

Rousing Leap

by Chuck Kallenbach II

The Akawah opened the hatch and his large frame filled the opening, backlit by the red glowing screens in the landing craft's cockpit. His position of *akawah* made him commander of the thirty ravagers on board. He often derided them with the Quay word for "babies."

"Attention, *nika*. Worse than we thought. Scanner techs aboard the *Karaktika* report two NoBots, not just one." The Tahka tribe life ship orbited Ganymede, gathering data about the moon's surface while its landing craft descended.

The Akawah stepped into the compartment, walking between the two rows of seats, glaring at each warrior as he slowly strode by. "Has this meaning for you?" He bent down to stare directly into Isau Pakang's face. "Painful death?" Pakang's mouth hung open silently. "Well?" he bellowed.

"No, Akawah!" Pakang stammered. "Prevail We Must!" he blurted out, repeating the title of a training sacrament. Pakang barely survived rituals to receive the first position of *isau*, and couldn't have been less experienced, or less capable.

Katuka, seated next to him, let out one tiny snicker. "Hear a joke, rock eater?" The Akawah now blared into Katuka's face. "Is that dirt digger humor?"

"No, Akawah!" she answered, meeting his gaze. Her teeth gritted with anger. His derisive remark about her mining brood ancestry struck deeply.

"What then?" he asked of Katuka. His voice rasped like razors cutting paper. She felt his hot breath on her face.

"Twice the enemies means twice the trophies!" she proclaimed, her chin spurs jutting forward.

"Better," sneered the Akawah. "Your survival might become a possibility." He continued down the line, hollering in each warrior's face in turn. He made each of his warriors alert, aware, and ready for action.

The landing craft lurched as the navigator made a hard bank to port. "Commencing evasion," declared the buzzing intercom above the cockpit hatch. Orange plasma bursts blossomed near the ship, shining through the hull's slitted view ports.

Katuka looked sideways at Daisa Lahrik, her eyes wide with fear. "Serious about the trophies?" he hissed at her with a smirk. He approached every situation with calm and cool, making no exception for a dangerous combat mission.

Lahrik's father was a cousin to Sitka, the Tahka tribe's brilliant chieftain. Such a heritage could provide him with command position whenever he wanted it. Some accused him of abusing that legacy, but Katuka knew different. He somehow liked being on the front lines, which she found incomprehensible. Lahrik had wide shoulders and stood very tall. Her *atakat*, the team of nine ravagers she commanded, liked Lahrik, and his levelheaded coolness under fire inspired all of them. "The warrior in the tunnel on the *dalaka*'s edge between failure and glory, you want that warrior to be Lahrik," boasted the Akawah. "He

inspires others. He is unique." The Akawah tried to give him command of an *atakat* several times, but Lahrik refused, remaining at *daisa*, or second position.

Katuka's father mined asteroids, a brood of lesser stature by Quay standards. He dug precious green traginium from an airless rock in some forgotten system as a slave to the Shi. The Quay could survive for hours in harsh vacuum, even doing hard labor. She worked her way up to *katan*, third position, and then *atakat* leader through sheer perseverance, despite the jeers from instructors and her fellows during rituals and sacraments. Her short height and slender frame inspired little confidence. "A burrowing *nika*! You will always be nothing," the Akawah told her. She wanted so badly to prove him wrong. She knew what her *atakat* said behind her back. She tried to put that aside and focus on the task before her.

On their last mission, Katuka's unit attacked a Maverick station on an asteroid near Saturn. Sitka ordered a simple search and destroy task, with no assets to be seized. This became Katuka's first action under fire. The tin men dug in, fortifying their defenses with construction vehicles. Some of them flanked Katuka's *atakat* with a barrage of rifle fire, and she froze. Lahrik looked to her for orders, and saw the fear in her eyes. He barked out the order to fall back and pulled her to safety. The Quay soon routed the Mavericks and took several prisoners, and the other warriors didn't notice Katuka's failure to react. She and Lahrik talked about it after the mission.

"I failed my *atakat*. I failed my *akawah*. I deserve no leader position."

"You have strength and knowledge, enough to lead. You excelled at rituals and sacraments."

"Mock combat drills?" she spat. "They are no help while I cower in fear at enemy fire."

"Many warriors, even heroes, face combat with terror in their hearts. It's not a fighter without fear that is a hero. Some of the bravest barely muster the courage to jump off the ramp. But they do. Feeling fear is not cowardice. When the fear wins, then the coward is born."

Lahrik stayed by her side after that, even when Katuka ordered him not to. He believed in her, and she drew strength from that. Nevertheless, the thought of combat terrified her.

A shudder traveled through the landing craft as a plasma burst sizzled off the port side. A hit or near miss, Katuka couldn't tell. The ship twisted to port and then back to starboard, shaking the warriors back and forth in their harnesses. Katuka grabbed the straps with both hands. Ravagers looked at each other questioningly, and the Akawah barked, "Prepare, *nika*! Soon we land. *Turuhnaka*, prepare." He pointed to the two teams at the aft doorway.

"Aye, Akawah," reported a *turuhnaka daisa*, as he flexed the long spines along the back of his carapace. *Turuhnaka*, or "spineslingers," manipulated their carapace to hurl short-ranged volleys of barbed spines, like a shotgun blast of razorwire. Barbed spine tips glinted in the dim light of the landing craft.

Katuka adjusted the *dalaka* on her left arm. Those bony plates struck like an axe or slashed like a heavy sword. She also carried a long, three-bladed *bikkarh*, a spear of tempered steel sharp enough to cut through armor plate. The hand holding her *bikkarh* trembled slightly.

"Hot landing. Hold fast," came the crackling voice over the intercom again. The engines whined loudly as the navigator pulled the craft's nose up. He landed it with a loud bang and the passengers lurched forward with the impact. The rear ramp clanged open, and harness buckle clicks filled the landing craft's passenger compartment. For a second the cabin silenced, and the whine of cannon fire could be heard outside. The hot metallic ozone smell of battle rushed in.

Then the Akawah ordered, "Go! Go! *Turuhnaka* left and right." The slinger teams leaped out to take firing positions beside the ramp. The other ravagers surged forward, rattling their spiky feet on the metal grating. *Bikkarh* and *dalaka* clattered as they ran.

Katuka gasped as she reached the open aft doorway. To her left and right, the *turuhnaka* fired barbed blasts to drive back the enemy. She saw other landing craft on the ground, ramps down, their ravagers pouring forth. On the horizon, a spout of orange Gongen plasma touched another Tahka ship that crashed to the surface in a blazing fireball. Ahead, she saw a line of Gongen skirmish troops with swords drawn and barbed spines in their blue armor. The swordsmen fell back toward the two NoBots, towering over them to the rear. One huge machine had broad shoulders and a blue finish, while the second had a grayish green appearance and four tentacled arms each ending in a grasping claw. They were as tall as ten Gongen. All along the front, Quay ravagers charged into the Gongen troops, clashing in a crush of swords and *dalaka*. Quay battle cries punctuated the melee, while protective helmets silenced the armored Gongen troops.

Katuka felt Lahrik's clawlike hand on her shoulder, and she remembered her rituals. *Time to jump off the ramp*, she thought. "Third *atakats*, with me!" she cried, and charged forward howling a battle cry, holding her *bikkarh* high. A thin line of blue Gongen troops stood against them, swords held in front. She batted a sword away and gave a backhanded slash to the head with her *dalaka*. The faceplate shattered, and she saw a young woman's face twisted with terror. The human gasped for air and collapsed, and she parried a sword slash from another. The rest of her *atakats* had similar success, and the Gongen fell back again. Looking up and down the battle line, she saw three Quay ravagers for every Gongen defender.

As the Gongen retreated in good order, the two NoBots slowly strode forward. Katuka held out both arms to halt the charge of her *atakats*. Her breath rasped and her chest heaved as she struggled to clear her head. Her heart pounded. Fear set in once again, as she had time to think. Rivulets of blood dripped from her left arm. Gongen blood, she supposed. She hoped. She put her right hand on her hip, and felt sticky wetness. A gash split her side. She felt dizzy, and leaned on her *bikkarh*.

"Are you injured, *katan*?" Lahrik looked down at her. He smiled slightly, cool as always.

"A...a scratch." She took a deep breath, and regained some strength. "Report status."

"As you say, a 'scratch' here and there," he answered wryly. She noticed a brutal slash across his chest. Not very deep. "Here come the *tangnak*," he added.

The mission plan detailed a frontal assault by *atakats* like Katuka's to drive off the Gongen infantry. Then, groups of *tangnak* would move forward to engage the NoBots. With overdeveloped slashing

appendages and fierce frenzy of *kundanaka*, the *tangnak*, or “cutters,” would be a match for the oversized war bots. That’s what the *akawah* believed. As Katuka watched the towering machines advance, she had her doubts.

The blue NoBot held in one hand a huge, broad sword, as tall as three men. The other hand held a stubby gun as big as a boulder. A round, porcelain face in its chest looked like a sad, noble woman. She was called Deigan. The other bot held a huge sword in each of her four tentacled claws. They writhed and twisted to make an impenetrable wall of blades. A horned demon face called Hannya glared from her chest plate. The two NoBots advanced with a glorious languor, graceful and omnipotent. Teams of Quay *tangnak* advanced, already glowing red from the fires of their *kundanaka*, burning embers of their battle rage. The blades of their claws swung angrily. As the two forces met, the *tangnak* danced about the giant bots. Hannya swiveled to meet their attacks, her four arms swarming. Suddenly, the Quay surrounded her, rending and slashing. A red-hot *tangnak* sliced off a tentacle, and the bot’s claw spiraled away, still gripping a sword. Deigan’s blade sliced at two Quay, cutting them in half with gouts of black blood. Then the blue NoBot’s hailstorm cannon fired. Icy shards hissed as they pierced the fiery *tangnak*.

The ravagers near Katuka became restless. Thirsting for battle, they suffered to wait their turn. Their rage inspired her, and quelled the fear rising in her throat. She felt pride in her *atakat*. “There is much glory to be won fighting these huge machines,” mused Lahrik at her shoulder. His voice had a dreamlike quality. She turned to look at him. He stared up at the NoBots, lights dancing in his eyes.

A swarm of *tangnak* overwhelmed the green NoBot, striking at her legs. Hannya shuddered and fell over backwards. A cheer came from the watching Quay. Some Gongen warriors surged forward to protect her, but the *tangnak* drove them back. Deigan loosed another frigid blast from her cannon to clear a path. Then she moved to help her sister, striding toward the fallen NoBot.

As Deigan turned away, Lahrik howled like a demon possessed. He ran headlong toward Deigan, holding high his *dalaka* covered arm and *bikkarh*. Katuka looked on in horror. The NoBot turned slightly to see him, and swatted him with her huge sword. Lahrik fell to the ground, limp and broken.

“Noooo!” Katuka screamed in despair, and she bolted toward the NoBot. Jumping on the shoulders of a *tangnak*, she leaped toward the back of Deigan. Landing on the bot’s hips, she grabbed the shoulder joint with one hand and plunged her *bikkarh* into the machine’s back with the other. As she pulled the weapon out, sparks flew and pieces of machinery fell to the ground. On the weapon’s tip, she noticed a green substance. She jumped back off the NoBot to the ground.

Consumed by rage, Katuka dropped her *bikkarh* and held up two blue clad fallen Gongen, screaming at her *atakat*. “We will despoil their mine and claim their truginium and have sport with them as well!” She flung the bodies to the ground. The other ravagers burst forward with a newfound fury. Hannya regained her feet, but lurched on unsteady legs. Deigan’s steps staggered too, and the two NoBots fell back towards the walled Gongen outpost.

The Akawah received word from the *Karaktika* that a Gongen carrier had arrived in orbit and launched fighters. He screamed orders to his warriors, but none listened. A formation of four triangular Gongen ships streaked over the horizon, flying low. Orange blasts strafed the ravagers, providing covering fire for the

retreating NoBots and infantry. The Quay regrouped as the Gongen forces found safety inside the outpost walls.

Lahrik looked up at Katuka as she knelt by him. Her hand rested on his arm. "I wanted glory," he whispered.

"Myself as well. I could not watch you die."

His body relaxed, and his eyes closed. She feared the worst, but then she felt him breathe. "*Yakih!* Over here now!" she cried. A *yakih* ran to him, opening her healer pouch.

"Will Lahrik survive?" asked Isau Pakang, standing behind Katuka.

She looked up at him. "It is certain. He is stronger than any of us."

"*Katan*, with respect, your rousing leap inspired us all," he bowed his head slightly.

She stood, leaning on her *bikkarh*. "It had to be done."

"What's that?" he asked, pointing at her weapon.

"Traginium," she offered, looking at the tip.

"From inside the NoBot?"

"Correct. Chieftain Sitka must be told of this."

"I heard the Chieftain told the council that she didn't care what they did with the traginium, just that the Shi wanted it."

"I know that, but I am sure she will want to know this," Katuka smiled.

Pakang suddenly saluted. "Akawah!" he barked.

"At ease, Isau. Leave us," ordered the Akawah. Pakang backed away.

The Akawah addressed Katuka. "*Nika*, this day you fought with fire and courage. I did not think this possible."

She stood proudly. "You honor me, Akawah."

"That *pumdi* Gongen ship drove away the *Karaktika*, so the twolegs command space now. We must break off the attack, so the Gongen will escape. But Quay hold the mine and the outpost and a base on Ganymede, so I declare success."

"I have found something valuable on Ganymede as well, Akawah," replied Katuka.

The Akawah clapped her on the shoulder and grinned. He walked away. Katuka's *atakat* gathered around her and cheered. She waved them off with a smile and looked at Lahrik again.

The *yakih* looked up. "He will live. Weeks of healing await." Another call took her away.

She knelt down close to Lahrik. "You did not see my 'fire and courage.'"

"No, I did see. You were... acrobatic." He coughed twice and grimaced.

"Pakang called it 'rousing.' Hmph. Look, I have fear even now." She held up her hand, and it trembled.

"You led the *atakat* well. Above the call. The Akawah will offer you a commemoration and higher position."

"I will remain a *katan* and an *atakat* leader," she confided with a smile. "It is where I belong."

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