

"Anything yet, Praxa?" Unit Commander Magma asked.

Few trackers were as adept at hunting as Praxa was and if he couldn't find the Rydoran scum who had defied Deceptar's will then no one could.

"Nothing yet, sir. I..." Praxa paused, his panther mode stopped and sniffed the air again as if a new scent had just been revealed to him.

"Is it them? Have you found them?" Magma asked.

"Yes. They've fled to the mountains!" Praxa roared, hoping for the chance to find the flesh creatures first, so he could crush them between his massive teeth. Praxa had found that stepping on the purple creatures turned his paws a purple hue and discovered the color hard to remove without a great deal of effort.

The Destara primarily converted their forms into vehicles, weapons or ships. A few were also equipment of some sort or the other—although those units were typically support crew, since they lacked the dexterity in battle situations to be on the front line proper. Still other warriors, such as Praxa, had chosen animalistic forms to better aid them in battle or other missions. Only the fiercest creatures were replicated in those circumstances and very few took them on, preferring the efficiency of technology over the savagery of beasts.

Magma regarded the assembled unit before him. They'd all worked with him for some time and each knew their place well. Praxa was the unit's tracker, while Skywhip, Wildstrike and Stryfe served aerial reconnaissance and assault functions. Pathfinder was the intelligence and logistics officer while Thundershock was a pure shock trooper—his all terrain vehicle being heavily armored and powerful.

He glanced at the crystalline mountains in the near distance. The slaves were nowhere to be seen. He suspected they'd already made it far enough to slip in to the ample cover the white-grey vegetation near the range provided. That would make the pursuit more difficult for his squad. Difficult, but far from impossible. After all, no one escaped the Empire very long.

"Destara, transform and roll out!" Magma yelled, converting his body into his tank mode and heading for the mountains beyond.

Elsewhere the two Rydorans scrambled to find safety knowing what happened to people who crossed the Destara. Kirzo, the male, and his mate, Jadzi, hadn't wanted to risk braving the Destara termination chambers, but what else could they do? The Destara had left their people to die on their own land and had scorched the farming fields in the initial assaults, destroying any hope of their race saving itself with this year's crops.

They'd heard of the Destara before now. In distant rumors, at first, as a far off threat that conquered and enslaved worlds. They hadn't believed the Destara would come for their people—they'd been told by the King that the Destara weren't interested in their world. Later, they'd realized they'd been wrong but it was too late.

The Rydorans had used every weapon and resource at their command to combat the empire but it had proven a futile effort. The Destara were too strong, too technologically advanced and vastly outnumbered them at every turn. They overran the planet, eliminating the Rydorans infrastructure, destroying their resources and disabling their communications abilities. The royal family had no choice but to surrender before there was nothing left of their kind.

Kirzo had heard it said that sometimes the Destara enslaved worlds they conquered and used the population as slave labor while other times they just swept the inhabitants aside and utilized the world for whatever purpose they chose. Rydora had abundant minerals and he suspected they would enslave the populace rather than eliminate them outright. But even presuming that was true, the Destara had only been here days and with their crops destroyed many would die before anything new could be established to sustain them.

He could not watch as his wife and children slowly died from starvation and had decided to brave the Destara for a chance at the royal family's vast stores of food in the depths of the castle. He'd wanted Jadzi to remain and tend their children, but she had insisted she be at his side. She'd argued he'd need the help and that if he failed in his mission then there would be little she could do for their offspring anyway. They had infiltrated the palace easily enough—the Destara security was still somewhat lax and there were plenty of places to slip inside. They'd made their way to the food stores and all had been going well until Kirzo, in the midst of warning Jadzi about hidden sensors, had himself activated one.

Now they could either find safety back in the caves with their children or die out here from the Destara's wrath. But Kirzo knew they could not fail or their children would die. He would *not* allow that to happen. No matter what, they had to get what food they'd managed to steal back to their lair.

The two of them had managed to make it inside the perimeter of the Yun'non mountain range and he knew they had a slight advantage now because the Destara wouldn't be able to spot them from the road. But they were far from safe...all it took was an aerial scout to spot them and they'd be just as dead. It was only once they were back in to the caverns that he would feel safe again. The Destara would never be able to find them in the deep, maze-like shelter they'd chosen.

They rushed out of the vegetation they'd been concealed within and in to the rocky terrain blanketing the

area. Jadzi lead him through a complex pattern of twists and turns on several foot paths running through the area.

"This is getting confusing," he yelled as they moved. "Are you sure we're going the right way?"

"Pretty sure," she replied. "But everything here looks so much alike it's a bit hard to tell."

Somewhere nearby Kirzo heard the sound of engines roaring along and knew their pursuers were close. He had hoped they'd have gotten a little more time before the Destara caught up to their prey, but it was not to be. He just hoped they could reach shelter in time...

The two Rydorans rounded a corner and found themselves in a box canyon. They raced about, searching for a passage on the far wall. They found no way through and somewhere behind him, he heard their pursuers closing in.

"Come on!" he yelled, gripping Jadzi's hand and leading her back toward the opening through which they'd emerged. They would have to double-back and hope they weren't caught.

Magma had ordered the Vexxa squadron to split in to three groups to find the slaves faster. Once they'd gotten in to the mountains proper, they'd discovered that the area had some sort of natural ore that prevented conventional sensors from locating anything in them. And since most of the fleet had already jumped to hyperspace for the next system, it would have taken too long and been too much effort to have a ship scan for the slaves.

Another problem they had encountered was high sulfate levels in the area which had negated Praxa's enhanced olfactory sensors—or so he claimed. The area had a pungent odor from the sulfur and Magma wasn't certain if Praxa's systems really were scrambled or whether he simply couldn't tolerate the terrible stench and feigned the technical problem to avoid having to smell it any longer than necessary. Either way, they couldn't rely on the tracker's skills to find out where their quarry had scattered to. They would have to do this the hard way and do a long, drawn out visual search to find what they were looking for.

Magma drove next to Pathfinder, his long time companion and friend. He'd known Pathfinder for several centuries and felt he could confide in him when he had something on his mind. One had to be careful in choosing one's allies in the Empire. To many Destara, friendship was an alien concept as they lived only to further their own agendas and camaraderie was simply a means to an end.

That reminded him of their comrade Stryfe—although he made little effort to conceal his ambitions. He suspected the jet soldier had worked his way up to the flagship by backstabbing everyone he could find. Fortunately, he hadn't been given the opportunity to try and get further ahead while under Magma's command. He'd made an effort to stay a few steps ahead of his underling and not give him any opening to exploit.

"Do you think we're actually going to find anything?" Pathfinder asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "But I do know that if we don't find them soon, we never will."

"Yeah, this place is just full of surprises, isn't it?"

"Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later," Magma said. "We can't always have it easy on every planet."

"True," Pathfinder agreed. "And, if nothing else, this hunt is a break from the usual monotony to some degree."

He chuckled. "Getting tired of the peace and quiet, eh?"

"Something like that." Pathfinder was silent a moment. "It looks like we have our choice of paths ahead. I'll take the left one and see what I can find."

Beyond them, Magma observed the road forked in three distinctive directions, each one disappearing in to the rocky mountainside.

"I'll take the right one, then," he replied. "We'll worry about the middle one later. See you in a few minutes."

He watched as Pathfinder's sleek car form sped up and roared off in to the distance. He hadn't wanted to say it but he was starting to believe this search was a waste of time. They were so far into the mountains now that the slaves had probably eluded them. His past investigations of the surrounding area had indicated a very complex terrain and mountainous area. It wouldn't have been hard to lose the squad by now if the slaves had preplanned their escape. Still, it never hurt to investigate the possibilities. After all, they might get lucky. And he had to expend a certain amount of effort before admitting defeat and returning to base.

He noted the cliffs were rising steadily the further he moved into the area. Very shortly, they would go from the outlying foothills he'd been traversing to outright canyons. Once that happened, his ground based abilities would be nearly useless and they'd have to depend on the aerial units to locate the slaves.

He drove a few minutes further, rounding a large bend at the end of the trail he'd followed, emerging in to a large box canyon. He lost his train of thought as he saw the two slaves standing just beyond him.

Kirzo cringed in fear at the sight of the Destara tank sitting in front of him. Up until now, he'd held out

some small hope that they might still be able to escape. Now, it was obvious what fate held in store for them.

Magma transformed into his robot mode and called up his rifle from sub-space, the weapon appearing in his hand even as he raised it to point at the slaves. Like all of the Destara, he could store weapons and extra equipment in an adjacent pocket dimensional space. Other more advanced Destara could even take on additional mass or lose it to help aid in their transformation to other forms.

"You have violated Destara property and fled authorities. You must be punished," he said in their language.

Fear overwhelmed Kirzo and he fell to his knees. "Please... we only wished to feed our family. Spare my mate and the food so that we can feed our starving children!"

"You would give your own life so that I might spare hers?" Magma asked.

"If I must make such a decision, I would gladly give my life for my mate and my family!" Kirzo replied.

"And so you shall give your life," Magma replied. "But you have both violated our authority and both of you must die for your defiance."

"What gives you the right to do this to other races?" Jadzi demanded. "Why must you punish us when all we seek is to support our children with the very basic of needs?"

The Destara held his rifle steady but did not answer.

"I see you have no answer!" Jadzi snapped. "That's because your kind are the truly cowardly ones. You have no right to do what you do to other races and you have no justification for your evils! Do you want to kill us? Then fine. Do so. We die with the knowledge that we were murdered only because we existed and wished to be free."

She stepped forward slightly, offering herself up to die. A slight breeze blew her long pink hair in the wind and Kirzo was never so in love with her as he was now. To face down a monster intent on her death—truly, she was not afraid of anything.

He shut his eyes and waited for the inevitable to happen. He anticipated the energy blast tearing into their flesh and burning it away, releasing them in to death's dark embrace.

He waited a moment longer and then opened his eyes again. The Destara still stood his ground, his rifle still pointed loosely at them but he had not fired. Had not moved an inch, in fact.

"What," he asked. "What's going on?"

Jadzi observed their pursuer a moment longer.

"He's not moving," she replied. "I don't know what's happening..." She turned and walked back to the sack that lay on the ground nearby. "But let's see if we can use this to our advantage."

She grabbed the sack and began moving off, out of the immediate range of their opponent's aim. Kirzo watched in astonishment as the Destara did not bother to track her movement or thwart her escape. He gazed up at the warrior a moment longer and then too began to move off.

Magma listened as the Rydoran male begged him to take his life and spare his mate's life so she could return to her offspring. He was used to this sort of reaction, of course. How the lesser beings would beg and plead, trying to bargain for their lives, looking desperately for a way out.

He replied to the male's pleading with the usual answer. They had both defied the Empire's authority, so both of them were guilty and both of them had to die. He wouldn't allow himself to be moved by any last second bargaining for lives.

He watched as the female stepped forward and heard her ask what gave him the right to do this other races. He had been about to reply with a lethal discharge from his rifle when he found his attention becoming fuzzy.

The world melted around him and he found himself watching as a fleet of Destara warships thundered through the expanse toward an unassuming blue and green world. Abruptly, he was on the surface, watching as laser fire illuminated the night sky. The skies were a reddish color from the energy passing through them and from all the smoke that bellowed upward from the horizon. This world was dying, its sentence passed by the Empire's sheer power.

He watched as a squadron of jagged, lethal looking fighters dipped low to the ground and strafed several humanoids that tried to flee. Some managed to avoid the barrage while others fell to their deaths.

An explosion erupted near him and he felt himself being flung uncontrollably by its released energy. He rose and felt a sharp pain in his leg. He glanced down and was astonished to see blood splattered chaotically about a flesh and bone leg that was connected to an entirely organic body instead of the reinforced steel one he was used to.

He glanced up in time to see a Destara fighter closing in on his location and he knew enough to break into a sprint before his one-time ally cut him down where he stood. The leg ached with pain but the wound appeared to be minor enough that he could still move on it without risking more damage.

He sensed the fighter closing on him and ducked in time as the jet screamed past overhead, narrowly

missing where he stood seconds earlier.

Magma rose slowly and turned about. In the distance behind him, he watched as a city he had not noticed before burned from the Destara onslaught. All around it, he saw forest that was also aflame. The Destara forces buzzed about the skies in the distance, but he saw no more of them nearby.

For the briefest instance he thought he might be safe but then as he watched, the Destara forces wavered and dissolved into blackness. Amazingly, the blackness coalesced into a single form and he watched in fear as the darkness began spreading outward consuming everything.

He turned and ran as fast as he could. Beyond him, darkness cut off his escape and it slowly began closing on him from all directions. He struggled to escape, but found no route any way he turned.

And then it was upon him. The darkness slowly traveled up his legs and he could feel his body going numb at its touch. As the darkness consumed him, he could feel a chilling emptiness emanating from its whole. Then, it encompassed all of him and everything was darkness...

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