

The Terror of the Sebumous

Filthy green fungal spores hissed and popped beneath the heavy steel boots of Epsilon Space Squad as they progressed carefully across the cratered grey landscape. High overhead, flashing ruby red, the scout ship John Spence hummed audibly; its laser cannons were trained on the bleak holes ahead of the four strong advance crew. These grim pits glistened with luminous golden blooms of slime and sludge. This was another offensive in the decade long war against the Sebumous: the subterranean troglodytes that pulsed maggot-like beyond the crust of their terrible lairs.

These brave soldiers were the bait; they didn't expect to survive.

There was no need for radio communications; every position had been painstakingly planned and drawn out on electronic pads back in the ship's strategy room. In theory, it was simple: the four *Eridani*, meaning river-people, high ranking warriors, would plant themselves at the four corners of the horrible hole in the middle of the target area. They would quickly block the satellite exits with *chemofoam* that would solidify instantly. Then they would fire one *supercharge* to rouse the anger of the creatures inside.

And then they would run.... run for their lives.

The early manoeuvres progressed perfectly. *Chemofoam* was tough and reliable; it expanded into the fissures and cracks, freezing the bulging mushroom eruptions and hardening within microseconds. *Eridani* AB, Ground Commander, nodded with satisfaction then paused as the ground shook and rumbled beneath him. He gestured to *Eridani* EF, Mistress of Weaponry, and pointed sharply at the target. His hand shook slightly and he couldn't avoid looking down, as if he expected the fronds and tendrils to reach up and wrap themselves around his armour plated throat.

The vibrations from the scout ship intensified as it moved to Laser Three, ready to explode in rage and fury.

The rings of Scabron, the giant blue planet that neighboured this cursed, infested world, gleamed wetly in the darkness: millions of miles away but seemingly almost close enough to touch. She was beautiful, exquisite and entirely alien.

Eridani EF raised her hand and held up three fingers. Her comrades braced themselves. She crouched behind the heavy space-cannon that was made of four separate crafted components. Each had been carried as part of the crew's standard baggage. Then she slammed her fist into the operating mechanism and it roared into life.

Jagged light ripped into the darkness of the pit, slicing deeply and remorselessly into the bowels of the planet. Three seconds passed, and then another, before a great fountain of gore and emerald foam shot upwards and outwards, coating all four attackers with what seemed like bile and vomit. Still she focused her fire, determined not to stray from her objective.

But the planet had other ideas. First the jagged collars of the diseased pits were flung madly in all directions. Some cascaded harmlessly into the bitter landscape but more blew obscenely into the steadfast crew. Their spacesuits were implacable; *Eridani* EF, AB and IJ braced themselves and deflected the incoming storm successfully; they refocused on their electric onslaught.

But *Eridani* NO was not so strong. Either his forcefield generation was faulty or the repellent air had somehow weakened it. Whatever it was, there was no potential that *Eridani* NO could survive the trident of death that jutted grotesquely from his chest and emerged, dripping with scarlet gore, from his powerpack. *Eridani* AB grimaced and barked into his communication; the trio reformed and, perhaps driven by grief and resolve, their attack redoubled.

Then they came. The first of the Sebumous emerged eyeless, pale as ash, from its hole. An emerald mohican flickered from its pointed beak and along its ridged spine. It seemed to sniff then, as swift as the solar wind, it lunged. *Eridani* EF snarled and caught it directly with the blaze that roared from her weapon. For a millisecond it was outlined in a nimbus of energy and then it exploded into tiny fragments of jelly, foam and bent bone.

There were three more behind it. Then six and then nine, twelve, fifteen. The trap had been set; the bait had tempted the Sebumous. Now they had to get out of there. From above, the power and force of the laser cannons replaced the weaponry of *Eridani* EF, splitting creature after creature from nub to twisted tail. *Eridani* AB urged his comrades on; he stayed, giving them every chance to escape.

He didn't last long; the Sebumous rolled over him, grunting and squelching, stripping the armour, the flesh, the muscles and the fat from his body. Only a skeleton, containing a still pulsing heart, deflating lungs and a soft brain, remained. *Eridani* AB's jawbone moved; he was still trying to speak.

Imagine a world devoured by the Sebumous. Imagine your world, your friends, family.... you.

Eridani EF and *Eridani* IJ raced over the roots and vile plants. The lasers lit up the sky and the Sebumous popped and shattered behind them. But then *Eridani* IJ was snagged as vines surged upwards, flowering instantaneously, and enveloped him. He was caught like a fly in a web and the Sebumous showed no mercy as they swarmed into him and through him. Once more, only heart, lungs and brain remained.

Eridani EF reached the teleport pad and stamped frantically at the engagement mechanism. A tide of Sebumous rose twenty, thirty, a hundred high in front of her. It was a beating, insane wall of alien life, blitzed and eviscerated by the John Spence laser attack but neither cowed nor retreating.

In a flash, *Eridani* EF disappeared, and the murderous cloud dropped over the machinery that remained. They arched upwards, questing ravenously for the scout ship, stretching into the thin atmosphere, silhouetted in the sapphire glow of Scabron, the blue giant.

In orbit around the planet, that still seethed with malignant life, Flight Commander Alex Moffatt stared down at the exhausted form of *Eridani* EF. Out of her armour, she was beautiful. She looked up. 'How many did we get?' she murmured.

'Enough,' replied Moffatt. 'We got enough.'

'But there are still millions more?' The Flight Commander could only nod.

This war was still beginning and Peace?

Peace was a distant dream.