodded. "I take it as it comes, colonel. Maybe this is a good day to die, maybe not. But it would be in glorious company."

Shivans came, and came, and came again. The diminishing group of defenders killed them by dozen, then hundreds as hours passed by. Mark dismantled one of the Shivan corpses to get to the power source, and managed to convert it for use on pulse rifles. But the horror this time was in Vasudan faces. The brain in the mechanical carcass, punctured and oozing into the dirt was the one they knew too well, one of their own. Sar'aah told that to Miseo.

"Bastards, they must be after us. Someone should tell that to the Alliance." Then she had to stop, because Shivans came again. The creatures stepped, moving jerkily over the bodies of their comrades, shooting balls of light at the defenders. Miseo aimed at one and one of it's legs disappeared in blaze, but the thing came on. She continued cutting him to pieces, but it took such a long time for one of them to finally die, and when they came close, the horrible light blades cut through everything, metal, stone, flesh and bone.

"Die, bastards" Sar'aah yelled, his rifle blazing, and looking at him Miseo understood how great a fighter he must have been in his time, and how great a person he is to subdue that in himself and be a gentle Vasudan he is.

When the things pulled back this time there were only 25 left of them. "We won't stand till the night", Mark said. One Shivan has cut him on his left hand, but only the skin was lacerated, and then Mark has sent him to hell with a direct blast to the brain casing. As Valerii was patching him up, his communicator burst to life.

"Carlei here. They are moving south towards your position. Thank god, I was ready to blow Poseidon up, so they wouldn't get my cargo."

"What are you carrying?"

"I have a reload of Tsunamis for the bombers from GTD Bastion. It was scheduled to arrive in a

couple of days.”

“That’ll be a couple of days too late for us, soldier.” ,Miseo has taken over the communicator. Her hair was a mess, singed in a few places, going white in others, her face a black and white mask of mud and tears. “Have you seen any Shivan atmospheric fighters?”

“No they seem not to have atmospheric capability.”

“Now, lieutenant, this is not an order. You can refuse. But I would like you to fly recon for us, see what the bastards are up to at their landing site.”

“I’m already up.”

“You don’t have to do this!”

“Hell, girl, I just got this job because I was recuperating from a wound I got at Vasuda Prime, when we tried to defend it. My real post is behind the stick of a fighter. Carlei, out.”

Miseo’s head dropped to her chest. “Another crazy flier. I wonder if there is anybody normal out there?”

“They will be”, Sar’aah motioned with his head towards the children. Then they had to fight again.

“Shivans have pulled out from the orbit everything except for one destroyer escort. There is a fight going on around the jump point, but I cannot see what’s going on. The escort has unloaded about two hundred Shivans, but has stopped sending reinforcements to the surface in the last hour. Maybe there are none left. That last group is moving towards you, to meet with what’s left of them.”

“How long till they come?”, asked Sar’aah. Only 5 of them were left now, and the situation got worse because the children started to cry. Miseo was bleeding badly from a wound in her belly, holding herself upright by sheer will of power, and the support of a nearby rock. Sar’aah wounds were fewer, and the rest of them were in similar shape. Mark lay semi-unconscious at the entrance of the cave, his shoulder bandaged to stop the bleeding from the remaining stump that was his arm.

“They won’t. I rigged the Tsunamis. See you guys in Valhalla. God be with you.” The communicator went out at the same moment a horrific explosion rocked the hills. Flames roared so high even they were able to see them over the mountain ridges.

“Jesus, she kamikazed them”, there were tears in Miseo eyes. “How will we go on when so much of our finest go out this way?”

“We will”, Sar’aah said “What do you think they”, he motioned the wailing children “will learn today”

“If they live” The sounds of mechanical legs on stone carried in the wind.

“They will, and we’ll see to that.”, Vasudan picked up his rifle, as Miseo straightened with a painful grimace.

“In any way, Sar’aah, and you know how difficult it is for me to say this, it was a rare privilege to fight alongside you.”

“It is an honor to hear this, and to die at your side, my friend”, he extended his three fingered hand in a gesture that was solely human. Vasudans newer shook hands. It took Miseo a moment to understand the meaning of that. She hesitated, the took his hand and shook

“Friend.” A statement.

As the first Shivans came into the opening, an unlikely bond among two persons, among two races was in their eyes.

“Goodbye”, said Miseo.

“Goodbye”, said Sar’ aah.

Then with guns raised and blazing they ran towards their doom.

The GTD Bastion’s crew found the children and the unconscious Mark Francis because of the communicator. Miseo’s and Sar’ aah’s bodies were upon the heap of metal debris, poised back to back in the last effort to protect the other. They were both cut in half by the horrendous lightblade of one of the Shivans, Sar’ aah alive a moments longer so he managed to blast the thing to its death.

As they carried him away, a medical officer asked Mark what happened.

“ I don’t know exactly, I was out at the very end. But as I see it here these two warriors managed to write their friendship in fiery letters on Shivan corpses. And they succeeded in saving all of us.”