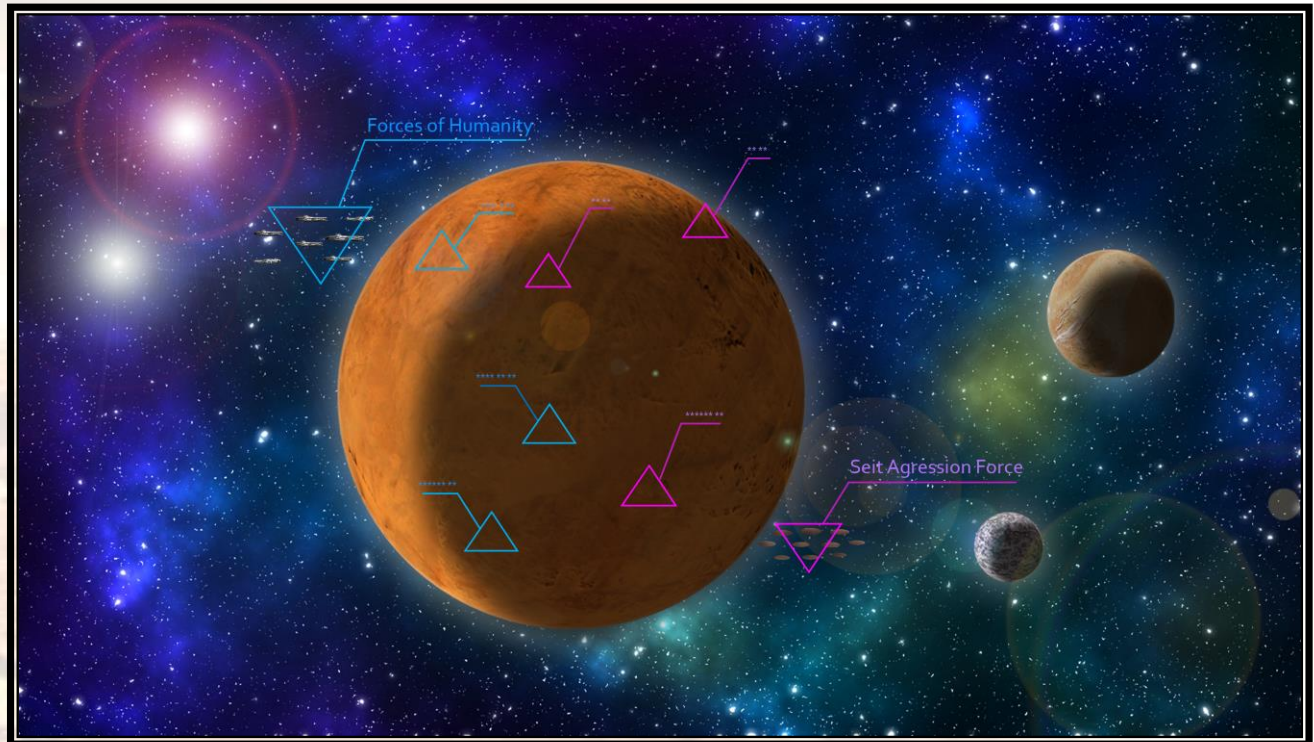


Griffon-22-4

Landing did not go according to plan. To say the least. A limited contingent of the 9th Fleet was to arrive and set up an outpost in the Griffon 22 system. The fourth planet had breathable atmosphere and was a perfect location to place a base. So the Fleet dispatched four cruisers with ground troops to conduct a covert operation and and strengthen the flank.



However, the Seit had exactly the same thought. So entering the landing orbit near the third moon, the human fleet bumped into a group of Seit ships that already started landing their troops. Hiding in the moon's radio shadow, they themselves could not see anyone. But humans have already launched the landing shuttles. Two hundred thousand kilometers is not a distance for a shuttle. Two fleets immediately began evasive maneuvering and opened fire. And the already launched landing shuttles rushed to the planet, trying to hide there from two hundred gigawatt cruiser guns.

Of course, no landing plan has been discussed. The humans and the Seit raced towards the planet, firing at each other on the way. The squadron HQ was too busy with a space battle

to coordinate the landing. Nobody could possibly say anything about safety of landing areas. And many of the shuttles got scattered beyond the designated corridors.



The first groups that managed to consolidate established a beachhead for the shuttles that followed.

"Provide fire support!!! ... We need escort from the coordinates.... ssh ... Anyone hearing this... Coordinates for the North.... We managed to hold the LZ... "

"Cut that shit!" ordered the sergeant and asked "Second group, what do you got?"

"Same stuff" answered the commander of the second team. "Still no signs of the beacon. Why are we so lucky, sarge? Why send us and not someone else to search for the damn escape pod?"

"Zipp it, Sabrina", said the sergeant, "Get busy covering your sector.

"Delgado, do you really think the greys are gonna look for some random human escape pod in the middle of a scorched desert?"

“Sabrina, I find zero pleasure in listening to your whining,” Delgado's voice concealed anger very poorly, “We have our orders. Shut up. Move. Do the job.”

“Same coordinates?” asked the sergeant from the second team.

“Affirmative, Bravo Two,” Delgado replied, “We push forward. Azimuth is the same.”



People continued moving in silence. One squad was everything Command could send on a SAR mission. Two fire teams now wandered through an endless red desert, looking for some high hat's escape pod whose shuttle was shot down during atmosphere entry. Support drones moved ahead of the riflemen. Even further ahead of them were the small reconnaissance UAVs. The squad made its way under the scorching sun being happy to wear airtight exosuits with climate control.

Finally, some outlines not characteristic of nature appeared in front and diluted the boring landscape of the prairie.

“Squad, hold!” ordered Delgado, “Get the drones to check it.”

Both teams stopped, both of the mules came to a halt in a defensive position, and the group's specialists kneeled behind them sending small reconnaissance UAVs to investigate. Delgado switched on the helmet monitors getting a picture from both scouts. Soon it became clear that these structures of artificial origin were buildings of a primitive civilization. Destroyed buildings.

“Get ready, people!” said Delgado, “There’s a destroyed settlement of primitives ahead. Give me a panorama.”

Unmanned scouts hovered higher providing a view of the village and its outskirts. “Here it is!” said Delgado, focusing the camera, “I see the escape pod!”

A quick maneuver of the drones alerted a pack of young Seit hunting raptors who chewed on cattle in the settlement. Predators rallied and, obeying their genetic program, ran to the hill from which they could get their bearings.

“I see the enemy! A pack of hatchlings,” commanded the sergeant, marking the direction of raptors’ approach on the map.

The troopers quickly deployed a defensive formation and waited for the enemy to appear in the cameras of their rifle scopes. The young raptors, being fast and agile, had weak armor, so were an easy prey for the advanced human firearms. A few seconds later, everything was over. Only a dozen of burnt bodies decorated the slope.

“Drone! Who sees the drone?” quickly asked Delgado.

“There was no drone...” answered one of the squaddies.

“Bullshit, there must be one! Find me their controller.”



“Easy, Delgado” the second sergeant tried to calm him, “They could be here alone, maybe lost their drone in a crash-landing and just hunt here. They’re animals.”

“That’s what the books say, but it does not work this way” denied Delgado who had more experience, “Hatchlings never hunt alone. They would instinctively search for either a grown-up raptor or a drone. They would attack us only if they felt safe with adults or controller drones around.”



“Uh... guys...” one of the soldiers said before a cry of a man being eaten alive filled the frequency.

“Bravo Two, rally!” cried Delgado, “Bravo One, push forward.”

With a support drone covering their rear, the first team rushed to the position of the second. Suddenly a shadow bolted between the riflemen and the drone and attacked the most dangerous target.

“Freakin’ scaly sons of...” in the headphones Delgado heard the voice of Jeremy, squad’s tech specialist, “They’re tearing Kiddo apart.”

People turned around and opened fire in a coherent way. But their assault rifles barely scratched the armor of adult raptors. Not wanting to test their fate the raptors scattered and hid quickly disappeared in the ground folds.



“Fuck!” cried Jeremy.

The mule drone could still move, but the heavy beamer on its back was toast.

“Fall back to the ruins!” ordered Delgado.

“I see the controller!” said Sabrina.

“How far?”

“Five hundred and forty meters.”

“To hell with it. Let's go!”

“Falling back!” confirmed Mike

They quickly moved towards the ruins. There they could set up a position and at least have their backs covered from the raptors.

“Sarge,” Sabrina reported, “My helmet’s freaking out!” “Same here, the image bleeds.”

“Son of a bitch!” cried Delgado, “Switch to aim-assist mode. The Seit is here! He messes with our brains!”



“So the day gets better and better!” Mike exhaled, “Come on, let’s go!”

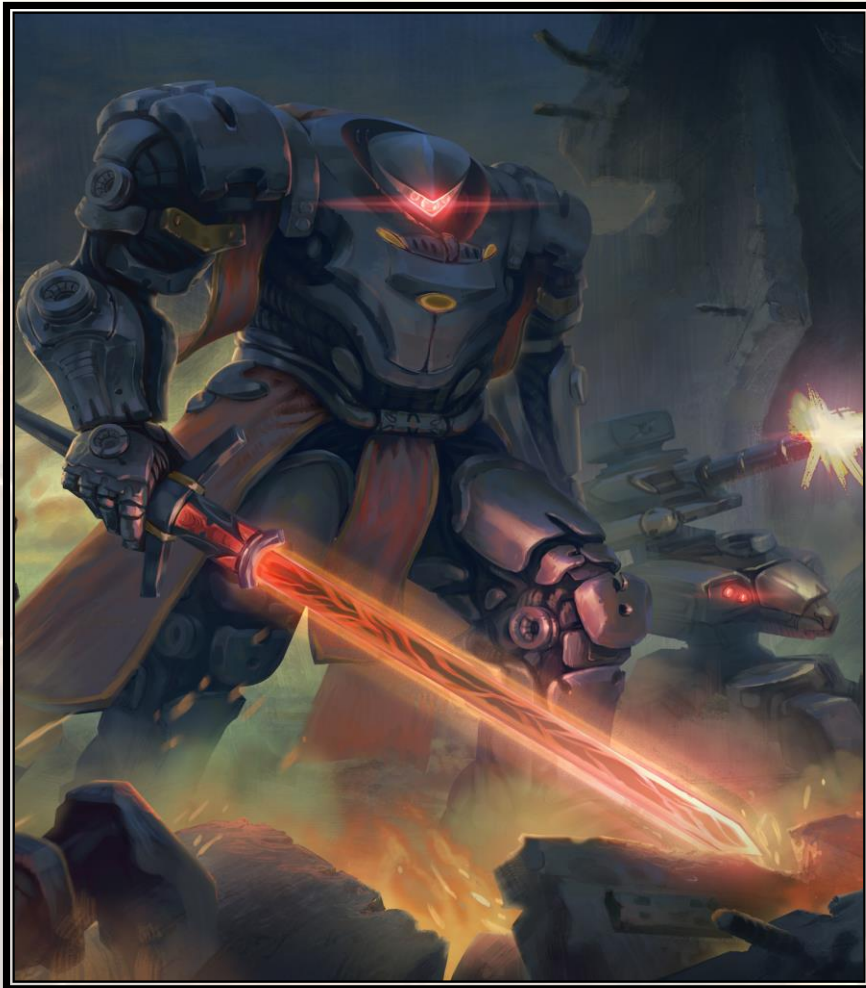
But before the humans managed to reach those life-saving ruins, three raptors blocked the way. Adult carnivores ducked to the ground preparing to jump.



And then a sharp sound struck. The Seit pressed on with his mental attack. Seeing that people got disoriented, the carnivores charged forward. The second drone was not switched from manual control and for a few moments the humans were completely defenseless.

Delgado squeezed his teeth and lifted up the rifle, hoping that the exoskeleton will help. But still everything was too slow. He could already see the claws directed at him. Suddenly a high-pitched sound of firing heavy beamer pierced the air and laser beams caught one reptile amid its jump.

The second raptor turned into a cloud of bloody steam, chunks of flesh flying. And Delgado saw the rescuer.



The three meters tall knight stood beside the drone, continuing to lay down fire on the hill where the rest of the raptors hid. In the right arm the knight held a spike hammer with a plasma beak. An anti-tank weapon with a sting point of seven hundred thousand degrees, capable of breaking an elephant, not to mention a foot-and-mouth disease.

People breathed joyfully. But carrying his breath quickly sought after a knight using his and two damaged drones as a shelter.

“Thank you sir,” Delgado said, “It seems you are the one we need to find and extract. I am Sergeant Delgado, squad commander”.

“It’s good to see a friendly face. I thought I got stuck alone in this wicked desert” a very young girl's voice appeared in the headphones “I’m Viscountess Helen.”

There was no time to exchange niceties, as enemies appeared on the hill.



An enormous shork strode on point. Hunched three meters tall figure clad in thick plating, with an elongated muzzle of a helmet marched forward, confident in its armor’s invulnerability. When he saw the knight, he switched on his plasma talons on the forearms and hailed the reputable enemy.

Slightly behind the shork ran the last uninjured raptor. Behind them floated a grav-platform on which stood a small gray humanoid - Seit. A wounded raptor limped in the rear.

“We’ll use drones as mobile shields” Delgado commanded calmly, “Take cover in the nearest building.

"Get moving," Helen replied, "I’ll cover you."

Delgado once again looked at the tabard of the knight. He had already seen this golden cross somewhere, but he couldn’t remember. No wonder: there were at least a dozen high-ranking guys from different noble houses at the briefing.



The troopers formed two lines. The knight and the drones in front, and infantry behind them, and maintaining this order they moved towards the building.

The enemies closed in in the same formation. Having almost nothing in terms of firepower, they tried to close the distance without provoking the humans.

The other side had no intention to rush things, as the only decent armor-piercing weapon that could deal damage to the shork was Helen’s spike hammer



“What about the Gatlings?” asked Delgado.

“Forget it” said Jeremy, the squad’s tech, “Two hours of repairs minimum.” “Don’t count on ours too”, reported Cassandra, the second technician, “It’s scrap metal.”

“Take mine” Helen said, shifting her left arm back.

“Sabrina, get the weapon” commanded Delgado.

“Aye, sarge” answered the trooper and threw the rifle behind the back, taking the heavy beamer from the knight.

“Everyone load underbarrels with APs” said the sergeant, checking distance to the enemies and their speed.

“We’re in position...” Mike said. The enemies also saw that.

The shork and the raptor jumped simultaneously, and a sharp sound hit the humans’ ears: the Seit supported his slaves with a mental attack. Reflexes forged by years of training worked as they should. Laying down suppressive fire the soldiers hid in the ruins. Helen crushed her shoulder into the charging shork and threw him on the ground.

The astroborne troopers, hiding behind the walls, aimed through the cameras on their rifles and kept on firing to not allow the Seit to concentrate on the knight. If the shork overcame Helen, their chances of survival would become really thin. Things looked grim for the viscountess. Having no protection besides armor, she tried to avoid the merciless avalanche of shork's attacks. But that amphibian was too agile.



Tabard turned into rags, and the armor itself was soon shredded by the enemy's plasma talons. Helen did not attack often - her weapon was able to kill the shork with one hit, but a mistake would mean death for her and the whole squad.

“Oh shit!” exclaimed Sabrina.

Delgado and Mike reacted in time. The raptor that knocked Sabrina down on the floor did not manage to escape.



Two AP grenades split the beast's solid shell. The reptile did not even understand what had happened as its remains fell down on Sabrina. Delgado moved towards her, but got literally knocked down by another psionic blow. When the troopers could finally deal with

the pain and get up, they saw that the platform with an exhausted Seit on it retreated from the hill. Shork covered.



“The little bastard finally faltered!” exhaled Delgado standing up.

The heart in his chest beat like crazy and he could barely breathe, but everything was over. Now all he had to do was to assemble the squad and get the hell out before the Seit returns with more friends.

“Helen, how are you?”

“In one piece, it seems” the girl said, “and that’s good news.”

“Sabrina?”

“Had better days, but I’m still alive” she replied.

Sabrina was injured, but the exoskeleton system worked as intended, so she could walk unassisted. And although the squad moved at maximum speed possible, it was long after dark when they made it to the camp.

There everything was in motion: the fire positions and observation posts were being set up, engineers covered everything with camo nets, and the officers registered and directed the newcomers to their units. The fact that the camp was covered with camo netting meant that everything didn’t go too well in orbit, but at least the Seit did not win.

So the battle for Griffon 22-4 has begun.



For some weird reason it was not a quartermaster who came out to meet the newcomers, but a knight in paladin’s armor escorted by three order sergeants. Each one had an azure tabard with a golden cross on it. Just like the one Helen had. The paladin's armor

was built to resemble woman's features – obviously a mighty expensive and complex suit even by knightly armor standards. And finally Delgado realized.

“Thank you for saving my daughter” said lady Rosenko-Alvarez, countess of Long Lagoon of Albatross 7.

“To tell the truth, milady” Delgado replied bowing down, “it was she who saved us.”

“Indeed?” the lady sounded surprised “I am pleased to hear that. Seems like the new fencing instructor was really worth it...”

“I am glad to see you too milady”, interrupted Helen.

“...but there's much more to work on, most certainly” the countess continued coldly, “Take this scrap off her and bring it back into shape as quickly as possible. We'll have to hold with what we have, and there's too few of us.”

Having said this to the order sergeants, the countess turned around and headed to the other side of the camp. As the commander of the ground operation she obviously had her hands full.

