

## *Lai'asku Mei'ka*

The sky roared with the chaotic rumbles of a departing spacecraft, sound distorting as atmosphere gave way to the void. It was shaken, venting a far larger thermal signature than it ever should have. As it gained enough speed to escape the pale grey planet's orbit, several greebles of metal fell off of it, burning red as the shimmering chameleon effect of the vessel's cloaking struggled to envelop the quickly evaporating fires throughout scarred hull. Red on red warning glyphs and incessant klaxons slowly turned to calming blues.

Her heart was beating faster than the warning klaxons, a thrill nearly as grand as when she was on the Hunt. But as the hunter's adrenaline passed, she wondered what went so wrong in the atmosphere of thoughts she had, peering beyond her ship's instruments and the slanted reinforced glass into a starry nebulae beyond.

She should've known better.

It is the way of the Hunt to test one's self against the worthy, not of one's machines. She had thought her modifications would have been sufficient. But her ship was originally a freighter, not a dedicated hunting craft with all the sleek advancements made by modern artisans...

She glanced backwards behind the cockpit, desperate to ensure her most prized trophies made it through intact.

A manuscript etched in stone, a beast dissected to display it's parts, prepared by the human prey she had taken a week ago, their skull occupying the same exhibit, and a set of black armor with scratches reminiscent of a massive furred beast and a lavender undersuit, the skeleton of that prize propping up in the display.

Everything important had survived, at least. She input a new target for the ship's autopilot and laid back in her chair, her biomask playing back the most recent events saved in it's cache, as orange holograms turning into full color scenery enveloped her vision and she was transported to a place that wasn't too long ago. She wondered what went so wrong...

"<HUNTING LOG - 304 - SPHERICAL OBJECT SG-56,003 - LAI'ASKU OF CLAN QUATZA-RIJ>

<REPLAYING BIOMASK CACHE>"

Snow crunched against her bladed sandals, the hatch of her ship hissing closed as its cloaking device shrouded it into the whirling blizzard. The cold bit against her skin, dulled by the warmth of criss-crossing thermal netting across her body, a moment's distraction as she surveyed her surroundings.

Her ship took her to a set of coordinates she had found on her last Hunt, KG-913. Within the frontier of human space, it was a nearly-frozen, inhospitable tundra that she had found herself in, with multiple energy signatures large enough to suggest the presence of settlements. Lai'asku was curious how her prey survived on such a world, what they valued here, and the quality of their warriors could tell her much about those questions.

She landed in a clearing surrounded by massive evergreen pines, nothing in particular caught her eye until she pressed a finger to her wristbracer. Her biomask's vision switched to a blue hue, reading the temperature as cold, save for yellow embers in the distance. Her vision zoomed towards the embers, and she recognized it as a camp. A large wire tower loomed beyond.

She checked that her quiver was fastened and her compound bow well-strung. A bit old-fashioned, but honorable nonetheless. Lai'asku ran towards the trees, securing her bow to her armor as she climbed upward.

Jumping from branch to branch, she took great care in softening her feet and avoiding the larger piles of snow. Much like the bow she used, it was ancient tradition that dictated an emphasis on quiet, yet fast movement during the Hunt. Drilled into her, it became habit to test herself without using her cloak.

Tree to tree, Lai'asku came closer, closer to that yellow ember, dropping onto a pile of snow to cushion her fall as she approached it-  
Only for a horned beast to charge straight for her.

She had been so focused on the human prey that she did not stop to consider other life on the planet. The hunter managed to leap over it just in time to avoid getting hit, but the damage was done as the beast hit the tree next to her, shaking off white flakes out of its grey fur. This thing had to die, and quickly before she was detected.

She thumbed a button on her right wrist, and a small extrusion extended out of it, letting loose bolts of green energy that struck the snow bear down. From all the noise it generated in its dying throes, she knew that her prey would be alerted.

Leaping once more above into the trees, she kept a fair distance and saw camouflaged human soldiers huddled around a campfire. One of the soldiers was looking up towards the sound of the snow bear, but the others kept to drinking around the fire, laughing and chuckling in their strange language of theirs. She double checked her position, ensuring she couldn't be easily seen. But the attentive soldier was still examining his surroundings, even as his comrades made merry.

"This is it," Lai'asku thought. "A worthy opponent." She readied her bow, anchored herself on the branch, and plucked a hard metal arrow out of her quiver, but tilted her head. "No. This one deserves better."

She thumbed a set of glyphs on her wrist computer instead, pulling an audio sample out of one of her prior Hunts.

*"A#\$^&ej, come over here! There's som^%\$-"*

Played in distorted russian, she masked the age of the sample with electronic interference, to better pique the interest of her prey.

The attentive soldier got up, yelled some expletive at his friends, and pointed at the distance, where the vocal sample was thrown.

*"Idiots! Something's out there, we need to know what it is!"*

*"Surrre, comrade, go bring us back a boar. These rice rations are shit."*

He stormed off in huff, flicking the safety off of his bayoneted pulse rifle, enough, he hoped, to ward off whatever he thought was out there.

The snow crunched underneath his boots as Lai'asku awaited in the treetops, quietly stalking him from a distance.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. He was far enough away, mostly out of ear-shot of his friends. They wouldn't be able to arrive in time even if they did.

She readied another arrow, pulling the string back, and letting loose.

In front of the soldier's vision, a metal arrow flew and collided with a tree. His brown eyes, shrouded by balaclava, darted to the arrow, and upon recognizing what it was, turned quickly in the opposite direction-

only to glance back at a freakishly large humanoid figure walking towards him. It growled and clicked at him like an animal, and he opened fire.

Lai'asku rolled out of the way, charging the man with her singular right wristblades extended.

She was fast enough to knock the man off of his feet, then to leap somewhere else in the trees.

*"God damnit! What the fuck is this shit?!?!"* her translator picked up. He fired widely into the trees, with none of his shots connecting.

The hunter clicked rapidly, jumping from branch to branch, staying just at the edge of the soldier's vision. *"@\$%^hey're in the !\$@^"* came from somewhere, he didn't know. He fired at the noise, once, and when it hit nothing, he backed towards a spot he thought was safe.

The humanoid fell in front of him again, charging him with its single pair of gauntlet-blades, serrated like nightmarish metal insects.

He fired, and a shot grazed off of her armor. She quickly closed the distance, trying to roll away again, only to be met with a bayonet nearing her throat and a thunderous warcry.

The rifle's bayonet met with her wristblades, a sharp intersection of knife and blade as she rose again, tackling the soldier even as his bayonet cut her thigh. Dots of bright bio-luminescent green fell on the white snow as they fought, the soldier lunging a definitively killing blow towards her chest, only for those gauntlet-blades to repel the bayonet and for the alien's free hand to grab him by his collar and pinning him to the ground.

He stared into the cold featureless face of death itself, as the hunter's mask focused on him for a moment, before taking a knife out of its greaves and sawing through the man's wrist with great agony! Lai'asku, satisfied, collected his hand for her trophy, and prepared to leave the man alone to fend for himself. A hand would serve just as well as a skull, and left the prey to continue their story, if they were truly worthy. Perhaps, their stories would intertwine again, and she would take his other hand as well.

A shrill warning beeps into her ear. A warning that her ship's cloaking had been disrupted, with no further information possible. Then pulse fire. Thermal oranges ran towards her, and she was running out of options. She thumbed her gauntlet, engaging her cloak, and lept for the trees.

"Sergei! What the fuck!" shouted one of the camouflaged soldiers, his words with a hint of a slur to them."

"Fuck, god, my hand! It cut off my hand!"

"Korporal! Suture him, now!" The soldier commanded, one of his comrades running with a surgical line.

"It-it went into the trees! Ju-Just turned invisible! A-aargh!" He struggled to say, pressing as much force onto his dismembered hand to limit the stream of blood loss.

"That can't be possible! Not here!." The leading man paused, clicking something on his headset.

"Dragon! This is Bear squad, Serzhant Xun! Unknown contact, it's an American infiltrator! Get me your grenadiers, they have cloaking! Team two, secure that damn insertion craft!"

"Alright, three point formation, cover Sergei! This guy can cloak and is fucking around in the trees! Switch to your flamethrowers, smoke him out and wait for Dragon!"

Her translator droned on as the packmates of her prey led an unexpectedly coordinated response. She had what she wanted and could depart, but her ship being compromised? Completely unacceptable. A small square in the corner of her HUD switched to the camera view of her ship, and sure enough, there was another party of human warriors standing outside of it.

Not good.

"<WARNING - UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO CLAN VEHICLE>" blared over her communicator as the trees started to burn around her.

She would have to find some way to divert the humans away from her ship.

Keying into her wristbracer, she played various sounds around her, drawing the flames into directions other than hers. As she ran, pulse fire and the creak of collapsing trees filled the forest.

Only an inkling of a plan in her head, she went towards the soldier's camp. After all, if they were hunting her, they wouldn't care for that, right?

She wasn't right. Back at the camp stood two soldiers, scanning the tree line. But Lai'asku had long since past the point of trying to go without her cloak. She readied a shot with her bow, uncloaked herself, and let an arrow fly that pierced right through the armor of one particularly unattentive prey.

The other soldier, a woman with her hands firmly on her weapon, returned fire while backpedaling.

"Serzhant, he's here! Contact at grid thi-AGH!"

Was all that she could vocalize before being skewered by an arrow in her heart that was thicker and yet longer than her arm.

The hunter acted quickly, finishing the dying woman with her wristblades and tearing her headset off her head. An old trick she had learned turned essential for her survival. Listening to the chatter of the prey was key to understanding where they would be, and more importantly, where they thought she was.

Amidst frantic chatter and unknown signatures being called out in the burning forest, requisitioning her prey's communications gave her an idea that led her towards the wire transmitter tower not far from the camp.

Nearing the tower, the rising sun on the horizon reflected off of a metal beast screeching through the sky. A white and grey patterned aircraft with bulbous windows descended on the camp, dropping capsules that impacted the ground with blue pulses of electricity. Her stolen headset vibrated:

"Attention all Bear teams! This is Dragon quick response! We have arrived and now beginning an EMP sweep of the area, we'll deploy our infantry momentarily! Stay clear of the bombs!"

What had she done to provoke such a response from the humans? Was this akin to sacred ground to them? Were others of her kind here prior? Lai'asku's head spun, but she had to stay focused, or she would surely die in this rapidly closing net.

The swoosh of four more arrows, the deaths of three more strangely-armored soldiers. She had access to the transmitter array, and it was time for her plan to work, or for her to die honorably. Finding an electronics panel, she bashed it open with her blades.

Lai'asku opened her wrist bracer and used its charge emitter on the communication tower's exposed panel. With it, she broadcasted a spoofed order, that the American commando was spotted on the opposite side of the forest, some half mile south from the camp, giving her much needed time to rush back to her ship.

The dropship circling above her head moved south, and she leaped through the once-tranquil forest. The burning trees and thunderous EMP detonations clouded her senses, but she kept, determined to escape.

"<WARNING - UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO CLAN VEHICLE>" rang in her mask again. The clearing she had landed in became clear in her vision, surrounded by soldiers, some pounding on the uncloaked ship of hers. She didn't have time for this, once they realized her order wasn't valid she had to be gone.

Engaging her own personal cloak, she ran directly to the side hatch of her vessel and climbed in. Immediately, the soldiers ran and tried to open the hatch as it shut, soon giving up and firing directly at it.

Lai'asku really couldn't afford a moment off-beat. She leaped into the seat of the ship's helm, tapped on the orange waking glyphs on it, and her makeshift hunting ship roared to life. Heavy mounted plasma casters unfurled from various hardpoints, clearing the ground for her ship to take off into the sky, unwittingly barreling into the firing line of two red-hot lasers.

"Commander! Dragon pilot! He's fleeing! We have him now, ready the orbital force!" crackled out of the headset as urgently intersecting runes and incessant alarms ringed in her ears. Missiles had locked onto her.

Yanking her helm control to the side, she could feel her entire craft rotating in a way that made even her yautja insides groan from the sheer force exerted. Hasty flare-countermeasures threw off the missiles as her heavy plasma casters turned to bear, striking down the pursuing dropship's engines. The altitude climbed, and suddenly the entire ship jolted with an impact from something she wasn't sure of-

"<HUNTING LOG - 304 - SPHERICAL OBJECT SG-56,003 - LAI'ASKU OF CLAN QUATZA-RIJ>

<BIOMASK LOG INTERRUPTED. DATA CORRUPTION LIKELY.>"

Lai'asku sighed. She still wasn't sure what she had stumbled into, but it was clear that something similar to her had affected these humans strongly. And that they valued that pale little grey rock far, far too much for safe hunting.

Disengaging her biomask with a hiss, she smiled at the hand still in her hunting pouch. A worthy memento, and an even worthier opponent.

Perhaps not the soldier himself, but of what he represented, a greater whole. Surely, she would not forget this experience with the lingering wounds given to her and her ship. It was quiet now.

Having escaped KG-913, she double checked that her ship's cloak and stealth system still worked, and set an automatic course for her clanworld for repairs. Lowering herself into the stasis bed, she thought about what she would see when she waked. Of arid comfort and familiar shapes...

It had been too long since she had to go home, even longer was the last time she was forced to go home. She stayed at the fringes of known space, continuously probing the unknown for worthy prey. She didn't trust the automated system scans, no, she had to go and explore the fringes for herself, to know if a planet was truly worth fighting on. To her clan, this made her an impromptu surveyor of sorts. Lai'asku would be gone for years at a time, pursuing leads from various prey cultures that could point her to new worlds, and she loved every bit of the exotic warriors and their own weapons she faced.

But it was unorthodox. Most clans traveled the stars in great nomadic motherships, preferring the company and support of one another.

Instead, Lai'asku risked death each time she departed, with no lines of communication connecting her to the greater yautja civilization. This was a regrettable effect of her ship never having the required technology. It was more akin to an ancient relic, a freighter from the time Clan Quatza-Rij's prestige marked it as one of the best, peddling their artisan's great works across the stars, only to be pressed into service an epoch later as one of the few small long-range vessels left to the decaying clan. All of the hunters simply went for better grounds, critiquing how stagnant and stale the clan's leadership had become, trawling the same few planets in the same system every age until the clan was reduced to a single pyramid on it's old favored world.

Her elders risked that maybe she would run into a greater hunting ground the clan could colonize, some day, to claim and regain their honor and old mantle. But to do that, her knowledge would have to be kept secret until it returned safely. Thus, she was spared no communication devices, so that Quatza-Rij's competitors could not intercept them.

She had to fight with her sister, Akl'iiya, on deciding who would get the ship this cycle. Akl'iiya was an honorable one, but enjoyed playing with her prey too much to the extent she didn't notice when it actually succeeded in escaping her traps. The hunt ended with Lai'asku having two more kills than her, earning the right to continue her mission, while Akl'iiya was left on the clanworld to tend to the rites of passage there.

"You owe me a re-match, Lai! Don't be too long!" was the last string of Sainja she remembered hearing from her before she left on this trip. A trip that, this time, lasted three years. She just wanted one more planet, then one more, as if she were following dots of blood from a freshly-wounded animal, she followed with her maps.

It would be good to see them again. To revisit that great valley dotted with the statues of the ancients, legendary hunters from previous ages. The well-maintained R'ka grounds in the depths of the pyramid, kept sealed outside of special occasions. The clan's pride, love and soul all in the same grand complex...

She awoke to sounds of stern buzzing coming from her ship's computers. Everything held together for the autopilot, at least she wasn't suffocating.

Lai'asku ate a hasty lunch of dried jerky, and eagerly sat into the helm once again.

Runes on her ship's computer indicated a debris field in low orbit. Strange, she thought. Asteroid mining, maybe? She hoped that there'd be something new for her when she arrived! She couldn't wait to tell all of her clan about the strangely armored humans and their fierce defense of one frigid rock after another. The vestiges of sleep still in her eyes as her ship broke atmosphere and landed seemingly in the middle of a desert badland...

Her heart sank and her stomach churned. A great void sat in her core, and she frantically double checked the coordinates her clan had used for so long.

They were true. What she landed on was not a bustling spaceport, but a plasma-scorched slab of sandstone next to a singularly massive crater.

She compared the present to her memories, and it was as if her home was simply erased, with the surrounding lands nearly untouched.

This... could have only meant one thing. The Serpents had escaped and caused a containment breach in that ancient settlement so severe that her elders believed the only way to preserve their honor was to destroy their last ancestral home.

She felt... empty. Despair. Falling to her knees, she struggled with a fountain of emotions she thought she'd never have to. Surely parts of her clan survived! This, wouldn't, couldn't be the end! Where would she even go!

Thoughts turned from grief to rage. Something had to have been left, a record, her clan couldn't be lost to the sands of history.

She uttered a prayer to Kytara, Guardian of the Fallen, and a swear to S'ahul that she would find and carry whatever little knowledge left from her clan.

Rising, she set her biomask back on her face, and with mixes of conflict, despair, hate, and sorrow welling in her, Lai'asku went back to her ship, and checked for energy signatures. Thermal signatures, power sources, smoke, even a fire, anything that could indicate survivors!

And she found something. One. A camp on the edge of the savannah jungle, on a mesa overlooking what was once her livelihood.

When she arrived, she found a makeshift wooden hut, supported by metal beams and various electronics equipment. A burning fire in the center of rings of stone, and a beacon rested on a pedestal made of sandstone, repeating a solemn message.

"Hunt brothers and sisters of Great Quatza-Rij, today we have celebrated the passing of another century in our most grand chronicle, letting loose the greatest Hunt of the epoch! But the empress and her scions had bested us. In accordance with our vows, we could not allow the serpents to infest our home."

"Forgive us."

She stood and stared at the beacon. How... how arrogant could her Elders be, to put her entire clan at risk, all for what, bragging rights? She-

She couldn't. She couldn't blame them. They had wanted Honor above all else, even if it meant sacrificing their last home.

But Ak'iiya... she had to hold hope, that she was spared armageddon...

As unrealistic as it was.

What she didn't expect was to be greeted by a snarl from the hut.

"Ah, so the suckling comes to roost!"

She turned, her mask's eyes flashing to acknowledge the stranger... the stranger she soon recognized as Aat'urta Quatza-Rij, a brother of hers that, though possessing legendary skill with a plasma caster, she never hunted with on account of his boisterous nature.

That didn't feel relevant to her now.

"What- Brother?"

"Ahah, Lai'asku! Come to contribute nothing again at the table? See what your ineptitude has wrought!" he clicked.

"Gone for three years of doing nothing but absurd searches for your worthless trinkets, and you expected to be greeted with open arms?"

She was taken aback. Her trophies weren't trinkets! They were artifacts of great and honorable prey!

"Aat'urta, are you mad? Our pyramid, our home is gone! And you would berate me for being unaware?"

He shrugged his arms,

"I would berate you for your failures! You could have joined us and fought the serpents off! I could have, were it not for being the only hunter worth my blades! You were worthless, and this is the result!"

A moment passed between them, staring at each other.

"At least your sister fought with honor."

"What? You- What became of her!?"

"She was among our... decent warriors, leading the youngbloods to an auxiliary chamber in order to recover some... archive. A log of good hunting. She told me she would rather die fighting to preserve our names and deeds than to rip the tongues out of the serpents causing our downfall."

"I arrived too late to join the hunt, but just enough to be pressed into overseeing the evacuation of workers and women."

"And? What happened to her, brother?"

"She pressed a cylinder in my hands and told me to run like some coward, like you. But I had a duty to attend. When she vanished inside the Pyramid, that was the last I saw of her. I would have liked to share her death. Instead, here I am tending to graves for elders I'm certain are gone."

Aat'urta threw the cylinder into the dirt, the heavy metal data storage capsule dropping with a thud.

"No longer! You're here now, now you can safeguard this thing with your cowardly character."

She blinked. Unsure of how to react, and offended by such carelessness he treated the repository of their clan's achievements.

"Bro-, and- And what exactly do you intend on doing, then?"

He clicked rapidly, as he bellowed, "What we were born to do! What I should have been doing! Quatza-Rij is dead and gone, and so are we! All that's left is to make the Serpents pay the blood price for every one of our kin killed by them, and when I run out of serpents to destroy, I will fall into the ashes, just as our fathers have."

She shook her head.

"Aat'urta! You can't be so careless, you- you're a part of the chronicle too! Your stories should be kept to inspire the future!"

"Future,ahaha! You are still like a child. Look! There is no future, that was it! I competed, Lai'asku, I Hunted and I have my glory! I need only complete the circle. Go tend to your chronicles if you love them so much. I will die with glory and honor in my heart."

He turned, picking up a glaive from his hut and set his biomask on.

"Perhaps one day, you'll understand as I do and honor our legacy."

Aat'urta walked and cloaked, disappearing into the distance.

Lai'asku shifted her eyes from him, to the cylinder laying in the sand.

This was all too much. What was she to do now? Die in a futile gauntlet like her brother? Cover in her ship? She...

She was unsure. She sat in that camp for hours, curled around the cylinder. She could only bear hearing the beacon for ten minutes before shutting it off.

In her head, she wondered what her sister would have done. She sacrificed her life for these etchings of data, hoping they would go somewhere. Somewhere to the future. But what future? All their clan's honor was gone, their home destroyed, the civilians sent fleeing to wherever would take them.

She turned to the gods. Though the black warrior may have claimed her clan, she kept the knowledge of her clan's past with her, and Ak'liiya's courage inspired her to get up off of the ground.

By S'ahul, she would continue her story, so that she could preserve the stories carried on through her.

Without her clan, she would have to go elsewhere, and trust in a stranger's hospitality.

As she returned to her ship, legends of tragedy echoed through her mind.

Mei'ka would understand. They had suffered a curse long ago, with all of their men disappearing.

She set a course for Clan Mei'ka space, in the hopes that they would adopt her as her own, and give her a place where she could make an effort to prevent any other clans from sharing the same fate as hers, their history obliterated, and culture nearly forgotten, save for the remnants she carried.