

Invaders

A Tale of the Chakat Universe

Planet – that doesn't matter, nobody but us remembers the name. Somewhere on the eastern continent – can't remember anymore. Was it a year in, 2 years in? Felt like a century. About 2290CE.

It was one of those dreams, kind of like life, but kind of like a nightmare.

It was certainly familiar. I'd spent a lot of my early life playing these old video games. Tech from a time before the first wolftaurs had been created. What they called retro when I was young.

I knew this one, I'd played it often enough.

Space Invaders.

The rows of bug-like icons, crudely shaped, from a time when this was the limit of the technology. Barely even colour.

But there was something hypnotic about it.

The first shot, and they started to move.

First to the one side, then the other. At the end of the row, they'd drop closer to your gunship, the sound pulsing.

Firing, manoeuvring yourself out of the way. Hiding behind the fortresses when they shot at you, trying not to get too excited and chip away at them yourself.

I'd been good at this game – put my name at the top of the high score list many times. Then a friend would push my name down by scoring higher. Others'd get mad, I'd work all the harder to put mine back on top.

That was why I used to win, by being the calmest, not letting the whispers from my wolf genes push me into a foolish rage. Top predator. That was me. They were mine. Mine. Wasn't using my teeth or my claws to pull them down, but they were each and every one my prey.

And no prey ever got away from me.

This time though, I felt my jaws opening in a snarl, my steady breathing turning into pants. My four paws were digging in, my hands holding the controller until the claws on my hands were making indentations in the case. My tail lashing back and forth.

They were relentless. You'd kill them all. There was a moment where you'd feel the joy of the kill because you'd cleared the screen, and you were still alive. Then a new screen full of them would appear.

And every time they moved faster than the last ones.

And you'd shoot, and shoot, and shoot. Dodge their shots, each time they're a little closer. The fortresses would be chipped away a little more. They'd be blasted so much that some shots would start passing through the gaps.

Somehow they weren't just pixels any more, they were becoming real, their shots shaking me as they exploded.

And there it was, that one shot that was so close, there was no where to move, no time to move, the one that you knew meant the end ...

Rough hands and blunt claws shaking my torso.

“Time to get up. Good thing for you I was already awake. The racket you were making, if I was asleep I'd have come over and given you a kick in your butt.”

Opened my eyes to the shape of another wolftaur, silhouetted against the dim lighting. Once there had been a full platoon, now there was just the two of us.

They say that if you die in a dream, you die in real life. I'll have to thank him that I didn't get to see if it was true, or maybe just give *him* a kick in the butt.

Showered and dried my fur quickly – needed to get the stink of my dream off. Can't let anyone else smell that, still have to keep up the illusion that we can win this. How long has it been going on now?

Sat down to eat, but my mind wandered.

It had been a pretty good planet when we arrived. A world we could make our own, put our history as war beasts behind us. Land for us to farm – fields to plant, pasture for the herds. Plenty of forests, plenty of local fauna for the occasional hunt to get the blood up. Five years in, good harvests, growing herds, families with cubs filling the dens.

That's when they found it – boronike. By the packs, they should have just buried it again like the scat that it is.

Then the Company heard about it and they came sniffing – if we'd been smart we'd have held out for Star Corp. We should have ripped their throats out instead of taking their money.

At first it was great. Then things started to go wrong.

It seemed like the usual stuff you'd expect. Crop failures. Dead stock.

There were the deaths among the packs, adults and cubs both – unexplained fires, crashes, accidents of all kinds.

Then the raiders showed up. Never could prove who was behind them, but we sure didn't get help from the Company. And Fleet was spread too thin to check on every colony world often enough to make any difference.

We were probably fools, or just wolftaurs, same thing sometimes. Took it into our own hands and answered violence with violence. Figured the Company owed us some supplies for our troubles. We *liberated* a lot of stuff ...

Shouts shook me out of my daydreams - time was growing short. Wolfed down my food without really noticing it.

Soon the two of us were getting buttoned up in our tanks. Nothing like the high tech tanks you'd expect. That's what happens when your primary weapon is anti-matter. And you improvise using heavy vehicles more at home on the farm or construction site than the battlefield.

The “shells” we fired were hardly deserving of that name. Tiny pellets of a ceramic magnetic monopole, each balancing in the vacuum of their interiors and their magnetic field just a few atoms of anti-matter. The kind of weapon that kills microelectronics with EMP. That's why the tanks have hardly any electrical gear on them, much less electronics.

Pelletized anti-matter - never was intended for this. Supposed to be the fuel for a furnace for smelting that devil's ore. A little *contribution* from the Company. They never should have had anti-matter on a planet, but no one ever stopped them.

The servicing crew had loaded the ammunition silo into the protected magazine at the heart of the vehicle.

Claws and teeth, we must all be idiots to use stuff like this.

One cracked pellet in the silo holding a million bits of death, and within a few microseconds they're all gone. All that's left is an eye-searing ball of light fading in the aftermath. Not that you'll be around to see it.

Settled the helmet over my head, made sure the indentations holding the speakers were placed correctly over my ears. It's like an itch you can't scratch if your ears get folded because you got it wrong. I powered up the two way radio, and waited for the tubes to warm up. Yeah, vacuum tubes. Crazy, but one of the few kinds of electronics they could keep working after the pulses.

After letting the glow plugs heat up, I trigger the air motor and the staccato burst of noise that accompanies them as they turn over the diesel engines. They catch with an uneven heavy pulse, steadying up in a few seconds. Pressure gauges on the pneumatic and hydraulic systems creep up, and then the slinger starts to wind up.

A sound that starts off quietly, just a hint of a vibration, kind of a rumble that you feel more than hear. Then it rises in frequency. A low hum that passes up, and up, and up to a screech drilling into your head. At last it gets to such a high pitch that it goes above what a wolftaur can hear.

The slinger, like a mechanical cyclotron. The pellets funnel into the centre of the revolving plates, cradled in jets of air. A crazy carousel of death and destruction, the pellets gaining speed with each revolution. Inexorably the pellets move towards the edge of the rapidly spinning plate. As they reach the edge they're travelling at slightly less than supersonic speeds. The deflector magnet tips them off the edge, and they're flung down the barrel toward their target. The ceramic cracks on contact with the

target, and bang – matter/anti-matter annihilation.

Tightening the straps of the 'taur bench, rear paws on the throttles and brakes, front hand-paws on levers for the valves that control the hydraulic motors of the tracks, hands on the hydraulic turret controls and slinger trigger.

“Ready to roll?” crackled in my earphones.

“Ready. See you in hell, if we're lucky.”

His chuckle filled my ears, “Or back here, if we're not.”

Just another day in paradise.

The Chakat Universe is the creation of Bernard Doove. All other parts of this story are the creation of Liath Mactire