

Holding the tide

The Aun'O looked concerned. He turned to the stiff fire warrior beside him, standing in front of his kneeling Crisis suit, from which he had just stepped out.

- Those are grave news, shas'O. The tyrannids have indeed started to move to assault our second line of defense. Yet we cannot afford to let you go there and direct the fight. You must stay with us and coordinate the front.
- Yes, of course, your highness, if such is the way of our greater good.

Vui'nee was not used to see a Shas'O show so much reverence. Of course, the fire caste, as all the other castes, revered the etherals and showed great admiration. But this tau was the mightiest warrior on maelstrom. Apart maybe from Sha'Vre Nasha Vanetea, a young female XV pilot which was standing at the shas'O's left. She was the greatest ace of the defense cadre, perhaps the best XV pilot of the whole tau empire. It was even said that she bested an elder wraith lord in a showdown in Teshav'e IV's asteroid belts...

- Yet, we have to send someone to lead these troops, or the tyrannids will break through our second defense line as they broke through our first yesterday.

The conflict was now three weeks old. The first news had been encouraging. A border force up north had been able to send a warning signal and even to delay enough the tyrannids assaults in their sectors that a few of the northern colonies, the ones in front of the defense lines, could be evacuated. Shas'el Ty'Kaeth's name was well known now, especially since the bulk of the tyrannids forces had struck south with the incredible violence that they now knew only too well, and that they now needed heroes and victories to heighten the morale of the troops. The tyrannids had broken through the first line of defense of Kaeloth yesterday. They had covered miles in a single day, and were already assaulting the second of kaeloth's 3 defense works. The first line had been broken through easily, although there were no questions of trying to hold it for more than a few hours. The tyrannids were too numerous and there was no logic in scarifying the lives of the fire warriors. Now they had been evacuated at the second line, just in time to participate at the defense. But preparations were already made for the beefing up of the third line. That was where they would hold the monstrous invaders long enough for the evacuation of the great city to be complete. Kaeloth's inhabitants will be evacuated farther south, shortening the communications and defense lines, and maybe even letting the tyrannids fight with the newly arrived gue'la that had launched some raids on the northern forces. The Aun'O looked more concerned by the minute. The shas'O had just let him know that the heavy support needed to hold the second line was en route toward the battle but that a spoiling attack by a brood of gargoyles dropped from an harridan before it was shot down had delayed them. Vui'nee sat up and bowed to the aun'O:

- I will go, Aun'O. I am but a novice here and of small use to you, but the troops will be heartened to see one of us with them. They will fight like lions. They will fight like tau fight for the greater good.

The Aun'O turned around to face the younger ethereal. He looked carefully at Vui'nee and spoke:

- You shall go Aun'la vui'nee. But I will ask the shas'O here, to send someone to protect you.
- This will be done, of course, your highness. Nasha! Please make sure that no harm comes to that Aun!

The young fire warrior wheeled and bowed to vui'nee, then to her shas'O:

- I shall not let one of these creature come close to him, Shas'O! May my life protect his!

And she stepped back, with a solemn look, backing against her mighty custom-built power suit. If Nahsa was keeping him safe, the prospect of that battle seemed suddenly less daunting, if as important. He bowed to the Aun'O and turned his back on the assembly. Time was short. He had to get there in time, before the tyrannids onslaught started. Behind him, as he left the tent that was housing the field headquarter, he heard the soft whirring of a battlesuit powering up and the characteristic sound of the front panel clamping shut. He didn't have to turn around to know that she was behind him, railgun at the ready, already taking her bodyguard job seriously. He *knew*.

Kroghure took a long look at the trench works. The place was a sound defensive ground to start with. And the fieldworks that the tau had done were making it better yet. The only sad thing is that they had cut all those trees near their positions. Better field of fire they said. But the woods were natural cover for his peoples. Bah! Those were good defenses. His clawed hand went to work to relieve a Itch near the tip of its beak. A good thing though, that they were, as the others were coming this way. He could smell them. Quite characteristic. His warband had surprised a large one earlier today. Like a chameleon. Hard to see, though. But his folk were part of the woods when they were patrolling. And that bug was not. They had known all along that it would be there. No more wildlife around. It had fought well. Even Killed Braghur, his second cousin. The flesh hooks had ripped its brains out of his head. But they had killed him. His instinct told him that his warband should partake the thing's flesh. It was fast, strong, crafty. But for the first time of its life, he didn't listen to his instincts. There was something otherworldly about that huge creature. Somehow, it didn't feel *right* to eat that flesh. But he kind of regretted it now. He should have.

He looked at his two hounds. They were nervous. The tyrannids hordes were approaching. The Taus were already holed up in their bunkers. Their great tanks were not there yet, though. Good thing. He hated having to duck because of the beehive rounds that those railguns spitted. And it messed the food, too. He was in command. Up to now at least. No Tau officers were showing up, so he considered that this was his front. His warband was fully half the force deployed in that section and his kroot warriors were visibly the only one that were not afraid of the upcoming fight. The hounds grew more restless still. Then, he spotted the first tyrannids, slowly making their way up the anti-

tank trench, thinking they were invisible. Hah! But he decided not to warn the tau yet. He had taken a decision for his warband. They would eat the Tyrannids. That would be good. He had been wrong to refuse to listen to his instinct. The role of the shaper was to choose the meals. He would make amends. And those genestealers seemed the perfect way. If he kept silent a bit longer, they would be close enough to assault his position. Then he would tell the tau, but not before. It was no use if they vaporized the stealers before he could eat them, so he had to let them close a bit... His eagerness made his body exude some strong pheromones and soon, the whole warband was eager, restless... and hungry. He kept looking at the genestealers and he couldn't help it... he was licking his beak in anticipation of the meal...