

Keeping Score

by Chuck Kallenbach II

I spoke with some who had fought this new lifeform, called "humans" or "Earthers." I studied the Earther language in the hopes of taunting one of them. They have only two legs, soft skin, and they are infested with hair. All accounts reported that they are cowardly, hiding behind their armor and guns. They prefer to fight in groups, and are unskilled at single combat. These reports increased my anticipation.

I am Quay. I fought in the Algot Rebellion, against the Shi slavers. I killed Shi before Seyal rifted to the Sol system. I am Yahak, a combat specialist. I am a hunter, a tracker, a mauler.

We are Luhus. We fight and we kill, and we shall one day command the Ruling Council and none will oppose us. We followed the Shi through the Gateless Gate, the Door that stays open.

The hekatons strafed the surface installations on this tiny asteroid, not much bigger than a life ship. The humans built roofs over the tunnels and craters and pumped atmosphere inside. They like their comforts. Light, heat, and oxygen are inside. Nothing to claim, or be proud of taking. Our chieftain said there were Earthers here, and he wanted them removed. Vermin to be exterminated.

I can smell them, in the stale air they need to breathe. The synthetic armor they wear. The burnt smell from their energy bolts. I smell their sweat. I smell their blood. Tracking them is like following a crawling makkau. They leave a slimy trail of tak.

Our daska leader broke the team protocol. Individual initiative, two of my most favorite words. I am free to do what I will, without teamwork, without reporting, without coordinating with anyone, not even my superior officers. I don't like teamwork. I prefer to work alone.

Nothing interferes with the hunt. The technicians gathered all of our comm devices, flame weapons, and scanners. Only dalaka and armored helms are carried on a sweep like this. We hunt in the primal state.

I walked only a few hundred kau, down the length of one hallway and up a ladder through a hatch. I stopped short at the top. Then I slowly pushed my head up until I could see down the upper walkway.

The smell of the human reached me first. A stench of fear wafting over me. Next, a bright green bolt stabbed into the hatch behind my head. Sparks flew with bits of metal. The human expected me, with its weapon covering the hatchway, but still missed. It said, "Oh man." I grinned. A female, and she was nervous.

I ducked back down for a moment. I grabbed the hatch opening firmly with one hand on each side. I tensed all four legs, coiling like a spring. Then, with a bellowing roar, I sprang out of the hatch and into the upper walkway.

I raced toward my prey. She sat at the end, about twenty kau away. I covered that distance in an instant. She fired twice more. One missed, the second glanced off the dalaka on my left arm. A plate flew off, and I felt pain. A black gout of blood, my blood. I angered.

Fear filled her eyes, behind her faceplate, as she looked up at me. Huge, white, soft eyes. My left arm swatted the rifle away and my right hand grabbed her shoulder. I slammed her back against the closed hatch behind her. My forelegs reared back and I impaled her with them. Piercing armor and bone, my feet thudded against the wall.

They make such poor trophies, the humans. The teeth are so small. The spine of a floater makes a fine trophy, long and articulated. Count the notches, the more the better. I have a 15-point spine in the barrack. Never seen its equal. That one was a worthy challenge, and I don't find many.

I threw the human aside and opened the hatch. Moving through, I walked down corridors. My path led downward. I searched for any scent of humans. Their foods, their acrid drinks, their soft beddings, these scents sickened me. After some time, I found the rock tunnels deep in the asteroid. It felt like home. My brood has been excavators for generations. The coolness refreshed me. The footsteps of a human walking reached my ears. Their shambling gait is unmistakable. We walk with a grace, a rhythm that two legs can never capture.

I stopped and leaned back against the tunnel wall. My dark coloration and the low light made me nearly invisible. The human edged around the corner, not three kau from me. A male, no helmet, with yellow hair. He carried no weapon.

Smiling, I stepped sideways into the tunnel, confronting him. He stopped, hands at his sides. Then the round thing on his chest armor shot a bolt at me. I had not realized this was a weapon. The large green bolt caught me in the chest. I flew backwards, sliding on my back. A searing pain played across my frontal carapace, but I remained motionless to draw him near.

He walked up to me and stood over my motionless body. "Not so tough now?" he spat out, harshly. A more worthy opponent than the last. My hind legs swept his feet out from under him. He fell forward with a crash.

In an instant, I leapt up and pinned him to the floor with my legs. Face down, the weapon on his chest could not fire. His struggles were stronger than I expected. He cried out, "Let me up! I'll kill you, you four-legged freak!" I found the resistance stimulating. However, my mission precluded any time for pleasure, so I reached down to grab his small head in my large hand. With a twist, his neck cracked. The struggling stopped. Feeling the pain in my wound, I made a mental note to find out more about the chest cannon, and moved down the tunnel.

A few more twists, turns, and dead ends brought me to a poorly lit vehicle park. A larger room than most, it held several small digging machines. Containers of ore stood empty nearby. I scanned the area, turning my head, moving slowly around the diggers. We had better on the life ship, I thought. Poor designs.

A scream broke my reverie. Another human slammed into me from the side, knocking me off my feet. Like a hunter in a blind, it had been waiting behind a mining machine. The weight of it bore down upon me, pinning me to the floor. It was another male, with wild black hair, a square face, and smallish blue eyes that burned. His bared teeth gritted and veins in his neck bulged. A fierceness was there, a fury I had not seen in a human.

He had no helmet, but he wore the rest of the Earther combat armor. Pieces of dalaka covered his right arm. The interlocking plates formed a sleeve that ended in a heavy gauntlet. This armored fist hit me hard across the face. It stung, and I spit out a tooth. Hard blows pummeled my midsection. He attacked the wound from the cannon fire.

This was a warrior. He lay in wait, with a weapon taken from his enemy, and struck me where I was weak. Inventive, clever, ruthless. He knew better than to punch my carapace with his naked left hand. His dalaka had dark Quay blood on them. He spoke, punctuating each word with another blow. "You. Will. Be. My. Third." Our scores were even. The weight of the human pressed down on me. I could not get my feet under my body. I fought to rise. The largest human I had ever seen held me pinned.

Anger swelled within me. My energy focused inward. My chest burned. I began The Change. I entered The Transformation. His face reddened in the glow of my kundanaka. His blows continued, but I felt nothing. The pains from my wounds melted away. The red glow of my body filled the chamber.

The fear grew in his eyes. This was something he had not seen before. Heat seared his body armor. It melted in globs, dripping to the cavern floor. A moment's hesitation provided my opportunity. With my legs now beneath me, I grabbed him and sprung to my feet. I flung him away, into an ore hopper. He landed awkwardly with a loud bang.

I rose to my full height, towering over him, glowing redly. The smell of ozone cleansed the chamber. One of his arms was pinned beneath his body at a sickly angle. A dull stare looked up at me. I strode to where he lay, crouched down, and picked up his lolling head in my hand.

Blood trickled from his mouth, along with a grim laugh. His arm emerged from beneath his body, and it held a device. A grav grenade. "I've got a fifth ace," he said.

"You'll kill us both," I hissed.

"I know," he said, "but I've already killed two Quay."

"I have killed two humans as well."

"Score's even," he said, and pressed the button.