

Sacrificers

The mission was simple: visit the planet Klæ, learn about the culture, deliver some materials from the Alliance of Planets to the remote Kandrla tribe, get some pictures while doing it, and go home with everyone feeling better for the experience.

Which did little to explain why anthropologist Madison Danvers was in chains marching in a line with her entire team of twenty Alliance representatives and soldiers as well as over fifty Kandrla tribesmen.

The answer to that particular enigma stepped forward and struck one of the soldiers sent to escort her between the shoulders with the butt of a laser rifle. The attacker was short, only standing about five foot four but there was a wiry strength to the body, and not to mention the weapon. He was dressed in a brown tunic worn by all the tribes of Klæ, but the blue bands on the sleeves of the tunic indicated the particular tribe of their attackers.

The Elizoweblekenns. A tribe from the far north, Alliance intelligence had assured her that they wouldn't be anywhere near the Kandrla tribe, situated over one hundred miles away. The tribe was a warrior tribe, always raiding and taking from others. They were a tough group, living in one of the most uninhabitable places in the known universe.

She fought back a sense of terror. If there was one group the Alliance knew about that nobody wanted to be captured by, it was the Elizoweblekenns, who were known by a different name throughout the organized worlds.

They were called the Sacrificers.

After marching for two days virtually non-stop, the line of captives was halted. Danvers and the others gratefully fell to their feet, more tired than they had ever been in their lives.

The far north of Klæ was barren desert, but unlike the sands associated with most Earthern deserts, this was a desert of rock. They were currently in a valley, one of dozens they had traversed through during their forced march. The rocks were so strong and foreboding that no plants could get a grip on life. Without the plants, neither could the animals.

Danvers' throat was so dry and parched it was almost swollen shut. Being a desert, there was no water available. She had heard numerous theories about the Sacrificers and how they survived in such a habitat, and now she found herself hoping that she could learn their secrets because now her survival depended on it too.

Despite the cold air of the North, she felt the sweat on her uniform from the rigors of the forced march. She took off her boots and gently rubbed her sore feet. She had always been a firm believer that humans had no business walking when machines could transport them just fine, and this entire business was confirming that belief in the worst way imaginable.

She looked up and realized that the Sacrificers were staying busy. While some guarded the prisoners, others were setting up machines she'd never seen before. They looked like a satellite dish that was pointed straight up at the sky, with the lower part ending in a sharp stake. From the device came a series of either wires or tubes.

One of the captors approached her. She tried to resist, but he grabbed her arm roughly and jammed the protrusion from the machine in, revealing that the tube ended in a sharp needle that pierced her skin with a rough burning sensation.

To her left, Lieutenant Hiro Mansaka was given a very different treatment. He was gently tapped on the shoulder and kindly led to the device that she thought of as a satellite dish. Like her and the rest of the team, he was wearing an Alliance uniform of navy blue with crimson cuffs. The uniforms had some padding for protection, so many of the team had burn marks where they had been hit by laser blasts, only for the uniform to take the blow. Many of the Kandrla who had been their hosts had not been so lucky.

Once the twenty nearest prisoners and the six Sacrificers next to them had been hooked up to the machine, a big and hulking Sacrificer grabbed the satellite dish and tested its balance in his grip. Then, without a word or a movement of warning, he thrust the stake into Mansaka's heart.

At first everyone in the mission just gasped, shocked by the suddenness of what happened. Then as the Sacrificers started to chant, Mansaka's still-standing body started to convulse while the dish at the top of the machine now impaling him started to spin around and around.

Danvers stared in wide-eyed horror as the lieutenant died in front of her while the Sacrificers chanted with their eyes closed, facing the dying lieutenant. As she looked around, she could see that there were at least three more such machines set up, with just as many victims.

Then she felt a new stinging sensation in her hand and realized that a liquid was coming through the needle in her arm. The needle was connected to a tube, not a wire, and it led to the machine that was protruding from Mansaka's chest, tearing him apart at a molecular level.

She closed her eyes, unable to watch. In a few long, agonizing moments, it was all over. She looked up when the noise of the machine, which she hadn't consciously registered until it was gone, ceased. Where Lieutenant Mansaka had been, there was now nothing. The machine had devoured everything, even his clothes.

The Sacrificers finished their chanting and started to withdraw the needles.

"Why did they stick us with needles?" asked one of the soldiers with her. "What was that liquid they injected us with?"

"You don't want to know," said Dr. Miles Jackson, a cloning expert who had been recently disgraced after having an affair with an intern and was now serving as the team's medical expert.

The soldier, a young, impulsive, and impetuous ex-convict sergeant named Clint Mason, turned to look at the doctor. "Yes, I do."

Jackson sighed, then answered. "The machine tore our unfortunate lieutenant apart almost at a molecular level, then redistributed the minerals and nutrients that had formerly composed his body among us all."

There was a stunned silence, then Danvers finally put to voice what they were all beginning to comprehend. "Wait, you mean that they just injected Mansaka into us?"

Jackson nodded, his face grim. "Yes, it's a fascinating process, but I'm afraid that's exactly what they did."

Danvers knelt at the side of the path and promptly dry heaved onto the barren, rocky ground.

After the sacrifices, their captors wanted to start the march all over again. Danvers, however, wouldn't hear of it.

"I demand to speak to the man in charge," she stated in her most authoritative voice. She hoped that the evidence of her upheaval alongside the road wasn't on her face. If so, coming across as a figure worth listening to would be very difficult.

At first the soldiers guarding her snickered, but she crossed her arms and they realized that she was serious. They made to reach for her, but her soldiers gathered around her.

Suddenly the tallest of the Sacrificers came to them.

"What is going on here?" he asked in the Klæe language.

Before their guards could say anything, Danvers spoke up using the same language. While her dialect was different, the meaning was clear.

"I demand to speak to the leader."

The guards took a step back in surprise, but the newcomer merely tilted his head in interest.

Finally he answered, saying, "I am he, Grik Osber."

She nodded, realizing that she had guessed correctly. "We are representatives of the Alliance of Planets, and prisoners of war. By international law, we are to be treated accordingly until a trade can be made." Her tone, gaze, and posture hardened as she continued. "We are not to be killed and fed to each other."

Grik Osber shook his head. "Look around you," he said, his tone firm. "Does this land look like it respects law?" He pointed at the barren rocky desert all around them. "We live in a god-forsaken land." He pointed to the Kandria of the group. "They drove our ancestors out into the Northern Desert over a century ago, knowing that nothing could survive in this desolate place. But Grad Masou created our altars, which allowed us to live. And now we're stuck in an endless cycle of raiding just so we can survive."

He looked at her and added softly. "I'm sorry, but in order for all of us to live, you and your men must be sacrificed."

In the days that followed, more and more of the Alliance members died so that everyone else could live...sacrificed.

Danvers found herself torn. She knew that what the Sacrificers were doing was horrible, but she didn't see another way for the group to survive.

Most of her crew despised the plight, but resigned themselves to their fate. The exception was Corporal Herman Shockley. A bit of a bully before the expedition, he had become worse in the current circumstances despite being in the same position.

The insufferable soldier would tell a random soldier that it was their turn to be sacrificed, nagging about it all day while they marched. To make matters worse, he was right far more often than he was wrong.

Today's victim was Peter Mann, a reporter who had been with the expedition for publicity. Mann was usually even-tempered, but the conditions that they lived in and Shockley's belligerent attitude had worn on his nerves until he turned around mid-step and punched the soldier in the face.

Shockley was shocked by the attack, but laughed off the blow and gave two fast punches to the reporter in response. The Alliance members tried to break up the fight, but the

Sacrificers came in too fast, forcing the two apart. By the look in their eyes, Danvers could tell who the next sacrifices were.

That night, the Sacrifice happened again. Mann was chosen. He faced his death silently, following his captors to the assigned spot with a face that looked as if it were made of stone.

Behind him, Martha Parkman was wailing. A popular actress who had joined the expedition to enhance her image, her and Mann had grown very close on the trip to Klæ and even closer during their imprisonment. She wailed long after he had been impaled and everything left of him had entered their bodies through the tubes injected into their arms.

Danvers, in respect of the reporter's bravery, watched him as he was killed and noticed an interesting detail.

When he was impaled, Mann's weakened body had collapsed and the altar had actually went into the rock below.

She turned to Dr. Oliver Plusman, the nuclear physicist who was here to investigate rumors of radioactive minerals under the surface of Klæ. "Did that altar just drive into the rock?"

He looked thoughtfully at the rock in question, then nodded his head. "Yes, apparently it did." His eyes widened in surprise as the implications hit him. "The altar can convert the rocks the same way it does human bodies. And with some of the minerals and rocks that this desert is made of, it would be a more efficient and nourishing transfer."

Her eyes widened. "Are you saying that not only would it work on the rocks, but it would work better?"

The nuclear physicist nodded his head.

"Grik Osber!" she yelled, raising her voice.

The leader came over. While he didn't value their lives, he held the anthropologist in great regard. "Yes?"

"We've just discovered that your altars will work on the rocks that fill this land so abundantly. Not only that, but it will be better for you and your people." Her voice softened. "You don't have to keep sacrificing others anymore."

He shook his head. "No, we are soldiers. To do what you suggest would turn us into miners, and that is not our way." He pointed to the few remaining native prisoners. "They drove us here, let them provide what we need to survive."

Her face, tanned in the desert sun, grew pale. "You mean that your people have known about this and instead actively choose to do this?"

He nodded. "Yes. We are warriors, not miners."

Her body was starting to shake with rage. "You once told me that this place was a god-forsaken land, and you implied that it was God who had forsaken it. You never told me that it was the people of the land who had forsaken God."

As they marched, Danvers looked at what was left of her expedition. The twenty people now numbered only six people. Whatever sympathy she had ever possessed for the Sacrificers had disappeared yesterday. Living a way of life by necessity was one thing, but actively choosing to kill innocents because it was less work was unacceptable.

As they marched, she tried to think about things that her and her companions could do. In the end, it was her training as an anthropologist that helped her. She took in everything

she could about the other culture and tried to make sense of it. In this case, she did something she'd never done before-she took that knowledge and weaponized it.

It took a lot of whispered conversations through the forced march, but the six of them were all in agreement. She looked at her group and tried to hold back her misgivings. They weren't the ones she would have chosen first, but they were what she had to work with to stop the Sacrificers.

Dr. Oliver Plusman, the nuclear physicist who knew the planet's geology and understood the power stored within. A scientist who liked fine food, the days of forced marching had just gotten him to where most of society wouldn't call him obese.

Miles Jackson, the disgraced cloning professor and Alliance medical doctor who understood the biology of the Sacrifice more than anyone else. He was 130 pounds dripping wet.

Martha Parkman, the celebrity actress. After the death of Peter Mann, she was up for anything. Her eyes shone full of unbridled fury and Danvers knew that if the group didn't act soon then the actress would on her own, and she didn't care for those odds. The good news was that Parkman was a very fit actress who had some knowledge of what they were doing due to trying to do her own stunts in her films.

Clint Mason, an ex-convict turned into an inexperienced soldier. He was stout and strong, despite not being too smart. Once they had a plan, he was in 100%.

Herman Shockley, the bully who knew that if this plan didn't work, he would be the next to be sacrificed. He was bulkier than Mason and a good four inches taller. He was a bully, which meant that he knew how to bide his time and pick out the weakest ones. He also knew that everyone of his comrades would willingly see him sacrificed after he played a role in Peter Mann's death, so he did his best to stay quiet and not aggravate anyone else.

They weren't much, but they would have to be enough.

When the next Sacrifice was called for, their captors reached for Shockley but Danvers, despite being exhausted from the marching, stood in their way. Grik Osber noticed the act of defiance and walked over, his eyebrows raised in a question.

"I'm the next sacrifice. I'm done waiting, watching the people under me die one by one."

Grik Osber nodded his head solemnly, his respect for the anthropologist growing. When everyone was hooked up, they were prepared for the Sacrifice. Due to the decrease in numbers, they were now all hooked up to two machines.

Val Nor, the strongest member of the Sacrificers and the best at impaling its victims on the altars, was getting ready to implant the machine in her chest when she crossed her arms and shook her head slowly and deliberately. The Sacrificer stopped in confusion, so she started to explain.

"No, you're not going to impale me on your altar." She reached out her hands. "I'll go out by my own hand, on my own terms."

Val Nor looked at Grik Osber for approval. The leader considered the arrangement for a moment, then nodded his head. No one had dared ask for this before, but it fit with the woman.

The Sacrificers knelt around her and started to chant. As they did, their weapons were laid down and their eyes were closed. Weeks of docility and no resistance from their prisoners had made them lax.

Working quickly, she unhooked all of the tubes that led to the Sacrificers so that only the Kandrla and the Alliance members would receive the energy and minerals from the Sacrifice. As soon as the sabotage was done, she held the altar up high and brought it down into the rock, spending most of her energy in the act.

Plusman had schooled her very carefully on which rock would be the best and she had chosen accordingly. The altar hummed and soon the rock was gone. While the process was going on, the Alliance members moved forward, seizing the laser guns that their captors used to keep them restrained.

The Sacrificers quickly realized that something had gone wrong, but the blast of laser fire ended whatever resistance they might have offered. Mason, the most accurate marksman of the group, fired a blast at the other altar, ending the Sacrifice early and leaving the Sacrificers confused and weak.

In a matter of moments, it was all over. The Sacrificers were all dead on the rocks that they had ignored in their search for human life. Standing over them were their prisoners. Jackson quickly hooked Danvers up to the altar, as well as the Kandrla who had been attached to the other altar, and used the power of the rock to give them the energy they needed to survive.

Feeling more energy than she had felt the whole time she was a captive, Danvers looked around at her fellow survivors. "It worked!"

Mason nodded his head, impressed by the anthropologist and glad the nightmare was over. "Yes, ma'am. Now let's go home."