

For a handful of eyes

- A short story in the Permaneo Humanus universe -

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Suddenly the vessels power door opened with a damp hiss and a greenish, thick fog entered the ship. The clinical air inside the craft was immediately put in the danger zone and was quickly taken over by a stale, swamplike smell that spread everywhere.

If that weren't enough, a chilly fog spread inside the ship that caused a layer of moisture on everything.

The planet they had landed on was called Ssakor in smuggling circles but its full name was Sseren Ssakor Duba'ii.

In the universal language of Batonn, it roughly meant "the planet whose deep, green jungles harbor secrets of the darkest kind".

Namely, Ssakor consisted of deep, living forests of the tropical variety that contained more life forms than some entire solar systems.

This was a place where fortune seekers from all over the galaxy could become very rich from the planet's natural resources, or face a cruel and sudden death.

Tage Lubb and Eks Dankonabi had come here to try their luck.

They carefully stepped down from the craft's loading ramp and tested the ground with their feet. It was wet everywhere and their boots sank a few inches down into the uneven ground. Slush-like sounds were heard from their clumsy progress and without wasting time they made their way out onto the damp marsh outside.

Eks was a Thordvarian and their race was characterized by their narrow, sinewy bodies.

They had gray skin and two arms and two legs. The face shared the appearance of the body, showing sunken cheeks and protruding cheekbones. This was not a consequence from years of malnutrition but the way they actually looked.

The eyes, in turn, shone with a faint yellow glow and they took in the surrounding area with a suspicious air. Below the nose, which was small and narrow, an elongated and narrow moustache grew which continued down a long way below the cheeks. It was white, and the moisture from the atmosphere caused droplets to form on the protruding hairs.

He wore a spacesuit which, apart from the hairless head and hands, covered his whole body, and he moved with extreme ease in it.

Tage, in turn, was the complete opposite of Ek's slender physique and was a fat Bohhk.

He had the same number of arms and legs as his companion and displayed a large, gray beard that was dirty and dense. He was dark red in color and his whole body was oily and flabby. He looked untrained, but underneath the lazy flesh there were lots of developed muscles that could have easily lifted several hundred pounds.

A pot belly protruded from the slightly too tight clothing and his leather-like top and pants had seen much better days.

His crystal blue eyes looked at Eks who nodded greedily.

The duo continued forward and when they had come some twenty meters from Bors Labok, which was the name of their ship, they stood still and listened to the surroundings.

Sounds, which to their ears sounded like a cross between grunts and agitated bowel movements, were heard deep in the jungle around them. Due to the green fog, visibility was very limited and they could only see a few meters in front of them.

Eks felt that the place they had landed on did not give them any security, so with a quick movement he pulled out his plasma gun and held it ready for battle. His companion noticed this but decided to remain unarmed for a while longer.

Tage took out a small box and pressed a button on it that activated the ship's security system with a loud alarm noise. Here on Ssakor anything could happen so it was best to be on the safe side.

A few seconds later, they took courage and moved further out into the foggy landscape and noticed how Bors Labok was quickly eaten up by the fog behind them.

Tage and Eks were walking there, silent and anxious with only the green atmosphere for company, when suddenly they began to see dark contours a little further on.

"Hmm... There seems to be a thicker patch of jungle over there." Eks said anxiously but hopefully. "Do you think they might be there?"

- "I think so." Tage replied, looking down at an instrument he held in his hand. "The Pi-4 sensor picked up several suspicious movements in that direction." he said, pointing at the dark jungle space. "Let's keep going."

They did just that and continued deeper into the marsh, all the while watching for dangers of all kinds.

Meanwhile, they listened to the organic myriad of sounds that ranged from bowel sounds to hisses and hungry grunts. For a normal visitor this would have been enough to turn around, but not Tage and Eks. They stubbornly continued forward instead.

The duo got further and further out and the dark outlines they had seen earlier now took on a dense jungle shape. They stopped short and saw a great wall of solid thicket looming ominously over them.

It would be very difficult to find what they were looking for in there, so Tage sighed heavily and pulled out his weapon, which was sticking out from one side of his protruding pot belly.

What Tage and Eks were after in this menacing place were the mysterious life forms called Hog children.

Namely, it turned out that their eyes were extremely valuable on the black market. This was because they were believed to contain mystical powers of some kind that made the owner of them rich and powerful. They had the harmless name, hog-children, because they looked like small, friendly child creatures, but nothing could be further from the truth than that.

Standing just over a meter tall, they were extremely wary of any life form higher than themselves.

The children were green in color and lived in dark passageways deep underground, where they built huge networks of tunnels.

Their skin color gave them a superior camouflage against all forms of enemies and they were very difficult to detect in the green atmosphere.

The Hog-children were very dangerous creatures and always attacked in large numbers. Due to living deep underground, their vision was very poor so they relied solely on sound and movement when hunting.

They could not consume meat in their usual state so all prey was taken alive and anesthetized with a special secretion from their jaws. After this, they placed their victims deep down in the tunnels where carnivorous parasites burrowed into them and broke down their bodies from the inside.

The process was extremely painful and it took a very long time for the hog-children's prey to die.

Only when the bodies had been broken down to the point where they were soft and porous could the children feast on the meat.

Countless tales had been spread in smuggling circles about these creatures, so with a nervous lump in their stomachs, Tage and his companion continued forward with their weapons on high alert.

They plowed through thick and difficult thickets and meanwhile the vegetation did everything in its power to impede their progress.

The duo went on like this for a long time and Eks felt more and more uncomfortable the further they got into the jungle.

Suddenly he wanted to abort the mission and turn back.

- "No, Eks! We can't stop now." said Tage with a greedy hunger in his eyes. "Think of all the credits we will earn from this. After we do this, we can party on Kva'um Doo for at least a month. Think of the opportunities we will have."

Eks nodded reluctantly at his companion and fingered his mustache nervously. He wiped drops of sweat from his forehead, clutched his weapon and continued forward when they suddenly heard a rattling sound further away. Eks jumped and immediately pointed his weapon at the source of the sound, raising his voice and shouting threateningly to scare off potential enemies.

- "Shut up, you Kreetlon!" Tage shouted, glaring at him in irritation. "If we are discovered now, it's all over for us. We have to surprise the Hog-children and take them one by one, and we can't do that if you keep shouting like that."

- "W-we should abandon this plan now and hurry back to the ship..." Eks continued when he was suddenly interrupted by the same rattling noise, but this time more intense and much closer.

The duo of fortune seekers stared stupidly at each other, not really knowing what to do. Both stood still for a long time, staring anxiously around but nothing happened, everything was still. In an unnatural way the fog thickened around them and with nervous expressions they stood there looking out into the mist. It got darker and colder where they stood and new sounds were heard that seemed to come from creatures that none of them would ever want to meet in their lifetime. Suddenly Tage saw how Eks turned pale with fear and his moustache trembled violently. He frowned and was about to ask Eks what had happened when he suddenly saw what was behind his terrified reaction.

He watched in horror as thirty or so hog-children literally materialized out of the trees, all sneaking around them with small, soundless steps, sniffing the air as if something had disturbed them.

- "Hrmf! They must have reacted to Eks' screams before." Tage swore angrily in his mind and felt his heart beating fast and agitated inside him.

They did everything in their power to stand absolutely still because if they moved an inch now it would be over for them.

Tage and Eks stood still like statues, staring at each other in horror, trying to communicate with their eyes. What would they do now?

The green creatures were almost the same color as the thick fog around them and they seemed to be moving closer towards them.

The darkness revealed their luminous eyes and they looked like points of light traveling in jerky movements through the forest.

As the hog-children approached, the duo watched as some of them disappeared without a trace into the vegetation while others appeared out of nowhere in other places. It was then that they realized why previous fortune seekers had so easily fallen prey to these deadly creatures.

A few terrified heartbeats later, the children walked past Tage and Eks and assumed they were part of the vegetation. Not long after, they saw three of the children dragging something that they suspected had caused the rattling sound earlier. It was a pig-like animal with six legs, squeaking anxiously.

Without warning it was dumped unceremoniously on the ground some distance away from Tage and Eks and they both felt very uncomfortable being in the center of what was about to happen.

Suddenly the ground opened up under the pig creature and in a few seconds it was swallowed whole and disappeared without a trace.

Eks swallowed nervously and felt panic quickly take hold of him. It turned out that he was holding his weapon in a very uncomfortable position and he wasn't sure how long he could stand there without moving a single muscle in his body.

The Hog-children were gesticulating wildly with each other and they seemed to be upset about something. The critters pointed down to the area where the pig had disappeared and continued with their wild gestures.

At the same time, Eks felt sweat running down his forehead and he began to tremble slightly.

Tage stared him straight in the eyes and made it clear that he was not allowed to move now.

To his horror, Eks watched as his involuntary trembling caused a mechanism on his plasma launcher to slowly slip apart and it was only a matter of time before it came loose. The sweat grew more intense with each passing second and he had great difficulty holding the weapon still in the elevated position.

Suddenly the mechanism came loose and Eks' planned breath caught up in his throat.

He realized that the only chance for him to lower the weapon to a more comfortable position would be right before the piece of metal hit the ground. With a silent and smooth gesture, he lowered the weapon just before impact.

Once the mechanism landed, it made a dull thud and all the hog-children reacted instantly to the event with lightning speed.

Tage and Eks, who were completely paralyzed by fear, watched silently as the children rushed towards the piece of metal with an unnatural hunger on their faces. Their eyes shone more clearly now and they turned their heads in rapid movements while listening intently to their surroundings.

The critters gathered around the strange visitors, searching for whatever had attracted their attention.

After a moment of searching, they found the piece of metal lying just by Ek's right foot. Someone gently sniffed it and immediately afterwards they started gesticulating wildly again.

The children sounded upset about something but no one touched it. Instead, they continued to converse loudly with each other for quite a while.

Without warning, they suddenly fell silent and Eks swallowed nervously again.

The children stared up at the treetops and started sniffing suspiciously. It seemed that they had sensed something they really didn't like.

One of the creatures curiously moved its face towards Eks' sweaty hand and sniffed it gently but quickly recoiled again as if it had been exposed to a terrible stench.

The other children stared silently at their companion who just stood there analyzing the smell it had just been exposed to.

The creature looked at the others without saying anything but after a while it suddenly raised its right arm in the air in a way that resembled a warning.

The child leaned forward and smelled again, but this time more intensely and carefully.

Suddenly the creature's eyes lit up with a bright light and it quickly turned to the others, breathing excitedly. After that, all the critters gathered some distance away and conferred about the smell incident.

By now, Eks felt he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown so he clutched his weapon tightly and looked at Tage.

Tage, in turn, grimaced with his face and did everything to prevent Eks from doing something foolhardy now. His attempt failed and suddenly Eks stood wide-legged and pointed his weapon at the hog-children. They reacted with lightning speed to the movement and stared at him with glowing eyes.

"Eat this, you dirty bastards!" Eks shouted in a shaky voice and emptied the entire clip in his plasma launcher.

The shots came at a furious pace and before the children could react to the attack, several of the projectiles hit their targets. A couple of them hit home and the unlucky creatures standing in its way exploded violently in a cavalcade of guts and green slime.

The green, sticky mass spread everywhere and Tage got a large amount of it all over him. It smelled rotten and stinky at the same time and it wasn't long before he started gagging.

Shortly thereafter, the clip was empty and Eks clutched the weapon extra tightly as if trying to extract more death and destruction from it. The only thing he succeeded in doing was to produce a thin layer of smoke that modestly emerged from the muzzle.

The smoke from the attack eventually dissipated and the hog-children who had survived now slowly emerged out from the darkness.

They were all staring in the same direction and it wasn't long before Eks realized that all their eyes were focused on him.

"Oh, no! They have discovered me." he gasped resignedly.

With one last desperate move, he threw the weapon at them and then fled from there as fast as his legs could carry him.

Clearly unwilling to stay there in the jungle all alone, Tage followed suit and ran after Eks as fast as he could.

However, it was not the easiest terrain to run through and their escape was constantly hampered by protruding roots camouflaged on the ground. They stumbled several times but somehow managed to get back on their feet.

Knowing there was a hungry horde of hog-children behind them gave them the necessary adrenaline they needed.

As they ran through the dense vegetation, Tage glanced behind them and saw how the advanced group of eyes kept approaching.

Suddenly, Eks stopped and didn't know which way to go. He seemed to be hopelessly lost and stared manically around him for the way out of there.

- "COME ON, EKS!" Tage screamed. "WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS NOW. WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!"

- "B-but I don't know the way out of here?" he complained with a shaky voice. "We're lost."

- "No! We're not!" Tage shouted and pointed a bit to his right. "The road to Bors Labok is that way."

Immediately afterwards, Tage took command and ran towards the direction where their ship was waiting for them.

With a relieved sigh, Eks followed suit, but a few steps later, the muddy ground under him suddenly opened up and sucked down his legs.

Eks let out a violent scream and Tage immediately stopped and turned around. Terrified, he saw how Eks desperately tried to grab a stump next to him to save himself from the hungry ground. Tage rushed up to him and threw himself on the ground to grab his arms. After a few seconds of desperate movements, he finally made contact and tried to pry him off the ground. Tage got a good foothold and seemed to succeed in the rescue when he saw how Ek's face was twisted with fear.

- "DON'T LET ME GO, TAGE!" he shouted in resignation. "Please, get me out of here."

- "Don't worry, my friend. We will get through this." he said soothingly, and that calmed Eks down somewhat.

However, it seemed that the environment had also heard Tage's promise because suddenly the ground pulled so hard on Eks that he was torn from his companion's grasp and disappeared into the dark earth without a trace.

Tage just gasped and stared around in horror.

In an instant his friend had disappeared and with a black feeling inside of him Tage now realized that he was alone in the cold and threatening jungle.

Suddenly he was jolted back to reality as he saw the incoming eyes rapidly approaching.

He got back on his feet and continued his desperate flight away from there.

Meanwhile, the jungle thicket continued its own warfare and on several occasions Tage was hit by rubbery branches that hit him right in the face. It stung with pain but he did not give up. He really didn't want to die now.

Tage heard the forest rustling menacingly behind him so he picked up the pace and ran through the tangle of vegetation as fast as he could, but it was still too slow.

He could hear the hungry sounds of the children behind him. They were close now.

Tage was constantly wrestling with twisted trees and branches and it almost seemed as if the forest would not let go of its panicked guest.

Tage pulled harder and harder at the awkward vegetation, swearing under his breath as he suddenly fell forward and landed hard on the ground.

Tired and disoriented, he stood up and realized to his surprise that he was just outside the dense jungle. Breathing fast and hard, he looked out over the dark swamps.

The only thing between him and Bors Labok now was the menacing green haze that slowly hovered over the marshy ground.

He continued his flight again, running across the desolate landscape, and after a while he saw nothing but green mist all around him.

He suddenly felt lost and did not know which way to go to get back to his ship.

Tage quickly dug out the device that had previously activated the ship's security system. He punched in a numerical code to deactivate it, hoping to get an audio confirmation of the ship's whereabouts.

Nothing happened and he felt the panic quickly growing inside him.

Suddenly there was complete silence where he stood. The rattle of the trailing hog-children had stopped and everything became calm and quiet. He turned around several times to make sure that no one was lying in ambush anywhere, but the area was completely deserted.

However, the green fog was as dense and impenetrable as before and Tage swore to himself about the poor visibility.

He cautiously crept forward and heard the wet sloshing sound of his boots echoing in the serious silence. Around the same time, Tage noticed another interesting detail.

The organic swarm that constantly permeated the landscape with its ominous symphony had also ceased. He quickly became very uneasy about this and wished he hadn't come to this godforsaken planet in the first place.

"W-what's going on?" Tage stammered anxiously. "I have to get out of here before they find me. If only I could find my ship."

He continued through the landscape while pressing the same numerical code on the device, but no matter how many times he tried, he did not hear the long-awaited alarm sound.

Tage was exhausted by the setbacks and collapsed to his knees with a soft thud.

A myriad questions passed through his mind now. Why didn't they heed the warnings? Why did they think Ssakor would be an easy match? Why had he and Eks been so blinded by greed?

Tage felt the tears forming in his eyes when he realized that he was lost in the inhospitable landscape.

He sat there with his eyes closed, listening to the environment in a last attempt to find his way back. A gentle breeze caressed his thick beard, it smelled sweet.

Suddenly he heard a branch break somewhere in the distance and Tage stood up in a flash and stared out into the mist. He saw nothing, but the sound made him walk on at a much faster pace.

After a while, Tage heard new twigs breaking behind him and with a cold fear permeating his whole being he turned around and almost didn't dare to breathe.

Suddenly two eyes appeared in the fog, staring coldly at him.

Tage's breathing became heavier and heavier with each passing second. He felt dizzy and nauseous. With a sinking feeling inside, he backed away from the duo of lights and was just about to give up when Tage suddenly hit something hard behind him.

He quickly turned around and realized to his surprise that he was standing right in front of Bors Labok.

Tage gasped and looked back over his shoulder and was relieved to see that his eyes were gone.

"To hell with this! I'm getting out of here." he firmly said and bravely stretched himself up.

Without wasting any more precious time, he activated his ship and lots of lights came to life around the vessel.

The start-up process was initiated and the entrance platform was slowly lowered towards the damp marsh grounds.

The sound of the platform disturbed the chilly silence with its mechanical rattle and he felt the seconds passing slowly now.

He hoped he could get out of here before they found him.

He turned around.

Suddenly he noticed how hundreds of eyes had come to life out there in the formless mist. They moved slowly and methodically, studying the craft with macabre interest.

Tage just stood there with his heart in his throat, barely daring to breathe. What would happen now? Would he end his days on this accursed planet now that he was so close to rescue?

Without warning, the hog-children started running towards the craft and Tage immediately turned around and shouted at the platform to hurry up.

The lowering of the jetty was going far too slowly in his mind and if he didn't do something about it now it would be the end of him.

With a jolt he jumped onto the craft and tried to climb into the opening gap.

Tage grabbed the edge of the platform and made every effort to get into the ship.

The chilly atmosphere had made the metal damp and slippery so it was difficult to get a good grip on anything solid. However, Tage was not willing to give up now and after a few valiant attempts he finally got hold of a bar on the inside and pulled himself into the ship with all his might.

Tage rolled down the steep hatch on the other side and landed on the ship's floor with a violent thud.

Now it was urgent, really urgent, Tage realized with a pounding heart and stood up. He stared out at the raging crowd of hog-children and realized that they were now only about ten meters away from the hatch that was still opening.

The frantic eye movements of the children had an hypnotic effect on him and he almost fell victim to it. However, he was brought back to reality and soberly shook his head to clear his mind.

Without another second's hesitation, he threw himself over the panel that controlled the platform and interrupted the opening sequence with a few frantic hand movements.

With a mechanical squeak, the platform stopped abruptly and began its journey back up.

It went slowly, far too slowly, Tage thought, and he stared helplessly as the opening out to the bog became smaller and smaller.

The hungry crowd of children, now showing the bestial bloodlust they were so famous for, reached the craft. In an instant they swarmed all over it, and Tage saw how only a small gap still remained before the platform was fully closed again.

The bloodthirsty horde immediately climbed up on the sides of the ship and tried to get in, but it was too late and at the last second the hatch closed with a metallic roar.

Drenched in sweat, Tage let out a breath he didn't know he was holding in and hurried to the cockpit.

In a daze, he collapsed into the pilot's seat and closed his eyes for a few seconds to get some mental rest before it was time to leave.

When Tage opened them again, he jumped in his seat and saw a crowd of hog-children crawling on the cockpit window outside, and for the first time he got to see what they really looked like.

Their eyes were twisted with an unnatural hunger and when they opened their mouths he could see rows of razor-sharp teeth. They shone in the light from the ship and he was immensely relieved that he would not be one of their future meals.

Their insane eyes studied his every move with a vicious precision and Tage really wanted to get out of there now.

With a quick intake of air, he activated the craft and started up the engines. Various computer panels and screens came to life inside the cockpit where he sat and everything seemed to be working as it should.

Once everything was ready, Tage pressed the button combination to take off and that's when the ship suddenly shook and died. Everything went dark inside the ship and with a growing panic, Tage pressed the button combination again. Nothing happened.

Sick with anxiety, he saw one of the Hog-children curiously playing with a broken energy cable outside the window.

Tage's jaw dropped and, just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, he suddenly heard the platform to the craft slowly open again.

He couldn't believe it, didn't want to believe it. He, who had been so close to getting out of this miserable place, had lost everything now. He, who only wanted to earn some credits to party on Kva'um Doo with his friend, would now meet a cruel and sudden death of the worst kind.

Tage slowly turned around in his chair and watched helplessly as Bors Labok was filled with the insane hog-children. A tear ran down his cheek and the last thing he saw was their precious eyes lighting up the cockpit like a starry night.

"If only I had listened to the warnings of the other smugglers." he thought bitterly and wished himself away from there.

"But I risked it all for a handful of eyes."

Outside the ship, the commotion was heard for a moment and Tage let out a heartbreaking scream that was quickly drowned out by the hungry hisses of the hog-children.

Suddenly all was quiet and still again and the fog outside became dense and impenetrable.

Bors Labok was no longer in sight and the only thing that could be heard was the distant sounds of life forms making their verbal wail against the landscape. The multitude of their calls echoed menacingly in the green atmosphere.

The event had now come to an end and had become a part of the dark and inexplicable secrets that lurked in the tropical forests of the planet that so many warned about... Ssakor.